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Killing in the Name of ...? Types of Ethnic Groups and Armed Conflict

Lasse Lykke Rørbæk

Aarhus University

Abstract

This paper asks whether certain types of ethnic groups are particularly likely to take part in armed conflict. Several theoretical arguments indicate that this should be the case, often highlighting religious and racial boundaries as being more conflict prone than, for instance, linguistic boundaries. However, the potential effects of groups being mobilized around these different boundary markers remain largely untested. The paper helps to fill this gap by analyzing conflict propensity across types of ethnic groups in a global sample for the period 1946–2009. At odds with common perceptions, the results show that the probability of armed conflict onset is not affected by whether ethnic groups are mobilized around religious, linguistic, racial, or regional markers. The effect of political discrimination on armed conflict is also not conditioned by these different boundary markers. The paper thus lends support to an inclusive conception of ethnicity and suggests that we need to focus on the social and political context rather than the specific cultural content of ethnic boundaries if we want to identify the conflicts that are most likely to escalate and turn violent.

Keywords

Ethnic groups, boundary markers, ethnic mobilization, armed conflict, religion

Corresponding author

Lasse Lykke Rørbæk; LLykke@ps.au.dk; Department of Political Science, Aarhus University, Bartholins Allé 7, 8000-DK. The online appendix as well as data- and do-files are available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/LLRoerbaek>

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Introduction

Since World War 2 approximately two-thirds of all civil wars have been fought along ethnic lines (Denny and Walter, 2014). The conflict literature explains this prevalence by ethnic groups' distinctive incentives and opportunities to mobilize for violent collective action (see also Cederman et al., 2010). Ethnic groups can be defined as social groups for which membership eligibility is determined by descent-based attributes rather than, for example, political ideology, socio-economic class, or gender (Chandra, 2006; Fearon, 2006). Most commonly, ethnic groups are mobilized around religious, linguistic, racial, or regional markers (Wimmer, 2013: 8). Although the ethnic conflict literature is rich, our knowledge is still sparse when it comes to the potential effect of these different boundary markers. Are certain types of ethnic groups particularly likely to take part in armed conflict?

To answer this question, I assess theoretical arguments that stress how the cultural content of ethnic boundaries may affect behavioral differences. Religious boundaries are often argued to incite violence (e.g., Reynal-Querol, 2002; Smith, 1996); a notion that resonates with the public perception as well as current armed conflicts in, for instance, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In somewhat similar fashion, racial boundaries have been described as inherently conflictual (e.g., Cornell and Hartman, 1998). Language differences have, by contrast, been highlighted as a factor that can hinder outbreaks of violence (Laitin, 2000). Despite arguments like these, recent conflict studies tend to pool all ethnic groups together (e.g., Cederman et al., 2013). However, conclusions drawn from these studies might be misleading if the propensity for armed conflict is systematically associated with types of ethnic groups.

As I will argue below, three potential effects of ethnic boundary markers can be hypothesized. First, if certain types of ethnic groups on average are more likely to take part in

armed conflict, all other things equal, there would be a direct effect. Second, if the variation in conflict propensity is driven by certain groups' increased likelihood of experiencing political discrimination or other factors known to increase the risk of violence, then the effect would be indirect. And, finally, if certain groups are particularly likely to engage in armed conflict when they experience these conflict-enhancing factors, then the effect would be moderating.

I test these propositions by combining data on ethnic power relations and armed conflict onset (EPR-ETH v.2; Cederman et al., 2010) with codings of ethnic boundary markers (Wimmer, 2015) in a global sample of politically relevant ethnic groups for the period 1946–2009. In contrast to theoretical arguments as well as empirical findings showing variations in conflict propensity depending on the type of ethnic boundary, I find no statistical evidence of either a direct or indirect effect. Also, the effect of one of the most important predictors of armed conflict, political discrimination, does not vary significantly across types of ethnic groups when proxied as either political exclusion or power loss (indicating absence of a moderating effect).

What these findings suggest is that religious, racial, linguistic and other ethnic boundary markers are not *sui generis* when it comes to outbreaks of armed conflict. Accordingly, the paper supports more generalizing or inclusive conceptions of ethnicity that treat various ascriptive markers as functionally equivalent (cf. Brubaker, 2015; see also Horowitz, 1985; Olzak, 2006). To quote Rothschild (1981: 86), “the possible ethnic significance of these marker-criteria is given, or withheld, or withdrawn, not by their [cultural] content, but by their social and political context.” An important implication of the paper is thus that the intensive focus on religious violence in the public as well as the academic debate is at least somewhat unjustified. Armed conflicts along religious boundaries

as we are currently witnessing in several Middle Eastern countries are likely more about political dominance than about religious differences. However, as I discuss in the conclusion, although types of ethnic groups cannot explain escalation into armed conflict, more research is needed to examine whether ethnic boundary markers matter in other stages of the conflict process. In this regard, the analysis is limited by only including politically relevant ethnic groups because it cannot be established whether certain types of ethnic groups are more likely to become politically relevant in the first place.

Types of ethnic groups

Although there is considerable debate about how to conceive of “ethnicity,” social groups are typically considered ethnic if group members qualify for membership based on their descent, or more specifically, on their shared belief in common descent (Fearon, 2006; Horowitz, 1985: Ch. 1). As argued by Chandra (2006: 400), the list of descent-based attributes is long and includes “language, religion, place of origin, tribe, region, caste, clan, nationality, or race of one’s parents and ancestors.” To reduce the complexity of the discussion and the empirical analysis, I focus below on what Wimmer (2013: 8) has highlighted as the four most important ethnic boundary markers: religion, language, race (i.e., shared phenotypical features), and regional belonging.¹

Just as non-ethnic boundaries such as ideology or class, ethnic boundaries change over time. But because they are based on people’s descent, they tend to be relatively stable or “fixed” (Chandra, 2006). As a consequence, ethnic groups are typically characterized by dense social ties that increase group solidarity and accessibility of information about group members, which, in turn, help overcome free-rider problems and minimize mobilization costs

¹ As a theoretical argument for limiting the number of categories, castes and clans are often not considered “ethnic” (see Fearon, 2006).

(Olzak, 2006: 66–67; see also Fearon and Laitin, 1996). At the same time, political and economic grievances in societies often follow ethnic lines, and the relatively fixed nature of ethnic categories makes it difficult to reshape preferences and thus to compromise (Denny and Walter, 2014: 206–207). All in all, we should expect that ethnic groups are more likely to mobilize for collective action, including violence.

The question here, however, is whether variation in conflict propensity also can be found when we compare ethnic groups mobilized around different boundary markers. According to Huntington (1996: 254), armed conflict is particularly likely in the presence of religious divides because religion constitutes “the most profound difference that can exist between people”. Religion is a powerful sign of identity for at least two reasons: Modern religions are exclusive – people only have one – and religious boundaries typically imply fundamentally different ways of understanding the world (Reynal-Querol, 2002: 32). By contrast, people often speak two languages or are born as a mix of two races, and regionally defined groups often share values and norms. This suggests that religious identities are particularly salient for individuals, which makes conflict resolution more difficult and increases the risk of violence (see also Toft, 2007; Wellman and Tokuno, 2004).

Research on social movements reaches similar conclusions. Participation in violent conflict is costly for individuals and requires motivation and commitment. Yet, according to Smith (1996), religion provides a unique means for solving collective action problems. Religion prescribes how society should be arranged and how people ought to live their lives, and the sacred or supernatural elements of religion can help legitimize the subversive and self-sacrificing behavior that violent struggle requires (Smith, 1996: 4). Shared religious identities moreover strengthen trust and cooperation between group members, and religious

organizations facilitate collective action by offering communication channels, material resources, and a functional hierarchy and leadership (Smith, 1996: 9-21).

Also race has been described as “the ultimate boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’” (Cornell and Hartman, 1998: 26). Because racial boundaries are based on physical (phenotypical or genealogical) traits, they are typically perceived as more natural, rigid, and involuntary than other ethnic boundaries (see also Brubaker, 2009). If race in fact is more rigid, then it should be more salient for individuals, easier to politicize, and a more persistent aspect of political struggles. Racial boundaries have traditionally been seen as particularly intertwined with hierarchical power relations as is well known from the Americas and the white minority rules in sub-Saharan Africa. The persistency of racial conflicts has been vividly illustrated in the history of the United States, most recently during the riots in Ferguson, Missouri. It is also mirrored in the scholarly debate, and in some sociological accounts race is even defined as a symbol of sociopolitical conflict (Winant, 2000: 172). The conflict literature does not explicate any expectations regarding racial boundaries and armed conflict, but protracted political struggle must, all else equal, increase the risk of violence.

According to Laitin (2000), language conflicts do not – unlike religious and other forms of cultural struggles – generate violence. By contrast, linguistic divides may ease peaceful political solutions. First, discriminatory language policies are likely subverted by linguistic majority populations to keep minorities from seeking autonomy (Laitin, 2000: 110–113). This enables governments to credibly commit to compromises, which, in turn, makes rebellion less likely. Next, linguistic minorities face collective action problems. Whereas it is collectively rational for minority groups to fight for their cultural rights, it is individually rational to defect and learn the majority language. This leads back to the argued differences between the ethnic boundary markers. Language is not exclusive: unlike religion, individuals

can learn an additional language without changing beliefs or identities; and unlike race, linguistic repertoires are subject to short-term changes (see also Laitin, 2007: 59). Following this line of reasoning, the propensity for outbreaks of armed conflict should be relatively lower when ethnic groups are mobilized based on linguistic boundaries.

However, several cases come to mind that question these clear-cut distinctions. For instance, the Hutu-Tutsi divide in Rwanda and Burundi indicates that racial boundaries are not particularly fixed. The alleged physical differences between the two groups (e.g., Hutu being short and dark and Tutsi being tall and light) are to a large extent based on stereotypes evoked by European settlers, and historically the divide between the two groups has been rather fluid and partly based on socioeconomic status (Cornell and Hartman, 1998: Ch. 3). This example thus questions whether types of ethnic groups can be clearly ranked according to “fixedness” (cf. Chandra, 2006). Instead, two examples of religious boundaries suggest that the variation in the stability of boundary markers may well be larger within than between types of ethnic groups. On one side of the spectrum, the sectarian Sunni-Shia divide has been salient for centuries in several Arab countries (e.g., Ruthven, 1984). On the other side of the spectrum, people in Bosnia rather suddenly began to identify themselves as Catholics, Orthodox, and Muslims during the disintegration of Yugoslavia (e.g., Sells, 2003).

Nonetheless, quantitative empirical studies have for the most part found systematic variations in conflict propensity when comparing ethnic boundary markers. Reynal-Querol (2002) finds that ethnic civil war is more likely in religiously polarized countries, whereas linguistic differences are inconsequential. Roeder’s (2003) analysis also shows that religious and sectarian divides increase the likelihood of violence; however, he finds linguistic divides to have some of the same effect. Laitin (2000) examines 268 politically relevant groups in 148 countries and finds some indication that language grievances can hinder conflict

escalation. On the basis of these results combined with qualitative evidence from India and Sri Lanka, he concludes that language cannot be ranked alongside religion and other cultural identities because language conflicts do not produce violence (Laitin, 2000: 98). In contrast to this finding, Bormann et al. (2015), who examine linguistic and religious cleavages between ethnic groups, find that civil war onset is made more likely by linguistic differences than by religious differences. To the best of my knowledge, no quantitative investigation of this topic has included racial or regional boundaries. This accentuates the need for more empirical research.

Potential effects

The theoretical arguments above suggest that the tendency to engage in armed conflict varies across types of ethnic groups. The potential effect would be direct if other explanatory factors of armed conflict at the same time have constant effects across these. One broadly recognized factor explaining outbreaks of ethnic violence is political discrimination. Ethnic groups that are politically excluded are more likely to rebel because restricted political influence leads to marginalization and grievances. This is especially the case when groups recently have experienced power loss and thus feel deprived of their former privileges (Cederman et al., 2010; see also Gurr, 2000; Horowitz, 1985). Thus, the effect would be direct if certain types of ethnic groups are more likely to engage in armed conflict no matter the level of political discrimination. I have illustrated this in the left panel of Figure 1. As shown, group type A has a higher probability of armed conflict than group type B at low levels of political discrimination, and the difference in conflict propensity remains the same as the level of political discrimination increases. The dotted line in the panel represents the biased estimate

of not accounting for types of ethnic groups in the presence of a direct effect. In more general terms, the potential direct effect can be hypothesized as follows:

H1: The likelihood of armed conflict onset varies across types of ethnic groups, all other things equal.

[Figure 1 about here]

Next, the potential effect could be driven by other conflict-enhancing, group-level factors. Such an indirect effect would be present if, for instance, certain types of ethnic groups are more likely to experience political discrimination and this, in turn, is what drives the variation in conflict propensity. As briefly touched upon above, racial boundaries are often seen as being intertwined with hierarchical power relations. According to Caselli and Coleman (2013), it is less costly to discriminate against easily recognizable groups because their members will find it more difficult to blend in or assimilate into the “winning group” as an attempt to avoid discrimination. That is, fewer resources should be needed to police visible ethnic boundaries. If we assume that racial boundaries are particularly visible, we would thus expect varying tendencies in political discrimination and, in turn, varying conflict propensity. More generally, the second proposition can be stated as follows:

H2: The variation in propensity for armed conflict onset across types of ethnic groups is driven by other group-level predictors.

Finally, the effect of other group-level predictors of armed conflict could potentially be moderated by the different boundary markers. Focusing again on political discrimination, we have reasons to expect that this is the case. According to Fox (2005: Ch. 4), religious boundaries alone have no effect on armed conflict (i.e., no direct effect); it is the combination of religious divides and political factors such as demands for self-determination that makes conflict particularly likely. Smith (1996: 8) also emphasizes that the unique conflict-inducing properties of religion typically are triggered by struggles for political power in which religion becomes the means to gain support (see also Toft, 2007). Returning to Figure 1, I illustrate the potential moderating effect in the right panel. Group types A and B have the same (low) probability of experiencing armed conflict at low levels of political discrimination. But as the level of discrimination increases, so does the difference in conflict propensity between the two groups, which makes group type A significantly more likely to take part in armed conflict. Again, the dotted line in the right panel illustrates the potential bias of not taking types of ethnic groups into account in the presence of a moderating effect. The third and final proposition can be hypothesized as follows:

H3: The effect of group-level predictors of armed conflict onset varies across types of ethnic groups.

In the empirical part of the paper, I examine all three propositions. In line with the theoretical arguments above, I focus on political discrimination, proxied by political exclusion and power loss, when I test the potential indirect and moderating effects. I do this because political discrimination, or group-based inequality, is one of the most well-established explanations of ethnic armed conflict.

Regarding political discrimination, it should also be noted that anecdotal evidence suggests less clear-cut differences across types of ethnic groups. Even the least visible group boundaries are often marked by discrimination. Serbs are, for example, segregated from Albanians in Kosovo, Sunni Arabs are excluded from political power in Syria and Iraq, and Russian minorities in the Baltic countries are subjected to language discrimination (Wimmer, 2013: 8). It thus seems that the highly developed social networks that characterize ethnic groups enable group boundaries to be effectively policed, even in the absence of apparent physical differences (cf. Fearon and Laitin, 1996).

Another potential challenge for the hypotheses proposed above is that ethnic groups rarely differ on only one marker-criterion. For example, the civil war in Sri Lanka was fought by two linguistically mobilized groups, Sinhalese and Tamils, but because the majority of Sinhalese are Buddhist and the majority of Tamils are Hindus, religion came to play an important role in the conflict, albeit secondary to that of discriminatory language policies (DeVotta, 2004). This indicates that reinforcing cleavages increases the risk of conflict (Selway, 2011). Yet religion may also fuel conflict when it cuts across ethnic ties as, for instance, in South Africa where the Christian church helped organize the fight against apartheid (Borer 1996). Notably, Bormann et al. (2015: 16) have recently shown that linguistically divided groups are no more likely to fight each other when they also differ in terms religious beliefs. I thus maintain that it is meaningful to distinguish between ethnic groups based on the main type of marker used to substantiate the belief in common descent (Wimmer, 2013: 8). However, to minimize potential bias caused by reinforcing cleavages, ethnic groups are coded in a “mixed” category if one predominant boundary marker cannot be identified. I return to the implications of the empirical strategy in the concluding discussion.

In sum, there are strong theoretical arguments that the propensity for armed conflict should vary across types of ethnic groups. Religious groups have been highlighted as particularly prone to violence, not least when subjected to political discrimination. Racial boundaries are often seen as especially fixed, and if it is less costly to discriminate based on more visible ethnic boundaries, then this would suggest an indirect effect on armed conflict onset. If notions like these are correct, conclusions drawn from samples pooling all ethnic groups should be reconsidered. We thus need to systematically test the potential association between types of ethnic groups and armed conflict. Below, I describe the data and research design before presenting the results of the quantitative analysis.

Research design

The analysis takes its point of departure in Cederman et al.'s (2013: Ch. 4) study of the relationship between political exclusion and civil war, which includes 790 politically relevant ethnic groups from 137 countries for the period 1946–2009.² I have decided to base both data and research design on this study to ensure that the theoretical propositions are tested on an already established and easily comparable foundation. What is new here, then, is the inclusion of ethnic boundary markers (from the EPR Version 3 dataset; Wimmer, 2015), which makes it possible to test the potential effects as outlined above. I start by presenting the coding of the boundary markers before turning to the other variables included in the analysis.

The criterion of political relevancy used in the data collecting process entails that each ethnic group is represented by at least one political actor or that the group's members are systematically discriminated against in the realm of public policy (Cederman et al., 2010: 98–99). The coding of boundary markers follows the same logic in that all ethnic groups are

² Of the 162 countries included in the EPR-ETH v.2 dataset, the remaining 25 are omitted for having no politically relevant ethnic groups in the entire time period.

assigned a type of marker based on the boundary that the relevant political actor sees as predominantly defining for the group, that is, the one that group members are mobilized around or the one the authorities discriminate on the basis of (Wimmer, 2015).³ To match the theoretical foundation, ethnic boundary markers are allowed to vary over time depending on political salience. As noted, the four most important ones concern religion, language, race, and regional belonging. In some cases more than one type of marker is relevant, such as in Sri Lanka where Sinhalese and Tamils are divided by language and religion (and to some degree region). However, in most of these instances, as in the case of Sri Lanka, it is possible to identify the primary defining boundary, but where this is not possible, groups are coded in a separate, mixed category.

Following Wimmer (2015), groups are coded as religious if the descent-based attributes that define the relevant ethnic boundary are related to religion. Thus, ethnic groups are considered religious if group membership in society is determined by association with different religions or sects such as Muslims/Catholics/Orthodox in Bosnia and Protestants/Catholics in Northern Ireland. Likewise, linguistic groups are defined by different languages, for example, Estonian/Russian speakers in Estonia or Flemings/Walloons in Belgium. Racial groups are defined by physical or phenotypical differences such as Whites/Blacks/Asian Americans in the United States or Hutu/Tutsi in Burundi and Rwanda. Ethnic groups are coded as regional if they are characterized by a shared regional identity (geographical or attachment to homeland) and if they are not distinguished by important religious, linguistic, or racial divides. Examples include “Northerners”/”South-Westerners” in Uganda and “Highlanders”/”Côtiers” in Madagascar. In the mixed category of groups that are not predominantly mobilized according to one of the four main categories, I also include

³ See also the coding guide at <http://www.columbia.edu/~aw2951/CodingMarkers.pdf>

groups characterized by specific lifestyles (e.g., Roma people in Europe) or professions (e.g., certain castes in India and Nepal).⁴ Of the 28,302 observations (i.e., group-years) in Cederman et al.'s (2013: Ch. 4) original analysis, it was possible to determine boundary markers for 27,009 observations (95.4%). Of these, 15% are religious, 55% are linguistic, 9% are racial, 8% are regional, and 13% are in the mixed category.

Turning to the statistical model, the outcome variable is a binary indicator coded "1" whenever an ethnic group is involved in an armed conflict onset. Armed conflict onset is defined as the starting year of an intra-state conflict in which the government is involved and at least 25 people die in combat per year. An ethnic group is regarded as being involved in an armed conflict if the relevant rebel organization claims to represent the group and recruits soldiers among the group's members. Ethnic groups that dominate the central state are not included in the analysis because they per definition are involved in all armed conflicts in the country in question (Cederman et al., 2013: 69).

Concerning political discrimination, the analysis includes two factors that previous research has argued should motivate violent collective action, namely political exclusion and power loss. First, ethnic groups are politically excluded when they have no meaningful representation at the executive level of the state, including representation in the national government and senior posts in the administration and army (see also Wimmer et al., 2009). Next, ethnic groups experience power loss if they during the previous two years have lost political influence. According to Gurr (2000: 69), power loss is particularly likely to cause frustration, and downgraded ethnic groups can be expected to attempt to regain what they

⁴ To be perfectly clear, Wimmer's (2015) data contain seven categories: the four primary group types (religion, language, race, and region), ethno-cultural groups (where differences in lifestyle are most important), ethno-professional groups (where differences in profession are most important), and a mixed category (where it is not possible to determine the most important set of markers). Wimmer (2013: 8) himself highlights the primary categories as most important, and to ease interpretation of the results, I merge the relatively few observations of ethno-cultural and ethno-professional groups with the mixed category.

have lost. Both political exclusion and power loss are binary measures and are expected to increase the probability of armed conflict onset (Cederman et al., 2013: 61–62).

Besides the different ethnic boundary markers (which are included as a categorical variable), the last group-level variables in the model are group size and previous conflict. Group size indicates the demographic size of an ethnic group relative to the total size of all power-holding groups in a country (Cederman et al., 2013: 69–70). Group size is a proxy for resources (finances and potential soldiers) and groups' legitimate claim to power. Therefore, larger groups should be more likely to engage in armed conflict. Previous conflict is a count of the number of conflicts a group has been involved in since 1946. Armed conflicts often recur if the underlying incompatibility is not resolved, and previous incidences of conflict are thus expected to increase the likelihood of armed conflict onset. At the country level, the model includes a number of control variables: GDP/capita (log, $t-1$), population size (log, $t-1$), ongoing conflicts (if other groups in the country fought in the preceding year), and years of peace since last conflict (nonlinear function based on cubic splines with three knots; for further information on model specifications see Cederman et al., 2013: Ch. 4).

After testing the potential direct effect, I turn to the indirect effect. By omitting political exclusion and power loss from the model, it becomes possible to assess the potential “post-treatment” bias of political discrimination. If types of ethnic groups become important predictors of armed conflict onset when the proxies for political discrimination are omitted, it would indicate that the effect is indirect. I also evaluate the robustness of the model in additional specifications. First, I include controls for democracy (“Scalar Index of Polities” from Gates et al., 2006) and ethno-linguistic fractionalization (from Fearon and Laitin, 2003), which are factors that may be associated with certain ethnic boundaries and at the same time increase the likelihood of armed conflict. I also control for geo-cultural regions (Eurasia,

Latin America, South-East Asia, the Middle East and North Africa, sub-Saharan Africa and the West). Ethnic boundary markers tend to cluster by geo-cultural region, and certain regions might, for other reasons, be more likely to experience armed conflict. Latin America mainly has racial boundaries, the Middle East and North Africa are marked by religious boundaries, and Eurasia and sub-Saharan Africa are dominated by linguistic divides. For example, if armed conflict is particularly common in the Middle East and North Africa due to regional dynamics, then the effect of religious boundaries might be overstated until geo-cultural regions are controlled for. Next, in another model, I include country fixed effects to control for all time-invariant country-specific factors such as colonial heritage and strength of the civil society. As a last step of the analysis, I test the potential moderating effect in several interaction models.

Results

The main results of the analysis are displayed in Table 1. Model 1 is as replication of Cederman et al.'s (2013: 73) base model, but it only includes observations (group-years) for which it was possible to determine ethnic boundary markers. As expected, Model 1 shows that ethnic groups are more likely to be involved in an outbreak of armed conflict if they are excluded from political power and if they recently have experienced power loss. The same is the case for relatively large groups and groups that have previously experienced conflict.

In order to test the potential direct effect, Model 2 includes ethnic boundary markers, that is, it differentiates between groups that are predominantly mobilized around religious, linguistic, racial, and regional markers. The variable also includes a mixed category as outlined above. First, it should be noted that the predictors from Model 1 do not change substantially when I control for ethnic boundary markers. Next, the different boundary

markers are not statistically significantly associated with armed conflict onset. The coefficients show the difference between each type of ethnic group and the reference category, religious groups. Religion has been chosen as reference category in the depicted models because much previous research highlights religious groups as particularly likely to engage in collective violence. However, no matter what type of ethnic group is chosen as reference category, the differences between the categories never reach the 0.10-level of statistical significance. The analysis thus finds no evidence in support of H1.

[Table 1 about here]

To test the potential indirect effect proposed in H2, I omit the proxies for political discrimination in Model 3. As shown, there is still no statistically significant effect of the different boundary markers. In the online appendix (Table A1, Model 1), I take additional steps in this direction and omit the rest of the group-level as well as country-level predictors. Again, no evidence can be found of an indirect effect.

The boundary markers also remain statistically insignificant when I assess the robustness of the model in Models 4 and 5. Model 4 controls for regime type and level of ethnic fractionalization at the country level as well as geo-cultural regions (region fixed effects). Interestingly, the model indicates that ethnic groups are more likely to rebel in more democratic regimes. This result may reflect the notion that political competition strengthens ethnic identification (e.g., Eifert et al., 2010). When country fixed effects are included in Model 6, all groups situated in countries that have not experienced ethnic armed conflict in the post-World War 2 period are dropped. In this model, only the proxies for political discrimination remain statistically significant. The online appendix reports additional model

specifications controlling for economic growth, religious fractionalization, and mountainous terrain as well as re-estimations of the main model using probit and OLS (Table A2, Models 2-6). None of these specifications suggest that types of ethnic groups should matter for armed conflict onset.

Finally, to test the potential moderating effect proposed in H3, I have run interaction models of the two proxies for political discrimination conditioned on each of the four main boundary makers. These models are presented in Tables A2 and A3 in the online appendix. Only in one of the eight models do I find some indication of a moderating effect suggesting that religious groups may be particularly likely to engage in armed conflict when they experience power loss (Table A3, Model 1). However, even this specification does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance ($p=0.08$), and across the models I find no systematic evidence that the effect of political discrimination on armed conflict onset should be conditioned by ethnic boundary markers.

I illustrate this finding in Figure 2 by plotting the coefficients for political exclusion and power loss together with the 95% confidence intervals across types of ethnic groups. The first group, “All,” in the figure corresponds precisely to Model 1 in Table 1. Moving downwards in the figure, the total sample from Model 1 is divided according to the different boundary markers. That is, the coefficients for “Religion” are the average effects of the variables proxying political discrimination for all religious groups in the sample controlled for the same variables as in Table 1, Model 1. What the figure illustrates, then, is the different types of ethnic groups’ likelihood of taking part in armed conflict when subjected to political discrimination, compared to that of the total sample (represented by the dotted lines in Figure 2). As shown in the left panel of the figure, the coefficients of political exclusion are the same for religious and linguistic groups (1.3) and only slightly higher than that of the total sample

(1.1). Regional groups are somewhat above (2.0) and racial groups somewhat below (.02) the overall average. However, none of the coefficients are statistically significantly different from that of the total sample.

[Figure 2 about here]

Turning to power loss in the right panel of the figure, it shows, as mentioned above, that religious groups fall somewhat above that total average, not far from obtaining statistical significance. Yet, when comparing the two panels, I do not find much in terms of systematic patterns. Most notably, both coefficients for racial groups are not statistically distinguishable from 0. A bold interpretation of this finding would be that racial groups are the only type of ethnic group that is not significantly more likely to rebel when discriminated against. However, as the interactions between racial groups and political discrimination are not statistically significant (Table A2, Model 3 and Table A3, Model 3), this interpretation seems like a stretch.

All in all, the analysis finds no statistical evidence that types of ethnic groups have a direct or indirect effect on armed onset, and the effect of political discrimination does not seem to be conditioned on ethnic boundary markers in any systematic way. The analysis thus questions studies that argue that religious groups are particularly likely to be involved in armed conflict (e.g., Huntington, 1996; Reynal-Querol, 2002; Wellman and Tokuno, 2004) as well as those that argue that linguistic divides generally can contain violence (Laitin 2000). And if racial boundaries in fact are more fixed than other ethnic boundaries (cf. Cornell and Hartman, 1998), then this does not seem to be reflected in racial groups' tendency to rebel. Instead, the analysis supports the notion that types of ethnic groups are comparable (e.g.,

Horowitz, 1985; Olzak, 2006). This inclusive or generalizing stance leads us to expect that explanations of armed conflict travel across types of ethnic groups (see also Brubaker, 2015). We should thus strive towards improving our understanding of the political and social context in which ethnic conflicts arise rather than becoming absorbed in the cultural content of ethnic boundaries (cf. Rothschild 1981). In this respect, the findings provided here support previous studies that argue that politically discriminated ethnic groups are more likely to rebel (Cederman et al., 2010; Cederman et al., 2013).

Conclusion

Although research on ethnic conflict has made important advancements in recent years, our knowledge is still very limited when it comes to the potential consequences of the specific boundary markers that ethnic groups are mobilized around. To date, no study has systematically examined whether different types of ethnic groups have different probabilities of experiencing armed conflict onset. The paper has assessed theoretical arguments that highlight how the cultural content of ethnic boundaries may help explain variations in conflict behavior. Contrary to these arguments, the analysis has shown that the propensity for outbreaks of armed conflict is unaffected by whether ethnic groups are mobilized around religious, linguistic, racial, or regional markers. This suggests that different types of ethnic groups can be considered part of the same overarching category when it comes to armed conflict onset.

This point is far from trivial. The scholarly and public debate on ethnic conflict is dominated by a focus on religious divides. As argued by Cavanaugh (2009: 15), “[f]rom first-year university students to media commentators to federal judges, the view is widespread that religion, if it does not simply cause violence, is at least a significant contributing factor in a

great many of the conflicts of human history.” This conception has only been strengthened by contemporary armed conflict along religious lines in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. However, even if religion is a contributing factor in cases like these, it needs to be added that religious groups on average are no more likely to take part in armed conflict than ethnic groups mobilized around linguistic, racial, or regional markers.

Nonetheless, there may still be aspects of the conflict process where the specific marker-criteria matter. An obvious next step in this research agenda would be to extend the analysis to include the duration and intensity of civil war. The analysis does not preclude that armed conflicts fought along religious lines last longer or are bloodier. It is also worth noting that the analysis only includes politically relevant ethnic groups. This could present a selection bias if certain types of ethnic groups are more likely to be politically relevant in the first place. One solution would be to analyze a sample of ethnic groups that do not have a political selection criterion. The ongoing All Minorities at Risk data project includes roughly 1,200 socially relevant ethnic groups and may thus present one way to examine this potential bias in the near future (Birnie et al., 2015).

The data currently available have likewise not made it possible to assess whether overlapping ethnic boundaries increase the risk of conflict. Are groups with different languages, for instance, more likely to fight each other if they also have different religious beliefs? Bormann et al.’s (2015) study indicates that this is not the case, but as they only analyze linguistic and religious boundaries more research on the potential effect of reinforcing cleavages are definitely needed (see also Selway, 2011). Contrary to the findings provided in this paper, Bormann et al. (2015) find that language differences between ethnic groups provide a better explanation of armed conflict than religious differences. The most obvious explanation for these contradictory findings is the different empirical strategies:

Bormann and colleagues code linguistic and religious segments within politically relevant ethnic groups and use these codings to measure the “ethnic difference” between groups within a country. This more fine-grained empirical strategy has several advantages, but it does not enable us to compare all relevant types of ethnic groups as it focuses exclusively on linguistic and religious divides.

Despite the empirical shortcomings described above, there is an important conclusion to be drawn from this paper. When we look across the myriad of ethnic groups that form political parties to increase their share of the pie, demand enhanced minority rights, or protest for self-determination, we cannot predict what conflicts are most likely to escalate and turn violent by focusing on the cultural content of the specific ethnic boundary. All other things equal, linguistically or regionally defined groups are just as likely to take part in armed conflict as religious and racial ones. On the positive side, this strengthens our ability to generalize about cases of ethnic armed conflict. For example, experiences with failed conflict prevention between religious groups in the Middle East can help avoid similar trajectories in conflicts between linguistic groups in Africa. Armed conflict is not constrained to countries with certain ethnic boundaries, and we need to acknowledge that ethnic divides often are little more than the most suitable social structures for mobilizing individuals in the competition for scarce resources. Hopefully, this competition will spur much less violence in the future.

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Figure 1. Two potential effects

DIRECT EFFECT

MODERATING EFFECT

Figure 2. The effects of political exclusion and power loss on armed conflict onset across types of ethnic groups, 1946-2009

Note: The included variables and statistical techniques correspond to Tabel 1, Model 1, which is divided according to types of ethnic groups. The dotted lines represent the values of the coefficients from the entire sample (“All”). The numbers of observations (N) are reported on the right side of the figure.

Table 1. Types of ethnic groups and armed conflict onset, 1946-2009

	Model 1 Base model	Model 2 Markers included	Model 3 Pol. disc. omitted	Model 4 Additional controls	Model 5 Country fixed effects
<i>Group-level:</i>					
Political exclusion	1.15** (0.20)	1.14** (0.20)		1.33** (0.23)	1.24** (0.36)
Power loss	1.51** (0.30)	1.51** (0.29)		1.37** (0.32)	1.70** (0.35)
Group size	1.04** (0.34)	0.98** (0.32)	0.62* (0.31)	0.90** (0.37)	0.72 (0.48)
Previous conflict	0.67** (0.07)	0.65** (0.08)	0.69** (0.08)	0.64** (0.10)	0.36 (0.25)
<i>Boundary markers:</i>					
<i>Reference: Religion</i>					
Language		-0.28 (0.26)	-0.29 (0.27)	-0.30 (0.35)	0.05 (0.42)
Race		-0.01 (0.31)	0.07 (0.32)	0.02 (0.32)	0.16 (0.47)
Region		0.05 (0.30)	0.06 (0.31)	-0.09 (0.38)	0.53 (0.41)
Mixed		-0.27 (0.34)	-0.16 (0.35)	-0.35 (0.41)	-0.15 (0.53)
<i>Country-level:</i>					
Ongoing conflict, t-1	0.56+ (0.29)	0.55+ (0.29)	0.58* (0.27)	0.47 (0.31)	-0.54 (0.34)
(log) GDP/cap., t-1	-0.20* (0.08)	-0.20* (0.08)	-0.20** (0.07)	-0.07 (0.11)	0.18 (0.24)
(log) Population, t-1	-0.01 (0.10)	-0.01 (0.10)	0.01 (0.08)	-0.01 (0.10)	0.16 (0.76)
Democracy, t-1				0.86* (0.43)	
Ethnic frac.				-0.26 (0.56)	
Constant	-3.89** (1.11)	-3.71** (1.10)	-2.87** (0.96)	-6.76** (1.82)	-8.01 (9.27)
Observations	27,009	27,009	27,009	25,093	17,482

Note: Logit analysis with robust standard errors clustered by country; peace year estimates (all models) and region and country fixed effects (Model 4 and Model 5, respectively) not shown.

** p<0.01, * p<0.05, +p<0.10.