

Introducing Blair Welsh

Postdoctoral Associate, New York University – Abu Dhabi

Blair Welsh is a Postdoctoral Associate in the Department of Political Science at New York University – Abu Dhabi. His research focuses on the politics of armed violence and development in Africa, utilizing survey and field experiments, spatial econometrics, and causal inference strategies. We discussed his academic journey, the challenges of researching conflict and development, and how he translates complex data into actionable insights for policymakers.



Hello Blair! Can you briefly tell us about your journey into academia? What led you to specialize in the politics of armed violence and development?

I have been interested in international affairs for as long as I can remember. My interest in armed violence and development stemmed from working in countries affected by conflict and speaking with people who lived in particularly violent contexts, such as Nigeria.

I witnessed how violence profoundly disrupted local communities, undermining essential services like healthcare and education, but also how violence created an almost permanent sense of insecurity for locals. This led me to pursue research and a PhD in Political Science, where I became fascinated with state-building, conflict, and development theories.

I've become especially interested in how societies recover from conflict and how exposure to violence exacerbates this recovery process. Through my research, I hope to offer policy recommendations that can contribute to sustainable peace and development in conflict-affected countries by addressing causes of violence while fostering inclusive pathways for recovery and reconciliation.

You've explored complex themes such as armed violence, displacement, and post-conflict recovery. What are some of the biggest challenges you've faced in researching these topics?

There are so many, particularly when conducting research in conflict zones. Of these challenges, I think concerns over physical safety, research ethics, and data reliability are substantial. The risk of violence in conflict zones is considerable, threatening both researcher and participant safety.

In recent years, we have seen armed groups directly target researchers in conflict zones, leading to extensive discussions in the discipline about our ability to ensure the safety of researchers and participants. It's really important to make accurate risk assessments before conducting research in conflict zones. Having strong local connections and good collaborators greatly helps.

On ethics, there can be challenges associated with consent, privacy, confidentiality, and concerns about re-traumatization. Ensuring the research being implemented meets the most rigorous ethical standards at both the

institutional and local levels is crucial. Involving local partners in discussions around ethics and how to protect and care for research participants is vital to ensuring all parties are as protected as possible.

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On data reliability, a significant challenge is collecting "representative" (by population standards) data and whether the data collected are free from any biases or mistakes, given the conditions under which the research is being collected. Often, conflict-affected countries lack up-to-date population statistics, so researchers have to be creative in thinking about the best ways to collect data. Overall, collecting data on these topics is very difficult, particularly in conflict zones, and researchers must take special care in planning and preparing data collection efforts.

Your work spans both theoretical and applied research. How do you approach translating complex data into actionable insights for policymakers?

I think the key is knowing how and why your research matters for real-world partners and key stakeholders and communicating this to them in a way that is easily digestible. The fundamental questions are: Why should these partners care about your research? How can the research help them in their work?

I like to involve partners and stakeholders early in the research process—before data collection—to learn what is important to their organization and create a direct link between the research and policy. I set up meetings to learn about what the organization is working on, its project aims, and what specific policy outputs might look like for them. Therefore, once the data is collected, it is already clear what the partner will find important; it's then more about discovering how to make the results easily digestible.

It's also important to share research findings with policy professionals and practitioners outside your partner organizations. For example, I have a working paper with Prabin Khadka on the reintegration of former enemy collaborators in Somalia, focusing specifically on the gendered nature of reintegration in times of conflict. We knew the paper would be relevant to policymakers in Somalia, but the findings also speak to reintegration practices across many conflicts around the world. We presented a more policy-orientated version of the paper to policymakers across West Africa, discussing the importance of providing tailored, gendered pathways out of armed organizations for women and children.

Mentioned Work:

Welsh, B. and Khadka, P. "Reintegration of Female and Child Ex-Combatants: Evidence from Somalia," *Governance and Local Development Institute Working Paper Series* (Forthcoming).

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