Getting Religion Wrong
A Response to Toft's "Getting Religion Right"*

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Abstract

In a recent contribution to the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Monica Toft presents new data and analysis that suggest a rise in religious civil war, and question our findings on linguistic and religious cleavages effect on armed conflict onset. We welcome Toft's contribution, in particular her replication of our results, and the very well documented new dataset on civil wars. Yet we disagree with several of Toft's specific claims and raise three larger questions about the study of religion and armed conflict. First, what is the relevant counterfactual when analyzing the religion-conflict link? Second, how useful is it to classify entire conflicts as religious? Third, what is the mechanism that links religion and conflict? Revisiting her analysis and adding new empirical evidence, we show that Toft fails to undermine our earlier results and does not find support for her own theoretical mechanism of religious outbidding in the Muslim world.

*The analysis in this article was conducted in R 4.1.2. Replication scripts and data are available in Nils-Christian Bormann's dataverse at https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/ncb

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Introduction

Are some ethnic cleavages more prone to violence than others? A long literature claims that religion has become increasingly central to political violence around the world (Juergensmeyer, 1993; Huntington, 1996; Laitin, 2000*a*; Fox, 2004; Toft, 2007; Hassner, 2009; Basedau et al., 2011; Basedau, Pfeiffer and Vüllers, 2016; Walter, 2017). Proposing a variety of arguments ranging from grievances about secularization, via the indivisibility of religious claims, to religious outbidding, these contributions suffer from a variety of shortcomings. First, they rarely compare religion to other social divisions or ideologies, and thus lack the necessary non-religious counterfactual to evaluate religion's supposedly distinct conflict-proneness (Tabaar et al., 2023, 9). Second, they often classify and analyse entire civil wars as exclusively religious. Yet, aggregating to the conflict-level obscures multiple and frequently competing goals pursued by the same or different actors within a conflict (Kalyvas, 2003) and runs the risk of confusing publicly stated intentions with true but hidden interests (Svensson and Nilsson, 2018, 1132). Moreover, case studies of religious conflicts alone suffer from bias due to selection on the outcome variable (Geddes, 1990). Finally, the majority of studies on religious armed conflict proposes isolated theoretical mechanisms that are not embedded in a broader theoretical model of armed conflict onset.

In a 2017 study in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, we highlighted these issues and suggested strategies to address them (Bormann, Cederman and Vogt, 2017, henceforth: BCV). First, we applied a general theoretical framework of group-based intrastate conflict to linguistic and religious divisions, with the expectation of both cleavage dimensions to have an underlying potential for armed conflict. Second, we explicitly compared the relative empirical propensity of linguistic and religious cleavages to trigger intrastate armed conflict. By comparing religion to language, we assessed a concrete plausible counterfactual. Third, we did not classify entire conflicts as fundamentally religious or linguistic but rather analysed the relative propensity of religiously or linguistically divided groups to fight over state power or territory. Providing an explicit theoretical framework

and multiple empirical tests, we found that religious cleavages were not more conflict-prone than linguistic ones in the post-World War II period. In fact, in most specifications, linguistically based group divisions were more likely to experience intrastate armed conflict, even after the Cold War.

In her recent study "Getting Religion Right in Civil Wars", Monica Duffy Toft (2021*b*) criticizes our argument and findings. Toft (2021*b*, 1610) claims that our "main result—that linguistic cleavages dominate religious cleavages as a determinant of ethnic civil war onset—is much weaker when using a more traditional definition of civil war with at least 1,000 deaths." Toft also introduces novel data and analysis with the intention to demonstrate the importance of religion for the onset, duration, and intensity of civil war.[1] Specifically, she classifies civil wars along different master cleavages, and shows that "centrally religious conflicts" have become more common since the end of the Cold War. She connects the increase in religious civil wars to a rise of intrastate conflicts in the Arab Muslim world, and explains "Islam's bloody innards" through an argument of religious outbidding first developed in Toft (2007). We welcome Toft's replication of our results and her carefully documented new dataset—not only as an important contribution in its own right but also because political science continues to lack a widespread culture of replication.

Yet we disagree with several of Toft's arguments and claims, especially as they fail to consider two of the three main issues we originally raised. First, we restate our main theoretical argument, which questioned the prevailing scholarly consensus "that political violence is more likely to occur along religious divisions than linguistic ones" (BCV 2017:744). We also demonstrate that the "much weaker" results of Toft's replication analysis still support our original argument. Second, we question Toft's classification of civil wars along one exclusive master cleavage, which presents an example of the over-aggregation we criticize. Separating centrally religious civil wars into those that Toft's own documentation describes as ambiguous, and those that she is certain about, reveals a far weaker positive trend of religious violence since the end of the Cold War. Third, we revisit

[1] Toft's argument and scope extends beyond our focus on ethnic/identity intrastate armed conflict or civil war. We do not comment on her analysis of duration and intensity but instead highlight a more specific argument that links revolutionary Islamic actors to high-intensity conflicts (Svensson and Nilsson, 2018, 1142).

Toft's comparison between linguistic and religious cleavages and show that she misinterprets her own empirical analysis. Correctly interpreting the statistical evidence calls into question the exceptional risk that Toft attributes to religious issues. Finally, over-aggregation also keeps Toft from providing convincing evidence in support of her preferred mechanism of outbidding. A systematic test of the latter requires more fine-grained data at the organizational level. Drawing on the new EPR-Organizations (EPR-O) dataset (Vogt, Gleditsch and Cederman, 2021), we find no support for the prevalence of outbidding as a driver of armed conflicts in Muslim-majority or Arab countries.

Religion and Other Conflict Cleavages

In a previous article in the Journal of Conflict Resolution, we challenge "the claim that religion is more salient in ethnic civil wars than language" (BCV 2017:745). Doing so, we confront a growing literature that claimed that religion is more conflict-prone than other ethnic dimensions such as language. Most prominently, Huntington (1996) anticipated that the major violent conflicts of the post-Cold War era would be fought between representatives of religiously defined civilizations. Some scholars use case-based evidence to argue for a particularly incendiary relationship between religion and political violence (e.g., Hassner, 2009). Others test various empirical relationships between religious cleavages and the onset or incidence of intrastate armed conflict or ethnic rebellion (e.g. Laitin, 2000*b*; Reynal-Querol, 2002; Fox, 2004; Toft, 2007; Basedau et al., 2011; Basedau, Pfeiffer and Vüllers, 2016).

We criticize this literature for two reasons: "First, proponents of the religion–conflict link typically focus on isolated theoretical mechanisms without embedding them in an overarching theoretical model of civil conflict outbreak. Second, many of these empirical studies do not compare religious differences to other ethnic dimensions" (BCV 2017:745). In response, we propose a theoretical framework that links ethnic cleavages to the outbreak of intrastate armed conflict in three steps: (1) the perception of grievances, (2) rebel mobilization, and (3) government reaction. Our

theoretical analysis applies each of these steps to both religious and linguistic differences. Importantly, however, we never argued that language is more conflict-prone than religion. Instead our argument calls for a balanced assessment of the relationship between different ethnic dimensions and their conflict propensity:

> Concluding our theoretical discussion, we note that both cleavage dimensions may be linked to collective grievances, offer the potential for rebel mobilization, and pose obstacles to the accommodation of violent challengers. Therefore, we reject the idea of a specific conflict-fueling effect of religion but expect ethnic civil conflicts along linguistic lines to be at least as likely as those between religiously distinct groups (BCV 2017:750)

Thus, any evidence that serves to refute our theoretical argument would have to show that religious cleavages are associated with intrastate armed conflict at a significantly higher rate than linguistic cleavages.

We also impose several scope conditions on our argument. First, our analysis focuses on ethnic armed conflict between a government and a non-state challenger, at the exclusion of non-state or one-sided violence. Second, the empirical setup of our study does not capture armed conflicts between members of the same religious group (BCV 2017:764). Toft (2021*b*, 1610) therefore correctly points out that we exclude "religious conflicts within linguistically or culturally defined ethnic groups or inter-ethnic civil wars between ethnic groups that share the same religion, but have competing ideas about religion in public life." These conflicts, which are exclusively over what Svensson and Nilsson (2018, 1131) call "religious issues", are in the minority in Toft's and other datasets that classify religious characteristics of armed conflicts (e.g., Svensson and Nilsson, 2018, 1139).[2] In keeping with our critique that it is a mistake to exclusively classify conflicts as religious or not, we point out that conflicts over religious issues can also occur between linguistically or religiously distinct groups, and our analysis, which we revisit below, still captures those.

[2]In Toft's dataset 68% of centrally religious conflicts are between linguistically or religiously distinct groups.

To test the respective conflict-proneness of the two cleavages in the context of ethnic civil wars, we collected we rely on the *Ethnic Power Relations* (EPR) dataset and its *EPR-Ethnic Dimensions* (EPR-ED) extension (Vogt et al., 2015). In EPR-ED, each group may consist of up to three linguistic and religious segments. For example, groups primarily defined by a linguistic identity might bring together members with diverse religious backgrounds, such as the Yoruba in Nigeria. Vice versa, groups primarily defined by a religious identity could encompass individuals who speak different languages, such as the Nigerian Muslim Hausa-Fulani.[3] Based on dyadic measures of linguistic and religious differences between a titular group and any other group in a given country-year,[4] we compare the conflict-propensity of linguistic and religious cleavages without pre-determining any conflict as either religious or linguistic. To do so, we estimate a series of logistic regression models with low-intensity ethnic armed conflict onset as the outcome variable (Harbom and Wallensteen, 2010; Wucherpfennig et al., 2012).

Figure 1 displays the main coefficient estimates from our original article (Table 1, Models 1-4). The average estimated effect of linguistic differences on low-intensity armed conflict onset is depicted by the black points, whereas black triangles identify the estimated coefficients for religious differences. The operationalization of the cleavage variables varies from Model 1 to 4. First, we assess the mean difference on the linguistic and religious dimension between the titular and a potential challenger group. Model 2 employs a categorical variable whenever the two groups differ in more than 50% of their linguistic or religious population shares. Model 3 distinguishes between group-dyads that differ only linguistically, only religiously, or along both dimensions (not shown). Finally, Model 4 counts all group-pairs that differ among both religious and linguistic dimensions as a religious cleavage and not as a linguistic one. Classifying reinforcing cleavages as purely religious should thus make a particular easy test for the religious-conflict argument if

[3]Multiple religious and linguistic cleavages within one group are also possible, for example, among the Muslims in India, who encompass both Sunni and Shi'a as well as different language communities.

[4]We identify the titular group as either the most powerful group in a given country-year or as the demographically largest group in power-sharing governments.

its proponents are right that religious differences are especially conflict-prone. Yet across all four models, we find a consistent positive and statistically significant relationship between linguistic differences and armed conflict onset (black circles). In Models 3 and 4, religious differences are also positively associated with armed conflict risk at least at the .1% level (black triangles). In those same models, we do not find a statistically significant difference between linguistic and religious cleavages in their propensity to result in civil war. In contrast, in Models 1 and 2, linguistically distinct dyads are more likely than religiously different dyads to experience armed conflict onset. Thus, our study concludes:

> Although we have found much less evidence for the religion–conflict link than the existing literature, we do not deny the fact that the political activation of religious cleavages has triggered ethnic conflict in many instances. When both linguistic and religious differences are present, our data do not reveal which of these cleavages is more important in a conflict (BCV 2017:764).

Toft (2021*b*, 1610) claims that the choice of our outcome variable drives our main findings by arguing that "the Bormann et al. findings are biased against even inter-ethnic religious cleavages because they rely on a permissive definition of 'civil war,' including all cases of armed conflict with at least 25 battle deaths."[5] She then replicates our main results in Table 1 with her own 1,000 battle deaths civil war classification as the outcome, and concludes that our "main result–that linguistic cleavages dominate religious cleavages as a determinant of ethnic civil war onset–is much weaker" (ibid.). However, it should be noted again that we interpreted our own findings not as evidence for the dominance of linguistic cleavages in ethnic civil war onset, but simply as evidence against Toft's (2007) and others' argument that religion exhibits a greater conflict propensity than language.

[5]The pros and cons of different onset definitions are not our main concern here. However, we note two drawbacks of the 1,000 battle-deaths criterion. First, using the high-intensity criterion complicates finding the correct timing of the outbreak of violence, which might have run at low levels for a while. Second, high-intensity definitions also frequently count multiple periods of conflicts as one, even if fighting stops intermittently or key actors change, and these periods would better be seen as distinct episodes.

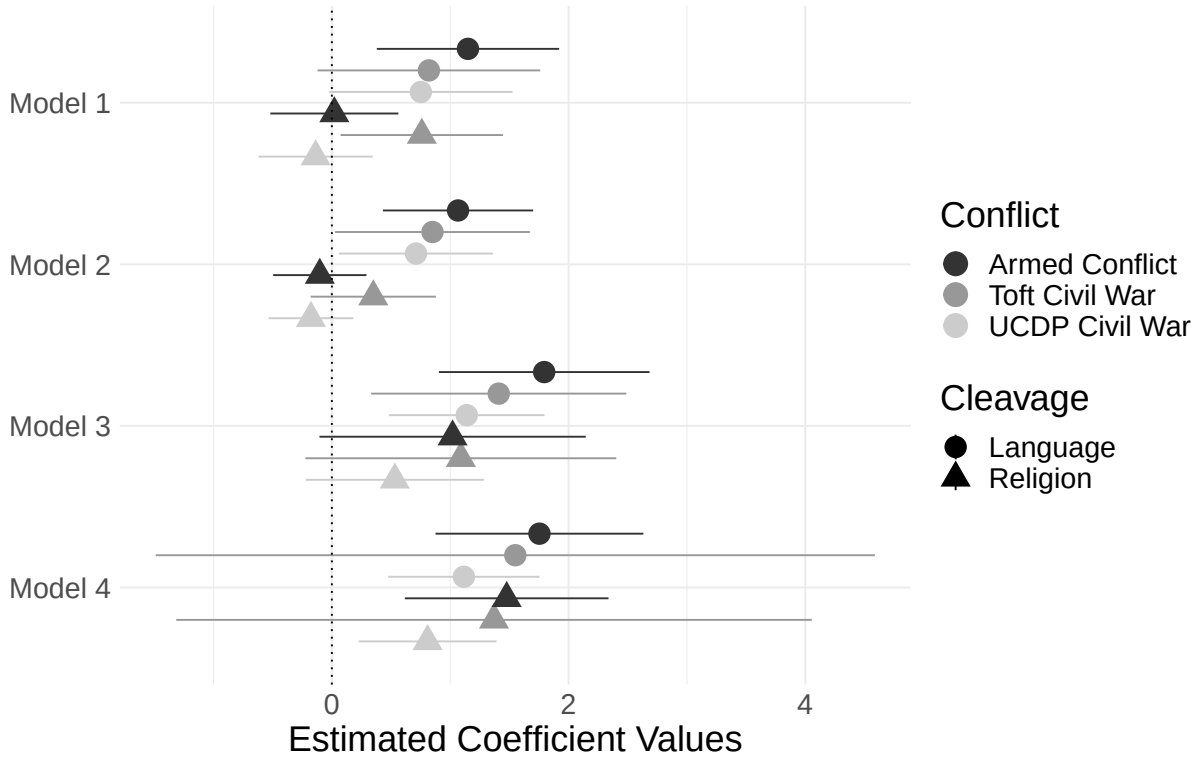

Figure 1: Replication of BCV's Table 1 with UCDP low intensity and civil war onset intensity in addition to Toft's new civil war onset measurement.

More importantly, though, Toft's replication analysis actually fails to undermine our finding. The dark grey circles and triangles in Figure 1 depict the estimated coefficients from her replication, whereas the black circles and triangles show the original results. Three observations stand out: First, only one of the estimated coefficients differs significantly from the original model (religion in Model 1, grey triangle). Second, linguistic differences continue to show a positive and statistically significant association with ethnic civil war onset at least at the 10% level in three out of four models.[6] Third, religious differences do not surpass linguistic differences as predictors of ethnic civil war in any of the four models, as would be expected by scholars who argued for religious cleavages as a particularly conflict-prone societal division. Moreover, replacing Toft's civil war onset measure with the UCDP high-intensity armed conflict onset measure that requires a minimum of 1,000 battle-deaths in the first year, reveals that linguistic differences are substantially more conflict-prone than religious differences in three out of four models (light grey circles and triangles). This robustness check calls into question Toft's assertion that our results are driven by a permissive definition of civil wars. Having accounted for a relevant counterfactual in linguistic cleavages, we thus stand by the main message of our study: "Without discounting religion as an important source of conflict in the contemporary world, we conclude that recent scholarly claims that religion is the most important conflict dimension have been overstated" (BCV 2017:746).

The Conceptual Challenges in Classifying Religious Civil Wars

In addition to criticizing our analysis, Toft's (2021) study advances several claims of her own based on the new *Religious Civil War* (RWC) data set. The dataset classifies civil wars between 1945 to 2014 with at least 1,000 battle-deaths into four distinct categories: (i) non-identity, (ii) non-religious identity (i.e., predominantly ethno-linguistic), (iii) peripherally religious identity, and (iv) centrally religious identity conflicts. There is much to like about the new data set, such

[6] As we observe fewer civil wars than armed conflicts, there is less information in the outcome variable, which explains the larger confidence intervals in the civil war relative to the armed conflict specifications.

as its carefully argued definition, its extensive and detailed documentation, and the inclusion of religious civil wars between members of the same identity group (moderates versus fundamentals). The dataset also identifies "the political meaning of religion and language" (Toft, 2021*b*, 1610). However, this classification of civil wars into mutually exclusive categories, instead of a more disaggregated analysis of potential conflict cleavages, carries a high price tag.

Contrary to the notion that "civil wars are not binary conflicts but complex and ambiguous processes" (Kalyvas, 2003, 475), Toft identifies civil wars as either religious or not.[7] While her definition of civil war subsumes religious conflicts as a sub-category of identity conflicts, the analysis she presents uses the four mutually exclusive categories introduced above. Once religion plays a central role in a civil war, Toft counts it as a religious civil war even if conflict actors simultaneously advance ethno-linguistic or other non-religious claims.

Consider, for example, the 2003 civil war in Iraq. Toft classifies the case as a centrally religious conflict although she writes that "when Saddam Hussein was removed from power in Iraq in 2003, the armed opposition initially consisted mainly of former members of the Ba'ath party. Yet, Salafist Jihadist groups soon 'hijacked' the insurgency in Iraq" Toft (2021*b*, 1626). Her extensive documentation provides the following quote: "From the beginning, there were several kinds of Sunni insurgents: former regime loyalists, anti-American nationalists, tribal elements, and previously suppressed Sunni Islamists (Hashim, 2003, 4-9; cited in Toft, 2021b, 148)". Clearly, the Iraqi rebel actors had diverse goals, and a key segment of rebels fought against the American occupation, not for the establishment of a religious state. Toft's documentation even states that "[w]hether or not religion was central to the conflict is ambiguous" (Toft, 2021*a*, 150). Similarly, Toft (2021*a*, 247) justifies her classification of the 1989 Kashmir Uprising as a centrally religious

[7]Our study does not fall into the same essentialist trap by identifying ethnic as opposed to all armed conflicts. Rather, we follow an actor-based approach and classify ethnic claims and recruitment by armed organizations in the UCDP Armed Conflict Dataset (ACD). Other rebel organizations might be fighting in the same civil war with non-ethnic goals. We therefore do not classify entire civil wars as ethnic or not. Moreover, we do not distinguish between ethnic/identity and religious conflicts, as does Toft. For details of the ACD2EPR dataset, see Wucherpfennig et al. (2012).

civil war by arguing "that Islamists helped instigate the conflict, particularly since the 1990s after they had largely supplanted the [Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF)]." Yet if Islamists only replaced the secular-nationalist JKLF after the conflict started, why should it be a primarily religious conflict, especially in analyses of civil war onset?

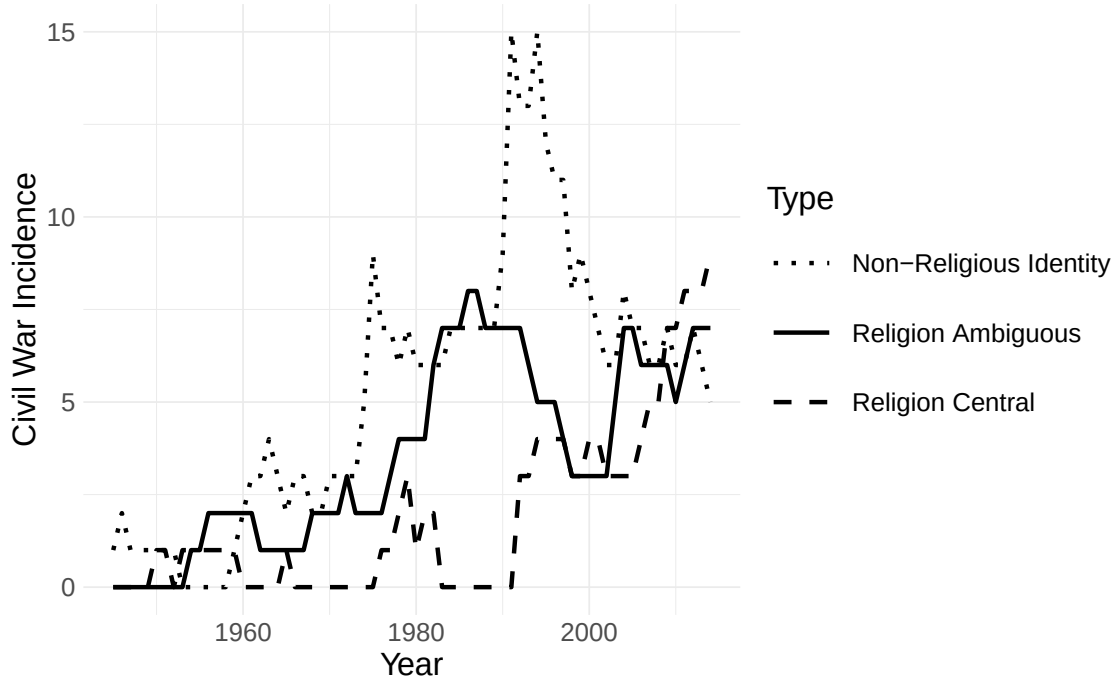

Figure 2: Civil war incidence by type with centrally religious conflicts split into ambiguous and non-ambiguous cases.

Similar questions arise in several other cases such as the 1977 FROLINAT rebellion in Chad, the 1954 Tibetan uprising in China, the 1968 First Intifida in Israel, or the 2004 Patani movement in Thailand. Out of the 41 civil wars in which Toft identifies religion to be of central importance, the religious character of 19 is "ambiguous" or "in dispute" according to her own documentation (see Table A1 in the Online Appendix). What is more, in 28 out of the 41 centrally religious wars, governments and rebels recruit from distinct linguistic or religious groups, and these conflicts may well be understood as ethno-nationalist (see Table A2). Downplaying well-documented alternative conflict issues in such ambiguous cases poses a serious risk of introducing bias into the very empir-

ical foundation upon which subsequent analyses are performed. Surely, coding ambiguous cases as religious is not the most conservative test of the hypothesis that religion has become particularly conflict-prone.

For instance, if the coding of ambiguous cases reflects the belief that contemporary conflicts are primarily of a religious nature, this might obviously directly affect the analysis of temporal trends based on these data. Figure 2 displays the yearly incidence of two types of civil war coded by Toft: non-religious identity and religiously central civil wars. It further splits the religiously central category into ambiguous (solid line) and non-ambiguous cases (dashed line). Although centrally religious civil wars are on the rise since the early 1990s, they barely outnumber non-religious identity wars (dotted line) in the most recent years. Ambiguous cases could conceivably fall into either category or constitute their own multi-dimensional cleavage class. Acknowledging the ambiguity of these codings then also raises doubts about the descriptive analyses of duration and intensity that Toft (2021*b*) presents. How can we be sure that "centrally religious" civil wars last longer or are more bloody than other types of conflicts if we are uncertain about half the cases that fall into this category?

One alternative to Toft's data is Svensson and Nilsson's (2018) Religion and Armed Conflict (RELAC) Data. Svensson and Nilsson adopt a two-pronged strategy to side-step the challenge posed by multiple and conflicting goals within civil wars. First, they classify conflict actors rather than entire conflicts; second, they only identify those actors as religious if their first publicly-stated incompatibility includes religious issues. The RELAC further distinguishes between separatist or ethno-nationalist, transnational, and revolutionary Islamic claims, but notably does not classify non-religious, ethno-nationalist claims. Contra Toft, Svensson and Nilsson (2018) find that only intrastate conflicts with a revolutionary Islamic goal exhibit greater intensity than other intrastate conflicts. Despite its more detailed classification, the RELAC dataset cannot make any statements about the conflict-propensity of particular issues or cleavages. By classifying only conflict actors but not potential conflict actors, it remains impossible to determine whether the frequency of ethno-

nationalist or Islamic claims in armed conflict is disproportionately higher than the baseline of such claims by actors that do not fight armed conflicts. Svensson's and Nilsson's dataset could only be used to analyse the relative conflict-proneness of religious or linguistic cleavages if it were paired with a sample of actors that advance religious or ethno-nationalist claims but have not yet engaged in violence.[8]

Challenging Toft's Claim of Islam's Bloody Innards

In the final two sections, we return to our critique of isolated theoretical mechanisms that prevail in the study of religion and conflict. In her influential 2007 study, Toft finds that post-Cold War civil wars are over-represented in Islamic countries.[9] She argued that this disproportionate concentration arose due to the lack of separation between state and church in Islam and outbidding tactics between political leaders on religious grounds (pp.102-6). In 2021, she revisits this argument by assessing the effects of religious exclusion on different types of civil war risk. Specifically, she distinguishes between non-religious identity conflict and centrally religious civil war as key outcomes, and excluded population shares of Christians, Arab Muslims, other Muslims, and other religions as central explanatory factors. Her results indicate that a rising share of excluded Arab Muslims significantly increases the likelihood of centrally religious civil war – both in the entire post-World War II and the post-Cold War period. In contrast, the share of excluded Christians consistently raises the risk of non-religious identity civil wars. Toft (2021*b*, 1624) interprets these findings as pointing "to religious civil war as a distinctively Arab Muslim phenomenon after the Cold War".

We question this interpretation on two grounds: first, Toft's results do not show any statistically significant difference in the effect of the excluded Arab Muslim population on different types of

[8]Other datasets such as Basedau et al.'s (2016) Religion and Conflict in Developing Countries (RCDC) do relate the number of potential religious challengers to religious conflicts but do not compare these results to other cleavages.

[9]For a similar claim, see Walter (2017).

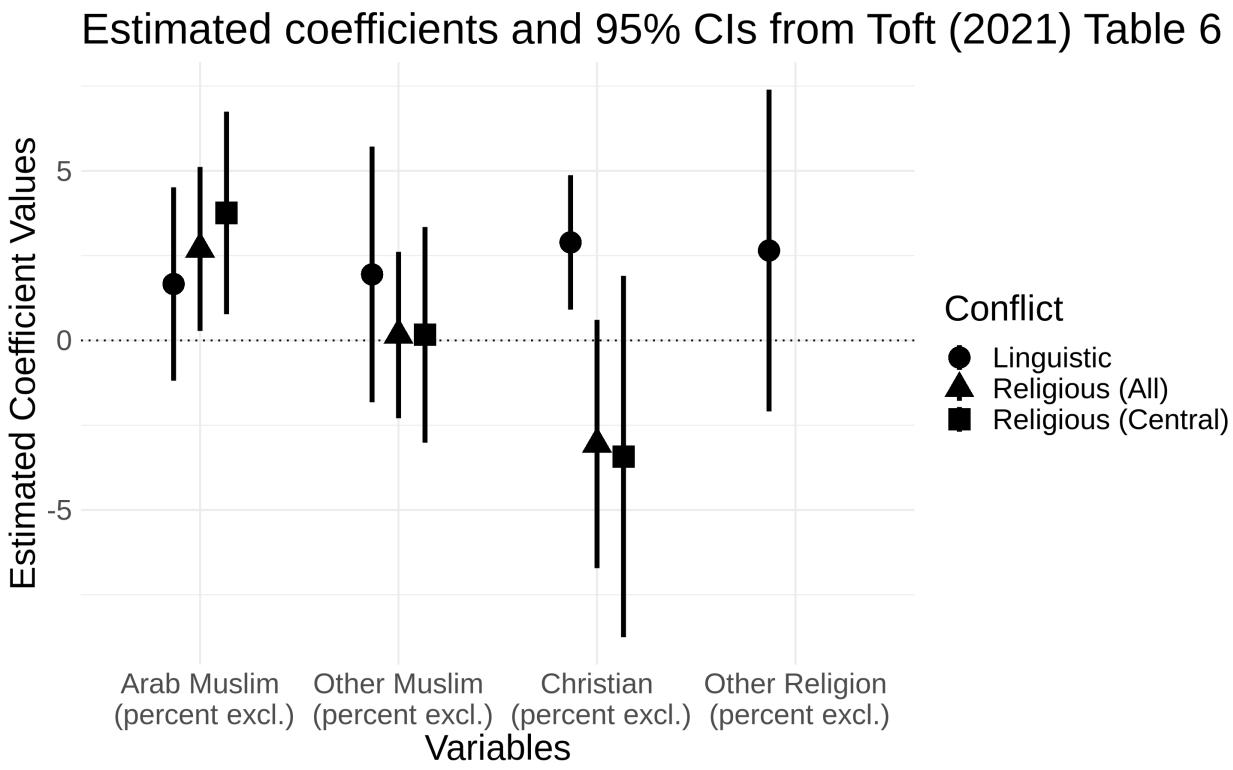

Figure 3: Toft's main results for the post-Cold War period.

religious and non-religious civil wars. Second, her results do not reveal any significant difference between shares of excluded Arab Muslims and excluded Christians in their associations with non-religious identity civil war, neither after World War II nor after the Cold War.[10]

Figure 3 shows the results of Toft's main analysis of the post-Cold War period, on which she bases her main conclusions about Islam's bloody innards.[11] Specifically, Figure 3 displays estimated coefficients and 95% confidence intervals of four major explanatory variables–the share of the excluded population of four religious communities–on the likelihood of three types of civil wars: linguistic or non-religious identity (solid circle), all religious (triangle), and centrally reli-

[10]We rely on Toft's original classification of civil wars and do not make any changes with regards to the ambiguous cases discussed above.

[11]Proponents of the religion-conflict link frequently identify religion as a major issue only after the end of the Cold War (Huntington, 1996; Toft, 2007). Others date the rising importance of religion in armed conflicts to the late 1970s (e.g., Fox, 2012; Pischedda and Vogt, 2023).

gious (square).[12]

We first focus on the estimated coefficients of the excluded Arab Muslim population on the very left. The confidence intervals of each coefficient overlap with the point estimate of each other coefficient for all three definitions of civil war. Thus, it is impossible to conclude that the share of the excluded Arab Muslim population has a greater effect on civil wars over religious issues, however defined, than on non-religious identity conflicts in either period.[13] Given that non-religious identity civil wars and centrally religious ones constitute mutually exclusive categories, the two logistic regression models can be interpreted as elements of a multinomial regression, and we can formally test the equality of coefficients across these models. In line with the graphical inspection, we find no statistically significant difference between the effects of the excluded Arab Muslim population on different types of civil war. If there is any Arab Muslim exceptionalism, it does not apply to religiously central civil wars specifically.

Toft also stresses that the share of the excluded Christian population is statistically significantly associated with non-religious identity civil wars. She explicitly contrasts that finding with the statistically significant relationship between excluded Arab Muslims and centrally religious civil wars. Yet she omits the fact that her results do not indicate any significant difference between excluded Christians and Arab Muslims on the risk of such non-religious identity conflicts (solid circles Figure 3). Her conclusion that "Christians are more likely to rebel for secular reasons after 1990" (p.1624) is not backed up by her results. The share of excluded Christians cannot be distinguished from either the excluded Arab or Other Muslim population shares as the point estimates of all effects lie within the range of the confidence intervals of all other coefficients. Taken together the lack of distinction between different civil war types for excluded Arab Muslims, and the lack of distinction between excluded Arab Muslims and Christians for non-religious identity civil war sheds doubt on Arab Muslim exceptionalism.

[12] We base the Figure on a replication of her results using the replication data provided by Toft.

[13] In the appendix, we compare differences in predicted probabilities rather than the estimated coefficients. The results remain unchanged. See Figures A1 and A2.

Challenging Toft's Religious Outbidding Thesis

Finally, we question the fit between Toft's theory and her empirical findings. Toft interprets her statistical results as supportive of her original outbidding thesis. However, her country-level analysis only indicates a statistically significant correlation of the politically excluded share of Arab Muslims with centrally religious civil wars. This difference is distinct from the effects of other excluded religious categories on centrally religious civil wars. Yet it is far from obvious how these estimates provide evidence in favour of religious outbidding dynamics rather than other theoretical mechanisms. Indicators of political exclusion have predominantly been interpreted as proxies for grievances (e.g., Cederman, Gleditsch and Buhaug, 2013). In our study, we cite work on religion and conflict that links grievances to the onset of armed conflicts: "Huntington and others also argue that grievances in response to a disappointing secular order are particularly acute in the Islamic world which is why Muslims are more frequently involved in intrastate conflict than members of other religions" (BCV 2017:747). Another interpretation stresses the preponderance of Jihadism in the Muslim Arab world. Kalyvas (2018) describes the similarities of Jihadism as a transnational political ideology to Marxism during the Cold War. That theoretical perspective suggests that mobilizing for civil war under a Muslim Jihadi guise provides rebel actors with greater ideational appeal and more resources due to funding from transnational Jihadi organizations. Relatedly, Pischedda and Vogt (2023) show that ethno-political organizations with religious agendas, especially from Muslim ethnic groups, have become more likely to use violence against governments after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 compared to before. They link this increase to a new transnational zeitgeist emerging in the 1970s that sets religious organizations aspiring for radical political transformation "on a collision course with defenders of the status quo" (p. 5). They also highlight specific domestic conditions, such as corruption and repression of religious organizations, that condition the influence of this transnational zeitgeist, again emphasizing the relevance of grievances in fostering (ethno-)political violence.

Toft's country-level analysis does not allow to adjudicate between the different theoretical interpretations of her finding as the alternative mechanisms described above are as consistent with the empirical picture as Toft's own interpretation. In fact, while the outbidding logic - i.e. the notion that the risk of political violence increases as different actors compete over the support of a common (e.g., ethnic) constituency - has been empirically tested on global datasets with mixed findings (Findley and Young, 2012; Farrell, 2020; Vogt, Gleditsch and Cederman, 2021), we are not aware of a direct test of Toft's religious outbidding thesis specifically. Hence, in the following, we draw on the new EPR-Organizations (EPR-O) dataset to test the thesis more systematically and thus evaluate whether it helps us explain identity-based civil wars in general, in the Middle East and/or the "Muslim world."

EPR-O identifies formal political organizations representing the interests of specific ethnic groups listed in the EPR dataset in a random sample of forty countries spanning all world regions in the period from 1946 to 2013 (Vogt, Gleditsch and Cederman, 2021). It includes a broad spectrum of organizations, ranging from political parties and NGOs to self-determination organizations, and provides yearly information of their political demands vis-a-vis the national government, as well as violent and non-violent actions. One of the political demands coded in the dataset refers to religious claims, in particular, defined as claims for the protection of the religious rights of a given ethnic group and/or the enhancement of the status of its religion.[14] This information on religious agendas of a set of political actors that may or may not "play the religious card" - ethno-political organizations - allows us to test the notion of religious outbidding within or outside the Middle East and Muslim world in a more direct and systematic way than Toft's country-level analysis.

Following previous studies (Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour, 2012), we operationalize outbidding using the logged number of organizations that make religious claims representing the same ethnic group. To capture the outcome variable of ethnic armed conflicts, we identified the organiza-

[14]The yearly claim codings in EPR-O are based on public statements by organizations and their leaders as recorded in primary or secondary sources, including original documents and websites of organizations as well as scholarly and journalistic texts.

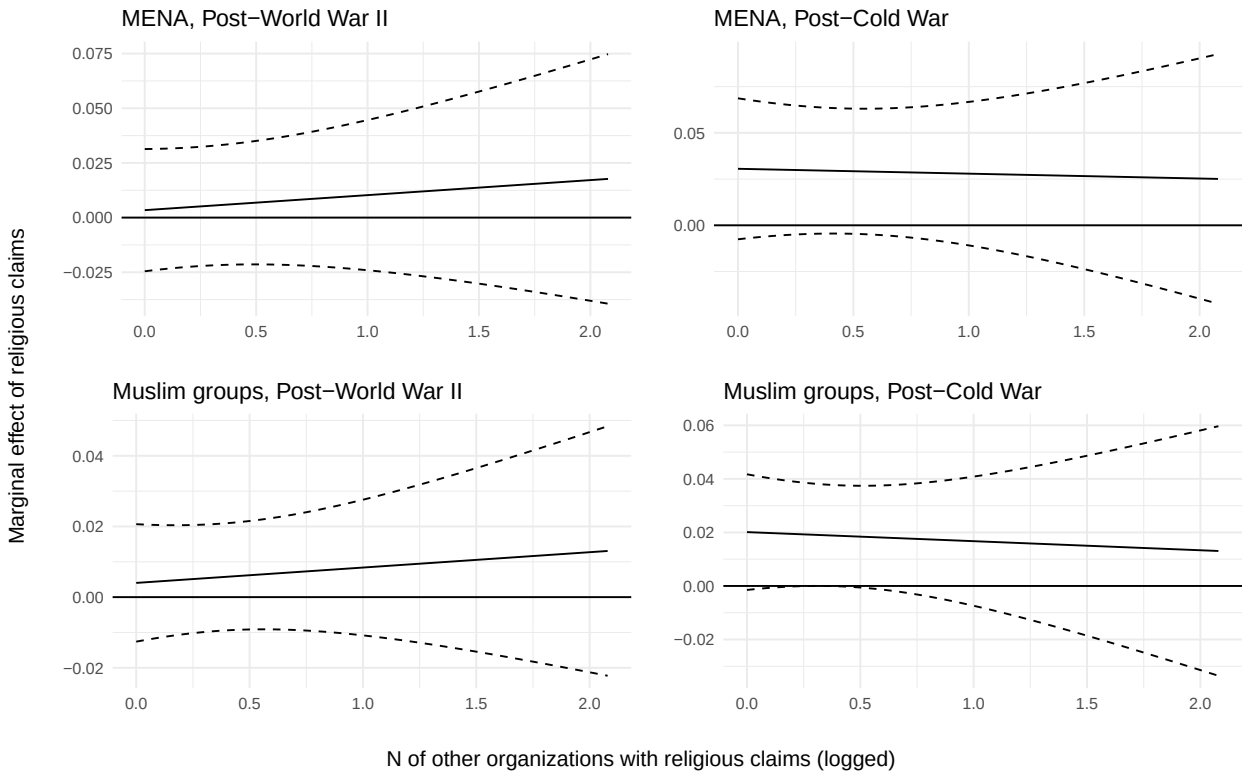

Figure 4: Predicted probability of ethnic armed conflict onset as a function of the number of religious contenders.

tions in EPR-O that are listed as civil conflict actors in the ACD data and coded a civil conflict onset in the first year an organization appears in an ACD dyad.[15] We then estimate the effect of whether or not an organization makes religious claims on its likelihood to initiate an ethnic armed conflict, conditional on the number of other organizations within the same ethnic group that make religious claims.[16] If religious outbidding is indeed systematically linked to identity wars, we would expect the effect of religious claims on civil war onset to increase as the number of "religious contenders" increases.

However, we do not find any such evidence for outbidding. Figure 4 plots the marginal ef-

[15]Our analysis thus excludes armed conflicts within the same ethno-religious groups, e.g., Arab Muslim moderates fighting Arab Muslim extremists.

[16]Table A3 lists the full regression results including control variables. We also use ethnic group-fixed effects, thus only exploiting variation in religious claims and the number of contenders within individual ethnic groups and over time, and estimate robust standard errors clustered on organizations.

fect of organizations' religious claims as a function of the number of religious contenders for four different samples: the MENA region between 1946 and 2013, and after the Cold War (top row), and all Muslim groups for both the post-World War II and post-Cold War periods (bottom row).[17] Increasing the number of religious contenders, our proxy for outbidding, does not result in statistically significant differences in the marginal effect of any one religious claim on armed conflict onset. While we see a slight increase of conflict risk for the period 1946-2013 (left panels), the risk of armed conflict slightly decreases with an increasing number of contenders in the post-Cold War samples. Further restricting the sample to only Arab Muslim groups or to only centrally religious civil wars that are present in both samples does not alter the null findings. In short, our actor-based analysis casts doubts on Toft's outbidding explanation of civil wars in the Muslim world.

Conclusion

In a recent contribution to the *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Monica Toft (2021*b*) criticizes our results on the relationship between different ethnic cleavage dimensions and the risk of civil war onset. Using a new Religious Civil War (RCW) dataset that classifies civil wars into religious and non-religious types, Toft shows that religious civil wars have become more frequent over time, that they last longer, are more intense than other civil wars, and that they disproportionately break out in the Arab Muslim world. By doing so, she reasserts the claim "that religion is more salient in [ethnic] civil wars than language" (BCV 2017:745)—a claim we theoretically and empirically challenged.

In this response, we question Toft's assertions on three grounds. First, we show that her replication of our results in no way shows that religious cleavages between ethnic groups are more conflictual than linguistic cleavages. Second, we demonstrate that about half of Toft's centrally religious civil wars are "ambiguous" classifications according to her own documentation. After

[17] Table A3 also includes two models that include the entire sample.

separating out these conflicts, the spectacular increase of religious conflicts after the end of the Cold War becomes far less impressive. Third, we demonstrate that Toft misinterprets her own empirical results by overstating the differences between Arab Muslims and other religions in the onset of civil war. Relatedly, her interpretation of country-level correlations as evidence for the theoretical mechanism of outbidding is not supported once we consider more specific organization-level data.

Together these problems in Toft's study echo deeper challenges in the study of religion and conflict. First, studies of religion and conflict tend to ignore proper counterfactuals. To answer questions about religion and conflict, it is necessary to explicitly compare cleavage or issue dimensions. For example, Kalyvas (2018) explicitly compares Jihadi or revolutionary Islamic ideology to Marxist ideology and its role in violent conflict during the Cold War, and finds remarkable similarities between the two. His study points thus to the relevance of revolutionary ideology, and not to anything specific about religion. Second, to answer questions about the conflict-propensity of religion or any other cleavage, it is necessary to compare the frequency of religious/identity conflicts with the frequency of religious/identity non-violent claims. Although there may be more religious conflicts around the world, it would not necessarily imply that religion is more conflict-prone if peaceful religious claims also increase. Third, to understand distinct mechanisms and their relevance for the role of religion in armed conflicts, it is necessary to choose both appropriate measurement, such as organizations when studying outbidding, and to contrast the operation of mechanisms across different actors or cleavages, e.g., by comparing linguistic and religious divisions in armed conflict onset.

Understanding the roots and dynamics of civil wars is still among the most policy-relevant social scientific enterprises. The lives and livelihoods of too many people are at stake (Ghobarah, Huth and Russett, 2003). Narrowing the perspective onto one potential cleavage blindsides us to the outbreak of non-religious armed conflicts, such as the 2020 war in Ethiopia's Tigray region or the 2013 civil war in South Sudan. Ignoring linguistic differences at the expense of religious

divisions risks underestimating the continued Kurdish grievances in Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran, and oversimplifies complex conflicts fought along both religious and linguistic-nationalist lines in Afghanistan, Kashmir, and Israel. Resolving these conflicts requires focusing on all types of grievances and cleavages, not only religious ones. Getting religion right is certainly important, but other cleavages continue to matter for our understanding of the dynamics of civil war.

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Supplementary Material to

Getting Religion Wrong

A Rebuttal of Toft's "Getting Religion Right"

#	Civil War	Time	Source
1	Afghanistan Ia: Mujahideen Uprising	1978-2003	"Whether or not this was an identity-based war is in dispute. Most sources indicate that this was not an identity-based conflict. However, because religion was central to the conflict, we code this as an identity-based civil war" (p.198). If it is not an identity-based conflict, it cannot be a religious one according to Toft's own coding rules.
2	Afghanistan Ic: Afghan/Taliban Resistance	2003-	"Whether or not this is an ethnic or religious civil war is in dispute." (p.203)
3	Chad Ib: FROLINAT Rebellion II	1977-1990	"Whether or not this case involved any Islamist insurgent groups is in dispute" (p.394)
4	China IIIb: Tibet II / Tibetan Khamba Rebellion	1954-1961	"Whether or not religion was central in this case is in dispute" (p.235)
5	India Ic: Kashmir	1988-	"Whether or not religion was central in this case is ambiguous" (p.247)
6	India IIX: Sikh Insurrection	1982-1993	"Whether or not religion was central to this conflict is ambiguous" (p.271)
7	Iraq IVa: Iraqi Shiite Insurrection	1991-1993	"Whether or not religion was central to the conflict is ambiguous" (p.147)
8	Iraq IVb: Iraqi Sunni Insurgency	2003 -	"Whether or not religion was central to the conflict is ambiguous" (150)
9	Israel Ia: Palestinian Insurgency / First Intifada	1968-1993	"Whether or not religion was central to the conflict is ambiguous" (155)
10	Lebanon Ic: Third Lebanese Civil War	1982-1990	"Whether or not religion was central to the conflict is ambiguous" (168)

11	Mali Ib: AQIM/Tuareg Rebellion	2012-	Conflict was started by a secessionist Tuareg movement, the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA), that declared independence three months after the conflict started. Divisions with smaller Islamist Tuareg group developed six months after the conflict started. The smaller Islamist group then brought in Al-Quaida. Most other datasets code two armed conflicts, one secessionist war, and one religious one (480-1).
12	Pakistan III: FATA / Waziristan	2004-	"Whether or not religion is central in this case is in dispute" (320)
13	Philippines IIIa: Moro Rebellion	1972-1996	"Whether or not religion was central in this case is in dispute" (333)
14	Sudan Ia: Anya Nya	1963-1972	"Whether or not religion was central to the conflict is ambiguous" (536)
15	Sudan Ib: SPLM/A	1983-2005	"Whether or not religion was central to the conflict is ambiguous" (539)
16	Syria II: Syria Post-Arab Spring War	2011-	"Whether or not the conflict with the Islamic State is a distinct armed conflict from the Syrian civil war since 2011 is in dispute. ACD codes two distinct armed conflict since 2013. By contrast, we treat them as part of a single civil war, which has seen religious actors become more central to the conflict after 2013." (176)
17	Thailand III: Patani	2004-	"Whether or not religion was central in this case is in dispute" (354)
18	Uganda IIIa: Holy Spirit Movement	1986-1987	"Whether or not religion was central in this case is ambiguous" (553)
19	Uganda IIIb: LRA	1991-2009	"Whether or not religion is central in this case is in dispute" (556)

Table A1: Centrally religious civil wars whose classification Toft's documentation describes as "ambiguous" or "in dispute." Civil war names, classifications, and war duration from Toft (2021). All page numbers reference the "Code Book for the Religious Civil Wars (RCW) Data Set" (Toft, 2021*a*).

#	Civil War	Time	Ethnic Groups (Government v Rebel Side
1	Chad Ib: FROLINAT Rebellion II	1977-1990	Sara v Toubou & Muslim Sahel groups & Arabs (pp.391-5)
2	China IIIa: Tibet I / Conquest of Tibet	1950-1951	Han Chinese v Tibetans (235)
3	China IIIb: Tibet II / Tibetan Khamba Rebellion	1954-1961	Han Chinese v Tibetans (235)
4	India Ia: Partition / First Kashmir War	1947-1949	Hindi-speakers v Kashmiri Muslims (241-3)
5	India Ib: Second Kashmir War	1965	Hindi-speakers v Kashmiri Muslims (243-5)
6	India II: Hyderabad	1948	Hindi-speakers v Urdu-speaking Hyderabadi Muslims (248-9)
7	India Ic: Kashmir	1988-	Hindi-speakers v Kashmiri Muslims (245-7)
8	India IIX: Sikh Insurrection	1982-1993	Hindi-speakers v Punjabi Sikh (271)
9	Indonesia II: Darul Islam Rebellion	1953-1959	Javanese v Acehnese (280-2)
10	Iraq IVa: Iraqi Shiite Insurrection	1991-1993	Sunni vs Shia (146-148)
11	Israel Ia: Palestinian Insurgency / First Intifada	1968-1993	Israeli Jews v Palestinian Arabs (152-5)
12	Israel Ib: Palestinian Insurgency / Second Intifada	2000-	Israeli Jews v Palestinian Arabs (155-7)
13	Laos II: Chao Fa Rebellion	1976-1979	Lao v Hmong (306-8)
14	Lebanon Ic: Third Lebanese Civil War	1982-1990	Christian Maronites v Palestinian Arabs & Shia Arabs & Druze (168)
15	Mali Ia: Second Tuareg Rebellion	1990-1995	Blacks (Mande, Peul, Voltaic etc.) v Tuaregs (478-9)
16	Mali Ib: AQIM/Tuareg Rebellion	2012-	Blacks (Mande, Peul, Voltaic etc.) v Tuaregs (478-9)

17	Pakistan III: FATA / Waziristan	2004-	Punjabi v Pashtuns (318-21)
18	Philippines IIIa: Moro Rebellion	1972-1996	Christian lowlanders v Moro (331-4)
19	Philippines IIIb: Moro Rebellion II	2000-	Christian lowlanders v Moro (331-4)
20	Russia Ib: Dagestan War	1999	Russians v Chechens and Dagestanis (97-102)
21	Russia Id: Caucasus Emirate	2007-present	Russians versus various minorities (106-8)
22	Sudan Ia: Anya Nya	1963-1972	Arabs v Azande & Bari & Dinka & Latoka & and Other Southern groups (534-6)
23	Sudan Ib: SPLM/A	1983-2005	(536-9)
24	Syria I: Sunni vs. Alawites	1979-1982	Alawites v Sunni Arabs (173-4)
25	Syria II: Syria Post-Arab Spring War	2011-	Alawites v Sunni Arabs (174-7)
26	Thailand III: Patani	2004-	Thai v Malay Muslims (352-4)
27	Uganda IIIa: Holy Spirit Movement	1986-1987	South-Westerners (Ankole, Banyoro, Toro, Banyarwanda) v Langi/Acholi (550-2)
28	Uganda IIIb: LRA	1991-2009	South-Westerners (Ankole, Banyoro, Toro) v Langi/Acholi (552-6)

Table A2: Centrally religious civil wars in which government and rebel actors are ethnically distinct. Civil war names and war duration from Toft (2021). All page numbers reference the "Code Book for the Religious Civil Wars (RCW) Data Set" (Toft, 2021*a*).

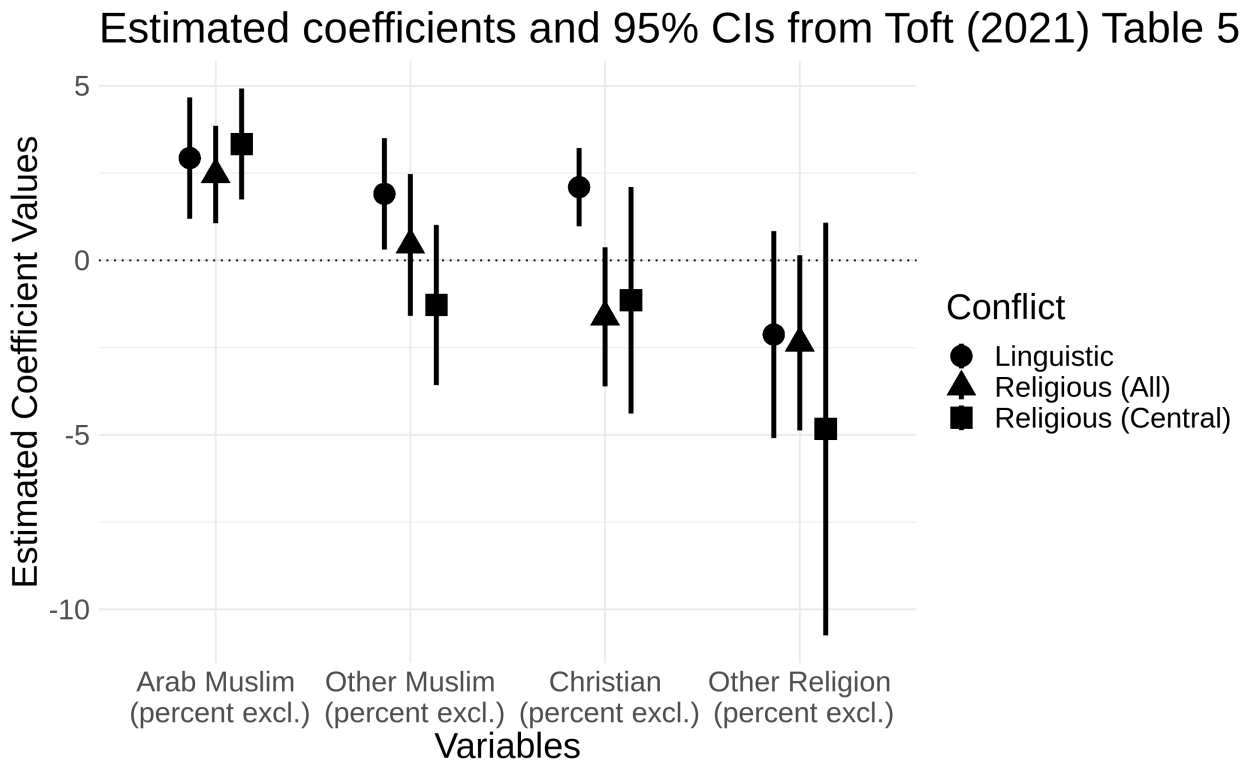


Figure A1: Toft's main results for the post-World War II period.

Figure A2: Predicted probabilities of Toft's main results for the post-World War II and post-Cold War periods.

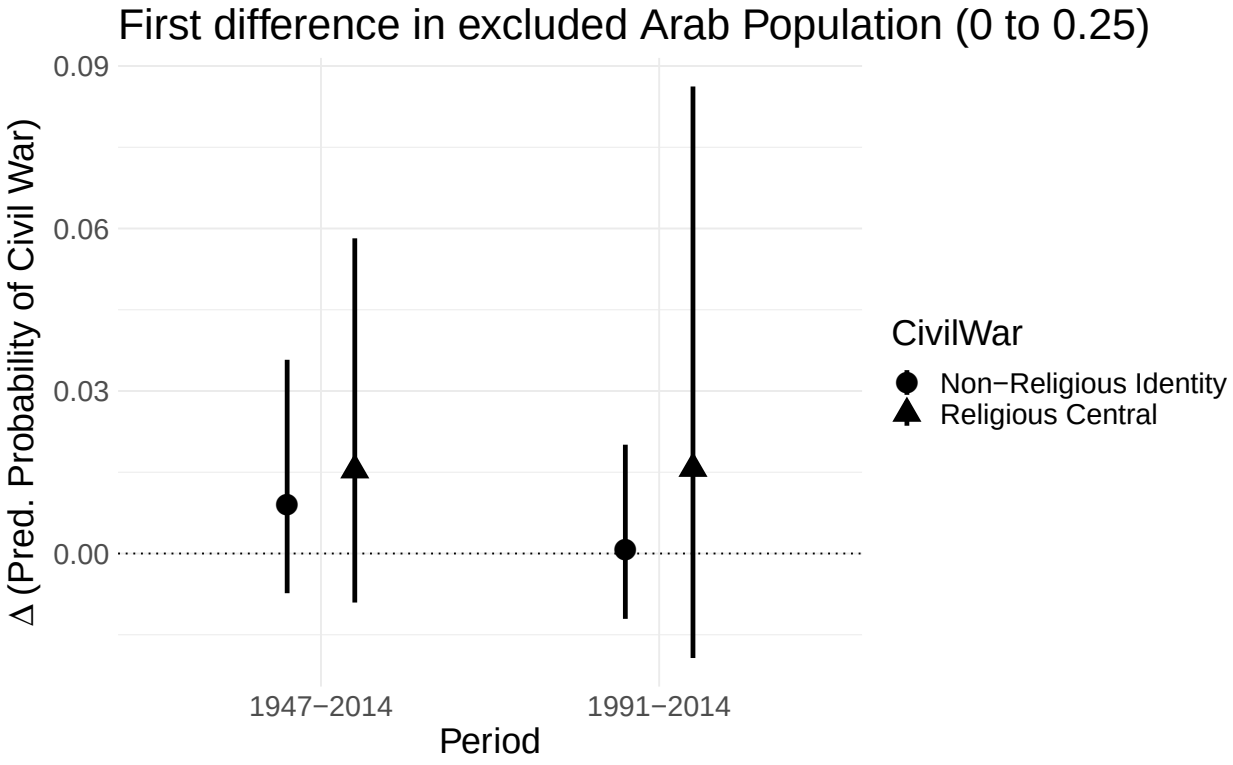


Figure A3: Predicted probabilities of Toft's main results for the post-World War II and post-Cold War periods.

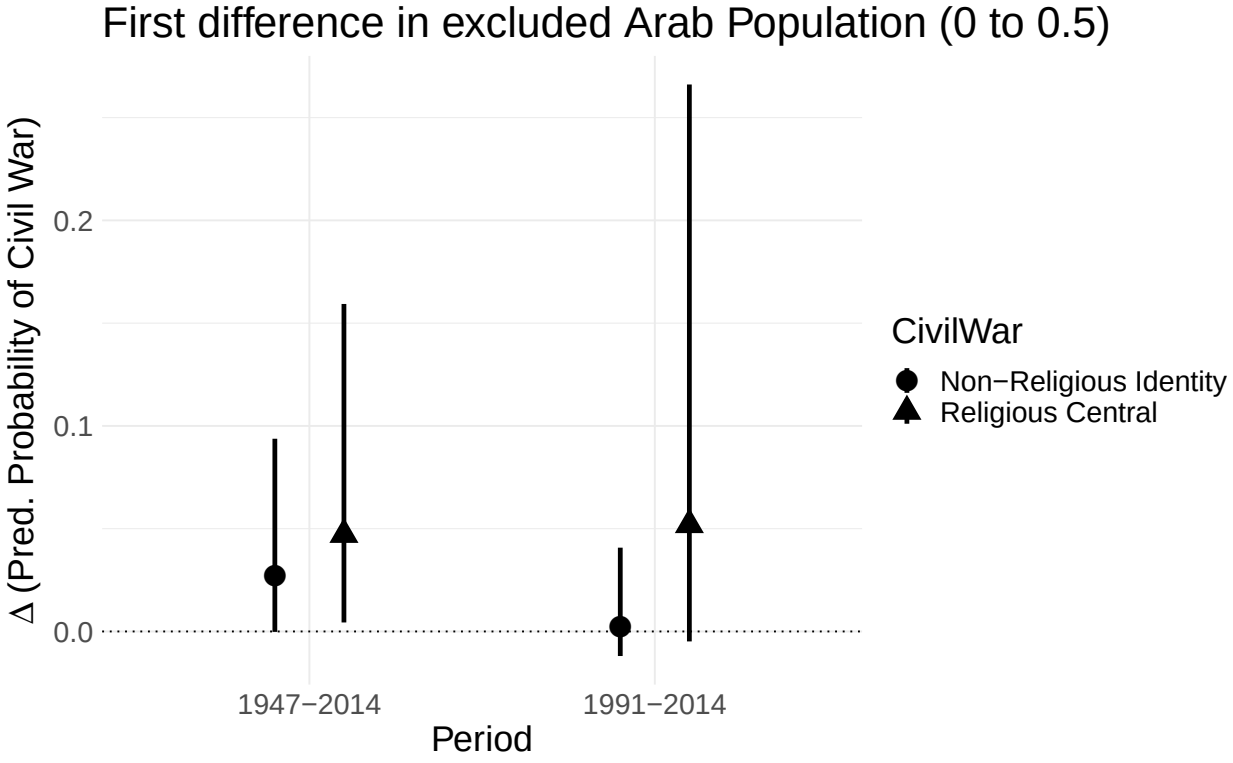
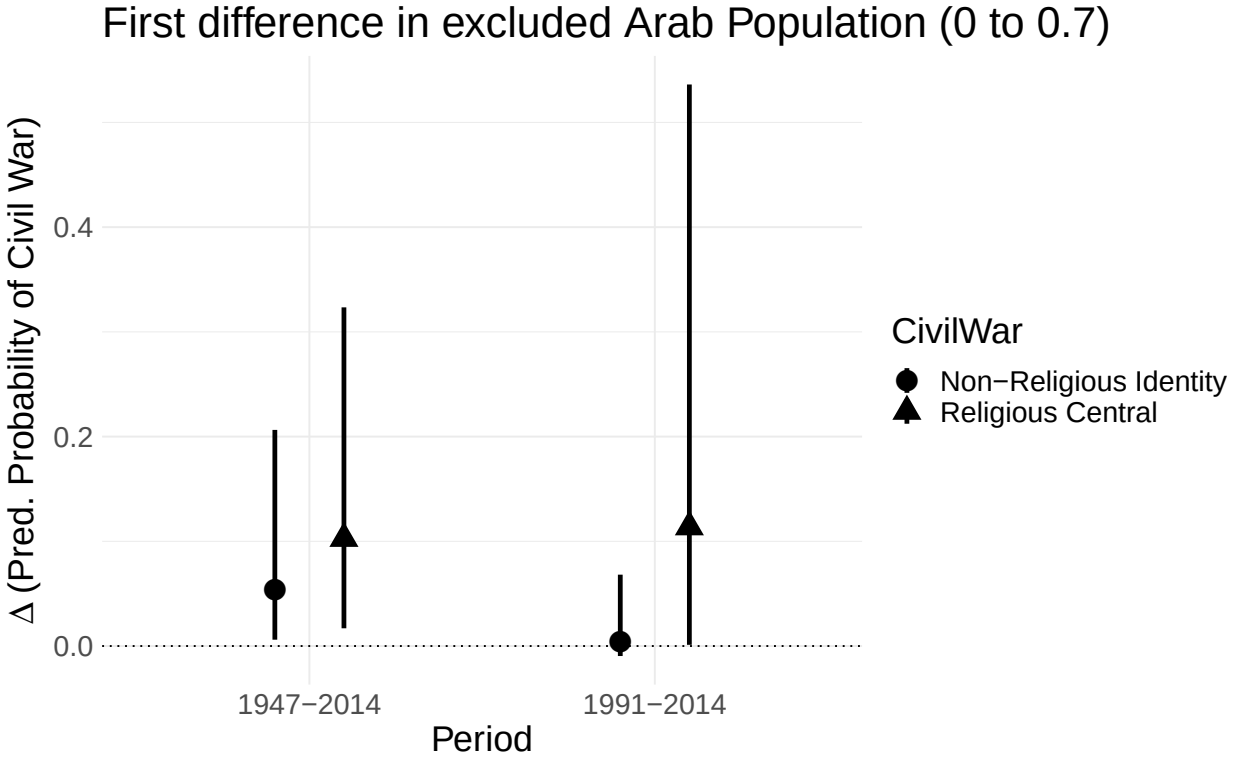


Figure A4: Predicted probabilities of Toft's main results for the post-World War II and post-Cold War periods.



	Model 1 (Full sample)	Model 2 (Post-CW)	Model 3 (MENA)	Model 4 (MENA, post-CW)	Model 5 (Muslim)	Model 6 (Muslim, post-CW)
Religious claims (RC)	0.004 (0.006)	0.014 (0.008)	0.003 (0.014)	0.031 (0.019)	0.004 (0.008)	0.020 (0.011)+
N other orgs. w/ RC (log)	−0.003 (0.007)	0.000 (0.010)	−0.003 (0.015)	0.016 (0.019)	−0.003 (0.011)	0.005 (0.016)
RC × N orgs. w/ RC	−0.002 (0.007)	−0.007 (0.009)	0.007 (0.014)	−0.003 (0.019)	0.004 (0.010)	−0.003 (0.013)
Muslim ethnic group	−0.011 (0.008)	−0.002 (0.007)	0.009 (0.026)	−0.001 (0.021)		
Excluded ethnic group	0.012 (0.004)**	0.008 (0.005)+	0.012 (0.012)	0.009 (0.006)	0.013 (0.006)*	0.010 (0.005)*
Ethnic group war history	−0.004 (0.003)	−0.012 (0.008)	0.004 (0.007)	0.004 (0.016)	−0.004 (0.005)	−0.009 (0.011)
Liberal democracy	0.016 (0.009)+	0.012 (0.012)	−0.008 (0.065)	−0.025 (0.044)	0.034 (0.029)	0.042 (0.024)+
GDP per capita (log)	0.006 (0.005)	0.004 (0.006)	0.037 (0.019)*	0.035 (0.025)	0.016 (0.010)	0.008 (0.010)
Country population (log)	−0.002 (0.004)	−0.017 (0.010)+	0.030 (0.015)+	0.032 (0.066)	−0.005 (0.012)	−0.006 (0.011)
Calendar year	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	−0.001 (0.001)*	−0.001 (0.001)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Rel. diff. to group in power	−0.009 (0.006)	0.008 (0.008)	−0.014 (0.011)	−0.002 (0.015)	−0.011 (0.008)	0.005 (0.011)
Electoral participation	−0.007 (0.002)**	−0.004 (0.002)+	0.001 (0.006)	0.007 (0.007)	−0.002 (0.003)	−0.002 (0.004)
Organization age	0.000 (0.000)*	0.001 (0.000)**	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
Peace years	−0.002 (0.001)***	−0.003 (0.001)***	−0.004 (0.002)*	−0.003 (0.001)*	−0.002 (0.001)*	−0.002 (0.001)*
Peace years (quadratic)	0.000 (0.000)**	0.000 (0.000)**	0.000 (0.000)+	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)+	0.000 (0.000)
Peace years (cubic)	0.000 (0.000)*	0.000 (0.000)*	0.000 (0.000)+	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)	0.000 (0.000)
N	13 363	9455	2474	1741	5145	3767
Ethnic group-fixed effects	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R2	0.043	0.055	0.029	0.031	0.028	0.028

Robust standard errors, clustered on ethnic groups, in parentheses. + p<0.1, * p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Table A3: Logistic regression models of ethnic outbidding. Outcome variable: ethnic armed conflict onset.