The Economics of Civil War

While civil conflicts are undoubtedly a multifaceted phenomenon, one of the largest and most influential factors in the occurrence of civil conflicts is economics. This paper will attempt to explain exactly why that is the case and how civil conflict can be illustrated in economic terms, particularly with regard to the economic causes and economic consequences of civil war. In doing so, it will employ both general theory and practical case-study examples. The two civil conflicts that will be discussed are the wars in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and within Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

To begin, a discussion of the general economic theory that underlies civil conflicts is necessary to have a foundation upon which to later apply real events. Scholarly work in the field of political and developmental economics has established a set of accepted ideas and theories, some admittedly more obvious than others, about the relationship between civil wars and economic conditions, which can be summarized to the following five major points. First, poor countries are more likely to have civil war than are rich ones. Second, the economy becomes collateral damage of war. Third, the choice to rebel against the government is an economic, cost-benefit one. Fourth, civil wars create economic opportunities for a minority of actors even as they destroy them for the majority. And fifth, rather than a discrete relationship existing between economic causes and effects, there is more often a trap-like environment or cycle between them.

If one understands what is referred to as “economics” as the scientific study of the choices made by individuals and societies in regard to the alternative uses of scarce resources employed to satisfy wants (rather than the more conventional notion dealing with production, distribution and consumption of goods and services), it is particularly useful to apply economic logic to understand civil wars. In essence, the more general notion of "economics" is the study of choices and the values that human beings inherently hold in order to make them, and everything else about the subject beyond this is essentially just a variation on the theme. Of course, the reason the more specific characterization dealing with goods and services is used more often is because, unlike the highly-abstract, microeconomic definition, it is a lot easier to distinguish it from that of other social sciences, not to mention to allow in other aspects of social science to complete the picture. Naturally, both the more abstract and the more expected notions of "economics" will be used here.

Poor countries are more likely to have civil war than are rich ones. Although easily recognized from a Western perspective, the statistical reality behind this statement (in fact, since 1960, almost all civil wars have been in developing countries) still does not have a solid explanation, economic or otherwise. What economic theory generally does point to, however, is a connection between the level of economic openness and the level of economic growth, and in turn, a connection between economic growth and political stability and internal peace. Thus, the less free a country's trade is, the more likely it is to have lower economic growth, and the lower its economic development the more likely it is to lack political stability which is so vital to peace.

The economy becomes collateral damage of war. This is probably even more obvious to most people than the latter statement, particularly if they are amongst the sizable portion of the world that has lived in such an environment and experienced the change in quality of life that it generates. This is clearly apparent to individuals who do not even have a comparative knowledge of the level of their national or regional development as it relates to the world; they simply can attribute to the fact that they are worse off under war than they were during peacetime, even if they are not familiar with exactly how this has occurred. These consequences cannot be equally applied to international wars. Unlike international wars, civil wars weaken rather than strengthen the authority of the state, are less clear in their duration, leave two opposing armies to be demobilized within one territory, and erode the institutions of civil society. Above all are the humanitarian crises that civil wars are notorious for. To put it briefly, civil war is almost always more economically damaging than international war and there are three words that best describe the means by which civil conflict negatively impacts economic growth- destruction, disruption and diversion.

First, war generates destruction- of resources, infrastructure, and most importantly, human beings. Second, it generates disruption or social disorder, often due to the uncertainty that is inherent in conflict, which lends itself to reduced production and market exchanges. Third, civil war leads to a diversion of public expenditure by the central government from output-enhancing activities into war-related activities- mainly, spending on military defense. With military expenditure prioritized, security of property rights, a cornerstone of any economy, is neglected through a reduced police force and a weakened legal system to enforce such rights. Government provision of public goods not available due to the normal phenomenon of market failure, important in even the most developed economies, is even more absent. At the same time, there is diversion on the part of the people, who move physical, financial, and human capital (often themselves and their families) out of the country, and foreigners, who redirect their investments into less volatile areas. Again, uncertainty or risk plays a large role in economic breakdown.

The choice to rebel against the government is an economic, cost-benefit one. This as well as the following statement is the crux of what is arguably the most contested aspect of civil conflicts- whether they are motivated by greed or by grievances. In disagreement with some political theorists, many economists believe it to be the former. They posit that economic opportunities instead of real grievances such as political and ethnic oppression are responsible for civil conflict because the act of rebellion (aimed at either taking over the state or seceding from it) is costly to rebels. The conduct of civil war is costly mainly due to the opportunity cost of labor, which is forgone income. The less the opportunity cost, the greater the incentive to conduct a rebellion (and vice versa). Collier and Hoeffler *("Greed and Grievance in Civil War")* point to the example of the Russian Civil War of 1918, where both Reds and Whites experienced a high level of desertions, but particularly during the summer, when the desertion rate was ten times higher than in winter. Apparently, forgone income was higher during harvest time for the mostly peasant recruits. Following this logic, similar other examples seem to indicate that if forgone income is particularly low (that is, if opportunity cost is barely an issue for rebels) civil war will tend to be longer and more destructive (assuming the government's ability to fight the rebels is unchanged). Evidently, this explanation is adept at explaining how poverty often leads to civil war in its own way.

Civil wars create economic opportunities for a minority of actors even as they destroy them for the majority. Continuing where the last point left off, the fact that rebel groups choose to conduct war implies they benefit from conflict and therefore have some interest in initiating and sustaining it, by the economic assumption of rational, utility-maximizing behavior. Civil wars cause an economic decline of, on average, 2.2% of GDP per year or

20% over the course of a decade, but despite these overall losses, civil wars do create an opportunity for profit not available during peace. First, economists have theorized that the less predictable the future is (that is, the greater the uncertainty or risk felt), the more opportunistically people behave. Second, there is usually an increase in crime (apart from the events of war itself), which is directly related to the aforementioned insecurity of property rights that are a result of higher spending on the army at the expense of police.

And last but certainly not least, the decline in competition that results from disrupted markets (which hinder information access and free entry) gives rise to more monopolistic trade. And of course, monopolists, as "price makers," have a much higher profit level despite lower demand than competitive firms or agents, which act as "price takers." Thus, there are often higher profit margins during civil war, but because of more monopolistic and opportunistic trade and greater risk, these gains are enjoyed only by a small group (consisting of businessmen, criminals, and traders) who, like the rebels themselves, have an interest in the continuation of fighting. In fact, often the rebel organizations themselves moonlight as war profiteers. Collier *("Doing Well out of War")* points out that rebels do well through predation on primary commodity exports, traders through widened profit margins on domestic goods, criminals through theft, and opportunistic businessmen "at the expense of those businesses which are constrained to honest conduct." The vast majority of individuals in the society, however, endure profound losses.

Rather than a discrete relationship existing between economic causes and effects, there is more often a trap-like environment or cycle between them. Particularly severe recessions can provide the spark that brings society on the verge of civil war, and if fullblown conflict ensues, society usually sustains more recession. Indeed, a country is more susceptible to fall into this "trap" the less politically stable or democratic it is.

To provide an example of how economic conditions impact civil conflict, this paper now turns to the war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, not to be confused with its western neighbor, the Republic of the Congo. The DR Congo is a country of 56 million people and a plethora of natural resources, including nearly half of Africa's and 6% of the world's tropical rainforest, as well as numerous precious stones and minerals. Yet it has been relatively very poor- even by African standards- for most of its post-independence, with debt, over-dependence on primary commodity exports, hyperinflation, and corruption taking its toll on the economy. The country has also been exceedingly politically unstable (the name itself is a misnomer, as the Democratic Republic of Congo has yet to hold an election, although it is now closer to this goal than at any other time in its history). Like many of its African neighbors, all of DR Congo's former leaders have succumbed to either overthrow or assassination. Soon after gaining its independence in 1960, the country experienced an army mutiny, attempted secession of a mineral-rich province, and the dismissal and subsequent assassination (with Belgian and reportedly American complicity) of Prime Minister Joseph Lumumba.

Ironically, five years into independence, Zaire under Mobutu Sese Seko wasn't much different from the Congo Free State under colonial power Belgium, whose King Leopold also exploited the country's resource and social wealth for his own personal gain. Mobutu ousted the post-Lumumba government of Joseph Kasavubu and Moise Tshombe (who led the secession of Katanga province and with whom Kasavubu replaced Lumumba after Tshombe agreed to end the rebellion). He then established a kleptocracy, or "rule by thieves," making Zaire (as he renamed the country) synonymous with corruption and amassing a four billion dollar fortune by stealing from his people during his rule from 1965 to 1997. Under Mobutu, economic conditions deteriorated from bad to worse. After nationalizing several foreign-owned firms and forcing out European investors, Mobutu's mismanagement of the economy finally lead DR Congo to default on Belgian loans, resulting in the cancellation of development programs by the IMF and World Bank.

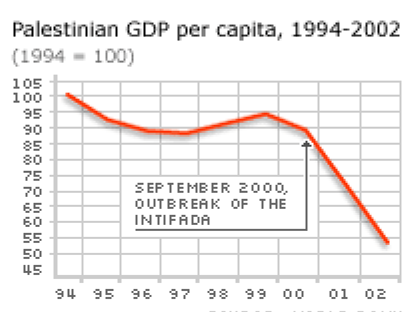
By 1993, with the creation of rival pro- and anti-Mobutu governments, DR Congo was on the verge of civil war. After Tutsi rebels captured much of the eastern region in 1996, the war officially began, with the Rwandan-backed Tutsis (sent in by Rwanda to flush out extremists Hutu militias) and other anti-Mobutu rebels capturing the capital, toppling Mobutu, and installing their leader, Laurent Kabila. But the following year, rebels backed by Rwanda, Uganda, and Burundi rose up against Kabila, while Zimbabwe, Namibia, Angola, and later Chad allied with the president. With fighting escalating in the northeast Ituri region, rifts emerged between Movement for the Liberation of Congo (MLC) rebels supported by Uganda and Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) rebels backed by Rwanda. Burundi too sent in troops to fight Hutu rebels from their country. The region's tangled and constantly shifting web of alliances later yielded other fighters, often ethnically-linked and with fluid political allegiances, such as the warring Hema and Lendu tribes, and the indigenous Mai-Mai militia. DR Congo's lush green hills had become perfect ambush country, and the number of armed groups using them to wage war had multiplied.

The legacy of exploitation that began with Belgian colonization and continued under the Mobutu dictatorship persisted. In a modern-day imitation of the colonial scramble for

Africa, a resource-fueled war ensued, with the plundering of oil, timber, gold, diamonds, copper, cobalt, coltan (the mineral used in the manufacture of cellular phones), and even the animals and horticulture. No matter if it was a security concern that pushed them in initially, it was the opportunity for profit that undoubtedly kept no less than seven other African nations, along with the Congolese army and numerous rebel factions and tribal militias, fighting on Congolese soil. For this reason, the DR Congo conflict is commonly referred to as "Africa's World War." In fact, a UN report charged the warring parties, including both the rebels and foreign armies, were deliberately prolonging the conflict to plunder the country's reserves and were using their loot to finance the war. Eighty-five multinational companies, including diamond giant DeBeers, were also mentioned. But while certain actors have benefited, the vast majority of the Congolese people have suffered. Three to four million people have died in the five years of war, either of murder or because of disease and starvation. In 2001, Oxfam reported that 16 million Congolese were starving, more than two million had been displaced by the war, and in some parts of the country, two out of five children were dying in infancy. Other NGO's were proclaiming that DR Congo's war had produced the largest number of war-time rapes in recent history. Hackings of children with machetes, spears and clubs, and even cases of cannibalism were reported.

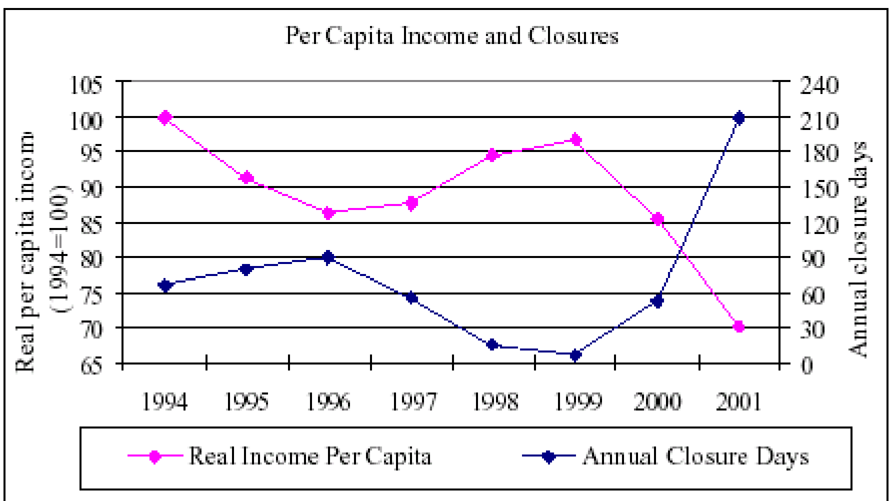
The case of the Democratic Republic of Congo clearly exemplifies the economic root of civil conflicts. It had a high level of poverty statistically linked with civil war and had experienced the same characteristics that made it poor as similarly affected countries. Among these were that the DR Congo had high debt (which acts as a constraint on economic growth), high dependence on primary commodity exports (which are prone to price shocks such as the one the country experienced with a drop in the copper price in the mid-70's), and large-scale corruption and protectionism that blocked free trade. Paradoxically, the country had a wealth of natural resources, especially vast geography and valuable minerals. Combined with political instability and misgovernment, this volatile environment fostered conflict by encouraging individuals to rebel against the state and contest physically for its control and the control of its actual and potential sources of wealth. Tragically but predictably, the majority of individuals suffered at the expense of a minority, who in typical Hobbesian fashion did not hold back their brutality, and had no disincentive to disarm.

Finally, this paper turns to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a much more familiar although much less deadly dispute, for an illustration of the economic conditions that result from war. By looking at the GDP graphs for the Israeli and Palestinian economies below, it is vividly clear already that there is a profound economic impact.



On closer inspection, the graphs (despite having different measures of growth) display the sharp nosedive experienced by both Israel and the Palestinian Territories after September 2000. It's not coincidental the date marks the start of the Second Intifada, sparked by the walkabout by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon on the Temple Mount and its al-Aqsa Mosque, which angered the majority-Muslim Palestinians and brought the Palestinian economic recovery that began in 1998 and was ironically starting to make real progress to an abrupt halt. Although both impacts are large, they are not equal; both countries have experienced severe recessions, but the Palestinian economy has been affected much more than the Israeli.

The main source of economic problems in the Palestinian Territories is Israel's security-based policy of "closure," which places restrictions on the free movement of people and goods across borders in the hopes of preventing suicide bombings and other attacks against Israelis. In fact, the graph below shows an especially strong inverse relationship- the more days in a given year that closure was implemented, the lower the average Palestinian earned.



Sources: World Bank and UNSCO.

There is severe and unpredictable interruption of the flow of goods and labor into and out of the Palestinian Territories via military checkpoints (which exist on all main and most secondary roads within the West Bank and Gaza). The result is quite apparent- this raises transaction costs (particularly the costs of transportation), which raises production costs above competitive levels, not to mention being a loss of productive time. It is not uncommon for Palestinians to travel in circuitous routes in order to avoid the hours of queuing at checkpoints, which often spring up overnight. Closure also includes the decrease in the number of Palestinians permitted to work in Israel, an important point because the Palestinian recession is largely seen as being driven by unemployment in the private sector specifically. Also, the destruction of infrastructure and the presence of curfews have played a role in negatively impacting the economy of the Palestinian Territories.

Thus, the problem of closure has two aspects- goods and labor. But what makes closure particularly effective is the high level of dependence of the Palestinian economy on Israel for both goods and labor, a degree of integration that has been a characteristic of the Palestinian economy since the 1967 Israeli occupation of the Palestinian Territories. Trade is largely across the Green Line, reflecting what is known as a "customs union trade regime," a discriminatory trade policy established through the Paris Protocol that has shown to highly favor Israel. In the territories, 96% of exports go to Israel, compared to 10% of Palestinian-bound exports in Israel. In addition, 76% of Palestinian imports are from Israel.

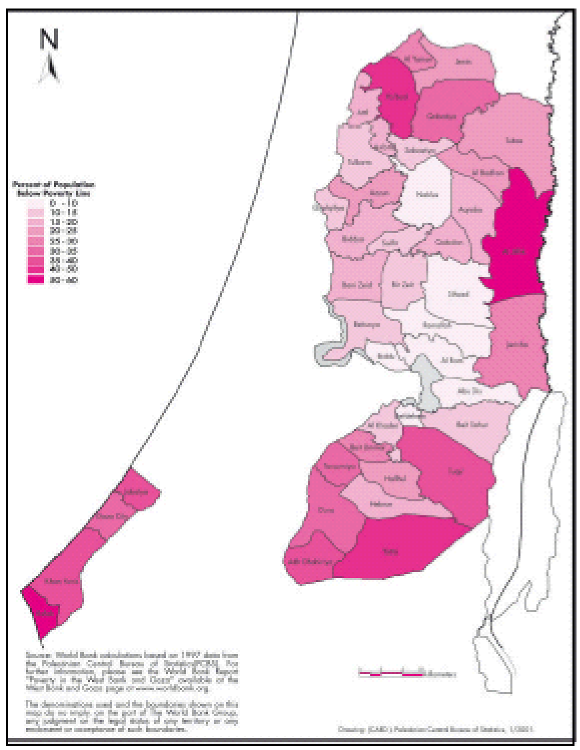
Moreover, Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza began to pursue a development strategy between 1968 and 2000 which featured the export of labor rather than goods.

Even after the cutback in work permits under closure, one quarter of all employed Palestinians worked in Israel, mainly in low-skilled construction and agricultural jobs. Net incomes from Israel (as well as from families abroad) provided more than 22 percent of Palestinian GDP, making it one of the most remittance-dependent economies in the world. This is why the loss of jobs in Israel since the start of the uprising has had such a strong impact- the intifada has demonstrated the vulnerability of a development strategy which relied too heavily on labor export to Israel.

Yet the limitation of Palestinian exports to other markets (such as members of the Arab League), through the levying of tariffs and requirement that all goods pass through Israel or Israeli-controlled borders, further stifled economic growth. Israel has also previously collected tax from the Palestinian Authority, bringing the Palestinian government close to bankruptcy, a fate it has so far avoided owing to the high level of donor funding it has received. The survival of the PA, which has underpinned the public sector by employing one-third of those still working, has in turn prevented a general economic collapse. The support of family networks in the territories and through remittances has further helped cushion the economic blow that has accompanied the Palestinian uprising.

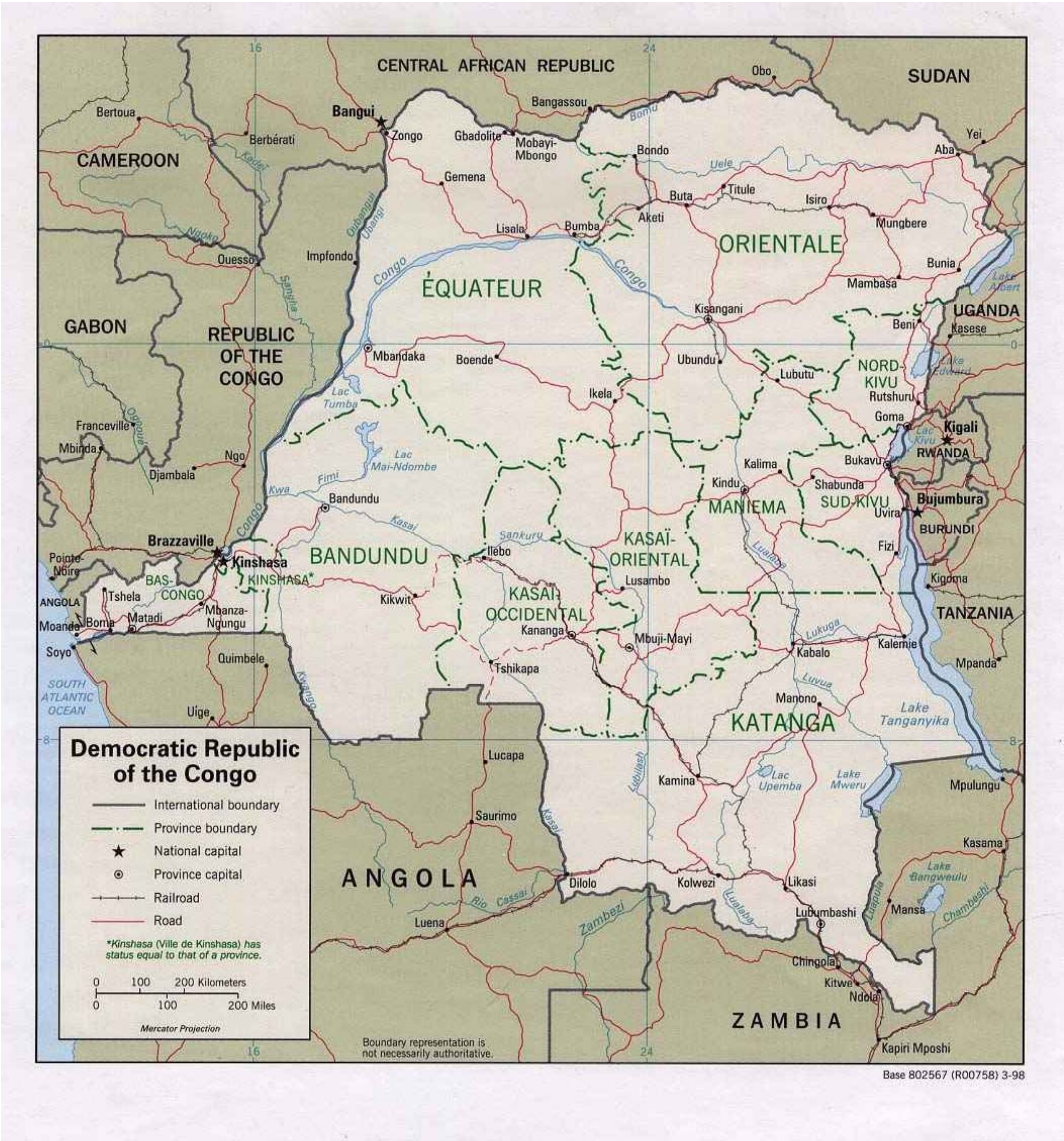
By 2002, two years after the onset of the Second Intifada, 60% of Palestinians had slipped below the poverty line, 53% were unemployed, and 13.3 percent of the population of Gaza suffered from acute malnutrition- similar to levels found in sub-Saharan Africa. Per capita income plummeted by 10 percent in 2000 and another 19 percent in 2001. So did production, exports, and foreign investment. The particular degree of physical isolation from Israel is a strong factor in the Palestinian economy, a point that is evident in the diagram below. Within the territories, the further away from Israel- and even more importantly, from the commercial hub of Jerusalem- the community, the deeper the poverty. As darker shades correspond to greater poverty, it is clear that the areas which surround the pouch (representing Jerusalem) jutting into the center of the West Bank are lightest, while the darker areas form the perimeter, farthest away. The much-isolated Gaza Strip, meanwhile, is completely shaded in; even though internal closures are less severe, Gaza is poorer than the West Bank because it has been almost completely cut off from Israel.

Map of Poverty (as of 1997)



There has also been an Israeli impact- namely, the decimation of the tourism industry (which is at a 20-year low), the drying up of Palestinian labor, a budget deficit because of increased military spending, and labor strikes because of a lack of public service spending. In Israel, too, there has been a recession ever since the start of the intifada (which got especially worse because of the added problems of the bursting of Israel's "dot com" bubble and the slowdown in trade with the U.S. following the terrorist attacks of September 11). Although now there are signs of recovery, it has been the worse recession in 50 years of the country's history, and Israeli unemployment is at a decade high of about 11%. However, while the intifada has cost the Israeli economy 3% of GDP, it has cost the Palestinian economy- one-twentieth the size of its neighbor's- a staggering 50-70%.

Just as the case of the Democratic Republic of Congo illustrates how civil wars often have strong economic causes, the Israeli-Palestinian example shows civil wars have even stronger economic effects. Of course, like the DR Congo, the Mid-East dilemma is no exception; indeed, almost any other conflict can easily demonstrate that the economy becomes the collateral damage of war.


Democratic Republic of the Congo
International boundary
Province boundary
National capital
Province capital
Railroad
Road
*Kinshasa (Ville de Kinshasa) has status equal to that of a province.
0 100 200 Kilometers
0 100 200 Miles
Mercator Projection
Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative.
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CENTRAL AFRICAN REPUBLIC
SUDAN
CAMEROON
GABON
REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO
UGANDA
RWANDA
BURUNDI
TANZANIA
ANGOLA
ZAMBIA
SOUTH ATLANTIC OCEAN
ÉQUATEUR
ORIENTALE
NORD-KIVU
SUD-KIVU
MANIEMA
KASAÏ-ORIENTAL
KASAÏ-OCCIDENTAL
BANDUNDU
BAS-CONGO
KINSHASA*
KATANGA
Bangui
Zongo
Gbadolite
Mobayi-Mbongo
Bangassou
Obo
Yei
Aba
Bondo
Gemena
Buta
Titule
Isiro
Mungbere
Aketi
Lisala
Bumba
Bunia
Mambasa
Kisangani
Beni
Kasese
Impfondo
Ouesso
Bertoua
Berbérati
Mbandaka
Boende
Ubundu
Lubutu
Ikela
Rutshuru
Goma
Kigali
Bukavu
Kalima
Kindu
Shabunda
Bujumbura
Uvira
Fizi
Franceville
Mbinda
Djambala
Ngo
Bandundu
Brazzaville
Kinshasa
Pointe-Noire
Tshela
Matadi
Boma
Moanda
Soyo
Mbanza-Ngungu
Ilebo
Kikwit
Lusambo
Kananga
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Tshikapa
Kabalo
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Kigoma
Mpanda
Manono
Quimbele
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Kasama
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Kolwezi
Likasi
Lubumbashi
Luena
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Chingola
Kitwe
Ndola
Kapiri Mposhi
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Lake Bangweulu
Lac Upemba
Lac Mai-Ndombe
Lac Tumba
Lake Albert
Lake Edward
Lac Kivu
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Lake

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