

I

Introduction

I.I THE PURGE: JUBA, DECEMBER 2013

The fighting erupted late on Sunday night, ten days before Christmas, within the headquarters of South Sudan's Presidential Republican Guard. The next morning, with the violence spreading, South Sudan's president, Salva Kiir, clad in full military fatigues, held a press conference in which he accused Riek Machar, his former vice president, of triggering the bloodshed in an attempted coup d'état. Reviving memories of a coup Machar attempted some twenty-two years ago against Dr. John Garang, then leader of the SPLA and eventual hero of South Sudan's independence, President Kiir declared, "My fellow citizens, let me reiterate my statement [from] a few days ago in which I said that my government is not and will not allow the incidents of 1991 to repeat themselves again. This prophet of doom continues to persistently pursue his actions of the past and I have to tell you that I will not allow or tolerate such incidences once again in our new nation."¹

The general consensus, however, conflicts with Kiir's telling of events.² Many claim that what triggered the violence was not a coup attempt but

¹ South Sudan TV, "President Salva Kiir Announced Foil a Coup Attempt Led by Riek Machar," December 16, 2013. Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=boLU2oO5JDI (accessed August 21, 2016).

² For example, as noted South Sudan expert Douglas H. Johnson writes, "while the government of South Sudan has kept to this version of events, they have presented little concrete evidence to support their claim of a plot, and few friendly governments have accepted it unequivocally. Instead there was strong international pressure for the release of the eleven detainees." Douglas H. Johnson, "Briefing: The Crisis in South Sudan," *African Affairs*, 113 (451) (2014): 300–309. Riek Machar claims that in a closed-door IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development) summit in Addis Ababa in June 2014, Yoweri Museveni, President of Uganda and one of Salva Kiir's strongest regional allies,

the incumbent's analogue—a *purge*.³ Fearing the very event he claimed to have faced,⁴ Salva Kiir sought to selectively disarm those loyal to Riek Machar within the presidential guard. When they resisted, all caution was thrown to the wind, and Salva Kiir sought to liquidate Riek Machar and his supporters. Machar's house was obliterated; perceived Machar loyalists in the Presidential Republican Guard were killed; and a witch hunt ensued in Juba to round up and kill men of the same ethnic background as Machar.⁵ Moreover, a group of ten high-ranking officials within the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), including the wife of Dr. John Garang, Rebecca Garang, and the secretary general of the party, Pagan Amum, were arrested and held incommunicado on allegations they were party to the coup conspiracy.

The purge failed to kill Riek Machar, but it did neutralize his capability to seize power from within. Having disarmed or killed Machar's forces in the presidential guard, disrupted his political network within

acknowledged there was no coup. See "Museveni Dismisses Kiir's Claims Coup Attempt Sparked Conflict," *Sudan Tribune*, June 11, 2014. Available at www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article51319 (accessed August 21, 2016).

³ One of the strongest counters to Salva Kiir's telling of events was by Dr. Peter Adwok Nyaba, former minister for higher education in the government of South Sudan, 2011–2013, and then a member of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) leadership council. See Dr. Peter Adwok Nyaba, "It Wasn't a Coup: Salva Kiir Shot Himself in the Foot," *South Sudan Nation*, December 20, 2013. Available at www.southsudannation.com/it-wasnt-a-coup-salva-kiir-shot-himself-in-the-foot (accessed August 21, 2016). Rebecca Garang corroborated Nyaba's account of the events on December 15: "Rebecca Nyandeng Garanga Reveals All: How Salva Kiir's 'Private Army' Prompted the Current Conflict," *London Evening Post*, January 25, 2014. Available at www.thelondoneveningpost.com/exclusive-rebecca-nyandeng-garanga-reveals-all-how-salva-kiirs-private-army-prompted-the-current-conflict (accessed August 21, 2016). Kiir loyalists insist that the disarmament of the Nuer in the presidential guard was only initiated to stop a coup that was under way.

⁴ Salva Kiir's fears were not completely unfounded, of course. Riek Machar had made it abundantly clear he was going after Salva Kiir's seat. While Machar seemed to be pursuing a nonviolent path to sovereign power through the ruling party, the SPLM, it is not beyond the realm of possibility, given his track record for the use of force to make political gains, that he would have done so through a coup, especially as Salva Kiir prevented open competition through the SPLM. On the link between the intra-party politics and the events of December 15, see Philip Roessler, "Why South Sudan Has Exploded in Violence," *Washington Post*, December 24, 2013. Available at www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/monkey-cage/wp/2013/12/24/why-south-sudan-has-exploded-in-violence (accessed August 21, 2016).

⁵ "S. Sudan Presidential Guards Raid House of ex-VP Machar," *Sudan Tribune*, December 17, 2013. Available at www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article49217 (accessed August 21, 2016). Human Rights Watch, "South Sudan: Ethnic Targeting, Widespread Killings," January 16, 2014. Available at www.hrw.org/news/2014/01/16/south-sudan-ethnic-targeting-widespread-killings (accessed August 21, 2016).

The Purge: Juba, December 2013

3

Juba, overcome resistance by Nuer soldiers within the SPLA headquarters, and forced the former vice president to flee to the bush, Salva Kiir and his inner circle eliminated the clear and present danger of the coup d'état from the “prophet of doom.” But Kiir’s preemptive strike came at a steep price: full-scale civil war.

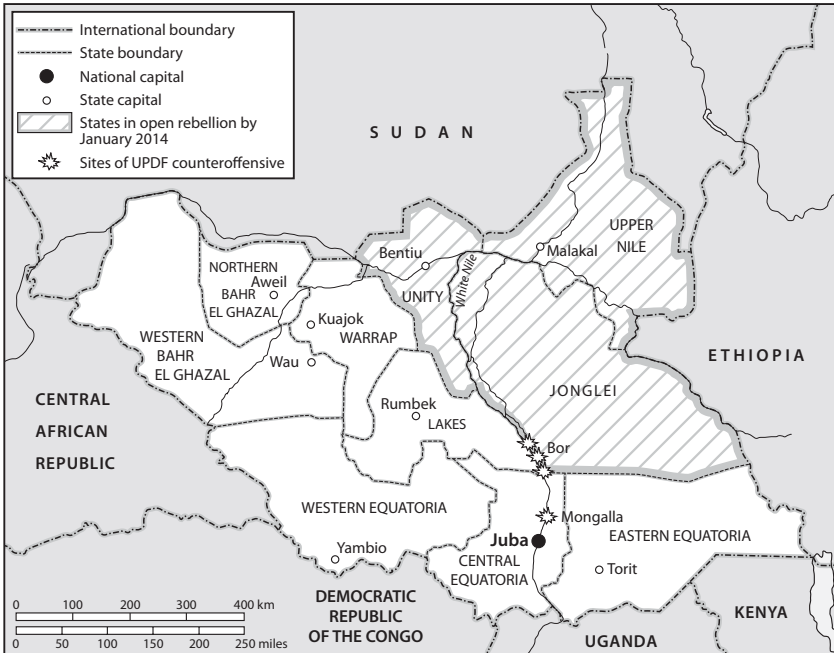
The problem for Kiir was the state he retained control of was extremely weak. Having been born out of decades of devastating and destructive war against Khartoum, South Sudan lacked the hardware (e.g., roads and other infrastructure) and software (e.g., impersonal bureaucracy) necessary for the central government to broadcast power over its population and territory. Instead, its authority and control emanated from a set of informal alliances between Big Men—powerful individuals who sat atop of and were embedded in a network of followers and were able to produce violence to gain control of scarce resources.⁶ These alliances were critical for the people of South Sudan to wrestle independence from Khartoum. For years, interethnic fighting within South Sudan weakened the region’s capacity to gain full concessions from the government of Sudan. The SPLA was only able to formally extract the right of separation from Khartoum after Riek Machar was reintegrated back into the rebel movement as number three in command behind Garang and Kiir in 2002.⁷ The integration of Nuer militia leaders, such as Peter Gatdet, in the SPLA after the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement with Khartoum contributed to a significant reduction of violence in South Sudan.

The pre-Christmas purge in 2013, however, destroyed these fragile alliances and divided the military. Immediately Machar was able to mobilize allies in Unity and Jonglei States against the government. The Fourth Division Commander of the South Sudan Army defected in Unity State and declared himself governor of the oil-rich state.⁸ Peter Gatdet, the commander of the Eighth Division, defected and captured the strategic town of Bor in Jonglei State. Less than five days after the purge, the South Sudan government lost control of the two states. Soon they would lose

⁶ Mats Utas, ed. *African Conflicts and Informal Power: Big Men and Networks* (London: Zed Books, 2012). Douglass Cecil North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, *Violence and Social Orders: A Conceptual Framework for Interpreting Recorded Human History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁷ John Young, *The Fate of Sudan: The Origins and Consequences of a Flawed Peace Process* (New York: Zed Books, 2012).

⁸ “Unity State’s 4th Division Commander Defects, Assumes Governorship,” *Sudan Tribune*, December 21, 2013. Available at www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article49274 (accessed August 21, 2016).



MAP 1.1 The Outbreak of Civil War in South Sudan, December 2013–January 2014

control of a third when Malakal, the capital of Upper Nile State, fell to Machar's forces on Christmas Eve.⁹ (See Map 1.1.)

With a significant part of the country in open rebellion, Salva Kiir faced the possibility that Machar and his allies would now march on the national capital, Juba, from Bor.¹⁰ But, as sovereign ruler of South Sudan, a position that he had taken such extreme measures to guard, Kiir possessed two advantages that he put into great effect. First, he controlled the state coffers and could leverage his discretionary authority over patronage to mobilize support against Machar.¹¹ Most importantly,

⁹ "Machar's Forces Capture Upper Nile State Capital, Malakal," *Sudan Tribune*, December 24, 2013. Available at www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?article49320 (accessed August 21, 2016).

¹⁰ The specter of this was real, especially in early January 2014 when the rebel forces managed to make their way down the Bor-Juba road, inducing panic in Juba. For a comprehensive chronology of events in the early part of the conflict, see Small Arms Survey Sudan, "South Sudan Crisis Timeline," June 27, 2014. Available at www.smallarmssurveysudan.org/fileadmin/docs/documents/HSBA-South-Sudan-Crisis-Timeline.pdf (accessed August 21, 2016).

¹¹ Alex de Waal, "When Kleptocracy Becomes Insolvent: Brute Causes of the Civil War in South Sudan," *African Affairs*, 113 (452) (2014): 347–369.

Kiir was able to elicit the support of the three Equatorian governors of the states around Juba who ramped up recruitment efforts to support the army.¹² Second, he was able to call on other sovereign states to protect his “democratically elected” government from an unconstitutional challenge posed by Riek Machar. Uganda, a strong ally of South Sudan, immediately responded and deployed substantial forces to, at first, protect Juba and the evacuation of foreign nationals, and then to attack opposition forces from both the ground and the air as they marched from Bor all the way to Mongalla.¹³ Without the support of the Ugandan military, it remains an open question whether Kiir would have been able to hold Juba.¹⁴ Though Kiir was able to survive in power and reverse some of the big early gains made by the opposition forces, his government was not able to crush the rebellion, and civil war engulfed the new state of South Sudan, leading to tens of thousands of deaths and millions displaced one year into the conflict.

The tragic course of events in newly independent South Sudan illuminates a dynamic that has been at the heart of state failure across postcolonial Africa—what I label as *the coup–civil war trap*. In Africa’s weak states, accommodating rival Big Men in the central government is necessary to mobilize support from beyond the ruler’s own ethnic base and extend the reach of the state. But doing so lowers the costs rivals face to usurp power in a future coup d’état, in which a given faction or group exploits its partial control of the state, especially the military, to unseat the ruler by force or other unconstitutional means.¹⁵ Excluding rivals weakens their coup-making capabilities but at the cost of increasing the risk of *civil war*—in which a group of violence specialists mobilize a

¹² “Military Mobilisation in E. Equatoria Attracts Excess Recruits,” *Sudan Tribune*, February 15, 2014. Available at <http://sudantribune.com/spip.php?article49964> (accessed August 21, 2016). Cited in de Waal, “When Kleptocracy Becomes Insolvent,” p. 366.

¹³ Nicholas Kulish, “South Sudan Recaptures Town from Rebels,” *The New York Times*, January 18, 2014. Available at www.nytimes.com/2014/01/19/world/africa/south-sudan-recaptures-strategic-town-from-rebels.html (accessed August 21, 2016).

¹⁴ Ugandan sources suggest this fear motivated the Uganda People’s Defence Force (UPDF) to take robust action. Haggai Matsiko, “Inside UPDF’s Juba Mission,” *The Independent*, June 29, 2014. Available at <http://allafrica.com/stories/201406300788.html>.

¹⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1968); Edward Luttwak, *Coup d’État: A Practical Handbook* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Press, 1968); Patrick J. McGowan, “African Military Coups d’État, 1956–2001: Frequency, Trends and Distribution,” *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 41 (3) (2003): 339–370; Jonathan M. Powell and Clayton L. Thyne, “Global Instances of Coups from 1950 to 2010: A New Dataset,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 48 (2) (2011): 249–259.

private military organization from a societal base to challenge the central government and its military.

The coup–civil war trap is rooted in the Hobbesian problem of how to share power in the absence of an absolute authority that can enforce its distribution.¹⁶ In such an environment, the threat of violence is necessary to guarantee one’s share of power.¹⁷ The crux of the problem, however, is that force can be used for both defensive and offensive purposes¹⁸—to uphold powersharing or to destroy it by appropriating others’ share of power. With rivals unable to credibly commit not to use force to lock in a larger share of power, each side must anticipate such a possibility, which can lead to the type of security dilemma and violent fallout seen between Salva Kiir and Riek Machar.

In the pages that follow, I demonstrate that this strategic dynamic helps to account for patterns of political instability, ethno-political exclusion, and large-scale political violence in postcolonial Africa as well as other weak, ethnically divided states, such as Syria and Iraq. In doing so, I offer a coherent explanation of one of the fundamental puzzles of civil war onset: what constrains rulers from making the concessions necessary to prevent the outbreak of large-scale political violence.¹⁹ With their rivals unable to credibly commit not to exploit privileged access to the central government to usurp power in a coup, rulers, desperate to protect their sovereign rule, often reject powersharing and take their chance on a vague, distant, and long-term threat of a rebellion versus the clear and present danger of the coup d’état today. Heretofore, the politics of civil war, by which bargaining over power ends in instability and large-scale political violence, has surprisingly represented one of the key gaps in extant scholarship.

¹⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986). This Hobbesian problem has been at the center of a number of seminal works in political science, especially in international relations. Robert Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma,” *World Politics*, 30 (2) (1978): 167–214. James D. Fearon, “Rationalist Explanations for War,” *International Organization*, 49 (3) (1995): 379–414. Robert Powell, “War as a Commitment Problem,” *International Organization*, 60 (1) (2006): 169–203.

¹⁷ Milan W. Svobik, *The Politics of Authoritarian Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

¹⁸ Jervis, “Cooperation under the Security Dilemma.”

¹⁹ James D. Fearon, “Governance and Civil War Onset,” Background Paper for *World Development Report 2011* (2010), Washington, DC: World Bank.

**1.2 CIVIL WAR IN WEAK STATES: EXISTING APPROACHES,
 UNANSWERED QUESTIONS**

Large-scale armed conflict between the central government and a locally supported rebel force, like the civil war that erupted in South Sudan at the end of 2013, has been at the heart of Africa's postcolonial development crisis. Since 1956, when Sudan became the first sub-Saharan African country to gain its independence, more than one-third of the world's civil wars have been in Africa, directly affecting one out of every two countries in the region, with many experiencing multiple civil wars.²⁰ The average civil war in Africa has lasted more than eight years, killing thousands,²¹ displacing tens of thousands, reducing economic growth, stifling democracy, and spreading conflict into neighboring countries.²² These conditions often trap countries in a cycle of violence that is difficult to break.²³ (See Map 1.2.)

Over the past ten to fifteen years, a large and impressive body of social-science scholarship has wrestled with understanding the phenomenon of large-scale political violence across Africa and other developing countries. This research program initially had a strong focus on the economic factors that drive citizens to join together, take up weapons, and challenge the state's monopoly of violence. Collier and Hoeffler, neatly synthesizing existing scholarship, framed the debate as between *greed* (citizens rebel when the opportunity costs to rebellion are low and they expect it to be lucrative) or *grievance* (citizens rebel in response to perceived injustices and discrimination by the regime).²⁴ However, in subsequent research by

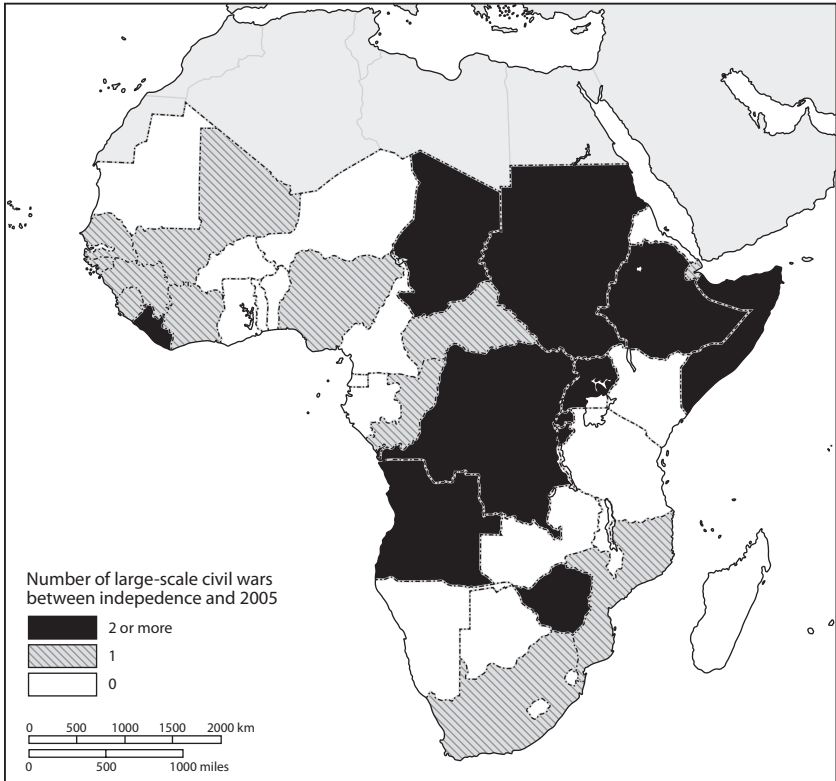
²⁰ The civil war data is from Jim Fearon and David Laitin's updated civil war dataset.

²¹ According to the Battle Deaths Dataset from the International Peace Research Institute in Oslo, there have been about 1,750,000 battlefield deaths due to civil wars in Africa between 1956 and 2005. Bethany Lacina and Nils Petter Gleditsch, "Monitoring Trends in Global Combat: A New Dataset of Battle Deaths," *European Journal of Population/Revue Européenne de Démographie*, 21 (2) (2005): 145–166. This does not include war-related deaths due to disease, malnutrition, and other indirect causes, which would increase the figure into the tens of millions.

²² Christopher Clapham, *Africa and the International System: The Politics of State Survival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Idean Salehyan, *Rebels without Borders: Transnational Insurgencies in World Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009).

²³ Paul Collier, V. L. Elliott, Håvard Hegre, Anke Hoeffler, Marta Reynal-Querol, and Nicholas Sambanis, *Breaking the Conflict Trap: Civil War and Development Policy* (Washington, DC: World Bank 2003).

²⁴ Paul Collier and Anke Hoeffler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers*, 56 (4) (2004): 563–595. They particularly draw on the work of Herschell I. Grossman, "A General Equilibrium Model of Insurrections," *The American Economic Review*, 81 (4) (1991): 912–921. Jack Hirshleifer, "Theorizing about Conflict," in Keith



MAP 1.2 Civil Wars by Country in Sub-Saharan Africa, Independence to 2005

Fearon and Laitin²⁵ and in Collier and Hoeffler's reappraisal of their own work,²⁶ the focus shifted away from the economic to the political. For one, both grievances and opportunities for rebellion are largely determined by the state's ability and willingness to protect and provide for its citizens. Moreover, the ability of citizens to form a rebel organization that can effectively challenge the state hinges on the capacity of the central government to police and control its territory.²⁷ This theoretical reinterpretation led to the *weak state paradigm of civil war*.

Hartley and Sandler Todd, eds., *Handbook of Defense Economics* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1995), pp. 165–189.

²⁵ Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War."

²⁶ Paul Collier, Anke Hoeffler, and Dominic Rohner, "Beyond Greed and Grievance: Feasibility and Civil War," *Oxford Economic Papers*, 61 (1) (2009): 1–27.

²⁷ Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War." Collier et al., "Beyond Greed and Grievance." For a good summary, see Fearon, "Governance and Civil War Onset."

The weak state paradigm places state capacity at the center of the analysis of civil war. Fearon and Laitin, in their seminal article, posit that the steady rise in civil war in the post-World War II period can be attributed to the wave of decolonization that occurred in the three decades between 1945 and 1975, which “gave birth to a large number of financially, bureaucratically, and militarily weak states.”²⁸ The weak state–civil war nexus has proven particularly vicious because civil war further weakens state capacity, leading to a self-sustaining cycle of conflict.²⁹ Even more, internal conflicts rarely abide by international territorial boundaries and regularly spill over into weak neighboring states, contributing to conflict contagion.³⁰

The weak state theory of civil war is a useful framework for understanding the global variation of large-scale political violence since the end of World War II, such as why the DRC has experienced multiple civil wars and peace has prevailed, in say, Belgium, despite the instability of its polity. It also helps to inform the case of Sudan, which is central to this book. One cannot account for the outbreak of the civil war in Darfur in 2003 or the earlier wars between the government of Sudan and various rebel groups from South Sudan without an understanding of the weakness of the Sudanese state and its inability to penetrate and control the periphery (as well as the external sanctuary and support provided to Sudanese rebels by neighboring states, such as Ethiopia, Uganda, Eritrea, and Chad).

One of the key limitations of the weak state paradigm, however, is that in assuming that “where rebellion is materially feasible it will occur,”³¹ it tends to rely too heavily on a deterministic logic to account for a highly dynamic and variable phenomenon.³² For example, while the lack of a monopoly on legitimate violence and the state’s feeble bureaucratic and

²⁸ Fearon and Laitin, “Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War,” p. 88.

²⁹ Collier et al., *Breaking the Conflict Trap*.

³⁰ Idean Salehyan, and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, “Refugees and the Spread of Civil War,” *International Organization*, 60 (April 2006): 335–366. Kristian Skrede Gleditsch, “Transnational Dimensions of Civil War,” *Journal of Peace Research*, 44 (3) (2007): 293–309. Salehyan, *Rebels without Borders*.

³¹ Collier et al., “Beyond Greed and Grievance.”

³² Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007). Sidney Tarrow, “Inside Insurgencies: Politics and Violence in an Age of Civil War,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 5 (3) (2007): 587–600.

administrative capacity renders weak states significantly more vulnerable to outbreaks of civil war than their more developed counterparts,³³ war in weak states is not inevitable nor a permanent condition. As mentioned above, despite all African countries beset by similar underlying structural conditions, only half have experienced civil war. The rest have remained peaceful throughout the post-independence period.

The weak state paradigm also poorly accounts for temporal variation within countries. The susceptibility of African states to civil war has differed across time as well as space. For example, in Sudan's Darfur, the government of Omar al-Bashir was able to effectively defeat an armed rebellion in the region in the early 1990s, but a decade later, facing a second rebellion, it failed to contain the insurgency, leading to a devastating civil war.

The primacy of the weak state paradigm has prompted the microcomparative turn in the civil war research program,³⁴ in which scholars have sought to shed light on the dynamic processes that explain *how* underlying structural conditions breed explosive large-scale political violence.³⁵ This scholarship has gone a long way toward filling the gap in our understanding of the microlevel processes that drive conflict escalation, especially the phenomenon of rebel formation.³⁶ But while microcomparative scholarship is better equipped to account for the specific dynamics that drive civil war, such as rebel recruitment, territorial control, and counter-insurgency, in many ways it tends to lose sight of the forest for the trees and suffers the same lacuna as the weak state theory of civil war. None offers a complete and coherent explanation of civil war onset—that is, how bargaining over state power ends in large-scale political violence and why, if the central government lacks the capabilities to effectively

³³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, 3 vols. (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968). Fearon and Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War." Cullen S. Hendrix, "Measuring State Capacity: Theoretical and Empirical Implications for the Study of Civil Conflict," *Journal of Peace Research*, 47 (3) (2010): 273–285.

³⁴ For an excellent overview of the major lacunae in cross-national civil war research, see Tarrow, "Inside Insurgencies." See also Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Promises and Pitfalls of an Emerging Research Program: The Microdynamics of Civil War," in Ian Shapiro, Stathis N. Kalyvas, and Tarek Masoud, eds., *Order, Conflict, and Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and Christopher Blattman and Edward Miguel, "Civil War," *Journal of Economic Literature*, 48 (1) (2010): 3–57.

³⁵ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. A number of important microcomparative studies preceded Kalyvas, including Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

³⁶ See, for example, Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion*. Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, "Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War," *American Journal of Political Science*, 52 (2) (2008): 436–455.