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Monkey Cage

# The problem with fragmented insurgencies

By Kristin M. Bakke, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham and Lee J. M. Seymour May 13

United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura recently announced that his schedule for the U.N.-backed “[peace consultations](#)” in Geneva includes over 40 one-on-one meetings representing an array of external states, non-jihadist armed factions, opposition groups and civil society actors with a stake in the Syrian conflict. [Expectations](#) for the process are dim, not least given the exclusion of the jihadist armed groups that have made important battlefield gains and the wider disarray in the opposition camp. Frustrated diplomats are right to note the problems posed by a fragmented insurgency: A large body of conflict research demonstrates that such fragmentation makes conflict more violent, longer lasting and harder to resolve.

Events in Syria reflect the wider fragmentation of Middle Eastern states and societies, as evidenced by ongoing conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Libya and Yemen. A prominent feature of these conflicts is the inability of movements to remain united, both during and after civil wars. In Syria, the opposition has fragmented repeatedly – and more recently, so have the various forces [aligned](#) with the government. [Militias](#) have proliferated in [Iraq](#), compounding the country’s already fractured politics. In [Libya](#), fighting among the various factions has divided the country into rival camps and provides a telling example of how tenuous the unity of armed groups can be. In [Yemen](#), an unlikely series of alliances has seen yesterday’s foes become today’s friends as political order has fragmented across the country’s divided regions and in the capital of Sanaa. These examples are not exceptional. Many opposition movements change over time and few remain cohesive, or unitary, over their lifespan. In a recent book, [Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham](#) documents that from 1960 to 2005 just 10 percent of nationalist opposition movements remained cohesive over time.

Fragmented movements are [characterized](#) by competition between multiple organizations, weak institutional links among organizations and a diffusion of power among them. Indeed, fragmented movements are a diverse lot, with clear differences in the number of factions, but also in how they are linked by institutional structures or power relations. As [Peter Krause](#) notes, the hegemony of a powerful group improves the effectiveness of divided movements, but this is easier said than done.

So what are the pernicious effects of such fragmented movements?

First, fragmentation makes conflicts more violent and messier. This is because each faction finds itself in a “[dual contest](#),” pitted against both the state and other factions in a struggle for political power *within* the movement. Factions that dominate the opposition generally reap wartime benefits and have better access to power and a bigger say in post-war politics. This increases violence against the state, as competing factions use violence to

signal that they cannot be ignored. Fragmentation also increases the chance of [violent infighting among factions](#). Infighting is particularly likely during “windows of opportunity” that factions exploit to eliminate rivals, argues [Costantino Pischedda](#). Unfortunately, opposition fragmentation also appears to increase risks to civilians, who become targets of violence as factions target the support bases of their rivals. Together, these dynamics produce multifaceted violence. A [recent study](#) highlights this in Darfur, for example, where killing involved “battles between the major combatants [and] among [allied] subgroups of combatant coalitions... inter-tribal conflict... one-sided violence against civilians by different parties... and banditry.”

Second, in addition to these patterns of multifaceted violence, fragmented oppositions are susceptible to defection to the state – fostering uncertainty about allegiances and potentially prolonging the war. Recent research has suggested several mechanisms that give rise to defection. Defections can result from infighting within fragmented groups, generating what Paul Staniland calls “[fratricidal flipping](#).” Similarly, [Sabine Otto](#) finds that splinter factions are the most likely to defect to fight alongside their former enemies, as a means to “survive” as an actor in the civil war. In Iraq, for example, infighting between al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and Sunni nationalists, ostensibly on the same side, along with [proliferating points of contact](#) marked by the “[surge](#)” and [the Anbar Awakening](#), helped push Sunni insurgent leaders over to the U.S. and Iraqi government side between 2004 and 2007. These flipped “co-ethnics” can make for effective counterinsurgents, as [Jason Lyall](#) argues, although side switching can increase the chance that [civilians become the targets](#) of insurgent violence, as they did at the hands of AQI.

In some conflicts, rather than increasing the chances for counterinsurgency success, repeated defections lock violence into a country’s politics. [Fotini Christia](#) suggests that wartime shifts in power that exacerbated concerns about the division of power in post-war Afghanistan and Bosnia prolonged violence there. [Lee Seymour](#) shows that motives for defection are sometimes more local and immediate. Examining cycles of war in Darfur and South Sudan, Seymour shows that factions might align with the other side if it provides them with resources boosting their power vis-à-vis local rivals. Indeed, states such as Sudan actively exploit local rivalries to splinter opposition movements through transfers of guns and money, a pattern [William Reno](#) observes in the recent history of warfare in Africa. But far from hastening an end to violence, these practices diffuse it across communities recruited into the war by states and rebels. These back-and-forth dynamics may prolong the conflict and increase violence, as well as complicate any outside actors’ assessment of “sides” according to ethnic or ideological cleavages.

A third consequence of opposition fragmentation is that it complicates attempts at bringing the conflict to an end. In the Israeli-Palestinian case, Wendy Pearlman has shown how peace settlements acceptable to some Palestinian factions have been unacceptable to others because they empower rival factions, not because the factions are innately opposed to the terms of the settlement. As such, some factions turned to violence to derail peace because of how it would impact their own position within the Palestinian movement. New research is beginning to further examine the conditions under which so-called [radical flanks](#) hurt or help movements in reaching their objectives. On a brighter note, [Cunningham](#) shows that governments are more likely to give concessions to fragmented oppositions that seek self-determination. However, concessions made to such groups

rarely lead to total settlement of the dispute.

For these reasons – and as further illustrated by the previous failure of international mediation efforts in Syria – opposition fragmentation makes it hard to reach a mediated settlement. Research by [Govinda Clayton](#) suggests that conflicts featuring strong opposition movements, cohesion being one indicator of strength, are more likely to see both the onset of mediation and a mediated settlement. The stronger the rebels are vis-à-vis the state, the less likely the state is to think that it can beat them on the battlefield, and stronger and more cohesive oppositions stand a better chance of finding a solution to conflict when negotiations ensue.

What explains this fragmentation? The structure of armed groups might reflect [pre-war political networks](#), influencing the degree to which there are strong ties among commanders and strong ties between commanders and local communities. The domestic politics of states also complicate the efforts of would-be rebels to organize cohesive groups. [Livia Schubiger](#) argues that indiscriminate state violence against civilians increases the fragmentation of armed groups, in part by disrupting their organizational coordination and strategic unity. We have [recently argued](#) that movement divisions are shaped both internal competition within movements that arise through interactions with the state and outside actors, and [Henning Tamm](#) shows how state sponsors shape cohesion in the Second Congo War in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. By channeling resources to opposition leaders' internal rivals, outsiders can trigger fragmentation. Similarly, [Kristin M. Bakke](#) argues that foreign fighters tend to come with different ideas about what the struggle is for and how it should be fought, which together can foster splits in armed groups.

Whatever the causes, these internal dynamics of opposition movements have clear policy implications. First, this research suggests that how conflicts and their outcomes are labeled matters. The short-hand labels given to actors and conflicts seldom reflect the complexity of the organizations, incompatibilities and identities around which violence is organized. So while we might talk about Sunnis vs. Shiites in Iraq, such labels should be treated with caution. [Mahmood Mamdani](#), for instance, has critiqued uncritical portrayals of violence in Darfur as a one-sided genocidal campaign pitting “African” rebels vs. an “Arab” government. Far from reflecting realities on the ground, this discourse was the product of [rebels](#) and [advocacy groups](#) seeking to legitimize Western intervention. The very act of labeling certain communities as groups, identifying organizations as their representatives and pinpointing what a conflict is not trivial. As [Séverine Autesserre](#) has shown, the U.N.'s framing of a conflict or post-conflict situation shapes the policies it adopts – which can be detrimental if the frame is incorrect.

Second, the internal dynamics of opposition movements and armed groups matter for a range of international interventions, including mediation success. Mediating a settlement goes beyond mediating between the two “sides” in a conflict. Indeed, this research suggests the dangers of further fragmenting movements through peace, the need to look beyond the armed groups who have fought their way to the bargaining table and the urgency of fostering cohesiveness among the relevant actors. As repeated failed mediations among factionalized movements in Darfur, Syria and Mali evidence, these objectives are difficult to achieve.

Third, internal dynamics also matter for military interventions and external support aimed at bringing the war to an end by force. In fragmented oppositions, intervention might mean supporting one faction over others. This has consequences, partly related to intra-movement power relationships that have downstream effects on infighting, side switching and the eventual [durability of peace](#). Policymakers need to think through how those consequences might affect their aims.

Finally, the internal dynamics of opposition movements and armed groups matter for humanitarian interventions aimed at protecting civilians in war-zones. They influence whom the civilians need to be protected from, how aid can be delivered and the prospects for post-intervention political order.

All of this means that we – researchers, policymakers, journalists and analysts – cannot ignore the complexity of opposition fragmentation. Focusing on the “sides” of a conflict can actually decrease our understanding of it and lead to misguided inferences and policies. Nor should we throw our hands up, declaring such conflicts so complicated as to be unresolvable. There is a growing body of research demonstrating predictable effects of fragmentation and, increasingly, we know more about its causes – both of which can translate to better policy.

#### Advertisement

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