

## Critical dialogue: "economy of force" and "violence and restraint in civil war"

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## Critical Dialogue

***Violence and Restraint in Civil War: Civilian Targeting the Shadow of International Law.*** By Jessica A. Stanton. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. 321p. \$34.99

- Patricia Owens, *University of Sussex*

It is an honor to engage in a critical dialogue with Jessica A. Stanton. Her book, *Violence and Restraint in Civil War*, is written from a completely different theoretical and methodological perspective to *Economy of Force*.<sup>1</sup> Yet I can easily recognise it as an extremely impressive example of American political science: rigorous, logical, impeccably researched, and lucidly expressed. Today, civil war is the most widespread and destructive form of organised violence. Stanton's book is not a history or theory of civil war, civilians, or international law. Rather it tests a series of empirical hypotheses concerning civilian targeting in civil wars with original quantitative and qualitative data, much of it painstakingly gathered by Stanton. In our world of internationalized civil war, the headline conclusions are important and clear. Violence against civilians during civil war is the result of strategic choices by government and rebel group leaders. The way in which governments and rebel groups calculate the most effective level and form of violence against civilians is influenced by their own and their enemy's relationships with domestic and international constituencies. Violence is strategic and so is the choice to *restrain* the level of violence. International actors play a significant role in shaping government and rebel group incentive to target civilians.

Stanton illustrates her central argument through a quantitative analysis of forms of government and rebel group violence against civilians in all civil wars from 1989 to 2010. This is supplemented by a series of case studies, the war between the Indonesia government and rebels in both Aceh and East Timor, Turkey and the PKK, and rebel group actions in El Salvador, Azerbaijan, and the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. Stanton finds that restraint in targeting civilians is more likely when military and political leaders are responsive to their own public's demands; when they have an inclusive political system; and when regimes are unstable and thus require domestic and international support. Belligerents are more likely to engage in high casualty civilian control the greater the civilian support for the opponent; engage in high casualty cleansing if the opponent relies on a small, geographically concentrated civilian base; and engage in terrorism if their own political system is exclusionary and the enemy is responsive to public demands. Most governments and rebel groups have a strong incentive to present themselves as legitimate international actors eligible for political and economic assistance. For Stanton, an important incentive for restraint is increasing acceptance of international human rights and humanitarian norms since the end of the Cold War. *Violence and Restraint* wears its theoretical influences lightly, but it clearly sits within the liberal internationalist tradition.

Stanton is not only interested in the scale of violence deliberately targeted against civilians, but the strategic choice of its *form*, including terrorism, interrogations and extrajudicial killings, sexual violence, territorial 'cleansing', scorched earth campaigns, forced displacement, and genocide. *Violence and Restraint* presents a spectrum of

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<sup>1</sup> Owens 2015

violence in civil war, from restraint and low casualty violence to high causality violence. However, the designations are thoroughly normative. For example, Stanton notes that rather than commit genocide, the Turkish government sought to separate Kurdish fighters from civilian support by forcibly depopulating four thousand Kurdish villages, as well as engage in extrajudicial executions and torture of thousands of pro-independence political activists. Hence, according to Stanton, through the 1980s and 1990s, Turkey engaged in a strategy of low-casualty cleansing and state terrorism. In response to international and domestic criticisms Turkey later moderated some of its most brutal policies. By the 2000s, ‘the government calculated that high casualty violence against civilians was not worth the risk of jeopardizing the country’s application or EU membership’.<sup>2</sup> Even though the overall number of Kurdish civilians killed by the Turkish state in its ‘low casualty’ war vastly exceeded those killed by rebels, Stanton describes PKK attacks on Turkish civilians as an example of ‘high casualty terrorism’. Clearly such designations are political. The designation of what is high and low casualty is not descriptive, but normative. Indeed, as Eyal Weizman has shown, the power to moderate violence, to be *seen* to restrain, can produce its own form of political power and even terror among those purportedly spared.<sup>3</sup>

Stanton addresses an important dimension of the strategic environment in which belligerents in civil war weigh the costs of civilian targeting, namely pressures to comply with international human rights standards. This question is central to the framing of the book in the Introduction and Conclusion, but plays less of a role in the analysis and development of the case studies. Indeed, if international actors are fundamental in shaping government and rebel group incentive to target civilians, then a greater and more immediate factor is military and other assistance from hegemonic powers, the most powerful international constituency there is. Thus I would be extremely interested to hear Stanton’s hypotheses concerning the relationship between US military and financial aid to belligerents and the degree of restraint in targeting civilians. Consider the US-backed Indonesian invasion and occupation of East Timor (1975-1999). Stanton’s powerful account of Indonesia’s high casualty ‘cleansing’, the forcible relocation in camps, the burning of villages and crops, recalls near identical United States practices in Vietnam, and British actions in Malaya and Kenya, which I discuss in *Economy of Force*. In ‘Government Restraint in Indonesia’, Chapter 4 of *Violence and Restraint*, Stanton argues that Indonesia’s counterinsurgency strategy, essentially the ‘institutionalization of terror’, fundamentally transformed after the 1998 fall of General Suharto. The new civilian leadership, in need of different forms of international support during the transition to democracy, had to rein in some of the military’s worst excesses and provide some humanitarian assistance and reduce torture and detention ‘without due process’.<sup>4</sup> Indonesian elites used the opportunity of transition to acknowledge some past atrocities, reform military and police, and reduce attacks on civilians. However, as Stanton notes, the Indonesian ‘military’s financial independence has impeded efforts to implement effective civilian control over the military, helping to explain why... incidents of military abuse continued even after the transition to democracy’.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Stanton 2016, 283

<sup>3</sup> Weizman, 2011

<sup>4</sup> Stanton 2016, 139

<sup>5</sup> Stanton 2016, 143

Is the role of ‘international actors’ in Indonesia’s counterinsurgency campaign best understood in these terms, of Cold War neglect and post-Cold War human rights advocacy? In *Violence and Restraint*, the role of ‘international actors’ during Suharto’s reign is primarily an act of omission: ‘international actors... did not pressure Suharto to alter his policies in Aceh or East Timor’.<sup>6</sup> But as an extremely close ally of the United States, General Suharto was not only able ‘to avoid any serious international criticism of his counterinsurgency operations’ and thus ‘had few incentives to exercise restraint’.<sup>7</sup> His most important international constituents were implicated in the slaughter of almost a third of the East Timorese, as arms suppliers and financiers. Suharto could kill with such impunity because he could rely on the diplomatic and ideological cover provided by the United States, Britain, and Australia who were more interested in Indonesia’s resource rich emerging market. In this sense, the role of international actors in Suharto’s choice to commit crimes against humanity was an act of commission. This is not just a Cold War story. *After* official military aid was cut off and the transition to democracy had begun the United States continued to train Indonesian troops implicated in the torture and killing of civilians.<sup>8</sup> The end of the Cold War is not always and everywhere the watershed that it often appears, as Iraqi civilians can also attest. The claim to be complying with international human rights standards is often ideological too.

*Violence and Restraint* raises fundamental questions about the strategic choice to target or refrain from targeting civilians in civil war. It also provides a good starting point to think through the *many* roles of ‘international actors’ in contemporary and internationalized civil wars. Stanton writes, ‘when a government is insulated from both domestic and international pressure, it is extremely difficult to prevent atrocities against civilians or to halt abuses once they have begun’.<sup>9</sup> But it is integration, rather than insulation, from the global order of capitalist neo-imperialism that can generate, as well as prevent, atrocities against civilians. Not all international constituencies are equally influential and civil wars are not only ‘a struggle for political power at the domestic level’.<sup>10</sup> The over-emphasis on international human rights standards can obscure as well as reveal much about the global military and economic order in which civil wars occur and are sustained.

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<sup>6</sup> Stanton 2016, 131

<sup>7</sup> Stanton 2016, 125

<sup>8</sup> Nairn, 1999

<sup>9</sup> Stanton 2016, 281

<sup>10</sup> Stanton 2016, 32

Weizman, Eyal. 2011. *The Least of All Possible Evils: Humanitarian Violence from Arendt to Gaza*. London. Verso.

### **Response to Stanton's review of *Economy of Force***

I'm grateful to Jessica A. Stanton for her generous reading of *Economy of Force*. She has captured a great deal of what I see as the main contributions of the book, especially those related to the despotic character of counterinsurgency rule. What she identifies as its main limitation, especially in relation to case selection, is broadly accurate. *Economy of Force* offers a new history and theory of Anglo-American counterinsurgency with major implications for social, political, and international thought. The historical case studies focus on late-colonial military campaigns in Malaya, Kenya, and Vietnam, as well as the more recent multinational campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq. The book does not address the very many other comparable historical and contemporary pacification campaigns conducted by other imperial or post-colonial states, though many of its main arguments would certainly apply to them. While the primary motivation of the book was not to pinpoint variation in forms of civilian coercion across cases, the central focus of Stanton's book, *Economy of Force* does not entirely neglect major differences in this regard. It argues that the dynamics of *oikonomia* in the use of force varied in relation to the level of organized resistance; the resources available to the counterinsurgency state; the perceived racial 'Otherness' of the target population and other racialized and gendered practices; and the degree of external support provided to insurgents.

*Economy of Force* is motivated not only by the inadequacies of existing theories of counterinsurgency war, but also the a-historicism of approaches to social and sociological theories in International Relations more generally. Stanton did not take up this wider contribution. *Economy of Force* not only seeks to historicize and critique social and sociological theory to give a better account of so-called 'armed social work'. It challenges the deeply ahistorical manner in which the field of International Relations has imported social and sociological theories. While IR practices a form of 'sociolatry', the worship of things 'socio',<sup>11</sup> it has ignored the historical origins of distinctly social theorising, demonstrating very little sense of when and why sociological explanations for human affairs first emerged and what this history might reveal. *Economy of Force* explains why this matters. International and even much political theory has been blind to the more fundamental governance form of which the modern social realm is a concrete historical expression. The late eighteenth-century rise of social forms of governance in the core of the major European capitalist empires did not destroy and replace household activities and forms of thought, as both liberalism and social theory claimed. They are the distinctly modern and capitalist variant on the science and practice of household rule. This is why neither liberalism nor social theory has offered an adequate theory of politics, assimilating it to household rule. In contrast, *Economy of Force* conceives politics as non-domestication and thus, *pace* much contemporary critical theory, is able to distinguish between politics and war.

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<sup>11</sup> Patricia Owens, 'Method or Madness: Sociolatry in International Thought', *Review of International Studies*, 41(4) (2015) pp.655-674