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A student of civil conflict, I research war termination, peace processes and post-conflict reconstruction, with a particular interest in the Middle East and the Balkans, and a growing interest in Africa. In my work, I explore conditions propitious to the explosion of violence as well as the peaceful conduct of politics in plural societies. Anchoring my work in the theoretical literature of international relations and comparative politics, I see my research as attempting to develop policy-relevant analysis, while, at the same time, contributing to theoretical debates.

War termination

My PhD dissertation analyzed the emergence and development of militia institutions in Lebanon and Bosnia. Not only was this aspect of civil war understudied and poorly understood but, I argued, it was crucial to understanding militias' motivations to settle conflict and the subsequent sustainability of peace. By drawing parallels between the origins of militia and state institutions, I was able to draw on mainstream political science to situate these actors. I then used insights from historical, sociological and rational choice institutionalism to understand the impact of institutions on decisions.

My concern for, and intuitions about, militias and their institutions is the direct consequence of first-hand experience of the Lebanese civil war. (A citizen of Lebanon, I spent my formative years and became politically aware during the civil war that tore my country apart from 1975 until 1991. Not only did I experience war first hand, I also gained knowledge of and access to the various political actors through my work as a war journalist and political analyst. After the signing of the Ta'if Accord which brought the war to an end, I left Lebanon to pursue graduate studies in Canada). This has also highlighted the necessity of a nuanced understanding of case studies. Reflecting on this experience has led me to embark on another research project to answer the question, "When and under what conditions do militias treat civilian populations in accordance with the spirit, if not the letter, of International Humanitarian Law?" In this project, I build on research that I conducted for the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and focus on two militias accused of carrying out "terrorist" actions against civilians (Hizballah in Lebanon and FARC in Colombia).

Peace processes

Militias are one of many types of non-state armed actors whose presence and importance on the international security scene was particularly felt since the end of the Cold War. The growing acknowledgement of the role and importance of these actors (private security firms, international terrorist networks) draws our attention to the emergence of new (and pressing) domains of investigation that International Relations (IR) theory has historically downplayed or ignored altogether.

My interest in militias and non-state armed actors is in line with efforts to broaden IR's domain of enquiry. I am also interested in the emergence of international networks that finance a number of civil wars. These networks are under-theorized. They are also extremely important. Analysts have singled them out as an important cause of the protractedness of civil conflicts. How do regional and international black markets prolong civil wars? Can they provide opportunities for conflict resolution? How should they be included in peace implementation schemes?

I am also involved in research on "transition" violence. This research, funded by SSHRC and conducted with Stephen Brown of the University of Ottawa, analyses the use and/or non-use of violence during war-to-peace and democratic transitions. No matter what their starting point or end stage, transitions are fluid moments when the old rules of the game are no longer valid but when new rules have not been institutionalized yet. The research asks when and under what conditions actors resort to, or threaten, violence in transition periods. How should we understand this violence? What is the role of outside interveners in fanning or dousing the flames of violence? The project draws on four African cases: two transitions from war to peace (Angola and Mozambique), and two transitions from authoritarianism to democracy (Kenya and Zimbabwe). The analysis also has direct implications and applicability for the Middle East. Notwithstanding significant political liberalization in countries like Jordan and Morocco, authoritarian politics remain the norm in the region and democratic demands are often met with violence. I would like to extend the findings of this research and use them to think about the role that outsiders can (or cannot) play in managing transition violence in the Middle East.

Peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction

For wars to end, local and international actors must not only succeed in silencing the guns; they must also be able to build sustainable states that will be better equipped to deal with internal tensions. This, at least, is the stated purpose of practitioners and policy-makers who have cast foreign assistance to post-conflict reconstruction as part of a process of social engineering with an eye on conflict prevention.

Power sharing is often proposed as the institutional solution most likely to provide reluctant actors with the necessary security guarantees to ensure that they will disarm and demobilize. But is power sharing really the panacea it is said to be? I point, in my research on Bosnia and Lebanon, to the challenges of building self-sustaining power sharing institutions in the wake of recent violence. The research also investigates the role played by outside actors in the reconstruction of war-torn states and societies. While many studies have cast foreign assistance to peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction as technical aid, my work highlights the highly political aspects of such interventions. It focuses on the imposition, by outsiders, of the means and ends of post-conflict reconstruction, and on the ensuing thorny issue of ownership. It also highlights the power dynamics inherent in local-international interactions and reflects on the modes of resistance that local actors develop to reclaim control of the processes of post-conflict reconstruction.

Both institutional and sociological aspects of peace-building and post-conflict reconstruction are important to our understanding of the kinds of polities that are being rebuilt on the morrow of civil wars. This research is concerned not only with the sustainability of peace, understood as the non-violent conduct of politics, but also with the nature of this peace and the extent to which it is conducive to the respect and promotion of diversity and pluralism.