İSTANBUL UNIVERSITY PRESS

Journal of Humanity, Peace and Justice, 1 (1): 49–64

https://doi.org/10.26650/hupej.2024.10.1.1459672

Submitted: 27.03.2024

Accepted: 25.04.2024

Journal of Humanity, Peace and Justice

Research Article **Open Access**

Revisiting Ethnic Framing in Conflicts: Challenging the Concept of Ethnic Conflict

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Abstract One of the primary research agendas in the fields of conflict resolution, security studies, and international relations in the post-Cold War era has been the rise of ethnic conflicts. Ethnic conflict has been one of the most widely used concepts in the scholarly literature, as well as by international organizations, peace practitioners, and other stakeholders working to end conflicts and build peace. During the 1990s when interstate wars were overshadowed by civil wars, conflicts in the breakup of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union and in Africa, the Middle East, and many other parts of the world were defined as ethnic conflicts. But do ethnic conflicts really have different characteristics that could call for a different conceptualization than other comparable conflicts? Has it been the increase in ethnic conflicts in the post-Cold War period, or has it been the ethnic framing of conflicts in certain geographies? Is a discussion of the ontological differences that distinguish an ethnic conflict from other interstate or intrastate wars possible? The study assumes that wars identified as ethnic conflicts do not have different dynamics that require a different conceptual framework than other civil wars. The concept of ethnic conflict would only be useful if it offered a different causal explanation than other alternative concepts for the conflict patterns it addresses. However, empirical analysis indicates both ethnic and non-ethnic conflicts to be largely related to the same factors. In other words, ethnic conflicts do not arise as a result of different causes, processes, or actors that place them in a separate category. While the concept of ethnic conflict does not effectively fill an analytical gap in understanding civil war dynamics, causes, and consequences, focusing on ethnic identity differences while leaving other conflict dynamics to the side risks losing sight of the real root causes that need to be addressed.

Keywords Bosnia Herzegovina · Conflict resolution · Ethnic conflict · Ethnic framing · War

Citation: Güven, İ. F. (2024). Revisiting ethnic framing in conflicts: challenging the concept of ethnic conflict. *Journal of Humanity, Peace and Justice*, *1*(1), 49-64. https://doi.org/10.26650/hupej.2024.10.1.1459672

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Revisiting Ethnic Framing in Conflicts: Challenging the Concept of Ethnic Conflict

In the post-Cold War era, one of the main themes of much research in fields such as conflict resolution, security studies, and international relations has been the rise of civil wars. During the 1990s when civil wars overshadowed interstate wars, conflicts arising from the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, as well as in Africa, the Middle East, and many other regions, marked a framework wherein conflicts were largely characterized along ethno-national lines. The term ethnic conflict has become widely used in scholarly discourse and embraced by international organizations, peace practitioners, and diverse actors engaged in conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Many scholars find ethnic conflict to be an appropriate term when the conflicting parties belong to different ethnic groups and when ethnic identities play a significant role in shaping the conflict dynamics. However, the question arises as to whether the concept of ethnic conflict has the analytical grounds to stand as a distinct category as such. In other words, what makes ethnic conflicts different from other similar conflicts, and what makes a conflict ethnic in a way that deserves to be referred to in a different conceptual framework? The study aims to address these main research questions using a qualitative approach based on theoretical and conceptual debates surrounding the concept of ethnic conflict. It also examines secondary sources that analyze various conflict cases to navigate the conceptual and analytical debates surrounding the question of what constitutes ethnic conflict.

Cross-sectional data from various conflict cases are used for discussing the concept of ethnic conflict, with particular emphasis on examining the case of Bosnia Herzegovina (BH, or Bosnia hereafter). The decision to focus mainly on the case of Bosnia is based on the author's familiarity with the country from his previous studies and the critical nature of this country as a case study due to its ethnic structure and political context. The war in Bosnia (1992-1995), which is almost a laboratory for the concept of ethnic conflict with the rich data it provides on the issue and its various dimensions, is one of the most useful illustrative cases for determining how the concept of ethnic conflict fills an analytical gap and what its strengths and weaknesses are.

The main assumption of the study is that wars referred to as ethnic conflicts do not have different dynamics requiring a different conceptual framework than other civil wars. This conceptualization fails to address the analytical gap in understanding civil war processes and the causes and consequences of wars; perhaps, more importantly, it leads to ethnic framing in the analysis of wars, with the danger of focusing on ethnic divisions and pushing to the background or even ignoring other conflict dynamics. Instead of explaining the phenomenon from a neutral perspective, the conceptualization represents a particular point of view on the phenomenon of civil war.

Is the Concept of Ethnic Conflict Analytically Useful?

Ethnic groups, which are seen as the main actors in ethnic conflicts, can be defined as people united around a common culture, language, religion, race, customs, and traditions, as well as around a common understanding of history and a psychological sense of belonging (Malešević, 2004, p. 4; Smith, 2010; Taras & Ganguly, 2016, p. 1). Ethnic conflict is a type of group conflict where at least one party interprets the conflict,

its causes, potential solutions, and main motivations in ethnic terms by referring to ethnic divisions. It describes situations where the leading cleavage is ethnic and where groups organized around ethnic identities engage in violent conflict (Cordell & Wolff, 2016, p. 4). Although ethnic conflict is often used to refer to a particular type of war, whether it fills an analytical gap and if the cases referred to as ethnic conflict are sufficiently different to sustain a distinctive concept are controversial issues. When failing to distinguish between ethnic and non-ethnic conflicts, the necessity of employing such a concept becomes questionable (Forbes, 1997, p. 1). The fact that ethnic groups constitute the parties to the conflict and that ethnic indicators are present in the conflict dynamics should not be the reason for a different conceptualization than other types of conflicts. Its usefulness depends on offering a unique explanatory basis for the conflicts it addresses compared to alternative frameworks. However, empirical analysis has shown that ethnic and non-ethnic conflicts are largely related to the same factors and that those defined as ethnic conflicts do not emerge as a result of different causes, processes, or actors requiring the a separate categorization of conflict (Gilley, 2004, pp. 1158–1160; Henderson & Singer, 2000, p. 293). Furthermore, seeing how ethnic identities hold a decisive sway over other motivations in conflict dynamics for ethnic groups and their political and military elites is difficult (Sarkees et al., 2003, p. 55). Although some ethnic groups may be participants in the conflict, whether their actions are primarily driven by ethnic identity is unclear. For example, Brubaker and Laitin (1998, p. 424) argued that, although some regions such as the Balkans and Sub-Saharan Africa are portrayed as places where ethnic problems and identity tensions are ever-present and ready to explode when the opportunity arises, violence based on ethnic identities and ethnic nationalism is not as prominent in these regions as one might think.

Many authors (Fearon & Laitin, 2003; Foroughi, 2002, pp. 48–52; Kaufman, 2023, p. 19; Wimmer, 2013, pp. 168–169; Yılmaz, 2007, p. 4) contend that, while ethnic identity differences or tensions are not inherently the direct cause of conflict, they can contribute to conflict initiation due to factors such as the breakdown of central authority, socioeconomic challenges, disparities in resource distribution, and competition for resources, as well as power struggles among political elites. The absence of conflicts in many countries with existing ethnic identity differences and tensions when these aforementioned conditions are not present suggests that ethnic identities do not exert a decisive influence on the onset of conflicts (Cordell & Wolff, 2016, p. 4; see also Jesse & Williams, 2011). Nevertheless, the concept continues to be widely used, perhaps because it is considered to offer an analytical framework with significant explanatory capabilities (see Taras & Ganguly, 2016).

Identifying conflicts as ethnic solely based on the involvement of different ethnic groups as primary actors and attributing ethnic tensions as the main cause inevitably result in a reductive understanding that lumps all such conflicts into a single category. Thus, different phenomena, events, cause-effect relationships, and processes with many nuances are homogenized to an ethnic framework. While the use of a new concept is expected to lead to richer and more powerful explanations, analyses, and conclusions, the concept of ethnic conflict has the opposite effect (Gilley, 2004, p. 1155). Applying an ethnic framework for analyzing a war may predispose researchers to an ethnic explanatory bias, potentially overemphasizing the role of ethnicity and affording it undue prominence in the analytical process (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998, p.

428; Fox & Jones, 2013, p. 385). As Hirschman (1970, as cited in Gilley, 2004, p. 1162) indicated, the widespread use of the term ethnic conflict may be seen as a prioritization of generating a new concept at the risk of reducing the possibilities of effectively analyzing the problem at hand. This is because focusing on ethnic identities to explain certain types of conflicts weakens the ability to see the other factors at play in conflicts and the other forms of difference held by conflict actors (Fox & Jones, 2013, p. 386).

Questioning the concept of ethnic conflict should be noted to not mean rejecting the ethnic, religious, or other dimensions of identity involved in such conflicts. Undoubtedly, identities represent a crucial variable in conflicts involving ethnic groups as actors (Gilley, 2004, p. 1155). However, the misconception lies in conflating the disputes, tensions, and animosities among different identity groups with violent conflicts and in viewing violent conflicts as a mere extension of ethnic disputes. In fact, war and violence are the transformation of ethnic disputes into another form under certain conditions (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998, p. 426). While ethnic diversity and identity tensions are evident in many countries, they often manifest themselves in cultural and political spheres without escalating into full-fledged violent conflict. In many cases the identity dimension, which includes ethnic animosities, should also be noted to perhaps not be the root cause of the conflict. But when violence erupts, identity polarization is exacerbated as a result of the conflict (Fearon & Laitin, 2000, p. 846; Hierro & Gallego, 2018, p. 1318; Rohner et al., 2013), and the ethnic aspect subsequently emerges as a significant factor shaping the outcome of the conflict. Therefore, what is observed in many instances is the ethnicization of conflicts due to the effects of war and violence, rather than actually being conflicts primarily rooted in ethnicity (Hierro & Gallego, 2018, p. 1332; Kalyvas & Sambanis, 2005, p. 216; Kılavuz, 2009, p. 694; Tunçer-Kilavuz, 2011, pp. 269–270).

Ethnic Politics and the Ethnicization of Politics

The Cold War was characterized by a bipolar international system, during which civil wars were defined along right-left or communist-capitalist divisions, reflecting the ideological polarization of the period. The actors of the conflicts also adopted these ideological definitions themselves, considering the political, military, and economic advantages of being close to one side of the global polarization. With the demise of the bipolar system and the conclusion of the Cold War, ideological paradigms gave way to identity-based, ethnic, and religious framings. This emerging mode of explanation revolved around historical ethnic animosities and clashes (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998, pp. 425–426; Fox & Jones, 2013, p. 387; Waever, 2008, p. 171).

To claim that ethnic conflicts have escalated in the post-Cold War era is an insufficient assertion, albeit partially accurate. While this perspective highlights the surge in ethnic conflicts, it fails to acknowledge the phenomenon of ethnicization and the framing of conflicts along ethnic lines. Analyzing the agents responsible for the ethnicization of war and violence, as well as the mechanisms through which this occurs, is crucial for addressing this shortcoming and moving toward a more comprehensive perspective. Examining the processes, discourses, attitudes, and policies that transform conflicts enables insights to be gained into how conflicts take on an ethnic dimension (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998, p. 427). The ethnicization of politics is often exploited by political elites to mask underlying power struggles, political instability, competition for resources, expansionist agendas, separatist movements, and similar territorial goals (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998, p. 425; Fearon & Laitin, 1996; Mueller, 2004; Sisk, 2022, p. 407; Stroschein, 2005, pp. 49–50; Weidmann,

2011, p. 1179). Thus, ethnic-based interpretations run the risk of neglecting the more complex challenges that need to be addressed. Understanding ethnicization clarifies how ethnic-based problems such as ethnic hatred that is often used to characterize these issues are either by-products or deliberate outcomes of ethnicization, rather than their root causes (Kuran, 1998b).

Political elites, often the key actors in ethnic politics and the process of ethnicization, have frequently paved the path for wars deemed as ethnic conflicts by promoting ethnic nationalist discourses and policies that engender polarization, competition, and violence among ethnic groups (Kennedy-Pipe & Jones, 1998, p. 13; Sandole, 2003, p. 73; Senehi et al., 2023, p. 2). Moreover, inequalities in resource distribution among ethnic groups, as well as political, economic, and cultural disparities and pressures along ethnic lines, facilitate the framing of such issues in ethnic terms (Gilley, 2004, p. 1159; Gurr, 1993, p. 59; King, 2001, p. 167; Taras & Ganguly, 2016, p. 13). Additionally, given the strong potential ethnic identities have for mobilizing masses and fostering a sense of solidarity, many political elites choose to instrumentalize ethnicity to advance their political interests (Brubaker, 2004, p. 110; Brubaker & Laitin, 1998, p. 446; Gagnon, 2004; Kaufman, 2001; Mueller, 2000; Taras & Ganguly, 2016, pp. 4, 22–23; Wolff, 2006, pp. 71–74).

Ethnic Divisions: Cause or Consequence of Conflict?

Have ethnic conflicts increased in the post–Cold War period, or has the ethnic framing of conflicts been what has increased instead? Gilley (2004, pp. 1155–1157), who proposed abandoning the concept of ethnic conflict due to its analytically weak and misleading nature, suggested that ethnic conflicts are not what have become widespread but rather the ethnic characterization of conflicts. While the number of interstate wars has undeniably decreased in the post–Cold War period, the number of civil wars has increased, and in several of these civil wars, the conflicting actors are from various ethnic groups. However, because of the increase in the number of civil wars in which ethnic groups confront each other, such wars have been thoughtlessly labeled ethnic conflicts, leading to the misconception that ethnic conflicts have increased (Gilley, 2004, p. 1156).

Under the concept of ethnic conflict, addressing the causes of such conflicts within the framework of ethnic identities and neglecting the socially constructed aspect of ethnicity leads to a hopeless picture of conflict resolution. This is because when the root of a problem lies in ethnic identities and in the tensions caused by these identity differences, finding a solution to these problems can be inferred to be impossible as long as ethnic identities exist (Holbrooke, 1999, pp. 26–27; Jenne, 2012, p. 256; Malcolm, 1999, p. 13). In this case, the most realistic steps that can be taken to stop a conflict and build peace is to separate (i.e., partition) these ethnic groups who cannot live together in peace into different political units, demographically separating ethnic groups by changing their settlements or by resorting to methods such as population exchange (Bağcı, 1994, p. 266; Mujanović, 2018, p. 72; Stroschein, 2005, p. 50). According to this view, forcing conflicting ethnic groups to coexist and integrate in the post-war period would prolong the possibility that centuries of ethnic hostility could lead to renewed war at any moment (Burg & Shoup, 1999, pp. 6–7; Gilbert & Mujanović, 2015, p. 606). While Chaim Kaufmann (1996a, 1996b, 1998, 2003) has been one of the most prominent proponents of this view for many conflict cases in general, noted academicians such as Henry Kissinger

(1997), Robert Pape, and John Mearsheimer (1993) have also suggest this, especially for the war in Bosnia[1], proposing partitioning BH along ethnic lines (Campbell, 1999, p. 404)[2].

Samuel Huntington (1996), who drew a famously pessimistic picture of identity differences in the post–Cold War era, interpreted the wars that emerged in the 1990s as inevitable identity-based wars situated on the fault lines of civilizational conflict. The war in Bosnia, which is seen one of the foremost examples of ethnic conflict in this period, has been interpreted through an ethnic lens not only by academicians (see Doder, 1993; Kaplan, 1993; Kennan, 1993; Vulliamy, 1994) but also by political leaders such as then US President George H. W. Bush and then British Prime Minister John Major, as well as by diplomats such as US Secretary of State Warren Christopher and former US Ambassador to Yugoslavia Lawrence Eagleburger. They argued that this war, stemming from centuries-old ethnic enmities that had resurfaced with the collapse of Yugoslavia, could not be stopped until Bosnian Muslims, Serbs, and Croats stopped killing each other and that the outside world did not have many options for a solution (Carmichael, 2002, p. 103; Çınar, 2019, pp. 19–20; Holbrooke, 1999, pp. 22–27; Sells, 1996, p. 142; Snyder, 1993, p. 79). In this way, international actors who were reluctant to intervene argued that intervention would not bring about a sustainable result based on the assumption that identity-based conflicts were doomed to remain unresolved (Ali & Lifschultz, 1994, p. 374; Cigar, 1995, p. 121; Mujanović, 2018, p. 52).

The search for the causes of ethnic conflicts in deep cultural divergences among ethnic groups and of historical intergroup hatred and enmity reflects the approach referred to as primordialism (Carment, 1994, p. 558; Çelik, 2009, p. 165; Cordell & Wolff, 2010, p. 14). The primordialist approach considers ethnic identities as fixed and unchanging phenomena arising from the nature of human beings, such as their biological characteristics; according to this approach, the causes of ethnic conflicts should be sought in the incompatibilities of these unchanging identities (Jesse, 2014, p. 94). In addition, a parallel can be identified between the primordialist approach and the Orientalist perspective. For conflicts in the non-Western world such as the Balkans, Africa, and Asia, explanations such as ancient hatred and ethnic conflicts are often preferred, whereas wars in developed Western countries are usually examined within the framework of national interests, rational policies, or, in some cases, liberal values such as the struggle for democracy and freedom. Although the motivations of the war actors are largely similar in both cases, Western wars are often ascribed more rational motivations, while wars in the East, which in the Orientalist imagination represents the un-

[1] In BH, however, ethnic divisions emerged as a consequence of the conflict, not as its cause. The Dayton Agreement, which institutionalized the constitutional and political structure along ethnic lines, played an important role in the ethnicization of the post-war political order and the legitimization of ethnic divisions (Ekinci, 2014, p. 34; Gilbert & Mujanović, 2015, p. 607). Bosniaks, Croats, and Serbs who'd lived together before the war were separated as a result of the war, violence, and ethnic cleansing that had occurred. This situation is observable in the changing demographic structure of the country after the war, especially in the BH entity Republika Srpska, where Bosniaks and Serbs used to live together, as well as in many cities (Ekinci, 2014, p. 39). Bosniaks were the majority population but were replaced by the Serbs after the war. In other words, as the war caused forced displacement within the country, ethnic groups separated from each other and had to settle in areas where their own group was the majority. This segregation was not only spatial but also mental. During my fieldwork in BH in 2021, I had the opportunity to personally observe this situation. Many people from BH (mostly Bosniaks) with whom I had the opportunity to speak stated how they had had no reservations about living together with other ethnic groups and establishing close relations before the war, but that nothing was no longer the same, as the war had damaged the relationship of trust among ethnic groups and pushed them away from each other.

[2] In contrast, Glaurdić (2011, p. 290) argued the proposed ethnic division for BH and the arrangements in this regard to be incompatible with the country's pluralistic ethnic realities, by which the author meant the acceptance and institutionalization of the new ethnic realities created by the war. Similarly, Lemarchand's (2007) examination of African countries such as Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of Congo and Vaughan's (2018) study of Lebanon addressed the problem of how ethnic division and power sharing institutionalize identity divisions.

developed and non-Western world, are attributed to such irrational and emotional reasons as ancient hatreds and ethnic enmities and bear traces of dichotomies such as us-them and barbarian-civilized that are found in the Western-centered and Orientalist approaches (Ali & Lifschultz, 1994, pp. 370–371; Bakić-Hayden & Hayden, 1992; Biondich, 2011; Gagnon, 2004; Roudometof, 2001; Todorova, 2009). Indeed, the concept of Balkanization, which labels the Balkans as a region almost ontologically prone to constant ethnic conflicts and civil unrest, evokes this Orientalist approach by reflecting the inaccurate assumption that Balkan peoples are prone to conflict, banditry, violence, and national feuds (Bora, 1995, p. 16; Kitromilides, 1996, pp. 163–171; Mazower, 2014, pp. 28–32; Rumelili, 2014, p. 378).

What is interesting is the potential for some ethnic groups, especially actors who pursue separatist policies in conflicts, to adopt this approach themselves (Gil-White, 1999, p. 790), a fact that has largely lost its relevance in the academic world today. This approach allows one to argue a conflict to be rooted in deep historical animosities, where all parties share the blame for the war in a way that makes distinguishing between aggressor and victim difficult[3]the only way to prevent ancient unstoppable identity-based hatreds from leading to repeated conflicts is to separate the ethnic groups. This is illustrated by the fact that Serbs and Bosniaks define the war in Bosnia in different terms. Arguing the war to be a religious and/or ethnic conflict, nationalist Serb leaders have tried to absolve themselves of the responsibility for the attitudes and policies they pursued that had led to the outbreak of the war by suggesting that the civil war and ethnic division had been inevitable (Bağcı, 1994, pp. 259–261). In addition, they have sought to legitimize their separatist views on the disintegration of BH being a natural consequence of the course of history, where efforts to restore its territorial integrity would only have led to a forced unity (Cigar, 1995, p. 121). This perspective portrays BH as a state doomed to disintegrate due to its multi-ethnic structure and argues that only a BH divided into mono-ethnic states can achieve peace and stability (Oliver, 2005, p. 11), thus reflecting one definition of the problem as an ethnic conflict[4].

When explaining the causes of conflicts in multi-ethnic and multi-cultural countries, the approach that places ethnicities at the center of the problems by pointing to the animosity among groups with different ethnic identities is inadequate for explaining the peaceful coexistence practices of the ethnic groups in such countries[5] in pre-conflict periods or the examples of countries where conflicts are not witnessed despite their multi-ethnic population structure (Jesse & Williams, 2011; Weidmann, 2011, p. 1180). The narrative of

[3] Especially among the US foreign policy elite, such a totalitarian assessment of the war in Bosnia was quite common. William Hyland, an editor of Foreign Affairs magazine, characterized the conflict as a "war of gangsters" without distinguishing between the attacker and the attacked. James Hoge, another editor for Foreign Affairs, similarly emphasized that no "good people" were among the parties to the Bosnian War. Then US Secretary of State Warren Christopher also stated that all parties shared responsibility for the bloody war in Bosnia (as cited by Ali & Lifschultz, 1994, pp. 371–372).

[4] On the other hand, Bosniaks insistently refrain from characterizing the war as an ethnic conflict, preferring to call it an attack and occupation attempt by neighboring Serbia and Croatia against the territorial integrity of the state of BH, whose independence is recognized by the international community. According to Bosniaks, the war in Bosnia, which was a conflict between those who wanted to preserve the territorial integrity of the country with its multi-ethnic structure and those who wanted to divide the country through ethnic cleansing and genocide, had not started as an ethnic conflict; instead, the intense violence experienced during the war had given the conflict a subsequent ethnic character.

[5] As an example, BH was a place where Bosniaks, Serbs, Croats, and Jews had lived together for generations and, except for exceptional periods of war such as World War II, was where the practice of peaceful coexistence had been maintained for centuries, especially in centers such as Sarajevo and Mostar. The intermingling of peoples and cultures had reached such a level that, in the 20th century, about a quarter of all marriages in Bosnia were between members of different ethnic groups (Ali & Lifschultz, 1994, p. 367). All this suggests that characterizing the war in BH in the 1990s as an ethnic conflict would be analytically simplistic.

ethnic hatred is usually constructed by considering the attitudes, discourses, and policies adopted by political and military elites or marginalized minority groups and exaggerates the importance the role of ethnicity had in causing conflict (Fox & Jones, 2013, p. 389). When examining the attitudes and behaviors of the wider society and the practices of coexistence and communication developed by different ethnic groups in daily life, a different picture of ethnic relations at the local level emerges compared to the top-down narrative portrayal (Brubaker et al., 2006; Fox & Miller-Idriss, 2008; Karner, 2007). Therefore, including the local everyday bottom-up dynamics in the analysis is important in order to avoid the ethnic conflict narrative, while examining at what stages, through what processes, and under what factors this dimension becomes a part of the conflict without denying the ethnic dimension in conflicts (Richmond, 2009a).

Such approaches that are based on a long tradition of rigorous anthropological and sociological research informed by rich empirical findings contribute to moving the narratives of ethnicity beyond the shadow of political elites, the media, and desktop analyses and to understanding the forms that ethnicity takes at the social level alongside the other types of identities and their significance (Eminoğlu & Aydın, 2021; Fox & Jones, 2013, pp. 389–390). In addition to a more careful examination of the role of ethnicity in the emergence of conflicts, these approaches offer the opportunity to discuss the potential for peace and reconciliation of local/micro-level practices of coexistence and avoidance of ethnic tensions in the post-conflict peacebuilding process (Berents & McEvoy-Levy, 2015, p. 116; Mac Ginty, 2014, pp. 550, 560; Richmond, 2009b, p. 331).

Recognizing that so-called ethnic conflicts acquire an ethnic dimension by being subjected to a process of ethnicization provides a way out of the pessimistic perspective that ethnic divisions are at the root of the conflict and will remain an insurmountable obstacle to lasting peace in the post-conflict period (Brubaker, 1996). This pessimistic perspective, which categorizes so-called ethnic conflicts as intractable conflicts, predicts that lasting peace will not be easily achieved in the post-conflict period, as identity issues are seen as being at the root of the conflict. An alternative perspective does not see identities as the main problem and draws attention to the process of ethnicization. Optimistically, ethnic polarization in many post-conflict countries can be ended if problems are removed from the ethnic framework and ethnic divisions are made to cease being a problem through a focus on common problems or the construction of new common civilian identities (Foroughi, 2002, pp. 54–56; Lowe & Muldoon, 2014; McKeown, 2014; Pickering, 2009; Touquet, 2015). This optimism does not mean that the influence of ethnic identities on social divisions and politics can be easily eliminated, but it does reflect the view that preventing the ethnicization of problems and politics can yield effective results even if ethnic identities persist. For example, if an ethnic conflict is argued to have arisen between ethnic group A and ethnic group B in a country due to ethnic problems, the solution focuses on ethnic groups and identities; however, if the ethnicization of problems by political elites or other actors is identified as the main problem, the prevention of ethnic politics and the de-ethnicization of the political structure can present itself as a solution. Relatedly, a focus on what Galtung (1969) described as "structural violence," such as in the unemployment, poverty, corruption, anti-democratic practices, and lack of development that constitute common problem areas for ethnic groups within a country, can be expected to lead to more effective solutions for peace and stability by transcending the ethnic framework (Gilley, 2004, p. 1163; Mayor, 1995, pp. 4–7; Murtagh, 2016, 2020).

Even if conflicts do not start due to ethnicity, the fact that they develop an ethnic dimension, especially with the introduction of violence, can be seen as a self-fulfilling prophecy. A self-fulfilling prophecy is a concept used in many fields of social sciences ranging from social psychology and political science to international relations and refers to the process by which an initial mis-definition of a situation leads to events and/or behaviors that justify the mis-definition, thereby validating it (Merton, 1948, p. 195). From this perspective, most so-called ethnic conflicts arguably do not start with ethnic motives but eventually become ethnicized once ethnic framing becomes dominant in the process, leaving a legacy of ethnic divisions for the post-war period. Nevertheless, this should not lead to a misconception that ethnic problems had suddenly emerged or been invented for the first time during the conflict. What is meant by ethnic conflicts being self-fulfilling prophecies is that the ethnic divisions and tensions that were not an initial determining factor in the emergence of the conflict had gone from being a marginal issue to becoming a central issue during the conflict and the political and social reality of the post-conflict period (Waever, 2008, pp. 176–177). If the actors in the conflict perceive the situation they are in as an ethnic conflict and the actors outside the conflict perceive the conflict situation they are following and trying to interpret as the same, then their attitudes and behaviors will be shaped by these perceptions. Thus, the attitudes and behaviors activated by the ethnic framing, which is initially only thought of as a meaning-making scheme, will pave the way for the ethnic conflict to become a socially constructed reality.

The portrayal of so-called ethnic conflicts not as conflicts that construct or sharpen divisions between ethnic groups but as the outcome of ethnic divisions whose existence is a given leads to the constructed and instrumentalized nature of ethnicity and ethnic conflicts being overlooked (Fox & Jones, 2013, p. 387; Jesse, 2014, pp. 95–96; Ruane & Todd, 2004, pp. 212–215). Emphasizing the socially constructed nature of ethnic groups and thus ethnic conflicts, Brubaker (2004, p. 13) opposed the concept of ethnic group in the first place and proposed the concept of "groupness" instead. According to him, the use of the concept of groupness can help one realize that, instead of attributing events to ethnic groups per se a predetermined reality, these groups are essentially the "events" that emerge and persist in a given period and conjuncture (Brubaker, 2004, p. 12). Based on this perspective, he goes on to argue that the conflicts referred to as ethnic are essentially conflicts between groups that define and construct themselves as ethnic. Although the main actors of the conflicts are the ethnic groups in question, this is not enough for these conflicts to be referred to as ethnic conflicts, as such a definition would mean the "reification" of ethnic groups that are formed as a result of social and discursive mental constructs (Brubaker, 2004, pp. 9–11). Similarly, Malešević (2004, p. 2) argued the definition of ethnic groups to objectify groups and individuals and to reflect an anti-sociological understanding that attributes a fixed structure to cultural and identity differences. According to Malešević, the danger of this objectification is not only that it leads to deep misunderstandings of ethnicities and ethnic groups (and ethnic conflicts seen as wars between these groups) but also that it can lead to the exploitation of these concepts in a political context. Rather than accepting ethnic categories as inherent realities without question, the task for researchers is to scrutinize the circumstances where ethnic categories are constructed, ethnic loyalties are reinforced and contribute to violent conflicts, or where ethnic loyalties erode and/or intertwine with other forms of affiliation (Gilbert & Mujanović, 2015, p. 608).

The Fallacy of the Homogeneity of Ethnic Groups

Another problematic aspect of ethnic framing is the neglect of intra-ethnic differences and the assumption that members of ethnic groups are united around common perspectives, goals, and interests (Stroschein, 2005). Thus, when ethnic conflicts are seen as the result of parties acting according to ethnic motivations, different attitudes and policies between ethnic groups are reduced to the ethnic frame, while the attitudes and behaviors of different subgroups within ethnic groups are often excluded from the analysis. The presupposition that the conflicting groups have homogeneous identities therefore leads to the assumption that the conflict results from identity-based problems between homogeneous groups. However, sociological and anthropological studies that look closely at post-conflict social dynamics in countries divided into different identity groups, as well as approaches that examine the microsocial relations of ordinary people in divided societies such as everyday peace, draw attention to intragroup heterogeneity and transitivity between groups (Mac Ginty, 2014, pp. 552–553, 2021, p. 31). An analysis of social relations in conflict countries shows that groups are not based on rigidly segregated identities, ideas, and practices that do not allow for any transitivity (Mac Ginty, 2012). In many cases, everyday intergroup interactions transcend or erode social divisions, otherwise identity groups cannot be fully incorporated into the social identity of any of the conflicting groups (Mac Ginty, 2014, p. 551).

The assumption of ethnic homogeneity makes Serbs' fighting in the army of BH or Serbs and Croats who did not leave the city during the siege of Sarajevo and risked being attacked by Serb forces together with Bosniaks difficult to explain. In the case of BH, this approach again leaves unanswered the question of why Bosnian leader Alija Izetbegović rejected the ethnic partition proposals offered to him and considered preserving the territorial integrity of BH with its multi-ethnic structure as the main goal of the war if it had actually been an ethnic conflict. If the war in Bosnia had been an ethnic conflict in which each side was ethnically motivated, Bosniaks would have been expected to pursue their own homogeneous ethnic state, as Bosnian Serbs did and Bosnian Croats did in part. However, putting aside the ethnic analysis of the war and listening to Taras and Ganguly (2016, pp. 15–17), who argued that many wars referred to as ethnic conflicts are actually fought between separatist or irredentist parties seeking territorial gains and those seeking to preserve the status quo, will allow the uncovering of how ethnic identities are instrumentalized for political and territorial purposes, not only in the war in Bosnia but also in many similar conflicts.

In many conflict cases, ethnic subgroups that advocate different goals and interests or different means of achieving the same goals may engage in a struggle for political power within their own ethnic group in addition to with the rival ethnic group (Jesse, 2014, p. 97). In some cases, elites emerge who succeed in uniting these subgroups under the umbrella of a common goal[6] or in framing the issue in ethnic terms; however, intra-ethnic rivalries and differences persist throughout the conflict in most cases, albeit at low intensity (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998, p. 440; Gagnon, 1995; Kuran, 1998b, 1998a, pp. 42–48; Laitin, 1995b). Some members of the ingroup may advocate softer policies toward the perceived enemy group, criticize violent methods, and seek to avoid violence, and such members may face the risk of being penalized by various

[6] İdil Tunçer Kılavuz (2009), in her study on the civil war in Tajikistan, refers to the efforts of elites to convene and gain the support of individuals and groups they are connected to in such times of crisis as "network activation."

formal or informal intra-group sanction mechanisms, ranging from exclusion and political isolation to violence (Brubaker & Laitin, 1998, p. 433; see also Laitin, 1995a and Pfaffenberger, 1995). In cases of ethnic outbidding, leaders who advocate more hawkish policies toward the other group publicly question their moderate opponents' loyalty to the group and willingness to defend its interests and security (Kaufman, 1996; Mitchell et al., 2009). As a result, moderate leaders may have to choose between losing electoral support or shifting to a more hardline stance to prove their loyalty to the group.

As ethnic nationalist political elites gained dominance during the breakup of Yugoslavia, particularly in Serbia and Croatia, those advocating more moderate views struggled to garner adequate support and representation within their respective ethnic communities. Moreover, as tensions between the groups increased, expressing peaceful and moderate views within the ethnic group became increasingly dangerous. To deviate from the ideas and actions of one's own ethnic group became even more dangerous with the outbreak of war. Sells (1996, p. 73) reported Serbs who tried to protect their neighbors from other ethnic groups during the war in Bosnia to have become victims of the aggression of Bosnian Serb forces and to have been killed along with the neighbors they were trying to protect. Under such extreme conditions, both political elites and social groups, even if they do not actually hold ethnically hateful views, are unsurprisingly forced to succumb to ethnic framing because of the social pressure that has been created (Güven, 2023, pp. 265–266; Oberschall, 2000, pp. 990–991). Therefore, when analyzing conflicts, limiting oneself to superficial conclusions such as the impression that ethnic groups act in lockstep[7] runs the risk of failing to adequately grasp the implications of intra-ethnic dynamics on intergroup relations and the conflict itself.

Conclusion

At a time when inter-state and civil wars worldwide cause civilian casualties and humanitarian crises and demand urgent solutions, a conceptual debate on ethnic conflict can be criticized from both practical and normative perspectives. This is because problems persist regardless of what they are called. However, the concepts used to define problems are crucial, as they influence the way a problem is viewed, the methods for addressing it, and the attitudes toward the possibility of a solution. The realities of the social world do not exist independently of how they are thought about. The agent-structure relationship is a two-way interaction, and people as social actors are not only under the influence of the structure they are a part of but also construct this structure through concepts, practices, and perceptions. Therefore, the concept of ethnic conflict reflects a particular perspective on conflict. Constructing meaning for these conflicts influences their analysis and proposed conflict resolution. Questioning the validity of a concept is a necessary endeavor, as it means questioning the validity of the phenomenon to which the concept refers. Identities are of existential importance for human beings, and almost every group is ready to fight to defend its ethnic, religious, or national identity. Ethnic identities and disputes around these identity differences are undeniably among the dynamics of conflict. From this perspective, the concept of ethnic conflict may seem a useful

[7] For instance, Taylor (1991, pp. 4–5) criticized the view of some authors who'd interpreted the 1990s conflict in South Africa as a conflict based on historical animosities between the Zulu and Xhosa tribes who'd been divided into ethnically homogeneous blocs, ignoring the ethnic transitions between the groups involved in the conflict. Taylor (1991, pp. 3–7) also argued that this view, which was found both in the media and in the assessments of prominent scholars such as Hermann Giliomee, R.W. Johnson, and Donald L. Horowitz, leads to a superficial and misleading analysis by reducing the problem to ethnic categories and ignores the conflict's underlying political and sociological causes.

tool for explaining a particular type of conflict. The concept's basic premise asserts that ethnic groups are the principal actors in certain conflicts or that the fundamental dynamics of the conflict are predominantly shaped by ethnic identities. Therefore, these conflicts are considered a distinct category separate from others. However, a close examination of the validity of this proposition through examples of ethnic conflict reveals that, ethnic identities are used instrumentally by political and military elites in many cases, thus concealing the underlying conflict dynamics behind ethnic identities. The misleading aspect of the concept of ethnic conflict is not that it pretends that factors that are not instrumental in the emergence of conflicts are instrumental. The main problem with the concept is the lack of assessment regarding how, under what circumstances, and through the influence of which actors do the issues related to ethnic identities become part of the conflict dynamics. A closer look at conflict examples reveals that many wars acquire an ethnic character over time, despite ethnic issues not being the main drivers of war. The concept of ethnic conflict fails to make this distinction and defines conflict superficially in terms of conflict actors and apparent ethnic discourses and symbols. In the social sciences, researchers may be inclined to create and use new concepts without asking basic questions about what the concepts are used for and in what situations new concepts are needed. This can lead to conceptual confusion, where the same ideas are expressed using multiple concepts. However, a new concept should only be used if it contributes to a better understanding and analysis of the phenomenon under study and the development of new insights. Ethnic conflict is a term that does not fully meet these criteria and can lead to misleading inferences about the phenomenon. Thus, far from providing a better understanding of a certain type of conflict, the term misdirects ideas about the phenomenon and plays a role in the construction of a new social reality. Therefore, to say that the drawbacks of using this concept, which offers a limited perspective when it should provide a deeper analytical insight into the phenomenon it addresses, are greater than the benefits it provides would not be an exaggeration.

Peer Review Externally peer-reviewed.
Conflict of Interest The author have no conflict of interest to declare.
Grant Support The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

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