The Center for the Study of Subnational Conflict

Fostering the collection of data to understand causes of localized conflicts

Since the end of the Cold War, the incidence of traditional state-to-state conflict has waned. In its place have emerged conflicts that occur within the borders of states. These struggles have pitted different religious sects, ethnic groups, and ideological adherents against one another.

What has become evident is that the causes of conflict have moved from global, or even national, ideological disputes to far more localized ones. Understanding the local dimensions or driving factors of these conflicts is critical, as they can lead to broader national or regional instability. As the security environment of the 21st century continues to evolve, it is clear that social science has failed to keep pace; very little reliable subnational data exists on the environmental, political, and social factors that can cause violence.

This research effort, therefore, aims to systematically collect and release data on the individuals and groups involved in conflict, along with data on the local geographic, social, and political environment in which these actors interact. To complete this project, we envision the creation of a center within the College of Arts and Sciences to serve as a focus for external grant funding that would bring together research efforts by quantitative scholars and country experts. The center would fund systematic data collection

Free Syrian Army rebels clean weapons in Aleppo, Syria, in 2012 during that country's civil war. Research is needed to understand the origin of today's conflicts pitting religious, ethnic and ideological groups against each other. The causes and impacts of these subnational conflicts are often less understood than wars between traditional nation-states (Voice of America public domain photo).

efforts that would involve interdisciplinary collaboration across a number of departments within the College of Arts and Sciences and scholars at other universities.

The Need

The Center for the Study of Subnational Conflict is needed to bridge the gap between two incomplete areas of data collection. On the one hand, quantitative scholars of conflict are engaged in a number of "disaggregation" efforts to create more fine-grained data on the causes of violence. They have attempted to geocode conflict data and collect subnational measures that may be associated with conflict. These projects are important because they recognize the severe

limitations of country-level data for understanding the causes of conflict.

On the other hand, another group of scholars study conflict using interviews, surveys, and fieldwork to understand the motivations and behaviors of individuals and groups engaged in, or affected by, violent conflict.

Unfortunately, little effort has been made to apply the lessons of each of these research agendas into a coherent body of knowledge. This hampers our ability to better understand this phenomenon as well as to create effective policy solutions to resolve violence around the world. Greater knowledge of local variables can lead to better predictive

models of where conflict is likely to take place, which conflicts are likely to spread regionally, and how best to deploy military and diplomatic assets to alleviate or end violence.

Goals

- Create a center for systematic data collection efforts involving interdisciplinary collaboration across a number of departments within the College of Arts and Sciences at Oklahoma State University, and scholars at other universities;

- Fund fieldwork in countries that experienced multiple and diverse civil conflicts during the 20th and 21st centuries, such as Nigeria, Myanmar, and Indonesia;

- Release subnational data on rebel groups, terrorist organizations, community-level characteristics, local institutions, and terrain;

- Release data in a way that is transparent, replicable, and based on the best available sources and recent advances in remote

Stephen Nemeth, Ph.D.
OSU Department of Political Science

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sensing and geographic information systems;

- Develop a web-based interface for downloading, analyzing, and interacting with data from the center and existing data sources of conflict, and;

- Create open source tools for easy integration of existing data sets, as well as data sets produced by the center.

Benefits

- Position Oklahoma State University as a leader in the study of subnational conflict by leveraging our existing institutional strengths and allowing for interdisciplinary collaboration;

- Provide the public and journalists with the ability to interact with state-of-the-art global conflict data to provide context for the enduring problems of our time, continuing with the spirit of our land grant mission. Journalists, for example, could use these data to better inform the public of the context of recent events, and to create visualization and presentations of data that allow for better comparisons of the causes and consequences of civil wars;

- Provide policy makers with a more nuanced understanding of the causes and consequences of conflicts that can destabilize states, increase global insecurity, and threaten American national interests. Better data and information on conflicts can prompt earlier and more effective diplomatic and military interventions in areas where conflict is most likely to occur;

- Provide researchers around the world with better data on subnational conflict and its characteristics to promote better understanding of conflict and war, and;

- Foster the development of graduate and undergraduate research skills.

For More Information

- The OSU Department of Political Science:
  - Dr. Stephen Nemeth, Assistant Professor, stephen.nemeth@okstate.edu
  - Dr. Laura Vinson, Assistant Professor, laura.vinson@okstate.edu
  - Dr. Peter Rudloff, Associate Professor, peter.rudloff@okstate.edu