

Ethnic Defection in Civil War

Stathis N. Kalyvas

Abstract

I explore the issue of ethnic defection in the context of civil war, broadly defined to include insurgencies against foreign occupiers and colonizers. In many ways, foreign occupation and colonization constitute the most “naked” and the harshest forms of alien rule, hence they are toughest to justify and the hardest to sustain in the age of nationalism. From this point of view, processes of native collaboration with occupiers and colonizers constitute a form of ethnic defection that is particularly puzzling and remains under-explored. I link this question to the broader theoretical issue of the dynamics of ethnic identification, especially in the context of “ethnic” civil wars. I argue that civil wars are settings that allow the manipulation of political dimensionality, including ethnicity. Although the ethnic demography of a country is difficult to alter, especially in the short term, ethnic identities are not fixed and ethnic defection is not uncommon. I provide a tentative theory to explain the determinants of ethnic defection at the macro and micro levels. I hypothesize that the factors most likely to produce processes of ethnic defection are the level of resources enjoyed by political actors and the war itself, particularly through its violence.