

Chapter 1

Introduction

"In South Vietnam, the U.S. had stumbled into a bog. It would be mired down there a long time."

– Nikita Krushchev, July 1962¹

"'They didn't even want to say the "i" word,' one officer in Iraq told me. 'It was the spectre of Vietnam. They did not want to say the "insurgency" word, because the next word you say is "quagmire." ' "

– George Packer (2006)

The notion of quagmire lurks in the shadows of the corridors of power. Governments of global powers and regional players alike agonize over how to confront civil wars abroad. Nominally internal conflicts threaten the stability of neighboring countries. With the decline of international war,² concern over quagmire applies ever less to any foreign military engagement. Rather, the prospects for quagmire lie squarely in civil war.³

But what is quagmire? Prime ministers, opposition leaders, flag officers, foot soldiers, bureaucrats, journalists, and ordinary citizens all refer to it. Even one

¹Quoted in Ellsberg (1970).

²Pinker (2011)

³Monteiro (2014) makes the case that the leading power in a unipolar world is likely to become involved in civil wars abroad.

century on, the word conjures images of muddy East Prussian and Belgian battlefields closing up over the bodies of a generation of young men during the First World War. Contemporary usage, though, goes beyond the literal. It implies a phenomenon that clearly involves civil wars abroad. But the meaning beyond aspersions of danger, defeat, hopelessness, and waste is ill-defined, even unexamined.

This “folk” notion of quagmire permeates public discourse and casts a pall over foreign policy debates and decision-making. The Yemen Quagmire, the Syria Quagmire, the Afghanistan Quagmire, the Iraq Quagmire, the older Afghanistan Quagmire, and the Vietnam Quagmire – all represent governments’ and indeed publics’ worst fears about civil wars.

For foreign states, civil wars abroad present a range of threatening possibilities.⁴ They put expatriate citizens in jeopardy and threaten the survival of friendly governments. They destabilize alliances and indeed risk escalation to international war between states caught with sympathies to opposing sides in the internal struggle. Refugees impose economic and political burdens, and even security risks, on host countries. And war’s destructive power, even if confined within a single country, disrupts markets and threatens livelihoods and economic security across borders. But the steps needed to protect their interests abroad also expose foreign states to risks. Their actions may place them in the middle of a conflict that will simply continue, no matter what their course of action. Their efforts might at best be futile; at worst, they could become trapped.

For those living through the hellish predicament of civil war daily, the stakes are grave. But it is one thing to suffer the depredations of war if one can expect

⁴Spruyt (2017) addresses the potential for civil wars to pose a threat to the international state system. He suggests that the extent of that threat be used to guide intervention.

it to end eventually; the sacrifices will have been in the service of a particular outcome. It is something else entirely if all the lives lost, all the suffering endured, all the opportunities foregone have simply been preparation for more of the same. This is the tragedy of quagmire: the unending human toll of conflicts in which belligerents are trapped, unable to make progress toward victory but also unable to withdraw.

Conventional approaches to understanding civil wars – in foreign policy circles, as in academic scholarship – emphasize the importance of intrinsic features that make conflict more difficult to resolve. The polarizing effects of social identities, particularly ethnicity and sect, the corrupting influence of resources, and the stubborn nature of movements that resist foreign occupation or push for self-determination are the subjects of long-standing academic research agendas, and form part and parcel of policy-makers' explanations of the intractability of some civil wars.

But these conventional approaches are incomplete, in what they seek to explain and how they seek to explain it. Existing accounts focus heavily on civil war duration, eliding conflicts that take a long time to resolve (the American Civil War, for example) and those often loosely described as “quagmires” – conflicts in which belligerents become trapped, unable to make progress toward victory but also unable to withdraw. This book refines these accounts in two ways. First, it argues that the concept of civil war quagmire, once defined with precision, presents a distinct set of problems. Second, the book argues that in seeking to understand the civil war quagmire, we must look beyond the intrinsic features typically at the center of analysis, and examine the *strategic structure* of the conflict and the decision-making problems it presents.

In aiming to uncover the mechanisms that produce quagmire in civil war, then,

the book does not assume that a conflict is, by dint of its inherent features, a natural quagmire. Instead, it focuses on the choices of the key players in civil wars: belligerents and potential foreign backers. It asks how these actors' decisions – based on their interactions and expectations about their opponents' courses of action – result in quagmire. Its core argument is that the strategic structure of civil war – this interlocking set of interactions between belligerents and potential foreign backers – can produce a quagmire.

In this Chapter, I define quagmire as a concept for civil wars. I then introduce the argument, and explain why the book uses multiple layers of empirical analysis – an in-depth study of Lebanon's 1975-1990 civil war based on field research, statistical analysis across civil wars, and case studies of wars in Chad and Yemen – to support that argument. Next, I review prevalent approaches to understanding civil wars to situate the book's argument within existing scholarship and popular explanations. I then outline the plan of the book.

1.1 Quagmire: A Definition

In its literal sense, a quagmire is a phenomenon that occurs in the natural world: “a mire that *quakes* or shakes; wet, boggy ground that yields under the feet.”⁵ The physical connotation carries over to the word's usage in politics. Intuitively, a quagmire is any situation that, once entered, is difficult or impossible to leave. The concept also implies a degree of difficulty or danger inherent in involvement itself. Thorny policy questions can be quagmires for politicians when any stance can be interpreted negatively or can distract from priorities. A government's response to a crisis might expand the country's exposure to the problem, and yet the gravity

⁵Donald (1867).

of the crisis demands that something be done. The general notion of a quagmire in politics is a threatening situation in which an actor who responds to it becomes bogged down, consumed by the problem and perhaps unable to deal with other pressing concerns as a result of the inability to withdraw.

Quagmire emerged as a foreign policy term, linked particularly to foreign intervention, during the war in Vietnam between 1955 and 1975.⁶ It has been used to imply a series of connected characteristics pertaining to a foreign war. The situation grows more dangerous if left unaddressed. Action is unlikely to solve any problems identified and frequently may exacerbate them, but may also be required to protect against additional harm. Deeper involvement is a constant and severe risk due to the tension between these characteristics. Finally, the hazard consists not only of the situation's immediate dangers but also the opportunity cost of involvement.

I formally define quagmire around the central idea of entrapment. A civil war experiences quagmire if:

1. for at least one of the belligerents, continuing to fight costs more than its expected benefits; but
2. withdrawing will *increase* rather than avert those net costs.

Such a belligerent in effect has the incentive to continue fighting past the point at which fighting can generate strategic gains. This "mired" belligerent may therefore be unresponsive to the war-fighting strategies of its adversary, however carefully the adversary has selected those strategies to fit the military circumstances of the war. Under these conditions, the interactive nature of conflict generates an over-arching predicament; the quagmire encompasses the entire war.

⁶Ellsberg (1970) credits Soviet Premier Nikita Krushchev with the first application of the term to Vietnam, in 1962 (see epigraph). Since then, French and American authors writing about Vietnam have used the concept of a quagmire or closely related terms to capture the futile nature of their countries' involvement.

Note that in setting out the analytic concept in this way, I exclude from it any assumptions about how or why participants may become trapped and what further features quagmire in civil war may regularly display. The folk notion, in contrast, implies that actions to deepen involvement in a war tend to exacerbate entrapment. It also assumes that quagmire is an intrinsic property of certain wars, certain countries, or more broadly the phenomenon of intervening abroad. The folk notion therefore closes the book on any analysis of the causes of quagmire.

1.1.1 Quagmire as All-Encompassing

Observers applying the folk notion tend to conceive of quagmire as actor-specific. Thus we have Saudi Arabia's current "Yemeni quagmire"; "the Soviet quagmire in Afghanistan"; Algeria as a quagmire for France and Western Sahara as Algeria's quagmire; Angola as "Cuba's quagmire"; the possibility of present-day Syria becoming Iran's quagmire; the possibility of late-1970s Lebanon turning into Syria's "Vietnam" – a not-so-disguised reference to quagmire only three years after the American withdrawal from Saigon; Vietnam's own quagmire in Cambodia; and Russia's "Chechen quagmire" and Aceh as Indonesia's "Chechnya."⁷

The analytic concept does rest on the presence of a particular incentive structure for at least one belligerent. However, I argue that fundamentally, the concept is of an all-encompassing predicament, that every belligerent is afflicted. How can these seemingly contradictory elements both be true?

To see why quagmire is all-encompassing, we need only take the uncontroversial step of recognizing that civil war involves strategic interactions, not in a military sense, but in the game-theoretic meaning of strategic. Each belligerent

⁷Ottaway (2015), Trenin (2016:28), Spruyt (2005:88), US. Department of State Cable 249555, Good (2017:659), Cambanis (2013), Dawisha (1978), McWilliams (1983), Williams (2005:683), Murphy (2003).

acts in anticipation of what other belligerents are likely to do. The folk notion of quagmire stops part way without completing its analytic journey by its application in an actor-specific manner and does not go the distance to understand this strategic interaction dimension.

Strategic interaction weaves together the fate of all actors involved in the war. A single belligerent's decision-making calculus is embedded in the decisions of others. In this way, the entrapment of one belligerent results in the entrapment of all; quagmire is an all-encompassing outcome.

To return to the Vietnam example, during the 1960s, American intelligence agencies understood the battlefield balance to favor the Viet Cong. But the U.S. and the Republic of Vietnam did not concede. Regardless of whether the Viet Cong qualify as a "mired" belligerent according to the definition above, they were entrapped due to the incentive structure guiding American and South Vietnamese decision-making.

1.1.2 Quagmire as Distinct from Duration

The most frequently used concept that when applied to civil war is thought to be related to or at its extreme values equivalent to quagmire is duration. But conceptualizing civil war entrapment as including duration obstructs our ability to understand the processes that create it. And for two reasons. To start, many factors can contribute to the length of any given civil war. To view quagmire simply as long duration would imply that length is produced solely by the circumstances under which belligerents are backed into choosing to continue to fight despite the seeming uselessness of that choice. Yet, various frequently studied factors provide insight into duration without reference to entrapment. A country's geography and terrain may privilege some strategies, which in turn may influence the

length of the conflict; technology and ideology shape the resources available to belligerents, and, as a result, the strategies they adopt.⁸ And when circumstances ought to prompt a belligerent to concede, decision-making that is skewed by distorted expectations about the possibility of victory or misleading assessments of enemy capabilities may lead it not to take the steps necessary to do so.⁹ Observing a war's duration in and of itself, then, does not provide insight into entrapment; an inquiry into the length of civil wars is analytically distinct from the question of which civil wars experience quagmire.

In addition, it is problematic to consider duration as an imperfect yet useful indicator of quagmire. When compared across wars, duration misleads. A war may be chronologically long and yet not feature entrapment, or chronologically short and revolve around it.

Consider the scenario of a civil war that is likely to take ten years to resolve based on the presence of country characteristics and decision-making biases afflicting key actors which make for a long-lasting war. This scenario hardly seems to be one of entrapment. And yet if the war were to be resolved in ten years, the folk notion would label it a quagmire if ten years did not fit some idea of what was a reasonable length for civil war, whether arrived at specifically in reference to that country or based on the typical length of civil wars in comparative perspective.

To see the flaw in putting stock in wars' length in comparative perspective, we need look no further than the example the American Civil War. Was this a short or long war? If the objective is to study the entrapment of belligerents, this chronological characteristic of the war taken in comparative perspective with other wars is simply not meaningful. Theory and research can work to illuminate factors that

⁸See, for example, Posen (1993) on the link between nationalism and governments' mass conscription policies, with the resulting ability to field massive land forces.

⁹Iklé (2005).

lead to quagmire, but only once duration is separated from it.

1.1.3 Quagmire and the Literature

Understood as I have defined it here, quagmire is distinct from existing terms in the literature on conflict. Intractability and stalemate are often taken to encompass quagmire's fundamentals and colloquially intractability has a close or even equiv-
alent meaning. But scholars clarify that intractability is in fact a judgment about a war's length and the absence of termination via a political resolution.¹⁰ Stalemate indicates a static battlefield or strategic situation produced by the warring parties' matched capabilities.¹¹ The military balance and often the technology of war prevent belligerents from making moves that produce lasting gains. Thus neither intractability nor stalemate captures quagmire's core characteristic of entrapment. Warring parties can be out of moves without being trapped – indeed under certain circumstances stalemate might lead to the end of war.¹² And, a war can continue without progress towards a political settlement and yet not feature entrapment.¹³

¹⁰Intractability is a slippery term. The consensus definition is that a conflict is intractable if it “[has] persisted over time and refused to yield to efforts to arrive at a political settlement” (Crocker, Hampson and Aall 2005:5). The U.S. Institute of Peace significantly advanced a research agenda on intractability. It is clear, though, that intractability was not intended as concept in the social scientific sense. It mixes length of war and termination, without specifying the extent of persistence necessary to qualify a conflict as intractable. And it imbues conflict with agency to “resist settlement.” Licklider best expresses its conceptual limits, summarizing, “Intractability is...a judgment that can and often is contested” (2005:34).

¹¹Liddell Hart (1991), Licklider (1993).

¹²Zartman (2000).

¹³Distinctions between the meaning of quagmire and other terms have become blurred because analysts to date have not defined quagmire as a phenomenon. In the salad days of its use during the Vietnam war, some observers intended the word in its literal sense (e.g. Halberstam 1965), while others employed it as explanation, an analogy or metaphor that accounted for why the Vietnam war had transpired as a disaster for the U.S. (e.g. Schlesinger 1966; Ellsberg 1970 quite helpfully distinguishes between the two). Later use made the word a stand-in for Vietnam without precisely defining what Vietnam *was*, and thus erased much of the specificity that the literal meaning had contained. Thus, Freedman (1991): “Quagmires, on the other hand, have been associated with messy ‘out of area’ conflicts tending towards an inconclusive stalemate.” Or Dominguez (2017): “Conflict Quagmire: US Tries to Break the Stalemate in Afghanistan.”

Protracted and prolonged war and duration more broadly are also thought to capture something akin to entrapment in war. The first two tend to be used interchangeably and to connote lengthy hostilities. Scholars, however, define protraction as the result of the intentional, strategic use of time in war. For example, an insurgent group following Mao's strategy for popular wars of liberation might pursue a campaign of attrition so that it can eventually overpower an initially stronger opponent.¹⁴ Prolongation, in contrast, describes a war that lasts longer than belligerents expected initially. But since at the outset of wars, belligerents often expect the conflict to end quickly, almost all wars can be viewed as prolonged. As a result the term, if distinguished from protracted war, can seldom be given a useful or precise meaning. Taken together, duration and its cousin terms elide wars that may be short in length in a relative sense and yet from participants' or observers' perspectives featured entrapment and those often labelled "quagmires" due to sheer length.

In addition, existing research pulls up short of investigating the phenomenon of quagmire. Some studies of military intervention examine whether states achieve their objectives,¹⁵ what can lead them to continue or escalate involvement in foreign wars, and why this might occur even in cases in which it seems to produce little tangible gain.¹⁶ Some studies of military occupation consider similar questions. Both literatures emphasize the costly nature of foreign entanglements, the domestic political concerns that constrain leaders, and the strategic difficulty of progress in the endeavor when less than a state's core interests are at stake.¹⁷ To

¹⁴E.g. Magyar (1994:5,14). See also Mao's *On the Protracted War*(1954).

¹⁵Gent (2008), Sullivan (2012), Downes and Monten (2013), Bueno de Mesquita and Downs (2006).

¹⁶Taliaferro (1998, 2004).

¹⁷Levite, Jentleson and Berman (1992), Betts (1994), Regan (1996), Liberman (1996), Dobbins et al. (2003), Pickering and Kisangani (2006), Brownlee (2007), Edelstein (2008), Hechter, Matesan and Hale (2009), Koch and Sullivan (2010), Martel (2011), Hughes (2015), Cochran (2016), Lake

the extent that they mention the term quagmire, it is in the folk notion sense. Neither literature defines quagmire or deploys a concept of it, and neither sets out to study it as such.

The rapidly developing literature on civil wars also does not study quagmire. Research on micro-dynamics and belligerents' behavior, perhaps its fastest growing segments, concentrates on outcomes at the level of the individual and the armed organization.¹⁸ Some belligerent- and macro-level studies examine organizational survival, victory, and defeat or war duration and termination. But quagmire is not on the agenda.

1.2 Quagmire as a Strategic Situation

Quagmires that occur in the physical world have an air of inevitability. This connotation provides the starting point for explanations of quagmire in thinking on foreign policy.¹⁹ Indeed, for the United States, the idea of the quagmire as lurking in the darkness beyond its borders is ingrained in foreign policy decision-making, harkening to President Washington's warning in his "Farewell Address" of 1796, "Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor or caprice?"²⁰

Some causes of quagmire in civil war are well understood, and take the first step to move beyond the quagmire-as-natural narrative. In particular, the cost structure that produces quagmire in civil war can be the result of domestic pol-

(2016).

¹⁸See Kalvyas (2012), Justino, Brück and Verwimp (2013), and Berman, Felner and Shapiro (2018).

¹⁹David Halberstam's (1965) book, *The Making of a Quagmire*, sets itself up in opposition to this default, prevalent view. Halberstam makes a forceful case that choices led to a quagmire for the U.S. in Vietnam.

²⁰Washington (1796). For an analysis of the speech and its historical context, see Bemis (1934).

itics, decision-making biases, and asymmetry in belligerents' time horizons; all can play a role in shaping the balance between the cost of fighting and net costs conditional on withdrawal.

Foreign powers intervening in a civil war may find it difficult to extricate themselves because the balance between their cost of exit and their cost of fighting differs quite radically from that faced by domestic belligerents. Foreign powers are insulated from the destruction that fighting wreaks on the ground. But they are particularly sensitive to the political costs of withdrawal and vulnerable to decision-making biases heightened by their national security establishments' distance from events on the ground. The former include challenges to leaders' survival in office when withdrawal plays into domestic political struggles. The latter can result in a systematic exaggeration of the cost of exit when, for example, cognitive bias impedes the ability to recognize lack of progress, or when bureaucracies see the crisis as a vehicle to amass resources and power. American policy in Vietnam War illustrates these points.²¹

Armed groups fighting foreign intervention have time-horizons for victory that vastly exceed those of the intervening power. They believe that they can win without sufficient military resources to produce victory via the battlefield because as long as they can survive, they can wait until the costs of sustained intervention become intolerably high for the intervener. Such was the Viet Cong's strategy. Similarly, the Algerian national movement achieved independence from France despite suffering repeated and progressively more serious tactical defeats.²² Successive American administrations publicly obfuscated plans to withdraw from Iraq and Afghanistan because they understood this dynamic; they were also roundly

²¹Ellsberg (1970), Gelb and Betts (1979), Logevall (1999), Goldstein (2008). Mendelson (1993) discusses Soviet domestic political calculations about withdrawing from Afghanistan.

²²Horne (1977), Connelly (2002).

taken to task because critics argued that such an asymmetry in time-horizons was insurmountable.

This book, however, focuses on a fourth and final factor that greatly affects belligerents' cost structures: foreign backing. Support from outside is already appreciated as an important factor in the calculus of belligerents. The civil war that engulfed Afghanistan following the 1978 coup provides one example. Militias fighting the Soviet-backed Karmal and then Najibullah regimes drew critical military and financial support from Pakistan, the United States, and assorted other anti-communist allies. The incumbent governments, in turn, depended on Soviet largesse and combat power.²³

But the way in which external support affects decision making and the decisions of foreign backers themselves have not been understood with analytic rigor, with important, severe consequences for foreign policy. It would be straightforward to identify how belligerents and foreign backers come to choose courses of action that avert or produce quagmire if the decisions of these key actors were independent of one another. However, each belligerent or foreign backer in fact assesses the situation and acts based on how it expects others to behave. In other words, the situation is one of strategic interaction in the game-theoretic sense.

As I will argue below, therefore, the strategic structure of civil wars – by which I mean the configuration of participants and the trade-offs guiding their involvement – in itself constitutes a systematic influence on whether a given war turns into a quagmire. In emphasizing strategic causes, this book aims to re-orient our understanding of quagmire in the context of civil wars. Rather than the character of internal decision-making or actors' time horizons, its focus is on interactions among the choices made by the actors central to the conflict. This focus sheds

²³Amin (1984), Amstutz (1986), Barfield (2010).

light on additional factors leading to quagmire and helps identify a broader set of conflicts that conform to the dynamics of quagmire. In identifying the strategic dimension as an additional cause, this book thus explores a side of quagmire that has not been sufficiently appreciated in the scholarly literature and policy debates.

In line with the definition provided above, quagmire in civil war is best understood as an outcome rather than an individual actor's predicament. It does not exist independently, divorced from the choices of other key actors. In a variety of circumstances, a belligerent may risk becoming entrapped in an ongoing civil war. But the war cannot be characterized as having experienced quagmire until all the relevant actors have made decisions that interact to generate the trap. In other words, it is not possible to walk or even stumble into a quagmire. Quagmires, I will argue, are made, not found.

1.2.1 Theory of Quagmire

The Approach

The theory that I develop in this book explains the logic by which the political-military organizations fighting civil wars make decisions that result in quagmire. Its premises are two-fold. First, it posits that at any time during the war, the leaders of each warring party face an array of strategies that are alternatives to the one presently adopted, even if these appear too costly or politically undesirable to carry out; continuing in the same manner represents a deliberate choice. Second, it posits that this leadership has the capacity to end the group's belligerency even in the face of attempts by petty elements to continue to fight at the local level.

In other words, the book deliberately adopts a top-down perspective. There are certainly limitations to this choice. Questions about leadership struggles and

factional politics, for example, are outside the purview of the argument. At the same time, the advantage of this perspective is that it puts into sharp relief three types of relationships – between the belligerents, between each belligerent and potential sources of support outside the civil war country, and between foreign states backing opposing sides in the conflict.

To determine how quagmire can occur, the book must analyze the trade-offs inherent within any of these relationships. But it must also address connections between the three types of relationships. To accomplish both tasks, I use the tools of game theory to analyze civil wars as strategic situations. This approach produces accessible insights, which require no prior knowledge of the method on the part of readers. Chapter 2 sets out the theory of quagmire in a non-technical fashion. Interested readers will find the complete model in an appendix.

Not all civil wars are at risk for quagmire. Not all civil wars with the potential to experience quagmire actually do. The approach adopted here guides us in making these distinctions. It proposes that a particular strategic situation sets up the possibility of quagmire in civil war. Within that situation, it allows us to analyze the conditions that make the outcome more or less likely. And, it underscores that the outcome transpires only through a particular pattern of choices that the actors themselves make.

The Argument

The theory of quagmire examines the interplay between three sets of interactions that the literature has tended to consider independently: between the warring parties, between each warring party and potential foreign backers, and the international rivalry between these backers. The central argument is the strategic structure of civil war – the interlocking interactions between belligerents and po-

tential foreign backers – produces quagmire through two mechanisms: foreign assistance as a subsidy, and substitution between non-territorial and territorial warfare.

I argue that a minimum of three factors are key to understanding the strategic structure of civil wars: the stakes of conflict, the cost to belligerents of escalating the fighting, and the interests of foreign states in the civil war country. The stakes represent the benefits a belligerent stands to gain through victory in war. The costs of escalation vary over a wide range of potential war-fighting strategies and tactics, but are readily divided between high-cost territorial fighting and lower-cost non-territorial fighting. Foreign interests capture the ways in which civil wars affect the international system. States can derive some benefits from a favorable outcome to a civil war. Considering the harsh realities of international competition for power, a state's interest consists at minimum of avoiding an unfavorable outcome to the war that would bolster the position of its international rivals.

Civil war belligerents weigh the stakes of conflict against the costs of fighting. When foreign assistance is available, it reduces the effective cost of ongoing participation in the war. Foreign backing constitutes a subsidy, expanding the conditions under which belligerents can continue to fight.

With foreign assistance in play, belligerents can select from among a variety of types of fighting, each with its own associated cost. The core source of that cost is the extent to which operations aim to capture and hold territory. Non-territorial operations – for example, raiding, or bombardment to induce capitulation – are less costly than territorial operations because the latter require a larger deployment of personnel, not only to successfully take an objective, but also to secure it after the fact. The cost of escalation represents the difference between high-cost, territorial fighting and low-cost, non-territorial fighting.

Foreign states weigh their interests in the war-torn country against the belligerents' likely courses of action. International competition prompts their interest in providing assistance to one side in the civil war. They would like to see a victory for their side but also strive to insure against its defeat by an enemy backed by rival foreign states. But whether they follow through and support a belligerent depends on the likely impact of that assistance.

The theory's two mechanisms – foreign assistance as a subsidy, and substitution between non-territorial and territorial warfare – account for quagmire in ways that run counter to standard expectations. First, we might expect foreign states to interfere in civil wars only if substantial interests hang in the balance. Instead, the theory predicts that foreign states have an incentive to provide assistance once a threshold – often modest – level of interests is reached. At the same time, a foreign state may not be able to guarantee that the belligerent it supports will opt for high-cost, territorial warfare, the type of fighting most likely to bring about victory. The foreign state's dilemma is that furnishing support therefore produces little gain, but withdrawing support risks a loss to a rival supporting an opposing internal actor.

Second, conventional wisdom holds that as the cost of fighting rises, or as the stakes of conflict decline, belligerents should face pressure to withdraw from wars. However, this view fails to take into account the range of types of warfare available to belligerents. The theory indicates that, instead of withdrawing, belligerents responding to increased costs of fighting are likely to substitute away from territorial warfare to non territorial warfare. This possibility helps to explain the observation that for considerable stretches of time, many long-lasting wars see little change in the status quo on the ground. Similarly, because belligerents weigh the balance between the stakes of conflict and the costs of fighting, the theory in-

dicates that a decline in the stakes of the conflict tends to push belligerents into lower-cost, non-territorial fighting. Declining stakes make escalation to territorial fighting less attractive, even though that option could tip the balance towards military victory, because victory is no longer commensurately valuable. Declining stakes do not necessarily reduce belligerents' willingness to fight until the bitter end, but rather influence the type of warfare they undertake.

1.2.2 Empirical Design

The theory makes claims about the behavior of belligerents and foreign backers within individual civil wars. It also predicts the incidence of quagmire across wars. To assess the book's explanation of quagmire fully, I examine empirical evidence at each of these levels of analysis.

Do the key actors in civil wars face the pressures and trade-offs that the theory identifies? How well does it capture decision-making critical to the war's trajectory? Deep analysis of a single conflict, which maps out belligerents' and foreign backers' choices along with the paths they opted not to pursue, provides the most direct means of answering these questions. I employ evidence from field research on a single war – Lebanon, 1975-1990 – to understand how a quagmire comes to pass. Through a detailed account of decision-making at turning points in the war, I examine whether the theory's proposed mechanisms accurately describe interaction between belligerents and foreign backers and the decisions that resulted from it.

Moving beyond the mechanisms, does the theory explain the quagmire as an outcome? This question is a comparative one. The theory should account for why some civil wars experience quagmire, as well as why others do not. To provide the necessary test over wide terrain, the book studies the presence of quagmire

in all civil wars between 1944 and 2006 using statistical methods. This systematic analysis across wars, especially over a long time period and across the globe, alleviates concern that evidence supporting the argument in the case of Lebanon may be an artifact of specific features of that war. It also constitutes a test in its own right. I use rigorous statistical methods to take into account the potential impact of many variables that distinguish one war from another. I isolate the effects of the factors pointed to by the argument. I also rule out confounding explanations and test the argument's power against rival explanations. Chapter 5 presents the results of these analyses, focusing on their substantive meaning. Like the exposition of the theory in Chapter 2, the discussion in Chapter 5 requires no background in the methods used. An appendix contains a technical treatment of the statistical analysis.

The statistical results establish a connection between the incidence of quagmire, on the one hand, and country- and war-level variables, on the other. But this type of analysis is a blunt instrument. To what extent can outcomes across wars be traced back to the theory's core concept – the strategic structure of civil war? To deepen the book's cross-war analysis, I offer two case studies – of quagmire in Chad, and quagmire that might have been in Yemen. Each one probes the links between the outcome in question and strategic interactions at the center of the war. The two cases also operate in tandem by maintaining the comparative perspective needed to evaluate the argument.

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A note about the diverse types of evidence and methods that the book includes. Many readers may wish to focus on the empirical chapter that contains the material or method of primary interest to them. One advantage of the book's

layered analytic strategy is that it builds the empirical case for the argument cohesively; readers should find that other empirical chapters provide insights relevant to their primary interest. Similarly, the book's geographic coverage can be read in implicit comparison to the countries or regions of most interest to the reader. The analyses of Lebanon, Chad, and Yemen contain sufficient conceptual structure and detail for readers to find instructive parallels and contrasts to other wars.

1.3 Approaches to Understanding Civil War

Existing research on civil wars does not single out the quagmire as a conceptual category or attempt to explain it. Yet that research provides a foundation on which explanations can be built. Two debates structure prevalent discussion of the dynamics of civil wars. The first considers the nature of the war as a process from start to finish. Do the same factors responsible for the outbreak of war explain why war continues? The second assesses the relevant actors. Are the domestic warring parties the prime drivers of the most consequential decisions in war, or does the behavior of foreign states or the international system as a whole explain war's trajectory? Are the external factors merely the background against which the warring parties choose and act, or are those parties themselves simply the context, taken as given, within which an analysis of foreign states and their interactions is to be placed front and center?

1.3.1 Civil War as a Process

In both scholarly literature and popular understandings, two traditions weigh in on the nature of civil war as a process (Chapter 2 contains a review with references). The first, consisting of rationalist accounts, views the onset and contin-

uation of conflict as part of one underlying process. Wars continue to the extent that the factors responsible for their outbreak persist. Rationalist accounts use this logic and emphasize mechanisms that cause bargaining between opposing actors to break down. The second tradition, consisting of “war economies” accounts, exposes the unique opportunities for profit that conflict creates. In its view, war creates a rupture with peacetime incentives and structures, and becomes a self-perpetuating force. The economic value of activities associated with war-making and the resulting networks of beneficiaries from a state of war help to explain obstacles to ending conflict, whether through military action or diplomacy.

The rationalist and war economies traditions each contain an important insight. Rationalist analyses build from the understanding that war is fundamentally destructive because, setting aside even the damage to life and property, there is an opportunity cost to allocating resources away from production. War is therefore socially inefficient, regardless of any apparent gains that individuals make during conflict or of however minimal the depredations of war appear to be. Counter-factual comparisons of social welfare under conditions of war and peace lie at the heart of the rationalist account’s traction in explaining war duration.

War economies analyses, in contrast, emphasize that conditions of war and conditions of peace can structure behavior in quite different ways. Individuals choosing among a given set of actions might face different incentives depending on the presence of conflict; the set of available actions and transitions itself may even differ.

The factors that come into play once a war has started and shape its length, as explained in war economies analyses, do not fit easily within the rationalist tradition. That observers identify their presence across numerous wars calls into question the rationalist contention that the start and continuation of conflict rep-

resents a single process. Yet the war economies tradition has its own weakness because its claim that war can be profitable does not apply to ordinary individuals. That people in the harsh setting that is life in war “get by” is a testament to resilience and resourcefulness under extreme duress rather than an endorsement of their well-being in comparative perspective. The more plausible war economies formulation, that benefits accrue to a select few for whom the wartime environment creates unique opportunities, does not explicitly confront the inefficiency of war and ask why society is unable to constraint these predatory actors or to offer them peacetime compensation sufficient to balance these opportunities.

In addition to these critiques of their logic, both accounts have yet to face rigorous empirical tests, although path-breaking research under the rubric of each one has taken place. Since rationalist analyses emphasize a single process underlying war onset and termination, they militate against an in-depth empirical exploration of warfare itself. Most offer cross-country statistical results as empirical support. But such evidence at best addresses the question at a level more aggregate than that specified in the theoretical analysis. In-depth information on specific wars or warring groups is the exception rather than the norm. Research on war economies excels at providing a detailed picture of key features of a particular war or geographic cluster of wars. Since, however, this account focuses theoretically on outcomes without counter-factual comparisons to alternative possibilities, it shies away from using comparative methods to establish robust descriptive patterns or to identify causal pathways.

1.3.2 The Relevant Actors

The principal debate that stands alongside disagreements about civil-war-as-process concerns which actors should be deemed central to explaining a war’s trajectory.

Adopting a domestic-centric perspective, one line of research studies the actors internal to a civil war country, along with the country's social, political, economic and geographic characteristics. Scholars writing in this tradition may note the influence of foreign actors or the structure of the international system. But their focus remains on the choices of actors internal to the civil war country. Any analysis of foreign developments potentially related to the war emphasizes the response of domestic actors. Foreign actions that may affect the war are taken as givens. These external factors may have an effect on an existing process internal to the war – they can change levels of resources, solve commitment problems between the actors, constitute additional veto players, and so on. But as such they are exogenous.

International-centric research, in contrast, studies how foreign states respond to civil wars. Here, scholars treat civil war as one among many classes of events with which states, as members of an international system, must contend. The internal characteristics of a civil war may affect its relevance for international actors. But the analysis examines how foreign states react to these conflicts. The domestic side of the civil war tends to be taken as exogenous.

Neither of these competing perspectives squares with intuitive understandings of how civil wars transpire in practice. History is replete with examples of the ways in which consequential choices of foreign and domestic actors intersect. In the mid-ninth century BC, the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III, for example, supported one faction in civil war in Babylon. A Babylonian king then reciprocated by coming to the aid of Shalmaneser's son Shamshi-Adad V, who faced a revolt within Assyria after ascending to the throne.²⁴ Nearly three millennia later, a con-

²⁴Larsen (2000:119).

temporary observer of the Swiss civil war of November 1847²⁵ blamed foreign “promises of an armed intervention” for the Sonderbund’s decision to engage in conflict; its “leaders would [otherwise] never have been allured into a contest, for which they know well that single-handed they were unequal.”²⁶ In such examples, foreign powers conditioned their behavior on expectations about the interaction between the belligerents at the domestic level of the civil war, while the choices of those very same belligerents took into account the likely responses of foreign states.

The prevailing approach to the study of civil war processes, then, is an analytical tradition that acknowledges the presence of two separate arenas relevant to civil wars but does not explicitly address the interaction between them.

1.3.3 Bridging Analytical Traditions

The book’s account of quagmire spans the fault lines of these two debates. Following the rationalist tradition, I base the analysis on the fundamentally destructive nature of war and provide an account that recognizes the presence of an underlying structural factor – the credible commitment problem – that pushes war to continue. Yet at the same time, I incorporate the war economies insight about the differences in peacetime and wartime choices by recognizing the opportunities that civil war creates for interaction between belligerents and potential foreign backers. Similarly, I draw on both the internationally- and domestically-centered perspectives but give a privileged place to neither. I articulate how foreign backers take into account the domestic conflict environment, specify the calculus of

²⁵By standard criteria in the contemporary empirical literature, this conflict would not be considered a civil war. Its onset, however, reflected a familiar process of political division leading to escalation and the outbreak of hostilities, even if there were relatively few fatalities in the conflict. See Duffield (1895) for a thorough account.

²⁶Mayers (1848:143).

the domestic actors, and only then consider how external assistance acts upon that calculus.

The pay-off of this multi-layered approach is that it permits clear analysis of the ways in which strategic decision-making interactions influence the course of civil war and, sometimes, trap the belligerents in mutually destructive violence.

1.4 Plan of the Book

I develop the theory of quagmire in Chapter 2. The theoretical model examines the interaction between external states as potential backers and internal belligerents who are already at war. Fighting is costly, but belligerents can choose between a low- and high-cost type of fighting. External states, motivated by self-interest, can provide assistance to the internal actors. The model shows that external assistance can function as a subsidy, expanding the range of conditions under which the internal actors will choose to continue fighting. The model generates three counter-intuitive predictions about quagmire. First, foreign backers can have an incentive to support a belligerent even when they lack sizeable interests in the country. Second, as the cost of fighting increases, wars become *less* likely to end. Third, as the stakes of conflict decrease for the belligerents, wars again become *less* likely to end. These can be understood as predictions about both the course of a single conflict and the comparative risk of quagmire in different wars. Appendix A provides the formal exposition of the game theoretic model and all associated proofs.

The remaining chapters provide empirical support for the theory. Chapters 3 and 4 examine the theory of quagmire through an analysis of Lebanon's civil war, 1975-1990. Chapter 3 provides a historical overview of the war. I describe the

issues of contention, the principal politico-military actors, and the foreign states relevant to the war. I then review the war's trajectory, developing the context for the five turning points analyzed in Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 assesses the theoretical account by examining those five turning points, drawing on 120 hours of interviews conducted in Arabic with former combatants across multiple armed groups that fought in the war. I show that the two mechanisms underlying the theory's predictions – (1) foreign assistance as a subsidy with agency problems and (2) substitution between types of warfare – realistically describe the behavior of the Lebanese belligerents at these junctures. Notably, certain armed groups, at times when they might have had reason to withdraw from the war, instead deepened their participation based on the availability of external support. And, when the cost of offensive operations to seize territory was too high, the armed groups remained at war, employing non-territorial fighting, despite having the military capacity to take the offensive.

The two chapters on Lebanon set the stage for cross-country empirical tests of the theory. Chapter 5 uses statistical analysis of all civil wars during the 1944 to 2006 period to test the theoretical predictions. As a first step, I conduct a baseline analysis of war duration, and use this model to generate a prediction of each war's length. Employing the definition of quagmire, I identify wars that lasted significantly longer than would have been expected – as measured by the deviation of their actual duration from the baseline predictions – as having experienced quagmire (for reference here, Table 1.1, below, identifies quagmire within a list of all civil wars included in the analysis). I then operationalize the theoretical model's core concepts, and estimate a model of the causes of quagmire. The analysis presented here addresses the interaction between foreign states' incentives to interfere in a war and the internal environment that shapes both the actions of

the warring parties and the likely presence and level of external assistance. Appendix B provides technical details of the statistical analysis, including extensive robustness checks to verify the results.

Chapter 6 vets the theory's explanatory power using two case studies – of Chad's 1965-1979 quagmire, and of a 1994 war in Yemen that might have become a quagmire. The two conflicts differ systematically from the Lebanese Civil War with reference to geography, state strength, economic opportunities, strategic importance, social polarization, and other risk factors that are the focus of conventional accounts of war duration. Analysis comparing the wars in Chad and Yemen confirms the hypothesized dynamics of quagmire in settings very different from that of Lebanon, while also ruling out alternative explanations.

Chapter 7 concludes by discussing the implications of the findings, in terms of policy and scholarship. Regarding the former, it describes how foreign states as potential backers can take into account the paths to quagmire that the book highlights. It also highlights how civil war belligerents might approach conflict in light of the findings. For both sets of actors, the emphasis is on existing beliefs about the causes of continuing war and the extent to which these square with the theory and evidence provided in this book. What is at stake in any discrepancies? How does the theory of quagmire recast the problem?

Table 1.1: Quagmire in Civil Wars, 1944-2006

<i>Country</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Quagmire</i>	<i>No Quagmire</i>
Afghanistan	1978-1992	Mujahideen, PDPA	
	1992-1996		Taliban v. Burhanuddin Rabbani
	1996-2001		United Front v. Taliban
Algeria	2001-	Taliban vs. Gov't & US/NATO	
	1962-1963		post-independence strife
Angola	1992-	FIS, AIS, GIA, GSPC UNITA	
	1975-1991		UNITA
	1992-1994		Cabinda; FLEC
	1994-1997		UNITA
Argentina	1997-2002		Montoneros, ERP, Dirty War
	1975-1977		
Azerbaijan	1991-1994	Nagorno-Karabakh	
Bangladesh	1974-1997	Chittagong Hills/Shanti Bahini	
Bosnia	1992-1995		Rep. Srpska/Croats
Burundi	1965-1969		Hutu uprising
	1988-1988		Org. massacres on both sides
	1991-	Hutu groups v. govt	
Cambodia	1970-1975	FUNK; Khmer	
	1975-1991	Khmer Rouge, FUNCINPEC, etc	
Chad	1965-1979	FROLINAT, various ...	
	1980-1994	FARE; FROLINAT	
	1994-1997		FARE; FROLINAT
China	2005-		MDJT, SCUD, RLD vs. Gov't
	1946-1949		PLA
	1947-1947		Taiwanese v. Nationalist soldiers
	1950-1951		re-annexation
	1956-1959		Tibetan uprising
	1967-1968		Red Guards
Colombia	1948-1966		La Violencia
	1978-		FARC, ELN, drug cartels, etc
Congo-Brazzaville	1993-1997		Lissouba v. Sassou-Nguesso
	1998-1999		Cobras v. Ninjas
Congo-Zaire	1960-1965		Katanga, Kasai, Kwilu, Eastern
	1967-1967		Kisangani mutiny
	1977-1978		FLNC; Shabba 1 & 2
	1996-1997		AFDL (Kabila)
	1998-	RCD, etc v. govt	
Croatia	1992-1995		Krajina, Medak, Western Slavonia
Cuba	1958-1959		Castro revolution
Cyprus	1963-1967		GC-TC civil war
	1974-1974		TCs; GCs; Turkish invasion
Djibouti	1991-1994		FRUD
Egypt	1994-1997		Gamaat Islamiya; Islamic Jihad
El Salvador	1979-1992	FMLN	
Ethiopia	1974-1991	Eritrean war of independence	
	1976-1988		Ogaden; Somalis
	1978-1991		Ideological; Tigrean

Continued on next page

Table 1.1 – continued from previous page

<i>Country</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Quagmire</i>	<i>No Quagmire</i>
Georgia	1991-1992		South Ossetia
	1992-1994		Abkhazia (& Gamsakhurdia)
Greece	1944-1949	EDES/ELAS; EAM	
Guatemala	1966-1972		Communists;
	1978-1994		Communists; Indigenous
Haiti	1991-1995		Cedras v. Aristide
India	1984-1993		Sikhs
	1989-		Naxalites (CPI-M; PWG; MCC)
	1989-		Kashmir
	1990-		Assam; Northeast States
Indonesia	1950-1950		Rep. S. Moluccas
	1953-1953		Darul Islam
	1975-1999	East Timor	
	1976-1978		OPM (West Papua)
	1990-1991		Aceh
	1999-2005		Aceh
Iran	1978-1979		Khomeini
	1979-1984		KDPI (Kurds)
Iraq	1961-1970		KDP, PUK (Kurds)
	1974-1975		KDP, PUK (Kurds)
	1985-1996	Kurds; Anfal	
	1991-1993		Shiite uprising
	2003-		US/Coalition occupation and Iraqi civil war
Jordan	1970-1971		Fedeyeen/Syria v. govt
Kenya	1963-1967		Shifita war (Somalis)
	1991-1993		Rift valley ethnic violence
Korea	1948-1949		Yosu Rebellion
Laos	1960-1973		Pathet Lao
Lebanon	1975-1991	Aoun; militias; PLO; Israel	
Liberia	1989-1990		Doe v. rebels
	1992-1997		NPLF; ULIMO; NPF; LPC; LDF
	1999-2003		anti-Taylor resistance
Mali	1990-1995		Tuaregs; Maurs
Moldova	1991-1992		Transdnistria
Morocco	1975-1991	W. Sahara, Polisario	
Mozambique	1976-1992	RENAMO; FRELIMO	
Myanmar/Burma	1948-1951		Karen rebellion 1
	1948-1988	Communist insurgency	
	1960-1995	various ethnic groups; Karen rebellion 2	
Namibia	1973-1989		SWAPO; SWANU; SWATF
Nepal	1996-		CPN-M/UPF (Maoists)
Nicaragua	1978-1979		FSLN
Nicaragua	1981-1990		Contras & Miskitos
Nigeria	1967-1970		Biafra
Nigeria	1980-1985		Muslims; Maitatsine rebellion
Oman	1971-1975		Dhofar rebellion

Continued on next page

Table 1.1 – continued from previous page

<i>Country</i>	<i>Years</i>	<i>Quagmire</i>	<i>No Quagmire</i>
Pakistan	1971-1971		Bangladesh secession
Pakistan	1973-1977		Baluchistan
Pakistan	1994-1999		MQM:Sindh v. Mohajirs
Papua New Guinea	1988-1998		BRA (Bougainville)
Peru	1980-1996	Sendero Luminoso, Tupac Amaru	
Philippines	1950-1952		Huks
Philippines	1971-2006	MNLF, MILF	
Philippines	1972-1992	NPA	
Russia	1994-1996		Chechnya 1
	1999-	Chechnya 2	
Rwanda	1963-1964		Tutsi uprising
	1990-1993		Hutu vs. Tutsi groups
	1994-1994		RPF; genocide
Senegal	1989-1999		MFDC (Casamance)
Sierra Leone	1991-1996		RUF, AFRC, etc.
	1997-2001		post-Koroma coup violence
Somalia	1988-1991		SSDF, SNM (Isaaqs)
	1991-		post-Barre war
South Africa	1976-1994		ANC, PAC, Azapo
Sri Lanka	1971-1971		JVP
	1983-2002		LTTE, etc.
	1987-1989		JVP II
	2003-		LTTE, etc.
Sudan	1963-1972		Anya Nya
	1983-2002		SPLM, SPLA, NDA, AnyanyaII
	2003-		Darfur, SLA, JEM, etc.
Syria	1979-1982		Muslim Brotherhood
Tajikistan	1992-1997		Popular Democratic Army; UTO
Thailand	1966-1982	Communists (CPT)	
	2004-		Pachani; Pulo, BRN, RKK, GMIP
Turkey	1984-2000		PKK (Kurds)
Uganda	1978-1979		Tanzanian war
	1981-1987		NRA/Museveni, etc
	1990-1992		Kony (pre-LRA)
	1995-	LRA, West Nile, ADF, etc.	
USSR	1944-1947		Latvia/LTSPA, etc.
	1944-1948		Lithuania/BDPS
	1944-1948		Estonia/Forest Brthers
	1944-1950	Ukraine/UPA	
Vietnam	1960-1975	NLF	
Yemen	1994-1994		South Yemen
Yemen AR	1962-1970		Royalists
Yemen PR	1986-1986		Faction of Socialist Party
Yugoslavia	1991-1991		Croatia/Krajina
	1998-1999		Kosovo
Zimbabwe	1972-1979		ZANU, ZAPU
	1983-1987		Ndebele guerillas