

## Fotini Christia

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*Fotini Christia joined the MIT faculty in fall 2008 as assistant professor in political science. She recently completed her Ph.D. in Public Policy at Harvard University, where she was a recipient of research fellowships from the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs, the Olin Institute for Strategic Studies and the Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs. Her research interests deal with issues of ethnicity and civil wars and her dissertation addresses the question of civil war alliances.*

**précis:** You joined MIT as an assistant professor this fall after receiving your Ph.D. from Harvard. What brought you to MIT?

**FC:** I was particularly interested in work on civil wars and security more broadly, and MIT is clearly renowned for that. MIT has a Security Studies program, which means that there is overlap between the subfields of international relations, comparative politics, and political economy, which I appreciate as it mirrors my own approach to research. I had also previously taken classes and attended seminars on ethnic politics and civil war at MIT while a graduate student, so I had extensive interactions with MIT students and faculty before I came here as a professor.

**précis:** What is your current role at MIT?

**FC:** I taught two classes in the fall, an undergraduate course entitled “Political Science: Scope and Methods” and a graduate course on civil war. This spring, I have been teaching a course on violent non-state actors, which pleasantly surprised me with a large enrollment of students who have a wide array of backgrounds, from biology to nuclear engineering, including members of the U.S. Army and Navy. I also helped start the Violent Non-State Actors working group at CIS, which I chair with Roger Petersen. I served on a faculty search committee in the methods subfield, and we were very excited that the person we tried to recruit has agreed to join the faculty this coming fall. Finally, I am starting to get involved in a growing number of dissertation committees.

**précis:** Your dissertation focused on alliances during civil wars. What were the major findings?

My dissertation looks at a specific sub-sample of civil wars. I do not examine the traditional “strong state facing an insurgency” type of civil war, which is arguably two-thirds of all cases. I am more interested in the cases of all-out civil wars where there has been state collapse. For example, instead of the Russian-Chechnyan civil war I am interested in civil wars in the Congo, Bosnia, and Afghanistan, where everybody is at war with everybody else and there is no strong central state. My motivation stems from the fact that insurgencies tend to be two-sided affairs, whereas my research focus on alliances necessitates the study of three or more actors. I am also quite interested in the role of ethnicity in civil war. The original research question of my dissertation was: Are groups in civil wars strictly driven by power considerations or does ethnic identity matter, and to the degree that ethnic identity matters, how and when does it matter? My findings were slightly counterintuitive. I expected to find existence of minimum willing coalitions, but also that groups would be constrained to certain degrees in their alliance choices by their identity repertoire. Instead, I found that the relative power balance determines who is going to ally with who and identity does not matter in alliance decisions. However, identity is used in the narratives that these groups use to justify their alliance decisions. Therefore, everyone becomes a potential ally and a potential enemy of everyone else, which is why the title of my dissertation was “The Closest of Enemies.” It would be wrong to suggest that my findings demonstrate that identity does not matter. Identity certainly matters, but within the very proscribed context of alliances, groups only use identity in this way.

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**précis: President Obama has already begun to place a renewed focus on Afghanistan. Do you think this infusion of troops, money, and political attention, perhaps alongside a shift in strategy, can achieve “success” in Afghanistan? And, what is a reasonable definition of “success”?**

**FC:** One of the cases in my dissertation was the civil war in Afghanistan, and it was very interesting to see the shifts and changes in various ethnic groups including the Taliban, which we consider unchanging and irreconcilable. In a piece that is coming out in *Foreign Affairs* in July, I argue with a colleague that we should peel off layers of the Taliban to better stabilize the country and weaken the opposition. The new Obama administration seems amenable to this idea, although it has had a bit of a schizophrenic policy by constantly shifting the focus back to troop levels instead of strategy. We argue that the U.S. first needs to squeeze the Taliban, because they are currently winning and have no incentive to flip. However, once we shift the balance of power and make them feel greater pressure, we must then offer them some incentives to flip. We call this an “honorable exit,” and the way you get there is you need to have a patron within the government structure who is someone a Taliban leader trusts that will initiate a leader to flip and perhaps bring his troops along with him given the right sticks and carrots. We cannot simply say, “We’ll talk to the tribes and have another Awakening like in Iraq.” The human terrain in this regard is a lot more complicated. People in Afghanistan know who these people are in the Taliban, but you need a system in place to get people to flip. Nonetheless, one-fourth to one-third of the Taliban movement will have to be taken out because they are irreconcilables with no interest in flipping.

If the goal is a strong central government controlling everything and everyone, then that is unrealistic. The ideal scenario would be some sort of stability like that after the U.S. invasion in 2001, fostered in part by increasing the

quality and quantity of the army and police. Building a central state army in a place that is so ethnically fragmented and fractionalized is going to really be a challenge. People are going to have to make do with strongmen and warlords, but redefined in different ways. Local leaders will have to play a role in this reformed, stable Afghanistan. The notion that the Obama administration has right is that this is a counterterrorism operation pursued so that Afghanistan does not become a safe haven for Al-Qaeda or other terrorists. Frankly speaking, unless the Pakistani issue gets addressed, Afghanistan will never be stable, in part because half of the people do not recognize the border between the two nations because of the relationships between the Pashtun tribes in both areas. Unless the strategy toward Pakistan is taken more seriously, we cannot have stability in Afghanistan. The problem is that that is a lot harder on a number of different levels than dealing only with Afghanistan.

**précis: Having lived and worked in Iran, what do Americans not understand about Iran that they should? How can the U.S. best achieve a more stable, productive relationship with Iran?**

**FC:** Many people have already conveyed that even though there is this notion that Iran is very anti-American, they love American soft power in the sense that they are very culturally involved with things that are very Western. I was struck with how modern Iran is. I am from Greece and it seemed like home, or even more advanced than home in some ways. That said, they have major issues with what the U.S. is doing in the Middle East. They had major problems with the American invasion of Iraq and are uncomfortable with the close relationship between the U.S. and Saudi Arabia. However, for Iranians it is completely compatible to think these things and drink Coke, wear U.S. outfits, listen to Britney Spears and generally embrace American pop culture. They are very excited about interacting with Americans.

The other thing that is very interesting to me is that there is this notion that Iranians are being repressed and there is this regime we need to liberate them from. They have a very different view. Even among the very selective sample of people that I talked with, who were very Western and supportive of the Shah, some of them wanted regime change, but most people realize that the future is to reform the current structure rather than overthrow it. Reform is what they are after rather than radical change. I would ask members of the student and women’s movements, “What is it from the U.S. that you would like?” And they would say, “Please don’t touch us. Basically, stay away. Because when the U.S. is involved everyone sees us as puppets and illegitimate, not as an indigenous movement, which is what we actually are.”

**précis: Political science is sometimes referred to as a predominantly observational science, which can pose significant challenges. However, your current projects involve experiments. Why? Can/should political scientists look for more opportunities to conduct experiments?**

**FC:** I am interested in questions of war and security that are constrained in this regard, since you cannot run experiments on war. However, there are other questions of ethnicity and cooperation that can be operationalized in this fashion. My first project built on a natural experiment in Bosnia in the divided city of Mosdar. You had two Croat schools on the west side of Mosdar and two Muslim schools on the east side. The international community went in and merged two of the schools into a so-called integrated school, leaving the other two schools, which set up a natural experiment of sorts. We used this quasi-experimental set-up and then added our own layer of experiments by playing public goods games with the students at all of the schools, based on this notion that diversity supposedly undermines contributions to public goods.

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The field is moving in this direction of trying to do more experimental work, be it lab work, natural experiments, or the increasingly popular field experiments. Field experiments have an advantage of being more externally valid as they are outside of the laboratory, but they need to be replicated in different geographical areas to determine how well the findings travel. I am currently working on a field experiment concerning the creation of local councils for development projects in Afghanistan, to determine the extent to which these local councils assist in state building by connecting citizens to the central government, giving citizens a greater voice, empowering women, and generally improving the standard of living. Some villages are given extra funding and others are not (the control group), and we are given the power to randomly assign the villages to groups. There is a question of fairness, but there are financial constraints that prevent all villages from receiving funding in the first place.

**précis: You speak a wide variety of languages from all parts of the world and have made field research a major part of your work; how have these endeavors impacted your research? There is some concern that area studies and language study are declining. Do you think young scholars of international relations and comparative politics will/should continue to do this type of research?**

FC: It would have been impossible for me to do any of the research that I do had I not invested long periods of time learning the language and studying up on the history of the places. This notion that area studies is a separate thing goes totally against my idea of how the subfields intermarry. There is no way I could have gotten the data I needed in order to conduct a randomized field experiment in Afghanistan or figure out ways of surveying and getting to women and what questions we can and

cannot ask without having extensive knowledge of the region and culture. I cannot emphasize enough how important it was for me and my work. At the same time, it is very hard for everyone to have every necessary skill, which is where cooperation happens, and it's nice to have people work together with complementary capabilities.

**précis: Can you give us a glimpse of your future projects?**

FC: I am currently most concerned about developing my dissertation into a book, which I will begin in earnest next year as a member of the Harvard Academy. My research agenda will continue to be motivated by issues of security, ethnicity, and cooperation (or the lack thereof). My agenda is currently focused on Afghanistan, due both to my interest and that of the policy community. ■

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## MISTI Awards Global Seed Funds

The MIT International Science and Technology Initiatives' (MISTI) Global Seed Funds Program selected its first recipients in spring 2009. The awards went to 27 of 104 proposals for grant money to jump-start international projects.

The winning entries represent 26 MIT departments, involve 42 countries, and include projects ranging from the study of stem cell-based engineered tissues to the regional, economic, and environmental implications of dual ethanol technologies in Brazil.

The selected teams, which are faculty-led but rely on student participation, will use the awarded \$457,400 to cover

international travel, as well as meeting and workshop costs. MISTI will provide cultural preparation for participating students before their departure.

"By enabling MIT students to participate in faculty-led international projects, we hope to increase opportunities for hands-on, global learning and connection to innovation around the world," said Richard Samuels, director of the Center for International Studies.

Applications for the 2009-2010 Global Seed Funds are now being accepted. Visit <http://web.mit.edu/misti/faculty/seed.html> to learn more.