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# 1

## Introduction

ARMED NONSTATE ACTORS, civil warfare, and the challenges these pose have dominated the US national security debate for most of the last 20 years. Nonstate fighters have been central features in large-scale American wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. They have been US targets or allies in a host of smaller-scale interventions in civil wars ranging from Syria to Somalia to the Philippines to Nigeria to Ukraine. The perceived requirements of fighting nonstate enemies have inspired major modernization programs for counterinsurgency, and multiple revisions of US military doctrine and training. In many ways, the US military of 2020 is now a product of a nearly two-decade focus on armed nonstate actors.<sup>1</sup>

Whether this focus should continue has become one of the most important ongoing debates in US defense policy. As the US role in Afghanistan and Iraq winds down, many would now shift emphasis away from nonstate enemies and civil wars and back toward the great power threats and interstate warfare that dominated military planning before 2001.<sup>2</sup> Arguments for such a shift sometimes cite the rising importance of Russia or China, but many frame their case around the military difficulties of civil warfare against nonstate enemies—which they often see as insurmountable at a cost Americans will be willing to pay.<sup>3</sup> Others, however, disagree, arguing that nonstate enemies in civil warfare will remain an important problem for the US military in the future and that the country cannot simply opt out of preparing to meet such challenges.<sup>4</sup> Still others say critics overstate the difficulty of defeating nonstate foes, and that hard-earned lessons from Afghanistan and Iraq enable more effective counterinsurgency at a more manageable cost.<sup>5</sup> And some argue that nonstate threats can be met with “balanced” forces not designed for a preclusive focus on civil warfare and counterinsurgency.<sup>6</sup>

Academics, too, have been paying attention to nonstate warfare. Since 2001, civil warfare involving nonstate actors has attracted a large and growing literature in international relations and comparative politics. Inspired partly by the public concerns raised by Afghanistan and Iraq, partly by the new availability of high-quality data on the conduct of these wars, and partly by the scale of human suffering created by such conflicts, the subject has drawn scholars and research that have now produced in excess of 275 published papers, more than 80 scholarly books, and a recognized sub-subfield: courses on civil war are now taught in most elite departments of political science in the United States.<sup>7</sup>

Yet for all this diversity in today's defense debate, and all the focus in the last generation of scholarship on civil warfare, most analysts share a critical underlying assumption. For most on all sides of today's debate, it is assumed that nonstate actors fight very differently than states do.

In particular, interstate warfare is usually seen as high-intensity, conventional combat in which large, uniformed, heavily armored formations maneuver in the open on substantially rural battle spaces away from large populations of innocent civilians, employing massed firepower to destroy one another as a means to take and hold ground. By contrast, nonstate actors are widely expected to wage irregular warfare using lethal but militarily unsophisticated "asymmetric" means such as suicide vests, roadside bombs, snipers, assassinations, and car bombings; to seek out densely populated areas and to intermingle indistinguishably with civilian communities; and to combine these tactics with sophisticated information strategies using the internet and transnational cable news networks to influence world and regional opinion rather than taking and holding ground or seeking decisive battle.<sup>8</sup>

In fact it is this underlying assumption about the distinctiveness of state and nonstate war fighting that drives the whole debate. Those who want US defense planning to shift away from nonstate war fighting and toward interstate warfare advocate this because they believe the two domains differ profoundly in their nature and requirements. Much of the opposition to this camp accepts its basic assumptions for nonstate warfare even while opposing their policy prescriptions as impractical. Even those who argue that nonstate enemies can be beaten with the same US forces and tactics that work against state armies still usually assume that the enemy will fight very differently if they are a nonstate warlord militia or guerilla insurgency than if they are a state army; for advocates of "balance" the issue is still one of balancing the demands of two very different styles of military opposition. The existence of a scholarly subliteration on "civil war" presupposes a category distinction: if state actors

in interstate warfare and nonstate actors in civil wars all behaved about the same way, there would be no reason to teach courses or write books about a distinction without a difference.<sup>9</sup>

Yet there are good reasons to suspect that this widespread assumption is oversimplified at best. While some nonstate actors do fight in much the way the standard assumption describes, others do not.

In 2006, for example, the nonstate Shiite militia Hezbollah met an Israeli state offensive with a remarkably conventional defense in southern Lebanon. Armed with modern, precision-guided antitank weapons and disposed in depth among a system of fortified villages astride critical lines of communication, Hezbollah defended ground against Israeli armor, infantry, and artillery through a 34-day campaign using methods not unlike those of German defensive doctrine on the Eastern Front from 1942 to 1945. The Israeli Army, for its part, had begun a low-tech transformation process to improve its effectiveness in irregular warfare and had reoriented its training and doctrine away from conventional combat by 2006. When it instead faced a surprisingly state-like defender in Hezbollah the result was unexpectedly heavy casualties and near defeat for a well-equipped Westernized state; the ensuing political unrest in Israel contributed to the fall of the Kadima government and cost the military chief of staff his job.<sup>10</sup>

Nor is Hezbollah in Lebanon the only such example. Al Qaeda fighters in 2001–2 at Bai Beche, Highway 4, and the Shah-i-Kot valley in Afghanistan used surprisingly conventional methods with considerable skill, as did Chechen militiamen in Grozny in 1994–95, Croatian separatists in the Balkans in 1991, and Rwandan rebels in 1994. And these conventional methods enabled nonstate actors either to defeat ill-prepared state armies (such as the Russians in the First Chechen War) or to sell their lives dearly in hard fighting at close quarters against even well-prepared state militaries (such as America's in 2002).<sup>11</sup> Not all nonstate opponents will be capable of this. But some already are—and others will be.

Nor do all *states* follow the expected playbook very closely. Saddam's state military in 2003 augmented its mechanized regulars with a variety of irregular Fedayeen militia organizations patterned after the Somali gunmen that nonstate warlord Mohammed Farah Aideed had used against American Rangers in Mogadishu in 1993. Much of the actual combat in 2003 took the form of attacks by these Saddam Fedayeen irregulars, who used a combination of rocket-propelled grenades, small arms, and civilian cars or motorbikes to assault heavily armored US ground forces on the outskirts of Iraqi cities.<sup>12</sup> In

2011, Libyan strongman Muamar Gaddafi quickly realized that his state military could not counter NATO airpower using concentrated formations of tanks and artillery in the open and instead abandoned such conventional methods for intermingled operations among the population waged by mostly irregular formations of dismounted infantry with a substantial involvement by hired foreign mercenaries.<sup>13</sup> In Crimea in 2014 the Russian state deployed foot soldiers in unmarked green uniforms that were meant to blur the line between state regulars and nonstate forces.<sup>14</sup> The Iranian state security forces today combine regular mechanized formations with irregular paramilitary militias with a combination of internal, border security, and possibly irregular warfare missions.<sup>15</sup>

Just how different, then, *are* state and nonstate war making? Is the widespread assumption of radical difference correct most of the time but with occasional, rare, exceptions? Or are the exceptions increasingly the norm? Is the accuracy of the standard assumption changing over time? If so, why? What determines how any given actor will fight? Are these determinants themselves changing? And what implications follow for the future of warfare and the proper design, structure, equipment, or doctrine of US or other militaries?

Their importance notwithstanding, these questions have been surprisingly little studied. There are enormous, sprawling literatures on nonstate actors, future conflict, and irregular warfare. But little of this tries to explain variance in nonstate actors' military strategy and tactics in any theoretically systematic way.

The counterinsurgency literature, for example, is built around the exigencies of defeating nonstate insurgents—but tends to assume a prototypically “asymmetric,” irregular fighting style for insurgents and makes little effort to explain systematic variance in insurgent methods theoretically.<sup>16</sup> Official intelligence assessments are rarely based on systematic theoretical foundations; the intelligence community tends to rely on rich reporting on particular cases, interpreted via the professional judgment of intelligence officers. The results depend critically on the skills and experience of the individuals involved, and the classified nature of most such data and findings typically precludes open assessment of the results.

The scholarly literature on civil warfare is extensive and growing, but its focus has typically been the onset, termination, and settlement of such wars, not their military conduct. Where the methods of civil warfare are studied at all the issue is usually whether combatants will target civilians, commit atrocities, employ indiscriminate force, or use sexual violence—not whether their

methods will be conventional or asymmetric.<sup>17</sup> (Some civil war scholars have recently distinguished “irregular” from “symmetric nonconventional” and “conventional” civil wars wherein some nonstate actors use conventional methods; but systematic theories of conventional nonstate war making remain uncommon, and to date the distinction has often been coded by actors’ equipment rather than their behavior or methods.)<sup>18</sup> Analysts and historians have considered individual conflicts or particular actors, but largely in isolation.<sup>19</sup> Political science more broadly has amassed a large body of research documenting nonstate actors’ growing importance in international politics, explaining this growth, and assessing its implications for traditional notions of sovereignty, the incidence of conflict, and international relations more broadly.<sup>20</sup> An overlapping literature prescribes policy responses for the United States and others.<sup>21</sup> Very little of this, however, is based on any explicit analysis of how such actors will behave militarily; the assumption of asymmetric methods is widespread, but rarely examined or evaluated.

In the absence of sustained direct research, analysts’ expectations for nonstate military behavior usually rest on implicit and largely unexamined assumptions about cause and effect. For most in today’s debate, these underlying causal assumptions fall into one (or both) of two broad schools.

The first sees the expected nonstate preference for asymmetry as a reflection of material structural constraints. In this view, states are too large and too strong for smaller, weaker, nonstate actors to beat them in conventional warfare, so the weak resort to irregular methods as a rational response to inferior materiel.<sup>22</sup>

A smaller school sees nonstate war making as a reflection of nonmaterial cultural distinctions. This argument usually emphasizes tribalism as a source of cultural norms that are expected to promote irregular warfare and make conventional war fighting too alien for effective adoption by some nonstate actors.<sup>23</sup>

Both schools expect irregular methods for most of today’s nonstate combatants. But the difference in their underlying assumptions about cause and effect matters: the two may yield the same expectations for *today*, but they imply very different predictions for the future, and therefore different policy prescriptions.

Most materialists, for example, assume that states’ advantages in military wherewithal are simply too great for nonstate actors to overcome, and hence today’s preference for irregular warfare is stable, because the material imbalance is stable.<sup>24</sup> But others see new technology as leveling the playing field for the

future. They see nonstate actors acquiring precision weapons that were once the preserve of states, and gaining access to new communications media for mass broadcasting in the form of the internet and transnational satellite television networks. At the same time, these analysts see declining state strength in the developing world resulting from environmental or demographic stress. The basic materialist causal logic would lead one to expect nonstate actors to adopt more state-like methods under such conditions. And in fact, a new school of “fourth-generation” or “hybrid” warfare theorists now predict that the combination of better nonstate materiel and weaker state opposition will lead states and nonstate actors to converge onto a common military model that blends high technology with irregular methods, creating a new form of warfare in the process.<sup>25</sup>

By contrast, a tribal culture argument would imply more limited change. While technology can be transferred quickly and state administrative effectiveness can collapse quickly, underlying cultural norms change more slowly. If tribal culture is the most powerful shaper of military behavior, then war-fighting methods are unlikely to be transformed simply because new weapons or communications technologies become available, or simply because opponents weaken. Few culturalists would see norms as completely invariant, but most see them as more stable than military materiel and less volatile over time. Hence a tribal culture approach would predict a continuing preference for irregular methods with limited adoption of alien doctrines typical either of historical state warfare or of some new “fourth-generation” or “hybrid” alternative.

Neither of these approaches, however, have been as systematically developed, tested, and debated as their importance would warrant. Given the stakes in the debate they underpin, it is essential that they receive the searching examination needed to put this debate on the strongest possible analytical foundations.

The purpose of this book is thus to provide such an examination: a direct, systematic analysis of the determinants of nonstate military behavior.

My central findings are that neither materiel nor tribal culture offers an adequate explanation for the observed pattern of nonstate war making—and that the commonplace assumption of distinct state and nonstate methods is unsound. Instead, I argue below for a different causal model, a political theory of nonstate war making, which implies a different pattern of future warfare.

This new explanatory model begins by rejecting the widespread assumption that “conventional” and “guerilla” or “irregular” warfare constitute



autonomous, exclusive categories of distinct military conduct.<sup>26</sup> Real actors' actual military behavior is so interpenetrated by the intuitive elements of each as to make the distinction mostly misleading. Of course there are differences of degree that matter. But the important differences are almost all matters of relative degree, not kind. The new theory thus begins by framing its dependent variable, its outcome to be explained, as a continuous spectrum of military methods, only the extremes of which resemble pure versions of intuitively "conventional" and "guerilla" war fighting. These extrema, moreover, are empirically very rare: almost all real warfare for at least a century has been closer to the blended middle of the spectrum than either extremum, and many current actors—both states and others—have been moving further toward this middle for the last half a century or more. Hezbollah's nonstate defense of southern Lebanon in 2006 bore little resemblance to the massed, exposed armored legions of popular "conventional" imagination—but neither did the US Army's state military defense of Saudi Arabia in Operation Desert Shield in 1990 fit this model. The popular model just isn't very helpful in characterizing the actual methods of real militaries in the modern era, whether these be states or not—there are meaningful differences between Hezbollah's methods and the US Army's, or between the Vietcong's and the Wehrmacht's, but a simple categorical dichotomy between "conventional" and "guerilla" doesn't get us very far in understanding those differences or their causes. On the contrary, the tendency in the debate to chop this continuum of shades in blended methods into exclusive categories of "guerilla" and "conventional" promotes misunderstanding: it exaggerates superficial epiphenomena, conceals underlying commonalities, and obstructs theorizing that might illuminate the real, incremental change now ongoing in all actors' methods. I thus begin the new theory with a different taxonomy of behavior to be explained: not which of two dichotomous categories (or three, if we include a third category of "hybrid") an actor occupies, but where an actor lies on a continuum that positions actors by their relative distance from empirically rare extrema that I will call *Fabian* and *Napoleonic* military styles, to avoid confusion with the artificially stark categories now so deeply embedded in the existing literature.

The new theory explains any given nonstate actor's position on this spectrum with an argument that emphasizes the actor's internal politics. In particular, the theory advanced here emphasizes combatants' institutional development and perceived stakes in the war, both of which vary widely across nonstate actors. The importance of internal politics derives from the complex cooperation among interdependent specialists needed to implement military



methods near the middle of the Fabian-Napoleonic spectrum. Properly executed, such midspectrum methods are the superior choice for a wide range of combatants. But proper execution requires complex interdependence of a kind that creates inherent collective action problems fundamental to this style of warfare. Actors whose political institutions are weak and whose decision making is personalized find these collective action problems very hard to overcome and thus face strong incentives to resort instead to less powerful but simpler Fabian or Napoleonic methods that rely much less heavily on complex cooperation among specialists. And even highly institutionalized actors sometimes prefer not to spend the resources needed to master such difficult midspectrum war fighting; where the stakes are limited—and especially in wars over divisible economic spoils—the cost of achieving midspectrum proficiency can exceed its likely payoff. Actors whose stakes are limited will thus often resort to simpler Fabian or Napoleonic methods even if their institutions would permit midspectrum war fighting.

This is not to say that materiel or tribalism are irrelevant. Materially overwhelmed actors have no choice but to adopt more-Fabian war fighting, and tribal culture can sometimes constrain institutional development. But ongoing changes in technology have been leveling the material playing field between states and nonstate actors for half a century or more. And many apparently tribal cultures of the kind some cultural theorists expect to adopt irregular methods have nevertheless adopted significantly more Napoleonic military styles. Materiel in particular can shape military behavior in important ways—but its effects work in close interaction with its users' politics. The scale of resources needed to wage state-like midspectrum warfare has now shrunk to the point where many nonstate actors can fight effectively in this style—if their institutions are up to the job. And the ongoing spread of sophisticated weapons means that actors' politics, and not their materiel, is increasingly the binding constraint on their methods.

This new theory has significant implications. It predicts, for example, faster change for many actors than tribal culturalists would expect, but not the scale of convergence that many fourth-generation or hybrid warfare theorists anticipate. Technology is spreading rapidly, but actors' internal politics vary and will continue to do so. Because politics are an important constraint on actors' military methods, this means that war-fighting methods are unlikely to converge as fast as technology does, and that technology will be a weak predictor of nonstate actors' behavior. Nonstate combatants *with permissive internal*

*politics* will be able to exploit modern weapons to wage increasingly state-like midspectrum warfare—but others will not, regardless of how modern or lethal their equipment becomes. The net result is thus likely to be increased variance, as some nonstate actors' war fighting comes increasingly to resemble that of states, but others retain older irregular styles even as they acquire modern weapons. And the chief determinants of how any given enemy will fight are shifting away from their weapon holdings, their numerical strength, or the scale of assistance they receive from state patrons, and toward their *politics*—the job of anticipating future opponents' methods is thus increasingly the social science challenge of understanding actors' internal political dynamics rather than the traditional military task of counting weapons or assessing technology per se.

These expectations for future opponents in turn pose implications for US defense policy. Since the early 1990s, a fixture of the defense debate has been a series of calls to “transform” an ostensibly out-of-date, legacy military for radically new conditions of future warfare. From the early 1990s to roughly 2005, transformation advocates chiefly sought a much smaller, faster-moving, higher-technology, information-enabled force built for high-firepower standoff precision warfare against massed fleets of enemy tanks and armored vehicles; existing forces were criticized as too manpower heavy, too slow, and too oriented toward low-tech close combat.<sup>27</sup> As the Iraq insurgency intensified after 2005, the debate flipped: new transformation advocates saw the existing US military as too capital intensive, too small, and too firepower dependent to cope with dispersed, population-intermingled insurgents using guerilla methods; “transformation” now meant a move away from high-tech standoff precision capital intensity and toward a more labor-intensive, dismounted, lower-firepower force better suited to persistent population security.<sup>28</sup> As the Iraq and Afghan insurgencies have wound down, the debate has now flipped back again, with “transformation” advocacy returning to its pre-2005 emphasis on high-tech standoff precision warfare enabled by new networked information technologies.<sup>29</sup>

Yet neither of these transformation agendas is a good fit to the threat environment the new theory projects. High-tech, standoff-precision forces perform well against massed, exposed, near-Napoleonic foes but perform poorly against better-concealed, midspectrum enemies—and the new theory predicts fewer of the former and more of the latter over time as many nonstate actors join astute state militaries in moving toward the middle of the

Fabian-Napoleonic spectrum. And a standoff military would be radically ill suited for the highly Fabian methods that will persist among those nonstate actors who lack the internal politics for midspectrum war fighting. Conversely, a force transformed for low-tech, low-firepower population security would lack the lethality needed against midspectrum enemies, whether these be states or the nonstate actors who will be increasingly capable of such methods in the future.

Perhaps ironically, the force best suited to the future might be one that looks much more like US forces of the past. In land warfare against midspectrum enemies, the ideal force would be a balanced, medium-weight alternative with more dismounted infantry than the high-tech transformed force but more armor and artillery than the low-tech transformed force—in fact, this ideal force bears more than a passing resemblance to the structure of the legacy US land forces of the Cold War. By contrast, the futuristic high-tech standoff alternative is optimized for fighting a kind of enemy that is likely to become less common in the future, not more: massed, exposed, highly vulnerable Napoleonic state armies. The low-tech transformed alternative has an opposite but analogous problem: it is optimized for fighting the highly Fabian nonstate irregulars that will not disappear, but will probably also become less frequent in the future as more nonstate actors shift toward the middle of the Fabian-Napoleonic spectrum. Of course the ultimate design of the US military depends on more than just the nature of likely opposition. But the threat environment does matter, and the new theory suggests, paradoxically, that both of the futuristic, ostensibly forward-looking “transformation” agendas in today’s debate are actually built around backward-looking threat projections for either state or nonstate actors in future land combat.<sup>30</sup> If sound, the new theory thus suggests that the best design for future US land forces may be among the least radically transformational.

For scholars, the new theory casts doubt on the widespread tendency to isolate studies of civil war, with ostensibly distinctive dynamics, from research on interstate warfare. In fact, military behavior by nonstate actors in civil warfare differs only by degree along a continuum from that of state actors in international warfare, and the study of each can profit from systematic exposure to the other. By helping to unify these phenomena as special cases of more general causal dynamics the new theory sheds light on both domains. And in the process, the results help develop an understudied topic in the civil war literature via a systematic account of participants’ combat methods and their military rationale.

To make this case, the balance of this chapter will first define some critical terms and delimit the theory's scope. It then presents the book's methodology and justifies this choice. It concludes with a description of the book's organization and structure and provides a roadmap for what is to come.

## Scope and Definitions

The book seeks to explain the military behavior of nonstate actors in warfare involving numerically superior state opponents since 1900. Several of these terms require careful definition.

First, by "nonstate actor" I mean any entity other than a sovereign state as defined in international law. The 1933 Montevideo Convention defines a sovereign state as an institution with "(a) a permanent population; (b) a defined territory; (c) government; and (d) capacity to enter into relations with other states."<sup>31</sup> Hence nonstate actors would include, *inter alia*, insurgent groups; ethnic separatists; internationally unrecognized armed forces such as warlord militias; mercenaries or private military firms; armed religious or ideological extremists; criminal syndicates; or any other user of armed force other than Montevideo Convention states.

But while I define "nonstate actor" expansively, I do not aspire to explain *any* use of violence by actors other than sovereign states. Labor riots, family violence, petty crime, or looting in the aftermath of natural disaster, for example, are all important in their own right but play little role in the national security debate. I thus limit consideration here to *warfare*, which I define as organized violence exceeding 1,000 total battle deaths with at least 100 deaths on each of at least two sides.<sup>32</sup> This includes some campaigns often described as "terrorism" (such as Al Qaeda's conflict with the United States) and others sometimes described as "criminal" (such as the FARC's narco-insurgency in Colombia)—my distinction is based on the scale of violence, not its purpose or motives.

This domain includes warfare between nonstate actors in wars where states are active participants (for an example, see the discussion of the Croatian War of Independence in chapter 8), and it has implications for purely nonstate conflicts as well (for an example, see the discussion in chapter 7 of the Somali SNA's warfare against other militias before the US intervention). But inter-nonstate warfare is not its focus, and the analysis is not meant to be dispositive for all such examples.

The theory's temporal domain extends from 1900 to the mid-21st century, and its scope includes continental warfare but excludes war at sea. This focuses

the analysis on the era of industrial- and information-age warfare that extends through today and into the midterm future, thus accommodating the most policy-relevant subset of the empirical record. I exclude piracy or other maritime conflict per se but include most other forms of large-scale armed violence in the 20th and 21st centuries.

The universe of potential cases thus includes all continental wars from 1900 to the mid-21st century involving at least one state and at least one armed nonstate actor.

The unit of analysis is the nonstate actor's modal military behavior in a given conflict year. Of course there will be subunit variance under this specification: different formations' commanders will use their fighters differently; the same commanders will change their behavior at irregular intervals. I argue, however, that internal politics will tend to shape relatively common behavior across commanders, and over time, for a given internal political configuration.

The dependent variable for the theory below is the behavior of military actors. Of course, combatants in war perform thousands of tasks and do so in thousands of ways; some subset must be specified if the analysis is to be tractable. Given the policy debate around which the book is framed, the natural approach is to focus on the subset of behavior most closely associated with the intuitive distinction between putatively "conventional" state and "irregular" nonstate styles of fighting. However, I treat these not as exclusive categories but as a continuum defined by an actor's modal distance from a *Napoleonic* extremum framed as a pure version of the popular intuition of "conventional" war fighting, and a *Fabian* extremum framed as a pure version of the "irregular" or "guerilla" category. These terms are defined in greater detail in chapter 2 and the appendix, but for now, the characteristics of pure *Fabian* methods include an absolute unwillingness to defend ground via decisive engagement at any point in the theater; dispersed operations with no local concentrations in excess of the theaterwide combatant density; insistence on concealment obtained via intermingling with the civilian population; exclusive reliance on coercion rather than brute force; and rejection of heavy weapons, even when available, in favor of light arms and equipment more suitable to concealment among the population. By contrast, the characteristics of pure *Napoleonic* methods include an insistence on decisive engagement to defend or seize ground that will not be voluntarily relinquished; local concentration to shoulder-to-shoulder densities at a point of attack where ground is contested; use of uniformed forces on battlefields removed from urban population centers; exclusive reliance on brute force rather than coercion; and preferential

employment of the heaviest weapons available to maximize firepower and armor protection. Of course few real actors fit either of these extrema; below I present an index measure that adjudicates varying combinations of observable correlates of these traits to code any given actor on a continuous (0, 6) scale, with 0.0 corresponding to the Fabian extremum, 6.0 corresponding to the Napoleonic extremum, and values in between denoting admixtures whose balance is increasingly Napoleonic as values increase from zero to six.

I explain this dependent variable via two classes of independent, or explanatory, variables: materiel and politics; and I contrast this new theory with prior views emphasizing materiel per se and tribal culture. Here, too, the variables are operationalized in more detail in chapters 2 through 4 and, especially, the appendix. For now, however, *materiel* encompasses both the quality of actors' military equipment (in terms of the lethality of its technology), and its quantity, in terms of the numbers of fielded combatants. *Politics*, like military behavior, comprises a potentially infinite variety of subdimensions; below I consider two: actors' institutional development (to what degree is leadership personalized and informal or impersonal and bureaucratized?) and their perceived stakes in the war (are these limited and divisible or existential and indivisible?).

Tribal culture is not an explanatory variable for the new theory, but, given its salience in the nonstate military literature, I treat it as an alternative explanation in the case studies below. Culture is a richly multidimensional phenomenon with a wide range of potentially important subdimensions and consequences; its role in the nonstate military behavior literature, however, tends to focus on the claim that tribalism is inconsistent with conventional war fighting.<sup>33</sup> In this literature, *tribalism* is a cultural trait in which much of social interaction is shaped by family lineage and descent patterns. In strongly tribal cultures, it is held, trust and cooperation are strong within the family unit but attenuate rapidly beyond it, making commerce, dispute resolution, and collective action progressively more difficult the more remote the perceived bonds of common descent. This in turn is held to produce distinctive patterns of military behavior: tribal societies are expected to field small, decentralized fighting units with often fierce motivation to defend others of close common descent but difficulty cooperating in larger formations that cross lines of family lineage. Loyalties are held to be fluid and command arrangements loose, reflecting the segmented nature of tribal lineage relationships; "me against my brother, my brother and I against my cousin, and all of us against the stranger" is a perhaps apocryphal Bedouin aphorism often cited to describe the

realignments that an emphasis on family group can promote when action is shaped by the relative closeness or distance of kinship.<sup>34</sup> And these patterns are in turn expected to promote tactics that emphasize small-unit raids, ambushes, and quick hit-and-run strikes rather than sustained defense of positions. As Richard Shultz and Andrea Dew put it:

Traditional societies do not have standing professional armies in the Western sense. Rather, all men of age in a tribe, clan or communal group learn through societal norms and legacies to fight in specific ways, and to fight well, if required. . . . these traditional concepts invariably take protracted, irregular, and unconventional forms of combat.<sup>35</sup>

In other parts of the political science and strategic studies literature, “culture” can have a wide variety of other meanings, referring, for example, to patterns of behavior within organizations, or to broad national systems of value or perception.<sup>36</sup> I do not seek in this book to advance a general claim about the causal role of culture in this broader sense. But given the role of arguments about tribalism per se in the nonstate military debate I do thus address this aspect of culture in the case studies and findings below.

### Approach, Method, and Cases

The theory below is motivated by a detailed deductive causal argument. This argument focuses on the relative military advantages and disadvantages of more-Fabian and more-Napoleonic methods and holds that for almost all actors, midspectrum blends of the two are militarily superior but extremely complex. I then develop the internal political requirements of fielding forces able to cope with this complexity.

The deductive argument below draws heavily on the experience of both state and nonstate militaries in modern war. Indeed, one of my central claims is that the putative category distinction between the two is largely an illusion; to sustain this claim requires a sustained exploration of both. The tendency to separate interstate and nonstate warfare into distinct, stove-piped literatures is part of the reason for the widespread misunderstanding of these underlying commonalities: if one studies nonstate warfare by looking only at nonstate actors then its similarities with interstate combat will never be seen. I argue that modern technology creates common military incentives that affect all actors alike—my theoretical discussion of these incentives thus makes extensive use of the modern military history of interstate as well as nonstate warfare,



as a means of shedding unique light on the features of nonstate warfare *per se*. Strictly speaking my findings pertain to nonstate actors *per se*, but the deductive discussion draws heavily on observations of both.

The result is a rationalist theory. None of this means that warlord commanders are cool, emotionless, Enlightenment calculators who evaluate all options in the way Adam Smith or John Stuart Mill might have done, and choose the one best suited to their mathematical objective functions. The causal mechanism here does assume, however, that the reality of warfare disciplines behavior by imposing disproportionate cost on those who make poor choices. War is an unforgiving enterprise. Those who misunderstand its dynamics will be exploited by those with stronger perception, and the result will be destruction or defeat of the obtuse at the hands of the astute: selection effects will remove, through death or conquest, those who consistently choose badly. In the crucible of war, trial and error will thus cause surviving combatants to vector in on something resembling the result of an objective calculation even if it never occurs to them as such. At any given time, some warriors will be in the process of elimination, hence not all will behave as a rationalist optimal behavior model would expect. But if the theory below is sound, then in steady state, most combatants at most times will display behavioral choices that mirror those the logic below suggests are optimal—and those who do not should suffer for their failure. The explicit calculations in the theory below thus short-circuit the process of experiential learning by real combatants in war, but they should predict about the same outcomes if the military logic below is correct.<sup>37</sup>

The result is a deductive theory of military behavioral choice. This deductive theory is then tested via a series of detailed historical case studies of campaigns chosen to create maximum leverage for assessing the theory's validity.

These case studies use a variety of sources but make particular use of field research involving a total of 137 structured interviews with state and nonstate participants in critically selected military campaigns. This field research was conducted in Iraq, Croatia, and Israel, and in the United States with participants who had returned from Iraq and Somalia. It included interviewees who either fought as nonstate combatants (in Croatia) or were in a position to observe directly the behavior of nonstate combatant foes (in Lebanon, Iraq, and Somalia), at military ranks from private to major general, and ambassadorial rank in the Department of State, and it enabled detailed, in-depth, granular description of combat methods, battlefield events, and political details important to the theories assessed here but absent from typical secondary historical accounts. Throughout, military participants were asked to address only factual

events they observed themselves (or performed themselves); wherever possible, multiple participants' accounts of the same events were solicited to insulate the findings against observer bias to the greatest degree possible.<sup>38</sup>

Case method permits the depth of analysis needed to characterize variables that have not heretofore been included in large-*n* data sets, especially military behavior. It also allows process tracing to help distinguish real causation from mere coincidence. This is especially valuable where a deductive theory with a detailed causal mechanism enables multiple observable hypotheses to be deduced for a single case—the more substantively detailed the deductive theory, the more points of tangency there will be between its claims and the historical events of any given case, and thus the more powerful the case can be as a test of the theory.

This depth of detail, however, makes it impossible to consider more than a handful of cases. No such sample can exhaust the range of possible empirical variation, especially for a theory whose dependent variable (and some independent variables) are continuous and real-valued. For a theory specified in continuous variables, there is literally an infinite number of points that make up the relevant theoretical space—this cannot be exhaustively surveyed to see whether prediction and observation match at each possible point. Nor could even the largest plausible large-*n* data set accomplish this. To test the theory here thus requires some act of selection to create a sample of observations chosen to create the greatest possible leverage for evaluating the theory given the scale of research needed to characterize fully all the relevant variables for any given case.

Given this, the cases considered here have been chosen to meet several important, theory-driven selection criteria designed to produce the most challenging test possible from an inherently limited sample.<sup>39</sup> First, they must enable direct observation of all independent and dependent variables; cases where the documentary record is insufficient or where participants are unavailable for interviewing are thus not suitable. Second, they must collectively show variance on all three classes of explanatory variable—materiel, tribal culture, and internal politics. Third, they should collectively explore as many distinct regions of the relevant theoretical space as possible (that is, they should approximate a stratified sample from that space). Fourth, they should present conditions for which the respective theories predict different outcomes, enabling the case to distinguish between them in their ability to explain the evidence. Finally, they should provide maximum benefit of the doubt to the preexisting prototheories, and stack the deck against the new theory to

the degree possible. Small-*n* case testing cannot prove or disprove theories. But if case testing shows the new theory outperforming its competition under conditions deliberately chosen to benefit the competition, this unusual result would merit a greater shift in confidence than would otherwise be warranted from such a small sample of cases.

The cases examined here are Hezbollah in the 2006 Lebanon campaign; the Shiite Jaish al Mahdi (JAM) militia in Operation Iraqi Freedom from 2003 to 2008; Mohammed Farah Aideed's Habr Gedir militia in Somalia from 1992 to 1994; the Croatian nationalist ZNG and Croatian Serb SVK in the Croatian Wars of Independence of 1991–95; and the Vietcong in the American phase of the Second Indochina War from 1965 to 1968.

Hezbollah in 2006 offers an opportunity for a controlled comparison with the Jaish al Mahdi in Iraq. Both were drawn from Shiite Arab communities that were much more tribal than those of their state opponents; both faced materially superior Westernized state militaries; and both had external support from the same Iranian patron. The 2006 campaign also approximates an Ecksteinian critical case for the hybrid materialist subschool: it is the single most prominent example of hybrid or fourth-generation warfare in the literature; for the theory to have much merit, it must account for Hezbollah in 2006. The two actors' internal politics, by contrast, were very different: Hezbollah had a stable, elaborately developed formal institutional structure and saw its conflict with Israel as existential, whereas the JAM's leadership was personalized and divided, with multiple factions turning increasingly to economic predation as the Iraq War continued. Orthodox materialist theories would thus predict similar, highly Fabian methods for both actors; tribal culture theories would do much the same, albeit with some expectation for more Napoleonic war fighting for the JAM (tribal norms were stronger in rural southern Lebanon than in urban Baghdad where the JAM was strongest). The new theory, by contrast, predicts substantially state-like midspectrum behavior for Hezbollah but more Fabian methods for the JAM—and this is in fact what the case evidence shows. The case also shows important variance between the details of Hezbollah's methods and the particular expectations of hybrid materialists: whereas the latter see hybrid warfare as a combination of high-tech weapons and irregular tactics, Hezbollah's tactics were no more irregular than those of most states.

Mohammed Farah Aideed's Somali National Alliance (SNA) militia approximates an Ecksteinian critical case for tribal culture theorists: if the theory is ever going to work anywhere, it should work here. Tribe and clan were the

central organizing principles both for Somali society in general and for the competing warlord militias in the aftermath of the Siad Barre government's fall. And in fact the Somalia case plays a prominent role in the tribalist literature on nonstate warfare, which treats this as almost the defining case of tribally determined irregular war fighting. The material imbalance here, by contrast, was more modest than in many cases of nonstate warfare. For over a year and a half, the war pitted rival militias against one another, with no state military engaged; neither the SNA nor its enemies enjoyed a decisive material edge. Only when American forces arrived after December 1992 did the SNA face a material disadvantage, and even here the material balance was less favorable to the Western forces than in cases such as Iraq: the SNA had access to a substantial arsenal of sophisticated weapons inherited from the Siad Barre state military, and the SNA fielded an unusually large combatant force for the size of its operating area. Materialist theories would thus expect Aideed's methods to change over time, with little need for the SNA to adopt highly Fabian irregular methods prior to 1993, but with increasingly Fabian "asymmetric" war fighting after that; neither period, however, should display a historical extremum of the kind that tribal culture arguments would expect. The new theory, by contrast, predicts change in SNA behavior over time, but in the opposite direction. The SNA's political organization was personalized and highly informal throughout. Its stakes, however, changed dramatically by mid-1993. Before that, SNA war aims were limited and economic, but when American admiral Jonathan Howe declared in August 1993 that his goal would be Aideed's capture and imprisonment and began targeting Aideed and his chief lieutenants, the war suddenly took on existential stakes for the SNA's leadership. For the new theory, the SNA's weak institutionalization would preclude highly complex midspectrum warfare throughout, but the radical change in stakes should motivate movement in that direction even for a nonstate militia—hence the new theory would predict *less* Fabian war fighting after the American intervention, not more (as materialists would expect), and not stasis (as culturalists would predict). In fact the case shows change, and change in the direction of an increasing effort by the SNA to hold key territory after August 1993. At no point did this amount to truly state-like midspectrum warfare, but neither was it the extremum of irregular methods predicted by tribal culture arguments, and the direction of change was toward the Napoleonic end of the spectrum after the United States intervened and the material balance worsened for the SNA—not the opposite, as materialist logic would imply.

The Croatian Wars of Independence present two different nonstate separatist groups, the Croatian nationalist ZNG and Croatian Serb SVK, together with a variety of associated militias. None were strongly tribal. The nationalist ZNG initially faced a materially preponderant state opponent in the Yugoslav National Army (JNA) in 1991; Serb militias aligned with the JNA enjoyed important material advantages over their ZNG rivals. This balance then reversed when the nationalists achieved international recognition and state status, Croatian Serbs did not, and the JNA withdrew—by 1995, Croatian Serbs were the materially inferior side. Throughout, Croatian Serb politics were highly personalized and subject to bitter factional disputes; their stakes were nominally existential, but until the very end their leadership assumed that the JNA would return to defend them—the expected outcomes for Croatian Serb elites varied mostly with respect to patronage and seniority in a regime they believed others would defend. Croatian nationalists, by contrast, saw unlimited stakes in a self-help war that they expected would yield brutal oppression in the event of failure. Nationalist institutions were much more formal and extensive than the Serbs' but remained highly personalized at the most senior levels as President Franjo Tudjman relied on cronyism to secure his own position. By 1995, however, this personalized institutional system was augmented via a different kind of nonstate actor: the private military firm MPRI, whose advisory services circumvented some of the normal politico-military problems of cronyism. In this setting, tribal culture theories would predict state-like “conventional” behavior for all parties. Materialist theories would expect highly Fabian irregular warfare for the nationalist ZNG in 1991 and for the outnumbered nonstate SVK when large-scale fighting reignited in 1995, but more Napoleonic methods for the materially superior Serb nonstate militias in 1991. The new theory identifies simpler, more Fabian methods as the best choice for poorly institutionalized actors like the Serbs with limited perceived stakes, and it implies that better-institutionalized parties like the nationalists should be able to field midspectrum militaries quickly when motivated by existential stakes; cronyism at the top should limit high-level coordination, especially in large-scale offensive action, but not tactical cooperation within small units. Observed behavior in the case fits the new theory but contradicts the others for the nationalist ZNG. The Serbian SVK fits none of the theories perfectly but follows the causal logic of the new theory even where the outcome is not exactly as predicted: the Serbs' weak institutional foundation and limited stakes left them incapable of the complex cooperation needed for midspectrum warfare; the theory assumes they would thus choose simpler, more

Fabian methods better suited to their limited skills. When they instead tried to implement complex midspectrum methods beyond their proficiency, the result was military disaster in August 1995 when the Croatian state army crushed the Serbs in a brief, four-day campaign.

The Vietcong from 1965 to 1968 were perhaps the paradigmatic nonstate irregular force in the eyes of most Americans, and their methods had a profound influence on subsequent policy and scholarship; any theory of nonstate warfare must account for the Vietcong. The case also offers a theoretically important opportunity to observe nonstate warfare prior to the advent of precision firepower—in fact, the 1965–68 era in Vietnam offers one of the last examples of warfare before the dawn of modern precision weaponry, which was introduced by the United States in the war's latter campaigns. The chief finding from the case is to corroborate the new theory's account of technology's role in nonstate war fighting. The Vietcong faced existential stakes and had remarkably formal, mature institutions. There is good reason to believe they could have mastered the complexity of modern midspectrum warfare. Yet they chose mostly very Fabian methods instead—and suffered gravely when they departed from this pattern as in the 1968 Tet Offensive. I argue that their inability to use midspectrum methods successfully was due to their low-lethality weapon technology, which combined with the difficult jungle terrain of their primary operating areas to leave them unable to control territory on the necessary scale even though they deployed a large combatant force. With only light, low-firepower weapons at their disposal, the VC could not prevent their American, and to some extent South Vietnamese, state opponents from massing overwhelming combat power at chosen points. The problem here was not numerical imbalance per se, or even technological asymmetry—Hezbollah and the Croatian ZNG both proved able to control ground with midspectrum methods under comparable numerical and technical inferiority. But whereas Hezbollah and the ZNG had modern weapons lethal enough to force better-equipped state enemies to disperse, yielding manageable local imbalances at the critical points, the VC did not. The Vietcong's 1960s-era light weapons and small arms could cause gradual attrition over time, but they could not stop a massed state offensive from crushing their defenses at any given point. Nor could the Vietcong take ground against state armies' positional defenses with such arms. Their only option was thus to resort to highly Fabian warfare, notwithstanding the VC's existential motivation and mature institutions. Later nonstate actors with more advanced weapons were able to make different choices even when faced with materially superior state opponents.



## Plan of the Book

Chapter 2 presents the theory's dependent variable—a continuous, Fabian-Napoleonic spectrum of military behavior—and distinguishes this from the treatment of “conventional” and “guerilla” warfare in the existing literature.

The theory to explain this dependent variable is presented in chapters 3 and 4. Chapter 3 treats the role of materiel, arguing that material military incentives have been driving both once-Napoleonic state militaries and once-Fabian non-state forces toward the midspectrum middle for more than a generation. Chapter 4 treats the role of internal politics, arguing that political constraints shape any given nonstate actor's ability to act on this material incentive and implement the complex methods required. An appendix formalizes the theory's coding scheme for these variables and its functional form for interrelating them, and it presents comparative statics to identify the theory's predictions with greater precision.

Chapters 5 through 9 present the case studies of historical campaigns and their relationship to the theories under test. These cases show a pattern of closer correspondence with the new theory than either its materialist or its tribal culture competitors even under conditions chosen to place those competitors on their strongest analytical ground. Of course, this neither proves the new theory nor disproves the others—proof or disproof is beyond the capacity of case method. But it does establish a degree of empirical plausibility for the new claims. And it does so under conditions that should have offered easy, unambiguous predictive successes for preexisting theories if the latter were correct. Empirical findings are necessarily provisional pending large-*n* research that is possible only with the development of new data, but the unusual conditions in the cases chosen warrant a greater shift in confidence toward the new theory than would otherwise be warranted from a small sample of cases.

Chapter 10 concludes the book. It provides a more detailed summary of my main arguments and findings; most of the chapter, however, develops their implications for scholarship and policy, and it contrasts these with the views now typically held on the basis of current understandings. I argue that these contrasts are quite sharp, and that neither scholarship nor policy can be conducted on a sound basis without a more systematic consideration of the real determinants of nonstate military behavior.



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