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. Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Gurr 1970) 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]](#footnote-22) 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.

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 (Akcinaroglu 2012; D. E. Cunningham 2006; D. E. Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009). D. E. Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan (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]](#footnote-23) 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 D. E. Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2009; Pearlman and Cunningham 2011; Staniland 2014). Furthermore, examining the relationships between rebel groups sheds new light on debates about the motives behind 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.

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1. Source: Pettersson and Wallensteen (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
2. Source: my own analysis using data from Sundberg (2008). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)