

The Partisans: Civilian Support and Indirect Violence in Civil War

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Although also victims, there is a growing appreciation that civilians are actors in civil wars. Scholarship on wartime civilian agency and action show how their decisions impact well-being and even shape conflict dynamics. Scholars often frame civilians as impartial forces resisting armed groups and cultivating peace. While often true, civilians are as likely to support armed groups, strengthening combatants and deepening violence. This paper seeks to better understand how civilians contribute indirect violence in civil wars. After reviewing scholarly approaches to civilians, I analyze scholarship on civilian support / collaboration. Some forms of support, such as refusing to provide information or protesting the other side, may reduce violence, while others are more neutral, such as providing food or medicine. Other actions heighten the capacity and likelihood of armed groups to carry out violence, such as providing intelligence, recruiting fighters, and procuring weapons. That civilians contribute indirect violence does not mean they are not victims in need of aid, but does call their innocence into question, providing a sober account of civilians in war.

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Conducting fieldwork in the wake of Aceh's separatist conflict in 2008, I arranged for what turned out to be a long meeting with Free Aceh Movement (GAM) Field Commander 'Kowboy' Effendi in Bireuen. After recounting some tall tales over coffee, we turned to interactions with civilians, the topic of my dissertation. The Commander and his entourage explained that some civilians schemed against GAM and supported Indonesia, persons he wrote off as corrupt opportunists. "Most Acehnese", explained Kowboy, "helped us fight...Some of the best help from the people was when they told the army we went one way, when we really were close. This allowed us to escape or ambush. People told us where the army was. One time, an old woman ran to the [Indonesian army] crying, saying that GAM killed her son, they can catch them, leading the army into our ambush." When I asked the rebel if this is dangerous for civilians, inviting military retribution, he explained that this is their sacrifice; "They are all basically GAM civilians. They are not fighters, but for Indonesian soldiers, they are not innocent" (interview with rebel Commanders, Bireuen, February 2008).

While civilians were also coerced to help either side, fled to find a better life, and/or stood up to combatants to demand peace, many voluntarily and frequently worked to support armed groups, seeing themselves as civilian partisans of state or rebel forces whose work contributes to victory. Although many civilians were victims of this long-standing civil war, many were participants whose actions increased the coercive capacities of armed groups. Indeed, many of those most committed to a particular side were motivated by having been victimized by the other, meaning that many victims simultaneously contribute to violence and the victimization of others. Although civilians, as they did not take part in active violence and thus did not represent direct mortal threats, civilian partisans were hardly pro-peace or innocent.

How do we understand civilian support for armed groups? How do civilians contribute to violence, strengthening the ability of combatants to utilize coercion? The ways that unarmed civilians contribute to violence remain undertheorized, perhaps chafing with dominant, even rose-tinted understandings of civilians. This paper examines the idea and practice of civilian support for armed groups, a topic that is critical to understanding civil wars but confronts normative biases of civilians as peaceful, innocent victims. I argue that many civilians contribute *indirect violence* through forms of support that enhance the coercive power of armed groups.

The first section of this paper reviews the literature on civilians in war. Here, I outline a shift from relative disregard, to a post-Cold War interest in civilian victimization, and then a more recent interest in agency. Recognizing that the civilian strategy literature focuses largely on civilians resisting armed groups and promoting peace, the second section reviews the study of civilian collaboration with and support for armed groups. In part three, I analyze how forms of support may fuel violence. Some actions may be seen as decreasing violence or as largely neutral. We can refer to indirect violence when civilian support

contributes to an armed group's ability and likelihood to commit violent acts. This may include contributing funds, joining organizations linked to armed groups, providing intelligence, recruiting new fighters, and procuring weapons. How these unfold and link to violence are illustrated with examples drawn from firsthand fieldwork and secondary sources. This paper concludes with some implications; indirect violence by civilians does not mean they are not victims in need of help, but does call their innocence into question, providing a sober account of civilians in war.

1. Civilians in War: Victimhood & Agency

Although civilian/combatant distinctions may be blurred by civilian contributions to violence, we should not dismiss them. The Geneva Protocols (ICRC 2021) define civilians as “any person not belonging to the armed forces”, a definition that seems statist (excluding rebel groups) and focuses on affiliation rather than action (for instance, a medic is neither a civilian nor a combatant). The Fourth Geneva Convention states that, in civil wars, those deserving of protection are “Persons taking no active part in the hostilities, including members of armed forces who have laid down their arms” (Geneva Convention 1949, 3:1). Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay (2004, 378-379) define a non-combatant as “any unarmed person who is not a member of a professional or guerrilla military group and who does not actively participate in hostilities by intending to cause physical harm to enemy personnel or property.” The problem here is that a civilian hiding weapons is participating in hostilities and may intend to harm an enemy, so may be a combatant, even if they never directly harm anyone. A civilian is a person in a violent armed conflict that is a non-combatant, an unarmed individual that does not represent a direct mortal threat to others, and is thus not a legitimate target for violence by armed groups. Meanwhile, a combatant may be a state soldier, rebel, militia member, or any number of armed persons affiliated with armed groups. By possessing weapons and some level of training, combatants represent direct mortal threats. A middle ground may be various self-defense forces, especially independent, locally-organized groups armed with rudimentary weapons (Clayton and Thomson 2016). For example, Shesternina (2021) describes militias in Abkhazia armed with hunting weapons, with recruits benefitting from mandatory military training earlier in their lives, but organized locally to protect their communities.

Throughout the Cold War (and before it), the study of violent conflict reflected a statist bias, concerned with Great Powers and state security. For traditional International Relations and related paradigms, civilians were afforded limited attention.¹ Following the Cold War, a new emphasis on civil

¹ An exception relates to international law, which includes humanitarian protection and laws of war, which have long been theorized from a liberal lens (Slaughter 1995).

wars led to an expanded concern for protecting civilians. The 1990s saw an ascendent Human Security paradigm, with humanitarians and scholars elevating civilian lives. Authors here shifted the referent of what was being secured, rethinking the importance of civilian well-being over securing abstract states (Buzan 1991). Policymakers declared a ‘Responsibility to Protect’ civilians if their states fail to do so (Bellamy 2009), while human rights defenders developed ‘Protection of Civilian’ networks (Hultman 2013).

Humanitarian concern for the victims of war has led to a considerable literature theorizing the causes of civilian victimization. Scholars have explained civilian victimization in terms of the capacity of armed groups (Reed 2010), conflict dynamics (Wood, Kathman, and Gent 2012), and rebel resources and organization (Weinstein 2007), to name a few. Some titles include *The Lessons of Terror: A History of Warfare against Civilians* (Carr 2003); “Handling and Manhandling Civilians in War” (Humphreys and Weinstein 2006); “One-Sided Violence against Civilians in War” (Eck and Hultman 2007); *Killing Civilians: Method, Madness, and Morality in War* (Slim 2010); *Targeting Civilians in War* (Downes 2011); as well as titles on bombing, purging, detaining, protecting, and defending civilians. The victimization frame endures for good reason—civilians do tend to be victims of war, facing coercion, exploitation, sexual violence, displacement, or ethnic cleansing—and are in real need of assistance.

Central to humanitarian concern is the idea of civilian innocence. After all, providing aid or security to those supporting violence will be less compelling than for those who have done nothing wrong, but find themselves caught up in war. The Red Cross has often stated that “During the past 60 years the main victims of war have been civilians. The protection of civilians during armed conflict is therefore a cornerstone of international humanitarian law...[especially] particularly vulnerable civilian groups such as women, children and the displaced” (ICRC 2010). For Slim (2003, 483), “the phrase ‘innocent civilians’ is repeated like a chant by those concerned to argue the humanitarian case of distinction and immunity in war.” Slim argues that the conflation of civilians and innocence is problematic—we should defend civilians due to their relative powerlessness and unarmed status. Charli Carpenter (2005) challenges the presumed innocence of women and children in war. Although helping women and children, this assumption is not always accurate, and is based on sexist and ageist essentialisms. Carpenter argues that assuming innocence based in ascriptive traits rather than individual action is problematic, potentially excusing violence against innocent men and overlooking how women and youths participate in warfare.

The shift towards a concern for protecting civilians, and theorizing what drives their victimization, has generated important insights. This said, activists and scholars often cast civilians as anonymous victims rather than actors in their own right. This well-meaning assumption has been shown to contrast

with micro-level studies of war. Authors here have contributed towards understanding civilian victimization, but have also hinted at agency. Kalyvas (2006) approaches violence against civilians in terms of armed group capacity across zones of control. This said, Kalyvas also recognizes that civilian support is a prized commodity for armed groups, even if this flows from territorial control (2006, 111). Control enables opportunistic collaboration and monitoring, but may also explain more principled support since weaker armed groups are more abusive and those enjoying control may provide public goods. Kalyvas affords civilians some role in shaping armed groups and conflict dynamics; for instance, civilians may use armed groups to settle personal scores and denounce rivals, politicizing personal conflicts and drawing armed groups into civilian affairs (330).

Scholars have discovered agency even among the victims of war. Chris Coulter's *Bush Wives and Girl Soldiers* (2009) criticizes the tendency to treat women only as passive victims of war; "The notion of *victim* has become a socially constructed identity that often reifies *women's* experiences of war" (10, italics in original). Coulter counters this by framing women as constrained actors that strategically navigate hard times. In Sierra Leone, many women sided with rebel groups as wives and girlfriends in pursuit of security as well as wealth, facing unique post-conflict challenges related to reintegration, and sometimes contributing to violence against others. Barter (2012, 2014) delineates civilian options in terms of flight, voice, support, and various combinations, a schema inspired by Hirschman's classic study. Similarly, Baines and Paddon (2012) analyze civilian self-protection strategies in northern Uganda, noting how strategies of neutrality, avoidance, and accommodation are too often overlooked by humanitarians. Fleeing from war can represent a harsh choice, or a series of choices, for civilians. Moore and Shellman (2004, 599) emphasize how scholars and humanitarians tend to frame flight as forced, lacking choice, even though we know that not everyone flees, many do so at different times, and they may choose different places to flee to; "When faced with extraordinary circumstances, people still make choices." Here, we see a greater appreciation of civilian agency, with constrained decisions often meaning the difference between life and death.

Much of the scholarship of civilian agency in civil wars has focused on civilians as neutral forces for peace. These studies show how civilians are not simply passive victims, and can sometimes speak up to manage their own affairs. In a sense, confronting armed groups represents a hard test for the presence of civilian agency in war. Kaplan (2017) analyzes civilian resistance and self-protection against armed groups in Colombia. He shows how civilian action can reduce violence, with strong social organization allowing communities to manage disputes and keep combatants at bay. Kaplan studies peaceful civilian action on the grounds that this is more common than civilian violence (16), perhaps overlooking grey areas of civilians contributing less directly to violence and to war. He suggests that we too often see

civilians as collaborators or victims, but rarely as actors able to limit violence (34).² A special edition of *the Journal of Peacebuilding and Development* brings together scholars interested in civilian resistance and non-violence. The contributors locate their research at the intersection of peace studies, social movements, and civil war studies, interested in how “ordinary citizens” drive “social and political change through nonviolent means” (Hallward, Masullo, and Mouly 2017, 3). For example, Suarez (2017) shows how civilians in the Democratic Republic of the Congo negotiate with armed groups to diminish violence, sometimes appearing as supporters and flattering rebels in order to moderate their behaviour. Avant et al (2019) reject civil wars as limited to contests between combatants, highlighting how various unarmed groups can take part in ‘Civil Action’, “a reluctance to resort to violence”. Reviewing the growing literature on civilian agency, Masullo (2021) emphasizes civilian non-cooperation as an overarching term for civilians rejecting armed groups and resisting violence.

Similarly, Chenoweth and Stephan (2011) make a case for nonviolent movements as more successful than violent ones. This is largely because non-violent campaigns are easier for people to join; “nonviolent campaigns have a participation advantage over violent insurgencies...The moral, physical, informational, and commitment barriers to participation are much lower for nonviolent resistance than for violent insurgency” (10). This suggests that civilians must enlist as fighters, overlooking how civilians join violent movements while not taking up arms. Chenoweth and Stephan are clearly aware that distinctions between violent and non-violent movements blur, and their study of non-violent movements is compelling, but it remains part of a broader narrative of peaceful civilian action. Here, combatants are violent and civilians, having chosen not to be combatants, are nonviolent. In reality, many persons that choose or are not allowed to take up arms contribute a great deal to violence.

A concern for civilian victimization in war is clearly an important, laudable part of protecting human rights and mitigating violence. Some assumptions in this literature have been challenged in more recent research on the micro-dynamics of civil wars, specifically the growing literature on civilian agency, which upends the idea of civilians solely as passive victims. Although often victims, civilians are also actors whose decisions shape their potential for survival and can alter the course of war. However, as narratives of civilians as inert and powerless have been challenged, we have retained a sense of civilians as innocent and peaceful. There may be some romanticism in studies of civilians as agents for peace, where civilians stand as protagonists. Civilians may promote peace and bravely resist combatants, but they may also support and strengthen them, indirectly fueling violence against other civilians.

² Kaplan briefly discusses civilians allying with armed groups, but only for “protection from that actor as well as incursions by a nearby enemy army” (2017, 45). This limits why civilians support armed groups to survival, overlooking their beliefs.

2. Civilian Support for Armed Groups

*An old woman gave us shelter
Kept us hidden in the garret
Then the soldiers came
She died without a whisper*
Leonard Cohen, "The Partisan" (1969)

Leonard Cohen's take on a French resistance ballad provides two senses of a 'partisan'. For those studying elections and party politics, a partisan is a dedicated supporter of a particular side, a stalwart. In studies of civil war, the term tends to be informed by Nazi-occupied Europe, with partisans as armed resistance groups. In the song, Cohen frames the singer as the partisan, an armed guerrilla. But those that have not taken up arms, and provide support to those that have, are also partisans, actively supporting a particular side despite grave risks.

It is important to define what is meant by civilian support. Although initially speaking of "civilian support", without which no combatant can be successful (2006, 91-92), Kalyvas prefers "collaboration" (104), framing civilians as opportunistic because support often follows territorial control. Others speak of civilian "loyalty", which may suggest moral commitment rather than action (Johnson 1962). Arjona (2016, 46) differentiates between obedience (complying with armed groups) and support, which she understands as more active. Arjona speaks of civilian cooperation "to denote the behaviors of civilians that directly benefit the armed groups, independent of the motivations that underlie them" (25). Petersen (2001) fluctuates between collaboration and support, speaking more broadly of civilian "roles" in war. Following Wickham-Crowley (1992), Wood (2003, 17), and Barter (2014, 28), I prefer to speak of civilian 'support' for armed groups. Collaboration carries a stigma of opportunism, while cooperation is a broader term that includes basic compliance. Support refers to a wide range of civilian actions that are intended to benefit an armed group, voluntary or otherwise.

Civilian support has long been considered as central to the success of armed groups. For Wickham-Crowley (1992, 8), "peasant support is a crucial contributor to revolution", with no rebels "likely to seize power without it" (see also Kalyvas 2006, 91). Combatants often battle for 'hearts and minds', promising reforms and providing public goods to cultivate voluntary civilian support, and to deprive their opponents. Mao famously wrote that the people are the water and communist rebels are fish swimming through them; insurgents will be sustained by the peasantry, who may provide "blankets, communication materials, transport, and facilities for propaganda work" as well as "revolvers, pistols, rifles, spears, big swords, and land mines and mortars of local manufacture" (1937, n.p.). In his *Bolivian*

Diaries (1967), Che Guevara wrote that the key to success is organizing civilians to provide supplies, transport, information, finances, urban actions, and contact other sympathizers; “In some cases, this could be organized exclusively through peasants; in other cases, it will include the aid of merchants or other individuals and organizations that offer their assistance.”

The centrality of civilian support has also been recognized in counterinsurgency operations. A widely distributed US Army field manual states that “In COIN operations, the population is vital—since whoever the population supports has the advantage” (US Army 2009, 1-7). The manual describes rebel auxiliaries, defined as “active sympathizers who provide important logistical services but do not directly participate in combat operations”, including women and children. Civilian auxiliaries may support rebels through intelligence; delivering messages; developing, storing, and transporting weapons; providing money; recruiting rebels; maintaining equipment; sabotaging state forces; and more (2-4). Many counterinsurgency operations are designed to sever rebels from supporters, as in various ‘strategic hamlet’ programs. Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay (2004) argue that state violence against civilians is not due to ethnic hatred or a lack of control, but instead may represent a strategy to weaken guerrilla forces that rely on civilian support, using violence to ‘drain the sea’. In other words, civilians are often victims because they are partisan supporters of one side.

While several studies speak of popular support for rebel groups, only a handful detail what this looks like. Wickham-Crowley (1992, 54-55) lays out a seven-point scale of civilian support for guerrilla movements, ranging from non-reporting (1) and providing food (2), to various errands (3) and providing shelter (4), organizational cooperation (5), joining a rebel militia (6), and enlistment (7). Petersen (2001) provides a similar model, with +/- referring to support for one side or another. He places inaction at 0 and +/- 3 as enlistment. This leaves the realm of civilian support as +/- 1, unorganized and sporadic resistance, including participating in protests, while +/- 2 represents more sustained, commitment, including membership in support organizations. Petersen is interested primarily in how people moved from one point to the other across fluctuating occupations in Lithuania. His work yields important insights for understanding civilian support as indirect violence, which is largely the domain of +/- 2 support. However, Petersen’s scale centres primarily on depth of commitment, not contributions to violence. Many forms of support in the 2 category, such as serving as a “partisan liaison...collecting food from other farmsteads to give to the regularly visiting partisans”, do not generate violence in the same ways as “gathering guns and rifles” and recruiting fighters (199).

Elizabeth Wood’s study of insurgency in El Salvador provides an authoritative account of civilian support as the lifeblood of insurgency. She focuses on rebel supporters in contested regions, where support is provided despite risks, unlike in rebel strongholds. Observing that many civilians actively

supported communist insurgents despite a lack of direct material benefits or security, she explains support in terms of a will to resist injustice and the pleasure in doing so. State violence drove many villagers to resist, with villagers terrorized by the army becoming active rebel supporters (2003, 115). Wood emphasizes the voluntary nature of collaboration, compared to other studies emphasizing opportunism or forced collaboration. Villagers supported rebels through silence to state forces, as well as providing food and supplies to rebels. They also provided forms of support that enhanced violence, including intelligence on army movements, transporting weapons, marking sites for bombs, and more (124, 173). Women and elders played especially important support roles, as those not encouraged to fight found other ways to do so. For Wood (158), “Extensive, voluntary support for the insurgency...was the political foundation of the FMLN’s military capacity.”

Civilian support for armed groups is often channeled and amplified through support organizations. Wood shows this through various political parties and farmer’s cooperatives that were aligned with the insurgents, just as Petersen emphasizes the importance of Catholic and university groups in organizing resistance. Communist rebel groups have been known to develop myriad organizations, including cooperatives, women’s groups, student groups, labour unions, NGO networks, and even religious wings. Pye’s classic study of Malaysian communist insurgents emphasizes rebel ties with civilians, commenting on their “conviction that the rural population or the peasantry is a revolutionary element that can be relied upon in the struggle” (1950, 32). Pye notes that the insurgents established a broad range of civilian organizations and ‘United Fronts’, from women and youth groups, to farmer cooperatives, schools, newspapers, informant networks, and more. One group tasked with pressuring sympathizers for funds, recruitment, and intelligence—Min Yuen—boasted 10,000 members, more than twice the number of fighters (98). Affiliate organizations allow civilians to join an armed group, but not as combatants, thus retaining their civilian status despite formal partisanship. For Petersen (2001), resistance in wartime Lithuania organized around pre-war Catholic, nationalist, and cultural organizations, which provided means through which ordinary people could support the armed resistance (see also Wood 2003, 124).³ Arjona (2016) analyzes ‘Rebelocracy’, explaining rebel governance by the time horizons of rebel groups, but also the presence of existing societal institutions. When local order is effective and legitimate, we may see resistance to rebel groups, perhaps a system of hybrid governance. Where local orders are weaker, we civilians more commonly align with armed groups, supporting rebels in governance and violence through rebel institutions (see also Arjona, Kasfir, and Mampilly 2015). Organizations channel civilian support

³ Dedicated support may also be found among those not organized or part of formal groups. Petersen describes those collaborating with occupying powers as social isolates, drunks, minorities, and others at the edges of Lithuanian society.

into formal, sustained action, as well as providing a place for wounded or demobilized fighters to fight through other means.

In sum, compelling research has shown how civilians may stand up to armed groups for peace. There are also rich studies of civilian support, where unarmed persons strengthen armed groups. Although civilians may be coerced into support or act opportunistically, many assist armed groups voluntarily, intending to help their favoured side. This not only challenges views of civilians as passive victims, but also begins to call into question non-combatant innocence. Despite differing on terms and motivations, scholars are clear that civilian support matters a great deal in civil war. However, different forms of support are often grouped together, perhaps differentiated in terms of commitment, but not in terms of the effects on violence.

3. Civilian Support as Indirect Violence

It is important to disaggregate the broad, varied forms of civilian support and their relationship to violence. This does not necessarily track with the degree of commitment or depth of support, as a rebel medic may be part of an organizational structure but be responsible for less violence than a civilian making a single denunciation. On one hand, some forms of support may be said to reduce violence, with others being somewhat neutral or contributing only minimally. At the other extreme, persons may shed their civilian status when taking up rudimentary arms. This paper is concerned with the middle ground, illustrated in Figure 1, with forms of indirect violence shaded. This echoes Petersen's spectrum, namely the +/- 2 level of support, but only partly. Petersen's scale is based on degree of involvement, not violence. It is conceivable that attending a rally, seen by Petersen as +/- 1, might entail criticizing the other side for human rights abuses or else call for the elimination of collaborators. Figure 1 also draws from Wickham-Crowley's schema, even though he does not consciously refer to scales of violence. For instance, his level 5 (organizational cooperation), includes participation in rebel schools as well as making weaponry (1992, 54). Figure 1 presents a spectrum of support focused on the relationship between support and violence, identifying forms of support that amplify violence by armed groups.

Non-Violence	Neutral	Indirect Violence		Violence
←—————→				
Inaction Non-Reporting Attend Rallies Information Flight Welfare Programs	Aid Combatants: Medical, Food, Shelter Labour	Information Provide Funds, Transport Symbolic Support / Legitimacy Join Organizations Courts / Governance	Information, Spying, Denunciations Recruitment Procure Weapons	Village Guards → Enlistment

Figure 1: Civilian Support and a Spectrum of Violence

Support as Non-Violence

On the left end of the spectrum are forms of civilian support that may reduce violence, instances of partisanship of interest to peace studies scholars. This may include inaction, where civilians refuse to support one side, anti-war resistance, or inaction, depending on combatant control and expectations. Non-reporting, where civilians refuse to provide information to one side, can be seen as support for the other side, but this will likely reduce violence by slowing military operations. Civilians protesting violence by one side may also be seen as a form of partisan support, but by promoting non-violence and human rights, may reduce violence. This may not be the case if criticisms and rallies are biased, overlooking or justifying violence by one side, or call for violence against others. Overall, criticizing human rights abuses strengthens norms of non-violence, and painting with broad strokes, we can see this as a form of non-violent civilian support. I also place flight here, as exit removes civilians from the battlefield and thus diminishes potential contributions to violence. Flight is not necessarily a form of support, but can represent a combined strategy, i.e., relocating to rebel strongholds or diasporic aid to armed movements.

Numerous examples attest to forms of civilian support that may diminish violence. In southern Thailand, silence represents a dominant response to military sweeps. This is due to a general contempt for Thai security forces, but also a clandestine rebel movement with limited popularity. Given uncertainty, even if civilians might know where rebels are or who is helping them, they are unlikely to tell Thai authorities (interviews in Patani, Summer 2008). In Aceh, villagers explained that they played dumb, pretending not to speak Indonesian when soldiers arrived. This corresponds to Wickham-Crowley’s non-reporting (1992, 55) and Petersen’s 0-point of neutrality (2001, 8). In many civil wars, civilians attend rallies criticizing government leaders and human rights abuses. Such events are often suspected of being orchestrated by, or at least sympathetic to, rebel groups. Protests in southern Thailand have been used by militants to provoke state reprisals, while in Mindanao, many NGOs are aligned with rebel groups or state politicians (Rood 2005, 37). Here though, emphasizing human rights abuses strengthens the narrative of

reducing violence, which may then pressure rebel groups. In Aceh, separatist groups initially rejected human rights language, but came to ally with civil society critics of Indonesian abuses; doing so undermined Indonesia, but also changed the rebels, slowly incorporating human rights language (Aspinall 2002, 19-20). In Mindanao, 'Zones of Peace', where residents declare their communities to be off-limits to combatants, over time came to be partly coopted by the state, making them a form of support as landlords and Christian villagers restricted rebel positions. This said, we can still see them as reducing violence, since they maintained a non-violent, albeit conservative status quo. In terms of loyal flight, in Mindanao, many civilians relocated to the strongholds of armed groups, just as Wood (2003) identified in El Salvador. This enabled protection for civilian partisans from state violence and allowed rebel groups to create strongholds where they provided governance and security to loyalists. In Aceh, state supporters and ethnic minorities often relocated to state strongholds, a form of support for the state and rebuke to rebels, but also providing security and reducing violence.

Information provided by civilian supporters often generates violence, discussed below, but it can also decrease violence. In my fieldwork, I found that religious leaders might sound prayer drums, church bells, or the call to prayer as a signal to rebels that troops are present (interviews in Aceh, February 2008, and Mindanao, June 2008). Civilians forced by the state to serve as night guards communicated to rebels that they are 'off duty', eventually creating systems where hanging their sarongs a certain way signaled their intent (interviews in Aceh Besar, November 2007). Civilians can also serve important roles in encouraging desertion from the other side. For armed groups, desertion represents a direct threat, although one not often publicized (McLauchlin 2015). In many conflicts, civilian messengers and officials aligned with one side are known to help rival soldiers demobilize with some guarantees of safety. In Mindanao, this role was played by Islamic leaders (*ustadz*), while in Aceh, some village chiefs worked with Indonesian officials to allow former rebels to demobilize. This is an important form of civilian support aiding one side by peacefully reducing the number of combatants.

Finally, there exist civilian members of armed organizations that, while part of violent groups, play largely peaceful roles and promote welfare. Many rebel and state groups, in an effort to capture hearts and minds, provide public goods, work typically carried out by civilian supporters. In Aceh, rebel commanders often donated money and other resources to mosques, widows, and victims of the Indonesian military. Charity work was typically carried out by Islamic and university students formally aligned with separatist rebels (interview in Bireuen, November 2008). In Sri Lanka, the Tamil Tigers briefly established a proto-state, which while largely concerned with security, also provided welfare and health services in cooperation with affiliated civilian organizations, improving people's well-being. The Tamil Rehabilitation Organization was run by civilian partisans, channeling international assistance to

provide services to IDPs and other conflict victims (Stokke 2006, 1029). Similarly, armed groups might establish a sort of ombudsperson role in which civilians can send complaints about combatant behaviour. This system might help armed groups to police their ranks and improve their reputation, with texts and social media messages informing civilian officials of violence leading to some investigations and reforms. In Aceh, such roles were sometimes played by rebel commanders (Aspinall 2009, 138), but also by pro-rebel student activists. All of the above forms of support strengthened a particular side, but in ways that reduced violence.

Support as Neutral

The next cluster of civilian support can be seen as largely neutral in terms of violence. This refers mostly to forms of support that enhance the well-being of individual combatants, such as providing medical assistance, food, shelter, or other provisions such as clothing, but do not directly lead to greater offensive capabilities. These actions may be seen as contributing to violence very indirectly, as they lead to healthier combatants and in aggregate strengthen a fighting force. But these forms of support are also provided to contribute to well-being, suggesting a neutral overall outcome.

Many civilians take up sustained roles as nurses, cooks, or billets, assisting armed groups despite significant risks. That civilians provide medical support, food, and shelter to armed groups is a core point in counterinsurgency strategies. In the Malayan Emergency, severing civilians from rebels was intended in large part to ‘starve out’ guerrillas (Pye 1950). Such support roles are especially common for women, whose gendered peacetime labour transfers to wartime support, replicating the roles of wives and mothers. Wickham-Crowley (1992, 22) finds that, even though leftist guerrillas promoted women’s equality, in practice “women in guerrilla movements apparently were relegated to typical ‘support’ roles rather than active combat”, either by choice or due to gender norms. Horton (1998, 207) focuses on peasant support for Contra resistance against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, where women and youths joined networks to supply food and other supplies. In Aceh, Aspinall (2009, 93) observes that “women were assigned support roles, such as provision of logistics, medical assistance, or hiding and smuggling male fighters”, almost never participating in combat. GAM rebels framed the *Inong Balee* as combatants, photographed with guns, but in reality, the rebel women’s wing served as a support network. *Inong Balee* members were tasked with serving as cooks and nurses. Such roles were risky, especially field nurses on the front lines; “It was very dangerous. We helped wounded GAM soldiers, we wanted to protect our brothers” (interview in Bireuen November 2007). Youths were also tasked with bringing food to rebels, a role that was often institutionalized, with some civilian members of the rebel group collecting food while others delivered it. Such actions helped to sustain armed groups, making healthy soldiers that could then

attack others. This might be contrasted with those providing food and provisions for wounded rebels or veterans, actions which might help an armed group in a way, but if the person being helped does not return to service, should not be seen as contributing to violence.

Civilians may also serve as labourers and engineers, building encampments or bridges, improving roads, improving irrigation, or providing other forms of labour—voluntarily or otherwise. Such work may enhance an armed group’s popularity or capacity, but may also serve the entire community as public goods, thus enhancing people’s lives. While civilians affiliated with armed groups building medical facilities must be seen as improving lives, building roads is more neutral, as it can assist armed groups in deployment and resource extraction. Such public goods serve multiple ends, and may thus be seen in multiple ways, but at a minimum is less directly linked to violence than other forms of support. Similarly, religious figures such as chaplains and affiliated *ulama* may excuse violence, provide legitimacy, and improve moral. In Aceh, the rebels benefitted from the gradual support of traditional Islamic leaders, which rebel commanders recognized as improving morale, public legitimacy, and recruitment (interviews in Bireuen, February 2008). While some Islamic leaders encouraged violence in their sermons and councils, others spoke of justice and non-violent ways to achieve their goals. For one Islamic leader, “I supported GAM, their actions were acceptable, but cautioned against attacking fellow Muslims” (interview in Bireuen February 2008). Here, religious officials support and even join armed groups, but with little effect on overall violence.

Support as Indirect Violence 01

Civilian support as indirect violence begins where partisanship can conceivably increase acts of violence while not decreasing violence or suffering, helping one side to emerge as victors. In Figure 1, I distinguish between two degrees, depending on how direct this linkage is. I begin with forms of civilian support that can amplify violence, even if they cannot be seen as causal.

Providing information could conceivably fit any category, depending on its content. If civilians provide information to combatants that helps them avoid an ambush, we can see this as non-violent, even this allows an attack tomorrow. If intelligence helps an armed group conduct an ambush of its own, civilian intelligence represents indirect violence, discussed below. Between the two, we may see civilians provide information by couriating messages for armed groups to relocate or pick up supplies or report intra-organizational intelligence, such as the actions of rival commanders. US counterinsurgency experts refer civilians providing “passive intelligence collection” and performing “courier operations” (US Army 2009, 2-4). In Aceh, youths were often asked to deliver messages to remote regions, with Islamic leaders often tasked with delivering messages across districts and into state strongholds. According to one report

(Child Soldiers 2008), 14–18-year-olds were pressured “to run errands, look out for police and purchase supplies”. This report frames these youths as child soldiers, misrepresenting their combatant status, intended to criticize the rebels but perhaps unintentionally inviting harm by state forces. According to one rebel commander in Aceh, “young men and girls would provide information, like where we could pick up supplies, sometimes uniforms or weapons. They were proud to do this, our scouts, sometimes our sons” (interview in Bireuen, 2008).

Although some forms of provision, such as food and shelter, may be seen as neutral in terms of violent outcomes, other forms more readily lend themselves to violence. While food brings nourishment, providing money or other sources of wealth may be used for various ends, including purchasing weapons. Donations, tolls, taxes, resource extraction, and other forms of transferring wealth to armed groups may thus increase violence. These funds may be derived from legal or illicit sources, from religious donations and diaspora communities to oil revenue, black markets, and narcotics. Rebel revenue may be generated by vast array of civilian supporters. Studies of civilian victimization tend to paint a picture of resource rich combatants not relying on civilians, whereas resource poor rebels rely on civilian support and thus treat them better (Weinstein 2007; Fortna, Lotto, and Rubin 2018). Of course, things are less clear in practice. Petroleum extraction demands expertise and equipment, while gemstone mining requires miners and transporters, and drug cultivation demands a large labour force of pickers and refiners (Lujala 2009, 54). In regions without such resources, civilian donations can represent a key source of revenue for procuring weapons and other supplies. Money may be provided voluntarily or else coerced in the form of tolls and taxes, with entrepreneurs and large businesses targeted for rents. In Aceh, Islamic leaders used a local tradition of roadside donations for mosques to help fund rebels, while village chiefs faced demands from both sides for scarce village funds (Barter 2014, 75, 82). Aspinall (2009, 155) describes a vast array of civilians supporting GAM, serving roles including tax collectors and donors. This allowed the rebels to provide stipends and public works, but was especially important in purchasing weapons, a vital source of coercive capacity.

Similarly, providing transport for combatants may assist in carrying out combat operations. Providing transport may serve mundane reasons, such as taking a combatant to see a friend, transporting food, or even helping combatants escape capture or violence. But transport or serving as local guides may also enable armed groups to position themselves for attacks. Civilian transport can also maintain illicit economic activities. In Colombia, Arjona (2016, 184) observes that transportation provided by civilians was crucial for coca economies, bringing their product from remote rural regions to towns, ports, and international markets. Civilians may donate vehicles, voluntarily or otherwise. More voluntary support is found in terms of maintaining equipment and vehicles, a role typically played by civilian partisans. For

instance, in Mindanao, rebel strongholds often employed mechanics, typically persons operating private businesses known to serve rebel vehicles (interviews in Cotabato June 2008). This echoes what Zhukov (2016, 399) dubs “the logistics of violence”, the technical, engineering side of war featuring non-combatants; “One cannot kill without means to reach a target. Without transport and open lines of communication, combatants cannot easily deploy their forces, reload their weapons, refuel their vehicles, repair their equipment, feed their troops, evacuate their wounded, or send detainees to camps.”

Myriad smaller support roles played by civilians allow armed groups to carry out attacks. This may include civilians forging documents such as stamps or passports that allow for armed groups to arrange shipments, prepare for attacks, or cross borders. Civilians may also manufacture equipment. Below, I will focus on weapons, but other forms of production may include clothing, footwear, tents, flares, glasses, and more. This may entail maintaining non-lethal equipment such as radios, mobile phones, internet access, printing presses, tractors, dredgers, and boats. Such equipment can be used to organize attacks, but also play various other roles.

Civilians may encourage violence through symbolic support such as propaganda, art, and graffiti, as well as attending rallies. Above, I noted that such expressions may diminish violence if criticizing one side’s human rights record. Such acts may increase violence when favouring one side, especially when justifying or encouraging violence. In Aceh, civilians helped the rebels post notices warning ethnic Javanese to leave or else face attacks, generating thousands of displaced persons. Supporters may write, print, and spread rebel propaganda that valorizes victories, justifies attacks, or downplays violence. Artists may paint murals that portray their chosen side in a positive light or facilitate recruitment. Keels and Kinney (2019) show how political wings of armed groups play important roles in deflecting media attention from terrorist strikes and other violent attacks, perhaps justifying violence and highlighting precipitants by the other side, while aggregating civilian grievances to support rebel goals. They identify several armed groups with political and media wings tasked with framing violence in ways that appeal to broader audiences. Although they do not identify such propaganda wings as operated by non-combatants, they do point out the different operational structure, expertise, and above-ground nature of such forces.

Combatant political wings allow civilian membership without taking up arms. Membership in armed group organizations represents an important form of support, one buttressing the above support methods. Communist rebel groups are especially known for creating mass and front organizations, including farmer cooperatives, study groups, women’s organizations, political parties, artist collectives, and more. This is a core part of an armed group standing as a social movement. Wood (2003) notes that, in El Salvador, communist organizations encouraged land occupations by peasants, promoting attacks on landlords to decrease the suffering faced by the poor. Some armed groups enjoy linkages with political

parties, such as the clear connections between the Irish Republic Army and Sin Féin. This is also a core lesson in the literature on rebel governance, as armed groups create formal organizations to carry out government functions and cultivate wider support, which in turn bolsters military operations. State forces may also create ethnic organizations, veterans' groups, and more as a means to enhance counterinsurgency operations. In East Timor, many violent militias were also welfare and vocational training organizations, with unemployed youths gaining job skills, but also becoming tied to nationalist groups that could be activated against rebel forces (Barter 2013, 82). Support organizations are primarily civilian, but by joining them, civilians provide material benefits to armed groups and join violent movements.

An important example of rebel organizations, and a foundational component of rebel governance, is when armed groups establish courts (Arjona 2016). Although sometimes overseen by armed groups, justice systems are often operated by non-combatants, such as elders, activists, chiefs, and religious figures. As civilians operate in legal systems established or tolerated by armed groups, they may provide order and reduce violence, with judgements reducing smaller issues from spiraling into violence. In Somalia, Barnes and Hassan (2007) shown how, briefly, Islamic courts developed to provide order and governance through the support of businessmen, students, and religious leaders. However, courts typically involve some degree of coercion, perhaps sentencing collaborators or others to capital punish or banishment. In Aceh, Islamic leaders sometimes served as judges in rebel courts, and village chiefs might defend their arrested villagers. For smaller offenses, villagers might face fines or exile, but also beatings. But for serving as an informant (*cuak*) for state forces against GAM, the sentence was often violent. Some courts operate within rebel groups, but involve civilian leaders. In Mindanao, rebels explained that civilians told them about a rebel that had committed sexual violence against a young woman. This led to the individual's capture, beating, and eventual disappearance (interviews in Cotabato, 2007). In such cases, armed groups typically frame offenders as claiming to be members of their group, or false members, a way to police their own while not admitting misdeeds. Overall, the functioning of armed group justice is often illiberal, leading to violence against perceived enemies while increasing the control of armed actors.

Support as Indirect Violence 02

The above forms of civilian support for armed groups can be understood as contributing indirectly to violence, but in a probabilistic way, potentially increasing the power and likelihood of an armed group to kill. The following forms of support represent more concrete forms of indirect violence, ones that may be seen as causal. Civilian violence remains indirect, but here, we can imagine that violence would not have occurred without these acts of support. Civilians may not pull the trigger, but they create contexts where others can, perhaps supplying the weapon or the person using it.

To complete the gamut of information provision, many civilians supply intelligence to armed groups that enables violence. The narrative that began this paper provides one example, where a civilian provided false information leading to an ambush. Intelligence regarding the location and movement of combatants may allow for successful strikes. In Aceh, mosques used traditional prayer drums to signal to rebels that the army was nearby, allowing them to flee. Rebels also used these signals to launch attacks, killing dozens of soldiers (interviews in Nagan Raya, December 2006). Armed groups may maintain networks of spies and informants that enable them to attack their enemies. For example, rebels in Aceh's west coast describe how a woman, angry that her sister was involved with an Indonesian soldier, told the rebels when he was likely to visit, leading to his murder (interview in South Aceh, April 2009).

Just as civilian information enables attacks on military targets, it also causes violence against other civilians. Such collaboration is how GAM was able to purge hundreds of informants across Aceh, with rebel informants providing the identities of state informants. This may even include the families of informants and security officers, with civilians providing information that enables armed groups to target the friends and family of their opponents. Balcells (2010, 297) describes how armed groups arrest, process, and kill their victims, throughout which "civilians can either facilitate or constrain this" by identifying, denouncing, and arresting their neighbours. One conclusion is that "civilian agency is relevant for the perpetuation of direct violence", guiding armed groups in their attacks. Denunciations are enabled by what Kalyvas (2006, 332) calls the intimacy of violence in civil wars, where community ties produce knowledge used against neighbours, the "dark face of social capital." Kalyvas provides numerous examples of civilian information leading to the murder of target groups. In one example from the Pacific War, Japanese commanders report compiling execution lists from those denouncing others for working with the Allies (Kalyvas 2003, 483). Kalyvas emphasizes that such denunciations are often self-serving or false; this is immaterial here, as either way, unarmed informants generate violence. The weight of denunciations can sometimes overwhelm armed groups, which must then decide to take action, investigate, or ignore. Kalyvas cites one example in Vietnam, where the United States employed an informant who used denunciations of supposed communists to relieve several generations of familial debt (2006, 350). Such denunciations occur not despite an aversion to violence, but because of it, as civilians are able to indirectly utilize coercion for personal gain without taking action themselves. Denunciations may take the form of reporting the ethno-religious identities of neighbours, or that neighbours are housing targeted groups. Civilian intelligence often drives violence against other civilians.

Another way that civilian support generates violence is through recruitment, expanding the number of combatants and thus the scale of war. Although civilians may also encourage desertion,

removing soldiers from the battlefield, they more commonly encourage others to enlist.⁴ In Southeast Asia, a handful of mosques and boarding schools operated as recruitment centres for separatist rebels; although this should not be conflated as madrasah as incubators for radicalism, it is true that many Islamic leaders tied to rebel forces encouraged their students to join, serving as trusted intermediaries. Women and elders were core recruiters, encouraging their sons and other men to enlist. In Mindanao, rebels explained that former fighters know combat and are credible, directing young men in their kinship networks to enlist; “it is hard to refuse someone who has risked his own life” (interview in Buluan, June 2008). Recruitment is a role especially open to those not expected to fight, but also those with direct contact with and influence over those that are. Civilians may play roles in screening potential recruits, investigating their backgrounds and providing indoctrination to those willing to take up arms. By providing more combatants, and dissuading desertion, civilians contribute to war.

Just as civilian support may multiply the number of combatants carrying out violence, it can also put weapons in their hands. Civilians may maintain, store, transport, donate, buy, and sell weapons to armed groups, especially for rebel forces and militias. Horton (1998, 207) describes popular support for contras in Nicaragua, in which peasants would lead Sandinistas into ambushes and hide or transport weapons. In El Salvador, trusted civilians that were part of organizations affiliated with the rebels were tasked with purchasing materials with rebel funds or “transporting heavy weapons and the wounded” (Wood 2003 173). Petersen (2001, 7) describes series of bunkers in Eastern European wars that were maintained by civilians. These bunkers allowed rebels to hide, stored with food as well as weapons. Partisan bunkers have since become historical sites, with archaeologists documenting food and weapon storage areas, and how civilians maintained them, including machine gun turrets (Petrauskas and Ivanovaité 2019, 180).

Weapons may be procured from everyday people, such as farmers or veterans donating rifles. For one veteran of an earlier Islamic rebellion, “I am still a soldier...but now I serve as a GAM civilian. I provided old rifles and trained young people to use them” (interview in Aceh Besar, 30 October 2007). Youths may transport bullets or explosives to remote rebel outposts. They may hide weapons before an attack, or else after one, helping rebels to escape. In Aceh, civilians report hiding weapons for rebels during military sweeps, enabling rebel soldiers to blend in and shed incriminating evidence. State soldiers, as well as civilians pressed to join militias, sold weapons to civilians affiliated with rebel forces; such leakage is a key method through which rebel groups acquire weapons, and often takes place through

⁴ Another more neutral form of civilian support is when civilians recruit other supporters—convincing, identifying, training, and vouching for persons that will provide other forms of support discussed in this paper.

civilian intermediaries. Civilians may be tasked with manufacturing and assembling weapons; in El Salvador, rebel bases included civilian-run clinics, schools, and “workshops to build crude weapons” (Wood 2003, 122). This may include developing improvised explosive devices (IEDs). In Iraq, US military reports emphasize the importance bombs, but also the bombmaker, including the social context of those doing this work. One report details how civilians connected to combatants by kinship or religious ties “provide active support when they transport, emplace, and detonate bombs” (McFate 2005, 40). The role of civilians in weapons provision can sometimes lead experts to “qualify them as combatants and therefore as legitimate targets” (Lichtenberg 1994, 347). Although understandable in some instances, such as professional arms dealers or IED builders, those storing or transporting weapons must be understood as civilians, as violence remains indirect.

Support as Direct Violence

Finally, at the far end of the spectrum are forms of support that come to represent direct violence, at which point the civilian status dissolves and a person becomes a combatant, a status defined by representing a direct mortal threat. There are, however, some grey areas that demand some discussion. Civilians may support armed groups through armed defense patrols. When armed with clubs or rudimentary weapons, this represents an unclear coercive threat, as such persons represent minimal mortal threats to others. When armed groups establish defense militias or policing units, not only is civilian innocence challenged, so is civilian status. This can be complicated, since self-defense forces might begin as lightly armed and loosely organized, but then be coopted over time to become pro-state militia groups, as Blocq (2014, 710) finds in South Sudan and Starn (1999) finds in Peru. We might see a self-defense group armed with clubs as civilians, perhaps supporting a particular side, but those armed with guns as combatants. As civilians participate more directly in violence, we may no longer see them as civilians.

Conclusions

Civilians are clearly victims of wartime violence, with armed groups seeking to eliminate rival groups and deepen their control. One reason why civilians are targeted in war is because they are not simply victims, providing forms of support for armed groups that may sustain or scuttle rebellion. Civilians are victims in part *because* they are actors. Studies of civil war have framed civilians as agents, demonstrating how non-combatants navigate and shape conflict dynamics. Civilians are often framed as innocent and pro-peace, and sometimes they are. But civilians are not always innocent, nor are they peaceful. This paper has laid out forms of support where civilians contribute to violence, showing how

partisans increase the coercive capacities of armed groups through forms of support that can be understood as indirect violence.

Understanding how civilians supply indirect violence leads to important implications and concerns. This study focused on civil wars, with greater weight attached to rebel forces that depend on civilian support to survive. However, nothing here should exclude state actors. Be they medics or cooks, engineers, recruiters, or other roles, civilians play important roles in maintaining state security forces. Youth scouts and veteran's organizations are sources of recruitment and legitimacy, just as they are for rebel groups. And the military industrial complex, the companies and employees responsible for designing, testing, manufacturing, and transporting weapons, are contributing to indirect violence.

One potential concern is that this line of inquiry may undermine civilian / combatant distinctions. After all, this article shows that civilians may be closely aligned with armed groups, even members of affiliate organizations, and contribute to violence. Although lines are sometimes blurred, appreciating how civilians fuel violence does not mean that we should disregard civilian / combatant distinctions. If anything, this divide may be clearer, identifying which forms of support make for indirect and direct violence. Civilian supporters that are responsible for indirect forms of violence are still civilians. This speaks to campaigns related to child soldiers⁵ as well as studies of female combatants (Wood 2019), which by confusing support roles and organizational membership with combatant status, may unintentionally lead to these groups being targeted. Support roles are especially likely among persons who are not allowed or expected to take up arms, the very women, youths, and elders that make the most marketable victims (see Horton 1998, 206).

Just as the civilian strategy literature has shown that civilians are not simply victims in war, but also agents, an emphasis on civilian indirect violence calls into question claims of civilian innocence. It is tempting to cast this critique off, perhaps saying that civilians are forced to act and have no choice. It is true that many forms of support analyzed in this paper are a product of duress, minimally standing as what Coulter (2009, 146) refers to as "choiceless decisions". However, we must not write off civilian agency for the sake of clearer moral categories. Many civilian partisans take action out of conviction, perhaps for revenge or belief in a given cause, as well as profit, social status, and other reasons. Forced support is more likely to take the form of smaller acts that are not integral to combat capacity such as meals or small payments. The forms of support that represent indirect violence are especially likely to be provided by those trusted by armed groups, those acting on their own will. As Wood (2003, 234) notes, many peasant

⁵ Studies of youths in war may misrepresent things by referring to teenage supporters as child soldiers. More careful studies refer to youths serving as cooks, guards, spies, and couriers as "support child soldiers" (Francis 2007, 215).

supporters of rebel groups put themselves at risk and make no personal economic gains, but do so anyways as the authors of their own fate, motivated by “pleasure in agency”. Many of the most dedicated supporters of armed groups are in some way victims of the other side, meaning that many victims are also persons driving violence against others, representing complex ethical terrain.

If civilians knowingly support armed groups in ways that increase violence, this calls into question assumptions of civilian innocence. Many civilians are innocent of contributing to violence in war, and others do so unwillingly, but others still knowingly enable armed groups to hurt others. This may complicate humanitarian work, since innocence is more likely to mobilize funds and compel action. But a more realistic approach may also make for more effective humanitarian aid, so that supplies are less likely to fall into the hands of armed groups. The chequered nature of civilian innocence should not then make civilians legitimate targets in war—they remain unarmed and do not represent direct mortal threats, deserving of civilian status and protection.

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