Beyond the Lines
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On November 12, 2015, a massive suicide bomb planted by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) ripped through a neighborhood adjacent to Burj al-Barajneh camp. Immediately after the explosion, I watched from the United States as friends in the camp took to social media calling for blood donations, including by sharing specific requests for A negative and B negative type blood from local hospitals. Someone started the hashtag “With South Dahiyeh” and attached it to these posts. Friends from the camp told me, via Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp, that the camp mosque was also announcing the blood drive on its speakers.

Years before, my interlocutors had explained that during the War of the Camps, everyone—including even very young children—was taught what their blood type was, in case they or anyone else were ever in need of a transfusion during the siege. This simple, potentially lifesaving piece of knowledge is something that many of my own North American and European friends don’t know about themselves. The practice of teaching it originated during the War of the Camps, when Palestinians were cut off from external supplies and the hospitals in Burj al-Barajneh and Shatila were frequently in desperate need of blood donations.

Much of what I was able to observe as a researcher in Lebanon fell into the category of what I term holdover practices: constitutive knowledge, skills, practices, and routines developed under dire conditions that have been worked into the everyday banalities of more peaceful times. For example, one employee of a civil society organization once commented to me that her group was able to address gender-based violence by employing women who had worked in the underground during the Israeli occupation and the War of the Camps. She explained
that having smuggled money to families left those women with trust-based ties as well as intimate awareness of family dynamics that allowed them to reach out in ways that others could not. I witnessed countless moments when people invoked the past—when women like Intisar were sexually harassed; when people like Abu Hadi had to solve a problem related to an aggressive, armed, potentially violent parent; or when they reached for old connections and points of reference. I listened as people occasionally spoke wistfully about the days of the War of the Camps, when, at least to them, people were together. These holdover practices hinted at the lasting influence of organizational and community-level adaptations to past violence and repression.

This book argues that militant groups’ adaptive trajectories flow from interactions between formal organizational hierarchies, repertoires of wartime violence, and the social infrastructure of quotidian network relationships that undergird, intersect with, and sometimes challenge official chains of command. It emphasizes that the plasticity of social ties facilitates militants’ repurposing and remapping of their relationships, enabling organizational adaptation. Moreover, it demonstrates that militant adaptability is not simply a function of inherent group attributes or capacities. Rather, people individually and collectively interpret repertoires of wartime violence as actors embedded in multiple social networks and respond to the everyday challenges that occupation and civil conflict pose in a relational context. I have used the setting of 1980s Lebanon—during conflicts that have become stereotypes of “complexity” (Leenders 2012, 1; Ghosn and Parkinson 2019, 494)—to illustrate how discrete elements of belligerents’ tactical repertoires restructure social networks, driving organizational adaptation and emergence, processes that in turn shape the military and social dimensions of ongoing conflict and its aftermath.

This theoretical and empirical perspective takes complexity and dynamism seriously, especially in terms of feedback between formal organizational and quotidian social worlds. That is, it provides an alternative to linear understandings of causality, event-based models of conflict, and rationalist assumptions of militant decision-making in favor of analytically emphasizing the messy realities of war via a relational, multiple-network perspective that systematically captures the interactions that collectively bring about organizational as well as social change. Such a perspective spotlights a far greater realm of possible trajectories for both organizations and communities in conflict than what research and policy currently postulate.

The dynamics this book explores provide a nuanced, grounded, and holistic account of the organizational and social processes that constitute intrastate conflict. This type of approach is particularly significant in a time when internationalized intrastate conflicts such as those in 1980s Lebanon are becoming more
prevalent (Dupuy et al. 2017). One need only look at Ukraine, Libya, the Central African Republic, Syria, Iraq, the Philippines, or even Mexico’s cartel wars to conclude that the analytical simplicity of an event-based “rebels versus the state” model of intrastate warfare frequently cannot capture the political, geographic, economic, or social processes that characterize contemporary conflicts. Understanding these armed struggles necessitates theoretical and empirical approaches that embrace complexity. In the following pages, I explore some of the implications of this approach for ongoing and future research trajectories. Specifically, I focus on lessons for researchers interested in militant organizations’ behavior in war, gender and conflict, and understandings of the social legacies of war and violence.

**Rethinking Intrastate Warfare**

This book offers several broad lessons for those interested in civil or intrastate war, political violence, insurgency, and asymmetrical warfare. First, rather than focusing on abstract and subjective concepts of militant “success” or “failure” or on more simple measures of “survival” or “death,” this volume complicates scholarly and policy-oriented understandings of organizational behavior and outcomes in armed conflict. Specifically, it introduces a new category of analysis—emergent organizations—and points to their significance in conflict processes. In so doing, it shows that formal organizational design and institutional structure cannot independently predict or ensure “success” in terms of a group’s resilience or survival, nor can it reliably predict the use of violent versus nonviolent tactics. Rather, the structure of organizational networks, the degree of militants’ social embeddedness, and local environment all matter for how organizations adapt and behave. This perspective complements and moves beyond scholarship that analyzes militant groups’ behaviors solely through formal, macro-structural traits such as cohesion/fragmentation or centralization/decentralization (Humphreys and Weinstein 2006; Weinstein 2007; Johnston 2008; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Giustozzi 2010; Sinno 2010; Serena 2014). While certain types of formal stratification or fragmentation may have high potential for change, outcomes fundamentally depend on how militants adapt in the moment, which is a product of how violence shapes the networks in which they are embedded and their own interpretations of it.

In emphasizing militants’ perceptions and understandings of their environments via the lens of multiple-network embeddedness, this book demonstrates how the intersection of organizational and everyday networks both creates and forecloses possibilities for militant groups. Specifically, the social infrastructure
that undergirds and intersects with militant structures shapes both the ways that people understand repertoires of violence and repression as well as how they respond to them. This finding has particular salience for recent conclusions that the relationship between rebel governance and military capacity is highly contingent and conditional (Stewart 2020, 27–29). For example, it explains why an ostensibly ideal initial combination of resource endowments or connections with civilian communities may produce an expected set of “positive” outcomes, such as a set of robust governing institutions and the absence of factional violence, in one locale but not in another. Militants may benefit, as Palestinian organizations did, from the ties that governing institutions generate and deepen because they lay the groundwork for future repurposing and remapping across organizational divisions that in turn produce, for example, dispute resolution mechanisms and social service provision. Yet deep connections to civilian communities may also elicit tensions between on-the-ground militants and distant elite leaderships, producing friction and the potential for disobedience, as they did in both Beirut and South Lebanon.

Relational Plasticity, Social Infrastructure, and Organizational Change

Analytically leveraging the concept of relational plasticity—the innate malleability of social relationships that allows militants to reshape their social relationships to organizational ends and vice versa—embraces the fact that actors are inherently socially embedded, conflicted by shifting modes of organizational and quotidian belonging, and infinitely creative in how they leverage social ties. Centering relational plasticity emphasizes interpretive potential in social networks, rather than assuming that specific types of connections—e.g., family ties (Pedahzur and Perliger 2006)—naturally or consistently do certain types of political work. The plasticity of ties is particularly important to understanding how social infrastructure and organizational hierarchies interact to influence militant behavior and broader community dynamics. For example, rather than leveraging marriage ties as Palestinian factions did in Magdousheh, many militant organizations actively seek to break down or simply reformat, rather than exploit militants’ existing, everyday relationships. Jeff Goodwin (1997), for example, points out that the Huk leadership saw romantic ties as impediments to military discipline and solidarity and therefore forbade them, a move that could conceivably limit adaptive options for the group. In some contemporary national resistance projects, such as the Kurdistan Freedom Movement, members abstain from sexual relations “as pushback to patriarchal conditions,” which in turn constitutes part of a larger political project that challenges and reconceptualizes
existing romantic norms and gender identities (“Open Letter to the Public” 2021). Other groups seek to engineer relations in particular ways, according to their ideological leanings (Asal et al. 2013; Thomas and Bond 2015). For example, leftist organizations such as the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) trained and deployed men and women together, meaning that women in the EPLF were not situated as brokers between organizational subdivisions. Indeed, clandestine networks in the EPLF did not flow through marriage ties (which were frequently engineered within units); rather, non-cadre women bartenders liaised with militant men who acted as smugglers and couriers (Wilson 1991, 82–84; Bernal 2001; Pool 2001). In a different vein, Afghan militant groups approached embeddedness with local qawm or tribal structures in very different ways. For example, Hezb-i-Islami (led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar) espoused the practice of hijrat, or evacuating land inhabited by infidels. Hezb-i-Islami fighters—who consisted predominantly of nontribal Pashtuns (Roy 1986, 133)—consequently cleared the land that they controlled of local tribes and villages, depending fully on training, a disciplined Leninist military structure, and external support to command the battlefield. One obvious question to ask is whether designing and institutionalizing organizational structures based on a strict Marxist-Leninist or religious ideology, including the explicit breakdown or rearranging of quotidian ties, could render a group relationally hypo-plastic, in other words, unable to remap relations in order to adapt. The relationship between plasticity, embeddedness, adaptability, and social change merits further investigation.

In a different vein, it seems improbable that organizations with high proportions of foreign fighters—such as Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria, or the Arab Mujahidin in Chechnya—lean heavily on local quotidian ties. When do these types of organizations seek to develop such relationships over time by, for example, marrying into local populations, as many foreign Islamic State fighters did (Moaveni 2015, 2019)? What outcomes are associated with the development of those quotidian ties? Pauline Moore (2019), for instance, finds that while insurgent groups that recruit foreign fighters are more likely to abuse civilians than those who don’t, foreign fighters who are locally socially embedded are associated with comparatively lower levels of harm. Further examination of these dynamics would provide crucial insight into a growing number of protracted armed conflicts that feature organizationally complex and strategically sophisticated militant groups that recruit internationally and at times also operate alongside private military organizations. Moreover, it could also provide insight into broader processes of social change linked to community-level adoption of organizational norms and practices.

The concept of relational plasticity in analyses of organizational decision-making and behavior applies beyond the realm of militant organizations. For
instance, viewing organizational adaptation through the lens of repurposing, remapping, and emergence provides insight into issues such as political party development and democratic accountability. Overlap between organizational and quotidian networks is an inherent aspect of political life. Members of American pharmacist networks that intersect with particular religious organizations refuse to dispense prescriptions, Chinese government officials provide public goods to certain localities in light of their inclusion in local moral solidarity networks (Tsai 2007), and Israeli bureaucrats facilitate settlement activity because of their location in religious-nationalist activist networks (Haklai 2007). Depending on context, certain social network identifications will be more salient or have the potential to become more salient as political conditions change. Rather than analyzing actors in isolation from the multiple social networks in which they are embedded, scholars should incorporate relational context into a broader range of research. Studying the ways in which particular configurations of overlap produce unexpected political and social outcomes is a productive line of future inquiry.

Insiders on the Outside

This book repeatedly demonstrates that significant cleavages arose between on-the-ground cadres and exiled leaderships during the period studied. In South Lebanon and in Beirut, schisms between those who gave top-down orders from exile and those who fought and lived through the occupation and civil war deepened significantly over the course of the 1980s. Disobedience, violence, and local narratives entrenched a local-versus-exile dynamic that repeatedly disrupted chains of command. These cleavages have continued to influence Palestinian factional politics in Lebanon, especially via moral narratives surrounding authenticity and power (Parkinson 2016).

Despite media attention to similar “insider-outsider” dynamics in conflicts such as the Syrian Civil War (Abouzeid 2013) and empirical similarities to organizations such as the African National Congress (Ellis 2013, 151–204), royalist Afghan muhajidin groups, and Palestinian Hamas, limited research expressly examines the politics of exiled leaderships, their relationships with militants and communities on the ground, and conflict outcomes. In one example, Wendy Pearlman’s (2011) research on cohesion and fragmentation in the Palestinian National Movement recognizes this insider/outsider distinction with regards to the divide between the PLO/Fatah leadership in Tunis and on-the-ground organizers in the West Bank; other research has examined the emergence and politics of Fatah’s “New Guard” in the West Bank (see, e.g., Harb 2009). Exile dynamics affect command and control as well as local militant cultures and pat-
terns of mobilization. These factors, in turn, have substantial potential to affect processes of negotiations, demobilization, and on-the-ground peacebuilding, especially if on-the-ground militants do not see their internationally recognized leadership as representative, trustworthy, empathetic, or accountable. The commonality of these inside-outside dynamics, and the informal power associated with meso-level commanders, imply serious disconnects between those who represent rebel groups on the international stage versus those fundamentally responsible for implementing ceasefires and peace agreements at the local level. Indeed, research has shown that meso-level commanders, rather than members of elite leadership, hold unique power to remobilize local soldiers under their command (Daly 2014; 2016). This study had gone even further by revealing how the localized nature of violence and organizational evolution in intrastate wars may create entirely different organizational forms and institutions across space and time, meaning that programs and policies that work in one region may fail in another. More research must be done to acknowledge the challenges and opportunities that these variations provide.

Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Network Analysis

Even as the ground–elite distinction played out across Palestinian factions, other potential cleavages—including those of an ethnic and sectarian nature—did not operate the way that prominent civil war literature would predict (Horowitz 2000; Toft 2005; Cederman and Girardin 2007; Cederman et al. 2010). Rather, strong, trust-based quotidian relationships that formed, for example, via military training, joint labor organizing, marriage, or co-membership on a football team acted as bridges between Palestinians and Lebanese, Muslims and Christians, and Sunnis and Shi‘as. These bridging relationships proved central to sustaining community-level mobilization, organizations’ armed operations, and clandestine information and logistics efforts. The salience that militants assigned to various modes of identification, whether based on class, ideology, gender, or neighborhood, varied based on how repertoires of violence activated and resonated within people’s multiplex networks.

The argument and evidence put forth in this volume concur with previous research indicating that group-level analysis is simply too coarse a measure to explain outcomes such as conflict onset and variations in mobilization. For example, in his research on the Syrian conflict’s trajectory, Kevin Mazur (2019, 996) finds that “the social units possessing the relevant network properties are often not entire ethnic groups. Rather, clans, extended families, and towns are more likely to contain such networks and thus, act in solidarity.” Mazur points to how network “frontiers”—that is, boundaries between dominant and marginalized
groups—and dense, local social networks shape mobilization. He demonstrates that in Syria, pro-regime, clientelistic brokers’ control over tight-knit local solidarity networks disintegrated in the face of regime violence and “acts of misrule”; dense, local, trust-based ties subsequently provided grounds for mobilization based on shared grievance (Mazur 2019, 482–483, 487–488). While Mazur emphasizes how clientelistic ties provide ethnically exclusive regimes control over dense local networks in times of stability via brokerage across network frontiers, his deeper theoretical point pertains to the importance of brokers and dense, community-level relations in shaping conflict dynamics. While ethnic and patron-client relationships may be strongly influential in some contexts and time frames, we should not assume the uniform primacy or salience of any one mode of collective identification or organizing across either space or time.2

This book emphasizes people’s systematic creativity in actively remapping social network ties in the face of a variety of repertoires of violence. It demonstrates that strong quotidian relationships in one domain—whether familial, neighborhood-based, team-based, or congregational—frequently connect populations that appear to be “divided” in another domain—whether between majority and minority ethnic groups or militant parties. These network bridges facilitate myriad adaptations. The localized repertoires of violence that belligerents use to target organizations and communities activate various modes of identification (e.g., those based on gender), inspire new collective narratives (e.g., of vulnerability and international responsibility), prompt network repurposing and remapping (e.g., based on neighborhood ties), and produce emergent modes of organizing resistance (e.g., a protest movement). This is why deliberate attempts to fragment one type of social network via a repertoire including, for instance, mass incarceration, collaboration, or checkpoint building (Gade 2020) will almost always initiate unexpected responses; those deploying it do not consider the complexity of social ties.

It’s worth noting that my interlocutors actively distinguished between Palestinian and Lebanese parties, their members (as a collective), and individual cadres and affiliates. For them, specifically local party organization and cultures shaped outcomes—whether among Lebanese militias, units within the IDF, or camp-level branches of different Palestinian factions. They refused to treat party membership, group-level sectarian categorization, and personal religious belief as coterminus. Put differently: no one in this study reported making decisions simply because others were “Sunni” or “Palestinian.” From a practical standpoint, this granular view of individuals’ social affiliations makes sense. Assumptions of group-ness weren’t viable decision-making heuristics during the wars of the 1980s, in terms of patterns of collaboration, shifting party alliances, and the reality of intermarriage, friendship, and labor solidarity in everyday social net-
works (especially in the demographically mixed neighborhoods of Beirut’s “Belt of Misery”). Lebanese trained with and served in Palestinian organizations (and vice versa); Christian Palestinians and Lebanese were victims of right-wing, Lebanese Christian militia violence despite their religious beliefs; members of rival Palestinian ideological currents put them aside to protect friends and family. This behavior isn’t surprising. It squares with extensive scholarship that challenges “sect-all-the-way-down” framings of Middle East politics (Cammett and Issar 2010; Clark and Salloukh 2013; Cammett 2014; Salloukh et al. 2015) and emphasizes the need to understand conflict through the lens of local histories (Makdisi 2000; Wedeen 2008, chap. 4; Philbrick Yadav 2014) and cross-cutting ideological currents (Schulhofer-Wohl 2020, chaps. 3 and 4).

Attention to these micro- and meso-level network relationships clearly offers important insights for understanding intrastate wars in terms of mobilization, the roles individuals come to play, and organizations’ ability to sustain operations. The significance of these ties suggests that reducing conflicts in the Middle East to “these fights between the Sunni and Shi’a side of the region,” as US policymakers continue to do (Sen. Chris Murphy, quoted in Petti 2021), does a severe disservice to understanding conflict and its on-the-ground consequences. More research should focus on how regimes strategically “sectarianize” and “ethnicize” conflicts (Fielding-Smith 2015; Majed 2016; Gordon and Parkinson 2018; Mazur 2021) and the role that both elites and foreign actors play in reifying ethnic, sectarian, national, and other identity categories, often for domestic political goals (Lawrence 2010, 2013; Torbati 2019).

Gender and Conflict

This book also holds lessons for incorporating gender-based analysis and feminist approaches more centrally into conflict studies. The experience of Palestinian militants in Lebanon reaffirms previous findings that militants’ and civilians’ experiences of war are deeply gendered (Tétreault 1994; Enloe 2000; Alison 2003, 2004; Viterna 2006, 2013; Sjoberg and Gentry 2007; E. J. Wood 2008; Coulter 2009; Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2009, 2013; Sjoberg 2013; Gowrinathan 2017, 2021; Eggert 2018; Kinsella 2019). It also underscores the reality that, given the militant roles that women play and the effects that conflict has on their lives, it is absurd to study intrastate war or its aftermath without addressing gender, a point that feminist scholars have repeatedly made (Lake 2014; Tripp 2015; Berry 2017, 2018; Lake and Berry 2017).

This book builds upon this prior work by demonstrating that many of the gendered hierarchies, motivations, and roles that outsiders project on to rebel work
do not pan out on the ground. That is, the idea that intelligence, financial, social service, and logistics-centric labor—often assumed to be “women’s roles”—are naturally less prestigious, less risky, or less important to armed conflict (Thomas and Wood 2017; R. M. Wood and Thomas 2017) does not align with militants’ own assessments of the organizational distribution and value of labor. These tendencies may be compounded by what Timothy Wickham-Crowley, among others, has called the “high newsworthiness” of gun-toting female fighters (Wickham-Crowley 1992, 21). Collectively, these portrayals of women in war contribute to both a systematic underestimation of support, logistics, and intelligence units’ importance and a biased representation of female rebels. In keeping with feminist research that emphasizes the need to move beyond stereotypes of militant women as “mothers, monsters, [or] whores” (Sjoberg and Gentry 2007), this book emphasizes how gender intertwines with and shapes mobilization, organizational hierarchies, and noncombatant activism. It eschews external categories in favor of serious engagement with militants’ own complex experiences and recollections, thus helping to recalibrate scholarly and policy understandings of the gendered nature of intrastate warfare.

Women do frequently take on backstage roles during civil war and anti-occupation movements. In Cuba, women served as couriers, underground publishers, money smugglers, and officers in the clandestine Action and Sabotage brigades; many came to the movement via family or neighbors (Klouzal 2008, 59, 62–63, 87, 89). The Association of Indonesian Women funneled women activists into the nationalist movement during the Indonesian campaign against the Japanese occupation; there, they carried out intelligence operations, provided logistic and medical services, and organized social services in addition to participating in active combat (MacFarland 1994, 197). Women have been centrally involved in clandestine operations in, for example, Irish, Algerian, and Eritrean civil wars well as serving as ground troops (Wilson 1991; Amrane-Minne 1992, 2004; Klouzal 2008). Evidence indicates that the same pattern may hold for recent conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Iraq (BBC 2011; Holmes 2012; Economist 2013; Moaveni 2015, 2019; Bond et al. 2019).

However, the argument presented in this book is that women often play these roles because of the structural positions that they inhabit rather than because of innate social characteristics. Indeed, in other contexts of intrastate war, revolution, and anti-occupation or liberation movements, other actors conduct this brokerage-based labor owing to their relational context, trustworthiness, and skill sets. During the siege of Sarajevo, members of Serb and Muslim families who had intermarried acted as smugglers (Andreas 2008, 65). So did local employees of foreign humanitarian organizations; they had access to the coveted “blue cards” that allowed for safe passage (Andreas 2008, chap. 2). In Zimba-
bwe, children who attended boarding schools served as informational brokers between urban areas and more rural communities, updating their mothers about the anti-colonial struggle during holidays at home. Those mothers subsequently participated in underground operations by providing food, compiling intelligence, transferring money, and serving in—and leading—village committees (MacFarland 1994, 72–73; Klouzal 2008). This variation speaks not only to organizations’ social resources, but also to interactions between social infrastructure and repertoires of violence, with context-specific brokers emerging as a result. The role of these informal structures is broadly overlooked by the extant literature, in part because they are rarely covered by journalists, identified as power centers by mediators or NGOs, or chronicled by militant organizations themselves.

**Violence beyond the Headlines**

While usually portrayed as politically defining, most intrastate conflicts aren’t decided by rapid-fire battlefield engagements, nor does combat alone dictate organizational trajectories. Rather, insurgency and other forms of intrastate conflict may be best described as grueling military, political, and social tests of organizational endurance and innovation. They usually last for several years, if not decades (Fearon 2004; Hegre 2004; Cunningham 2006; Balcells and Kalyvas 2014). This book’s emphasis on the various forms of labor—from intelligence to logistics, sabotage, publishing, social services, protest, advocacy, and combat—demonstrates how both violent and nonviolent labor complement and shape each other’s impact on organizational and broader political outcomes. While most work on rebel groups has focused disproportionately on young male combatants, the evidence presented in this book portrays a more nuanced picture of the labor of armed resistance. Here it is also important to underscore the fact that people who are front-line combatants one month may be teachers the next; as in other political organizations and vocations, many militants move across subdivisions as they progress through the ranks, making their professional trajectories an important point of analysis in rebellion.

To focus only upon violence that can be seen, heard, and quantified is a mistake (Parkinson 2015). Scholars such as Timothy Pachirat (2011) have argued that hidden or less-commented-upon violence carries significant analytical heft in terms of understanding broader politics and political systems. Shifting analytical focus off spectacular, performative violence produces an account of war that recognizes the local and global sociopolitical significance of patterns of violence and repression that may be hard to measure but that have long-standing effects. These include forced disappearance and incarceration, in addition to
starvation and withholding of medical treatment. Collaboration, infiltration, denunciation, and intimate betrayals—as well as deep loyalties—are features, not bugs, of any civil war or occupation, as both research and artistic renditions such as the Palestinian film Omar (Abu-Assad 2013) and the Canadian film Incendies (Villeneuve 2010) recognize. And yet they are frequently omitted from scholarly and policy-based representations of conflict.

This reality is attached to a macabre arithmetic in the contemporary Middle East, where multiyear (and sometimes multidecade) internationalized intrastate conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Turkey, Yemen, Libya, and Sudan accounted for approximately 90 percent of an estimated 102,000 global battle deaths in 2016 (Dupuy et al. 2017, 3). Casualty numbers are, however, a matter of contention in any conflict (Andreas and Greenhill 2010). In 2014, the United Nations stopped updating its overall death count for Syria, acknowledging that it no longer had the ability to reliably update and verify the numbers (Ohlheiser 2014); in 2016, casualty estimates for the duration of the Syrian Civil war ranged from the mid-100,000s (caveated for being low) and the high 400,000s (Taylor 2016). Yet the oft-hidden aspects of civil war and occupation violence are extraordinarily salient for political outcomes in the contemporary Middle East. Siege has been a feature of wars in Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, as it was in Chechnya and the former Yugoslavia. Despite a long media focus on Aleppo, Syria’s second city, over a dozen Syrian cities and huge neighborhoods of Damascus, including Yarmouk and Eastern Ghouta, have experienced protracted sieges since the war began in 2011.

The erasure of conflict and its constitutive labor may also occur via other mechanisms, such as siege, which may grind on so long that it loses media and public attention (Andreas 2008; Borri 2013). Indeed, multiple studies demonstrate that these “fatigue effects” and other journalistic biases (Davenport 2009) affect analyses of conflicts from First Intifada in Palestine to the US invasion of Iraq (Gerner and Schrodt 1998; Pérez-Peña 2008). Moreover, casualty counts only speak to those killed as a direct consequence of armed conflict, not due to disease or disappearance (for example), which are both notoriously hard to measure. Focusing exclusively on battlefield deaths ignores those who perish while incarcerated in prisons such as Saydnaya in Syria, where an estimated 17,723 people died between March 2011 and August 2016 (Wainwright 2016). The Syrian Network for Human Rights estimates that belligerents in Syria—primarily the state itself—had disappeared over 100,000 people (Syrian Network for Human Rights 2020, 2); 3,364 medical personnel, professionals who are protected under international law, were arrested or disappeared (Syrian Network for Human Rights 2021, 5). In Yemen, battlefield casualty numbers do not account for nearly 4,000 people who have died from cholera or the estimated 2,510,806 people who
have been infected (Electronic Disease Early Warning System 2018; World Health Organization 2020). Nor does an emphasis on battlefield casualties encompass the immediate social repercussions of the fact that “the main causes of avoidable deaths in Yemen are communicable diseases, maternal, perinatal and nutritional conditions (together accounting for 50% of mortality)” (World Health Organization 2017).

Scholars of civil wars, including those in Mozambique, the United States, and Afghanistan, have also noted regional differences in incumbent violence and militant behavior (Roy 1986; Rubin 2002; Lubkemann 2008; Geiger 2010). How militants interpret patterns of violence and resolve challenges that stem from the nonlethal and indirect aspects of wartime repertoires—ways to transfer information, identify collaborators, feed communities, educate children, and replenish their ranks—make all the difference in the forms that they take. In other words, while certain aspects of violent repertoires may never make it into the global headlines or into scholarly data sets, they have a profound effect on how organizations as well as communities understand war and participate in organizational politics related to it. They shape people’s participation in militant organizations, grassroots social movements, and wartime contentious politics.

These realities speak to one of this book’s core underlying themes: that while wartime casualties matter, deadly battlefield violence is only one piece of the puzzle when it comes to how people experience wartime violence, how they interpret those experiences, and how their understandings interact with broader politics. Indeed, combat medicine has drastically reduced the incidence of battlefield death, making nonlethal battlefield injuries more prevalent (Fazal 2014, 96); compared to past eras, more people are living to participate another day after experiencing various forms of violent contention. To capture this reality, this book has sought to center the common, often less spectacular, and slower-paced (when compared to conventional warfare) modes of violence—incarceration, collaboration, harassment, starvation, besiegement—that shape millions of peoples’ experiences of war and their resulting participation in organizational politics. The processes described in this book do not flow from individualized reactions to death. Rather, they are the results of militants’, survivors’, and bystanders’ complex, relational, strategic, emotion-laden, and above all human decision-making. Bystandership and survivorship, in of themselves, have profound effects on individual participation, organizational adaptation, and social change in war.

Violence is not simply death; militants are not merely men with guns. Embracing complexity in the study of intrastate conflict highlights how militant social embeddedness, capacities for organizational improvisation, and contingency make prediction of civil war outcomes both difficult and problematic. This book demonstrates that two of the strongest militaries in the Middle East could not
eliminate either Palestinian military or political organizing in Lebanon, despite those organizations’ repeated battlefield defeats. Furthermore, it suggests that their efforts to do so inspired fresh mobilization, reanimated survivors, taught militants new skills, and helped to produce organizationally diverse modes of both violent and nonviolent resistance. Simplified accounts of organizational decision-making and behavior mask the processes that shape these outcomes, presenting a sanitized, if parsimonious, account of intrastate conflict dynamics. The approach outlined in this book de-emphasizes casualty counting and battlefield scorecards in favor of analyzing how individual experiences of armed conflict influence organizational trajectories. The larger point here is not that either of these measures is irrelevant. It is that scholars of intrastate conflict—together with policymakers interested in the same—should work toward a more holistic understanding of the lived experiences and complex dynamics of asymmetric conflict if they are interested in finding durable pathways out of it.