

The Logic of Alliance Formation Among Rebel Groups

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Introduction

Theories of civil war tend to focus on individual- or group-level motives [e.g. Gurr, 1970, Collier and Hoeffler, 2004] or opportunities [e.g. Fearon and Laitin, 2003] for rebellion, while giving little attention to the organization of dissent into rebel groups and coalitions. Even those studies which do explicitly consider rebel group formation tend to focus on group attributes and do not consider the possibility that multiple groups might emerge [e.g. Weinstein, 2007]. Yet, this step in the conflict process is far from straightforward, as 44% of civil conflicts feature at least two rebel groups challenging the government.¹ Over the course of the Chadian Civil War, for instance, 25 distinct rebel groups fought against the government. Conflicts in Afghanistan in the 1980's, Sudan in the 2000's, and Somalia in the 1990's have been similarly complex. The ongoing civil war in Syria is contested by at least two dozen armed groups. Even ethnically homogeneous, geographically concentrated movements with common goals, such as the Karen secessionist campaign in Myanmar, often fragment into multiple rebel groups. Furthermore, the number of groups operating in these conflicts often varies greatly over time. The existing literature offers many useful insights to the conditions under which civil war will emerge, but it has few explanations of the structure of rebel movements.

¹Source: Pettersson and Wallensteen [2015].

While little attention has been given to the causes of multi-dyadic conflict, several studies suggest that such configurations can have deleterious consequences. Conflicts with multiple rebel groups last longer than dyadic competitions [Cunningham, 2006, Cunningham et al., 2009, Akcinaroglu, 2012]. Cunningham et al. [2009] find that the presence of multiple government-rebel dyads decreases the likelihood of peace agreements and increases the likelihood of rebel victories, though Findley and Rudloff [2012], find that fragmented rebel movements are often associated with an *increased* likelihood of negotiated settlement. Relatedly, Atlas and Licklider [1999] find that episodes of conflict renewal often occur between formerly allied rebel factions. Finally, conflicts with multiple dyads feature more fatalities than dyadic ones.² Clearly, conflicts with multiple rebel groups comprise one of the most severe subsets of civil wars. Thus, understanding the causes of multi-dyadic conflict is of great normative and policy importance.

I seek to address this gap by explaining one of the primary determinants of rebel movement structure — the formation of alliances between rebel factions. Which rebel groups are likely to form alliances? With whom are they likely to ally? While alliances cannot account for all of the variation in the number of rebel groups in a conflict — the fragmentation of existing groups and the entry of previously non-violent groups to the conflict are also important processes — alliance ties tend to predict deeper integration between rebel groups. Many rebel alliances evolve into umbrella organizations with shared command, and weak rebel groups are frequently absorbed by alliance partners. Thus, alliance formation is a crucial determinant of whether conflicts become less complex over time.

This work advances our understanding of the complexity of civil conflict in terms of the number and arrangement of actors, building on the growing literature that addresses the countervailing process — the fragmentation of existing groups [see Cunningham et al., 2009, Pearlman and Cunningham, 2011, Staniland, 2014]. Furthermore, examining the relationships between rebel groups sheds new light on debates about the motives behind

²Source: my own analysis using data from Sundberg [2008].

rebellion [e.g. Collier and Hoeffler, 2004]. For instance, if rebellion is fundamentally about ethnic or religious grievances, we might expect to see the emergence of coalitions with homogeneous identities. If, by contrast, rebels are motivated by the desire for profits from natural resources or illicit activities, we might see groups with access to such revenues seek to limit the number of combatants with whom they share their spoils.

I proceed with a review of the literature on relations between rebel groups. Next, I outline the potential benefits rebels might receive by forming alliances. Subsequently, I explore the conditions under which rebels will elect to engage in such cooperation. Finally, I present results from an inferential network model applied to the Syrian Civil War.

Relations Among Rebels

Relations among rebel groups remains one of the most underexplored aspects of civil war. The vast majority of existing studies explore conflict between non-state actors. In the most comprehensive study to date, [Fjelde and Nilsson, 2012] suggest that rebels fight each other for control over resources such drug supplies or valuable terrain. Greater resource endowments should lead to better postwar bargains with the government in the long run, and greater ability to sustain a rebellion in the short run. The authors find that this logic is most likely to prevail in the presence of natural resources, territories that are not controlled by the government, militarily weak governments, and significant power asymmetries among rebels. [Atlas and Licklider, 1999] find that this dynamic can also arise in the aftermath of conflicts, as the main fighting in renewed civil wars is often between previously allied rebel groups.

Several works examine the emergence of conflict within previously coherent movements. [Bakke et al., 2012] conceptualize the fragmentation of rebels movements as varying in terms of the raw number of organizations, the degree of institutionalization unifying the organizations, and the distribution of power among them. They expect a greater general likelihood

of infighting in more fragmented movements, particularly those with large numbers of groups and low degrees of institutionalization. [Asal et al., 2012] find that ethnopolitical movements with factionalized leadership structures are most likely to experience splits. Similarly, [Cunningham et al., 2012] find that infighting is most likely in self-determination movements with large numbers of factions, and that the emergence of new factions is especially likely to trigger violence. [Christia, 2012] also sees pre-existing social structure as a contributing factor to infighting, finding that rebel groups and coalitions tend to fragment when battlefield losses exacerbate divisions between faction leaders. [McLauchlin and Pearlman, 2012] find that repression can deepen rifts within movements that are already divided, but cohesive movements may become further solidified by repression.

There is also a substantial literature on intraethnic violence. Lilja and Hultman [2011] find that that Tamil rebels used violence against coethnic civilians to control populations and the resources they hold, and against coethnic armed groups to establish dominance within the ethnic group. Staniland [2012] finds that these patterns intraethnic violence tend to be self-reinforcing, as violence within ethnic insurgencies is the primary cause of the defection of some subsets of ethnic groups to the opposing side in the conflict. [Warren and Troy, 2015] seek to explain which ethnic groups are likely to experience such fragmentation, finding a curvilinear relationship between the size of an ethnic group and its probability of experiencing infighting. Small ethnic groups have the ability to police themselves, limiting violence, and intraethnic violence in large groups is likely to be met with government intervention. Thus, only moderate-sized groups tend to experience internal violence.

One of the very few studies to examine alliances in civil war is Christia [2012]. She argues that neorealist balancing theory from international relations explains alignments in civil wars. When one coalition - a group of rebels or government-aligned forces - becomes too powerful, other groups will band together to prevent their own destruction. This mechanism is constrained, however, by a desire to maximize one's share of the post-war

spoils. Thus, rebels realign frequently, seeking to form minimum winning coalitions. While shared identity appears on the surface to be an important determinant of rebel alignments, Christia views these narratives as post-hoc justifications aimed at legitimizing decisions that are really driven mostly by power. While Christia [2012] supports her theory with excellent fieldwork and quantitative evidence, it does not fully address important aspects of alliance formation. Namely, while balancing can potentially account for why rebel groups form alliances, and when they will alter their ties, it does not explain why groups choose a particular partner when multiple options are available, though Christia suggests that these decisions are shaped by personal relationships between rebel elites. Furthermore, in the international realm balancing has often failed to occur when realist theory would predict it [Schroeder, 1994]. Thus, it is important to determine whether Christia's theory applies beyond her two cases of Afghanistan and Bosnia, and whether other factors might be at work.

The Value of Rebel Alliances

I begin with the assumption that rebels genuinely care about political outcomes. This contrasts with the most extreme interpretations of the greed-based theory of civil war [e.g. Mueller, 2000], which view rebellion as little more than large-scale criminal activity. I do not, however, view this assumption as incompatible with the notion that private material benefits play an important role in recruiting and retaining rank-and-file members, or even with the evidence that many rebel elites have accumulated great personal wealth by capturing natural resources and other revenue streams. I simply expect that rebel groups have political preferences of some variety, and that these preferences will play an important role in shaping their relations with other groups. For example, rebels may have ideological goals that could be classified on a standard left-right spectrum, advocate for increased political status for an ethnic or religious groups, or pursue secession for a particular region.

Frequently, rebel groups engage in military collaboration with other non-state actors. This can range from an agreement not to target each other, to a distribution of territory, to joint campaigns on the battlefield, to formal alliances. If political interests are a primary motive for rebels, then all else equal, they should have an incentive to cooperate with groups that share similar goals. Cooperation should be mutually-beneficial to like-minded rebel groups for several reasons. First and most obviously, alliances aggregate capabilities. This is perhaps the most common conception of alliances in international politics [see Bennett, 1997]. Yet, in the context of civil wars this process takes a somewhat different form. Whereas international alliances aggregate capabilities by bringing states into a conflict they might not otherwise participate in, rebel groups by definition are already participating in conflict. Nevertheless, these alliances can bring great value because rather than simply aggregating, they can concentrate capabilities in space and time. For example, two rebel groups might be unable to capture a government-held town on their own, but in a joint operation would be sufficiently powerful to do so.

Second, alliances can allow for burden-sharing. This dynamic has been offered as an explanation for international alliances such as NATO [Sandler and Forbes, 1980], though it may not occur under all circumstances [see Olson and Zeckhauser, 1966]. Alliances can ensure that a single rebel group is not responsible for defeating the government, and might serve as a mechanism for reigning in the temptation to free ride off of another group's efforts. Relatedly, alliances can facilitate specialization by rebel groups. For example, one alliance partner might specialize in holding territory, while another specializes in launching offensives in new areas.

Third, alliances can manage conflict between members and ensure that their resources are directed toward common enemies. Weitsman [1997] argues that alliances often serve to tether powerful states to one another, so as to reduce the probability of conflict between them. Gibler [1996] finds that alliance treaties are often used to settle territorial disputes

between the signatories. Similar alliances can be seen in civil wars, as rebels amongst themselves. In this case alliances allow the rebels to coordinate on a distribution of territory and avoid conflict. Compliance with such agreements is incentivized by the fact that reneging on the territorial arrangement would likely result in the loss of the other benefits of the alliance, such as capability aggregation.

Fourth, operating as an alliance bloc may be beneficial to the groups involved in bargaining situations. An alliance bloc with a set of coordinated demands might command greater bargaining leverage than individual members, who collectively have similar power, but a more disparate set of demands. Perhaps more crucially, alliances might mitigate credible commitment problems. Peaceful settlements to conflicts can be derailed by concerns that the other side will not adhere to the agreement [Fearon, 1995]. In civil wars, this is often borne out by extreme “spoiler” factions. A rebel commitment to a peace agreement is more likely to be viewed as credible if it has formal control over other factions.

The Choice of Alliance Partners

While cooperation in the form of alliances can be beneficial to rebel groups with shared interests for the reasons outlined above, it is necessary to develop more precise expectations regarding when these shared interests will exist. In theory rebels at a minimum share a common interest in defeating the government. Yet, even that is not always the case, as rebel factions have defected to the government side in a number of conflicts including those in Sri Lanka and Iraq [Christia, 2012, Staniland, 2012]. Thus, the formation of alliances seems to require a more specific set of shared interests. Broadly, I expect rebels to cooperate when their primary objectives entail the provision of public, non-rival goods to society, and to be much less likely to form alliances when they are pursuing goals that are subject to rival consumption.

Most ideological interests should fall into the category of public, non-rival goods. If two

groups each prefer a similar goal, such as a redistributive welfare system, a greater role for Islam in government, or greater regional autonomy, they will be able to enjoy the benefits of such policies regardless of which group enacts them. All else equal, goals of this sort should create common interests among the rebels who share them. Yet in many cases, shared overarching goals are undercut by conflicts over other interests. For example, even the successful implementation of a shared policy goal does not exclusively create non-rival benefits. While all rebels who share the goal will benefit from a revolution that leads to its implementation, government power is a finite resource that is likely to be concentrated in the hands of a relatively small groups of elites Christia [2012]. However, this potential conflict is unlikely to become relevant until late in conflicts, and even then only if a group believes it could succeed in overthrowing the government on its own. In most other cases, rebels should have relatively short time horizons, and prefer to maximize their chances of success on the battlefield in the short run. Thus in most cases, rebel groups that share inclusive policy goals (i.e. those that benefit most or all members of society) should be likely to form alliances.

H1: Rebel groups with similar inclusive policy goals should be more likely to form alliances than other rebel dyads

H2: More powerful rebel groups will be less likely to form alliances than weaker ones

While groups with similar policy interests should tend not to come into competition until late in conflicts, for groups representing identity-based interests, the effect is contingent on the size of the group and malleability of group boundaries. The reason for this lies in the fact that many rebel groups rely on civilian populations for material support [Weinstein, 2007], and the types of goals a group pursues is an important determinant of the malleability of civilian support coalitions. A group with broad-based policy goals might be able to persuade or coerce almost any group of citizens to support it. Thus, until a very large portion of the civilian population has been captured, groups sharing these types of goals

will not be in competition over support as they can simply carve out different coalitions. Similar dynamics should occur among groups pursuing the interests of large or social groups, such as the majority ethnic or religious group. For example two Syrian rebel groups seeking to replace the Alawite-dominated Assad regime with one that embraces Sunni doctrine should find that civilian support is not particularly scarce given that Syria is majority-Sunni. Similarly, groups advocating the interests of social groups with fluid boundaries should tend to have opportunities to capture new civilian support rather than competing with similar groups over existing support. For instance, for a group advocating a Salafi-Jihadi ideology, any Sunni Muslim might serve as a potential convert.

Rebels representing minority social groups, however, should tend to come into conflict more quickly. Groups of this sort must draw their support from a social base that is both smaller and more likely to be tapped out than the bases of more broadly defined groups, and that is more rigidly bounded. A rebel group aimed at advancing the interests of a particular ethnic or religious group is unlikely to attract support from non-group members. Even if it was able to do so, this might hurt its standing with co-ethnics/co-religionists, as rival groups could claim that it is watering down its agenda. In other words, socially-defined rebel groups seeking to expand the pool of potential support might be vulnerable to outbidding appeals. In short, I expect that groups with the agenda of advancing the interests of majority ethnic or religious groups will be likely to cooperate with groups holding similar interests. Groups representing social minorities, however, should be unlikely to cooperate.³

H3: Rebel groups representing the same majority ethnic or religious groups will be more likely to form alliances than other dyads

Groups seeking to control the same territory should face a similar problem of rival consumption. Because secessionist claims tend to have well-defined geographic and/or ethnic

³In the present analysis, however, the Kurds are the only group to whom this logic is likely to apply, and thus I do not test this hypothesis as it would essentially be a dummy variable for the one Kurdish-Kurdish dyad.

boundaries, rebel groups representing such claims are likely to be in competition over a fixed pool of support. Thus, I expect that groups making similar territorial claims will be unlikely to cooperate.

H4: Rebel groups with overlapping territorial claims will be less likely to form alliances than other dyads

Research Design

To test these hypotheses, I use data on rebel interactions during the Syrian Civil War. The war in Syria began in March 2011, and presents a rich environment for studying rebel alignments as it is one of the more complex conflicts in the post-WWII era. The conflict is characterized by numerous loose coalitions, which are often made up of several largely autonomous brigades, each with their own name, support base, and agenda. For example, the Free Syrian Army is in theory one of the largest groups in the conflict, but it is made up of brigades that range from moderate defectors from the Assad regime to factions with jihadist sympathies. Several such brigades have split from their parent organizations to become independent, and others have defected to rival groups. Because of this decentralized structure, estimates of the number of groups active in the conflict vary wildly. If one counts each brigade as a separate organization, they number likely surpasses 200, and may approach 1,000.⁴ In the data employed here, I only consider fully autonomous organizations (i.e. those that are not subsidiaries of other groups). I do this in part for practical reasons, but also because while factions within larger groups may have the ability to leave their parent organization, it is not necessarily the case that they have the ability to engage in lasting cooperation with other groups, separately from the decisions made by the parent organization. This definition yields a set of 29 organizations that are active at some point in the conflict.

⁴See BBC News, "Guide to the Syrian Rebels" <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003>.

The Data

I employ a compilation of existing and original data that on the Syrian conflict. The data cover the period March 15, 2011 to September 30, 2016, and as noted above, includes the 29 non-state actors that are clearly independent from other groups at some point during the conflict.[^Some became independent by splitting from a parent organization, and others were independent at some point but were later absorbed by a larger organization.] This includes all non-state actors that have engaged in violence in Syria. Thus several groups that did not originate in Syria, such as Hezbollah (Lebanon) and the Islamic State (Iraq). It should be noted that I include several actors that have to this point fought mainly on the side of the government. I do this for two reasons. First, there are numerous cases of pro-government actors defecting to the rebel side, and vice-versa. Second, while the conflict between the Assad regime and various rebels is obviously a prominent dimension of the war, in many locales the primary opponent for rebels is the Islamic State (IS). Thus it is quite conceivable that these actors might form alliances with anti-Assad forces, either due to a realignment in the conflict, or more likely, to fight against IS. The primary source of the data is the Stanford Mapping Militant Organizations Project⁵, which I used to define the universe of independent rebel groups, and provided the majority of the alliance ties in the data. I supplement this with my own codings of additional alliances and several covariates based on news articles procured through LexisNexis and reports from think tanks including the Institute for the Study of War and the Carter Center. The complete list of included groups is presented in Table 1 and the network of alliances is plotted in Figure 1. As the figures make clear, the pattern of alliances changes considerably over time, with many new alliances forming over the course of the conflict, and several existing alliances crumbling.

⁵<http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/>

Dependent Variable

My dependent variable is military cooperation between rebel groups.⁶ This includes three types of relationships. One is battlefield coordination, which is defined as one or more instances in which two groups attack the same opponent at the same place and time, and in which there is evidence of joint planning. Second are explicit statements of alliance, which could entail high degrees of integration, such as the formation of umbrella organizations, or less formal statements of common goals or enemies or agreements to provide military aid. Finally, a few groups are connected through formal affiliations. For example, until earlier this year, Jabhat al-Nusra was the Syrian affiliate of al-Qaeda.

Independent Variables

Rebel Goals Hypotheses 1 and 3 expect that alliances should be most likely between rebel groups that share similar goals, with the effect differing depending on the type of goal. I thus code the primary goal of each group, which are coded from manifestos, public statements, and group websites. This coding is highly specific to the Syrian context, and takes on one of the following values. Groups with “moderate” aims seek to overthrow the government, but tend to have few other strongly-held beliefs. “Islamist” groups seek to give Islam a greater role in public life, but under my definition do not aim to fundamentally change the boundaries of the polity. “Jihadist” groups are essentially a more extreme version of Islamists — they adhere to strict interpretations of holy texts, and tend to be more accepting of extremist tactics such as terrorism and civilian targeting. Still more extreme are groups pursuing a “Caliphate” — while they may share many beliefs with Islamists and jihadists, these groups differ in that they aim to replace the existing polity with an Islamic Caliphate covering a much broader area. Finally, there are two categories of groups primarily aimed at advancing identity-based interests: “Shiite Interests” and

⁶Technically, as noted below, it is the network of military cooperation between rebel groups.

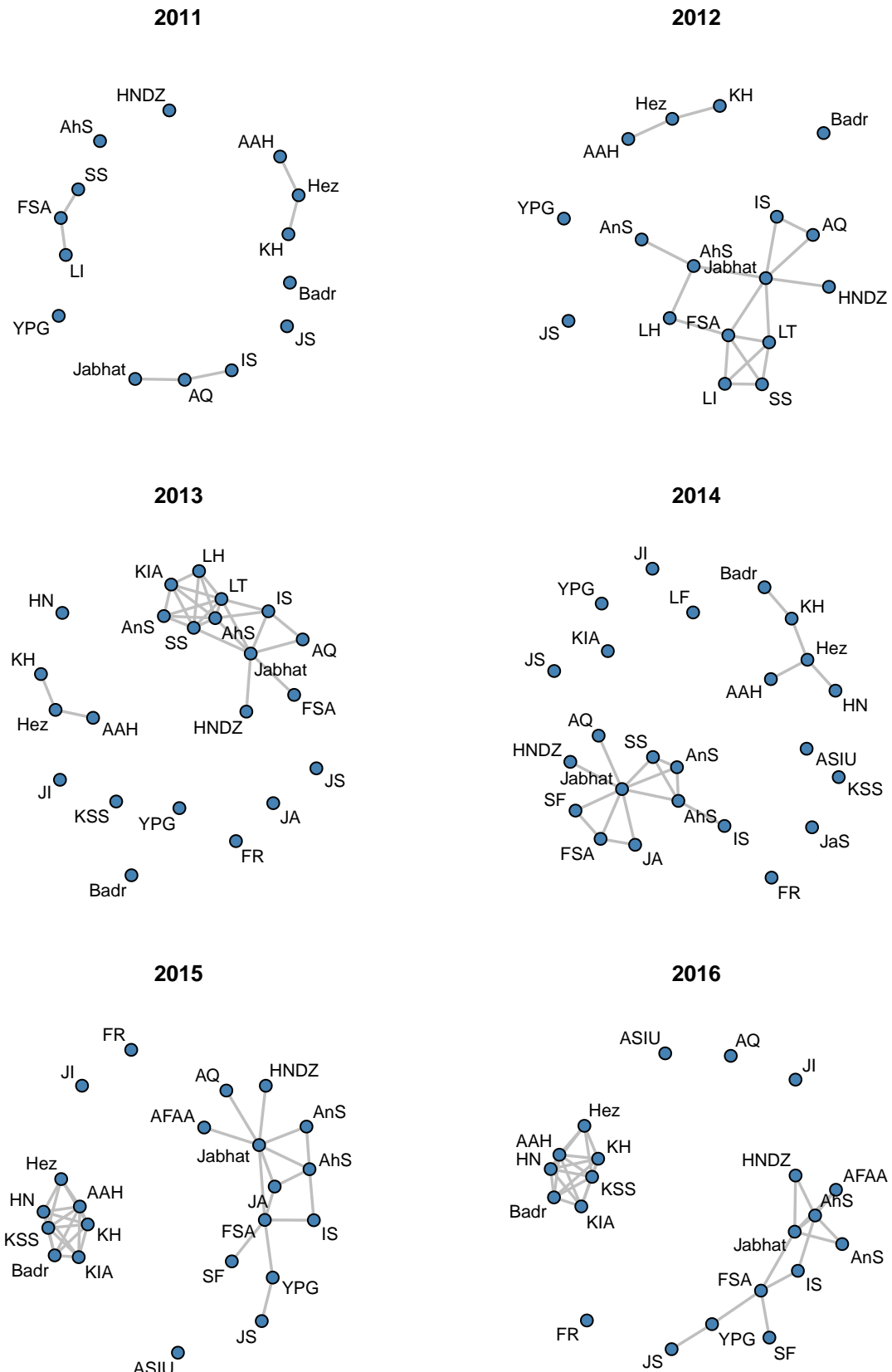


Figure 1: Alliances in the Syrian Civil War

“Kurdish Interests.”

Troop Strength Hypothesis 2 predicts that stronger groups will be less inclined to form alliances than weaker ones. To test this, I include estimates of the number of troops each rebel group has at their disposal. Unfortunately this is a static measure, as for most groups estimates are available only once or twice.

Predominant Religion I code the predominant religion in each group, distinguishing between Sunni and Shia Muslims. When the demographics of the broader group are not available, I make a coding based on the group’s leadership.

Territorial Aims I code a binary indicator of whether a group seeks control of a territorial unit other than the current configuration of the state. For instance, a Kurdish state or Caliphate.

Political Wing I include an indicator of whether a group engages in non-violent political activity. This can include running candidates in elections, as Hezbollah does, or governing a territorial area, as IS does. This variable might proxy for the centrality of political goals to a group’s mission, and may account for alternative mechanisms of alliance formation, such as participation in a government in exile.

The Model

To make statistical inferences about the determinants of the Syrian alliance network, I employ an extension of the increasingly popular Exponential Random Graph Model (ERGM). The ERGM uses Monte Carlo Markov Chain maximum likelihood estimation to assess the effect of various actor attributes and network dependencies on the formation of the observed network. Ultimately, it allows one to make inferences about the probability of a tie between two nodes given the values of their covariates. As I have a network that is observed annually for six years, I use the Temporal Exponential Random Graph Model extension, which allows one to control for temporal dependence in network ties. The net-

work approach is necessary because a standard regression model likely could not account for dependence between dyads. For example, if actors A and B share ties and A and C share ties, the probability of a tie between B and C is likely not independent of the other two decisions. The TERGM can account for these sorts of dependencies.

I treat alliances as undirected ties. I include parameters for several network effects that might account for the observed structure. This includes a triad effect to account for the propensity fully closed triads in the network (i.e. connections between A, B, and C). In addition I account for the propensity toward three trails — connections between three nodes (i.e. i is connected to j, and j is connected to k). Finally, I account for the number of two stars — open triads in which i is connected to j and j is connected to k, but k is not connected to i. Numerous other network effects, such as the geometrically weighted edgewise shared partner distribution, were considered but were found to be not statistically significant.

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Group Name	Abbreviations
Badr Organization of Reconstruction and Development	Badr
Kata'ib al-Imam Ali	KIA
Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada	KSS
Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq	AAH
Harakat al-Nujaba	HN
Kata'ib Hezbollah	KH
Hezbollah	Hez
Jaysh al-Sanadeed	JS
The Peoples Protection Units	YPG
Harakat Nour al-Din al-Zenki	HNDZ
The Southern Front	SF
The Islamic State	IS
Al Qaeda	AQ
Jabhat Fatah al-Sham	Jabhat
Jund al-Aqsa	JA
Kurdish Islamic Front	KIA
Ahrar al-Sham	AhS
Liwa al-Haqq	LH
Ansar al-Sham	AnS
Al-Fawj Al-Awl	AFAA
The Levantine Front	LF
Liwa al-Tawhid	LT
Jaysh al-Islam	JI
Liwa al-Islam	LI
Suqour al-Sham	SS
Jaysh al-Sham	JaS
The Free Syrian Army	FSA
Faylaq al-Rahman	FR
The Ajnad al-Sham Islamic Union	ASIU

Table 1: Non-State Actors in the Syrian Civil War