



# Civil Wars and Insurgencies

INTA 4803/8803  
Fall Semester 2026

## Instructor Info



David Muchlinski



12:00-1:00



Habersham 147



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## Course Info



Prereq: None



M & W



2:00-3:15pm



Skiles 154

## Course Description

Why do actors use violence in pursuit of their political goals? Most people assume that violence is an inherent part of human nature, or that humans will always use violence to settle disputes. However, violence is puzzling as it entails significant costs and is often far from effective in helping perpetrators achieve their stated goals. Further, why do some states respond violently to dissident, separatist, or other protest movements? While accommodation often may require states to sacrifice some authority or power, it is often a better bet to bargain with opposition forces than risk a costly gamble on a conflict which may result in total loss of control. The unfortunate outcome of many violent political processes is civil war, a concept we will study in depth this semester. Civil wars are the dominant mode of political conflict in the modern international system, and deaths from civil wars have outpaced deaths from interstate wars in the 21st century.

This seminar explores the questions of how, when, why, where, and under what conditions various actors engage in political violence. We will approach these questions from a strategic perspective emphasizing costs, benefits, and collective action. Strategic choice explains conflict not as an inherent aspect of human nature, or an accident, but as an outcome arrived at by the deliberate choices made by various political actors. Actors may well desire their goals without having to engage in violence, but various constraints stand in the way. We will discover why, in the presence of these constraints, sub-optimal outcomes like civil wars are arrived at.

Studying civil conflict provides an important perspective on the nature of violence in the international system. Civil conflict blurs the distinction between the fields of Comparative Politics and International Relations, and makes interdisciplinary theorizing necessary. Rather than seeing civil conflict as the inevitable outcome of some security dilemma between a state and dissident actors, this course emphasizes that civil wars are dyadic – it takes two sides to engage in such violence. Rather than being an inevitable outcome of the struggle over power, resources, or whatnot, civil wars are an outcome of strategic interaction. Understanding political violence in this way allows us to untangle its complicated causes, break down these conflict processes, understand violence at the most fundamental level, and hopefully, work to keep these kinds of conflicts from occurring in the future.

## Material

### Required Texts

Arjona, A., Kasfir, N., & Mampilly, Z. (Eds.). (2015). *Rebel Governance in Civil War*. Cambridge University Press.

Berman, E. (2011). *Radical, Religious, and Violent: The New Economics of Terrorism*. MIT press.

Gurr, T. R. (2015). *Why Men Rebel*. Routledge.

Lichbach, M. I. (1998). *The Rebel's Dilemma*. University of Michigan Press.

Kalyvas, S. N. (2006). *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge University Press.

### Other

Any required journal articles can be accessed via Google Scholar.

## Grading Scheme

|     |                  |
|-----|------------------|
| 20% | Discussion Lead  |
| 30% | Participation    |
| 50% | Research Project |

Grades will follow the standard scale: A = 89.5-100; B = 79.5-89.4; C = 69.5-79.4; D = 60-69.4; F <60. Curving is at the discretion of the professor.

## Learning Objectives

- Students will be able to demonstrate theoretical knowledge of civil wars, insurgencies, and other forms of political violence.
- Students will be able to demonstrate empirical knowledge of civil wars, insurgencies, and political violence.

## Attendance Policy

Attendance does not contribute to your grade for this course. However, because this course relies on student participation and discussion, a lack of attendance will not only negatively impact your participation and will cause the class as a whole to suffer due to substandard discussions. If I notice you are regularly absent from class, your participation grade will decrease by one-quarter of a grade point for each class you habitually miss.

## Participation

Students are expected to actively contribute to seminar discussions. This will require that all reading be completed in advance of seminar meetings, and come to class ready to discuss the central themes from the week's reading from a critical perspective. Students should go beyond merely understanding the readings to a critique shortcomings in logic, research design, data analysis, case selection, generalizability of findings, scope conditions, connecting common themes, and evaluating paradigmatic debates. As this class is a graduate seminar and (advanced) undergraduate elective, my role is to facilitate discussion. To that end, I will not prepare slides or lecture on the readings.

## Discussion Lead

Each week one student will be randomly selected to begin seminar discussion by preparing their own questions to the reading. These initial questions will serve as the initial foray into discussion for each seminar from which other forms of discussion will arise. Students will be graded on a pass/fail basis for their discussion questions.

## Research Project

All students will write a seminar paper (undergraduates 5,000-7,000 words, graduate students 8,000 - 10,000 words) that is due to Canvas before TBD, 18:00 EST in pdf format. Paper topics must relate to one or more of the main themes of the course and should be discussed with the instructor, by email if necessary, as early as possible in the semester. All students should have met with me to discuss their research topics by Week 5 and received notice that the topic is acceptable. More directions will be forthcoming at a later date.

## Make-up Policy

Generally speaking, since the only required piece of written work for this seminar will be the final project, late work will not be accepted since you are aware of the due date well in advance. If, for any reason, you feel that you cannot complete this assignment in good faith, please contact me on an individual basis to discuss your situation.

## Student-Faculty Expectations Statement

The Georgia Tech community believes that it is important to continually strive for an atmosphere of mutual respect, acknowledgement, and responsibility between faculty members and the student body. The Student Faculty Expectations Statement (linked here <https://catalog.gatech.edu/rules/21/>) articulates some basic expectations that you can have of me and that I have of you. In the end, simple respect for knowledge, hard work, and cordial interactions will help build the environment we seek. Therefore, I encourage you to remain committed to the ideals of Georgia Tech while in this class.

## Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Reasonable accommodations will be made for students with verifiable disabilities. In order to take advantage of available accommodations, students must register with the Office of Disability Services at Suite 123, Smithgall Student Services Building, 353 Ferst Drive, 404-894-2563 (Voice); 404-894-1664 (TDD). For more information on Georgia Tech's policy on working with students with disabilities, please see review the Office of Disability Service's web page at <https://policies.ncsu.edu/regulation/reg-02-20-01/>. The Office of Disability Services collaborates with students, faculty, and staff to create a campus environment that is usable, equitable, sustainable and inclusive of all members of the Georgia Tech community. Disability as an aspect of diversity that is integral to society and Georgia Tech. If students encounter academic, physical, technological, or other barriers on campus, the Disability Services team is available to collaboratively find creative solutions and implement reasonable accommodations.

## Academic Integrity

Academic dishonesty in the form of cheating or plagiarism will not be tolerated. In brief, plagiarism is defined, for the purposes of this class, as: copying, borrowing, or appropriating another person's work and presenting it as your own in a paper or oral presentation, deliberately or by accident. Acts of plagiarism will be reported in accordance with the Honor Code. In order to avoid being charged with plagiarism, if you use the words, ideas, phrasing, charts, graphs, or data of another person or from published material, then you must either: 1) use quotation marks around the words and cite the source, or 2) paraphrase or summarize acceptably using your own words and cite the source. The plagiarism policy is not restricted to books, but also applies to video and audio content, websites, blogs, wiki's, and podcasts. For information on Georgia Tech's Academic Honor Code, please visit <http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/policies/honor-code/> or <http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/rules/18/>. Any student suspected of cheating or plagiarizing on a assignment will be reported to the Office of Student Integrity. The student will also receive a grade of zero on the assignment at the professor's discretion.

## Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) Tools

Students are not allowed to use any form of Generative AI to assist in the submission of any assignment for this seminar in any way, including the generation of discussion questions or seminar paper. Generative AI derives its output from previously created texts from other sources that the models were trained on yet doesn't cite sources. Per GaTech's Honor Code, students may not submit any work generated by an AI program as their own.

## Class Schedule

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### Ontology and Epistemology of Civil War

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Aug 24      Introductions, Syllabus Review

Required Reading:

None

Aug 26: W:    What is a Civil War?

Required Reading

Blattman, C., & Miguel, E. (2010). Civil War. *Journal of Economic Literature*, 48(1), 3-57.

Kalyvas (2006) Intro and Ch. 1

Kalyvas, S. N. (2001). "New" and "Old" Civil Wars: A Valid Distinction?. *World Politics*, 54(1), 99-118.

Sambanis, N. (2004). What is Civil War? Conceptual and Empirical Complexities of an Operational Definition. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 48(6), 814-858.

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### Paradigms in the Study of Civil War

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### New Directions in the Study of Civil War

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Week 11     Spring Break

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Week 16     Research Project Due to Canvas

TBD

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