1 | *Introduction*
The Problem of Factual Misinformation and Misperception in War

The first casualty when war comes is truth.

– US Senator Hiram Johnson, 1917

On April 6, 2017, two days after the Syrian regime's infamous chemical weapons attack against the rebel-held town of Khan Shaykhun – which killed dozens of innocent Syrian civilians and left hundreds more burned and disfigured, prompting widespread international condemnation – Syria's Foreign Minister Walid Muallem held a defiant press conference outside of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Damascus. The Syrian government, Muallem said, "has not used and will not use" chemical weapons. Instead, the army had "attacked an arms depot belonging to the Al-Nusra Front which contained chemical weapons." Moreover, the allegation that the event was a sarin gas attack by the government, Muallem stated, had been *fabricated* by Al-Nusra as a desperate attempt to provoke Western military intervention in the conflict.[1] These statements are typical of those that have been made by the Syrian government and its Iranian and Russian backers following atrocities in the country's ongoing civil war.

There is just one problem, of course, with Muallem's claims – they are unequivocally false, a clear example of factual misinformation[2]

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[1] See "LIVE: Syrian FM Walid al-Muallem holds press conference in Damascus." *Ruptly Video News Agency*. Available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=AcaF1vC8SPA.

[2] I follow a number of existing studies and define misinformation as false information that is conveyed with or without the intent to deceive its targets (Vraga and Bode 2020), whereas disinformation is false information that is specifically intended to deceive its audience (as is fake news, see Tandoc, Lim, and Ling 2018). The argument in this book applies to both of these concepts as well as to related ones such as lies, rumors, and fake news, as it is not specific to the source (or intentionality) of the falsehood. I often default to the term misinformation in the book because it is the most general and inclusive concept, though I use other more specific terms when warranted as well.

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in modern war. In this sense, however, they are actually unremarkable. Misinformation, lies, and fake news have long been with us in situations of war as well as peace. From false stories about German atrocities – such as the mutilation of Belgian babies and the industrial processing of corpses by the German government – that proliferated in World War I (WWI) to fake reports about the crucifixion of Russian-speaking civilians and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) attacks against Russia during its occupation of Ukraine,[3] these phenomena have been a longstanding feature of violent conflict.

But to what extent are such lies actually believed? Do Syrians buy the regime's fabrications about events at Khan Shaykhun? More broadly, do civilian populations[4] really know what is going on in war, or do they form false beliefs about it? These questions are vitally important because of the dangers that such factual misinformation and misperception can present. For one thing, if it is embraced, misinformation in war-torn or otherwise fragile contexts can incite or escalate violence. For example, a flood of fake news about attacks by the Rohingya minority in Myanmar has fueled a brutal military crackdown against the community since 2017, sending over half a million people fleeing to neighboring Bangladesh.[5] Similarly, evidence suggests that some of the incendiary radio stations that were active in Rwanda in the 1990s – which contained rampant misinformation about Tutsi behaviors – played a significant role in fueling the tragic violence of the Rwandan genocide (Yanagizawa-Drott 2014).

In addition, wartime misinformation can undermine the possibility of peace. For instance, for Syrians who come to think that chemical attacks in places such as Khan Shaykhun were perpetrated by the rebels, the idea of reconciling with these groups becomes even more unlikely. And in World War II (WWII), lies by the Nazis about their continued successes late into the war helped sustain German war support rather than allowing for a greater acceptance of reality and

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[3] See, for example, Arkady Ostrovsky, "Putin's Ukraine Unreality Show." *The Wall Street Journal*, July 28, 2014.

[4] By "civilian" this text refers to people in armed conflicts who are not "members of State armed forces or organized armed groups" and do not otherwise "take a direct part in hostilities" (ICRC 2009, 16).

[5] See, for example, Annie Gowen and Max Bearak, "Fake News on Facebook Fans the Flames of Hate against the Rohingya in Burma." *Washington Post*, December 8, 2017.

readiness to end the conflict (USSBS 1947). In sum, factual misinformation and misperception in war can spark more violence, and they can spoil and undermine the potential for peace. If we care about seeing violent conflicts de-escalated and resolved, we thus need a comprehensive understanding of misinformation and its appeal in war. That is the task taken up for the first time in this book.

1.1 The Neglect of Misinformation and Its Appeal in War

This book sits at the intersection of two major bodies of scholarship that have to date had remarkably little interaction. On the one hand, there has been growing attention in security, peace, and conflict studies in recent years to the "micro-dynamics" of conflicts – that is, to understanding how groups and individuals think and behave "on the ground" in violent conflict (e.g., Lyall 2010, Shapiro 2013, Toft and Zhukov 2015, Balcells 2017, Kaplan 2017, Hoover Green 2018, Krause 2018). This research has produced insights on everything from the patterns of violence that occur in civil wars (Kalyvas 2006) to the recruitment and management strategies of rebel organizations (Weinstein 2006) to the ways in which civilian populations mobilize and organize to resist armed actors (Arjona 2016). On the other hand, there has also been an explosion of research in the social sciences on lies, misinformation, conspiracy theories, and other related phenomena in social and political life (e.g., Nyhan and Reifler 2010, Uscinski and Parent 2014, Jolley and Douglas 2015, Druckman and McGrath 2019, Guess et al. 2020, Vraga and Bode 2020, Greene and Murphy 2021). This information helped us understand the spread, appeal, and consequences of misinformation in various social arenas, from election fraud (Berlinski et al. 2021) to climate change (Tesler 2018) to public health (Roozenbeek et al. 2020) and beyond.

Yet the area where these two substantial literatures would naturally bump into each other – that is, understanding misinformation in war and conflict – has received little scholarly attention. This is surprising from both perspectives. From the perspective of conflict studies, it is surprising that there has been much attention to individual-level behaviors and attitudes in war in recent years, yet little to people's factual beliefs – even though those beliefs can shape attitudes and behaviors. That is, *what people think is going on in war* can shape whom they support and what they do. From the

perspective of misinformation research, it is equally surprising that while scholars have studied misinformation and lies in so many other areas of public life, its dynamics in situations of war and conflict have remained relatively unexplored. As contemporary, high-profile wars such as Russia's invasion and occupation of Ukraine and the conflict between Israel and Hamas have made quite clear, these two phenomena are deeply connected – war has become one of the main arenas of misinformation today, and misinformation has become one of the primary battlefronts in war. This book aims to rectify this gap and ultimately will have something important to say to both of these bodies of scholarship. It will show how influential models of civilian attitudes and behaviors in war should be modified based on people's varying latitude for believing misinformation and how our existing understanding of factual misinformation in other areas of social and political lives changes when it crashes on the jagged rocks of violent conflict.

Moreover, in addition to the sheer dearth of research at the intersection of these two areas, there are strong conceptual reasons why extending our understanding of belief in misinformation to consider situations such as war is critically important. In particular, while the existing literature has identified a wide variety of factors that shape people's susceptibility to embracing misinformation, its focus is overwhelmingly on *individual differences*. Factors such as ideological motivated reasoning (Nyhan and Reifler 2010), animosity toward partisan opponents (Osmundsen et al. 2021), a desire for group belonging (Rathje et al. 2023), weak critical reasoning skills (Pennycook and Rand 2019), low generalized social trust (Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016), and prior exposure to the claim (Pennycook, Cannon, and Rand 2019) among others have been credibly linked to people's receptivity to false and unsubstantiated information. Yet all of these factors focus on variation across individuals – the extent to which they hold certain preferences, possess certain capabilities, or have consumed certain information – and not variation in the *situations in which they find themselves*. This is surprising given that both "the person" and "the situation" are powerful drivers of human psychology (e.g., Ross and Nisbett 1991), and we might expect that extreme situations such as war are especially influential in shaping how people think and process new information. This text aims to fill this gap in our knowledge and will reckon with how the situational

dynamics of war shape people's political psychology and their ability to discern true information from false information.

1.2 The Argument in Brief: How Proximity Constrains Credulity in War

This book explores the question of when people can sort truth from lies in war and form accurate beliefs about what is going on around them. It argues that much of the answer lies in their degree of proximity and exposure to the conflict events or dynamics in question. The punchline is that lies are pervasive in conflict, but they can be punctured when people are close to the "action" over time – in short, that seeing is the key to disbelieving in war.

The logic behind this conclusion is straightforward. In particular, it is premised on the idea that factual beliefs in war hinge critically on two key factors: (1) the *information* that people have about the relevant events and (2) their *motivation* to understand that information accurately or not. Indeed, drawing on research from social psychology, the argument begins with the fact that people often indulge in "motivated reasoning" about events around them, developing factual beliefs about their environments that fit their existing worldviews. In war, this means that people will often form beliefs about the nature of conflict events based on what they already think about the groups that are fighting. If, for example, an airstrike is conducted by the USA, and they dislike and distrust the USA, they will probably come to think the attack was indiscriminate in nature – as that matches the motives they think the Americans possess. Yet, not everyone has the luxury of allowing their worldviews to dictate their beliefs. For those who are sufficiently near the action – for those who see it and are directly affected by it – these "directional biases" will take a backseat to an "accuracy motive" (Kunda 1990), as getting it right or wrong may be a matter of life or death. In these cases, people's tendencies to form self-serving, biased beliefs about their environments are "disciplined" by the need to understand the risks and dangers around them in order to survive. Thus, if civilians live in a community that is under regular American bombardment – even if they dislike the USA – they are strongly incentivized to know who exactly is targeted and what exactly the dynamics of the bombing are for their own survival.

Meanwhile, a parallel process unfolds in the informational arena. Drawing on key ideas in communications, the argument advanced in the book builds on the fact that people's "information diets" have a strong effect on their beliefs as well, with distinct information sources varying widely in their representations of the world. The media in conflict environments are particularly prone to these dynamics, fueling factual biases among different audiences. For example, during the Israeli invasion of southern Lebanon in 2006, Lebanese civilians who got their news from *Al Jazeera* or Hezbollah's *Al-Manar TV* were treated to a very different depiction of what was happening on the ground – who was winning and losing, what was being bombed, and to what effects – than civilians who followed the *BBC* (Kalb and Saivetz 2007). Yet, as discussed earlier, not everyone is equally vulnerable to such biases – communities that are more exposed to the relevant events will resist or reject biased media narratives due to their superior local information about what is going on. In other words, for Lebanese civilians who were living on or near the front lines in towns such as Qana or Bint Jbeil, their beliefs about the nature of events in the war were sharply constrained by what they themselves and those around them actually experienced in the fighting. In this way, too, proximity to reality can be a powerful check on misinformation.

Table 1.1 sums up the theory. The overall picture is clear: Communities who are distant or removed from the relevant events will tend to form false beliefs and be easily misled about them, whereas those who are proximate and exposed to the events in question – for both informational and motivational reasons – will tend to form more accurate perceptions about them and to know better. This

Table 1.1 *Summarizing the model of people's factual beliefs in war*

Types of individuals	*Information*		*Motivation*		Result
Proximate/ exposed to the relevant events	→ Local knowledge	+	Accuracy motive	=	↑ Belief accuracy ↓ Misinformation vulnerability
Distant/removed from the relevant events	→ Partisan media	+	Directional biases	=	↓ Belief accuracy ↑ Misinformation vulnerability

conclusion is a powerful one from multiple perspectives. From a conflict perspective, we will see how it knits together existing disparate understandings about how civilian communities think in war into a more coherent whole. And from a misinformation point of view, we will see how it adds to existing ideas about people's biases and other individual differences fostering false beliefs and shows how these can be constrained by the power of high-stakes situations.

1.3 Empirical Approach to Analyzing Factual Beliefs and Biases in War

Broadly speaking, this book's methodological approach is to use a range of evidence about what people actually think in violent conflicts in order to test its claims. Indeed, studying people's susceptibility to wartime misinformation requires examining what people believe is happening in war and why they believe it. This requires looking carefully at what is "in people's heads" as they navigate violent conflicts – their attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions. The empirical core of the text thus contains a wealth of "micro-level" evidence from different wars.

Within this context, the book marshals several different types of micro-level information. This reflects a view that combining diverse types and sources of evidence is beneficial when testing an argument. One key source of data that is used is public opinion surveys, including both widely available public opinion polls conducted by large organizations such as the *Pew Research Center* in conflict environments and more specialized surveys obtained specifically to study the issues in this book. Surveys allow us to examine broad patterns in public perceptions and the factors driving them, and they are amply used – albeit in somewhat different ways – in both Chapter 3 on Pakistan and Chapter 4 on Iraq.

Another major source of data presented in the book is violent event data. Violent event data does not directly tap into people's thinking in war. However, it is highly useful in multiple ways. First, violent event data helps us benchmark baseline realities in armed conflicts, especially when we can triangulate across multiple sources of data and complement them with detailed qualitative and contextual understanding. Second, violent event data can be combined with public opinion surveys in novel ways to examine how people's beliefs and

attitudes shift with proximity to wartime events in either space or time. Indeed, this is a strategy that is used extensively in Chapter 4.

A third key type of data used in the book is interview data. Interviews are often conducted on smaller samples than large-n public opinion surveys, but they can provide deep knowledge of people's thinking and decision-making in situations such as wars because they can capture and convey their personal narratives and experiences robustly. In this sense, they are an important complement to the use of large-scale public opinion surveys and violent event data referenced earlier. The book analyzes a sizable batch of semi-structured interviews with refugees from Syria both quantitatively and qualitatively in Chapter 5.

Finally, the content in this text is informed by exploratory fieldwork that was conducted in Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, Pakistan, in the winter of 2014–15, and in Amman, Jordan, in the summer of 2017. While this fieldwork was conducted early on in the research process and aimed to interface with local survey firm administrators as much as to personally collect data, it included considerable "soaking and poking" that informs the treatment of the cases in the book. In Pakistan, especially, information was gleaned from direct conversations with numerous journalists, experts, political elites, and ordinary civilians about the fighting in the country's northwest and the politics around it, yielding important contextual knowledge about the conflict and public perceptions of it by people both from the tribal areas and from elsewhere in the country.

1.4 Conceptual Ground Clearing

It is also important to do some conceptual ground clearing and flesh out a few key concepts and scope conditions before proceeding. First, a word on the types of violent conflict to which the book applies. While many important works on the dynamics of conflict in recent years restrict their focus to a specific type of war – such as interstate war, civil war, or insurgency – to facilitate clear theory building, the dynamics outlined here apply widely across different types of violent disputes. The primary argument in the book is applicable to any form of organized violence, be it intrastate or interstate, asymmetric or symmetric, ethnic or nonethnic, or criminal or political in nature. This is because the assumptions required

for it to hold are simply that (1) civilians in the dispute have some prior preferences or allegiances toward the belligerents involved – that is, they are not simply all neutral and impartial – and (2) media outlets do not all report events in the dispute with perfect agreement and accuracy. If these two minimal conditions are met, and one can argue that they are in all violent conflicts, the central argument of the book – that civilians removed from events will tend to form factually biased beliefs about them, whereas those in the line of fire will tend to be more accurate in their perceptions and be less easily misled – will be applicable.[6]

There is also the question of the types of beliefs to which this text applies. Here it is worth stressing that the book studies the accuracy of people's *factual or empirical* beliefs about conflict, and not their *moral or normative* beliefs about it. Thus, questions about who is winning and losing, who is fighting and not fighting, who is being targeted and not being targeted, and what tactics are being used and not being used are all subject to the central argument. In contrast, judgments about whose cause is just and unjust, who is the victim and who the oppressor, and who deserves to win and lose are not within our purview. In fact, this distinction parallels the words of one scholar and ex-war correspondent, who noted aptly that "wartime news breaks down into two main sections – news of the fighting and the justification for it" (Knightley 2004: 502). The book tackles the former and not the latter. No claims are made about the extent to which people's normative beliefs about the conflict change with their degree of exposure to the events in question, except insofar as they are influenced by new information learned about what is taking place on the ground.[7]

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[6] Now, when the different civilian communities and media outlets in the dispute are *more* polarized, the gap between proximate and distant civilians may be *larger*, but the basic argument requires only that there be some distribution of popular preferences and media coverage in the dispute.

[7] One further caveat is that we must focus on factual beliefs about the past or present as opposed to the future. People's predictions or expectations about the future course of a war are not falsifiable, no matter their content (e.g., "we *will* win" may yet turn out to be true even if one is currently losing), whereas those about the present or past may be judged against the facts on the ground (e.g., "we *are* winning" or "we *have* won" is false if your side is losing or it has lost).

1.5 A Note on Sorting Fact from Fake

One practical question that should be addressed here is what is meant by terms such as "fake," "false," and "misperception" – that is, how one can identify a particular factual belief as incorrect or inaccurate. In fact, this is a critical question not just for this book but for all research about fake news, misinformation, and other related phenomena. Following influential studies in the literature, this book treats as inaccurate any belief that is either: (1) demonstrably false or (2) not supported by or at odds with the weight of existing evidence – in other words, that is *false* or *unsubstantiated* (Nyhan and Reifler 2010). Such definitions can be best clarified in concrete terms. For example, if I hold up a blue pen and say, "this pen is red," my statement is demonstrably false. Similarly, if there is an attack in war that is extremely precise and causes no collateral damage, and someone believes that it killed all civilians, that belief would also be inaccurate.

Since it is easy to get lost in the definitional "weeds," it is important here to step back and recall that wars are generally deeply politicized contexts awash in blatant combatant propaganda. Many beliefs that arise in war are either the result of stories that were fabricated and manipulated (sometimes even admittedly) by one "side" or another, or are so plainly false to those outside the passions and prejudices of the conflict as to be almost absurd. In other words, there are many bald lies in war. For example, infamous pieces of atrocity propaganda such as the German corpse factory story in WWI (Knightley 2004, Ch. 5), the accounts of Israeli rape at Deir Yassin in 1948 (Morris 2005), or the Kuwaiti "incubator babies" story in the Gulf War (Marlin 2002, Ch. 5) were all later acknowledged as at least partially false by those who created or spread them. Moreover, the release of private correspondence from participants such as combatants, censors, editors, and correspondents has made clear the suppression of news about major developments in numerous violent conflicts, from the British concentration camps during the Boer War (Knightley 2004, Ch. 4) to the carpet bombing of Laos and Cambodia by the USA during the war in Vietnam (Knightley 2004, Ch. 16). While hindsight often provides the clearest indications of such manipulation, the revelations from WikiLeaks and other major "document dumps" that occur today give us windows into the private views of participants about campaigns such as the US drone program in Pakistan.

In addition to public admissions and revelations of lying, factual statements and beliefs can be judged against evidence about what is actually happening on the ground. For example, one false belief explored in Chapter 4 is that the international anti-Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) Coalition during the administration of President Barack Obama was "mainly targeting" the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) – a collection of Shiʿa-led militias with whom it was nominally allied – rather than ISIL in Iraq. Leaving aside the fact that this claim was outlandish on its face, *Airwars* – an independent organization that tracks air campaigns around the world – found only a few dozen credible "friendly fire" claims out of more than 10,000 airstrikes conducted by Coalition forces in Iraq (Airwars 2017). Regardless of the intentionality of such incidents, the claim that the Coalition is *mainly targeting* the PMF is thus clearly not supported by the evidence. Similarly, organizations such as Bellingcat have used open-source evidence to expose a variety of false claims in conflict. For instance, in the face of Russia's claims that none of its troops fought in Ukraine in 2014, Bellingcat found Russian social media posts that included "selfies" by Russian soldiers with their platoons in Ukrainian territory, which exposed this as a lie (Bellingcat 2014a). Meanwhile, it also retraced the transit of a surface-to-air missile across Ukraine using ground-level and satellite photos to reveal that the Malaysian passenger jet (MH17) that crashed in Ukraine in 2014 was in fact downed by Russian-backed militants (Bellingcat 2014b). In sum, academic and NGO conflict event datasets, analyses by conflict-monitoring groups such as Bellingcat, and other types of high-quality information can offer crucial "reality checks" about factual claims in war.

Ultimately, however, the approach taken in this book for factual claims in ongoing conflicts (for which there is generally no single "silver bullet" piece of evidence like an admission of lying) is to rely on multiple different types and sources of independent evidence to establish falsehood. Pursuant to this end, the book triangulates between not just quantitative evidence such as violent event databases but also qualitative evidence such as journalistic and academic interview-based investigations, leaked combatant reports and statements via WikiLeaks, and other sources of reliable information about events on the ground. Moreover, given the relatively high-profile nature of the three primary cases in the book, there is often a wealth of evidence available – including a number of databases monitoring events that

can be compared. If all of the data sources point in the same direction, that is telling. For example, as discussed in Chapter 3, the fact that all three leading US drone strike-tracking databases – despite their distinctive methodologies – indicate that the US drone campaign in Pakistan is *not* primarily killing civilians is significant. When combined with diverse qualitative evidence such as eyewitness testimonies, quality investigative reporting, interview-based scholarly research, and candid official statements that all tell the same story, this allows us to be confident that claims about the American drone campaign in Pakistan being indiscriminate are false. Finally, the aforementioned exploratory fieldwork that was conducted in Pakistan and Jordan, during which informal conversations took place with a number of people who had personally lived through the conflicts of interest, has only added further confirmation to the selection and treatment of the cases of misinformation that are examined in this text.

1.6 Major Implications of the Book for Theory and Policy

The argument advanced here has a number of key implications for scholars, policymakers, journalists, and engaged citizens. This section sketches out a few of the most important takeaways – a more extensive discussion can be found in the book's conclusion.

First, the book shows where factual misinformation and misperception is – and critically, is not – a threat in war. For both informational and psychological reasons, people near the "action" in war typically know what is happening in conflict, while those more removed from the front lines are more vulnerable to lies and misinformation about what is going on. Counter to alarmist views of misinformation and propaganda by states like Russia as unstoppable and overpowering in war, this reveals how its impact is quite constrained by and conditional on people's actual exposure to the fighting. It is chiefly communities who are *partisan about but removed from* the actual fighting that are most susceptible to falsehood – for example, this may include urbanites in a country with a rural insurgency, citizens of a powerful state intervening in another country or fighting abroad, or those in diasporas with resistance organizations that aim to represent them and exploit their grievances. In the words of one Somali community advocate based in the USA, Abdirizak Bihi, "the Somalis inside Somalia knew that al-Shabab was bad … [w]e were concerned about the Somalis in the

diaspora … who never really knew the facts and were always manipulated and misled."[8] This project helps build on these anecdotes and provide a systematic framework for thinking about where we should expect to see this problem of dangerous factual misperceptions flourish the most (and least) in armed conflicts. Using this framework, the book also builds on bargaining models of war and extracts implications for where wars are likely to be the most enduring and peace the most elusive.

Second, this book helps deepen our understanding of civilian populations and what makes them "tick" in war zones more broadly. Research and writing on civilians has been split between two camps: A "rationalist" view in which they are seen as pragmatic actors who recognize and react to combatant rewards and punishments in ways that maximize their odds of survival (Popkin 1979, Kalyvas 2006), and an "identitarian" view in which they are seen as harboring powerful in-group vs. out-group loyalties that strongly condition their attitudes and behavior (Lyall 2010, Lyall, Blair, and Imai 2013). The book suggests that both of these views are partially right, and partially wrong. Specifically, it reveals that civilians living directly in the "line of fire" fit the pragmatic model well – their biases are "disciplined" by survival concerns – but the majority of civilians living elsewhere in conflict settings do not. In this sense, the project has a deeply *unifying* effect on different strands of scholarship about civilian populations, showing how they coexist at different levels of removal from events on the ground. As discussed more fully in subsequent chapters, this helps explain why we see such differential responses locally vs. nationally to something like the US drone campaign in Pakistan, and it sounds an important note of caution about the efficacy and scalability of many of the "population-centric" tactics at the heart of modern counterinsurgency practice.

Third, this volume should also be of interest to political psychology and behavior scholars more generally. In recent years, there has been a surge of behavioral research on the abundance of lies, conspiracy theories, false perceptions, rumors, and "fake news" in mainstream politics (e.g., Wood and Oliver 2014, Jolley and Douglas 2015, Miller, Saunders, and Farhart 2016, Vraga and Bode 2020). While

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[8] See "'Most Wanted' American Jihadist Rapper Killed in Somalia." *Associated Press*, September 12, 2013.

debates continue to rage about the strength of these beliefs, there is a creeping image in the mass public and commentariat that we are mired in a "post-truth era" in which facts exert little impact on how people form beliefs and opinions. Misinformation scholars tend to hold more nuanced views than this, recognizing that the prevalence of misperceptions on an issue hinges on a variety of factors such as people's identities (Kahan 2017), their cognitive biases (Pennycook and Rand 2021), and the information they consume from the media (Nyhan 2021). Yet they leave little room for the *real-world situations* that surround people to shape and constrain their beliefs. This book shows that, while rumors and lies are pervasive in wars, there are also clear situational limits to their appeal. In fact, it suggests that exposure to high-stakes stimuli is an antidote to lies and misinformation: Civilians who witness events and have to make good choices to survive seek out the facts and cut through the lies. In this sense, the study offers a note of qualified optimism in the often-gloomy debates about facts in politics. When people have enough "skin in the game" and can see the relevant events, they tend to get it right regardless of their prior attitudes and identities. At the same time, it also raises the question: Who else in social and political life – from those near violent crime to natural disasters to outbreaks of disease – thinks like local civilians near the front lines of war? In the conclusion, crucial implications are extracted about the generalizability of the book's findings for our understanding of when people learn beyond situations of war and conflict, implications which should be of great interest to behavioral social scientists more broadly.

Finally, the project also contains key implications for policymakers. For those who wish to mitigate or manage violent conflicts, it suggests that encouraging combatants to exercise restraint, aid civilians, participate in peace negotiations, or undertake any number of other prescribed actions within a given conflict zone is necessary but not sufficient. For instance, did ordinary Colombians *believe* that the FARC was actually demobilizing as part of their society's peace process or not? Without challenging disinformation (and the psychological and informational biases that underpin it), such deeds may fall on deaf ears – or even have an exacerbating impact – on the vast majority of the population. In this sense, actors like the United Nations who wish to mitigate or de-escalate wars must consider not only which actions are taken by combatants, but also – or even especially – which actions

civilians *think* are being taken by them. Waging information campaigns to counter influential lies should thus be a standard part of the peace-making toolkit. In the book's conclusion, other novel solutions to these issues are considered, including methods that social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook could use to amplify the voices of local communities near the front lines in conflict settings over their more distant counterparts in order to inject more truth into what we read, hear, and see from armed conflict settings. Ultimately, it is up to us as scholars, policymakers, and citizens to help translate the new insights revealed in this text into social and political actions that can challenge the influence of dangerous wartime lies and misinformation.

1.7 Outline of the Book

This book consists of six chapters. Chapter 2 builds the theory about how civilians develop factual beliefs in war. This chapter walks through the two major factors that power the theoretical engine behind the book's argument. First, it explores the role of people's psychological *motivation* in how they think about the world, and its application to belief formation in war zones. In general, people will be motivated to interpret events in a way that fits their prior worldviews in the dispute, but not everyone will do so: for those who are closer to the action, such biases are outweighed by an "accuracy motive" and the need to get it right. Then, it discusses the role of people's *information* sources in shaping their factual beliefs. The media in conflict zones is particularly prone to fueling factual biases, but not everyone is equally vulnerable: Those more directly exposed to the relevant events will often reject biased narratives due to their community's local information about what is actually taking place. Ultimately, the chapter weaves these two factors together, showing how they jointly ensure that fake news spreads widely in war, but those who are close enough to the action are generally less vulnerable to it and often know better.

Chapter 3 examines these issues in the case of the US drone campaign in the tribal regions of Pakistan. It first shows that, while the drone campaign is empirically quite precise and targeted, it is largely seen as indiscriminate throughout Pakistani society. In other words, there is a pervasive *factual misperception* about the nature of the drone strikes in Pakistan. Second, the chapter shows that this misperception is consequential. Notably, it shows that Pakistani perceptions of the inflated

civilian casualties associated with the strikes are among the strongest drivers of opposition to them in the country. It also provides evidence which suggests that this anti-drone backlash fuels broader political alienation and violence in Pakistan. Finally, the chapter shows that these misbeliefs about drones (and the reactions they inspire) are not shared by local civilians living within the tribal areas where the incidents occur. In sum, the chapter demonstrates that factual misperceptions about US drone strikes in Northwest Pakistan are generally widespread and consequential in the country, but not in the areas that actually directly experience the violence.

Chapter 4 shifts to the Coalition air war against ISIL in Iraq. In particular, it investigates a unique nationwide survey of contemporary Iraq that measures Iraqis' factual perceptions about the Coalition airstrikes against ISIL, as well as whether they have lived under ISIL rule where the vast majority of strikes actually occurred. Moreover, this survey is paired with geo-located event data on the Coalition airstrikes themselves obtained from *Airwars* in order to measure the respondents' proximity to the events more directly. Overall, the results reveal that Iraqis' factual misperceptions about Coalition actions are widespread – fueled by both their own preexisting political orientations and streams of information in the dispute – but that civilians with greater personal exposure to the campaign are much less likely to embrace these falsehoods. Indeed, both experience living under ISIL control and proximity to the airstrikes themselves significantly reduce factual misperceptions about the Coalition's aerial campaign, including false claims about its targeting of Shiʿa Arab-led militias and its strategic benefits to ISIL.

Chapter 5 investigates these dynamics in the context of the Syrian civil war. In particular, it plumbs a rich batch of semi-structured interviews conducted with Syrian refugees in Turkey that was generously shared with me by Schon (2020) for this book. These interviews measure people's confidence in their truth discernment ability – their ability to distinguish true vs. false information – during the war, along with detailed information on what they heard and experienced while they were in Syria. The chapter analyzes these interviews with a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative analyses show that those who spent longer in Syria, witnessed a wider range of events in the war, and explicitly rely on personal experience to assess new information are much more confident in their truth discernment ability. This is

supported by ample qualitative material from the interviews, which demonstrates how Syrian refugees put stock in many of these same factors and drew many of these same connections themselves when discussing informational dynamics, lies, and learning in the war.

Chapter 6 concludes and considers the book's major theoretical and practical implications. As alluded to above, the book pushes us to think about fake news and factual misperceptions as an important "layer" of war – a layer that has been largely neglected despite the burgeoning attention to these issues in other domains. This final chapter examines what the book's findings tell us about such topics as the psychology and behavior of civilian populations, the duration of armed conflicts, the feasibility of prevailing counterinsurgency models, and the depths and limits of misperceptions more broadly in social and political life. It also engages with the practical implications of the book for policymakers, journalists, activists, and ordinary politically engaged citizens in greater depth, exploring how the problems outlined in the research might also be their own solutions. Ultimately, this book has something to offer to anyone who is interested in the dynamics of truth and falsehood in violent conflicts (and beyond) – and perhaps the beginnings of a framework for those who would like to cultivate more truth.