

Quagmire in Civil War,

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İç Savaş Bataklığı

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مستتق الحرب الأهلية

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Theory of Quagmire: As an Explanation of the Risk of Entrapment in Civil Wars

In recent years, as a term commonly and increasingly taking place in both public and academic discourses about bloody civil wars, “quagmire” has been mirroring the over lasting conflicts. In such a context, Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, Assistant Professor of Political Science at Leiden University, has conducted research to suggest an answer to the question of why quagmire occurs in some civil wars, while not in others. Differentiating from the varying usages of the term in folk notion, Schulhofer-Wohl defines quagmire as a situation that the warring belligerents “unable to make progress but also unable to withdraw” (p.2) in other words entrapment for both domestic belligerents and foreign backers. Based on the specification of the term, he sets out an analytical concept that helps to develop the theory of

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quagmire, which is based on the analyses of the interactions of belligerents and foreign backers. In doing so, the game-theoretic approach in examining actors' interactions in the strategic structure of the conflicts enables the author to display how foreign backers and belligerents' preferences are shaped as a result of the interactions of them, thereby portraying the scenarios causing the quagmire.

In applying cross-country comparisons and empirical analyses about the civil wars, Schulhofer-Wohl's privileges the Middle East as the area of expertise. Even though his research concerning the book centralizes the Lebanese Civil War as a case for testing his developed theory, the author provides quantitative analyses of all civil wars that occurred between 1944 and 2006. In this way, the author aims at by-passing the possible concerns about the quagmire theory regarding its explanatory power in other cases. Apart from the way of testing hypotheses, the originality of the book primarily derives from the fact that it is the first study that develops a conceptual perspective about the quagmire situations in civil wars. The most related literature ascertains the reason behind the continuation of some civil wars despite the high cost of the conflict by way of domestic level constraints on foreign backers or describes how costly this kind of behavior is. In this context, Schulhofer-Wohl defines the sui generis of the quagmire condition with an academic but quite clear touch. However, the latter stages of the book put complex statistical analyses in play, and thereby one may face difficulties to grasp some parts of the theory-testing process if a reader has not an abstract knowledge about quantitative data analysis.

In chapter two, the author presents the quagmire theory in light of the existing rationalist accounts analyzing the cause of ongoing war. Rationalist studies consider the problem of credible commitment and incomplete information as the core reasons for belligerents to keep fighting since the disruptive effects of the war are not preferable under the conditions that possible gains from victory are less than the costs of fighting. However, the theory of quagmire provides additional insight into this assumption; even if the cost of fighting increases while the stake of conflicts decreases, withdrawing is not the only option for the belligerents. They might be able to, instead, prefer altering the way of fighting from territorial warfare to non-territorial low-cost warfare with the less incentive to win the battle. The niche point is that an assumed game-theoretic approach foresees the foreign backers' assistance as a subsidy to belligerents can be kept giving even under the conditions that foreign backers' interests do not hang in the balance with the possible gains of the victory. This negative deficit is fulfilled by the incentive that the zero-sum nature of the rival foreign backers' relations requires preventing rivals' victory. Hence, because of the costs are burdened by foreign backers, belligerents continue to fight in a nonterritorial sense. This decreases the possibility of peace, then causes the quagmire. This rationalist and game-theoretic approach give the author an advantage to develop a relatively parsimonious but feasible theory of quagmire because identifying both domestic and foreign actors as the unitary actors acting concerning others' behaviours provide a sterile basis for generalizability. That is the main contribution of this book to civil war literature.

Chapter three and four examine the feasibility of the two mechanisms through the analysis of the Lebanese Civil War; the effect of foreign backers to belligerents' decision-making about the continuation of the fight and the changes in the way of fighting from territorial to non-territorial low-cost warfare. To have in-depth knowledge about the development of the war, the author also applies 120 hours of interviews with the former military commanders and political officials of the warring parties. While chapter three introduces the main actors, issues, turning points and decision-making process of the crises, chapter four tests the quagmire theory in picturing how belligerents and foreign backers behave and interact with each other in the turning points. These are the moments that can be arrayed as; rightist parties' push to continue fighting in January 1976, the rightist attempts to restart the conflict culminating in intense fighting in the summer of 1978, the Amine Gemayyel administration's shunning of a political settlement in favor of a forceful

expansion of government control between 1982 and 1984, and General Michel Aoun's rejection of the Taif Agreement in the fall of 1989 (p.95). Belligerents' behaviors in these critical junctures demonstrate the perfect fit with the theory of quagmire's two mechanisms.

Chapter five and six evaluate the validity of the theory in other cases through the use of the statistical model of civil war. To identify the quagmire situation in civil wars that occurred between 1944 and 2006, he uses a different type of Cox/OLS Regression Residuals analysis that is about finding out the gap between observed and predicted length of the conflicts through a dataset of 158 civil wars built by Schulhofer-Wohl. To identify the question of whether the gap corresponds to the quagmire condition or not, normal deviate residual (NDR) which functions in identifying the patients having unusual survival times is applied. For these series of statistical analyses, he defines six factors associated with duration; a country's geographic features, social characteristics, level of economic development and resources, government capacity, type of conflict, and international environment. These are also the factors that have the importance of affecting not just the duration of the conflict but also the level of foreign interests, domestic war environment (cost of escalation) and stakes of conflicts. With a complex series of quantitative analyses through these variables in existing databases, the author demonstrates crucial pieces of evidence of the general applicability of the theory. He believes that "this provides confidence in the empirical case for the theory" (p.174). Then, chapter six tests the theory of quagmire against civil wars in Yemen and Chad as the frequently used method in comparing the most similar (Yemen) and the most different (Chad) cases with the central case (Lebanese Civil War) regarding both intra and inter-state conditions.

Finally, in examining the domestic belligerents, their foreign backers and interaction between these two levels, Schulhofer-Wohl developed a fabulously original theory of quagmire that is based on the game-theoretic notion. Originality comes from his definition of the quagmire and his efforts to conceptualize this situation in civil wars. Both civil war literature and even war studies mostly focus on the cause of war and the effects of domestic, international or ideational variables on any part of an ongoing war. However, this book researches a specific condition in the ongoing war. According to Schulhofer-Wohl, the definition of the quagmire condition is twofold; "*for at least one of the belligerents, continuing to fight costs more than its expected benefits, withdrawn will increase rather than avert those costs*" (p.4). By specifying the scope of the term against the folk notion usage, Schulhofer-Wohl opens up a space for himself in the literature, thereby could fill the gap that he found out. However, while the study aims to provide a parsimonious theory of quagmire, not to privilege one of those domestic and foreign levels leads this theory to consider many factors affecting both stakes of the conflict, cost of escalation and the foreign support. Despite empirical pieces of evidence supporting the feasibility of his theory that he showed from chapter three to six, the theoretical notion might be able to show which one of the variables are more important in explaining the concerning political phenomenon². For this reason, as a personal interpretation, it would be preferable that this study, which has a great place in the literature, theoretically set out on fewer variables to make its explanatory power intense. Nevertheless, this is not a weakness of this study because this will pave the way for further researches about the quagmire condition in civil wars.

Bibliography

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1 Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*: Routledge 1962, p. 46.