CHAPTER 1

Diffusion and Escalation of Ethnic Conflict

Steven E. Lobell and Philip Mauceri

Introduction

In this book we offer an approach to understanding the internationalization of ethnic conflict in different regional contexts that integrates international relations and comparative analysis. We examine four core explanatory frameworks that contribute to the diffusion and the escalation of ethnic conflicts in divided states and societies. These explanations are at the nexus of comparative and international understandings of conflict. Much of the literature on ethnic conflict focuses on the origins of ethnic identity (instrumentalists versus constructivists; Smith 1986, 1993; Kaplan 1993; Connor 1994; Arfi 1998) or on the sources of ethnic conflict (Lake and Rothchild 1998).1 We focus on the link between ethnic and interstate conflict, and specifically, on the internationalization of ethnic conflicts. We recognize the internationalization of ethnic conflict as requiring an understanding of “intermestic” structures and processes.2

By treating the state as a unitary actor that pursue national interests and international relations as the interaction of sovereign states, many international relations theorists ignore the domestic political environment that characterizes most divided states. For instance, realists assume that the central government commands the obedience of different groups under its authority and thereby controls what goes on within its borders (Waltz 1979; Grieco 1990; Mearsheimer 2001). International conflicts are viewed largely as interstate conflicts involving unitary state actors. Yet, internal armed conflict is much more prevalent than interstate conflict. Since the end of World War II, most wars have been internal conflicts, a trend that accelerated in the aftermath of the end of the Cold War. Between 1989 and 1994, there were no fewer than 99 civil wars, with 80,000 deaths in the 1993–1994 period alone (Gurr 1994; Wallensteen and Sollenberg 2000). The majority of these internal conflicts had a strong ethnic dimension. Although few states have ceased to exist, even in the third world (David 1991), states experiencing internal ethnic conflict face serious threats to their structures and regimes, which are often of a much higher order in comparison with external threats (Ayoob 1991; Gause 1992). What has increasingly been referred to as “state failure,”

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territory, has been largely the result of spiraling internal ethnic conflicts and not interstate wars (Carnegie Commission 1997).

Few comparative political analyses focus on the role of international structures and politics to explain domestic conflicts, as Theda Skocpol (1979: 18–19) long ago pointed out. Whether analysts focus on culture or structure, what often results is an approach that comes close to suggesting the enclosed and *sui generis* nature of the conflict being examined (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 1997: 143). Conflict is viewed as the result of purely internal disputes and histories, only indirectly influenced by external dynamics. Yet international conditions can provide favorable or unfavorable opportunities for access to resources, legitimacy and coalition partners. Most theoretical approaches that focus on the impact of international politics in domestic conflict remain limited largely to the economic policy making process. Dependency school theorists (Amin 1976; Cardoso and Faletto 1979; Evans 1979) were the first to draw attention in systematic ways to the important influence exercised by multinational corporations, foreign governments, and international financial organizations in the internal policy making processes and political coalitions of underdeveloped countries. More recently, growing market integration and technological changes have renewed attention to the links between policies and their outcomes in different states (Keohane and Milner 1996). Still, even in the area of political economy, many, such institution-oriented analyses, continue to focus on domestic economic structures in determining policy outcomes and coalitions.

Many realist accounts accentuate systemic pressures as determining but ignore the influence of domestic politics. Comparative analyses that emphasize internal factors grant domestic coalitions primacy but neglect the importance of international politics. In this book we integrate this literature. We argue that “inter-mestic” forces, and especially the entangling of domestic and international pressures, and their internal and external reverberations, contribute to the diffusion and the escalation of ethnic conflict (Gourevitch 1978; Putnam 1988; Muller and Risse–Kappen 1993; Risse–Kappen 1995; Keohane and Milner 1996; Lobell 2003).

We believe that there are significant differences within states, with multiple actors that influence a state’s international policies and its position in the global system. Moreover, international actors play a major role in the possibility of constructing domestic political coalitions, not only through direct intervention but by supporting and/or opposing them. In an analysis of the relation between internal ethnic conflict and international relations, it is useful to view the state as consisting of a ranked or unranked divided ethnic systems (in most system there are more than two ethnic groups; Horowitz 1985: 21–36). In the ranked system, one ethnic group is superordinate and the other is subordinate. In this system subordinates can try to displace superordinate groups or raise their own position without denying the legitimacy of the hierarchy. In the latter system, neither is subordinate to the other. Instead, parallel ethnic groups coexist, perhaps autonomously, with each “peak” group internally stratified. In this system there is strong pressure for educational and occupational proportionality by both ethnic groups.