

Cooperation, Coexistence, or Conflict?

An Analysis of Rebel Interactions within Internal Armed Conflicts

Daniel Garepis-Holland

POL S 403: Conflict, Crime, and Repression

Prof. Gabriella Levy

June 9, 2025

At the outset of Afghanistan's intra-mujahedin war in 1992, the Pashtuns were fighting the Tajiks, Uzbeks, and Hazaras (Christia 2012). By 1994, the Pashtuns, Hazaras, and Uzbeks were fighting the Tajiks. In just two years, bitter ethnic enemies became allies and former partners became adversaries. Afghanistan is not unique — civil wars with multiple rebel groups often exhibit frequent alliance shifts which cannot be easily explained. However, civil war scholarship until the early 2010s focused primarily on state-rebel dyadic interactions, failing to consider the various interactions between rebel groups.

To solve this puzzle, this paper reviews the emerging literature concerning the variation in rebel interactions within civil wars. First, it discusses the “Why” question, addressing commitment problems facing rebels who attempt to form alliances, as well as the possible benefits of alliance formation for rebels. Next, it answers “With Whom?” through the two most prominent competing explanations for partner choice, drawing on similar cleavages from other areas of the civil war field (Furtado 2007). Strategic, or “greed”-based explanations draw on neorealism to argue that groups choose alliances based on power-based traits which best guarantee victory and post-conflict power, and that group identity is instrumental and not significant in determining alliance formation. Conversely, identity-based, or “grievance” explanations posit that shared identity alignment fosters cooperation, due to improved trust and coordination between groups. Finally, it will examine areas of exploration for this emerging area of study, including expanding focus to novel cases such as Myanmar, as well as further study into the post-conflict effect of rebel interactions. Although rebel group fragmentation is mentioned in much of the literature, and the processes behind inter-group alliances are similar in many ways to those of intra-group factions, this paper will focus on interactions between armed groups, rather than between their subgroups or factions.

## Why Ally? The Commitment Problem and Coalition Benefits

Considering rebel groups often share a common enemy in the state, which individually they are often far weaker than, there is clearly a strong incentive for cooperation amongst rebel groups (Furtado 2007). However, civil war is an entirely anarchic environment due to the breakdown of social institutions, meaning there is no enforcement mechanism for rebel alliances to prevent the possible negative outcomes of coalition building. This commitment problem can be understood across multiple time horizons: immediate group survival, success in the ongoing conflict, and influence over the post-conflict political order. Rebels want to survive as long as possible, attempt to win the conflict, and ensure their goals will be achieved after the conclusion of the conflict. Groups can defect from any alliance or coalition (hereby used interchangeably) at any stage, creating the dilemma.

When a rebel coalition appears to be close to victory, the weakest members will worry their needs will be ignored by their stronger coalition partners in the post-conflict settlement, and they will lose power in the post-conflict settlement (Christia 2012). Due to this, they will prolong the conflict by defecting to a balancing alliance, where they will have a greater share of power. On the other hand, other studies focus on defection during the group survival conflict horizon, specifically due to *selective accommodation*. In this process, states facing fragmented rebel landscapes offer rewards or concessions to specific groups, in an attempt to induce them to defect from the coalition, stop fighting, or fight on behalf of the state (Akcinaroglu 2012). This allows the state to eliminate fragmented groups and decrease rebel strength without having to fight on multiple fronts. This increases the importance of forming alliances, as strong alliances make selective accommodation more difficult compared to rebel groups who are in conflict or only hold weak ties.

However, it also introduces a commitment problem, as groups cannot ensure their coalition partners will not defect to the government (Bapat and Bond 2012). Using a game theory model, as opposed to Akcinaroglou's empirical analysis, the authors examine how capacity influences this commitment problem. When government repressive capacity is low or group capacity is high, rebel groups are less likely to face immediate defeat or co-optation pressures and can rely on the shadow of the future (potential for future interactions) to incentivize cooperation due to reputation penalties for defection. When state capacity is high, weaker coalition partners face defection pressures, and an external state sponsor is required to punish defection — the authors find that third-party state actors only intervene when it is required (for weak groups facing strong states). Despite the potential pitfalls of coalition building, it offers significant benefits to groups. Using a simple linear capability aggregation model, Akcinaroglou finds that rebel capability aggregation increases the chance of rebel victory. However, rebel coalitions create synergies greater than the sum of individual group capabilities, through mechanisms such as intelligence sharing and multiple fronts of attack (Steinwand and Metternich 2022). While coalition building offers significant gains, it also creates commitment problems and pitfalls.

### **When Rebels Fight: Windows of Opportunity and Vulnerability**

Beyond cooperation or coexistence, rebel groups may also engage in violent rivalry—a phenomenon that, while seemingly counterproductive given their common enemy and collective weakness relative to the state, occurs relatively often. Pischedda's *window theory* of opportunity and vulnerability provides a rational explanation for inter-rebel conflict as a response to shifts in relative power between groups (Pischedda 2020). Infighting occurs when groups perceive either a window of opportunity—a chance to eliminate weaker rivals at low cost—or a window of

vulnerability, where a declining group resorts to violence in a desperate bid to reverse its trajectory. He argues that co-ethnicity intensifies these dynamics, as groups drawing on the same ethnic base face overlapping ambitions and can more easily absorb each other's social networks. Multiple studies support these patterns while identifying additional factors. Phillips (2019), drawing on terrorist infighting data, and Fjelde and Nilsson (2012), drawing on global civil war data, find that power asymmetries and co-ethnicity increase fratricide, as does state sponsorship. Through analysis of the Syrian civil war, Gade, Hafez, and Gabbay (2019) confirm that power asymmetry drives fratricide, but find it more common between groups with distinct identities rather than co-ethnics, particularly between sectarian jihadists and secular nationalists in Syria. However, as their analysis only focuses on Syria, these findings could illustrate a unique conflict dynamic rather than an overall trend.

Additionally, Phillips and Fjelde & Nilsson diverge from Pischedda by focusing on lucrative resources and state sponsorship effects on rebel infighting. Drug trafficking and mining generate new incompatibilities over smuggling routes, while external sponsors may encourage proxy conflicts even when these serve sponsor rather than rebel interests. Methodologically, both studies control for group strength in their models, finding that illicit revenue and foreign sponsorship increase infighting irrespective of baseline capabilities—suggesting these factors operate beyond simple power dynamics that window theory would predict. However, Gade et al.'s analysis contradicts these findings, showing no significant association between state sponsorship and fratricide. These empirical contradictions, alongside the broader endogeneity questions surrounding rebel infighting, remain underexplored compared to alliance dynamics and require additional scholarship to resolve.

## **With Whom? Strategic versus Identity-Based Partner Selection**

Having examined why rebels choose to ally or fight, this paper now turns to partner selection — *with whom* do rebels choose to ally? While the foundational scholars in the field generally consider group identity to be irrelevant in alliance formation, later scholarship has challenged this view and provided support to identity-based explanations for whom rebel groups choose to ally with, providing two competing explanations to solve this puzzle.

Strategic explanations suggest that rebel elites form alliances based on what best serves their goals within each time horizon, using ideology instrumentally to motivate rank-and-file members. Survival considerations dominate for smaller groups facing extreme vulnerability and marginal bargaining power, leading them to seek short-term coalitions or external sponsorship to minimize commitment problems, especially when confronting strong states (Bapat and Bond 2012). For victory and post-conflict influence, minimum winning coalition (MWC) theory provides the key framework: groups seek coalitions just large enough to secure power while maximizing each member's benefit share, preferring narrow alliances over broad ones in anticipation of post-war bargaining (Christia 2012). This logic explains why strong groups often fight alone, while intermediate groups most frequently form formal alliances to create synergies and achieve favorable outcomes.

Ahmad and Diallo (2023) provide an example from Mali: one commander of Sufi pastoralists stated his group would 'ally with the devil if necessary', and chose to ally with jihadist groups, using identity instrumentally by emphasizing a broad Islamic identity and downplaying sectarian differences. In this case, two groups of moderate strength developed a coalition out of mutual need, as neither were strong enough to form a winning coalition alone or weak enough to be easily co-opted by the state. Steinwand & Metternich add geographic and

demographic considerations, finding that groups strategically pursue ethnic and territorial diversity to widen recruitment bases and enable multi-front attacks, despite increased coordination costs (Steinwand and Metternich 2022). Their network analysis of African civil wars finds that larger distances between coalition partners had a positive effect on coalition formation likelihood. Steinwand's separate examination of ethnic recruitment as a synergy source suggests greater ethnic diversity increases coalition formation by providing military advantages through broader geographical control and reduced infighting between co-ethnic groups. These strategic logics generate observable patterns: moderately-sized groups ally with similar groups, large groups prefer independence, and weak groups facing repressive states rely on third-party enforcement mechanisms.

On the other hand, identity-focused explanations argue that shared identity creates structures and networks which link rebel groups, expose and punish defectors, and increase trust, solving the commitment problem and increasing alliance formation (Blair et al. 2022). These networks lengthen the shadow of the future through repeated interactions and connect groups with external supporters (diaspora groups, third-party states) who can punish betrayals and facilitate cooperation. Shared ideology also provides stronger authority structures, particularly for religious groups, while increasing familiarity, trust, and group cohesion against state defection (Gade et al. 2019). While power-based scholars like Christia argue that identity is instrumentally manipulated by elites, Blair et al. argue that apparent shifts reflect multiple, yet durable, identities within groups. For example, Palestinian organizations have consistently held both nationalist, leftist, and religious factions, but have emphasized religious ideologies in recent years to tap into transnational support networks. However, it could not have adopted ideologies such as Christianity or anti-communism, meaning ideology is still important to coalition

formation. Empirical evidence supports identity effects through different methodological approaches. Gade et al. categorize Syrian rebel factions by their conflict framing, desired political order, and territorial aspirations, finding that ideological similarity increases inter-rebel cooperation. Supporting the Syrian analysis, Blair et al. use a large-N dataset and find that both rhetorical and material alliances form more frequently between ideologically similar groups, though more so for rhetorical alliances (those without material exchange). This difference likely reflects lower costs and defection risks in rhetorical partnerships. These rhetorical alliances serve strategic recruitment purposes, as demonstrated by the Islamic State's use of global religious partnerships to compensate for its lack of religious legitimacy (Blair and Potter 2023).

Within the identity category, the scholarship has various subdistinctions which make it difficult to assess which categories hold more importance for alliance formation. While Blair separates shared religion, ethnicity, and ideology, Gade et al. include religion within the broader scope of "ideology" as separate from ethnicity. Blair et al. specifically emphasize religion as a distinct category, finding that at high levels of repression, shared religion becomes strongly significant in alliance formation, though at low levels it is susceptible to competing over constituencies, in a manner similar to co-ethnics. Blair et al. also directly compare shared leftist ideology during the Cold War to post-2001 shared religion, due to their similar transnational networks, and find that shared religion had a stronger effect on alliance formation, likely due to stronger institutions, while leftist groups struggled to form durable alliances in comparison.

On the other hand, Balcells, Chen, and Pischedda (2022) clarify the impact of ethnic compared to ideological and religious constituencies. They agree with Blair et al. that shared constituencies can allow easier alliance formation and cooperation, but add that ethnic parochialism makes it easier to absorb members of co-ethnic organizations, leading to increased

infighting between groups in attempts to expand their reach over the ethnic base. In contrast to Blair et al., however, they measure formal versus informal alliances, instead of material and rhetorical, and do not separate religion from ideology or examine alliance formation at differing levels of repression. This means the positive result they find for ideology may be limited to religion rather than political ideologies as well. Overall, there is significant support for the argument that shared ideology, specifically religion and possibly shared political views, shape alliance formation, though the impact of shared ethnicity remains disputed.

### **Bridging the Gap between Identity and Strategy**

Despite ongoing debates about specific identity categories, both power-based and ideological explanations for alliance formation have garnered substantial empirical support from case studies and large-N analyses. Direct comparison is difficult, as even analyses such as Steinwand and Blair focus on different types of alliances: Blair focuses on formal alliances, where shared trust may be more important while Steinwand focuses on battlefield coalitions, where geographic and ethnic diversity may be preferable for their military advantages. Topal (2024) further explains that shared constituencies (of which identity measures can serve as proxies) lead to the creation of united fronts, or long-term formal alliances with deep cooperation, while for battlefield coalitions, strategic factors may be more important.

Rather than competing explanations, these findings suggest that strategic calculations and identity networks operate simultaneously in shaping rebel alliance decisions. It is likely that both sets of dynamics play a role in shaping alliance formation. Building on this insight, scholars such as Corradi (2023) have developed typologies which consider both identity and time horizon. Tactical-heterogeneous alliances, for example, are generally designed to quickly defeat a common enemy or survive a crisis before ending the alliance, while strategic-homogeneous

alliances between groups of shared identity attempting to achieve post-conflict goals can initially be very cohesive, but risk usurpation and fratricide over the shared constituency. However, this typology notably ignores other dimensions of power considered by power scholars, namely group strength, as this has been found to significantly impact alliance formation. Emerging case-specific work examines the impact of both identity, time-horizon, and group strength on cases such as Syria, Turkey, and Sri Lanka. Future scholarship should attempt to include more dimensions of power as part of a potential typology and test it using a large-N dataset such as the Militant Group Alliances and Rivalries dataset (Blair et al. 2022).

### **Underexplored Cases: The Internal Conflict in Myanmar**

Since it first began to be explored in the early 2010s, the literature regarding rebel interactions has developed rapidly. However, significant gaps remain in the literature. Firstly, existing case studies focus overwhelmingly on the Arab world, specifically on Syria. Although the Syrian civil war poses an interesting case to study rebel alliances, due to its variety of factions representing various ethnicities, religious ideologies, and post-conflict goals, such a heavy focus makes it difficult to distinguish between multinational trends and peculiarities of the Syrian situation. Most notably, the long-running internal conflict in Myanmar has received only a handful of mentions from rebel alliance scholars, despite being a perfect case study to analyze interactions. The conflict involves various ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) such as the Arakan Army, United Wa State Army, and Karen National Union, many of which have ideological affiliation as well, fighting against the state (Boonyawongwiwat 2022; Brenner 2019).

More recently in 2021, the democratic government-in-exile created the People's Defense Force, a majority-ethnicity (Bamar) organization, to join the conflict against the military junta,

and is allied with various EAOs as well. The various EAOs exhibit diverse patterns of alliances and fratricide, much of which occurs irrespective of shared geographic or ethnic affiliations. For example, the Shan State Army – North (SSPP) and Shan State Army – South (RCSS), co-ethnic groups sharing a Shan nationalist ideology, fought for decades before declaring a truce and moving towards a possible alliance as of 2023 (Cho 2023). Although in-depth scholarship exists on the various rebel dynamics in Myanmar, such as that by David Brenner (2019), few articles specifically examine rebel alliances under the previously discussed frameworks or use Myanmar as a case to compare identity and strategic explanations.

### **Rebel Interactions and Post-Conflict Outcomes**

In addition to incorporating new cases, an underexplored question concerns how rebel interactions affect peace negotiations and post-conflict governance. While the minimum winning coalition (MWC) and commitment problem logics both invoke post-conflict fears and goals, and multiple identity-focused studies sort groups based on their ideal polity, these theoretical expectations lack empirical verification. Do weaker groups within a winning coalition get ignored or repressed? Do alliances create more lasting peace or affect the formation of political parties during democratic transitions? The limited research yields mixed findings. Akcinaroglu (2012) finds that formal alliances decrease the chance of peace settlements, likely because strong ties weaken the ability of the government to engage in selective accommodation of rebel groups. Longoni (2021) confirms that the absence of alliances hurts rebel chances of victory and increases the likelihood of peace settlements, due to decreased rebel strength; conflicts with dispersed power among various rebel groups were more likely to end in ceasefires or terminate due to low activity. Regarding long-term stability, Zeigler (2016) found that only victories by competitive rebel alliances — those with significant internal security dilemmas and commitment

problems (such as more heterogeneous power structures) — increased the chance of conflict recurrence, while victory by non-competitive rebel alliances did not affect recurrence. Notably absent from this limited body of work is analysis of how identity-based alliances specifically shape post-conflict trajectories. Do ethnic coalitions gain autonomy, and do leftist or jihadist alliances successfully reshape the state’s political workings? This represents a critical gap for future research.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined the existing literature on rebel group interactions within civil wars. Interactions occur along a continuum of cooperation, coexistence, and violent rivalry, with alliances contending with commitment problems across the survival, victory, and post-conflict time horizons, and when rebels may fight amongst each other in addition to the state. Strategic logics rooted in the minimum-winning-coalition principle and relative capabilities explain why intermediate-strength groups so often aggregate power, while identity-based logics explain how shared ideology, religion, or ethnicity supply the social infrastructure needed to reduce collective-action dilemmas. Taken together, the evidence demonstrates that both “greed” and “grievance” mechanisms operate simultaneously: power considerations and identity networks both provide logical and evidence-based explanations to answer the “why” and “with whom” puzzles of rebel alliances, and typologies attempting to integrate the two have begun to emerge. However, much of the literature has been limited to a small subset of conflicts, especially the Syrian civil war, leaving cases such as Myanmar yet to be explored, despite complex dynamics of rebel alliances. Additionally, how alliances shape post-conflict governance remains thoroughly unexplored. Future research into the field of rebel alliances is key to understanding the ever-changing dynamics of civil war.

## References

- Ahmad, Aisha, and Ousmane Diallo. 2023. "A Winning Team of Losers: The Logic of Jihadist Coalitions in Civil Wars." *Journal of Global Security Studies* 8(1).
- Akcinaroglu, Seden. 2012. "Rebel Interdependencies and Civil War Outcomes." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56(5): 879–903.
- Balcells, Laia, Chong Chen, and Costantino Pischedda. 2022. "Do Birds of a Feather Flock Together? Rebel Constituencies and Civil War Alliances." *International Studies Quarterly* 66(1).
- Bapat, Navin A., and Kanisha D. Bond. 2012. "Alliances Between Militant Groups." *British Journal of Political Science* 42(4): 793–824.
- Bencherif, Adib, and Aurélie Campana. 2017. "Alliances of Convenience: Assessing the Dynamics of the Malian Insurgency." *Mediterranean Politics* 22(1): 115–34.
- Blair, Christopher W. et al. 2022. "Honor Among Thieves: Understanding Rhetorical and Material Cooperation Among Violent Nonstate Actors." *International Organization* 76(1): 164–203.
- Blair, Christopher W., and Philip B.K. Potter. 2023. "The Strategic Logic of Large Militant Alliance Networks." *Journal of Global Security Studies* 8(1).
- Boonyawongwiwat, Thitiwut. 2022. Asymmetric Alliance Formation by the Arakan Army During the Civil War/Peace Process in Myanmar. *Journal of Mekong Societies*. <https://so03.tci-thaijo.org/index.php/mekongjournal/article/view/255658/176351> (June 8, 2025).
- Brenner, David. 2019. *Rebel Politics: A Political Sociology of Armed Struggle in Myanmar*. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7591/j.ctvfc55nc> (June 8, 2025).
- Cho, Ko. 2023. "Rival Shan Armies Declare Truce as Other Ethnic Armed Groups Gain Ground." *Myanmar Now*. <https://myanmar-now.org/en/news/rival-shan-armies-declare-truce-as-other-ethnic-armed-groups-gain-ground/> (June 7, 2025).
- Christia, Fotini. 2012. *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*. 1st ed. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Corradi, Edoardo. 2023. "Beyond Armed Competition: The Logic of Rebel Groups' Alliance Formation." *Civil Wars* 25(2–3): 249–67.
- Corradi, Edoardo, and Giampiero Cama. 2024. "Institutions, Power-Sharing, and the Cohesiveness of Rebel Coalitions in the Syrian Civil War." *Small Wars and Insurgencies*.
- Desgrais, Nicolas, Yvan Guichaoua, and Andrew Lebovich. 2018. "Unity Is the Exception: Alliance Formation and De-Formation Among Armed Actors in Northern Mali." *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 29(4): 654–79.
- Fjelde, Hanne, and Desirée Nilsson. 2012. "Rebels against Rebels: Explaining Violence between Rebel Groups." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56(4): 604–28.
- Furtado, Christina S. 2007. *Inter-Rebel Group Dynamics: Cooperation or Competition? The Case of South Asia*. <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/items/83858> (June 8, 2025).
- Gade, Emily Kalah, Michael Gabbay, Mohammed M. Hafez, and Zane Kelly. 2019. "Networks of Cooperation: Rebel Alliances in Fragmented Civil Wars." *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63(9): 2071–97.
- Gade, Emily Kalah, Mohammed M. Hafez, and Michael Gabbay. 2019. "Fratricide in Rebel Movements: A Network Analysis of Syrian Militant Infighting." *Journal of Peace Research* 56(3): 321–35.

- Longoni, Gian Marco. 2021. *How Civil Conflicts End: Fragmented and Competitive Armed Oppositions and the Outcomes of Civil Conflicts (1989–2017)*. Trento. <https://tesidottorato.depositolegale.it/handle/20.500.14242/178884> (June 7, 2025).
- Novellis, Andrea. 2023. *Why Fight When You Can Rule Together? Rebel Power-Sharing During Civil Wars*. <https://air.unimi.it/handle/2434/1050579> (June 8, 2025).
- Phillips, Brian J. 2019. "Terrorist Group Rivalries and Alliances: Testing Competing Explanations." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 42(11): 997–1019.
- Pischedda, Costantino. 2020. *Conflict Among Rebels: Why Insurgent Groups Fight Each Other*. Columbia University Press.
- Steinwand, Martin C., and Nils W. Metternich. 2022. "Who Joins and Who Fights? Explaining Tacit Coalition Behavior Among Civil War Actors." *International Studies Quarterly* 66(4).
- Topal, Sedef A. 2024. "Pathways to Cooperation: A Relational Theory of Rebel Alliance Formation." *Journal of Conflict Resolution*.
- Zeigler, Sean M. 2016. "Competitive Alliances and Civil War Recurrence." *International Studies Quarterly* 60(1): 24–37.