Civil Wars

Sample Course Syllabus – Undergraduate Level

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Course Description

Why do civil wars begin, why do people participate in armed rebellion, and why are some conflicts more protracted and violent than others? This course examines the causes, dynamics, and consequences of civil wars through competing theoretical explanations and comparative evidence. Topics include inequality and ethnicity, state capacity, natural resources, political institutions, bargaining failures, rebel organization, civilian victimization, and foreign intervention.

A central theme is the connection between domestic conflict and international politics: how regional rivalries, transnational networks, and external support affect armed groups, civilian security, and prospects for peace. Students will compare cases across regions and evaluate evidence from historical research, cross-national studies, surveys, and field experiments. Class discussions and applied exercises connect scholarly arguments to concrete political problems while considering the ethical challenges of studying violence.

Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Define civil war and distinguish it from related forms of political violence.
2. Compare structural and strategic explanations for civil war onset and duration.
3. Explain how recruitment, rebel organization, and external support shape wartime behavior.
4. Evaluate research designs, evidence, and the limits of causal claims in conflict research.
5. Develop evidence-based arguments about civilian protection and conflict resolution.

Course Structure

Each meeting combines a short lecture with discussion, case comparisons, or an applied exercise. Exercises include mapping a conflict's actors, identifying bargaining obstacles, and assessing a study's research design. Students should arrive prepared to identify each reading's question, argument, evidence, and limitations. No prior statistical training is required; quantitative findings will be explained in accessible terms.

Course Requirements

Component	Weight
Class participation	10%
Reading quizzes	20%
Two analytical reflection papers (10% each)	20%
Midterm examination	25%
Second examination	25%
Total	100%

Class Participation (10%)

Participation is assessed through preparation, constructive contributions, attentive engagement with peers, and completion of in-class activities. Students may contribute through spoken discussion or brief written responses. Contributions should explain an argument, connect readings, evaluate evidence, or raise a substantive question. Respectful disagreement is encouraged.

Reading Quizzes (20%)

Ten brief quizzes assess comprehension of the assigned readings rather than memorization of minor details. Quizzes are announced at least one meeting in advance. The two lowest scores are dropped, and the remaining eight receive equal weight. Students facing an approved absence or accommodation should contact the instructor to arrange an alternative where necessary.

Analytical Reflection Papers (20%)

Students write two papers of 1,000–1,200 words each, drawing on *Hotel Rwanda* and *Beasts of No Nation*, respectively. Each paper must connect at least two course readings to the film, advance a clear argument, and assess where the portrayal illuminates or simplifies scholarly explanations. These are analytical essays rather than plot summaries. An equivalent written case study is available for students who need an alternative to viewing graphic material.

Papers are evaluated on the quality of the argument (30%), engagement with course readings (30%), use of evidence and critical analysis (30%), and clarity and citation practices (10%). Paper 1 is due at the end of Week 8; Paper 2 is due at the end of Week 14. Cite sources consistently using an established author–date style.

Examinations (50%)

The midterm in Week 8 covers Weeks 1–7. The second examination in Week 15 covers Weeks 9–14, while requiring students to apply foundational concepts from the first half of the course. Each combines short answers and analytical essays assessing conceptual understanding, comparison of theories, and application to evidence. A study guide and review meeting precede each examination. Each exam contributes 25% of the final grade; there is no additional final exam.

Illustrative Grading Scale

A+: 97–100	B+: 87–<90	C+: 77–<80	D+: 67–<70
A: 93–<97	B: 83–<87	C: 73–<77	D: 60–<67
A–: 90–<93	B–: 80–<83	C–: 70–<73	F: Below 60

The scale will be aligned with the host institution's grading system.

Course Guidelines

Deadlines and extensions. Written work loses five percentage points per calendar day when submitted late, up to seven days. Students should request extensions before the deadline when possible; emergencies and approved accommodations are handled individually. Work submitted after seven days requires an agreed submission plan.

Feedback and grade review. Feedback identifies strengths and areas for improvement. Students may request a review within one week of receiving a grade by submitting a brief explanation tied to the assessment criteria. Reconsideration may increase, decrease, or leave the grade unchanged.

Academic integrity and AI tools. All submitted analysis must reflect the student's own understanding, and all sources must be acknowledged. Generative AI may be used for brainstorming or language editing if its use is disclosed; it may not produce substantive answers, replace reading, fabricate sources, or be used during quizzes or examinations. Students remain responsible for the accuracy and originality of submitted work. Institutional academic-integrity procedures govern suspected violations.

Accessibility and inclusion. Students are encouraged to discuss learning needs with the instructor and the institution's accessibility service early in the course. Reasonable accommodations will be implemented through the relevant institutional process. Course materials address violence, sexual violence, and child soldiering; advance notices and equivalent alternatives will be provided where appropriate.

Communication. Course announcements, readings, submission instructions, and feedback will appear on the institutional learning platform. Students should check their institutional email and the platform regularly. Institution-specific policy language will be added before the course begins.

Course Readings

There is no required textbook. Assigned articles will be available through the institution's library or learning platform. Complete the readings before the corresponding meeting. The schedule below uses teaching weeks so that it can be adapted to different academic calendars. Breaks and holidays will be incorporated when the course is scheduled.

Course Schedule

Part I. Introduction and Consequences

Week 1, Meeting 1: Introduction

Course overview; defining and comparing political violence. No required readings.

Week 1, Meeting 2: What are Civil Wars? Definitions and Concepts

- Kalyvas, Stathis. 2001. "'New' and 'Old' Wars: A Valid Distinction?" World Politics 54: 99-118.
- Kalyvas, Stathis, and Laia Balcells. 2010. "International System and Technologies of Rebellion: How the End of the Cold War Shaped Internal Conflict." American Political Science Review 104: 415-429.

Week 2, Meeting 1: Why do we Study Civil Wars? Part I

- Ghobarah, Hazem Adam, Paul Huth and Bruce Russett. 2003. "Civil Wars Kill and Maim People – Long after the Shooting Stops." American Political Science Review 97:189- 202.
- Gleditsch Kristian Skrede, Idean Salehyan, and Kenneth A. Schultz. 2008. "Fighting at Home, Fighting Abroad: How Civil Wars Lead to International Disputes." Journal of Conflict Resolution 52(4): 479-506.

Week 2, Meeting 2: Why do we Study Civil Wars? Part II

- Blattman, Christopher. 2009. "From Violence to Voting: War and Political Participation in Uganda." American Political Science Review 103: 231-247.
- Gilligan, Michael, Benjamin Pasquale, and Cyrus Samii. 2014. "Civil War and Social Cohesion: Lab-in-the-Field Evidence from Nepal." American Journal of Political Science. 58(3): 604–619.

Part II. Causes of Civil Wars

Week 3, Meeting 1: Inequality and Ethnicity

- Cederman, Lars-Erik, Nils B. Weidmann, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch. 2011. "Horizontal Inequalities and Ethno-Nationalist Civil War: A Global Comparison".American Political Science Review 105: 478-495.
- Cederman, Lars-Erik, Andreas Wimmer, and Brian Min. 2010. "Why Do Ethnic Groups Rebel? New Data and Analysis." World Politics 62: 87-119.

Week 3, Meeting 2: State Capacity and Economic Development, Part I

- Fearon, James and David Laitin. 2003. "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War." American Political Science Review 97: 75-90.
- Fjelde, Hanne and Indra De Soysa. 2009. "Coercion, Co-optation, or Cooperation?: State Capacity and the Risk of Civil War, 1961—2004." Conflict Management and Peace Science 26: 5-25.

Week 4, Meeting 1: State Capacity and Economic Development, Part II

- Collier, Paul and Anke Hoeffler. 2004. "Greed and Grievance in Civil War." Oxford Economic Papers 56: 563-595.
- DiGiuseppe, Matthew, Colin Barry and Richard Frank. 2012. "Good for the Money: International Finance, State Capacity, and Internal Armed Conflict" Journal of Peace Research 49: 391-405.

Week 4, Meeting 2: Natural Resources

- Ross, Michael. 2004. "How do Natural Resources Influence Civil War? Evidence from Thirteen Cases". International Organization 58: 35-67.
- Fjelde, Hanne. 2009. "Buying Peace? Oil Wealth, Corruption and Civil War, 1985-99". Journal of Peace Research 46: 199-218.

Week 5, Meeting 1: Regime Type

- Hegre, Havard, Tanja Ellingsen, Scott Gates and Nils Petter Gleditsch. 2001. "Toward a Democratic Civil Peace? Democracy, Political Change, and Civil War, 1816-1992". American Political Science Review 95: 33-48.
- Fjelde, Hanne. 2010. "Generals, Dictators, and Kings." Conflict Management and Peace Science 27 (3): 195–218.

Week 5, Meeting 2: Strategic Explanations I: Informational Asymmetries

- Walter, Barbara. 2009. "Bargaining Failures and Civil War." Annual Review of Political Science 12: 243-61.
- Walter, Barbara. 2006. "Information, Uncertainty, and the Decision to Secede". International Organization 60: 105-135.

Week 6, Meeting 1: Strategic Explanations II: Commitment Problems and Issue Indivisibility

- Roessler, Philip. 2011. "The Enemy Within: Personal Rule, Coups, and Civil War in Africa." World Politics 63: 300-346.
- Toft, Monica, 2006. "Issue Divisibility and Time Horizons as Rationalist Explanations for War." Security Studies 15: 34-69.

Week 6, Meeting 2: Transnational Dimensions of Civil Wars

- Salehyan, Idean. 2007. "Transnational Rebels: Neighboring States as Sanctuary for Rebel Groups." World Politics 59: 217-242.
- Salehyan, Idean and Kristian Gleditsch. 2006. "Refugees and the Spread of Civil War." International Organization 60: 335-366.

Week 7: Comparative Application and Research Design

Meeting 1: compare explanations for two civil wars using readings from Weeks 1–6. Meeting 2: evaluate measurement, case selection, and causal inference in two assigned studies. No additional readings.

Week 8: Review and Midterm

Meeting 1: review and synthesis. Meeting 2: midterm examination. Reflection Paper 1 due at the end of the week.

Part III. Dynamics of Civil Wars

Week 9, Meeting 1: Participation and Recruitment, Part I

- Kalyvas, Stathis and Matthew Adam Kocher. 2007. "How "Free" Is Free Riding in Civil Wars? Violence, Insurgency, and the Collective Action Problem." World Politics 59 (2): 177-216.
- Humphreys, Macartan and Jeremy Weinstein. 2008. "Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War." American Journal of Political Science 52: 436–455.

Week 9, Meeting 2: Participation and Recruitment, Part II

- Lyall, Jason, Graeme Blair, and Kosuke Imai. 2013. "Explaining Support for Combatants during War time: A Survey Experiment in Afghanistan." American Political Science Review 107(4): 679-705.
- Beber, Bernd and Christopher Blattman. 2013. "The Logic of Child Soldiering and Coercion." International Organization 67(1): 65 – 104.

Week 10, Meeting 1: Inside the Rebel Groups, Part I

- Cunningham, Kathleen Gallagher, Kristin M. Bakke, and Lee J. M. Seymour. 2012. "Shirts Today, Skins Tomorrow: Dual Contests and the Effects of Fragmentation in Self- Determination Disputes." Journal of Conflict Resolution 56(1) 67-93.
- Cunningham, Kathleen Gallagher. 2013. "Actor Fragmentation and Civil War Bargaining: How Internal Divisions Generate Civil Conflict." American Journal of Political Science 57 (3): 659–672.

Week 10, Meeting 2: Inside the Rebel Groups, Part II

- Staniland, Paul. 2012. "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries." Journal of Conflict Resolution 56(1): 16-40.
- Toft, Monica and Yuri Zhukov. 2015. "Islamists and Nationalists: Rebel Motivation and Counterinsurgency in Russia's North Caucasus." American Political Science Review 109(2): 222-238.

Week 11, Meeting 1: Tactics and Repertoires of Violence

- Cohen, Dara Kay. 2013. "Explaining Rape During Civil War: Cross-National Evidence (1980-2009)." American Political Science Review 107(3): 461- 477.
- Fortna, Virginia Page. 2015. "Do Terrorists Win? Rebels' Use of Terrorism and Civil War Outcomes." International Organization 69(3): 519–556.

Week 11, Meeting 2: Level of Violence, Part I

- Humphreys, Macartan and Jeremy Weinstein. 2006. "Handling and Manhandling Civilians in Civil War." American Political Science Review 100: 429- 447.
- Carey, Sabine, Michael Colaresi, Neil Mitchell. 2015. "Governments, Informal Links to Militias and Accountability". Journal of Conflict Resolution 59(5): 850-876.

Week 12, Meeting 1: Level of Violence, Part II

- Salehyan, Idean, David Siroky and Reed M. Wood. 2014. "External Rebel Sponsorship and Civilian Abuse: A Principal-Agent Analysis of Wartime Atrocities." International Organization 68(3): 633 – 661.
- Wood, Reed M. 2014. " From Loss to Looting? Battlefield Costs and Rebel Incentives for Violence." International Organization 68(4): 979 – 999.

Week 12, Meeting 2: Duration of Civil Wars

- Cunningham, David E. 2006. "Veto Players and Civil War Duration". American Journal of Political Science 50:875-892.
- Fearon, James. 2004. "Why Do Some Civil Wars Last So Much Longer Than Others?" Journal of Peace Research 41: 275-302.

Week 13: Applied Research Workshops

Meeting 1: Rebel organization and civilian violence. Compare arguments from the readings on fragmentation, recruitment, and civilian abuse. Groups develop a causal explanation and identify evidence that could challenge it. No additional readings.

Meeting 2: Evaluating external sponsorship. Revisit the readings on external support and transnational rebellion. Debate how sponsors influence rebel conduct and consider alternative explanations for observed patterns. No additional readings.

Week 14: Case Comparison and Synthesis

Meeting 1: Foreign involvement and conflict duration. Using the readings on transnational rebellion, external sponsorship, and veto players, compare how international actors shape two conflicts selected in consultation with the class. Groups prepare an actor map and evaluate competing explanations. No additional required readings.

Meeting 2: Civilian protection and conflict resolution. Students present short comparative analyses and discuss the implications of course research for civilian protection and prospects for peace. Revisit readings from Weeks 11–13. Reflection Paper 2 due at the end of the week.

Week 15: Review and Second Examination

Meeting 1: review and integration of course themes. Meeting 2: second examination.

This syllabus is a sample and may be revised to reflect institutional requirements and the academic calendar.