

*Part I*

Theory and Concepts

## 1 Organized Rebellion and Its Intractable Problem

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### **Darfur, 2003–2010**

Since 2003, Minni Minawi has been an important, if somewhat polarizing, fixture of Darfur's armed rebellion. Born in North Darfur in 1968 to the Awlad Digayn clan of the Zaghawa, Minni had an eclectic career prior to joining the militant Darfuri nationalist organization, the Sudanese Liberation Army (SLA). The soon-to-be rebel commander worked early on as a primary school teacher in Darfur, transitioned to being a customs officer in Chad, and finally settled as an English instructor in Nigeria. With no real military experience to speak of, his rise to prominence within Darfur's armed political field is striking. Yet what he lacked in military expertise, he compensated for with natural rhetorical skill and political acumen.

In 2001, a relative who was prominent in nationalist Darfuri circles gave Minni USD 5,000 to join the incipient rebellion in Darfur. As one of the few available cadres who were literate, Minni was appointed the secretary of Zaghawa strongman Abdallah Abbakar Bashar, who would become the SLA chief of staff. In January 2004, Abdallah was killed in fighting with the Sudanese government. This was a critical turning point in Minni's career, as he engineered a process through which he was installed as Abdallah's replacement over and above the skepticism of many better-trained Zaghawa fighters. This move placed Minni at the apex of Zaghawa politics in Darfur.

As chief of staff of the SLA, Minni's direct superior was Abdel Wahid-Nur, who represented the other major component of the SLA coalition – the Fur, Darfur's other large, non-Arab ethnic grouping. With large political ambitions, Minni was not content with playing second fiddle. Differences between the two men would soon boil over, triggering a rupture between the Zaghawa and the Fur that fueled intense violence in mid-2004.

In an about-face that would become his political trademark, Minni solidified the SLA's fragmentation by signing the Darfur Peace

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Agreement (DPA) in 2006 – in effect, transforming this antigovernment rebel into an ally of the central government in Khartoum. Not only were Minni's forces refitted as a progovernment militia, he also became a state functionary, replete with offices, vehicles, and salaried employees to the cost of USD 1 million a month. Khartoum appointed Minni the highest-ranking central government official in Darfur and senior assistant to the president – the latter post making Minni the fourth in line to the Sudanese presidency. Minni even tried his hand at electoral politics – although his forces remained an armed presence throughout Zaghawa-populated areas of North Darfur – winning several parliamentary seats in the 2006 elections.

These were good years for Minni, as the largesse of the central government allowed him to thrive politically. His willingness to make peace earned him the grudging acknowledgment of the international community. Yet Minni's warm embrace of Khartoum, and the rise to national prominence it promulgated, quickly came to an end. Despite the trappings of his new office, the reality was that his position was more symbolic than substantive. When the incentives for keeping Minni around changed, the central government in Khartoum acted. After the 2010 general elections, Minni's post in the national government was not renewed. Minni moved to the South Sudanese capital of Juba as relations with the central government appeared to unravel, and in December he declared the DPA “dead,” seamlessly switching allegiances back to Darfur's antigovernment rebels. The central government in Khartoum responded by declaring Minni a “legitimate target” and began ruthlessly attacking his forces in Darfur. The dramatic turn of events triggered another round of rebel fragmentation in which Minni was again to feature prominently, although this time he was less an agent of fragmentation and more its victim.

The collapse of the alliance with Khartoum caused a three-way rupture within Minni's forces that he found impossible to contain. One faction of his organization broke ranks, staying in Khartoum and negotiating the terms of its disarmament with the government. A second group in North Darfur defected to a rival Darfuri insurgent group named the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM), which remained steadfast in its opposition to Khartoum. The third group, led by his longtime chief of staff, Juma Mohammed Hagar, and field commander Mohamadein Osman “Aurgajo,” remained loyal. Over time, a fourth faction would emerge and defect from Minni's forces.

Today, Minni's rebel organization, which is fittingly called the SLA-Minni Minawi, forms part of an anti-Khartoum rebel alliance called the Sudan Revolutionary Front (SRF). It is through this alliance that Minni

has made amends with many of the former rebel colleagues he had so unceremoniously betrayed, and been forced to reconcile with some of those who had been quick to reject Minni's authority when the DPA collapsed in 2010.

If Minni appeared to be a political chameleon, or perhaps more pejoratively the consummate opportunist, his behavior was by no means unique. The seeming fluidity with which Minni forged, and more importantly for the purposes of this book, broke political and military allegiances, was echoed by many of his subordinates. As is clear, many Minni loyalists have broken ranks with their leader and defected to the government or other militias, or struck out on their own – most prominently after the signing of the DPA, but also following Minni's rupture with SLA–Abdel Wahid and in more recent years as Minni has struggled to regain the credibility lost by joining forces with the central government.<sup>1</sup>

The twists and turns of Minni's political career, and the political itinerary of many of those who served under him, illustrate a broader pattern of behavior in the Darfur rebellion. Factionalism and fragmentation among Darfur's rebel forces was not the exception but the rule, a seemingly endemic feature of Darfur's ever-shifting political map. Indeed, when the rebellion broke out in 2003, there were two clearly defined organizations that had emerged to challenge the authority of the central government – Minni's SLA and the JEM of Dr. Khalil Ibrahim. Seven years later, there were nearly two dozen factions vying for influence within Darfur's armed political arena, the product of a seemingly endless process of fission that had rendered the region's politics a maze of temporary loyalties and alliances of convenience. Meanwhile, Darfur's armed struggle – notwithstanding periodic signs of life – hangs in limbo.

### The Puzzle of Rebel Fragmentation

Darfur's recent politics underscore what is seemingly an intractable problem of organized rebellion – that of factionalism and fragmentation within rebel ranks. In civil wars around the world, rebel organizations fight against states and their nonstate rivals, while at the same time waging an ongoing but often covert internal battle to maintain their organizational coherence and unity.<sup>2</sup> And just as rebels often fall short in

<sup>1</sup> Information on Minni Minawi is drawn from Tanner and Tubiana (2007), de Waal (2007), and Flint and de Waal (2008). Also see a profile published by *Sudan Tribune*, which can be found at [www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?mot190](http://www.sudantribune.com/spip.php?mot190) (Accessed August 20, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> This book treats the terms “rebel” and “rebellion” as synonymous with the terms “insurgent” and “insurgency,” respectively.

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their struggle against external adversaries, they sometimes fail to surmount internal challenges as well. In Afghanistan, Syria, Somalia, Iraq, Sri Lanka, and Colombia, rebel organizations have regularly exhibited factionalism and fragmentation, with dramatic and wide-ranging effects.

This book attempts to explain factionalism and fragmentation within organized rebellion. Its laboratory is Africa, specifically the Horn, which has been home to the some of the world's most intractable civil wars. However, as will be clear, the book's lessons are not regional but global. As such, this book is firmly situated within the recent body of social science scholarship that has sought to unpack the causes and consequences of insurgent factionalism and fragmentation in contemporary civil wars. Drawing an analytical distinction between factionalism and its variants, this study provides a careful treatment of what I argue is one of the more significant manifestations of rebel factionalism – “rebel fragmentation.” This phenomenon can be defined as the splitting of rebel organizations into politically distinct, mutually exclusive entities, where these entities create a new rebel organization, join an existing organization, or join forces with the incumbent government. At its core, this book asks, and answers, the following central question: Why, and under what conditions, do rebel organizations fragment?<sup>3</sup>

In answering this question, this study yields a number of testable, falsifiable hypotheses. I evaluate these hypotheses through a multimethod approach, using historical data from one of Africa's longest, and bloodiest, conflicts, the Ethiopian civil war. The analysis of the Ethiopian civil war, which examines the conflict and its key rebel participants between the years 1960 and 2008, is complemented by a rigorous analysis of the civil war in neighboring Somalia.<sup>4</sup>

The argument contained in the following pages can be summarized as follows. Rebel organizations are coalitions that depend on cooperation among differentiated, heterogeneous units. In the anarchic context of war, where in the famous words of Hobbes (1981), the life of man (or woman) is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short,” immediate concerns over survival predominate. Thus cooperation within rebel organizations

<sup>3</sup> This book's operative definition of “factionalism” within rebel organizations conceptualizes the phenomenon in terms of its real-world manifestations. Formally, I define factionalism as a clearly identifiable manifestation of a breakdown of cooperation within a rebel organization, which may include phenomena such as coups, extrajudicial killings, extrajudicial purges/arrests, fragmentation/organizational splitting, and insubordination.” These events are characterized by their extralegal nature, and sit outside the bounds of the normal, political processes of a rebel organization. I will provide a more rigorously defended definition of “rebel fragmentation” in the following chapter.

<sup>4</sup> The Ethiopian conflict is ongoing (although the insurgency is now low intensity), and 2008 is the year in which this study began.

depends on the *perception* that continued participation in the organization is the best way for constituent units of a rebel organization to maximize the core imperative of survival.

Yet this perception depends on the overarching military situation a rebel organization faces. In settings where a rebel organization is losing territory, often through a set of major shocks, the incentives to cooperate are reduced, as battlefield losses suggest that the collective enterprise that is organized rebellion no longer guarantees the survival of the organization's constituent units. Put differently, losing territory creates a basic commitment problem, prompting an organization's constituent units to question the cooperative bargain that is at the heart of the rebel organization. All things equal, fragmentation is more likely in such contexts.

Yet victory has its costs as well. If the constituent units of a rebel organization participate in the organization because they believe that it is the best way to guarantee their survival in war, then it follows that the reduction of security threats (or at the least the perceived reduction), and the resulting dissipation of survival concerns, bodes ill for the internal coherence of rebel organizations. I argue that there is little that reduces security threats more rapidly than battlefield victory and gaining territory. With a core *raison d'être* for the organization removed, the basis for cooperation is eroded, and the constituent units of a rebel organization behave in ways consistent with the pursuit of their own *individual* interests. All things equal, fragmentation is more likely.

The implication of this very simple argument, of course, is that rebel organizations are in a double bind, as the inevitable ebb and flow of war, and constantly shifting battlefield geography, produce internal pressures that can contribute to organizational fragmentation. Somewhat counter-intuitively, it is only battlefield stalemate that can preserve organizational cohesion – a concept I call “cohesive stalemates.”

### The History of an Intractable Problem

Why is the issue of rebel factionalism and fragmentation an important topic of inquiry? On one level, it is important because some of the prominent practitioners of insurgent or revolutionary warfare have told us it is. Concerns over internal cohesion, and by extension, rebel fragmentation, have been a central preoccupation of some of the twentieth century's most famed theorist-practitioners of insurgent warfare.<sup>5</sup> These concerns

<sup>5</sup> The classic literature on insurgent warfare is largely a twentieth-century creation. Owing to the ideological ferment of the time, it owes its emergence to the efforts of theorist/practitioners rooted in leftist traditions of revolutionary warfare.

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were sometimes directly stated, but often implied, manifesting themselves in various ways: in ruminations about the dangers of enemy infiltration; fears over the impact of ideological, class, or tribal differences on internal unity; or the urgency of politically indoctrinating rank-and-file fighters.

Consider the following. Vladimir Lenin, the Marxist ideologue who led the Russian revolution, wrote in his now famous 1902 treatise “What Is to Be Done?” that an ideologically astute core of “professional revolutionaries” was critical to propelling the Russian workers’ movement to victory. This professional class, better known as the “vanguard,” was to feature heavily in the organizing logic of later rebel movements that sought to model themselves on Lenin’s successful revolutionary project. In Lenin’s view, this professional class was necessitated by a number of factors, none greater than the fear of movement fragmentation. This concern is best signaled by Lenin’s identification of “agents provocateurs,” “demagogues,” and the “two opposite extremes” of “unsound economism and the preaching of moderation, and equally unsound ‘excitative terror . . .’” as core impediments to the unity of the revolution (Christman, 1987, pp. 141–159).<sup>6</sup> Four years later, in his treatise on guerrilla warfare, Lenin expressed similar concerns, postulating that the ideological diversity of revolutionary movements could leave them

<sup>6</sup> These ideas are littered throughout Lenin’s essay. On “agents provocateurs,” Lenin writes, “We must also warn the workers against traps often set by police, who at such open meetings and permitted societies spy out the ‘hotheads’ and who, through the medium of legal organizations, endeavor to plant their *agents provocateurs* in the illegal organizations” (Christman, 1987, p. 140). On the threat of demagogues, Lenin writes, “. . . I shall never tire of repeating that demagogues are the worst enemies of the working class, because they arouse bad instincts in the crowd, because the ignorant worker is unable to recognize his enemies in men who represent themselves, and sometimes sincerely represent themselves, to be his friends. They are the worst enemies of the of the working class because in this period of dispersion and vacillation, when our movement is just beginning to take shape, nothing is easier than to employ demagogic methods to sidetrack the crowd, which can realize its mistake only by bitter experience” (Christman, 1987, pp. 146–147). On ideological tensions within the Russian workers’ movement, between moderates and extremists, Lenin writes, “It is precisely at the present time, when no such organization exists yet, and when the revolutionary movement is rapidly and spontaneously growing, that we already observe two opposite extremes . . . This is not surprising because, apart from other reasons, the ‘economic struggle against the employers and the government’ can never satisfy revolutionaries, and because the opposite extremes will always arise here and there. Only a centralized, militant organization that consistently carries out a Social-Democratic policy, that satisfies, so to speak, all revolutionary instincts and strivings, can safeguard the movement against making thoughtless attacks and prepare it for attacks that hold out the promise of success” (Christman, 1987, p. 159).

“frayed, corrupted, and prostituted.”<sup>7</sup> Writing in 1930, even Lenin’s Russian comrade Leon Trotsky, in his meticulous account of the Russian revolution, fatalistically acknowledged the pervasiveness of infighting and fragmentation, admitting that “such tragic ‘accidents’ are one of the inevitable overhead expenses of a revolution” (Trotsky, 2008, p. 382).<sup>8</sup>

Mao Tse-Tung, the Chinese rebel whose victory over the Nationalists became the blueprint for insurgent armies around the world, largely shared Lenin’s preoccupation with the issue of internal fragmentation. Arguing that “Victory in guerrilla war is conditioned upon keeping the membership pure and clean,” Mao worried that “the enemy may take advantage of certain people who are lacking in conscience and patriotism and induce them to join the guerrillas for the purpose of betraying them.” As such, he advocated the swiftest of countermeasures: “The traitors who are in our ranks must be discovered and expelled, and punishment and expulsion meted out to those who have been influenced by them” (Mao Tse-Tung, 2000).<sup>9</sup> That same year, in another widely distributed essay titled “On Contradictions,” Mao – much like Lenin before

<sup>7</sup> On this subject, Lenin’s exact words were, “It is said that guerrilla warfare brings the class-conscious proletarians into close association with degraded, drunken riff-raff. That is true. But it only means that the party of the proletariat can never regard guerrilla warfare as the only, or even as the chief, method of struggle; it means that this method must be subordinated to other methods, that it must be commensurate with the chief methods of warfare, and must be ennobled by the enlightening and organizing influence of socialism. And without this latter condition, all, positively all, methods of struggle in bourgeois society bring the proletariat into close association with the non-proletarian strata above it and below it and, if left to the spontaneous course of events, become frayed, corrupted and prostituted.” See “V. I. Lenin: Guerrilla Warfare,” which can be found at [www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/gw/](http://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1906/gw/) (Accessed May 25, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> This quote was brought to my attention by a working paper written by Boston College’s Peter Krause, which was presented at Rand’s Insurgency Board on September 8, 2016. It was titled “Winning the ‘War of Position’: Measuring and Explaining Insurgent Organizational Success.”

<sup>9</sup> Written in 1937 as the communists were embroiled in arduous resistance to Japanese invasion, Mao’s solution to the cohesion problems – as it was for most Marxist revolutionaries – was political education. On this, Mao says, “First of all, political activities depend upon the indoctrination of both military and political leaders with the idea of anti-Japanism. Through them, the idea is transmitted to the troops. One must not feel that he is anti-Japanese merely because he is a member of a guerrilla unit. The anti-Japanese idea must be an ever-present conviction, and if it is forgotten, we may succumb to the temptations of the enemy or be overcome with discouragement. In a war of long duration, those whose conviction that the people must be emancipated is not deep rooted are likely to become shaken in their faith or actually revolt. Without the general education that enables everyone to understand our goal of driving out Japanese imperialism and establishing a free and happy China, the soldiers fight without conviction and lose their determination” (Mao Tse-Tung, 2000).



him – suggested that ideological tensions could be an additional source of dangerous internal “antagonism” that would require, in his words, “serious struggle against erroneous thinking.”<sup>10</sup>

The Argentinian insurgent leader Che Guevara, whose final bid as a rebel ended with his demise in a shallow Bolivian grave in 1967, advised that a guerrilla should be “closed-mouthed . . . and never permit himself a single useless word, even with his own comrades in arms,” since the enemy could introduce spies into insurgent ranks that could undermine the rebellion (Guevara, 1961). Later, in writing about his disastrous 1965 Cuban-backed campaign in the Congo, Guevara bemoaned the political infighting of his Congolese counterparts. In a letter to Fidel Castro that same year, he excoriated the Congolese leftists he had come to support, arguing that their lack of unity had caused them to surrender major towns without a fight. Although acknowledging his own initial “totally unwarranted optimism” about the prospects of leftist revolution in the Congo, these divisions had caused Guevara to glumly concede that “on our own, we cannot liberate a country that has no desire to fight” (Gott, 1996, pp. 29–30).

General Vo Nguyen Giap, who along with Ho Chi Minh was a leading architect of Vietnamese resistance to the Japanese, French, and American occupations, argued that within its ranks, insurgent armies needed to “energetically combat expressions of bourgeois and other non-proletarian ideologies.” Although Giap believed that Vietnam’s arduous years of resistance had melded the insurgency into an “unbreakable monolithic block,” he argued that maintaining cohesion required continuing vigilance: “We must always take care to strengthen the monolithic solidarity within the army.”<sup>11</sup>

Writing around the same time as Giap and Guevara, Amílcar Cabral, the Guinean insurgent so instrumental to the decolonization of Lusophone Africa, also intellectually grappled with the challenges of insurgent fragmentation. In a famous address titled “A Weapon of Theory,” Cabral acknowledged a core dilemma. While the “petty bourgeoisie,”

<sup>10</sup> On this issue, Mao Tse-Tung (2010) writes, “At present the contradiction between correct and incorrect thinking in our Party does not manifest itself in an antagonistic form, and if comrades who have committed mistakes can correct them, it will not develop into antagonism. Therefore, the Party must on the one hand wage a serious struggle against erroneous thinking, and on the other give the comrades who have committed errors ample opportunity to wake up. This being the case, excessive struggle is obviously inappropriate. But if the people who have committed errors persist in them and aggravate them, there is the possibility that this contradiction will develop into antagonism.”

<sup>11</sup> See “Giap: People’s War,” which can be found at [www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/031v03445/041v04015/051v04154/061v04158.htm](http://www.nelsonmandela.org/omalley/index.php/site/q/031v03445/041v04015/051v04154/061v04158.htm) (Accessed September 4, 2015).

endowed with a “revolutionary consciousness,” must lead the revolution, this group would always revert to its base class interests, undermining the working class and thwarting the true political transformation that was in the interests of the majority. To eliminate this veritable Trojan horse, Cabral famously argued that the petty bourgeoisie leaders needed to commit “class suicide” and be reborn as “revolutionary workers.” In practice, this meant that insurgent leaders must voluntarily give up the trappings of their class status, lest they pollute the purity of the movement. For Cabral, then, the concept of “class suicide” was the solution to the ongoing problem of forging a unity of aim and action in the midst of a movement wracked by contradictions of wealth and status.<sup>12</sup>

Predictably, insurgent fragmentation has not only been the preoccupation of some of the twentieth century’s most famed theorist-practitioners of rebellion. It has also been a phenomenon of great interest to counterinsurgents – not as a condition to avoid, of course, but as a weakness to exploit. David Galula, the French officer who was captured by Mao’s Chinese communist forces in 1947 and would later serve with French forces in Algeria, acknowledged that “among guerrillas, as among any human group, can be found a variety of thoughts, feelings, and degrees of commitment to the insurgent’s cause.” Given these internal differences, Galula urged caution, warning that “treating them as a bloc would surely cement their solidarity.” Instead, the task of the counterinsurgent should be to “divide their ranks, to stir up opposition between the mass and the leaders to win over the dissidents” (Galula, 1964, p. 89).

More recently, David Kilcullen, a widely read theorist-practitioner of contemporary counterinsurgency, has argued that in the post-9/11 globalized threat environment, those who have waged armed rebellions against US and coalition forces in contexts as diverse as Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia were “accidental guerrillas.” By “accidental,” Kilcullen meant that these rebels were motivated not by hatred of the United States, Takfiri ideological leanings, or the transnational programmatic aims of Al-Qaeda’s global jihad but by profoundly localized feelings of threat provoked by US interventions throughout the Muslim world. In this setting, organizations like Al-Qaeda have exploited these fears, and grafted themselves onto local struggles whose aims and purposes were quite different from those of transnational militant jihadism. The task of the counterinsurgent, then, was to break this alignment and co-opt those who were not committed to the global jihadist project (Kilcullen, 2009). In effect, it was to use all tools at the disposal of

<sup>12</sup> For a copy of Cabral’s speech, delivered in Havana in January 1966, see [www.marxists.org/subject/africa/cabral/1966/weapon-theory.htm](http://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/cabral/1966/weapon-theory.htm) (Accessed September 8, 2015).