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*Understanding
fragmentation in
conflict and its impact
on prospects for peace*

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Introduction

Complicated conflicts with many disparate actors have become increasingly common in the international system. The extreme fragmentation of the Syrian opposition in the ongoing civil war embodies this 'new normal' for civil wars. Fragmentation affects a number of conflict dynamics, including the turn to violence, internecine conflict among parties, targeting of civilians, collaboration with the state, and the extent to which opposition movements are accommodated. In this paper, I explore the phenomenon of fragmentation in conflict, its known effects on conflict processes and how it affects mediation and settlement success. I centre specifically on the fragmentation of 'opposition' movements – those actors that challenge the recognised state in civil wars.

Violence between government and opposition movements is more likely when the opposition is divided.

The paper will highlight a number of key findings about fragmentation and conflict, and the role of mediation in fragmented conflicts.

In **Section 1**, I examine the concept of fragmentation, explaining how both conflicts and actors within conflict can be divided internally. I follow this by providing some early warning indi-

cators of fragmentation, new trends, and a summation of why fragmentation occurs.

In **Section 2**, I examine the known consequences of fragmentation of actors and conflicts, including violence, accommodation and side switching. Violence between the government and opposition movements is more likely when the opposition is divided. Increased fragmentation after a conflict exacerbates this problem, leading to further violence. Fragmentation is also associated with the increased targeting of civilians and fighting between organisations.

Section 3 addresses the effects of peace processes on fragmentation, exploring conditions under which unity may be increased, intentional and unintentional fragmentation of the opposition, and the role that mediation can play directly in increasing fragmentation. The decisions made by facilitators about inclusion or exclusion of specific actors typically emphasize inclusion of moderates. Yet, the designation of an actor as a 'moderate' is dependent on the mediator's perspective. Attempts to distinguish moderates from extremists by mediators can serve as a focal point for further fragmentation.

In **Section 4**, I lay out how mediators and other third party actors have responded to fragmentation and the costs and benefits of these responses. Strategies include negotiation with only armed actors, sequential negotiation, including unarmed actors, and efforts to coalesce the opposition.

Finally, **Section 5** briefly addresses post-conflict dynamics after settlement has been reached in fragmented disputes.

1. What is fragmentation?

We can think of fragmented civil conflicts as those with a profile more complex than ‘state versus rebels’ or ‘north versus south’. Internal conflicts are described as fragmented when there are multiple rebel groups fighting the state. Actors or ‘opposition movements’ are said to be fragmented when they consist of multiple internal factions. Disputes are sometimes characterised as more or less fragmented based on whether rebel groups fight among themselves.

In general, we can think about conflicts as being fragmented in two ways: in terms of the actors and of the conflict itself. Actors range from very cohesive, hierarchical groups to loosely connected elements. Any group (‘dissidents’, ‘rebels’, ‘social movements’ or others) can be more or less cohesive or fragmented. Conflicts can be fragmented if there are multiple ‘sides’. Each side is then made up of actors that are more or less cohesive. These two elements can be combined to understand fragmentation within a conflict.

FRAGMENTED ACTORS

Three dimensions combine to determine the fragmentation of an actor.¹

- **Number of organisations.** Some opposition actors are essentially a single organisation that challenges the state, such as the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), which has represented Kurds in Iran since 1946. Other opposition movements commonly have multiple organisations, such as an armed wing and a political wing. The Irish Republican Army in Northern Ireland, for example, is a military organisation historically closely associated with the political party Sinn Féin. Some single organisations divide over time into multiple organisations with often complex inter-relationships. The government of Chad was initially challenged in 1966 by the rebel group FROLINAT. By 1971, FROLINAT was splintering into multiple groups. Some opposition movements are always fragmented, consisting of numerous organisations that share some broad goals but have little coordination across them. Assessing the degree of fragmentation based on the number of organisations is straightforward: actors with more organisations or factions within them are more fragmented. For example, the insurgency in Kashmir is considered among the most fragmented and has included dozens of organisations active over the course of the conflict.

- **Degree of institutionalisation among constituent organisations.** Political and military wings are often linked formally, for example, with strategy or policy decisions made together but specific tasks assigned to each wing. Yet, political and military wings typically operate with some degree of independence. In other opposition movements, ‘umbrella groups’ coordinate a set of independent or quasi-independent organisations. The strength of ties between military and political wings, or between an umbrella organisation and its members, reflects the degree of institutionalisation.
- **Distribution of power among organisations.** In some opposition movements there is a clearly dominant organisation that holds the majority of power within the movement. For example, the Tamil Liberation Tigers held the vast majority of both military power and societal support among Tamils in Sri Lanka, even though there were other organisations that advocated on behalf of Tamils in that conflict. In contrast, there have often been multiple organisations with substantial power bases within the Palestinian movement challenging Israel, including Fatah, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The degree to which power is centralised affects but does not determine the degree of fragmentation. Some organisations may have little military power but great strength from support within the population.

Each of these three dimensions is dynamic: organisations splinter or coalesce; umbrella groups disintegrate and form; power shifts over the course of conflict. It can be difficult to decide with whom to engage in dialogue once the dispute becomes violent.

MULTIPLE ACTORS

In some conflicts, it is easy to collapse the actors into two ‘sides’. Often, one side is the government and its allies, generally in favour of maintaining the status quo. The other side, often labelled ‘dissidents’ or ‘rebels’, seeks some change. For example, a national government typically wants to keep power centralised, while organisations representing a peripheral opposition group seek greater local control.

In other cases, the dissidents are divided in terms of what they want. This can lead to a situation of multi-party civil war, in which rebel groups fight both the government and each

other.² Civil wars in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Iraq, Lebanon and Somalia do not fit the general conception of ‘state versus rebels’ but rather involve a number of actors, one of which is the government, battling across the country. In these wars, rebel groups may try to work together, but often change their allegiances in the midst of war.³

The current civil war in Syria illustrates both of these elements of fragmentation – fragmented actors and a multi-party conflict. The conflict has seen a proliferation of opposition groups of different types, and even identifying which actors carried out which attack or who may control what territory is challenging. There have been numerous efforts to encourage organisations to ally or coalesce but these have generally been unsuccessful.

The consequence of splintering within an organisation is not always fragmentation.

IDENTIFYING FRAGMENTATION

Fragmentation in conflict is common and can have a number of pernicious effects, as discussed below. Most assessments are made after conflict and fragmentation has occurred. How can we spot fragmentation occurring at an earlier stage? Here, I suggest three indicators that could be used as observation points to understand whether a movement is becoming more fragmented.

- **Resilient splintering.** The consequence of splintering within an organisation is not always fragmentation. A key factor is whether that splinter leads to resilient (or persistent) new organisations. For example, an organisation that splinters may turn into two competing organisations that engage in internecine violence. During the 1985–2003 civil war between Northern and Southern Sudan, the Sudanese People’s Liberation Movement was the dominant Southern rebel group, but divided over time into multiple factions that fought one another.⁴ However, an organisation that splinters may lead to a more coherent single challenger, or may demobilise some individuals. For example, the Corsican rebel FLNC-October 22 organisation splintered from FLNC-UC in 2003,

but was inactive by 2005. This suggests that an observation of splintering alone is not necessarily a reliable indication of imminent fragmentation of a conflict.

- **Leadership debates.** In many cases, splintering that leads to multiple persistent organisations engaging in conflicts is preceded by disagreements within the leadership structure. For example, disagreement over leadership of the rebel group Rally for Congolese Democracy (RCD) led to an election at the organisation’s general meeting in 1999 of Emile Ilunga as the new leader.⁵ Following this internal leadership struggle, a faction of the RCD splintered off, increasing fragmentation. Attention to competition within an opposition movement, and in particular to disagreements about leadership and strategy, can reveal tensions that often precede fragmentation.
- **Uneven or contested participation in peace processes.** Conflict itself is often a driver of fragmentation, but peace processes also create space for emergent splintering. Uneven or contested participation in a peace process can serve as an early warning of possible fragmentation. For example, the rank and file soldiers in the Mizo Liberation Front essentially caused their leader to renege on a public commitment to peace in India in 1976.⁶ In the Burundian civil war, rebel groups fragmented several times around peace processes, with smaller factions of the main rebel groups CNDD-FDD and Palipehutu-FNL signing ceasefire agreements with the government years before the main factions. Disagreement within an organisation often comes to the fore on the brink of such peace processes as actors stake their positions internally.

NEW TRENDS

Several new trends in fragmentation are worth noting. First, there has been an upswing in transnational actors moving across borders to join conflict. This is exemplified by the long-running conflict in Chechnya, where foreign fighters have brought both new ideas and new expertise to the struggle with Russia (and in the Caucasus more generally). Interaction between foreign and domestic fighters shaped the degree to which Chechen soldiers gave primacy to religious identity over national identity. In Chechnya, the focus shifted from Chechen nationalism to an Islamic struggle. This was, in part, the product of foreign influence in the leadership

of the movement. Additionally, the setting up of foreign-sponsored training camps influenced how soldiers perceived their opposition movement's goals and the legitimacy and efficacy of specific types of tactics.⁷ Some soldiers became more aligned with the Islamist goals of the movement, and began to accept more radical and violent tactics being used in the dispute.

The degree to which IS members are happy with the status quo power arrangements will play a critical role in determining whether we see splintering.

The influence of foreign fighters led to divergence in movement goals and tactics, which created a foundation for splintering. Whether transnational fighters are skilled or novices, the entry of these individuals into the dispute has the potential to increase fragmentation.

More recently, the ongoing war fought by the 'Islamic State' (IS) has drawn in people from all over the world. These international recruits tend to be young and are trained by IS rather than bringing expertise and ideology with them. We have yet to see whether the influx of foreign fighters will have a divisive effect on IS. As IS increased territorial control and was on the offensive, we were unlikely to see splintering because all actors could focus on increased success. This may change as IS is subjected to increasing pressure and battlefield losses over time. Opposition movements frequently fragment under such pressures as the costs of conflict spread unevenly among members.⁸ At that point, the degree to which IS members are happy with the status quo power arrangements will play a critical role in determining whether we see splintering.⁹ The distinction between local and foreign fighters provides a natural dividing line along which the movement can fracture under stress.

A second new trend is the ease with which actors can reach a broader audience, including potential recruits and the international community. The number of terrorist-related websites, for example, more than doubled between 2003 and 2009.¹⁰ Easy access to both traditional and social media allows nascent organisations to develop and foster their identity. As such, the barriers to entry are low for new organisations.

Small groups of individuals can organise independently of existing opposition-movement structures, making fragmentation more likely.

A third and related trend is the complexity of international financing for civil wars, which promotes opposition fragmentation. External actors provide a variety of types of support, including money, weapons, intelligence, training, and direct support with troops. As well as states, opposition and rebel movements provide support (such as that given by Al Qaeda to expand its affiliate network), as do diaspora populations. The increasing sophistication of the financial industry means that supporters can transfer funds without needing direct contact with opposition actors. The large number of potential supporters and ease of providing financial support enable more, and smaller, organisations to survive in conflict environments, and the multitude of external supporters brings new preferences and ideas to the conflict. Both of these mechanisms foster fragmentation.

A final trend is the presence of multiple/fragmented governments in some civil war states, such as Libya and Yemen. Following the Cold War, we saw a sharp decline in support to incumbent governments from major world powers.¹¹ While the majority of external support in civil wars is still provided to governments, we have seen an increase in the fragility of states, leading to fractured governments or even multiple competing governments. In addition, the increase in the number and type of actors providing support can lead to fragmented governments when different external actors support competing factions within governments.

THE CAUSES OF FRAGMENTATION

Some countries have structural preconditions that make it particularly likely that conflicts will involve multiple actors. This is particularly true in societies with several large ethnic groups, when these groups are geographically concentrated,¹² and when there is a history of ethnic groups facing economic discrimination and political exclusion.¹³ The Ethiopian civil war (from the 1970s to the 1990s) involved armed Tigrayan, Eritrean, Oromo and Somali groups fighting together against a communist government. Following the overthrow of the government in the 1990s, many of these groups continued to fight what they then perceived as a Tigrayan-dominated government. In Somalia, likewise, armed groups that coordinated in the 1980s to overthrow Siad Barre turned their guns on each other within hours of his overthrow in 1991, and the country has existed without a functioning government for decades.

When repression puts increased stress on an opposition movement with deep internal divisions, it is likely to fragment, but in the absence of major internal disagreements, such pressure can inspire greater cooperation.

Violent competition with the state and with other opposition organisations plays a significant role in determining fragmentation. Repression by the state (or conflict with another opposition faction) can break apart opposition movements by increasing the costs of participation through crackdowns and wartime losses. Given higher costs, individuals or factions often respond in different ways as they attempt to mitigate these costs. Subsequent disagreements on strategy can fragment actors, leading individuals and factions to split from the original organisation.¹⁴

While repression can splinter oppositions, it can also serve to galvanise a movement and increase cohesion in the face of a common enemy. For example, if a state singles out a group for repression (such as Iraqi repression of the Kurdish population), individuals with different agendas can rally around the common threats.¹⁵ Whether repression leads to increased fragmentation or unity depends, in part, on whether the organisation and its leadership were stable to begin with.¹⁶ When repression puts increased stress on an opposition movement with deep internal divisions, it is likely to fragment, but in the absence of major internal disagreements, such pressure can inspire greater cooperation.

Within opposition movements, use of violent tactics can lead to polarising debates between so-called moderates and hardliners.¹⁷ Civil war can militarise political competition with serious consequences for social cohesion within ethno-political movements,¹⁸ particularly when governments seek collaborators from within the opposition, supporting them as factional rivals within the opposition.¹⁹

External support, such as troops, weapons, or financial assistance, to a conflict can also foster divisions within an opposition.²⁰ This dynamic can be seen clearly in Syria, where many opposition organisations find support from external states or even private individuals, contributing greatly to fragmentation. A potentially very divisive form of external support is armed actors from abroad joining the domestic movement, as they can then have a direct influence on the ground.

2. The consequences of fragmentation for conflict

VIOLENCE

Opposition fragmentation is associated with violence in a number of ways. When the social movement more generally is fragmented, governments have difficulty discerning what the opposition wants and under what conditions opposition actors will employ violence.²¹ This uncertainty can inhibit governments with an interest in preventing violence from managing these disputes effectively, and can give incentives to governments to work with some groups and fight others. My research has demonstrated generally that, when social movements are divided, violence between the government and these movements is more likely. Increased fragmentation after a conflict can exacerbate this problem, leading to greater violence.

Fragmented movements are also plagued by more targeting of civilians and internecine violence between organisations.²² When organisations contest one another (in addition to challenging the state), they must compete for resources, often including civilian support. Such competition sometimes leads to coercion against civilians. The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, for example, established and maintained dominance among Tamil organisations, partly by harsh coercion of civilians.

Fragmented disputes are often characterised by sequential, limited concessions.

ACCOMMODATION AND WAR TERMINATION

While fragmentation is often associated with violence, a high degree of opposition fragmentation can also lead to higher rates of accommodation.²³ Governments in civil war frequently use a combination of fighting and accommodation to try to manage these disputes, often at the same time: governments continue to fight but offer and implement concessions to opposition movements. This accommodation typically takes the form of limited concessions that give groups some, but not all, of what they want. In return, opposition organisations often stop fighting or downgrade their demands of the state.

Examples of accommodations include the freedom to speak a language of choice, or to manage schools or some other

local services. These limited concessions are appealing to governments facing fragmented oppositions because they have the potential to satisfy some groups, thus decreasing the strength of the opposition, and to screen out groups that make extreme demands. Fragmented disputes are often characterised by sequential, limited concessions. For example, the government of Myanmar used a piecemeal approach in negotiating ceasefires with the disparate rebel groups active there.

These concessions can help to manage disputes, but rarely resolve them. Research shows that civil wars with more rebel groups last much longer than those with fewer, and are less likely to be resolved by comprehensive negotiated settlement.²⁴ Many of the longest-running civil wars fought since World War II, including wars in Afghanistan, Cambodia, Colombia and Somalia, have involved a large number of rebel groups battling the state. Using statistical analysis, research finds that civil wars with three main rebel groups are about four times as likely to last at least 14 years as those with only one.²⁵ There are four main barriers to full settlement of multi-party conflicts. First, the diversity of preferences brought by the different armed groups make finding one settlement that satisfies all of them extremely challenging. Second, the dynamics of the war (with groups joining and dropping out) mean that it is much harder to determine the balance of power in the conflict. Third, all actors in multi-party conflicts have incentives to hold out to be the last signatory to get the best deal to fully resolve the war. Finally, alliances among groups often shift in these conflicts, as actors that agree on one dimension of the dispute find themselves in opposition on others.

In some cases, governments and mediators respond to the challenges of negotiating in multi-party conflicts by pursuing 'partial peace' agreements in which some, but not all, of the rebels participate. In Chad, for example, the government has signed peace agreements with a series of rebel groups, although the conflict has continued as new groups have emerged. Nilsson examines these partial peace agreements and shows that they can work to get some groups to agree to stop fighting, although they rarely resolve multi-party wars completely.²⁶ Non-signatories may eventually follow suit, but these actors have incentives to hold out for their preferred accommodations if they can continue the fighting unilaterally.²⁷

The barriers to peace in conflicts with multiple rebel groups also present substantial challenges for international efforts to resolve these conflicts. Doyle and Sambanis conducted a seminal study of 25 international 'peacebuilding' missions

Organisations that originated from splintering of other organisations are most prone to switching to the state.

in civil war led by the United Nations (UN) and concluded that the UN was successful in approximately 50% of them.²⁸ Dividing these cases into those with one, and more than one, rebel group shows that the UN was successful (by its own definition) in about 63% of one-rebel-group cases, and successful in only about 27% of multiple-rebel-group cases.²⁹ I discuss the potential strategies that mediators can use to contribute to the resolution of fragmented conflicts in Section 4 below.

SIDE SWITCHING

A recently acknowledged consequence of fragmentation is the possibility for side switching by opposition actors. Side switching refers to an opposition actor joining the government side and fighting other opposition organisations. For example, a portion of the Southern Sudanese SPLM splintered off and defected to fight for the state (SPLM/A-WN) in 1992.³⁰ Side switching can occur when the state puts sufficient pressure on organisations that they fear for their own survival and thus turn on their brethren.³¹ In Sudan, Lee Seymour finds that side switching has primarily been caused by opportunistic factors.³² Rebel actors seek military support to fight in local political rivalries, and to maintain patronage systems. In a statistical study, Sabine Otto finds that organisations that originated from the splintering of other organisations are most prone to switching to the state.³³ Splinter organisations have undergone the process of breaking off from their original organisation, making them more homogenous in their membership and willing to act as a smaller unit. The smaller, more homogenous character of these groups then increases their ability to make and enforce decisions to switch sides in a conflict.

3. How peace processes affect fragmentation

Scholars have demonstrated that fragmentation of oppositions has substantial impacts on peace processes. In addition, there is evidence that peace processes themselves can affect the fragmentation of oppositions in a number of ways. Different peace efforts have been linked to both unity and fragmentation.

COALESCING

The prospect of peace negotiations can induce opposition actors to coordinate or attempt to coalesce. By providing the state with a united front, opposition organisations hope to strengthen their bargaining position, and often to convey a sense of legitimacy for their participation in talks. In the civil war in Guatemala, the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) was formed by five different opposition groups in the mid-1980s to coordinate both the military effort and negotiations. Negotiations between the URNG and the government of Guatemala began in 1987 and a series of peace agreements eventually resulted in a comprehensive agreement and an end to the war in 1996.

Limited accommodation to opposition movements can decrease their fragmentation over time.

Furthermore, limited accommodation to opposition movements can decrease their fragmentation over time. Using quantitative data on fragmentation of self-determination disputes, I find that accommodation plays a role in decreasing fragmentation in terms of the number of organisations.³⁴ For example, in Niger, the Tuareg Liberation Front of Air and Azawad disbanded after accommodation. Similarly, Shanti Bahini, which fought on behalf of the Chittagong Hill People in Bangladesh, disbanded after accommodation in the 1990s. These accommodations are typically limited, offering movement specific concessions over issues such as increased local taxation power or rights to education in their native language. Tracing the fate of organisations after a movement achieves accommodation, I find that many of the organisations in complex movements demobilise altogether. The decrease in organisations after accommodation appears to be the product of decreased claim-making/mobilisation and does not suggest that organisations are coalescing into a

stronger challenge for the state.³⁵ This is notable because mediators can attempt to help organisations coalesce to facilitate settlement (as discussed further below). Limited accommodation seems to meet the demands of organisations in many cases, and countries use the process of accommodation to integrate elements of the opposition into regular politics.

INTENTIONAL FRAGMENTATION

A peace process can also promote fragmentation. Faced with a divided opposition, states can try to leverage differences so that they have to deal with only one set of demands. If the state chooses a peace process in which only some actors can participate, opposition organisations have incentives to shed links to one another. Such attempts by the state have long-term effects on the ability of opposition organisations to cooperate. In India, for example, the state frequently manages insurgency through bilateral negotiations with specific rebel groups. In the Naga dispute in the Northeast, rebels compete not only against the state, but with one another to be the authentic representative of the Nagas. In Burundi, throughout the long peace process, the Tanzanian and South African facilitation teams showed a willingness to negotiate with breakaway factions of the rebel groups, which led to splintering of these organisations.

UNINTENTIONAL FRAGMENTATION

When the opposition is fragmented, competition among organisations can create incentives for spoiling or joining a peace process. As actors attempt to discern the likely outcome of a peace process, individual organisations look to their own survival and influence in addition to their goals in the conflict. Competition among Palestinian organisations, and over leadership within specific organisations, has led actors to oppose or support peace overtures depending on the impact the peace deal would have on their specific organisation.³⁶ Fatah, for example, chose to participate in the 1973 Geneva conference to maintain its own power within the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

State accommodation also has the potential to foster divisions or generate unity. With accommodation presenting new possibilities for the future, latent divisions within a movement may emerge. An extensive literature on 'spoilers' suggests that movements split over peace settlements for a number of reasons. Some organisations split along difference of ideology. For example, splintering occurred in the

The process of trying to distinguish moderate from extreme actors (or positions) emphasises differences within an opposition movement or actor which can serve as a focal point for further fragmentation.

Sudanese People's Liberation Army due to differences between committed separatists, and those that would settle for staying in a greater Sudan.³⁷ In addition to ideology, personal disagreements among leaders³⁸ and internal competition over representation within movements can generate splits.³⁹ For example, when accommodation includes new local administration (such as a regional parliament or council), opposition leaders often vie for positions of power within them. These dynamics have played out multiple times in the conflicts in Northeast India as Bodo factions have worked to gain local dominance through accommodation from the centre. Moreover, accommodation can engender conflict when it falls short of the aspiration of some opposition members.⁴⁰ Disagreement over concessions to the Catholics in Northern Ireland has led to resistance to specific accommodations from elements of the Irish Republican Army.⁴¹

MEDIATION

Mediation can split movements when external parties seek to forge coalitions between moderates that exclude hardliners, manipulating incentives in ways that promote fragmentation.⁴² When mediation begins, facilitators make decisions about the inclusion or exclusion of specific actors, often seeking to bring the most 'moderate' parties on board. Yet, the designation of an actor as a 'moderate' is contextual, and influenced by the mediator's perspective. The process of trying to distinguish moderate from extreme actors (or positions) emphasises differences within an opposition movement or actor which can serve as a focal point for further fragmentation. Mediation can also create an opportunity for the state or external parties to use peace talks to induce the defection of opportunistic organisations from the opposition movement to the state. For example, Johnston details the sequential defection of parts of organisations operating in Darfur once the peace process began.⁴³ He argues that the Chadian government (as well as that of Sudan) leveraged the split of the National Movement for Reform and Development (NMRD) from the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) during the talks to pursue their own agenda. Instead of pursuing a comprehensive peace deal with the opposition, the government used the peace process itself to undermine connections between opposition actors to induce them to turn on their former compatriots.

4. Responses of mediators and other third-party actors to fragmentation

Wars such as those in Guatemala, Angola, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC) and Somalia have seen multiple different peace processes, often led by different actors. In Syria, attempts at conflict resolution have been carried out since shortly after the war began, and high-profile figures like Lakhdar Brahimi and Kofi Annan have devoted significant attention to trying to resolve the war.

We can group the different strategies that mediators pursue in these conflicts into various types, with an important distinction being who is invited to participate in the process, and when they are included. In some cases, mediators seek to have a large set of actors at the table, including the armed groups, the government and other voices from across society. In others, mediators try to start with partial agreements among smaller sets of actors, and gradually build the coalition. The various strategies used have both potential benefits and downsides.

NEGOTIATIONS INCLUDING ALL ARMED GROUPS

In some cases, mediators are able to get the key players to the table to negotiate. The 1997–2003 civil war in the DRC was extremely fractionalised, and was really a civil war and inter-state war fought among the DRC's neighbours at the same time. Early negotiations in that conflict included only the external states, because the government initially refused to negotiate with the rebels. However, by the time the war was a year old, the facilitators of the peace process recognised that there was resilient armed internal opposition to the government and that negotiations exclusively among states would be unable to resolve the conflict. More comprehensive negotiations were held that brought virtually all the key armed groups to the table.⁴⁴ These negotiations led to a peace agreement signed in Lusaka, Zambia, in 1999, although the war continued largely unchecked after that agreement. However, when the war did finally de-escalate in 2003, it did so largely along the lines agreed in Lusaka. It is difficult to call the DRC in any way a 'success', but the framework established in Lusaka did eventually lead to the end of large-scale violence targeted against the government.

In many cases, however, there are armed groups that do not participate in negotiations. In Burundi, for example, the civil war began in 1991 and negotiations were held in Arusha, Tanzania from 1997 to 2000. However, the two main rebel groups (CNDD-FDD and Palipehutu-FNL) were barred from participating. The justification given by Julius Nyerere, the facilitator of the Arusha process, for blocking their participation was that these were actually armed wings that had

broken away from the 'legitimate' political organisations. However, the effect of their exclusion was that the 'peace agreement' reached in Arusha in 2000 had no hope of resolving the conflict because major warring parties were continuing the conflict.

More frequently, there are armed actors who refuse to participate in negotiations. When faced with an unwillingness to negotiate, mediators can use a variety of strategies. One strategy is to go ahead with negotiations without the hold-outs. In the conflict in the Sudanese region of Darfur, negotiations were held in Sirte, Libya in 2007, despite the refusal of the leaders of the main rebel groups to participate. There may be a logic to starting a process with those who are willing to negotiate and then building momentum to put pressure on the hold-outs, but this strategy is unlikely to be effective if the strongest parties continue to refuse to participate. Neither the Arusha process in Burundi nor the early negotiations in Darfur had much hope of contributing to an end to the war because none of the main parties was participating.

SEQUENTIAL NEGOTIATIONS

When mediators cannot get everyone to the table at once, they can pursue a determined strategy of sequential negotiations. This strategy of negotiating initial agreements with the actors who are willing to participate is likely to be effective only in cases where it is the strongest groups that participate first. As noted above, the Arusha accords in Burundi were signed by 19 parties including both unarmed groups and very small rebel groups, but did nothing to reduce the level of violence in the conflict because the main rebel groups were intentionally excluded. The failure of Arusha led to a strategy of negotiating with these stronger groups, and the decision was to focus on CNDD-FDD, the largest of the two, first.

Nelson Mandela took over facilitation of the Burundian peace process and was able to convince CNDD-FDD (which had a new leader from 2001) to participate in negotiations. CNDD-FDD eventually signed and implemented the Pretoria Protocol on Political, Defence and Security Power-Sharing in Burundi in October 2003, providing for military and political power-sharing and eventually leading the way for the leader of CNDD-FDD, Pierre Nkurunziza, to become President of Burundi. Convincing Palipehutu-FNL to stop fighting proved more challenging, but over the years it was clear that the group had little chance militarily and eventually it agreed to stop fighting in 2009 without gaining much by way of concessions from the government. In summary, the Arusha process involved years of negotiations and an agreement that

had no notable effect on the dynamics of the war. However, Mandela's (and later Jacob Zuma's) decision to deal sequentially with the remaining armed actors, and start with the most powerful actors first, enabled a long peace process that eventually brought the Burundian civil war to an end.

Another approach, when it is impossible to include all combatant groups together, is to sequence negotiations to focus on specific dimensions of the conflict. During the 1980s, the civil war in Angola was a mix of internal and external actors. Internally, the Marxist government battled against pro-market UNITA. The conflict also contained an important external dimension, as the government was supported by a significant number of Cuban troops and South Africa supported UNITA as part of a broader strategy to undermine anti-Apartheid governments in the region. US Assistant Secretary of State Chester Crocker decided to take a two-stage approach to resolving the Angolan conflict, negotiating first with the external parties and then with the internal combatants. This strategy was successful at removing the external element, as Cuba and South Africa reached an agreement that resulted in removing their troops from the country (as well as the independence of Namibia). Once the external dimension was removed, an internal agreement was reached as well, although it broke down in the implementation phase.⁴⁵

While the Angolan example is not exactly a case of fractionalisation of rebels in that it contained both internal and external dimensions, it contains significant similarities to more recent and contemporary civil wars such as the conflict in the DRC and the current war in Syria. In many civil wars, both internal and external actors have agendas in the war, and satisfying only the internal groups may not lead to an end to the war. In wars in which different actors have substantially different agendas, sequencing negotiations to focus on the specific dimensions of the conflict these actors care about can be a viable strategy for managing the conflict.

INCLUSION OF UNARMED ACTORS AND NATIONAL DIALOGUE

The preceding discussion has focused on efforts to reach peace among all of the armed actors. In many cases, this is rightly the priority of mediators, because these are the actors that have to agree for the violence to stop. However, in recent years, there has been a trend toward opening up peace processes to a broader set of actors as well. Scholars and practitioners have identified civil society actors – such as women's groups, religious organisations and human rights organisations – as important to conflict resolution and broader

societal change, and often these actors are included in negotiations. The primary goal in including non-combatants is to create a more durable peace, one that addresses the underlying causes of societal conflict by addressing grievance broadly. In Liberia, for example, the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement of 2003 was signed by the government, the two main rebel groups, 18 political parties, and a number of civil society organisations such as religious and women's groups. There is some evidence that including these actors can increase the durability of a peace agreement because they may grant the peace process greater legitimacy in the eyes of the population.⁴⁶

Including non-combatants has potential downsides, as well, however. The primary risk for this type of strategy is that the presence of additional actors (and preferences) can make an already challenging negotiation process even less able to reach an agreement. In recognition of this, there are two main strategies that have been tried. First, as discussed above in terms of multi-party negotiations, it is possible to sequence negotiations and include civil society actors at a later stage. In the DRC, for example, these actors were left out of the process leading up to the Lusaka agreement and subsequent agreements between the government and external states. However, the Lusaka Accords called for an Inter-Congolese dialogue which would include these groups and plan the political future of the country. This dialogue was held in 2002 and resulted in an agreement on a transitional government.

A second strategy is to include different groups at the table, but not to give all of them final say over the agreement. In South Africa, during initial multi-party negotiations in 1993, the Congress for a Democratic South Africa collapsed for various reasons, one of which was that there were too many parties in face-to-face talks. However, a second round of talks incorporated these parties, but operated on a rule of 'sufficient consensus' in which the focus was on the African National Congress and the National Party reaching agreement. This gave other actors a role in the negotiations to make their voices heard and to contribute to the final agreement but the negotiations had a greater chance of success in reaching agreement between the two primary and strongest antagonists.

The inclusion of unarmed actors may have long-term advantages. By introducing further factions or interest groups to the peace table, a resulting agreement can better address the underlying societal challenges that led to conflict. However, this must be weighed against the risks of including more seats at the peace table, which include slowing down or even derailing the peace process.

EFFORTS TO COALESCE THE OPPOSITION

While mediators often attempt to get all actors to the table, there has historically been less emphasis on explicitly trying to coalesce actors – through either merging organisations or promoting the creation of an umbrella organisation. One tactic that can be used by parties external to the conflict is to recognise umbrella groups as legitimate actors. The starkest example of this is the international community’s recognition of the Syrian National Coalition as either the ‘legitimate’ or ‘sole’ representative of the Syrian opposition. By explicitly recognising an umbrella group through an invitation to talks, both national governments and external mediations can enhance the perceived legitimacy of actors. Likewise, the express rejection of certain groups from a peace process suggests that these groups are not seen as legitimate bargaining partners. Externally created (or encouraged) umbrella groups run the risk of being seen as a pawn of foreign powers.⁴⁷

Empirically, we see different types of coalescence. Some umbrella organisations seem to emerge in direct connection to a peace process (such as the Syrian National Coalition). In Myanmar, for example, the Nationwide Ceasefire Coordination Team (NCCT) represented a large number of small ethnically oriented rebel groups and negotiated on their behalf during the peace process of 2013–2014. Coalescence can also entail the merger of previously independent organisations. The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) in El Salvador was an umbrella organisation formed by five leftist guerrilla groups in 1980. The Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) was likewise formed by multiple existing leftist groups in the 1980s.

While we can find many examples of groups coming together to varying degrees, this is often a tenuous process. Why is generating unity so difficult? First, many organisations have distinct agendas. Even when organisations are on the same ‘side’ of a dispute, they have relatively large policy differences. For example, a key difference over the course of the Southern Sudanese struggle was disagreement among Southern groups about whether autonomy in a unified Sudan or independence was the best goal. Similarly, although disparate groups in Myanmar have worked together, each represents a different set of concerns for its own ethnic population.

A second barrier to sustaining a coalition is competition among leaders of individual organisations. Both statistical studies and in-depth case studies have demonstrated that competition between leaders and organisations within opposition movements generates increased conflict.⁴⁸ The settlement process often generates a clearer set of goods and positions of power that factions fight over. Thus, the inherent

distributional issues that arise in the shadow of a political settlement create incentives for fighting and disagreement within a coalition.

Finally, a history of conflict among factions in the same movement may prohibit sustained cooperation that leads to a unified movement. A number of opposition movements are fragmented to the point where factions fight violently against each other, as happened among Kurdish groups in Northern Iraq. The Naga movement in Northeast India has been characterised by longstanding divisions and fighting across factions. Overcoming distrust of former opponents is a challenge in these cases, adding another layer of complexity to disputes where organisations differ on their perceptions of the movement’s goals.

Should mediators attempt to foster such coordination? Yes, but not as a definitive rule. Dialogue between groups could be helpful. If a primary challenge for organisations that want to coordinate is logistical, or related to information, mediators could play an important role of generating coalescence. For example, given an uncertain future, organisations may have limited ability to trust one another. Working together through a mediator can help to build this trust, and even to create a shared understanding of what the future should look like after a peace deal. However, creating an umbrella from the outside is not going to generate lasting stable integration (as we have seen in Syria). Instead, mediators can look for connections among organisations and for opportunities to foster these connections (such as offering support for inter-faction talks).

Mediators may be able to play a larger role in helping to maintain progress once coalitions have emerged through the impetus of participants. However, one of the central challenges in recognising and dealing with umbrella groups is that they do not necessarily reflect stable preferences or constitute a stable coalition of actors. In the Syrian opposition, for example, the Syrian National Council announced in January 2014 it was leaving the Syrian National Coalition in opposition to the proposed Geneva (II) peace talks. Working with and supporting umbrella organisations is more likely to be successful as a strategy when the cooperation occurs endogenously, as it did in Guatemala and El Salvador, rather than resulting from pressure from external actors. Mediators can recognise that umbrella organisations may not remain totally stable in who they include, but this does not necessarily suggest total failure of cooperation among actors. Helping to maintain cooperation among opposition actors requires having some sense of power balance among them and the support they can muster. This is a role more realistically played by actors such as NGOs.

5. After settlement

Once a settlement has been reached, there are still likely to be challenges to peace. One central issue is whether parties maintain the agreement or return to conflict. Many agreements fail shortly after signing because one or more actors renege on the agreement and re-start the war. Guarantees by third-party states can play a role in reinforcing an agreement.⁴⁹ Yet the long-term effects of relying on external guarantors can have pernicious effects on consensus-building in societies. Marie-Joëlle Zahar's study of Lebanon's recurrent conflict suggests that the role France and Syria played in bolstering the post-conflict institutional arrangement left the society unable to compromise further.⁵⁰ Overcoming the challenges of fragmentation through a third party alone is not likely to be a path to lasting peace. Compromise that reflects the preferences of actors in the dispute, and that is supported but not enforced by external actors, can generate self-enforcing political arrangements.

Another challenge for the post-settlement period in fragmented disputes is the potential for violence along pre-existing fissures.

This risk is most clearly illustrated by post-independence South Sudan. Although the civil war that led to independence was rife with internecine violence, South Sudanese organisations came together in the 2005 peace settlement and succeeded in their aim of independent statehood. Yet shortly after independence in 2011, civil war broke out along the primary divide within the Southern movement (a split between the Nuer and Dinka ethnic groups). Ultimately, even though the South won independence, the peace was fragile. Attention to pre-conflict divisions could be integrated into settlement – not only in the process but in the outcome as well. In the short to medium term, this could be structured in ways that guarantee some division of power among opposition factions. Existing work on power-sharing (whether focused on elections, the executive, the military or other elements) centres on the main conflict cleavage. The extent to which power-sharing provisions that address divisions within actors can mitigate the chance of recurrent conflict (as in post-independence South Sudan) has yet to be explored systematically.

Conclusion

I have identified several ways in which we can observe fragmentation (from splintering, to leadership debates, to contested participation in peace processes). Moreover, the free flow of information through the internet and relatively easy movement of people has expanded the potential recruiting ground for many rebel groups, and transnational recruitment can potentially further diversify conflicts. The causes of increased fragmentation in conflicts are multifaceted, although the use of repression and violence appears to engender fragmentation in many situations, as does external support flowing into a conflict.

Coalescence cannot be generated or maintained exclusively by external actors.

The consequences of fragmentation are also complex. A high or increasing level of fragmentation is almost always associated with more conflict (both of a longer duration and with fighting among more actors). It is also associated with more attempts to manage the dispute by states through accommodation short of full settlement, as states try to assess the opposition preferences and commitment to the fight.

In Sections 3 and 4 of the paper, I addressed how peace processes affect fragmentation and the role that mediators can play. Empirically, we see a wide range of behaviours

during peace processes, including the further fragmentation of the opposition and attempts to coalesce (sometimes successfully). External mediators have a number of options when facing a fragmented conflict. Mediators can include all armed groups or employ sequential negotiations. Addressing combating parties in turn allows for less complicated negotiations but we have seen empirically that sequential negotiations which do not include the main armed actors are less successful. Mediators must also decide whether to include unarmed actors. Including unarmed actors from society can bolster the legitimacy of a negotiated deal and make it more likely that the settlement will address the underlying causes of the conflict. However, adding more parties to the negotiations may also make getting to a settlement more complicated.

Finally, I addressed the possibilities for mediators or other actors (such as NGOs) to help fragmented oppositions to coalesce. Support can be given to actors that want to cooperate with one another. In many conflict situations, the provision of logistical support or even monitoring of behaviour could facilitate coalescence that allows them to overcome the challenges of fragmentation. However, coalescence cannot be generated or maintained exclusively by external actors. As the violence in South Sudan demonstrates, conflict can erupt easily between competitors even when actors in fragmented conflicts have managed to work together in the short term during a peace process. Settlement is clearly possible in fragmented conflicts, and external actors can play a role in this. Yet, the consequences of fragmentation are profound. Mediators must understand the specific characteristics of fragmentation in the disputes they attempt to manage.

Endnotes

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