Civil war: discord within

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To call formally organized violence within a regime “civil war” is never an innocent act. As armed conflict within borders has become a widespread mode of warfare in recent years, civil war has attracted new attention across disciplines. Bellum civile, the Roman concept for partisan warfare among citizens, has lent its name to such disturbances in modern European languages (guerre civile, Bürgerkrieg), but many other terms compete for dominance. What are the stakes of naming violent domestic conflict civil war rather than revolution, or the Greek stasis, or tumult, sedition, insurgency, or guerilla warfare? At what point do we call conflicts civil wars and when do we stop doing so? The recent disturbance in Syria, for instance, goes by civil war in the Western media, but it raged for a full year before earning that appellation. Arabists, however, prefer to characterize it as a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran and therefore feel civil war is off the mark—a terminological-conceptual controversy that hearkens back at least to the “Spanish Civil War.” Some might choose to designate the Syrian conflict rather a religious war within Islam. Depending on one’s stakes, the name of civil war can legitimate one side or condemn all of the warring parties.

Civil war always entails boundary violation—physical, political, social—whether by crossing geopolitical and normative-ideological lines or failing to do so. This means that it confronts notions of cosmic and conceptual order. Where does the division fall between internal and external violence, between different kinds of internal violence? How legitimate is the distinction or indistinction between familial and political violence, between religious and political violence? Why is fratricide a common trope for civil war even when actual brothers hardly ever kill each other? At what point can you say civil war has come to an end?

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