

Nonstate actors, fragmentation, and conflict processes¹

Introducing the special issue

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The most prominent form of violent conflict in the world today occurs within states rather than between them. Since 1945, over 75 percent of militarized disputes have been civil conflicts.² From the African continent to the Balkans, civil wars have raged and self-determination movements have mobilized for collective violence. Conflict over identity has emerged as a central problem for nations and the internal community as nationalist groups battle the state and each other in places like Iraq and Sudan.

The comparative decline of conventional inter-state war casts a spotlight on the myriad of conflicts involving nonstate actors, be they in conflict with each other or with existing states. We define a nonstate actor as an organized political actor not directly connected to the state, but pursuing aims that affect vital state interests. The dominant approach to analysis of conflicts involving nonstate actors views them, like inter-state conflicts, as the outcome of bargaining between antagonists (Fearon 1995; for review, see Walter 2009). This bargaining framework entails identifying key players – typically just two – and specifying their preferences, the limits of their capabilities and resolve, and the information they have about each other.³ Given such information, analysts derive predictions about when their strategic interaction will result in conflict, as well as the characteristics of that conflict.

Most scholars are careful to note that nonstate actors have objectives and capacities that can differ markedly from that of states. After all, the imperatives and possibilities of a collective striving to attain statehood, secede from a state, or seize

² Based on the Uppsala Conflict Database. This is internal conflicts and internationalized internal conflicts (types 3 and 4) as a proportion of all conflicts.

³ An exception is Cunningham (2006) which looks at bargaining in multi-party civil wars. Also see Nilsson (2008).

control of a state are quite different from those of the duly constituted government of a state with a monopoly on violence and internationally recognized sovereignty. When invoking a bargaining framework to analyze the behavior of nonstate actors, therefore, scholars specify their unique objectives and capacities accordingly. This might appear sufficient to modify the bargaining framework from the context of interstate war to that of intra-state conflict, were it not for a major issue: bargaining models assume the stability of unitary actors. In previous work, questioning of the unitary actor assumption has benefitted research on international relations and conventional war. Work on two-level games (Putnam 1988), diversionary war (Brown 1996), bureaucratic decision making (Allison 1969), and the domestic sources of foreign policy (Schelling 1960; Milner 1997; Tarar 2001), has shed light on conflict processes that were missed when scholars treated states as coherent entities. They show that state behavior in the international realm may not result from cogent calculations of the national interest.

Our agenda is to do for intra-state conflict what these works have done for interstate conflict. The norm in more recent civil conflicts is not coherent antagonists as much as shifting coalitions of groups with malleable allegiances and at times divergent interests, only some of whom actually engage in violence at any given point in time. The history of national liberation struggles reveals how relentlessly nonstate actors can splinter, proliferate, merge, and splinter again. In the genealogy of the Palestinian national movement, for example, the Arab Nationalist Movement combined with the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF) to create the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). The former leaders of the PLF then broke away from the PFLP and established the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command, whereas

other aspirants broke away and created the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (Pearlman, forthcoming). In Northern Ireland, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) split in 1969 between the “Official” and “Provisional” IRA, with the latter subsequently spawning the “Continuity IRA” and “Real IRA” (Moloney 2002). In Bangladesh, a variety of organizations took shape to represent the Chittagong Hill peoples in their conflict with the state from 1975 -1992. Some of these were armed groups with a separatist agenda while others were social associations working peacefully for civil rights. Following the peace settlement in 1992, some groups dissolved while others emerged to oppose the deal (Cunningham 2011). Hence, even in a single ethnic group, where it is assumed that a powerful identity effectively binds individuals together, there is often a dizzying diversity of political strategies and organizational forms.

There is hence a gap between neat conceptual frames, in which nonstate groups are treated as unitary entities, and a messy empirical record in which nonstate groups are frequently racked by internal differences and struggles. Toward a narrowing of that gap, this special issue brings together an international team of scholars to consider the causes, consequences, and dimensions of fragmentation in nonstate actors. We are motivated by a number of questions. Why do nonstate actors in conflict fragment? How is fragmentation conditioned by characteristics of the group in question or its dynamic interaction with the opponents with which it fights? How does fragmentation affect the initiation, escalation, and termination of violence?

These questions are crucial for understanding conflict in the contemporary international system, yet knowledge remains quite insufficient. Large-n studies of civil wars have tended to focus on national-level variables such as terrain, natural resources,

and level of economic development (Fearon and Laitin, 2003). Recently, new works have criticized the overly general, aggregated character of this approach for missing or misinterpreting many of the fine-tuned processes that drive conflict. As such, the cutting edge for large-n studies has been the disaggregation of conflict into dynamics at the sub-national level.

In this regard, a recent special issue of *Journal of Conflict Resolution* on “Disaggregating the Study of Civil War” examines how local and micro-level interactions below the state level influence the onset, duration, and outcome of conflict. Here Cunningham, et al. (2009) advance a “dyadic perspective” that turns on identifying constellations of states and rebels, many of which may engage in conflict in any single country at any point in time. This dyadic approach helps to unravel war into underlying interactions and mechanisms obscured by country-level analysis. Nonetheless, it too assumes that the actors constituting pairs are unitary entities. That is, it disaggregates conflict, but not the actors engaged in conflict. Recognition of the factionalism or decentralization internal to many insurgent groups calls into question the degree to which a state-insurgent confrontation is really a dyad rather than something more multifaceted.

Analyzing the Russian-Chechen civil war, for example, analysts often portrayed it as a conflict between government and rebels. This dyadic framework led scholars to focus on such questions as the divisibility of territory and sovereignty. The assumption implicit in this approach was that violence persisted due to the difficulty of achieving an autonomy compromise acceptable to both parties. In reality, however, the war was anything but dyadic. Many small Chechen groups fought other Chechen groups as well as the state. This growing recognition that the Chechen insurgency is not as a single “side”

of the war, but as a fragmented nonstate actor, leads us to ask different questions. For example, why do we see some Chechens defecting from the rebellion and allying with state to fight other Chechens? Who, if anyone, can speak for the majority of Chechens in bargaining with Russia?

Moving beyond the assumption of unitary actors, case studies offer more clues about the complex characters of civil conflict. Examining the Greek Civil War, Kalyvas (2006) argues that conflict fosters a convergence of local motives and supralocal imperatives, such that violence is often propelled by micro-level actions, pre-existing feuds, and petty grievances unrelated to the main conflict dimension of the war. Comparing four insurgent movements, Weinstein (2007) contrasts resource-rich settings, which generate rebel groups organized around material incentives, to resource-poor settings, in which rebels participate out of commitment to a cause. In the former, leaders are less able to control fighters in the field, rendering them more liable to commit such acts as looting, use of indiscriminate force, and violence against civilians. These works demonstrate how the multiplicity of interests in any community confound the view of conflict as a binary cleavage between two coherent adversaries. However, they tend to focus on divergent individual-level motivations. While this is, no doubt, critical, much of the violence seen in internal conflicts is perpetrated by organized actors. Shifting analysis from the micro-level to the meso-level highlights a host of new issues relating to how such factions form, compete, define goals, and confront problems of collective action, and how these influence patterns in violence.

Several studies of terrorism, as a particular form of violence, address such matters. These examine escalatory “outbidding” among factions within the same

overarching struggle (Bloom 2004) or the ways in which negotiations with the state fuel conflicts between “moderates” and “radicals” (Kydd and Walter 2002; Bueno de Mesquita 2005). Such research sheds light on factionalism in nonstate actors as a problem of organizational behavior. However, as the McLaughlin and Pearlman article in this issue argues, it typically takes the existence of factions as given and hence tells us little about their emergence in the first place. This leaves many questions unanswered. Why are some movements more factionalized than others? Is the emergence of factions exogenous or endogenous to the course of conflict? Do groups that have many factions behave differently than groups that do not?

Our special issue takes disaggregation as its premise and explores both the causes of divisions in nonstate actors and the effects of those divisions on conflict processes. In this, we join an emergent body of work, most of it very recent or yet unpublished, that puts forth new ways of thinking about the complex character of nonstate actors (see Greenhill and Major 2007, Kalyvas 2008, Christia 2008, Pearlman 2008/09, Staniland 2010, Cunningham 2011). The contributions to this volume explore various types of nonstate actors, including nationalist and self-determination movements, rebel groups, and warlords. The relevant actor depends on the question, with studies on the emergence of conflict tending to consider broader actors such as encompassing movements, while those focusing on termination of conflict tending to focus on specific disputing parties, such as warlords and rebel factions. Fragmentation can be seen as one of a range of processes that affect the size, complexity, and identity of such actors. Yet whereas some literature has examined processes by which actors coalesce into larger, more coherent actors, such as coalition-building (see Laver and Schofield 1990) and alliance-building

(Smith 1995, Sandler 1999), less attention has been given to how they divide into smaller and smaller units.

We believe that a research agenda focused on fragmentation in and among nonstate actors can contribute to our understanding of conflict processes because it sheds light on a number of puzzles and questions that emerge in the literature. First, current research cannot explain the differential influence that many factors have in different conflict situations. Collier and Sambanis's (2005) volumes on civil war find that factors such as ethnic fragmentation and economic inequality are statistically associated with civil war, but in-depth case studies show a number of causal stories related to these factors. They conclude by asking why these factors appear to operate very differently in the myriad of disputes they examine. This query has set forth a challenge for research on intra-state conflict, and we believe that our analytical approach can offer some answers. One reason for the puzzling variation between country cases is the fact that these and other studies of civil war take as their starting point aggregated models, such as the Collier and Hoeffler (2004) model. They argue that civil war is more likely when the opportunity costs to participating in rebellion are low, and they estimate these costs using macro-level factors, without regard for their existing social or organizational structure. Yet, if we unpack these actors in civil wars, we find that they are actually quite different: some are centralized groups with clear war aims, yet others are loose networks of factions with diverging ambitions or ideologies. These differences should play a key role in determining how opportunity and incentives for violence are created and maintained. Thus, attention to actor fragmentation can shed light on this overlooked dimension and in so doing, invite a rethinking of conventional models of civil conflict.

Turning again to the example of opportunity-based arguments, we can see how this might be the case. This approach asserts that individuals become more likely to engage in insurgency as doing so entails fewer costs in terms of time and effort that could be channeled into other activities (Collier and Hoeffler 2004, Miguel et al. 2005). Conventionally, it is assumed that opportunity is structurally defined by factors such as economics, terrain, regime type, or state policies that are typically regarded to be constant within country cases. Staniland's paper in this issue shows, however, the variable effects of conflict promoting factors based on the geographic spread of nonstate actors and the varying opportunities created for these actors by the state in different strategic contexts.

This work suggests that opportunities and constraints are not solely a product of the interaction between the nonstate actor and its external environment. Rather, opportunities emerge and vacillate in accord with the divided character of the nonstate actor itself. Following this logic, we should expect external impetuses to interact with internal fragmentation to open and restrict constraints on actor's choices. These dynamics come to light in McLoughlin and Pearlman's examination of whether state repression increases or decreases unity in nationalist movements. Conventional wisdom suggests either that conflict with an out-group generates unity in an in-group, or that repression exaggerates the gap between radicals and moderates in any movement. Challenging both views, they argue that repression disrupts the institutional arrangement that distributes power among subgroups within a movement. When subgroups constituting a movement are relatively satisfied with the prior institutional arrangement, repression will be a challenge to be surmounted and thus an impetus to redouble efforts to unify the community. By contrast, when movement members are dissatisfied with existing

arrangements, repression will present an opportunity to act on that opposition. It can thus leave the movement more divided than beforehand. Grounded in a comparison of the Kurdish and Palestinian movements, these findings challenge typical notions of what constitutes “opportunities” for nonstate actors in conflict. Attention to actor fragmentation reveals how different factions within the collective face different sets of opportunities and constraints, both vis-à-vis each other and vis-à-vis the state that they challenge.

Second, scrutiny of actor fragmentation aids understanding of conflict processes by explaining when new actors are likely to emerge or when they will matter in the conflict process. Existing research is insufficient to address this puzzle. In assuming that parties to a dispute are unitary actors, most studies ignore the possibility that some settlements might actually cause an actor to conflict to fragment. This can create obstacles to the conclusion of a settlement or, alternatively, perpetuate fighting once a settlement has been reached. Attention to fragmentation can yield better understanding of the conditions under which we are likely to see new violent actors emerge.

Considering Middle East cases, Asal, Brown, and Dalton in this issue ask when organizations split and thereby give rise to new organizations. They examine such factors as the leadership structure, age of organizations, organizational legality, violence by the state, violence by the organization, and levels of diaspora support. Their analysis finds that the key factor driving organizational schisms is their political structure in general and the presence of a factionalized leadership in particular. By contrast, Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour turn to the effects of fragmentation processes. They demonstrate that the emergence of a new actor in self-determination struggles increases in-group competition,

creating incentives for all factions to use violence against the state and against their co-ethnic brethren.

Third, attention to actor fragmentation unlocks the complexities of collective identity and the contingency of the linkage between collective identity and collective action. Much of the scholarship on conflict tends to be uncritical in exaggerating the role of collective identity. Some scholars see identity as inherited and fairly immutable (Smith 1986, Connor 1994), while others regard it as malleable and hence subject to manipulation (Gourevitch 1979, Gagnon 1994/5). Still others see it as a rational outcome of people's self-interest in reducing uncertainty (Hale 2008) and reaping the benefits of success in the game of coordination (Hardin 1995). Where all of these camps agree, however, is that ethnic or national identity is a clear focal point for collective behavior. They therefore concur that ethnic groups are easier to mobilize for high-risk collective action than are interest or ideologically-based groups (Toft 2003). For example, it is because Fearon and Laitin (1996) invest such confidence in the strength and socially binding character of ethnic ties that they conclude that in-group policing is one of the most important factors preventing conflict between ethnic groups.

Attention to fragmentation within identity-based groups, however, reveals sure limits to the extent to which all members share similar preferences, respond to the same incentives, or recognize the same authority structures. Even those who share an ethnic or national identity are likely to vary in the degree to which they have a stake in that identity or can be expected to mobilize for the achievement of what are assumed to be its collective goals. Staniland casts doubt on the assumption that collective identity drives coordination by pointing to civil wars in which insurgents defect to fight for the

government against their ethnic kin. His theory of “fratricidal flipping” argues that senior leaders and local elites are driven to move to the side of the state not due to hegemonic state control or to ideological sympathies as much as in response to rivalries within their group. Evidence from Kashmir and Sri Lanka show that factional elites defect when fellow militants threaten their survival and exit options like exile or safe retirement are implausible.

Finally, greater understanding of actor fragmentation enhances knowledge about conflict processes by helping to clarify under what conditions conflict resolution is more or less likely. In some instances, the emergence or existence of multiple factions appears to create a bargaining partner that facilitates settlement with the state. Cunningham (2011) finds that more factions in self-determination movements lead to more concessions from the state. In other cases, however, fragmentation of one of the parties to conflict appears to inhibit an effective and lasting settlement. Such is often the case when some of a group’s leadership agrees to negotiate peace while others in its camp act as “spoilers,” and use violence or other means to undermine those negotiations in the expectation that a settlement will threaten their power or interests. Stedman (1997) argues that spoilers emerge because actors within a rebel movement differ in the radicalness of their goals, while Greenhill and Major (2006/7) argue that shifts in the relative power among a movement’s subgroups loosen the constraints that otherwise keep spoilers in check. While these author’s draw clear linkages between a nonstate actor’s fragmentation and the likelihood of anti-peace activity, Pearlman (2008/09) argues that fragmentation not only creates opportunities for factions to challenge a peace settlement, but also shapes their very incentives for doing so. Even once warring parties are able to bring hostilities

to a close, there emerges the challenge of institutionalizing the peace. Here again, the issue of actor fragmentation crucially affects the circumstances under which regimes and rebels can effectively shift away from conflict. In his piece in this issue, Driscoll argues that most civil wars end not because incumbent regimes inflict comprehensive battlefield defeat on rebel forces, but rather because they manage to co-opt rebel field commanders selectively. Civil war settlement can thus be understood as a coalition formation game between various regime and rebel factions in the shadow of war. This game gives rise to institutions that incorporate rebel groups in the waning phases of civil war, which is both cause and effect of divisions in the rebel camp. Actor fragmentation is thus the crux of the dynamics that end fighting and build peace.

Case-based explorations and formalized approaches highlight the causal processes through which conflict dynamics encourage fragmentation in nonstate actors and how this fragmentation in turn shapes the course of conflict. They generate hypotheses and preliminary evidence to be tested against cross-national data. To date, the lack of such data has hampered our ability to address actor fragmentation as a dynamic process. Toward a redress of this problem, two contributions to this special issue offer analyses of new datasets of fragmented actors. The contribution by Asal, Brown, and Dalton uses a new dataset of 112 ethno-political organizations in the Middle East claiming to represent minorities that are at risk. Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymour likewise assemble a new dataset on separatist disputes, including fresh information on internal divisions within separatist groups. They present a framework for understanding the effect of internal fragmentation—focused on competition within these groups for political relevance—on a range of outcomes, including the use of violence against the state, conflict among co-

ethnic factions, and targeting of co-ethnic civilians. Using faction-level analyses, they find that more fragmented challengers to the state resort to violence more frequently, both in terms of violence against the state and violence against their own kin. This suggests a complex relationship between the nature of these actors, their conflict behavior, and the response of the state.

This special issue moves beyond the dyadic bargaining framework to look systematically at the causes and consequences of actor fragmentation. It offers new data that explores fragmentation internal to what are traditionally regarded as “sides” in civil disputes. The analytic yields of scrutiny of fragmentation are many. Simply put, better identification of the actors involved in conflict offers better grounds for understanding the processes that drive conflict and can therefore generate testable hypotheses about when conflict begins, escalates, and terminates. Scrutiny of actor fragmentation enables a deeper exploration of the dynamic of state-challenger strategic interaction and sheds light on the context for understanding disputes’ master cleavages.

These papers share the common conceptual framework that fragmentation matters, yet their nuances suggest fruitful areas of disagreement and debate. One area is the fundamental bases on which nonstate actor are likely to fragment. Asal, Brown and Dalton underscore the coherence of a nonstate actor’s leadership. Groups with unified leadership bodies may weather the storms of insurgency, yet those under the leadership of a coalition of factions are much more likely to divide. McLoughlin and Pearlman shift focus away from organization characteristics. Instead, they argue that the essential grounds for group fragmentation lay with members, but not with their personal characteristics as much as their satisfaction with their movements’ organizational

structure. The conjunction of these works highlights a puzzle for further research.

Nonstate actors are likely to contain many kinds and sources of cleavage within their ranks. Yet which play the greatest role in driving fragmentation and in determining the shape of groups that emerge thereafter?

Other papers bring to light a debate on the effects of fragmentation. Driscoll suggests that rebel fragmentation can aid resolution of conflict with the state. When the challenging group is fragmented, the state can strategically co-opt rebel commanders, which offers an effective, if piecemeal, path toward ending the war. Staniland likewise links fragmentation to side-switching and hence conflict termination, but attributes this outcome to a different mechanism. Fragmentation can be the precursor to attacks by one faction against co-ethnics, which drives rebel organizations to defect to the state and increases its capacity to wage effective counterinsurgency. Against these two works, Cunningham, Bakke and Seymour show how fragmentation in nonstate actors leads not to peace in the overriding conflict, but to a higher probability of violence. According to their findings, competition within nonstate actors for political relevance creates incentives for militancy, encouraging factions to impose costs on the state through violence. These conflicting arguments present questions of great significance for theorists and policy-makers alike. Under what conditions or at what stages of a conflict does insurgent fragmentation contribute to escalation or de-escalation of conflict? Is fragmentation in the interests of states that battle nonstate actors or not? What makes states more or less adept at utilizing divisions within their nonstate challengers?

The findings of the papers in this special issue—and the differences among them—set forth a new agenda for research on nonstate actors, fragmentation, and

conflict processes. Having established that actor fragmentation plays a critical role in conflict processes, this volume suggests several directions for future research. One issue is the scope of conflicts that are often construed to be “intrastate” in character. Of particular significance here is the link between internal fragmentation and external involvement in civil conflicts. Such involvement takes many forms. In many disputes, one or more factions within a nonstate actor are based in or funded by another state. For example, Turkey’s backing of the Turkish Cypriots was a critical factor in the dispute that created a de facto independent Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus. Even after the conventional conflict ended in 1974, the Turkish-based Grey Wolves continued to play a role in radicalizing the dispute with Greek Cypriots by actively engaging in violence on the island. Likewise, a key division in the Kashmiri Muslim movement has been between factions backed by Pakistan and those that are not. This has led to armed conflict between factions that appear to have the same basic agenda.

Several papers in this volume touch upon the role of external involvement in civil conflict. Existing analyses attribute intervention to cross-border kin ties between the third-party and groups immediately engaged in conflict (Saideman, 2001; Cetinyan 2002; Jenne 2006; Salehyan 2007; Thyne 2009; Cederman et al 2009). In emphasizing cross border connection based on ethnic identity, however, these works neglect the question of organizational structure and interests. The latter comes to the fore in the works presented here that show how group factionalism and shifting internal balances of power creates varying incentives and opportunities for intervention, regardless of shared ethnicity. McLoughlin and Pearlman consider how fragmentation precipitates intervention, illustrated when the rivalry between Iraqi Kurdish parties invited contradictory alliances

with rival Middle East state patrons. Driscoll reverses the causal arrows and suggests that it is instead intervention that precipitates fragmentation. In the Tajik case, foreign intervention in civil wars gave competing warlords new resources over which to fight, and thus exacerbated conflict among them. Further investigation is needed to uncover the causes and effects of this interaction between third-party intervention in conflict on the one hand and actor fragmentation, on the other. This can help us not only understand the conditions under which outside actors goad or suppress fragmentation, but also help us build better models about the regional and international dimensions of conflicts that appear to center within a single state.

Another issue for further exploration is conceptual. Many of the papers in this volume invite us to rethink what constitutes a “side” in any situation of conflict. Staniland demonstrates the frequency of factional defection, Driscoll argues that coalitions of insurgents and the state alter the “rebel” side frequently, and McLoughlin and Pearlman think of a movement not as an actor but as an “institutional equilibrium” among actors. Taken together, these works imply the danger in reifying and overestimating the unity of any group participating in conflict. Analytical frameworks that accurately reflect the messy realities on the ground can more readily produce valid inferences about causal processes and reliable strategies for conflict resolution policy.

Pairing these new frameworks with more general testing is vital to push forward the fragmentation research agenda. In advancing a research agenda focused on the fragmentation of nonstate actors in conflict, we suggest new variables on which data should be collected and new sources to use to that end. Several of the papers in this issue provide small and medium-n data, several introduce new datasets. Cunningham, Bakke,

and Seymour use a dataset on fragmentation in self-determination conflicts and test a number of hypotheses on 22 disputes including 242 factions. Asal, Brown, and Dalton utilize of a dataset on Middle Eastern minorities which also provides fertile ground for testing a range of competing models.

These large-n studies, in demonstrating the power of fragmentation across a large set of cases, highlight the necessity of more information about fragmented actors. We call for further work in this area. We wager that increasingly disaggregated data on nonstate actors in conflict will not only support new and powerful theories of conflict; they can also offer grounds for better tests of existing theories that scholars have thus far supported with evidence at a higher level of aggregation. The fragmentation research program brings to light previously neglected actors and variables. Will such data validate or invalidate the models and assumptions currently considered to be authoritative in the field of conflict studies? The stakes are high. Fragmentation, as concept and empirical reality, unsettles that which we often take for granted to be “actors.” Future research will reveal to what degree this shift likewise unsettles reigning wisdom about the sources, processes, and outcomes of conflict.

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