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EDUCATING U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY LEADERS

IDENTITY POLITICS, NATIONALISM AND CONFLICT
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Reading Notes

When and how do political actors such as states and rebel organizations construct, reinforce, or manipulate social identity for political purposes? How, in turn, do identities and ideologies influence patterns and dynamics of war between or within countries? This session's assigned readings explore the various ways in which governments and their opponents marshal various forms of identity – religious, ethnic, national, and more – to mobilize popular support, consolidate power, and wage war against internal and external opponents. The readings also shed light on the conditions under which such efforts are likely to succeed and to fail; why some strategies for "solving" internal conflicts may backfire; and how policymakers and policy implementers can better anticipate, combat and help deescalate future identity-based conflicts.

RELIGION AND CONFLICT

Scott Appleby reviews the literature on religious violence, grouping the literature into three schools of thought: Strong Religion, Weak Religion, and Pathological Religion. Scholars in the first school, like Mark Juergensmeyer, argue that, for true believers and their adherents, religion alone is sufficient inspiration and justification for violence. These violent practitioners, regardless of specific faiths, believe themselves to be in "cosmic war" with eternal stakes. This perspective makes true believers less susceptible to rational deterrents against violence. One issue, Appleby notes, faced by the Strong Religion school is that its adherents struggle to disentangle the effects of religion from the wider cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic factors that surround it.

The second school, Weak Religion, argues instead that religious violence has to be understood in the context of those wider cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic factors. Scholars like Scott Hibbard focus on how religious fundamentalists can be co-opted by secular actors, like nationalist governments, in order to do the "dirty work." However, Appleby argues that the Weak Religion school risks focusing too much on individual leaders and neglecting the genuinely held beliefs of the actual practitioners of violence.

Finally, the Pathological Religion school treats religion as a convenient mask for a psychological disposition enabling extreme violence. In labeling religious militants as "fundamentalists" foremost, scholars like Lee Quinby argue that little separates religious fundamentalists from other violent ideologues. However, this school, Appleby contends, flattens the distinction between nonviolent religious fundamentalists and their less numerous militant relatives.

Appleby concludes by postulating that the field might be close to developing a "comprehensive general theory of religious violence."

Daniel Byman argues that the religious ideology of Islamist insurgents–and specifically those with *Salafi-Jihadist* ideology–differentiates them from non-religious insurgents in important ways. While *jihadist* insurgents attempt to win control of the government and secure vital resources just like non-religious insurgents, the recognized cause of *jihad* leads to comparative strengths and weaknesses.

Islamist insurgents have pre-made friends and resources–those who already support the cause–but also pre-existing enemies, like the United States. Groups like Boko Haram in Nigeria, for example, are able to tap into the resources of the Al Qaeda global network and draw in foreign fighters. However, those associations dramatically increase the willingness of Western governments to combat them and also bring them into conflict with local tribal loyalties. Moreover, the religious ideology of these insurgents can lead to tensions with the nationalist sympathies of the population, who may resent the international focus of *jihadist* groups. A focus on ideology purity, Byman notes, also tends to lead to internal division and extreme tactics. He writes, "The decision to cast some or all non-*Salafis* as apostates makes killing them more acceptable—another key weakness of this type of insurgency. Coercion is vital to successful insurgencies, but it depends on being able to both reward as well as punish, and *Salafis* are far better at the former than the latter."

Byman points to the differences between Islamist and non-religious insurgents as crucial for evaluating effective policy. He argues that the United States and other nations can capitalize on the local dissatisfaction with religious insurgents' lack of nationalist ideology to promote local opposition to Islamist insurgents. However, Byman concludes by warning that if *jihadist* insurgents are foiled in the local goals of their insurgency, they are more likely to undertake international terror attacks.

Marc Lynch, Jeroen Gunning, and Morten Valbjørn argue that the concept of *warscapes*—developed by anthropologists studying protracted African conflicts—offers a better framework for analyzing armed Islamist groups in the Middle East, Africa, and beyond. Warscapes capture the indefinite and transnational nature of conflict, the blurred boundaries between war and peace, and the transformations of social, political, and economic life that accompany protracted violence. Within these shifting environments, Islamist groups evolve through their embeddedness in warscapes: some adopt governance roles, others build symbiotic relations with states or local actors, and all must navigate the uncertainty of recurring conflict. The warscapes approach shifts analysis away from static definitions of civil wars or insurgencies, encouraging attention to how Islamist groups interact with broader societies, transnational networks, and the everyday lives of civilians.

The authors highlight three puzzles that emerge from viewing Islamist insurgents through a warscapes lens. First, Islamist groups appear unusually resilient compared to secular counterparts, surviving near-defeat and often re-emerging stronger, as seen with the Taliban, ISIS, and al-Shabaab. Second, these groups are highly fragmented yet adaptable, producing multipolar Islamist landscapes with fluid alliances and rivalries. Third, religion remains a uniquely durable factor: even as conflict pressures lead many armed actors toward pragmatic adaptation, Islamists often sustain doctrinal debates and religiously infused governance practices. Religion thus shapes cohesion, legitimacy, and transnational support networks in ways that both strengthen and divide them. The warscapes perspective destabilizes familiar typologies and de-exceptionalizes Islamism by embedding it within broader conflict ecologies, while still recognizing how religious identity and organization can generate distinctive outcomes

REBEL GROUP FORMATION, POLITICAL MOBILIZATION AND INSURGENCY

Christopher Blattman begins his examination on the origins of conflict with a war that never happened: the Billiards War between the El Mesa and Pachelly gangs in Colombia. While Medellín, Colombia, is home to numerous openly hostile armed groups, these gangs–termed combos–seldom go to war, instead resolving their issues through negotiation and diplomacy. Blattman argues this serves as a microcosm of the international sphere, writing, "The globe is a patchwork of rival territories. Possessing them brings wealth, power, and status. Rivals covet their neighbor's territory and resources, pretty on the weaker ones, and defend themselves from the strong. Most human groups are simply combos in another guise. And, like combos, they strive not to fight."

Blattman uses the example of combos in Medellín to illustrate a fundamental point about armed conflict: it is a costly lottery. Rational leaders realize that a pre-war negotiated settlement offers a higher expected value than entering into the costly lottery, where losers are eliminated and even victors pay high costs. The amount of expected destruction in any war can be thought of as wasted resources; this waste is the bargaining range available to potential combatants, the peace dividend that results from not fighting. Blattman writes, "This shows us something important: peace arises not from brotherly love or cooperation, but from the ever-present threat of violence." A corollary is that the more destructive conflict seems, the more likely the potential belligerents should be to find a negotiated solution.

Blattman argues that there are five causes of wars, each of which interrupts the negotiation process: 1) unchecked interests, in which leaders pursue their own gains at the cost of society; 2) intangible incentives, in which societies places value on things not captured by a rational cost-benefit calculation; 3) uncertainty, in which rivals lack important information on the balance of power; 4) commitment problems, in which rival sides cannot credibly commit to bargains in the face of changes to the balance of power; and 5) misperceptions, in which rivals misjudge their enemies and themselves.

In the second chapter, Blattman examines in more depth the unchecked interests explanation for war. He argues that when leaders are able to capture the benefits of conflict and externalize the costs, the fundamental impetus towards peace breaks down. He writes, "War bias comes about when the people who decide whether or not to launch a conflict have a set of risks and rewards different from the society they supposedly represent." From Liberian warlords to monarchs in Europe, Blattman argues that powerful individuals unmoored from consequence are likely to stoke the flames of conflict.

Janet Lewis probes the micro-processes by which weak vulnerable insurgencies emerge and sometimes become viable rebel groups. This work is consistent with Carter and Straus's finding that most civil wars in contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa are small in scale and involve militarily weak insurgents. She observes that existing research—by equating the onset of civil wars with the start of conflicts of a certain size-has tended to overlook a much larger universe of nascent rebel groups that failed to establish themselves publicly as challengers to the state. By examining these failures as well as groups that succeeded in becoming viable insurgents, Lewis argues, scholars can better understand how, precisely, insurgencies begin.

Through in-depth studies of 16 rebel groups in Uganda since 1986, Lewis finds that most insurgencies begin as small clandestine operations with limited resources, concerned first and foremost with evading state detection as they build strength. Whether or not a group can evade detection and build popular support depends, she argues, on the personal connections and skills of its leaders and on how tight-knit kinship networks are in areas where the group operates. The tighter the kinship networks in a community (e.g., due to ethnic homogeneity), the easier it is for rebels to spread favorable rumors about themselves and to ensure their operations are kept secret from the state.

Drawing upon original cross-national survey research conducted in conflict-affected areas of southern Thailand, Mindanao in the Philippines, and Aceh in Indonesia, **Kelly M. Greenhill and Ben Oppenheim** show that three factors determine whether individuals will adopt security and other rumors (and other unverified information) as true or plausibly true. The first is *worldview*, or the rumor's fit with an individual's pre-existing beliefs and/or experiences. The second key variable is salience or *threat perception*—how anxious an individual is about issues related to the rumor. Worldview and threat perception may be additive, as in cases where people are both predisposed by their worldview to view the information as true or plausibly true and they also have elevated levels of threat perception with respect to the content of the rumor. Alternatively, worldview and threat perception may cut against one another, such as in cases wherein individuals are disinclined to believe the information ex ante due to their worldviews but are still quite anxious about the issues in play, or if they are inclined to believe the information, but their level of threat perception is low. The third variable of note is repetition or prior exposure—whether and how often the individual has heard the rumor or a related rumor before. Greenhill and Oppenheim's findings challenge the conventional wisdom that rumor receptivity is driven by education, income, or other socio-economic factors; rural v. urban divides; ethnic minority status; and/or other demographic factors.

IDEOLOGY, IDENTITY AND VIOLENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Ron Hassner argues for a reconceptualization of the relationship between religion and war. Religion needs to be seen as an environmental factor that combatants manipulate on the battlefield. It acts as a force multiplier (or divider) that enables and constrains not only radicalized, fundamentalist insurgents, but also the secular, professional soldiers of modern nation-states. Religion has influenced the selection and timing of attacks and targets, thereby influencing not just why combatants fight, but also how they fight. Hassner's objective in the piece is to demonstrate that it is not just fundamentalist religious beliefs and ideas that affect warfare, but also more mundane religious rituals and practices.

Hassner identifies four effects that religion can have on warfare: Force multipliers include motivation and exploitation. Force dividers include inhibition and provocation. A religious environment can *motivate* one's own troops or can be *exploited* to constrain opposing troops. Conversely, it can *inhibit* one's troops, and if overexploited, can *provoke* opponents or third parties. To manipulate or ward off these effects, commanders need information about contemporary religious practices—not beliefs, texts, or historical analyses. Religious practices impact the operational environment. Time-based practices like religious holidays can be exploited for surprise attacks, which can in turn provoke outrage.

Religious spaces inhibit those who do not want to destroy sacred shrines or artifacts. For example, Hassner details the effect of the Abbey of Monte Casino on German and Allied forces in the Second World War: Germans were inhibited from occupying the Abbey despite its strategic advantages; allies were inhibited from bombing the Abbey even though they assumed the Germans were indeed occupying it. Once the Allies *did* bomb the Abbey, the Germans were able to provoke and exploit the resulting outrage.

In his chapter, "Overstating Islam," **Ömer Taspinar** argues that the West overstates Islam and conflates Islam, the religion, with political Islam. He argues that the roots of the current clash between Islam and the West are tied to the return of Ayatollah Khomeini to Iran and the 1979 Iranian revolution. The same year, in Saudi Arabia, fundamentalists seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca. To create an outlet for Islamic fundamentalists, the Kingdom supported exporting Wahabi fundamentalists to Afghanistan, creating the foundation that would form Al-Qaeda. Although this turning point set the stage for the current distrust of Islam, 9/11 lit the spark for current tensions between the West and the Islamic world.

Taspinar argues religion is viewed as a more dangerous, more immutable identity than other forms of ideology. This enhances distrust of different religious groups compared to ideological groups and has prompted backlash to multiculturalism. However, *cultural determinists* like Samuel Huntington overstates Islam's role, ignoring problems in governance, the economy, and politics that plague the Middle East. For example, Islamic terrorism cannot be understood without understanding relative socioeconomic deprivation. Similarly, while Islam does not support democratic governance, this is true of all the Abrahamic religions and ignores democracy in Turkey, Malaysia, and the Arab Spring. However, there is still undoubtedly a democratic deficit in the Muslim world. This is not because of Islam as a religion, but due a multitude of unrelated factors, including the weakness of civil society, efficacy of government repression, and high illiteracy rates. This is further complicated by the fact that outside powers, including the West, will back autocratic regimes to maintain stability due to the region's oil reserves being of geostrategic importance. Taspinar concludes by stating that autocracy and violence are prevalent in the Middle East because it has not been able to develop the political institutions to support democratic transition, though this conclusion begs the question of why the Middle East has not developed political institutions conducive to democratic transition.

Marc Lynch argues that the publics in Arab countries are enraged by Israel's war in Gaza, and their activism—through protests, boycotts, and online campaigns—has created a powerful constraint on regional governments despite authoritarian repression. This popular backlash makes efforts at normalization with Israel politically costly and highlights a widening gap between rulers who ignore public opinion and societies that feel solidarity with Palestinians. Lynch warns that both Middle Eastern regimes and the United States risk serious instability and strategic setbacks if they continue to discount the depth and persistence of this public outrage.

Ömer Taspinar argues in “Turkish-Saudi Convergence in the New Middle East” that years of animosity, shared interests, and strategic vision are pushing Türkiye and Saudi Arabia toward an unlikely strategic partnership. Türkiye seeks and needs Saudi support for expanded influence in Syria, which supports Saudi Arabia’s interest in an Iran-free Syria. At the same time, Türkiye’s growing defense industry offers Saudi Arabia flexible options in joint development and local production that Western firms are loath to provide. At the same time, Saudi Arabia provides a much-needed export market as Türkiye seeks to subsidize its defense industry with exports. They’ve also both now embraced engagement with Iran and have grown critical of Israel’s war in Gaza. This presents Washington an opportunity to endorse a stable contra-Iran coalition in the Middle East.

Alper Coşkun and Sinan Ülgen argue in “A Reflection on Türkiye’s Centennial” that the last twenty years of AKP rule in Türkiye have transformed its self-image from a secular one to one rooted in religious tradition. It now leans towards reclaiming its role as the leader of the Islamic world. Until Erdogan and the AKP came to power in 2002, the Turkish elite followed Atatürk’s vision for a more Western country and society despite real foreign policy and societal friction. The authors argue that the West is responsible for worsening relations with Türkiye. American support for Kurdish rebels and European double standards on EU accession undermined domestic support for progress toward political reform in Türkiye. However, despite recent economic success, Türkiye may find itself languishing in the middle-income trap without further productivity-enhancing reforms and access to Western markets. The best hope for Turkey-West relations is a “new deal” that expands its consideration within the Western coalition and preserves its access to Western markets.

IDEAS, IDENTITY AND NORMS—A DEEPER DIVE INTO CONSTRUCTIVISM

In a chapter devoted to illustrating the explanatory power of the constructivist paradigm, **Thomas Berger** posits that pacifist norms have created unique approach to national security in Germany and Japan. In each country, antimilitarist values were imbued in postwar institutions that persist to this day and have prevented each country from expanding its military’s power and responsibilities when neorealist and neoliberal theories would anticipate they would.

Berger argues that realism struggles to explain the failure of Japan and Germany to emerge as major military powers when they emerged as major economic powers in the 1960s and 1970s. Domestic political constraints also proved important in deterring each from pursuing an independent nuclear deterrent and sending troops to support the First Gulf War. Neoliberalism cannot explain the origins or depth of German and Japanese antimilitarism compared to other countries. This is because both theories ignore national identity as a driver of national interest.

States have unique *political-military cultures* that are the set of shared ideas, beliefs, and principles that guide acceptable ideas related to the national security of the nation. These ideas may change over time, but absent some massive external shock, Berger argues they shift only incrementally. The creation of antimilitarist political-military cultures in Japan and Germany helps explain why there was no shift toward military expansion and a larger military role as each country's economy grew.

Prewar, both Germany and Japan were quintessential militarist societies. Postwar political debates in the late 1940s and early 1950s set each country on a path towards antimilitarism that persists today. This was a response to the massive destruction and loss suffered by each country in the war, creating disillusionment with the fervent nationalism and militarism of prewar society. As the Cold War progressed, Japan shifted towards militarism, while Germany shifted further away from it, but neither fundamentally shifted their antimilitarist political-military culture.

It should be noted that some contend Berger's analysis of Germany relies on outdated or contested historical interpretations. Moreover, today, Germany and Japan's approach to national security have each shifted in response to the decline in relative American power.

INDIA TODAY: MODI, HINDU NATIONALISM, AND THE BJP

Milan Vaishnav argues that despite the narrow victory of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in the 2024 Indian elections, the BJP has managed to transform India's democracy on a scale not seen since the establishment of the First Republic in 1950. This "Second Republic" is defined by 1) higher electoral turnout, especially among women; 2) the growing centrality of Hindu identity and reduced importance of Muslims as a political constituency; and 3) a stark divide between national and state elections, as the BJP has failed to achieve state-level dominance.

Vaishnav argues that the BJP does not share the liberal democratic values of India's founders. The author writes, "Today, neither the values nor the interests of the BJP and the larger Hindutva ecosystem suggest an embrace of liberal principles. The Hindu-nationalist movement is wedded to electoral democracy by simple arithmetic: Hindus are 80 percent of the population; uniting them means lasting electoral hegemony." This self-interested democratic preference is tied to majoritarian impulses: the BJP routinely ignores minority rights in the interest of the majority.

The BJP's governing style represents, in Vaishnav's argument, a complete repudiation of the original idea behind India as a "state-nation" defined by diversity. Instead, BJP leaders have embraced the idea of a "civilizational state" that places a premium on a Hindu golden age which was erased by centuries of foreign rule. As such, the BJP believes that India is above foreign criticism of its democratic practices because a) Indian democracy is an older and truer form than Western-style liberal democracy; b) Western criticisms are rooted in illegitimate colonialist attitudes; and c) India as a leading civilization should not be taught by other nations but should be teaching other nations Indian values.

Kapil Komireddi discusses how India has changed during Modi's tenure. Modi has subverted democratic institutions and fomented violence against Muslims. Modi has attacked both the independence of the Indian judiciary and the independence of the central bank. Some supporters of Modi are growing wary, no longer finding that the emphasis on Hindu nationalism to be less convincing as he has failed to deliver on material improvements to their lives. In fact, 79% of Indians believe in religious pluralism, not Hindu nationalism. In Modi's second term, his government revoked the constitutional autonomy of Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir then passed the Citizenship Amendment Act to invoke religion as a qualification for citizenship, being offered to Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Parsi, and Sikh, but not Muslim refugees from neighboring Muslim-majority countries. In 2019 and 2020, many Indians protested this and a new proposed law that would require citizens to demonstrate ancestral links to India. However, there remains no functional political opposition party to challenge Modi due to the dysfunction of the Indian National Congress party, operated as the personal fiefdom of the Gandhi family. As the author reflects on his father's funeral and the people of all religions who mourned and shared the vision of a multicultural India reminds him, like the protesters, that India may yet choose the right path.

Ashley Tellis writes that the United States is no longer as interested in helping India's rise, but India still needs outside help to fend off China. India is a rising great power that closely guards its autonomy. However, the growing gap between China and India's power is unlikely to be closed by mid-century, if at all. If India maintains six percent GDP growth each year, it will become a great power by mid-century, but will be the weakest of the US, China, and maybe the EU. No other country can substitute for American military power in the Indo-Pacific, which means India needs the US. While India has long pushed for multipolarity, this would mean it does not benefit from public goods provided by the US today, like freedom of navigation. India also damages ties by becoming a less liberal democracy, which both weakens India's power through domestic political polarization and hastens the end of the liberal international order of which India is a beneficiary.

EAST AFRICA, THE SAHEL, AND FAMINE IN SUDAN

In "Lineages of Genocide in Sudan," **Alex de Waal** traces the historical roots of genocide in Sudan, arguing that mass violence in Darfur and elsewhere cannot be understood in isolation but rather as part of long-term political and social trajectories. He highlights how colonial and postcolonial governance structures created patterns of exclusion, marginalization, and racialized hierarchies that later fueled violence. De Waal emphasizes the central role of the Sudanese state's political economy, which relied on selective patronage, militarized control, and the manipulation of ethnic identities. These dynamics meant that violence was not merely the result of ethnic hatred or cultural divisions, but a deeply entrenched mode of rule where armed groups and elites used atrocities to consolidate power and resources.

De Waal further examines how international actors and discourses have shaped the framing of Sudan's violence, particularly through the labeling of Darfur as "genocide." De Waal contends that this framing, while morally compelling, risks obscuring the complex local and historical dynamics that produced the violence. He suggests instead that genocide in Sudan should be seen as a lineage—an evolving pattern of governance, repression, and militarization—rather than a discrete event. By situating mass atrocities within these longer continuities, de Waal calls for a rethinking of how scholars and policymakers conceptualize genocide, highlighting the need to address structural causes rather than focusing only on legal or moral categories.

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (**IPC**) reports in their July 2025 bulletin on famine conditions in Sudan that in many areas, the famine is likely to become more acute due to funding shortfalls, continued conflict, and displacement. Although there are some reasons for optimism, the IPC notes continued fighting and lack of sustained access for aid groups mean famine conditions are likely to continue to worsen. Sudan is already classified as a phase 5 catastrophe/famine the worst classification in IPC's classification system.

The **IPC Famine Factsheet** details what constitutes a famine, 20% of households facing extreme food shortage, or 30% of children acutely malnourished. It notes that Sudan has been classified as a famine since 2024, though ultimately, governments and other international NGOs officially announce an ongoing famine.

UKRAINE AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY

Writing in 2019, **George Soroka and Félix Krawatzek** warn that the rise in recent years of "memory laws"–laws that prescribe particular national narratives and penalize the voicing of alternative or critical accounts–poses potentially significant challenges to liberal democracy in Europe. They note that this new "politics of memory," as exemplified by a 2014 Russian law criminalizing the spread of "false information" about the Soviet Union's actions in World War II, is both rooted in and differs in key respects from earlier efforts in West Germany and France to legally enshrine the memory of Holocaust victims. Whereas earlier laws aimed to foster reconciliation and protect minority rights, today's laws tend to exacerbate political divisions within and between states in Europe.

At the same time, they argue, laws memorializing the Holocaust planted the seeds for this newer "mnemonic legislation" in various ways, including by giving rise to practices of "competitive victimhood" within and between countries in Eastern Europe. While such historical memory laws appear to have strengthened nationalist and populist regimes in countries like Russia, Poland, and Hungary, they risk having the opposite effect in liberal democracies like Spain, where recent efforts to memorialize the victims of Francisco Franco sparked domestic political controversy. More troubling, Soroka and Krawatzek suggest, "by encouraging states to engage in spirals of recrimination," memory politics centered on specific ethnic, national, or religious identities may undermine the liberal and universalist underpinnings of the European Union itself.

Maria Popova and Oxana Shevel track how disputes over identity and history drive the current war between Russia and Ukraine. They write, "This theme of Ukrainians being 'really' an organic part of a Russian pan-nation and an independent Ukrainian state being an artificial construct existing at the expense of 'historical' Russia, or at the pleasure of contemporary Russia, is at the core of the current war."

Underlying Russia's claim of Russo-Ukrainian shared identity is a long-entangled history. Both Ukraine and Russia, the authors write, trace their states to the Kyivan Rus', an early state formed in the 9th Century. The lands and peoples of Kyivan Rus' were scattered by the invasion of the Mongols and split between different political entities–primarily the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (PLC), which incorporated the western territories, and the Grand Duchy of Muscovy, which remained under Mongol control. Different political control led to differential cultures and norms. Popova and Shevel write, "In the PLC, Ukrainian territories had exposure to influences from the West that the Muscovy did not experience; most consequentially Renaissance and Reformation."

Eventually, Moscow threw off the Mongol yoke and Cossacks in modern-day Ukraine rebelled against Polish-Lithuanian rule. Under Cossack leader Bohdan Khmelnytsky, the newly independent state signed the treaty of Pereiaslav in 1654, which recognized the authority of the Russian tsar in exchange for security guarantees. The treaty is a point of contention between modern Ukrainian and Russian scholars: the former treats it as a temporary security arrangement which was betrayed by the Russians, who gained more and more influence over Ukraine while the latter argue that the treaty is evidence of a single people choosing to reunite.

The authors continue tracing the interwoven history of Russia and Ukraine through the centuries. They highlight a) the creation of a briefly independent Ukrainian state in 1917 which lasted until its conquest by Soviet forces in 1920; b) the Ukrainian experience of the famine from 1930-1933; c) the small numbers of Ukrainians who fought against the USSR in the Second World War; and d) the much greater number of Ukrainians who fought with the Soviet Union in WWII. They note that Ukraine lost 15% of its population in the conflict, but that the inclusion of formerly Polish, Romanian, and Czechoslovakian territories into the USSR meant that "For the first time in history, the vast majority of ethnic Ukrainian-inhabited lands, as defined by Ukrainian scholars, were within the borders of a single, albeit Soviet, Ukrainian state." When the Soviet Union dissolved, this polity became an independent country, with the vast majority of Ukrainians voting for independence (90.3% in favor with 84.2% turnout).

In the second section, Popova and Shevel look more closely at differences in interpretation for two key historical events: the famine (or Holodomor) and the anti-Soviet Ukrainian forces in WWII (the OUN and the UPA). In each case, Russian and Ukrainian historians diverge sharply on how to understand what happened. Russians believed the famine was a shared tragedy; Ukraine, in contrast, passed a law in November 2006 labeling the famine a genocide. Similarly, in Ukraine the image of the OUN and UPA were rehabilitated–despite those organizations' collaboration with the Nazis–because they fought for Ukrainian independence.

In the final assigned section, Popova and Shevel recount the path to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. After the 2014 seizure of Crimea, Ukraine enacted a series of laws known as "decommunization laws" which sought to officially distance Russian and Ukrainian historical understanding. Among other things, the law changed the term for WWII from "The Great Patriotic War" to the "Second World War" and criminalized "public denial of the legitimacy of the struggle for Ukraine's independence in the twentieth century." In a boon for political scientists, the laws also guaranteed access to Soviet-era archives. Russia itself passed diametrically opposed laws which criminalized "dissemination of knowingly false information on the activities of the USSR during WWII." In the authors' framing, a war fought by politicians and historians became a war fought by soldiers and generals.

Georgiy Kasianov writes that the war between Russia and Ukraine can be understood as "the collision of two incompatible historical narratives." On the former side, Russians have argued that Ukrainians and Russians are one people, united in their common ancestry and history. Ukrainians reject this characterization, however, and point to the numerous independent kingdoms and states populated by Ukrainians that have sought to maintain separation from Russia. Specific events have dramatically different interpretations. For Russians, the great famine of the early 1930s was a shared tragedy which befell the Soviet Union. For Ukrainians, the *Holodomor* resulted when Russians wielded starvation as a weapon of genocide.

Even in friendlier times, Russian and Ukrainian historians and politicians have never been able to reconcile their divergent views of history. Kasianov argues that these differences of opinion are far from academic and in fact motivated Russia's first invasion of Ukraine in 2014. In response, Ukrainian opinion became more belligerent, with the Ukrainian government going so far as to outlaw criticism of World War II-era militant organizations which both fought for Ukrainian independence and collaborated with the Nazis. The author concludes by siding on one side of the debate, writing, "Russia turns to the past to justify expansion, aggression, and domination, to resurrect an empire. Ukraine does it in self-defense and self-determination to preserve and nurture an independent republic. Russia fights for the past. Ukraine fights for the future."

In a recent article for *the Washington Post*, **Mary Ilyushina** describes how pro-Kremlin ideologues within Russia have rewritten high school history books to paint a distorted version of the past. The new textbooks describe how Russian soldiers in Ukraine: "Like their grandfathers, they are fighting for goodness and truth shoulder to shoulder… Courage and bravery to give up your life for the Motherland is something inherent to a Russian, Soviet soldier." The textbooks further warn children not to believe misinformation spread by "Western social networks and media" and paint the conflict as an American creation. Ilyushina quotes a Russian history teacher, on the condition of anonymity, who argued, "Imagine you have a hammer — you can use it to drive nails, or you can use it to smash someone's head; the same with history."

Filip Edjus explores how the politics of memory intersects with ontological security—an individual's or collective's need for social order, stable relationships with others, and continuity and integrity of the self. Using the example of Serbia's annual commemoration of NATO's 1999 bombing, he shows how states employ selective remembrance to sustain a continuous and coherent sense of self, often emphasizing victimhood or heroism while suppressing inconvenient histories. Ontological security studies argue that states, like individuals, need stable narratives to alleviate existential anxiety. Memory politics thus becomes central: collective memories, whether of trauma, victory, or guilt, serve as tools for maintaining identity and predictability in world politics. Edjus argues that memories can be stabilizing by fostering coherence, but also destabilizing when competing narratives challenge established self-conceptions or produce anxiety.

The chapter maps the diverse ways memory politics can generate or undermine ontological security. Positive or "chosen" traumas, such as Serbia's medieval defeat at Kosovo, can unify national identity, while contested or external interpretations can destabilize it, as in Sino-Japanese or Balkan memory wars. Memory politics functions preventively, providing everyday stability, and restoratively, helping actors recover from crises of identity. Ejdus situates these dynamics on a continuum between securitization, where states rigidly police memory through laws, denial, or erasure, and desecuritization, which allows plural narratives and reflexivity. Ultimately, he argues that control over historical memory offers states power and that future research should explore why some memories are more fundamental to ontological security and to integrate this research with research into the role of emotions in international relations.

FOREIGN-IMPOSED REGIME CHANGE

Alexander Downes examines the question of why foreign-imposed regime changes often fail, inspired by the numerous cases of large empires failing to impose their will on weak adversaries, as the United States, the Soviet Union before it, and the British Empire before them failed to do in Afghanistan. Foreign-imposed regime changes aimed at aligning the target with the foreign state's interests regularly fail to change the target state's alignment, and often the puppet leader is violently ousted from power. The reason for this, according to Downes, is mainly because the new regime must balance competing domestic and foreign interests, which increases both the risk of civil conflict and conflict with the foreign power that backed regime change.

Chapter 1 introduces the definition and a typology of foreign-imposed regime change (FIRC), which includes the removal, though not necessarily replacement, of a leader by an external actor. After removal, the target state remains nominally sovereign. Downes then identifies 120 cases between 1816 and 2008, noting that interveners are typically, but not always, great powers; the most common initiator of which has been the United States.

POSSIBLE RESPONSES: MONITORING, INTERVENTION, PREVENTION

Colum Lynch recounts how the UN's Black Sea Grain Initiative emerged from behind-the-scenes mediation by the Geneva-based Centre for Humanitarian Dialogue, which crafted a plan to reopen Ukraine's grain exports in exchange for easing restrictions on Russian wheat and fertilizer. This pragmatic arrangement not only alleviated a looming global food crisis but also restored some of the UN's credibility as an effective mediator during the Ukraine war.

Thant Myint-U argues that on its 80th anniversary, the UN has overextended itself and lost sight of its founding mission. He contends that the organization should be retooled for a "less internationalist age" by focusing squarely on preventing war, rather than stretching across an unwieldy range of issues where its effectiveness has waned.

In Chapters 8-10 of *Empire of Humanity,* **Michael Barnett** details the rise of humanitarian ideals and their (then) growing influence on international relations. In *"It's a Humanitarian's World,"* Barnett traces how humanitarianism evolved from a marginal pursuit to a central global enterprise. By the late 20th century, humanitarian actors became indispensable players in world politics, not just alleviating suffering but also shaping the moral discourse of international relations. Humanitarianism expanded beyond emergency relief to encompass human rights, development, and peacebuilding, creating a powerful global network that simultaneously saved lives and advanced Western liberal values. Yet, this rise also tethered humanitarianism to geopolitical agendas and donor interests, complicating its moral purity.

In *"Armed for Humanity,"* Barnett examines the growing militarization of humanitarianism, particularly in the 1990s and 2000s. Humanitarian interventions in places like Somalia, Bosnia, and Kosovo blurred the lines between military force and humanitarian goals, embedding humanitarianism within the logic of security. This "armed humanitarianism" reflected both a moral imperative to stop atrocities and a strategic calculation by powerful states to stabilize regions of concern. However, reliance on military power raised dilemmas: it often undermined neutrality, invited accusations of neo-imperialism, and left humanitarian actors entangled in wars they sought to alleviate.

In his *"Conclusion: The Empire of Humanity,"* Barnett reflects on humanitarianism as an "empire" — a sprawling, contradictory project that both alleviates suffering and reproduces global hierarchies. Humanitarianism provides a sense of moral progress and global solidarity, but it also legitimates inequalities between donors and recipients, often privileging Western priorities. Barnett suggests that humanitarianism's future will be defined by this tension: it can mitigate suffering but cannot escape its role in structuring a world of power asymmetries. Ultimately, humanitarianism is both an expression of compassion and a tool of governance, embodying the paradox of a world order that seeks to save while also ruling.

EAST AFRICA, THE SAHEL, AND FAMINE IN SUDAN

In "Lineages of Genocide in Sudan," **Alex de Waal** traces the historical roots of genocide in Sudan, arguing that mass violence in Darfur and elsewhere cannot be understood in isolation but rather as part of long-term political and social trajectories. He highlights how colonial and postcolonial governance structures created patterns of exclusion, marginalization, and racialized hierarchies that later fueled violence. De Waal emphasizes the central role of the Sudanese state's political economy, which relied on selective patronage, militarized control, and the manipulation of ethnic identities. These dynamics meant that violence was not merely the result of ethnic hatred or cultural divisions, but a deeply entrenched mode of rule where armed groups and elites used atrocities to consolidate power and resources.

De Waal further examines how international actors and discourses have shaped the framing of Sudan's violence, particularly through the labeling of Darfur as "genocide." De Waal contends that this framing, while morally compelling, risks obscuring the complex local and historical dynamics that produced the violence. He suggests instead that genocide in Sudan should be seen as a lineage—an evolving pattern of governance, repression, and militarization—rather than a discrete event. By situating mass atrocities within these longer continuities, de Waal calls for a rethinking of how scholars and policymakers conceptualize genocide, highlighting the need to address structural causes rather than focusing only on legal or moral categories.

The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (**IPC**) reports in their July 2025 bulletin on famine conditions in Sudan that in many areas, the famine is likely to become more acute due to funding shortfalls, continued conflict, and displacement. Although there are some reasons for optimism, the IPC notes continued fighting and lack of sustained access for aid groups mean famine conditions are likely to continue to worsen. Sudan is already classified as a phase 5 catastrophe/famine the worst classification in IPC's classification system.

The **IPC Famine Factsheet** details what constitutes a famine, 20% of households facing extreme food shortage, or 30% of children acutely malnourished. It notes that Sudan has been classified as a famine since 2024, though ultimately, governments and other international NGOs officially announce an ongoing famine.