Causes of Ethnic Conflict: Examining the Role of Religious Diversity and Contagion Effects

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Introduction

Throughout history, ethnic conflicts have long been a component of international politics. Even today, ethnic wars continue to be the most common form of armed conflicts around the world. In the recent past for example, there have been numerous instances of ethnic conflict including ethnic war in Somalia, Kurdish struggle for autonomy in Iraq, Iran and Turkey, guerilla wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua, insurrection in Chechnya, and the conflict between Hutus and Tutsis in Rwanda to name a few (Sadowski 1998). However, it is apparent that certain places and states are more prone to ethnic conflicts, while others experience essentially none. What makes ethnic conflict more likely within a nation-state?

Ethnic conflict is defined as any episode of sustained violent conflict in which national, ethnic, and religious or other communal minorities challenge governments to seek major changes in status (Bates et. al. 2003). This inquiry will look at ethnic conflicts and possible causes within the 20th century. I will explore ethnic conflicts that have occurred in different nation-states across the globe; specifically I will examine the conditions that contribute to an increased likelihood of ethnic conflict within a region.

I argue that the religious composition of the population affects the likelihood of ethnic conflict within a nation-state. Religion has been shown to be an issue in many worldwide conflicts; however, I contend that religious diversity is a significant factor in determining how likely a state is to experience ethnic conflict. Furthermore, I argue that the environment surrounding a nation-state plays an integral role in determining whether a state will or will not experience ethnic conflict. Particularly, the presence of armed conflict in neighboring states increases the likelihood that conflict will also be experienced within a nation’s borders. I also
look at the influence of refugee flow in increasing the likelihood of ethnic conflict. I will use the State Failure and Forcibly Displaced Populations datasets to assess the role of religious diversity, presence of conflict in bordering states and refugee flow in determining the likelihood of ethnic conflicts. I will perform a series of multivariate tests in order to determine if these variables have a significant impact in increasing or decreasing the likelihood of ethnic conflict.

**Literature Review**

Numerous theories and much research attempts to explain the causes of ethnic conflict. Importantly, ethnic conflict has gained much attention since the end of the Cold War. Literature concerning ethnic conflict generally consists of similar methods and forms of analysis, focusing on ethnic conflict in broad terms and employing large n-size studies. Furthermore, most of the literature agrees on the operationalization of ethnic conflict into a simple dichotomous variable. The variable measures simply if there is an ethnic conflict in a given state or not. The measurement of other variables differs depending on expectations into the cause of conflict. The true distinction between research concerning ethnic conflict lies in theoretical underpinnings.

The first body of research posits that ethnic conflict is a result of globalization bringing multiple cultures in contact with each other and ultimately causing a clash of civilizations. This hypothesis proposed by Samuel Huntington (1993) states that “conflicts of the future will occur along the cultural fault lines separating civilizations.” It is thought that the increased ease of global communication will lead to more interactions between people of different cultures, thus intensifying civilization consciousness. This increased civilization consciousness makes the differences between civilizations more apparent and will invigorate animosities leading to conflict (Huntington 1993). Differences in culture seem to be a reasonable cause of ethnic
conflicts; however, when subjected to empirical analysis there are several problems with this argument. It is found that civilizational conflicts constitute only a small minority of all ethnic conflicts and that there is no statistically significant evidence that points to civilization clashes as increasing the likelihood of ethnic conflicts (Fox 2002). Russett, Oneal and Cox (2000) find that civilizational differences tell us little about the likelihood that disputes would escalate to violence. Furthermore, it has been found that ethnic conflicts are likely to be much less lethal in places that are receptive to globalization (Sadowski 1998).

A second hypothesis argues that there is a link between the availability of natural resources and ethnic conflict. The hypothesis assumes that when a nation-state is dependent on primary commodities including both agricultural produce and natural resources, it is much more prone to internal violence. Conflict is explained by greed or grievances where there are feelings of ethnic or political marginalization as one group is disadvantaged by another group in terms of access to natural resources (Humphreys 2005). This hypothesis concerning resources is based upon the theory that conflict stems from the presence of inequality, in this case economic inequality. As Davies (1962) argues “political stability and instability are ultimately dependent on a state of mind, a mood in society.” When there is an intolerable gap between what people feel they deserve and what they get in terms of goods or economic power, dissatisfied people will join together and revolt (Davies 1962). It is argued that this economic inequality will eventually lead to violence. However, a study by Marie Besançon (2005) showed that economic equality and not inequality actually precedes the escalation of ethnic violence. This suggests that it is not necessarily resources or economic inequality that causes ethnic conflict. These mixed results are consistent with Nagel (1974), who finds that the inequality-discontent relation applied cross-nationally is inconclusive. Furthermore, the natural resources ethnic conflict connection is
undermined as many nation-states both resource-poor and resource-rich have experienced ethnic conflict.

Another body of research concerning ethnic conflict focuses on the role of religion. Here the findings suggest that religion is a core element of modern social and political phenomena, and that religion is an essential foundation of civilization (Arjomand 1993). Furthermore, Fox (2004b) argues that religion has a significant influence on ethnic conflicts. In utilizing the Minorities at Risk and State Failure datasets, Fox (2004b) found that religion can be an important influence on conflict, has had an increasingly consequential impact on ethnic violence since the early 1980’s, and religion based conflict tends to be more violent than other conflicts. Other studies by Fox (2004a) show that religious grievances, religious institutions, religious legitimacy, and religious discrimination, among other factors contribute a great influence in ethnic conflict. According to Fox religion has an influence on ethnic conflict, as religion is a way to identify as part of an ethnic group. However, what this research does not answer is specifically what aspect of religion has an influence on conflict. Does it matter what religion it is? Does it have something to do with the teachings of the religion itself or is it more a matter of the people? The research concerning the influence of religion on ethnic conflict is still ambiguous in exactly what the causal relationship is. One such aspect of religion that may influence ethnic conflict includes religious diversity. Smith (1975) argues that as society becomes divided into socially and politically significant corporate units, such as religion, and the distribution of power depends on the unit to which one belongs, the likelihood of collective violence increases. Furthermore, Rummel (1997) notes that when political power is centralized and highly dependent upon one’s social group membership, such as religion, then collective violence is also highly likely in terms of guerilla or revolutionary warfare. An additional finding of Rummel (1997) is the link between
the number of religious groups in a state and the more intense the general violence. In contrast, Blimes (2006) argues that moderate levels of diversity are more likely to produce conflict rather than highly homogenous or heterogeneous states. It has been found that highly fractionalized states are no more likely to experience civil wars than ethnically homogenous states (Blimes 2006). Again, what is unknown is how religious diversity serves as an influence in causing ethnic conflict specifically.

Yet another set of research argues that spatial dependence or contagion effects have a significant impact on ethnic conflict. Previous studies by Hill and Rothchild (1986) and Gurr (1993) have found that contagion and diffusion influence political conflicts. This idea is based on the assumption that behavior in geographic units is somehow related to and affected by behavior in neighboring areas (Sadowski 1998). In a world that is becoming increasingly interdependent, social phenomena occurring within a given society is not isolated, but rather affected by the domestic events of other societies (Klingman 1980). This idea can be applied to ethnic conflicts in that adverse consequences from one nearby nation-state can spread to other nation-states causing intrastate conflict to occur. As a result groups residing in highly conflictual regions are more likely to experience violence including intrastate ethnic conflict (Saideman and Ayres 2000). Vasquez (1992) argues that conflicts may spread directly through spillover or through demonstration effects, where actors elsewhere learn from examples set by original combatants. Saideman and Ayres (2000) argue further that an example of spillover effects may include refugee flows that destabilize neighboring states. It is also noted that labor migration, expulsion or flight of people across territorial borders to escape war or oppression can cause dramatic changes inside a nation-state (Horowitz 1985). In terms of demonstration effects, Bonneuil and Auriat (2000) find that diffusion of revolutionary political ideals affect the onset
and outcome of many ethnic conflicts that occurred between the years of 1945 and 1994. Essentially this hypothesis argues that context matters in terms of ethnic conflict. Although this is a compelling argument, there has been relatively little attention given to this idea in terms of empirical testing.

Although research concerning the causes of ethnic conflict seems extensive, there still exist many ambiguities that remain unexplored. Specifically, what aspects of religion play an integral part in explaining the likelihood of ethnic conflict? I will look at religious diversity to explain exactly what feature of religion affects ethnic conflict. Furthermore, I empirically analyze how context matters and how contagion effects contribute to ethnic conflict. To do this I use the number of border states with armed conflict and refugee influx as indicators of contagion effects. In exploring these concepts I hope to develop a better understanding of how religion plays such an influential role in ethnic conflict and the causes of ethnic conflict in general.

My first expectation is that religious diversity is nonlinearly related to ethnic conflict. Rummel (1997) argues that more religious groups in a state increases general violence; however, I contend that past a certain level of religious diversity, there exists some type of tolerance or acceptance between different religious groups that decreases the likelihood of conflict. In applying Blimes’(2006) argument concerning diversity and civil wars, I suggest that states with moderate levels of religious diversity are more likely to experience ethnic conflict. I propose that nation-states with either high levels of heterogeneity or high levels of homogeneity in terms of religious composition are less likely to experience ethnic conflict.

H1: High levels of religion heterogeneity or homogeneity will decrease the likelihood of ethnic conflict.
My second hypothesis concerns contagion effects and looks specifically at the number of border states with conflict. Following Gurr (1993) and Hill and Rothchild (1986), but focusing on ethnic conflict, I expect an increase in the number of border states with armed conflict will lead to an increased likelihood of ethnic conflict.

H2: An increase in the number of border states with armed conflict will lead to increased likelihood of ethnic conflict.

My third hypothesis looks at the specific spillover effect of refugee flow. In an extension of Saideman and Ayres’(2000) argument, I predict that an increase in the number of refugees coming into a nation-state will increase the likelihood of ethnic conflict.

H3: An increase in the number or refugees coming into a state will lead to an increased likelihood of ethnic conflict.

Data

The empirical analysis of ethnic conflict in this study uses the State Failure, International Macroeconomic, Polity IV and Forcibly Displaced Populations datasets. The State Failure dataset is compiled by the Political Instability Task Force and catalogues “information on nearly 1,300 political, demographic, economic, social and environmental variables for all countries of the world from 1955 to 2002” (Bates et. al. 2003). The dataset includes major episodes of “state failures” which consist of four different kinds of internal political crisis—revolutionary wars, ethnic wars, adverse regime changes and genocides. The State Failure dataset is compiled from existing databases provided by the World Bank, United Nations, US Census Bureau and other organizations and independent scholars along with data developed specifically by the Political Instability Task Force (Bates et. al. 2003). The State Failure dataset was chosen because of its
robust nature including numerous variables and cases from which to draw from. The dataset is very large, comprehensive and has been used in several studies concerning ethnic conflict. The International Macroeconomic dataset is assembled by the Economic Research Service (ERS) of the United States Department of Agriculture. The dataset provides information 190 countries starting from 1969 concerning population, exchange rates and real gross domestic product (GDP). The Polity IV dataset, compiled through the Polity IV Project, covers all major, independent states with a total population of over 500,000 between the years of 1800 and 2009. Polity IV codes data concerning democratic and autocratic patterns of authority as well as regime changes. The Forcibly Displaced Populations dataset is compiled through the U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants using the World Refugee Survey. The dataset provides cross-national, time-series data on the numbers of “source” and “host” refugees as well as internally displaced persons from 1964 to 2008.

This study uses data from the ethnic wars section of the State Failure dataset and specifically the variables of religious diversity index and number of border states with armed conflict. The unit of analysis for the State Failure dataset is a conflict year. A conflict is coded separately for each year the conflict occurred including partial years in which the conflict began or ended. For control variables, this study uses data concerning GDP per capita and levels of democracy taken from the ERS International Macroeconomic and Polity IV datasets, respectively. Data concerning refugee flow is taken from the Forcibly Displaced Populations dataset. The Forcibly Displaced Populations dataset provides information concerning refugee populations for all countries for multiple years.

The ethnic wars variable is a discrete dichotomous variable. This variable is measured simply by noting if there was an ethnic war that occurred in an independent state with a
population of at least 500,000 within that given year. Cases in which ethnic war occurred are coded with a 1 and cases in which an ethnic war did not occur is coded with a 0.

Multiple variables are used to control for various factors discussed in the large body of literature. The first two control variables are region and population, both derived from the State Failure dataset. Region is a discrete variable ranging from 1-5 where each category represents a distinct region of the world. Population is a continuous variable that measures the total population within a nation-state in a given year. This variable is measured in millions of people. The third control variable is GDP per capita as measured in thousands of dollars and adjusted for inflation. GDP per capita is an important aspect in measuring a nation-state’s economic progress and is used to control for economic factors discussed by Humphreys (2005), Davies (1962), Besançon (2005) and Nagel (1974). The final control variable is democracy, as measured in the Polity IV dataset. Democracy is measured on an eleven-point scale (0-10), where 10 represents full democracy. The democracy indicator is based upon the four different codings of competitiveness of political participation, openness of executive recruitment, competitiveness of executive recruitment, and constraints on the chief executive.

The first independent variable, religious diversity, is measured using the religious diversity index and is a continuous variable. The religious diversity index is calculated from the seven largest religious groups present in the state. The index is sum of the square population fractions and ranges from 0 to 1. Lower values indicate religious heterogeneity and high values indicate religious homogeneity (Bates et. al. 2003). Religious diversity is derived from census data and measures are therefore available for only once every ten years. To replace missing values, the religious diversity variable was interpolated. For this study, the religious diversity variable is recoded to represent a non-linear relationship. I recoded the variable turning it into a
dichotomous variable. Religious diversity scores lying between the 25th and 75th percentiles were coded as a 1. Religious diversity scores outside of this middle range were coded as 0. In recoding the variable to distinguish between moderate levels of religious diversity versus highly homogeneous or heterogeneous levels, I was able to measure if a non-linear relationship exists, as predicted in my second hypothesis.

The second independent variable, border states with armed conflict, is a simple continuous variable that uses a ratio measurement. The variable is coded by accounting for the number of border states with any type of armed conflict, not just ethnic conflict. The variable ranges from 0, meaning no border states with armed conflict, and increasing depending on how many border states have an armed conflict. In this study it was found the highest number of border states with an armed conflict measured a 7.

The third independent variable is refugee population within a nation-state. The variable is a continuous variable that measures the population of refugees residing in a given country at the end of the designated year. The variable provides a raw number of refugees measured in hundred-thousands of people.

The main issues with the validity of this dataset concerns internal validity. Since the State Failure dataset contains information from census data, some variables are only coded once every ten years. By using census information, this dataset may be subject to history effects, or is affected by the passage of time. The Forcibly Displaced Populations dataset also suffers from internal validity problems, because it is mainly reliant upon survey data.

The measurements used in this study were chosen because of their simplicity and scope. The measures of ethnic war, number of border states with armed conflict and number of refugees in a nation-state are largely in agreement with previous literature. Furthermore, measures of
region, population GDP per capita and democracy are consistent with past research. These measurements are used because they are straightforward and unlikely to vary from country to country. The only modification to the data was with the religious diversity variable. The measure was changed to be a squared value because this study looks at the possibility of a non-linear relationship, something that has not been addressed in previous literature.

Methods

A number of different techniques are used to generate information about what factors are most closely associated with ethnic conflicts. The first test examines whether or not there are any correlations between the variables. Correlation analysis is used to determine if a linear relationship exists between the independent and dependent variables. This correlation analysis was performed using the independent, dependent and control variables to test for multicollinearity; none were identified.

The second test examines exactly how the variables are related using a cross-sectional time-series logistic regression. A cross-sectional time-series logistic regression was performed for all countries between 1969 and 2002. A logistic regression was used because the dependent variable is dichotomous and logistic regression provides the best means to predict the likelihood of ethnic conflict occurring given multiple variables. Furthermore, logistic regressions are most appropriate when testing non-linear relationships, such as the one focused on in this study concerning religious diversity. A cross-sectional time-series is integrated into the model, because the data covers several countries over several years. Using a cross-sectional time-series allows for comparison of variances between countries as well as within countries over time.
Data Analysis and Discussion

The correlation analysis found that religious diversity and ethnic conflict are not significantly related with an R-value of -0.0167, meaning low levels of correlation. However, this was expected because religious diversity was predicted to be a non-linear relationship and correlation tests only measure linear relationships. In terms of the border state variable, the analysis presented an R-value of 0.2070 indicating a positive correlation between border states with armed conflict and ethnic conflict. Analysis showed the number of refugees to have a positive correlation with an R-value of 0.1753.

The logistic regression analysis took into account all the variables including the non-linear squared religious diversity variable. As presented in Table 1, the logistic regression shows a log likelihood of -577.59 and a Wald Chi-Square value of 52.27. Furthermore, the degrees of freedom was measured at seven and the significance was 0.00, indicating that the model fits reasonably well. The final results show that several variables are statistically significant including religious diversity, border states with armed conflict and number of refugees. The first variable found to be significant is population. The B coefficient of 0.01 for population shows a positive relationship in that as population increases the likelihood of ethnic conflict also increases. GDP per capita was also found to be significant at the p≤ 0.05 level with a B coefficient of -0.12, meaning there is a negative relationship between GDP and ethnic conflict. Region was also found to be significant at the p≤ 0.1 level with a B coefficient of -0.55.

Religious diversity was found to be statistically significant at the p≤ 0.05 level with a B coefficient of 1.48. This indicates that there is a relationship between religious diversity and ethnic conflict in that moderate levels of religious diversity increase the likelihood of an ethnic conflict occurring. The two contagion variables are also shown to be statistically significant.
The number of border states with armed conflict is significant at the p ≤ 0.01 level with a B coefficient of 0.33. The number of refugees coming into a state is significant at the p ≤ 0.05 level with a B coefficient of 0.07. Both indicate a positive relationship in that increases in the number of border states with armed conflict or refugees coming into the state increase likelihood of ethnic conflict.

Table 1. Causes of Ethnic Conflict Using Logistic Regression 1969-2002

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Model 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Independent Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious Diversity (dichotomous variable)</td>
<td>1.48* (0.73)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Border States with Armed Conflict</td>
<td>0.32** (0.11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refugees Coming into State</td>
<td>0.07* (0.03)</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Control Variables</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Population</td>
<td>0.01*** (0.003)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Region</td>
<td>-0.55^ (0.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDP per capita</td>
<td>-0.12* (0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>-0.01 (0.04)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-5.42 (1.09)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>3501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Log likelihood</td>
<td>-577.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wald X²</td>
<td>52.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p ≤ 0.1, **p ≤ 0.05, ***p ≤ 0.01, ****p ≤ 0.001
The effects of the coefficients for the religious diversity, border states and refugees variable can be interpreted using a metric or logistic function where all the other variables are kept constant. The following metric was used:

\[ P = e^{\mu + e\mu} \]

where \( P \) is the probability of an ethnic conflict occurring, \( e \) is a constant (2.718), and \( \mu \) is the logit. When all the other variables are kept constant, the effect of the \( B \) coefficient of the border states variable can be measured to see how the probability of an ethnic war occurring changes with each change in the number of border states with armed conflict. Keeping all other variables at their mean, it was found that nation-states with moderate levels of religious diversity are approximately 4.39 times more likely to experience an ethnic conflict than those with high levels of religious heterogeneity or homogeneity. This supports my hypothesis that religious diversity has a non-linear relationship with ethnic conflict.

The first contagion variable of border states with armed conflict was also significant, and its effect can be measured using the same metric. Again, keeping all other variables at their mean, it was found that a nation-state having seven border states with armed conflict is approximately 9.80 times more likely to experience an ethnic conflict than a nation-state with zero border states with armed conflict. It is evident that the number of border states with armed conflict has a significant impact on the likelihood of ethnic conflict occurring.

The same metric is applied to the refugees variable to determine what the likelihood of ethnic conflict would be for every increase of 500,000 refugees. Keeping all other variables at their mean, it was found that a nation-state with the maximum number of refugees, 5.5 million, is approximately 39.35 times more likely to experience an ethnic conflict than a nation-state with no refugees.
In general, the evidence shows us a few main things. First, religious diversity has a non-linear relationship with ethnic conflict. Analysis indicates that nation states with moderate levels of religious diversity are more likely to experience ethnic conflict than those that are highly homogenous or heterogeneous. This supports the literature that religion is an important factor in ethnic conflicts, but goes against previous findings that religious diversity has a linear relationship with ethnic conflict. Second, the evidence shows that context and environment does matter in terms of conflict. Analysis of data confirms that as the number of border states increases, there is an increased likelihood of ethnic conflict occurring. Furthermore, analysis also shows that an increase in the number of refugees coming into a nation-state also increases the likelihood of ethnic conflict occurring. This data supports theories about contagion effects and how problems of other countries can move to affect nation-states internally.

Taken into a broader perspective, this evidence adds to a larger knowledge base of ethnic conflicts overall. Considering the prevalence of ethnic conflicts throughout history and all over the world, it is vital to know what causes these conflicts. Knowing what causes these conflicts could possibly help in preventing ethnic conflicts from occurring in the future or help alleviate and settle conflicts more efficiently. Multiple nation-states as well international organizations such as the United Nations, European Union or Arab League would be able to utilize this information in creating more effective policy or addressing these issues in the future. The evidence gathered in this study can serve as a starting point for further research. In the future, contagion effects can be examined as a significant causal factor and other aspects of religion, beyond religious diversity, can be studied to explain why religion has such an influential role in the international system.
Conclusion

In this study I set out to explore what may cause ethnic conflict within nation-states. I hypothesized that some important causal factors were religious diversity and contagion effects. Analysis of these variables showed that religious diversity does not have a significant impact in determining the likelihood of ethnic conflict, while the number of border states with armed conflict and number of refugees coming into a nation-state both play a significant role in increasing the likelihood of ethnic conflict. The evidence gathered from this research contributes to a better understanding of ethnic conflicts overall; a better understanding will then allow for more effective policy and broader knowledge when addressing the issues of ethnic conflict in today’s international society.
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