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Emil Aslan Souleimanov , David S. Siroky , and Roberto Colombo 

ABSTRACT

As an embedded sociocultural code, blood revenge is present in many societies where civil wars occur. Whereas evidence from other social sciences attests to its enduring global significance, security studies scholarship has largely neglected the custom of blood revenge. This article is the first to investigate its relevance for understanding the inception, dynamics, and aftermath of armed conflicts, and to present a comprehensive account of how blood revenge may shape civil wars. Drawing upon multidisciplinary scholarship, cross-case qualitative evidence, and a newly compiled dataset, this proof-of-concept article illustrates how blood revenge influences key dynamics in civil wars—specifically, the processes of violent mobilization, target selection, recruitment, defection, and disengagement. Setting the stage for further inquiries into the causes, mechanisms, and consequences of blood revenge in civil war, this conceptual article suggests why and how this sociocultural code continues to influence civil wars across the world.

As an embedded sociocultural code in many societies, the custom of blood revenge has received attention from anthropologists and historians alike. Yet its role in armed conflicts has long been ignored among international relations and security studies scholars. Given its endurance across a diverse array of societies, religions, and ethnicities, this is an unfortunate oversight.

Over the last 50 years, global data indicate that one-third of the states recognized by the United Nations (UN) have experienced at least one civil war. Of these, approximately two-thirds have occurred in societies with a tradition of blood revenge.¹ On average, conflicts involving blood revenge have been much deadlier, registering more than twice as many battle fatalities compared to conflicts in countries where this custom has never existed

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¹Specifically, 110 of 160 conflicts occurred in countries with a tradition of blood revenge. For the definition and coding criteria used to determine whether a country has blood revenge, see the section “Global Data on Blood Revenge in Civil War.” For a full list of countries and conflicts, consult the supplemental materials.

or has long since disappeared. In addition, civil wars in countries with blood revenge have been almost four times more likely to end up in a stalemate.²

If conflicts in countries with blood revenge are not only more prevalent but also deadlier and more intractable to resolution, then our understanding of civil war could benefit from a closer, more systematic examination. This article suggests that blood revenge plays an essential role in civil wars, shaping not just the patterns of violence but also forms of restraint. As we discuss in more detail later, this deep-rooted customary code has traditionally acted as a crucial conflict-resolution mechanism, discouraging kinship groups—clans or families—from initiating deadly disputes with others, and reducing the risk of broader escalation. One Chechen clan leader explained that blood revenge is “not about retaliation, or even about people murdering each other for generations, but actually about them respecting each other and living side by side in peace and harmony ... It is not about tit-for-tat retaliation. If that was the case, we would have all been dead by now.”³

Blood revenge is therefore critical to the very social fabric and cultural context of many societies where irregular conflicts occur. Indeed, we suggest, it is essential to understanding many of the most fundamental questions in the study of civil war. Developing this point, the article aims to make three main theoretical contributions. First, we argue that blood revenge serves as a local solution to the collective action problem belligerents face in armed conflicts. Since failing to exact blood revenge is tantamount to suffering social stigma, avengers are disincentivized from free riding on their obligation to mobilize and retaliate against their blood enemies. Second, the logic of blood revenge defines an avenger’s choice of viable targets. When identifying or attacking the direct culprit is impossible, avengers may in some cases expand the pool of potential targets, which can grow as wide as the culprit’s entire military, (sub)ethnic, or (sub)religious group. The loosening of the selectivity principle leads, in turn, to the politicization of violence directed against members of a broader community, thereby heightening the conflict’s death toll.

Third, we suggest that blood revenge plays an important role in the recruitment, disengagement, and defection of fighters in civil war. By offering support to avengers, armed actors may attract highly determined recruits unlikely to disengage from violence before exacting their revenge. Belligerents may also turn blood revenge into an effective counterdefection mechanism, considering a fighter’s relatives as legitimate targets of

²These data and statistics are discussed further in the section “Global Data on Blood Revenge in Civil War.”

³Wojciech Jagielski, “Blood for Blood,” *Przekrój*, last modified 3 September 2018, <https://przekroj.pl/en/society/blood-for-blood-wojciech-jagielski>.

retaliatory attacks to deter noncompliance and thereby maintain group cohesion. Challenging greed-centered explanations for recruitment and violent mobilization, we argue that nonmaterial incentives play an equally if not more prominent role in recruitment and retention of a highly determined fighting force in societies where blood revenge endures.

A deeper appreciation of blood revenge in civil war must therefore constitute a vital part of efforts aimed at preventing violent mobilization and finding lasting solutions to disputes through effective disengagement policies. Building on insights from several disciplines and research traditions, this article develops a conceptual framework and proof of concept regarding the role of blood revenge in civil wars. Using ethnographic methods, cross-case evidence, and a newly compiled global dataset, we show that insults to honor and the need to restore it through blood revenge shape high-risk violent mobilization and other conflict dynamics, highlighting how customary traditions contain the keys to conflict regulation and termination. While examining the evidence, we present our preliminary results and lay some groundwork for future research.

Situating Blood Revenge in Social Science Scholarship

Though blood revenge has yet to receive a systematic, comparative scholarly treatment, there are many influential works that speak to closely related phenomena, emphasizing the role of traditions, culture, symbols, emotions, ideology, and vengeance in conflict. Marc Howard Ross was arguably one of the first to offer a cultural understanding of conflict, and his crucial contributions paved the way for future research in this tradition.⁴ Drawing on evidence from Ayodhya, Jerusalem, and Mecca, Ron E. Hassner advanced this line of scholarship by highlighting how “sacred sites” lead to intractable conflict.⁵ Stuart J. Kaufman also progressed this agenda by suggesting that “symbolic predispositions,” as well as threat perception, explain why peace is preserved in some places while ethnic conflict

⁴Marc Howard Ross, *The Culture of Conflict: Interpretations and Interests in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993); Marc Howard Ross, *The Management of Conflict: Interpretations and Interests in Comparative Perspective* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993). In the first part of his two-volume set, Ross focuses on psychocultural theories and social-structural theories, emphasizing that the former accounts for the overall level of conflict in a society, whereas the latter best explains who fights with whom, and how both account for variation in conflict levels across different cultures and societies. In the second volume, Ross investigates conflict management, highlighting how cultural differences and attitudes shape the use and efficacy of conflict mitigation strategies.

⁵Ron E. Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010). Stacie E. Goddard also focuses on indivisible territory, offering evidence from Jerusalem, Ireland, Kosovo, and Kashmir, and argues that how actors legitimate their demands for a given territory at the bargaining table determines whether the territory will be indivisible or not. The legitimization strategies actors choose can lock them into positions from which they cannot recognize the legitimacy of their rival's claims, particularly when actors deliver incompatible demands to the bargaining table. See Goddard, “Uncommon Ground: Indivisible Territory and the Politics of Legitimacy,” *International Organization* 60, no. 1 (Winter 2006): 35–68.

emerges in others, and brought in new evidence from the southern Philippines, South Sudan, Rwanda, India, South Africa, and Tanzania.⁶ Roger D. Petersen similarly observed that symbols, along with resentment and safety considerations, act as key mechanisms for the mobilization of unorganized opposition⁷ and highlighted the role of fear, hatred, resentment, and rage in contributing to ethnic violence across Eastern Europe.⁸

Another stream of research investigates the role of humiliation and revenge in international politics. Robert E. Harkavy was arguably the first to set forth a research agenda analyzing the relationship between national defeat, humiliation, and revenge in international relations, suggesting that states suffering defeat are more prone to engage in compensatory revenge in order to regain lost status and prestige.⁹ Building on Harkavy's work, Oded Löwenheim and Gadi Heimann further conceptualized revenge's role in international politics, persuasively arguing that "an unjustified wrong can be perceived as not only morally outrageous but humiliating, which increases the propensity of that state to seek vindication through vengeance."¹⁰ Lastly, drawing upon recorded data of state territorial conquests from 1816 to 2000, Joslyn Barnhart showed that great powers that have experienced a humiliating defeat are statistically more likely to wage wars of aggression to reassert their status vis-à-vis other states.¹¹

Looking at the social role of gender, another group of scholars explores how the ideology of masculine honor prompts men to respond to aggressions and personal insults with violence. Drawing upon survey data extracted from a sample of male political activists in Thailand, Elin Bjarnegård et al. note that the adherence to patriarchal values and masculine ideology "strongly and robustly predicted a higher likelihood of participation [in political violence] among male political activists," suggesting that this ideology "is a driver of violence in political conflicts."¹² The constant need to showcase "toughness" encourages men to engage in high-risk behavior to prove their manhood in front of their peers. After comparing the survey responses of men from "honor regions" and "non-honor

⁶Stuart J. Kaufman, *Nationalist Passions* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

⁷Roger D. Petersen, *Resistance and Rebellion: Lessons from Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

⁸Roger D. Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). In his view, "emotion and rationality are not always irreconcilable forces that require completely separate modes of analysis" (xi). See also David S. Siroky and John Cuffe, "Lost Autonomy, Nationalism and Separatism," *Comparative Political Studies* 48, no. 1 (January 2015): 3–34.

⁹Robert E. Harkavy, "Defeat, Humiliation, and Revenge Motif in International Politics," *International Politics* 37, no. 3 (September 2000): 345–68.

¹⁰Oded Löwenheim and Gadi Heimann, "Revenge in International Politics," *Security Studies* 17, no. 4 (2008): 723.

¹¹Joslyn Barnhart, "Humiliation and Third-Party Aggression," *World Politics* 69, no. 3 (July 2017): 532–68.

¹²Elin Bjarnegård, Karen Brounéus, and Erik Melander, "Honor and Political Violence: Micro-Level Findings from a Survey in Thailand," *Journal of Peace Research* 54, no. 6 (November 2017): 758.

regions” across the United States, Collin D. Barnes et al. conclude that men from “honor cultures”¹³ are much more likely to engage in extreme risk-taking that can lead to death, “because such behaviors signify that one possesses the ‘manly’ attributes of strength and courage.”¹⁴ Though this prediction for violence and risk is more easily observed among men, women living in such societies are likely to legitimize the use of honor-restoring retaliatory violence. Barnes et al. note that “women in honor cultures might pronounce such responses as right and good and call upon men to defend their country’s good name from the insult of an attack.”¹⁵ Adding a gendered perspective to the legitimization processes of masculine violence, these studies shed new light on how both men and women contribute to sustaining the social norms and cultural practices that encourage and justify blood revenge.

Other scholars have focused on the role of political revenge in civil wars. Drawing on evidence from such conflicts in Spain, Côte d’Ivoire, and Northern Ireland, Laia Balcells argues that both prewar political rivalry and revenge in the later stages of a war are the primary reasons why some armed groups target civilians, whereas others avoid it, in the zones under their control.¹⁶ Distinguishing between reprisal and revenge violence, Michael J. Boyle shows how these types of revenge explain postconflict violence in Kosovo.¹⁷ Some studies have shown that, for suicide bombers, the duty to seek revenge is often grounded in cultural understandings of martyrdom.¹⁸ Rachel M. Stein shows that leaders in states with vengeful populations can trigger a desire for revenge by using strategically crafted rhetoric.¹⁹ Once this yearning for revenge is activated, leaders use it to gain support for war and to loosen constraints on democratic accountability,

¹³Honor cultures are those “in which a person (usually a man) feels obliged to protect his or her reputation by answering insults, affronts, and threats, oftentimes through the use of violence.” See Dov Cohen, “Culture of Honor” in *Encyclopedia of Social Psychology*, vol. 1, ed. Roy F. Baumeister and Kathleen D. Vohs (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007), 212.

¹⁴Collin D. Barnes, Ryan P. Brown, and Michael Tamborski, “Living Dangerously: Culture of Honor, Risk-Taking, and the Nonrandomness of ‘Accidental’ Deaths,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3, no. 1 (January 2012): 105.

¹⁵Collin D. Barnes, Ryan P. Brown, and Lindsey L. Osterman, “Don’t Tread on Me: Masculine Honor Ideology in the U.S. and Militant Responses to Terrorism,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 38, no. 8 (August 2012): 1020.

¹⁶Laia Balcells, *Rivalry and Revenge: The Politics of Violence during Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017). Toward the later stages of the war, when many people were killed or denounced, individuals often retaliated against those who killed their loved ones.

¹⁷Michael J. Boyle, “Revenge and Reprisal Violence in Kosovo: Analysis,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 10, no. 2 (2010): 189–216. The author emphasizes that “revenge violence is premised on a judgment of individual responsibility for a prior act of harm” (189).

¹⁸Andrew Silke, “Becoming a Terrorist” in *Terrorists, Victims and Society: Psychological Perspectives on Terrorism and its Consequences*, ed. Silke (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2003), 29–54; Anne Speckhard and Khapta Ahkmedova, “The Making of a Martyr: Chechen Suicide Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 29, no. 5 (2006): 429–92.

¹⁹Rachel M. Stein, *Vengeful Citizens, Violent States: A Theory of War and Revenge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

thereby augmenting their latitude to use armed force as foreign policy instrument.

Drawing on evidence from Cambodia, Alexander Laban Hinton explains the escalation of individual revenge up to society-wide conflict.²⁰ His analysis reveals that the cultural model of disproportionate revenge, “a head for an eye,” contributed to the genocidal violence in Cambodia.²¹ This is consistent with what we know about the role of revenge in armed conflicts. As Stathis N. Kalyvas observes, revenge “is probably the most recurrent feature in descriptions of violence in civil war” and, because of its intensity, often leads “to the metaphor of blood feud or vendetta.”²²

Finally, directly broaching our subject of interest in this article, Roger V. Gould offers an important study of blood revenge on the Mediterranean island of Corsica. He argues that blood revenge is conceptualized as a rational and altruistic form of an institutionalized conflict resolution mechanism. Drawing on an extensive analysis of nineteenth-century Corsican court records, Gould shows that blood revenge was more likely to occur if a social group’s reputation for cohesiveness had been impaired. However, even a brutal murder did not always result in blood revenge. Only “when *the way* it occurred made the issue of group solidarity *salient*”—in other words, when the group’s reputation and cohesion required it—did blood revenge result in violence.²³

Despite being studied in social anthropology as a trigger of intracommunal violence,²⁴ political scientists have largely emphasized political revenge, while mostly ignoring the role of blood revenge in the study of civil war. Though the theme of blood revenge resurfaces from time to time in journalistic accounts, its role in civil war remains heavily understudied in political science and international relations. One exception is Emil Aslan Souleimanov and Huseyn Aliyev’s study of blood revenge in the Chechen wars. Drawing on ethnographic research with former Chechen insurgents and eyewitnesses of the two Russian-Chechen wars, the study showed that blood revenge compelled thousands of apolitical Chechens to violently mobilize to avenge relatives who had been killed during the armed con-

²⁰Alexander Laban Hinton, “A Head for an Eye: Revenge in the Cambodian Genocide,” *American Ethnologist* 25, no. 3 (August 1998): 352–77.

²¹This is illustrated with a story about King Rama, who ordered the use of harsh violence against a family in which one person committed a murder, and against all relatives for seven generations.

²²Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 59.

²³Roger V. Gould, “Revenge as Sanction and Solidarity Display: An Analysis of Vendettas in Nineteenth-Century Corsica,” *American Sociological Review* 65, no. 5 (October 2000): 682–704, 683. Emphasis in the original. See also Roger V. Gould, *Collision of Wills: How Ambiguity about Social Rank Breeds Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

²⁴For a synthesis of the social scientific research on the subject, see Joshua Conrad Jackson, Virginia K. Choi, and Michele J. Gelfand, “Revenge: A Multilevel Review and Synthesis,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 70 (2019): 319–45.

frontations.²⁵ Though acknowledging this contribution to the study of sociocultural codes in civil war, we nonetheless note two critical limitations—one theoretical and one empirical—that the present study seeks to overcome. First, the article largely failed to theorize the role of blood revenge in shaping many key civil war dynamics—the patterns of target selection, recruitment, and disengagement. Second, because the empirical results were based on single case-study research design, the extent to which the findings generalize across time and space remains unknown.

This article develops a more comprehensive conceptual framework, drawing on interdisciplinary scholarship. It brings together studies and stories from around the globe to systematize our knowledge of how blood revenge may shape core aspects of civil war, focusing explicitly on three dimensions: (1) violent mobilization; (2) target selection; and (3) recruitment, defection, and disengagement. The empirical strategy is anchored in an extensive cross-case inquiry that allows us to summarize global patterns on blood revenge in civil wars and to set the groundwork for future empirical research.

Conceptualizing Blood Revenge

Blood revenge has survived for centuries as an institutionalized “mechanism of social control” regulating interpersonal conflict resolution.²⁶ According to the definition Napoleon A. Chagnon proposes in his influential work on the customary codes of the Yanonamo Indians, blood revenge constitutes “a retaliatory killing in which the initial victim’s close kinsmen conduct a revenge raid on the members of the current community of the initial killer.”²⁷ In signaling that avengers can select as targets not only the direct culprit but also any other (male) member of the culprit’s community (kinship ties are patrilineal), Chagnon underscores that responsibility is defined in collective, not individual, terms. As the transgressor’s relatives are all considered accountable under the assumption that they share the same blood, an avenger can retaliate against any of the direct culprit’s (patrilineal) kinsmen, which provides avengers with a notable degree of freedom when selecting a target.

Blood revenge often endures in societies that social anthropologists refer to as “honor cultures.”²⁸ Although the traditional laws of many honor

²⁵Emil Aslan Souleimanov and Huseyn Aliyev, “Blood Revenge and Violent Mobilization: Evidence from the Chechen Wars,” *International Security* 40, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 173.

²⁶Peter Waldmann, “Revenge Without Rules: On the Renaissance of an Archaic Motif of Violence,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 24, no. 6 (2001): 438. Waldmann brings forward the case of blood revenge in modern-day West-Boyacá, Colombia, where the custom resurfaced due to the central state’s inability to act as a legislator.

²⁷Napoleon A. Chagnon, “Life Histories, Blood Revenge, and Warfare in a Tribal Population,” *Science* 239, no. 4843 (26 February 1988): 985.

²⁸See footnote 12 for more information on honor cultures.

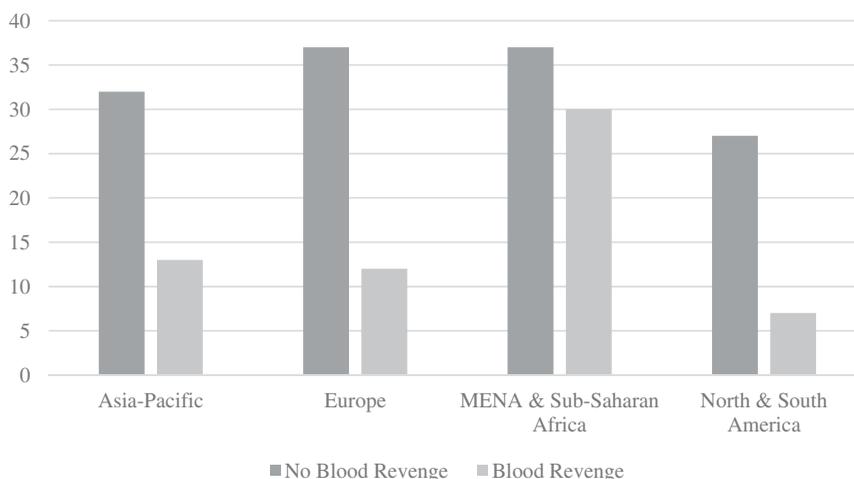


Figure 1. Countries with blood revenge.

cultures have been either suppressed by the authorities or have eroded over time due to fragmentation of the tribal order, blood revenge has displayed “a remarkable ability to survive,” even in unlikely places.²⁹ According to our newly collected global data, the custom of blood revenge endures in approximately 30% of all countries today.³⁰ Figure 1 shows the differential distribution of blood revenge across the major world regions. Whereas it survives in almost half of the countries situated in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) regions, as well as in a third of countries located in the Asia-Pacific sector and Europe, the percentage drops to one-quarter of the countries situated in North and South America.

Although the custom varies quite substantially across regions, blood revenge is clearly a global phenomenon, spanning from modern-day Colombia to postcommunist Albania and across the Philippine islands.³¹ We often see blood revenge in places where the government is incapable or unwilling to police territory, but the presence of a central authority does not automatically entail a decline in blood revenge. Restoring honor without reaching out to authorities is often considered the optimal—and sometimes the only—option for affected kinship groups.

²⁹Jenny Wormald, “Bloodfeud, Kindred and Government in Early Modern Scotland,” *Past & Present* 87 (May 1980): 96.

³⁰We consider the custom of blood revenge to survive within a country if recorded episodes of blood revenge occurred between 1971 and 2021. See section “Global Data on Blood Revenge in Civil War” for more information.

³¹Waldmann, “Revenge Without Rules”; Colin Lawson and Douglas Saltmarshe, “Security and Economic Transition: Evidence from North Albania,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 52, no. 1 (January 2000): 133–48; Wilfredo Magno Torres III, *Rido: Clan Feuding and Conflict Management in Mindanao* (Washington, DC: Asia Foundation, 2007).

Compelled to exact vengeance, members of the offended social group will not be deterred from their quest for honor even if they are temporarily unable to perform the killing, and even if authorities do exist to administer justice. In his study on the customary laws practiced on the Greek island of Crete, Aris Tsantiropoulos tells the story of a 25-year-old man who, in 2005, to avenge his uncle who was killed in 1958, retaliated upon one of the murderer's distant relatives, thereby restoring his family's honor in a developed country almost half a century after the initial crime.³² Responding to injuries or insults does more than merely deter deviant behavior. Where traditions of blood revenge prevail, a family's wealth and social rank are secured only insofar as the collective reputation of its members remains unblemished.

The moral duty of restoring one's reputation is made more pressing by the social sanctions inflicted upon individuals who are deprived of their honor. Failing to exact revenge leaves "one's honor in a state of desecration and is therefore equivalent to cowardice."³³ For the family, the ignominy of being looked down on with disdain exposes each member to never-ending humiliation. When an Aboriginal man killed a fellow tribesman in a village situated in the Northern Territory of Australia, his entire kinship group fled to Adelaide, the capital city of South Australia. As one woman from the village explained, the victim's relatives could restore their collective reputation only by exacting vengeance according to tribal customs: "One thing that will bring cure to us and make us satisfied is if they [the culprit and his kinsmen] come back from Adelaide and go through their tribal punishment. That's how the Aboriginal system runs."³⁴

Because honor constitutes a finite currency that is collectively gained, owned, and lost by each member of the same social group, defending the family, clan, or tribe's reputation is an obligation that falls upon all kinfolk. In his study of Kurdish customary laws, Mahmut Tezcan explains that one must step in when relatives are either unwilling or unable to defend their reputation: "If there is no close relative, the duty of revenge falls on any living relative of the family."³⁵ Armed with this conceptualization of blood revenge, and a better appreciation of what it entails, we next turn to laying some foundations for a theory of blood revenge in civil war.

³²Aris Tsantiropoulos, "Collective Memory and Blood Feud: The Case of Mountainous Crete," *Crimes and Misdemeanours* 2, no. 1 (2008): 63.

³³Julian Pitt-Rivers, "Honour and Social Status," in *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society*, ed. J. G. Peristiany (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1965), 26.

³⁴Jason Om, "Family Wants Tribal Punishment for Man's Death," *World Today*, 27 September 2010, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2010-09-28/family-wants-tribal-punishment-for-mans-death/2276798>.

³⁵Mahmut Tezcan, "The Tradition of Blood Feuds in Turkey," *Turkish Studies Association Bulletin* 6, no. 1 (March 1982): 10.

Toward a Theory of Blood Revenge in Civil War

The theory we propose asserts that blood revenge serves a local solution to the collective action problem for the initiation, continuation, and termination of conflicts. Individuals dragged into blood feuds are unlikely to engage in free riding due to the immense social sanctions failed avengers and their families experience. Given that “a deep-seated injury like wounded honor or a family insult burns,” and does so until soothed by the perpetrator’s blood, avengers experience strong incentives to retaliate, in effect regardless of the risks associated with taking part in armed hostilities.³⁶ This holds significant implications for our understanding of the collective action problem belligerents face in civil war. According to the mainstream view of this dilemma, individuals are reluctant to expose themselves to life-threatening hazards if the rewards for their actions are made available to others on a nonexcludable basis: “If others protest, they do not need me and I will get the benefits anyway.”³⁷ Following this line of reasoning, a rational individual should always prefer to stay on the sidelines and reap the benefits of the risky actions others undertake.

Contrary to this conventional view, we argue that there are three primary ways that the custom of blood revenge contributes to overcoming the collective action problem. First, the free-rider logic often fails to explain the choices of local avengers, whose need to exact revenge precludes them from considering shirking their social obligations—a behavior deemed inconceivable because it is socially despicable. Duty bound to retaliate, avengers are compelled to participate in hostilities, despite their indifference or outright aversion for larger political agendas.

Avengers’ mobilization is further encouraged by a climate of impunity—a factor that exacerbates episodes of blood-revenge-driven violence in civil war. The chance of settling scores with impunity was a primary motive for the mobilization of tribesmen into the so-called village guards, a Kurdish-based progovernment militia sponsored by Turkey to counter the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) insurgency. With the Turkish criminal code stipulating that people who perform blood revenge killings would be executed, the fear of incurring capital punishment forced many prospective avengers to postpone their vengeance.³⁸ When the village guards were established in 1985, the government’s attitude toward blood revenge changed dramatically. As Ceren Belge explains, the offer to join the village guards came “with an implicit understanding that previous crimes

³⁶Charles K. Tuckerman, *The Greeks of To-Day* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1872), 341.

³⁷Mark I. Lichbach, “What Makes Rational Peasants Revolutionary? Dilemma, Paradox, and Irony in Peasant Collective Action,” *World Politics* 46, no. 3 (April 1994): 386.

³⁸Clementine van Eck, *Purified by Blood: Honour Killings amongst Turks in the Netherlands* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2003), 256.

[including ongoing blood disputes] would not be prosecuted.”³⁹ It follows that, for avengers, neutrality is not a feasible option. Given that the injuries done to one are cast upon the entire social in-group, the impossibility of free riding can engender the collective mobilization of multiple kinsmen on behalf of an incapacitated or “offended” relative. What might appear to be irrational individual mobilization is, in fact, a logical response to the requirements of local sociocultural customs. As a wide array of triggers can activate blood revenge, including episodes of verbal insult and cultural insensitivity, this phenomenon can have enormous consequences in wartime.

Second, the logic of blood revenge serves to regulate the avengers’ target selection, justifying the use of retributive violence against the direct culprit to more distant and/or symbolic ones. In the chaos of a warzone, obtaining information on a presumed offender’s identity and whereabouts can be a daunting task. Faced with the inability to identify and neutralize the intended target, avengers often decide to expand the pool of potential victims and retaliate against noncombatants associated by location, ethnicity, and religion with the alleged culprit, progressively relaxing the selectiveness criterion to satisfy their impending social obligations.⁴⁰

As a result, blood revenge is a highly relevant but far less appreciated driver of civilian-centered violence than information asymmetries.⁴¹ In our view, information asymmetries are important mainly insofar as they modify the scope of blood revenge. Because guilt is defined in collective—“primordial”—terms according to the logic of blood revenge, every kinsman, clansman, or co-ethnic might be deemed responsible for one person’s misdeeds. To overcome the lack of information needed to hit the culprit and perform a blood revenge murder, avengers possess incentives to uphold the traditional principle of collective guilt and retaliate against individuals that share a clear connection with the preferred yet unreachable victim. From an initially small group sharing kinship ties with the direct culprit, the pool of potential targets can grow as wide as the culprit’s entire military, (sub)ethnic, or (sub)religious groups, engendering wide-scale escalation from individual to collective violence. The inclusion of a wider list of legitimate targets leads to the politicization of violence, with both avengers and armed actors targeting civilians due to their membership in competing (sub)ethnic or (sub)religious groups. Avengers and armed actors, on this count, can rightfully claim the lives of civilians sharing kinship or symbolic-kinship ties with unreachable culprits, often giving rise to

³⁹Ceren Belge, “State Building and the Limits of Legibility: Kinship Networks and Kurdish Resistance in Turkey,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 43, no. 1 (February 2011): 106.

⁴⁰Stathis N. Kalyvas, “The Paradox of Terrorism in Civil War,” *Journal of Ethics* 8, no. 1 (2004): 101.

⁴¹Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, “Rage against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars,” *International Organization* 63, no. 1 (January 2009): 67–106.

episodes of civilian victimization on a guilt-by-association basis. Sociocultural customs can be turned into lethal and legitimate weapons wielded against noncombatants, and thereby can shed light on how low-scale violence escalates into broader societal conflict and civil war.

Third, blood revenge serves as a potent incentive for recruitment. For belligerents in civil war, recruiting new combatants can often be challenging. Because taking part in armed hostilities entails the very real possibility of death in combat, individuals might be unwilling to join without receiving material benefits in return, either for themselves or their families; hence, they free ride. As Mancur Olson noted, resourceless armed groups have low chances of stirring apolitical individuals into action and are more likely to attract thugs: “There is no incentive for any individual ... to join such an association.”⁴² This perspective sees individuals mobilizing primarily if not solely because of their interest in material rewards.

When it comes to recruiting individuals dragged into blood feuds, however, this narrative loses much of its explanatory power. Because honor, rather than wealth, constitutes the primary currency for cultures with a tradition of blood revenge, individuals tend to prioritize the fulfillment of social responsibilities over the obtainment of economic inducements, even if this entails being deployed in high-risk combat operations. Similarly, avengers entered in blood feuds are often encouraged to seek membership in armed groups to provide protection for their relatives. This is sometimes the case for tribal leaders or warlords who, after being dragged into blood feuds with their rivals, are co-opted into an armed actor’s ranks with the promise of security and support. Additionally, armed actors have threatened to exact blood revenge against the relatives of fighters who are either reticent to mobilize or who consider defection. By holding one’s relatives accountable, an armed actor can turn a sociocultural custom into an effective counterdefection mechanism. Conversely, avengers who exact blood revenge may successfully disengage from violence, provided that their relatives suffer no repercussions.

Challenging the greed-centered narrative that has become so prominent, these findings underscore the important but often ignored reality that non-material incentives may be far stronger in the recruitment of fighters in societies with a tradition of blood revenge. For armed actors, capitalizing on the social sanctions brought about by sociocultural customs is much more rewarding and much less challenging than recruiting risk-averse individuals interested in profiting from the tragedies of war.

Traditionally, the disruptive potential of blood revenge is mitigated by the intercession of tribal elders, who authorize a retaliatory murder only

⁴²Mancur Olson, *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 58.

when it is thought to increase long-term stability and harmony between the parties involved. When the victim's relatives accept the killer's apology and decide to forgive him, often in combination with some form of compensation (for example, a blood payment), their graciousness is appreciated, for everyone knows violence has been averted and social cohesion safeguarded. In Ethiopia's tribal areas, the entire community contributes to de-escalating blood feuds by collectively appointing a respected person to mediate between involved parties.⁴³ If available, these mechanisms provide a peaceful resolution to pending disputes, restoring the injured party's honor and sparing the culprit and his kinsmen from blood revenge attacks. As David Kilcullen notes, US forces stationed in Iraq turned to tribal mediators to avoid getting entangled in blood feuds:

You should find a local sheikh who is in charge over that district ... He will then act as your broker. He will not tell the people that he has been approached by you. Instead, he will say to them "this happened in my area, and so I will take it up to the Americans to resolve it" ..., once it has been resolved, you would go to pay the *diya* [blood money].⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the outbreak of conflict can subdue the traditions of a victimized community, depriving elders of their position of authority. Tribal leaders might either be killed by a rival armed group or lose their impartial position after siding with a belligerent. Furthermore, tribal leaders might be unable to mediate between the parties, especially if the culprits are unknown foreigners serving within an armed group's ranks. When this occurs, the injured party is left with no other means to obtain justice but through blood revenge. As a Chechen villager remarked: "There are no real elders left in our village. There are state appointed so-called 'elders,' but they don't have the respect of the community."⁴⁵ When no recognized leaders are available, or the reconciliatory mechanisms cannot be deployed because tribal authority is curbed by armed actors during civil war, cycles of blood revenge can spiral out of control. Armed actors may exploit this situation, replacing traditional authority figures in the peaceful settlement of blood feuds to win over the population's sympathy and prevent their members from committing abuses to the detriment of the broader war effort.

⁴³Melaku Abate and Wubishet Shiferaw, "Customary Dispute Resolution in Amhara Region: The Case of Wofa Legesse in North Shewa," in *Grass-Roots Justice in Ethiopia: The Contribution of Customary Dispute Resolution*, ed. Alula Pankhurst and Getachew Assefa (Addis-Ababa: Centre Français des Études Éthiopiennes, 2016), 108.

⁴⁴David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 169–70.

⁴⁵Egor Lazarev, "Laws in Conflict: Legacies of War, Gender, and Legal Pluralism in Chechnya," *World Politics* 71, no. 4 (October 2019): 698.

Though the literature refers to many structural and material factors in the study of violent conflict, and emphasizes a primarily rationalist logic of mobilization, target selection, and recruitment, this article suggests that blood revenge constitutes a powerful yet still underappreciated nonmaterial motivation for violent mobilization, and thus it merits more systematic attention in the civil war scholarship.⁴⁶ Moving it from the margins and antechambers to center stage of the security studies literature, this proof of concept seeks to motivate a new research agenda on how blood revenge, and sociocultural codes in general, influence civil wars. The next sections theorize how blood revenge influences three key civil war dynamics: (1) violent mobilization; (2) target selection; and (3) recruitment, defection, and disengagement.

Violent Mobilization

Civil war theaters routinely embolden indiscriminate violence. Armed groups harass, insult, and kill people to impose control over territory and population. Such instances create a breeding ground for avengers. Although some individuals join belligerent forces for political or economic reasons, much less appreciated is how, in many war zones, the custom of blood revenge features as the primary motive for violent mobilization. According to the classic conceptualization of the collective action problem, a rational, self-interested individual has few incentives to participate in the risky business of rebellion and counterrebellion.⁴⁷ Because an armed actor's successes are typically conceptualized as public goods, enjoyed by everyone regardless of their (non)participation, the optimal choice for a rational individual is to free ride. In her account of the civil war in El Salvador (1979–1992), Elisabeth Jean Wood finds that two-thirds of the peasants living in the selected case study areas opted for free riding on the insurgency because access to collective goods, such as food and farmlands, was available regardless of their involvement in the hostilities. As a local campesino expounded, for many fence-sitters, remaining neutral represented an optimal choice: “Neither the one band nor the other be here; that is what we prefer.”⁴⁸

Individuals do not always view neutrality as their preferred option in civil war, however. In societies where one's status rests upon the ability to defend familial honor, the concept of free riding contradicts the tenets of blood revenge. As exacting vengeance is a tribesman's highest social and

⁴⁶Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein, “Who Fights? The Determinants of Participation in Civil War,” *American Journal of Political Science* 52, no. 2 (April 2008): 436–55.

⁴⁷Olson, *Logic of Collective Action*, 2.

⁴⁸Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 153.

moral obligation, nobody but the avenger himself or one of his relatives can fulfill it. Hence, blood revenge substantially alters the baseline cost-benefit narratives associated with nonmobilization, or free riding, by increasing the repercussions of nonparticipation and heightening the pay-offs associated with revenge-driven violent mobilization. For avengers, to not mobilize is from this perspective irrational and seen as socially impermissible, providing incentives, as it were, for avengers to mobilize even when free riding would be feasible.⁴⁹ As one former Chechen insurgent noted, “Whether the murderer of my brother would be killed by a random bullet or not was of little relevance to me. I had to end his life [*prikonchit*] myself. Otherwise, I couldn’t look myself in the eye for the rest of my life.”⁵⁰

Moreover, for avengers, the decision to participate in armed hostilities is often made irrespective of one’s commitment to a political or ideological cause. In the South Indian region of Karnataka, a blood feud that started between two Hindu families over the ownership of local lands in the 1970s pushed several members of the former to join the People’s War Group, part of the underground Maoist insurgent movement of the Naxalites, to exact their revenge.⁵¹ An important aspect of blood revenge is that the triggers for the violent mobilization of avengers are often apolitical. Violent mobilization can follow incidents of rape, fatal injury, and murder inflicted upon the avengers or their families. Whether an initial offense was deliberate or accidental is largely irrelevant. As Kilcullen observes, even “collateral damage” incidents can drive clan members to blood revenge violence.⁵² Exacting vengeance during a war is risky and costly, however. Attacking a member of an armed group—or an entire armed group, for that matter—is no easy task for a civilian. Hence, avengers are frequently driven to seek the support of armed groups for the sake of defending their—and their family’s—reputation.

The desire to exact revenge for their relatives murdered by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was a common theme among Iraqis who mobilized in progovernment groups and fought in the battle for Mosul, a military offensive launched in October 2016 to drive the

⁴⁹The only exception to this rule is when the culprit takes full responsibility for his or his kinsmen’s actions, making amends with an offer of “blood money.” Following the end of the ethnosectarian violence that hit Iraq between 2006 and 2007, the relatives of insurgents guilty of murdering innocent civilians came to terms with the victims’ families. As explained by a local sheikh, the acceptance of guilt followed by the payment of *dīya* allowed the offended families to restore their honor without resorting to violence: “Revenge means killing again, so we decided to seek peaceful ways.” See Scott Peterson, “As Violence Drops, Iraqi Tribes Begin to Make Amends,” *Christian Science Monitor*, 9 October 2008, <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2008/1009/p01s04-wome.html>.

⁵⁰Interview with a former Chechen insurgent, Germany, July 2019.

⁵¹“A Saga of Chilling Feud between Two Families of Anantapur,” *Deccan Herald*, 4 January 2011, <https://www.deccanherald.com/content/126207/a-saga-chilling-feud-two.html>.

⁵²Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerrilla*, 85.

extremists out of their regional stronghold. One journalist reported how an Iraqi lieutenant was determined to hunt down two ISIL fighters who murdered his father,⁵³ while civilian eyewitnesses explained that blood revenge was an unmistakable source of anti-ISIL violence: “Every fighter from the *Hashd* [Popular Mobilization Forces] had his own personal revenge to take ... They drove around the village with men strapped onto car bonnets shouting things like ‘come see the *Daeshi* who informed on me and my father.’”⁵⁴ For many Iraqis, joining the progovernment camp was the best opportunity to retaliate and restore their families’ honor.

The Turkish government’s decision to turn a blind eye to the village guards’ abuse of their position flared instances of blood revenge in the Kurdish areas of the country. Joost Jongerden reported that “the *korucu* [village guards] enjoyed virtual immunity and could use their arms for the exercise of private violence as well. They revived old feuds and took revenge at old enemies.”⁵⁵ One local villager described how joining the village guards granted recruits a *carte blanche* to carry out their long-postponed vengeance: “If you had a blood feud ... and if you had managed to establish good relationships with a station commander, you could obtain a license for your ‘keles,’ [slang for the AK-47 Kalashnikov]. Possessing a licensed Kalashnikov automatically made you a security officer ... you then almost had the authority to arbitrarily kill people.”⁵⁶ The blood revenge killings perpetrated by Kurdish progovernment militias prolonged cycles of tit-for-tat murders that encouraged apolitical civilians to join armed groups in pursuit of vengeance.

In this manner, individual blood revenge can lead to collective mobilization. As blood revenge requires every kinsman to defend his family’s or clan’s honor when one of his relatives fails to do the same, the obligation of exacting vengeance does not die out when the individual is either unable or unwilling to retaliate himself. His relatives will be equally—if not more—interested in retaliating. In wartime, blood revenge can motivate several avengers belonging to the same social group to join armed hostilities on behalf of their relatives, thereby triggering collective forms of violent mobilization.

⁵³Susannah George, “Iraqi Officer Admits to Executing Multiple ISIS Fighters in Mosul and Vows a ‘Slow Death’ for His Family’s Killers,” *Business Insider*, 20 July 2017, <https://www.businessinsider.com/iraqi-officer-admits-executing-isis-fighters-mosul-2017-7?IR=T>.

⁵⁴“Iraq: Tribal Militia Tortured Detainees in Revenge Attacks during Mosul Offensive,” Amnesty International, 2 November 2016, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2016/11/iraq-tribal-militia-tortured-detainees-in-revenge-attacks-during-mosul-offensive/>.

⁵⁵Joost Jongerden, *The Settlement Issue in Turkey and the Kurds: An Analysis of Spatial Policies, Modernity and War* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), xxii.

⁵⁶Emel Ataktürk, “Interview with Ridvan Dalmış: ‘I Do Not Believe the Murders Committed in the Region Will Be Solved,’” *Hafıza Merkezi*, 1 July 2014, 2021, <https://hakikatadalethafiza.org/en/interview-with-ridvan-dalmis-i-do-not-believe-the-murders-committed-in-the-region-will-be-solved-i-have-no-faith-at-all-that-the-murders-committed-in-the-region-will-be-so/>.

In South Sudan, for example, countless tribesmen took up arms to avenge their relatives murdered during clashes between their respective ethnic groups over land and cattle. When, in August 2011, ethnic Murle militia massacred about 600 Nuer civilians during cattle raids across the Uror County, as many as 8,000 tribesmen joined the militia known as “Nuer White Army” to exact vengeance. As one Nuer man explained shortly after the attack, the death of a relative could not be left unpunished: “They killed my family ... I want revenge.”⁵⁷ Mobilization of multiple kinsmen became a recurrent theme during the civil war that tore apart the country between December 2013 and February 2020. Interviewed shortly after the breakout of hostilities, a 15-year-old boy affirmed that he joined the Nuer White Army to kill Dinka militiamen, deemed responsible for the death of his parents: “I just want to fight because of what they have done to my parents.”⁵⁸ With their tribes entrapped in cycles of tit-for-tat killings, avengers from each warring party joined local militias, hence contributing to the escalating intensity and lethality of the armed hostilities.⁵⁹

The obligation of exacting revenge does not arise solely when a kinsman is killed, raped, or severely injured. Episodes of verbal insult, disregard for traditional customs, and cultural misunderstanding can also trigger revenge-motivated violence. One young Somali man who joined the local insurgent group, Al-Shabaab, said that profound humiliations brought about an obligation for vengeance: the security forces “would touch our women inappropriately at the checkpoints. Imagine when you see this being done to your mother or your sister ... it is humiliating and infuriating.”⁶⁰ This is particularly the case when external armed actors, being “outsiders” and thus less familiar with local customs, hold a disrespectful attitude that prompts individuals from the offended community to seek vengeance.

In the Iraqi city of Ramadi, locals hired an insurgent sniper to exact revenge upon a US soldier who frequently urinated in public. The soldier’s lack of cultural sensitivity was the cause of his death, according to one analyst: “It was not the urinating as such that offended them [the population]; it was the way he exposed himself regardless of whether any women were around.”⁶¹ Similar episodes occurred in Afghanistan, where the foreign troops’ cultural inappropriateness triggered revenge-motivated attacks. In

⁵⁷James Copnall, *A Poisonous Thorn in Our Hearts: Sudan and South Sudan's Bitter and Incomplete Divorce* (London: Hurst, 2014), 168.

⁵⁸“Child Soldiers Battle in Worsening South Sudan War,” Agence-France Presse, 17 April 2014, <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/child-soldiers-battle-in-worsening-south-sudan-war-557670>.

⁵⁹John Young, *Popular Struggles and Elite Co-optation: The Nuer White Army in South Sudan's Civil War* (Geneva: Small Arms Survey, 2016).

⁶⁰Muhsin Hassan, “Understanding Drivers of Violent Extremism: The Case of al-Shabaab and Somali Youth,” *CTC Sentinel* 5, no. 8 (August 2012): 19.

⁶¹Hala Jaber, “Iraq’s Sharpshooting Rebel Legend,” *Sunday Times*, 22 February 2005, <https://renew.com/general63/shrp.htm>.

2012, for instance, an Afghan villager killed four French soldiers in revenge for US servicemen's desecration of the bodies of three Taliban fighters.⁶²

Regardless of its triggering episode, once activated, the custom of blood revenge engenders a compelling responsibility to mobilize for avengers in need of restoring their family's reputation. In high-risk contexts, blood revenge inhibits one's self-preservation instincts, prompting avengers to take great risks to restore their family's honor. For many campesinos living in the Colombian municipality of Puerto Boyacá, the desire to avenge their relatives murdered by the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) was a strong motivating factor to join paramilitary units deployed in high-risk combat operations in the 1980s.⁶³ Similarly, during the civil war that erupted across the North Solomon Islands of Papua New Guinea between 1988 and 1998, the security forces' indiscriminate killing of civilians prompted countless local villagers to join the local separatist movement, known as the Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA). As a young recruit who mobilized at the age of nine recalled, the desire for vengeance offset the fear of dying in combat: "They killed my brother and uncle ... I discussed [joining the BRA] with my parents. They tried to stop me, but I was too determined ... finally, [they] said, okay, I can go."⁶⁴

In sum, blood revenge can lead to high-risk mobilization at the individual level, creating a self-enforcing solution to the collective action problem in civil wars; and such violence can escalate to collective mobilization by linking revenge to the extended families of the offended parties and to armed groups.

Target Selection

Blood revenge is anchored in strong sociocultural customs that require action.⁶⁵ Because the custom of blood revenge casts an individual's guilt upon their entire social group, vengeance can be rightfully exacted against anyone belonging to the direct culprit's community, including their civilian relatives. In the context of civil war, where members of armed actors are difficult to locate and even harder to kill, civilian kinsmen can become second-best victims of retaliatory strikes performed according to traditional customs. In this way, blood revenge offers avengers with socially sanctioned means of overcoming the lack of intelligence to fulfill their personal obligations.

⁶²"Afghan Soldier Killed Four French Troops after Watching US 'Desecration' Video," *Guardian*, 25 January 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/jan/25/afghan-soldier-french-marines-desecration>.

⁶³Victor Hugo Peña Salinas and Jorge Alirio Ochoa Lancheros, "Puerto Boyacá en los orígenes del paramilitarismo" [Puerto Boyacá and the origins of paramilitarism], *Derecho y Realidad*, no. 12 (2008): 257.

⁶⁴Karen Emmons, *Adult Wars, Child Soldiers: Voices of Children Involved in Armed Conflict in the East Asia and Pacific Region* (Bangkok, Thailand: UNICEF East Asia and Pacific Regional Office, 2002), 28.

⁶⁵Beatrice Heuser and Eitan Shamir, "Universal Toolbox, National Styles or Divergence of Civilisations?" in *Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies: National Styles and Strategic Cultures*, ed. Heuser and Shamir (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 342.

Nevertheless, there is a clear hierarchy of targets in customary blood revenge. Traditionally, an avenger is allowed to retaliate only against either the direct culprit or his male relatives. In the turmoil of civil war, however, this principle is often relaxed due to the barriers prospective avengers encounter. The difficulty of obtaining information on the direct culprit's identity constitutes a first impediment. Being capable of reaching the direct culprit—or his relatives—is another challenge. As identifying the barrel from which the bullet was fired is often impracticable, would-be avengers may decide, in accordance with the logic of revenge, to enlarge the pool of suitable targets to include individuals unrelated to the culprit and his family, including military or insurgent units, garrisons, and (sub)ethnic or (sub)religious groups. This transition from a relatively small pool of kinsmen to a wider group of targets morphs the traditional principles of blood revenge, turning a highly institutionalized custom into a loosely regulated instrument for self-help justice during civil wars.

A broader list of targets does not mean avengers refrain from following a scale of preferences or a hierarchy of targets in their selection process. During the Chechen wars, avengers lacking personalized information were inclined, typically in consultation with their elders or clan leaders, to retaliate “against the narrowest group of offenders they were capable of identifying.”⁶⁶ According to the traditional logic of blood revenge, an avenger's preferred targets remain the direct culprit and his closest relatives. In 2011, in the southwestern Indian state of Kerala, a former Maoist insurgent killed one of his former comrades in arms to avenge his brother, who was executed by the same man in the mid-1990s because he was believed to be a police informer.⁶⁷ In areas bombed by the Russian Air Force, local villagers “would make notes of the planes' markings so they could track down the families of the pilots to extract revenge.”⁶⁸

When retaliating against the direct culprit or his relatives was unfeasible, avengers sometimes attacked individuals stationed in the culprit's garrison, as these soldiers were assumed to share a tighter connection with the direct culprit and his deeds. Prevented from exacting blood revenge against the soldier guilty of having raped and murdered a young Iraqi girl, local avengers attacked two of his comrades in arms rather than the first soldiers they came across.⁶⁹ Similarly, a former Cambodian soldier explained how, during the post-Khmer Rouge period, the killing of one of his comrades in

⁶⁶Souleimanov and Aliyev, “Blood Revenge and Violent Mobilization,” 175.

⁶⁷“Maoist Feud Led to Ramulu Murder: Police,” *Hindu*, 22 May 2014, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/maoist-feud-led-to-ramulu-murder-police/article6034309.ece>.

⁶⁸Richard H. Shultz Jr. and Andrea J. Dew, *Insurgents, Terrorists and Militias: The Warriors of Contemporary Combat* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 113.

⁶⁹Akeel Hussein and Colin Freeman, “Two Dead Soldiers, Eight More to Go, Vows Avengers of Iraqi Girl's Rape,” *Telegraph*, 9 July 2006, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iraq/1523465/Two-dead-soldiers-eight-more-to-go-vow-avengers-of-iraqi-girls-rape.html>.

arms by unidentified Vietnamese troops prompted his unit to exact vengeance upon the entire enemy garrison.⁷⁰

If the avenger cannot target the soldiers stationed in the culprit's garrison, however, then any enemy fighter may be targeted, thereby expanding the pool of potential victims. When Irish peacekeepers killed a man during a firefight with the South Lebanon Army, a Christian-dominated militia, in April 1980, his siblings murdered two soldiers in return: "We killed the Irish soldiers in revenge for the death of our brother ... if we capture other Irishmen, they will suffer the same fate, and this will go on until there is an official reconciliation."⁷¹ For a young South Sudanese boy who joined the Nuer White Army, the act of killing Dinka militiamen satisfied his desire of vengeance: "Yes, I got revenge, even though I did not kill those who killed my brothers."⁷²

The practice of retaliating against random servicemen is often upheld when tracing the direct culprit's identity is genuinely impossible. After a US drone strike accidentally killed innocent civilians in Pakistan, local sheiks announced a "Jihad against America," declaring: "We have given permission to our loved ones to do suicide attacks against Americans. And we will take revenge so that Americans will remember it for centuries."⁷³ As explained by a PKK supporter, the selected target is often the unfortunate victim of a blood revenge performed on the responsible institution: "It's not that sergeant who slaps our elderly on the face; it's the uniform. Then, automatically, the hatred is directed not to the person, but to the uniform; and since the uniform represents the state, it means that the target of reaction, in fact, is the state."⁷⁴ The victim becomes the symbolic vessel of a blood revenge performed against a larger community deemed responsible.

The widening of the pool of suitable targets often leads to the escalation and politicization of violence, a process that puts entire (sub)ethnic or (sub)religious communities at risk. In the aftermath of the US invasion of Iraq, al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) persuaded many Sunni avengers to retaliate not only against members of Shia militias judged guilty of killing innocent Sunnis but also against noncombatants belonging to the same sectarian group. In his 2005 "declaration of total war" against the Shias of Iraq, AQI

⁷⁰Hinton, "Head for an Eye," 357–58.

⁷¹"Lebanese Villagers Vow to Kill U.N. Irish Troops," *Washington Post*, 21 April 1980, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1980/04/21/lebanese-villagers-vow-to-kill-un-irish-troops/fd35bf18-fbbb-4940-a3d6-e50ee9616b8f/>.

⁷²Skye Wheeler, *"We Can Die Too": Recruitment and Use of Child Soldiers in South Sudan* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2015), 44, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/southsudan1215_4.pdf.

⁷³Brian Glyn Williams, *Predators: The CIA's Drone War on al Qaeda* (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2013), 215.

⁷⁴Kamil Yilmaz, "Individual Disengagement of 'Turkish Penitents' from Political Violence as Rite of Passage" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2012), 123.

leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi stated that vengeance could be exacted upon “whoever is proven to belong to the Pagan [National] Guard, the police, or the army, or whoever is proven to be a Crusader collaborator or spy.”⁷⁵ He further specified: “If you can’t find any Christians or Jews to kill, vent your wrath against the next available Shia.”⁷⁶

Shia militias applied the same logic when engaging in blood revenge attacks against Sunni communities. As Abu Kemael, former head of the Shia militia known as the Mahdi Army, stated: “Anyone Sunni was guilty. If you were called Omar, Uthman, Zayed, Sufian, or something like that, then you would be killed. These are Sunni names and you were killed according to identity.”⁷⁷ Similarly, a southern Yemeni sheik explained that the kinsmen of villagers killed in US drone strikes are eager to exact their blood revenge upon anyone who shows an association with the unreachable culprit: “Any American they see, they exact [blood] revenge, even if it’s a civilian.”⁷⁸

The deployment of blood revenge against the kin of insurgents has been systematic across the northeast Caucasus. As the Chechen president Ramzan Kadyrov routinely states, insurgents’ families and civilian collaborators will experience the same fate as their rebellious relatives in the woods: “If a rebel kills a policeman or another person, his family will be immediately expelled from Chechnya with no right to return, and their house will be razed to the ground.”⁷⁹ In the neighboring republics of Dagestan and Ingushetia, the local governments have not refrained from emulating the Chechen leader. In Dagestan, the population is aware that blood revenge will be exacted upon the insurgents’ families. Leaflets distributed among the inhabitants of Buinaksk make that clear; they read: “We’ll kill one close relative of a devil from the forest [insurgent] for one killed normal Muslim.”⁸⁰

In Ingushetia, the government systematically punishes rebel’s families. As the former head of state, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, once remarked: “All those who provide shelter, food, and other assistance to the bandits will be criminally prosecuted for helping the militants. It should be clear to everyone— if you allow someone to enter your home, you bear responsibility for

⁷⁵Leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq Al-Zarqawi Declares ‘Total War’ on Shi’ites, States That the Sunni Women of Tel’afar Had Their Wombs Filled with the Sperm of the Crusaders,” Middle East Media Research Institute, 16 September 2005, 2, <https://scholarship.tricolib.brynmawr.edu/handle/10066/4810>.

⁷⁶Martin Walker, “The Revenge of the Shia,” *Wilson Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (Autumn 2006): 18.

⁷⁷Patrick Cockburn, *Muqtada: Muqtada al-Sadr, the Shia Revival, and the Struggle for Iraq* (New York: Scribner, 2008), 185.

⁷⁸Yara Bayoumy, “Insight: In Yemen, Al Qaeda Gains Sympathy amid U.S. Drone Strikes,” *Reuters*, 13 December 2013, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-us-drones-insight-idUSBRE9BC0A020131213>.

⁷⁹Tanya Lokshina, “Dispatches: Burning Down the House in Chechnya,” *Human Rights Watch*, 10 December 2014, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2014/12/10/dispatches-burning-down-house-chechnya>.

⁸⁰Valeriy Dzutsev, “Attacks in Dagestan Suggest Inefficiency of Administrative Changes,” *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 14 June 2013, <https://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/12756-attacks-in-dagestan-suggest-inefficiency-of-administrative-changes.html>.

him.”⁸¹ Fearing for their families, many civilians avoid the rebels. As one prospective Dagestani insurgent made clear: “I didn’t join [the insurgency] to protect my family from falling victims to the same abuse.”⁸²

As the selection of targets is expanded in times of war, avengers may target civilians for blood revenge, which can lead to the systematic victimization of civilians sharing kinship or symbolic ties with a perceived culprit. In this way, violent individual mobilization spreads and spirals, escalates and de-escalates. Civilians are sometimes the last in line. Although their victimization is present in virtually all civil wars, one of the less appreciated reasons for this phenomenon is blood revenge. With the concept of “guilt” defined in collective terms, friends and families of direct culprits risk falling victim to blood revenge attacks as legitimate targets.

Recruitment, Defection, and Demobilization

For armed actors, recruiting combatants is the *sine qua non* of survival. In an article exploring the microfoundations of insurgent success in civil wars, Scott Gates explains that rebellion is a futile endeavor if no recruitment takes place: “A rebel army’s ability to succeed depends on its ability to recruit and motivate its soldiers to fight and kill.”⁸³ Yet, faced with the perspective of encountering death in combat, risk-averse individuals are reluctant to join hostilities without receiving concrete benefits in return. To overcome the collective action problem, armed actors typically offer “selective incentives” to participants to increase the individual payoffs of engaging in violence. For many dispossessed Colombian peasants, for instance, the chance of exiting a life of misery was a fundamental incentive for joining FARC. As a local official explained, the offer of economic incentives lured many peasants into joining the insurgents: “If the guerrillas approach a poor family ... and offer to pay for ‘borrowing’ the children and take them to war, [the parents] are not going to say no.”⁸⁴

According to this perspective, recruitment based on material incentives, such as money and loot, should occur more frequently in poorer areas where low incomes “decrease the opportunity cost of fighting.”⁸⁵ Nevertheless, recruiting members based on short-term economic endowments is a double-edged sword. As Jeremy M. Weinstein demonstrates,

⁸¹Mairbek Vatchagaev, “Ingushetia’s Yevkurov Appears to Back Blood Revenge against Militants’ Relatives,” *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 11, no. 140 (2014).

⁸²Jean-François Ratelle and Emil Aslan Souleimanov, “Retaliation in Rebellion: The Missing Link to Explaining Insurgent Violence in Dagestan,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no. 4 (2017): 582.

⁸³Scott Gates, “Recruitment and Allegiance: The Microfoundations of Rebellion,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46, no. 1 (February 2002): 112.

⁸⁴Andrea Peña, “Así Reclutan las Farc” [This is how the FARC recruits], *Semana*, 16 July 2006, <https://www.semana.com/on-line/articulo/asi-reclutan-farc/79954-3>.

⁸⁵Seth G. Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 20.

these armed groups are often “flooded with opportunistic joiners who exhibit little commitment to the long-term goals of the organization.”⁸⁶ Mutiny and defections can thus become endemic. In Mozambique, the Mozambican National Resistance movement could only offer cheap looted goods to its members—a meager reward for engaging in risky anti-incumbent activity. Dissatisfied with their personal payoffs, many insurgents disengaged and defection “became the dominant norm of rebel conduct.”⁸⁷

Yet, in some societies, evidence suggests nonmaterial incentives can be far stronger catalysts for recruitment, even in areas with high poverty rates. Set against an environment in which family and clan honor constitute the main currency, an individual’s top concern is to accumulate and to maintain status through honor—not wealth. This is particularly true for avengers whose family’s reputation is at stake. Because avengers prioritize the fulfillment of their social obligation over any other form of selective incentive, an armed actor capable of supporting revenge-seekers in their quest for vengeance can access a valuable source of manpower, even if the material endowments are meager.

In contrast to opportunistic joiners, whose only interest is to minimize the risks of getting killed while reaping the benefits of membership, avengers are often willing to be deployed in high-risk combat operations for a chance of retaliating. Recruiting such individuals can therefore avert the defection and mutiny experienced by groups with opportunistic fighters. In Kerala, Maoist insurgent groups recruited indigenous tribesmen by exhorting them to exact blood revenge upon members of the local law enforcement agencies.⁸⁸ The custom of blood revenge allows armed actors to recruit highly motivated fighters, even without powerful economic inducements and in the face of high opportunity costs. In Iraq, recruitment of avengers willing to engage in (almost) suicidal attacks was AQI’s operational trademark. In the fight against the US forces in Fallujah, AQI deployed individuals recruited from across the tribal areas where Western forces inflicted casualties.⁸⁹ This was the case of many tribesmen from the village of Falahat, mobilized by AQI to fight in Fallujah after a US army unit killed several local fighters. As local villagers reported, the victim’s kin were “outraged by the fact that ... his head had faced the ground, rather

⁸⁶Jeremy M. Weinstein, “Resources and the Information Problem in Rebel Recruitment,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 49, no. 4 (August 2005): 599.

⁸⁷Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 145.

⁸⁸T. P. Nijeesh, “Footage Shows Maoists Welcoming Tribals to Fold,” *Times of India*, 12 December 2016, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/thiruvananthapuram/footage-shows-maoists-welcoming-tribals-to-fold/articleshow/55934534.cms>.

⁸⁹Roel Meijer, “Defending Our Honor’: Authenticity and the Framing of Resistance in the Iraqi Sunni Town of Falluja,” *Etnofoor* 17, no. 1/2 (2004): 23–43.

than the holy city of Mecca ... and [that his body] was [left by the US soldiers] riddled with maggots.”⁹⁰

In other instances, AQI recruited avengers willing to serve as suicide bombers. In an interview released after the end of the combat operations in Fallujah, a 10-year-old child recruit explained that his desire to avenge his parents motivated him to become a suicide bomber: “I do not have anyone for me in this world and I want to meet my family in heaven by revenging their death.”⁹¹ In Ramadi, official sources reported a case of a teenager who joined AQI and organized an improvised explosive device attack to avenge his father.⁹² By capitalizing on the population’s grievances, jihadis were able to access a growing pool of recruits willing to fight and die in pursuit of vengeance.

Likewise, during the armed conflict that occurred in the North Solomon Island of Bougainville, the Papua New Guinea government sought to recruit local avengers dragged into blood feuds with militants of the separatist BRA. As a photojournalist who visited the region explained, the government’s provision of weapons and support to BRA opponents or defected BRA elements seeking vengeance contributed to setting up a capable, motivated counterinsurgency force: “Many were drawn to the [progovernment indigenous militia known as Bougainville Resistance Force] because of their need to avenge killings, in their families or clan by BRAs.”⁹³ In these instances, the custom of blood revenge perpetuated the cycle of retributive killings performed by new recruits, imposing a layer of apolitical grievances atop the genuine edifice of a political conflict.

By deploying blood revenge against the relatives of potential recruits, armed actors can compel unaligned civilians and enemy fighters to join its ranks. During the Second Chechen War, Chechen authorities exploited blood revenge as a recruiting mechanism to coerce hundreds of insurgents into joining the *kadyrovtsy*—the progovernment militia controlled by the Kadyrov family. This was the case of the insurgent leader, Magomed Khambiyev, who defected to spare dozens of his relatives being held by the authorities. Interviewed by a Russian newspaper, Khambiyev explained that the logic of blood revenge underpinned his defection: “Yes, they detained my relatives ... But they were guilty. Do you understand? If I’m a bandit, they’re bandits too.”⁹⁴

⁹⁰Anthony Shadid, *Night Draws Near: Iraq’s People in the Shadow of America’s War* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005), 296.

⁹¹“Insurgents Using Children to Fight US-Led Forces,” *New Humanitarian*, 2 November 2006, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/report/61917/iraq-insurgents-using-children-fight-us-led-forces>.

⁹²Tom Bowman, “Teens, Children Aiding Iraqi Insurgents,” *NPR*, 26 February 2007, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=7599096>.

⁹³Ben Bohane, “Blackfella Armies: Kastom and Conflict in Contemporary Melanesia 1994–2007” (Master’s thesis, University of Wollongong, 2007), 155.

⁹⁴Andrew E. Kramer, “Russia Shows What Happens When Terrorists’ Families Are Targeted,” *New York Times*, 29 March 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/30/world/europe/russia-chechnya-caucasus-terrorists-families.html>.

Once recruited into the government's ranks, returning to civilian life is difficult due to the risks encountered by families of recruits deprived of the incumbent's protection. As a Chechen militiaman described, the families needed protection from revenge-seeking insurgents: "Imagine that bandits have killed a policeman. His brother gets a job in the police or joins the 'kadyrovtsy.' Not because he wants to serve there, but to get revenge. But he doesn't know specifically who killed his brother ... so he simply kills any bandit, the first one he comes across ... But now the brothers of these bandits that he killed must also get revenge," triggering a "geometric progression" in revenge murders that has forced many *kadyrovtsy* to rely on the government for securing their relatives' safety.⁹⁵

In this manner, blood revenge can exacerbate ethnosectarian cleavages. First, eliminating the ideological factors pushing people to mobilize for the opponent can contribute to splintering the opposition into uncoordinated and mutually hostile groups. Second, aggravating intratribal feuds leads tribes looking for protection from their foes to seek support from armed actors. Third, morphing the conflict into a tribal war makes it harder for the enemy to reconcile hostile social groups. Without the prospects of top-down peaceful solutions, hostilities can last indefinitely, as tribesmen seek vengeance against their rivals. By triggering local blood feuds, an incumbent can pit entire social groups against each other, recruit new members, weaken the rebel support base, and prevent a united front against it.

In other cases, an armed faction may attract recruits and gain popular support because it safeguards traditional conflict resolution mechanisms. In South Sudan, the government's attempts aimed at de-escalating blood feuds often fell short due to its perceived lack of authority and the unacceptably low compensation offered to the injured parties. As a tribal chief explained in 2013, "A soldier shot [my daughter]. He was told to pay compensation, but I would prefer him to be killed ... I have been given cows as compensation from the soldier, but they are so few ... Compensation means nothing now."⁹⁶ Militias often fill the vacuum left by the lack of judicial authority, and their leaders gained the respect of the local communities by de-escalating blood feuds and settling interpersonal disputes. As Ingrid Marie Breidlid and Michael J. Arensen argue regarding the leaders of the Nuer White Army, they "mitigate blood feuds between families and sections and are frequently involved in arresting perpetrators."⁹⁷ Through a

⁹⁵"Borozdinovskaya and the Role of Revenge," *North Caucasus Weekly* 6, no. 31 (2005), <https://jamestown.org/program/borozdinovskaya-and-the-role-of-revenge/>.

⁹⁶Naomi R. Pendle, "The Dead Are Just to Drink From': Recycling Ideas of Revenge among the Western Dinka, South Sudan," *Africa* 88, no. 1 (February 2018): 112.

⁹⁷Ingrid Marie Breidlid and Michael J. Arensen, "The Nuer White Armies: Comprehending South Sudan's Most Infamous Community Defence Group," in *Informal Armies: Community Defence Groups in South Sudan's Civil War* (London: Saferworld, 2017), 28.

consistent application of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms, leaders largely transformed their militias from a threat to security into an instrument of peace. In a 2015 interview, Duor Tut, the appointed governor of the South Sudanese district of Sobat, claimed that the White Army had become “a positive force for security” in the area, as “most White Army fighters now appreciate that seeking revenge and killing [members of the rival ethnic community] Dinka is a ‘dead end.’”⁹⁸

However, the co-optation of militia commanders involved in blood feuds is also an instrument to weaken opponents. This constituted a strategic mainstay of Russia’s counterinsurgency in Chechnya. For Akhmad Kadyrov and the Yamadayev brothers, four of the most notorious figures in the insurgency’s political landscape, the imperative of settling scores with their enemies comprised a key incentive to join the pro-Russian local government.⁹⁹ Thanks to the defection of these ex-rebels, Moscow weakened the insurgency by rallying at least 100,000 Chechens, roughly one-tenth of the entire Chechen population.¹⁰⁰ During the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62), the French government adopted a similar “divide and conquer” strategy aimed at pitting local tribes against each other to weaken the insurgency of the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN). To exacerbate intertribal grievances, French forces resorted to using the services of renowned ethnographers. In November 1954, for instance, ethnologist Jean Servier engineered a blood feud between the Ouled Abdi and Touabas tribes, successfully stigmatizing the former as a FLN supporter to compel the latter into siding with the government.¹⁰¹ The multiplication of intertribal vendettas played “a sizable role” in the recruitment of local tribesmen into progovernment militias¹⁰² and pushed revenge-seeking individuals “into the arms of the French Army,” causing many to enlist as new recruits as part of irregular forces known as “Harkis.”¹⁰³

Nevertheless, exacerbating existing animosities is no silver bullet. Once turned into a civil war, cycles of revenge murders can continue for a long time. In Yemen, the strategic exploitation of intratribal feuds initially helped the government in containing the Houthi insurgency, but only at

⁹⁸Young, *Popular Struggles and Elite Co-optation*, 33.

⁹⁹Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, “Assessing Unholy Alliances in Chechnya: From Communism and Nationalism to Islamism and Salafism,” *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 25, no. 1 (2009): 85.

¹⁰⁰Emil Souleimanov, “An Ethnography of Counterinsurgency: *Kadyrovtsy* and Russia’s Policy of Chechenization,” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 31, no. 2 (2015): 107.

¹⁰¹Martin Evans, “The Harkis: The Experience and Memory of France’s Muslim Auxiliaries,” in *The Algerian War and the French Army, 1954–62: Experiences, Images, Testimonies*, ed. Martin S. Alexander, Martin Evans, and J. F. V. Keiger (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 121–22.

¹⁰²Michael Lejman, “Unrequired Loyalty: The Harkis in Postcolonial France,” *Studia Historica Gedanensia* 5 (2014): 253.

¹⁰³Ethan M. Orwin, “Squad Leaders Today, Village Leaders Tomorrow: Muslim Auxiliaries and Tactical Politics in Algeria, 1956–1962,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 23, no. 2 (2012): 335.

the cost of fueling deep-rooted animosities between tribes.¹⁰⁴ By weaponizing intratribal feuds, the government co-opted tribal leaders, along with their subordinates, which removed an important source of recruits and resources. However, this had the side effect of turning the war into a tribal conflict with no political end in sight.¹⁰⁵ Trapped in an ongoing civil war, many locals fear the end of the hostilities because it would likely prompt avengers from the winning side to ignite “a chain reaction of revenge killings,” unless tribal elders were successful in mediating conflicts peacefully.¹⁰⁶

Heightened polarization can also provide insurgents with a recruitment opportunity to grow in numbers and strength. In the ongoing civil war in Somalia, the endemic presence of intratribal blood feuds guaranteed Al-Shabaab the support of marginalized clans that “were cornered at one point in the civil war and were eager to [get] revenge.”¹⁰⁷ The patterns of insurgent violence and recruitment across Somalia showcase the strategic importance of social divisions for insurgent groups. While Somali insurgents routinely assassinate high-value targets involved in intratribal reconciliation processes,¹⁰⁸ Al-Shabaab’s presence is reportedly stronger in areas where feuds are spiraling out of control.¹⁰⁹ With members of harassed clans feeling an obligation “to [take] revenge [for] what big clans did to them,” Al-Shabaab will likely continue aggravating blood feuds, spoiling peace processes and prolonging the hostilities.¹¹⁰

In other cases, insurgent groups have resorted to blood revenge killings to maintain their internal cohesion and avoid reputational harm. On Corsica, some of the most determined members of the local separatist movement, known as the National Liberation Front of Corsica (FLNC), returned to civilian life after years of violence. As a former member described: “At the end of July 1989, I stopped all my activities with the FLNC. A friend of mine had just been killed for exposing himself too much ... I found that the Front was backtracking on its revenge policy and wanted to distance itself from the death of my friend ... It

¹⁰⁴Marieke Brandt, *Tribes and Politics in Yemen: A History of the Houthi Conflict* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 258.

¹⁰⁵International Crisis Group, “Yemen: Defusing the Saada Time Bomb,” *Middle East Report* 86 (2009): 14.

¹⁰⁶“Yemen—Tribes,” *GlobalSecurity.org*, last modified 2014, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/yemen/tribes.htm>.

¹⁰⁷Roland Marchal, *The Rise of a Jihadi Movement in a Country at War: Harakat al-Shabaab al Mujaheddin in Somalia* (Paris: SciencePo Paris, 2011), 6.

¹⁰⁸“Al Shabaab,” Center for International Security and Cooperation, Stanford University, last updated 20 February 2016, https://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/print_view/61#note83.

¹⁰⁹Mohamed Haji Ingiriis, “The Anthropology of Al-Shabaab: The Salient Factors for the Insurgency Movement’s Recruitment Project,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 31, no. 2 (March 2020): 370.

¹¹⁰Abdalle Mumin, “Insurgent Strength, Government Demise,” *Good Governance Africa*, 22 October 2016, <https://gga.org/insurgent-strength-government-demise/>.

disappointed me.”¹¹¹ Eventually, the FLNC resumed carrying out vendettas to avenge its militants. When a rival faction killed one of its historical members in 2011, the group exacted vengeance against the identified culprit, claiming responsibility for the killing to showcase strength and resolve: “One of our commandos ... proceeded to liquidate Christian Leoni, leader of the mafia group responsible for the assassination of our militant Philippe Paoli.”¹¹²

After recruitment, rebel groups must not only maintain their reputation for blood revenge against its external enemies but also against sowers of internal discord and defectors. During the Syrian civil war, the regime exacted blood revenge upon defectors’ relatives to discourage side-switching. A high-ranking soldier who defected in 2011 stated that fear of the government’s reprisals prevented many servicemen from joining the rebellion: “Many soldiers are waiting because the regime will kill them or kill their families if they leave.”¹¹³ Another defector confirmed that the risks for his relatives were the primary motive for his delayed defection: “It took a year before I managed to defect ... the regime has many ways to hurt our families, which is the main reason [why] many are still hesitant to desert.”¹¹⁴ Given the severe repercussions, many soldiers were deterred from side-switching, and those who did were forced to live with the distress of knowing their relatives were suffering. As one defected Syrian soldier explained, armed groups can make defection a hard choice that most eschew: “Every day I am free, I know that my brother is paying for this in detention. I am living my life on his account.”¹¹⁵

For other avengers, honoring their social obligations can exhaust their reasons for engaging in the armed hostilities. During the Chechen wars, those avengers successful enough to exact revenge without joining insurgent groups (for example, in secrecy) frequently returned to civilian life. As one avenger who had disengaged later explained: “I knew the guy who offended me, I knew his name, where he lived and worked, so I knew where to find him ... As soon as I avenged my family’s honor, the cause

¹¹¹Sébastien Bonifay, “Natio, du FLNC au grand banditisme”, le livre témoignage de Michel Ucciani” [“Natio, du FLNC au grand banditisme”, the book testimony of Michel Ucciani], *Franceinfo*, 23 September 2020, <https://france3-regions.francetvinfo.fr/corse/haute-corse/balagne/natio-du-flnc-au-grand-banditisme-livre-temoignage-michel-ucciani-1836572.html>.

¹¹²“Le FLNC revendique un assassinat commis en Haute-Corse le 28 Octobre” [The FLNC claims a murder committed in Haute-Corse on 28 October], *L’Obs*, 28 November 2011, <https://www.nouvelobs.com/societe/20111128.AFP0075/le-flnc-revendique-un-assassinat-commis-en-haute-corse-le-28-octobre.html>.

¹¹³Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “Syrian Defectors Target Security Police: Colonel,” *Reuters*, 30 September 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-officer/syrian-defectors-target-security-police-colonel-idUSTRE78T3XE20110930>.

¹¹⁴Khaled Yacoub Oweis, “Psychologically Battered, Syrian Soldiers Abandon Assad,” *Reuters*, 12 July 2012, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-defectors/psychologically-battered-syrian-soldiers-abandon-assad-idUSBRE86B0NF20120712>.

¹¹⁵*Between Prison and the Grave: Enforced Disappearances in Syria* (London: Amnesty International, 2015), 49, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/2579/2015/en/>.

was over for me.”¹¹⁶ In other situations, avengers disengage before accomplishing a blood revenge murder because their leaders have arranged other means of settling the dispute. When a group of US soldiers accidentally killed two Iraqi girls in late 2003, their unit started receiving mortar rounds fired from the nearby village, which previously registered no insurgent activity. It was only after the US forces contacted a local mediator and paid the agreed *diyya* that the mortars “stopped immediately” and the villagers disengaged from their quest for vengeance.¹¹⁷ Similarly, a declassified US government study tells the story of a blood feud that erupted in late 2006 between two factions of the same tribe, Alby Issa, in the Anbar Governorate, Iraq. When a faction joined the Anbar Salvation Front, a loose coalition of tribes determined to drive AQI out of the region, the pro-AQI subtribe reconciled with their fellow tribesmen and “agreed to pay 280,000,000 Iraqi dinars (\$186,000) in blood money as restitution for the killing of sixteen Iraqi police officers [members of the same tribe].”¹¹⁸

Finally, some avengers may disarm and disengage from violence when their leaders offer incentives to resolve pending disputes through peaceful processes. During the armed conflict in Papua New Guinea, the security forces and progovernment militias carried out extrajudicial killings of the rebels’ relatives, which dragged hundreds of avengers into the hostilities. At the end of the war in 1997, a group of observers associated with Amnesty International found that “there are now many members of the [Papua New Guinea Defense Force] who have lost clansmen, family or friends at the hands of the BRA and who have themselves sought revenge ... The involvement of the [progovernment indigenous militia known as] Resistance Forces ... also contributes to and helps perpetuate the culture of payback killings.”¹¹⁹

Once the war ended, disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration programs carried out by the government were combined with efforts aimed at solving pending blood feuds through local elders and tribal leaders. A leading expert on the Bougainville conflict, Volker Boege, noted that the availability of traditional conflict resolution mechanisms allowed avengers to disengage from violence without the risk of bearing a social stigma: “Peace ceremonies have taken place at the local level between enemy

¹¹⁶Emil Souleimanov and Huseyn Aliyev, *The Individual Disengagement of Avengers, Nationalists, and Jihadists: Why Ex-Militants Choose to Abandon Violence in the North Caucasus* (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 73.

¹¹⁷Katherine Blue Carroll, “The Strangest Tribe: U.S. Military Claims in Iraq,” *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 4 (Winter 2015): 46.

¹¹⁸“AQI Dominates the Insurgency (2006)” in *Study of the Insurgency in Anbar Province, Iraq* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Intelligence Activity, 2007), 207, <https://ahec.armywarcollege.edu/CENTCOM-IRAQ-papers/1007.%20Chapter%206.pdf>.

¹¹⁹*Papua New Guinea: Bougainville: The Forgotten Human Rights Tragedy* (London: Amnesty International, 26 February 1997).

villages and clans all over the island since the end of the war ... In many places, elders and chiefs once more became responsible for regulating conflicts and organizing community life.”¹²⁰

Global Data on Blood Revenge in Civil War

To assess the external validity of some of these findings on a global scale, we compiled a new database covering all 195 UN-recognized countries, including both countries with and without episodes of blood revenge occurring over the last 50 years. Drawing upon evidence from scholarly articles, local newspapers, and international media outlets, we provide a preliminary assessment of our framework for studying blood revenge on a global scale.¹²¹

We define “blood revenge,” drawing on the anthropological tradition, as a socioculturally embedded practice of retaliatory violence aimed by the offended person or his kinship group (family, clan, tribe) against the direct culprit or, alternatively, against the male members of his kinship group (family, clan, tribe).¹²² To establish whether a country has an active tradition of blood revenge over the past half century, we ascertained whether there was at least one recorded episode of blood revenge between 1971 and 2021 via the following systematic methodological approach. First, we collected no more than one hundred results from each Google-based search, systematically varying the name of each country alongside the following four keywords: “blood revenge,” “blood feud,” “vengeance,” and “revenge killing.” We searched articles using these keywords in English, and in any source written in or translated online into French, Italian, and Spanish, using dedicated keywords for each language (see [Online Appendix Table 5](#)). With thirteen keywords and 195 countries, we conducted a total of 2,535 distinct searches to retrieve global evidence of blood revenge over the past 50 years.¹²³ Our data-scraping process generated approximately 1,000

¹²⁰Volker Boege, “Peacebuilding and State Formation in Post-Conflict Bougainville,” *Peace Review: A Journal of Social Justice* 21, no. 1 (2009): 33.

¹²¹See the dataset provided as supplemental material for a list of sources.

¹²²We draw this definition from the ones provided in Chagnon, “Life Histories, Blood Revenge, and Warfare in a Tribal Population”; and Rolf Kuschel, “Killing Begets Killing: Homicides and Blood Feuds on a Polynesian Outlier,” *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 149, no. 4 (1993): 691.

¹²³Most positive cases were clearly identifiable using the country name, but we are aware that blood revenge is often regionally concentrated and frequently practiced only by some groups. Although we did not explicitly search by region and substate groups, we counted as positive results those that only indicate one region or group within the country had an episode of blood revenge during the past 50 years. We chose 50 years as the threshold for coding positive cases and recognize that some cases we coded as negative would have been positive with a longer time frame, which future research can easily adjust. These cases include Tanzania, where blood feuds recorded in open-source material date back to the 1950s, and Mali, where the last episodes of recorded blood feuds date to the early twentieth century.

search results for each country, for a global total of roughly 200,000 stored search results.¹²⁴

It is critical to note, in this context, that terms such as “blood feud” and “blood revenge” are often misused and misreported in open-source material to refer to acts of collective violence, such as massacres and ethnic genocides, that fall outside the logic of blood revenge. As a socially embedded and highly regulated customary code, blood revenge lacks the dehumanizing component that characterizes indiscriminate mass atrocities committed on women, children, and elderlies, who are traditionally considered impermissible targets for retaliatory attacks. Whereas the social obligation to restore individual and collective honor is the driving force behind blood revenge killings, mass atrocities and ethnic genocides respond to different logics, among which the most cited are ancestral hatreds, radical ideologies, uneven power relations, and economic disparities.¹²⁵ To avoid overrepresenting the prevalence of this phenomenon, each source we used to identify a country as one with an active tradition of blood revenge was first vetted to ensure that it did not refer to massacres or genocides.¹²⁶

Using these coding criteria, we identified a total of 62 out of 195 countries with an active tradition of blood revenge, or roughly one-third of all UN-recognized states. Given that more than two-thirds of the world’s population, roughly 5.5 billion people, live in these 62 countries, it follows that blood revenge plays a crucial role in many people’s lives across the globe.¹²⁷ However, because the sensitive nature of the topic often prevents people from sharing relevant information with outsiders, this is likely a conservative estimate. Acknowledging that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence, our database constitutes a preliminary effort to map the phenomenon of blood revenge for the security studies field.

We then overlaid this information on blood revenge with conflict data by cross-matching our list of countries and all 160 civil wars fought over the last 50 years.¹²⁸ The results show that civil wars are heavily overrepresented in blood revenge countries—almost two-thirds of all civil wars have

¹²⁴The keywords used are listed in [Online Appendix Table 5](#). A list of the episodes identified by country (with an approximate time stamp) are provided in [Online Appendix Table 6](#). For each country, we restricted our sample to no more than three episodes that were included in the sources obtained with our data-scraping process, which amounts to a total of 119 episodes. We underscore that more episodes may be found through targeted manual searches using different keywords. Stored results are available for download as supplemental material.

¹²⁵James Hughes, “Genocide,” in *Routledge Handbook of Ethnic Conflict*, ed. Karl Cordell and Stefan Wolff (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 122–39.

¹²⁶This definition draws on work cited in footnote 122.

¹²⁷See the dataset provided as supplemental material for more information.

¹²⁸Data extracted from Jeffrey S. Dixon and Meredith Reid Sarkees, “Intra-State War Data (v5.1),” *Correlates of War Project*, <https://correlatesofwar.org/data-sets/COW-war/intra-state-wars-v5-1.zip/view>.

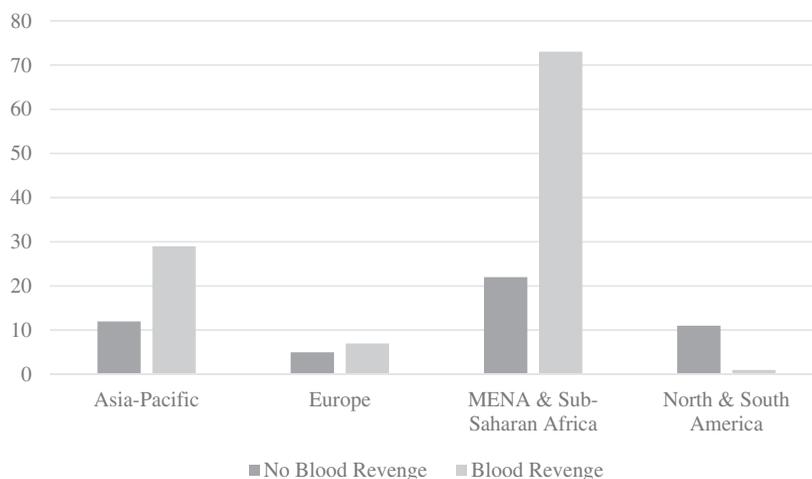


Figure 2. Distribution of civil wars.

occurred in the one-third of all the countries that have blood revenge. [Figure 2](#) shows the distribution of civil wars across four broad geographical areas. In the Asia-Pacific region, one of two civil wars transpired in blood revenge countries, even though only one-third of the countries in the region have a tradition of blood revenge. A similar pattern characterizes the MENA/SSA region, where civil wars in countries with a tradition of blood revenge were more than three times as likely to occur, even though this custom endures in slightly less than half the countries in this region. In Europe, there was not a large difference, and in the Americas the pattern was reversed, but most of the civil wars during the studied period have been clustered in MENA/SSA and in the Asia-Pacific.

[Figure 3](#) summarizes the distribution of civil war outcomes.¹²⁹ It shows that civil wars in blood-revenge-affected countries display distinct outcomes.¹³⁰ Altogether, civil wars in places where blood revenge persists have been almost four times more likely to end in stalemate, five times more likely to be ongoing, and almost two times more likely to be transformed into another type of war.¹³¹ These statistics suggest, in

¹²⁹Civil war outcomes are shown as percentages calculated in relation to the total of civil wars occurring in countries where blood revenge is no longer active ($n = 50$) and civil wars in countries where blood revenge is active ($n = 110$).

¹³⁰The data in our possession did not allow us to create a reliable classification of which regions within each country possess an active tradition of blood revenge. Accordingly, we acknowledge that, in certain cases, the dynamics of civil war might be shaped by blood revenge only in certain regions, and not others.

¹³¹We adopt the coding categories provided by the Correlates of War Project. A civil war reaches a compromise when both sides come to agree on a solution, whereas a stalemate occurs when the fighting ceases without a satisfactory agreement. A war is transformed when it passes from one type of war to another (for instance, transforming from an intrastate conflict into an interstate conflict). Accordingly, a conflict that no longer registers at least 1,000 battle-deaths per year is considered as continuing at “below war-level,” typically as a low-level insurgency. Lastly, a civil war is considered ongoing if the fighting was taking place as of 31 December 2014.

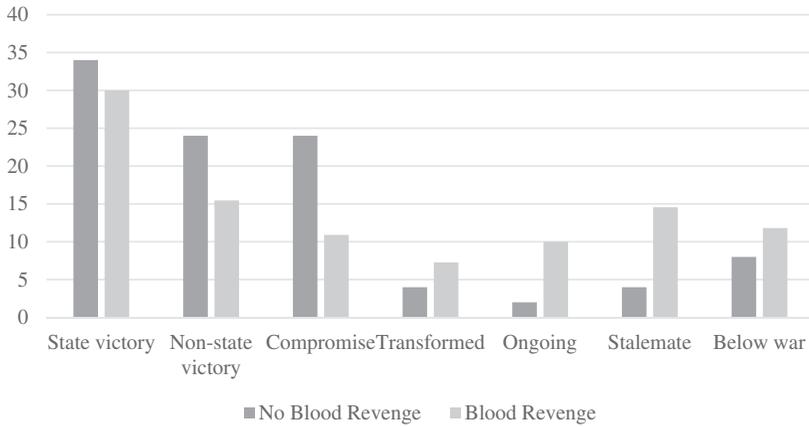


Figure 3. Civil war outcome.

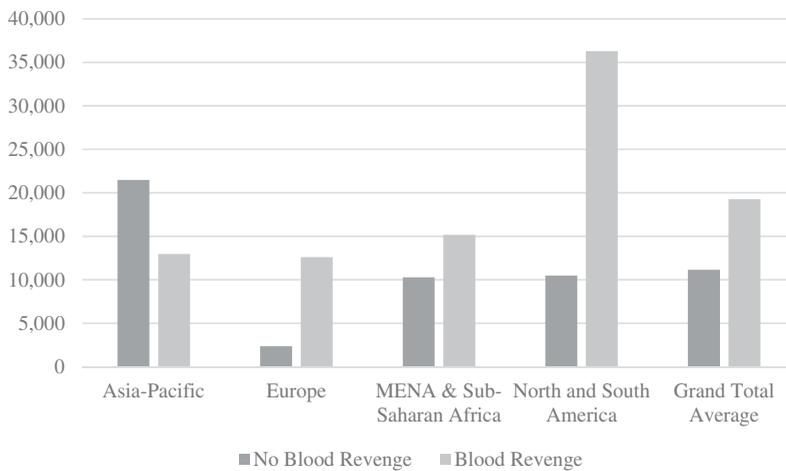


Figure 4. Average total battle fatalities.

short, that blood revenge makes it less likely for a conflict to reach a definitive settlement, while dramatically increasing the chances of armed hostilities continuing below the threshold of civil war. [Figure 4](#) displays the deadliness of civil wars in blood revenge and non-blood-revenge-affected places. In general, civil wars in blood revenge areas are one and half times as deadly.¹³² This is consistent with our qualitative evidence showing how, in certain civil wars, avengers dramatically widened the pool of potential targets, thereby contributing to a higher number of battle-related fatalities.

¹³²In the Americas and Europe, this difference is particularly stark, and it is still noteworthy in Africa and the Middle East. Only in the Asia-Pacific do we find that civil wars in blood revenge areas were less deadly. One reason for this are the civil wars in Myanmar of 1965–93 and Sri Lanka (1990–2001), where blood revenge has disappeared, but which both registered a very high number of casualties. Nevertheless, on average and across the world, we find that civil wars in blood-revenge-affected regions were considerably deadlier.

Summary and Implications for Future Research

This article offers a proof of concept for the role of blood revenge in civil war. Ranging from the European countries of Albania and Greece to the Southern Asian territories of Cambodia, Papua New Guinea, and the Philippines, and from the Central Asian battlefields of Afghanistan and Pakistan to the Middle Eastern theaters of Syria and Iraq, blood revenge continues to shape patterns of violence and restraint in war and peacetime. Yet, for various reasons—not least the difficulty acquiring firsthand data on this sensitive subject from war-torn societies—security studies scholars have largely neglected how blood revenge shapes civil wars.

Drawing upon an extensive overview of cross-case evidence and quantitative evidence based on a newly compiled dataset, this article suggests that blood revenge has a profound impact on key aspects of civil wars, namely violent mobilization, target selection, recruitment, defection, and disengagement. Our theory and analysis of blood revenge make several noticeable contributions to the literature on civil war. First, they highlight how blood revenge minimizes an avenger's incentives to free ride on his social obligations even in the face of life-threatening risks; apathy in the face of a blood offense is akin to accepting humiliation and severe loss in social status. Caught amid a conflict, avengers possess incentives to participate in hostilities themselves to defend their and their family's honor. The custom of blood revenge therefore also pushes apolitical avengers to join armed actors, and to do so even in the absence of selective material incentives to restore honor. Casting new light on the collective action problem armed actors face, these findings show that blood revenge can compel rational individuals to voluntarily put their lives at risk to exact vengeance on their enemies without seeking neutrality or relying on other actors to execute retaliation.

Second, the logic of blood revenge shapes target selection by defining choices for avengers, especially when identifying the direct culprit or their location is impossible. To fulfill the compelling social obligation of retaliation, and to escape social sanction from their in-group, avengers may expand the pool of potential targets to include individuals associated with the unreachable perpetrator. From a relatively small group of kinsmen associated with the offender, the pool of viable targets can grow as wide as the culprit's entire military, (sub)ethnic, or (sub)religious in-groups, often leading external observers to believe that the root cause of violence is essentially ethnic, religious, or generally political. The loosening of selectivity in targeting that underpins traditional blood revenge killings contributes to conflict escalation by increasing the numbers of civilians murdered based on their kinship, ethnicity, religion, or symbolic ties with presumed offenders. This suggests that it may be difficult to properly analyze the logic

of civilian-centered violence without accounting for blood revenge. The essentially apolitical quest for blood revenge and restoring individual and collective honor often fuels violence. Driven by the blood-revenge-centered logic of retaliation and guilt by kinship, avengers are encouraged to widen the net of potential targets when the actual offender is unknown or beyond reach. This often leads to the politicization of violence directed against members of broader communities associated with the offender, not just the offender's kinsmen.

Third, this article demonstrates that blood revenge can be turned into a powerful tool for recruitment. In contrast to opportunistic joiners, who may seek membership in an armed actor's ranks for short-term material gains, individuals dragged into blood feuds are mostly motivated by retaliation to restore their individual and collective honor and by protecting their families from violent reprisals. Facing social stigma, avengers are compelled to seek membership in an armed group to retaliate, signaling that blood revenge provides a powerful incentive to overcome the collective action problem belligerents experience in civil wars. Consequently, armed actors offering their support to avengers in return for their participation in armed hostilities can attract highly motivated and selfless recruits. Belligerents can also turn the custom of blood revenge into a counterdefection mechanism to deter their recruits from demobilizing. By threatening to exact vengeance against the defectors' relatives, an armed actor deters its fighters from disengaging. As a result, armed actors obtain access to a pool of determined individuals ready for high-risk combat operations and unlikely to disengage or defect, even without material rewards. In contrast to greed-centered narratives, the proposed theory suggests that, especially in the cultures of honor where the custom of blood revenge persists, non-material incentives can serve as stronger mechanisms for recruitment.

This logic, which finds supportive evidence in different areas of the globe, holds enormous relevance for both scholars and practitioners, and indicates that a largely overlooked sociocultural code—blood revenge—has profoundly influenced key civil war dynamics in ways that can no longer be ignored. This article has provided a novel theoretical systematization of the role of blood revenge in civil wars, but there is much more to learn about this important phenomenon. Whereas students of civil war usually tend to attribute ideopolitical, political, or opportunistic explanations to the choices facing individual armed actors and groups, the root causes of violence in civil war may frequently be intrinsically apolitical and nonmaterial. The age-old sociocultural code of blood revenge challenges the core aspects of current thinking about civil war, urging scholars to explore how socio-cultural norms shape behavior in civil wars.

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Data Availability Statement

The data and materials that support this study’s findings are available in the *Security Studies* Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/DUC9DF>.