

## Introduction

### TALIBAN DECREE

[Taliban Seal]  
Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan

In the name of Allah the most merciful, the most compassionate

Piece of advice to officials of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan and to the Taliban from the respectable *Amir al Mu'minin* [commander of the faithful, title used historically by powerful leaders in Islam that Mullah Omar also assumed]

There has been lethal activity in our midst which may result in our destruction. Taliban accuse each other behind each other's backs, . . . resorting to false and unfounded accusations. . . . There is no doubt that this backstabbing is happening. I once again appeal to you to stop this or else whoever is involved will be cursed in this world and in the afterlife, over which I have no control. These acts are damaging Islam. For God's sake, stop doing this!

With respect,  
Servant of Islam  
Commander of the Faithful  
Mullah Mohammad Omar, *Mujahed* [freedom-fighter]<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Taliban decree in author's possession.

EXCERPT FROM *THE FOREVER WAR*

Men fought, men switched sides, men lined up and fought again. War in Afghanistan often seemed like a game of pickup basketball, a contest among friends, a tournament where you never knew which team you'd be on when the next game got underway. Shirts today, skins tomorrow. On Tuesday, you might be part of a fearsome Taliban regiment, running into a minefield. And on Wednesday you might be manning a checkpoint for some gang of the Northern Alliance. By Thursday you could be back with the Talibs again, holding up your Kalashnikov and promising to wage jihad forever. . . . Battles were often decided this way, not by actual fighting, but by flipping gangs of soldiers. One day, the Taliban might have four thousand soldiers, and the next, only half that, with the warlords of the Northern Alliance suddenly larger by a similar amount. The fighting began when the bargaining stopped, and the bargaining went right up until the end.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Filkins (2008), p. 51.

## THE PUZZLE

In the years since the ousting of the Taliban, we have seen scores of lives, military and civilian, lost in Afghanistan. The internecine relationships between the warring actors have made the logic of the fighting hard to make sense of – so much so that it has prompted the United States to revise its counterinsurgency doctrine, shifting the strategic focus from killing the enemy to protecting the population. In that vein, the United States has sent anthropologists into the field to lead American soldiers and commanders through the maze of Afghanistan's ethnic and tribal politics. This book argues that although the importance of cultural awareness can never be overestimated, no knowledge of history and culture alone, regardless of how deep or profound, will get us to understand why warring actors fight with or against one another.

Rather, we are arguably going to be just as well off going with one rule alone: the expectation that warring groups will aim to side with the winner, so long as they can have a credible guarantee that the winner will not strip them of power once victory is accomplished. Afghan commanders, not unlike other wartime commanders in similar circumstances, are the guardians of specific interests linked to the groups from which their men are recruited. And few factors have motivated them more over the years of war than the desire to end up on the winning side. They have often switched camps mid-conflict. In doing so, their rationale was obvious: In a war that drags on, changing camps means surviving longer and holding onto power.

Indeed, Afghanistan's recent history is replete with examples of warring leaders choosing to switch sides. In the civil war that lasted from the collapse of the Soviet-backed regime in 1992 to the Taliban's capture of almost 90 percent of Afghanistan in the fall of 1998, the heads of mujahedin groups constantly shifted their allegiances. The Uzbek general Abdul Rashid Dostum was the Tajik commander Ahmad Shah Massoud's friend first, and then his foe. The Hazara leader Abdul Ali Mazari fought against the Pashtun headman Gulbuddin Hekmatyar before fighting by his side. Constantly shifting alliances meant no single group could gain the upper hand, eventually allowing the Taliban to persuade many factions to side with them. By the time the Taliban reached Kabul, their ranks were teeming with fighters once allied with someone else.

This book explains the choices behind the double-crossings in the Afghan civil war and develops a broader theory on alliance formation and group fractionalization in multiparty civil wars. It shows that changing sides, realigning, flipping – whatever one may choose to call it – is not just the Afghan way of war. Rather, the theory travels well across warring times and regions in Afghanistan, and also outside it. Indeed, apart from Afghanistan, some of the most brutal and long-lasting civil wars of our times – Bosnia, Lebanon, and Iraq, among others – are associated with the rapid formation and disintegration of alliances among warring groups, as well as with fractionalization within them. The resulting multiplicity of actors has paralyzed outsiders, who

have often been unable to even follow the unraveling of the conflicts' complex trajectories.

It would be natural to suppose that the way in which warring groups align and the determinants that shape their internal splits and takeovers result from similarities and differences of identity within and between these warring groups. For example, in a multiparty war of Christians versus Muslims (i.e., Bosnia or Lebanon), we might expect the Christian groups to always ally with one another. In reality, however, this is not what we see. Instead, there appears to be no such thing as an impossible alliance in the context of a multiparty civil war: Two groups that identify themselves as bitter foes one day, on the basis of some identity cleavage, might be allies the next day, and vice versa. Nor is any group, however homogeneous, safe from internal fractionalization. Rather, I find that the relative power distribution between and within the various warring groups in a given conflict is the primary driving force behind alliance formation, alliance changes, as well as group splits and takeovers.

#### CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LITERATURE

In recent years, there has been a surge of scholarly interest in civil war, as a result of the high place of internal conflict on the U.S. national security agenda following the end of the Cold War. However, the majority of these works have focused on civil war onset and termination rather than on within-conflict processes.<sup>3</sup> Existing works on civil war processes have predominantly taken the form of either formal models or case studies, which are, respectively, too abstract or too esoteric to capture empirical reality.<sup>4</sup> Most extant literature treats civil war as a contest between two coherent, unitary actors (the government vs. the rebels, the incumbents vs. the insurgents), thus overlooking internal divisions among groups and the multiparty character of many such conflicts.<sup>5</sup> Using a theoretical approach, along with multiple methods of empirics, this book aims to shed light on these warring group interactions that have been largely understudied, thereby relating civil war processes to onset and termination.

Other contributions of this book to the broader literature on civil war can be enumerated as well. The book speaks to the debate over whether so-called

<sup>3</sup> Examples of such work follow. On onset, see Posen (1993); Harff and Gurr (1994); Collier and Hoeffler (2000); Petersen (2002); Fearon and Laitin (2003); and Toft (2003), among others; on duration, see Elbadawi and Sambanis (2000); and Fearon (2004), among others; on termination, see Licklider (1995); Kaufmann (1996a, 1996b); Stedman (1997); Walter (1997); Hartzell (1999); Zartman (2000); and Toft (2010), among others.

<sup>4</sup> Examples of formal models of conflict processes include Skarpedas (1992); and Hirshleifer (1995). Exceptions to this trend include Petersen (2001); Valentino (2005); Kalyvas (2006); and Weinstein (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Prominent examples include Kaufmann (1996a, 1996b); Walter (1997); Fearon (2004); Kalyvas (2006); Lyall and Wilson (2009); Toft (2010).

ethnic and nonethnic civil wars should be considered separate phenomena,<sup>6</sup> by studying alliance and fractionalization dynamics in both contexts. Ultimately, I find that the rationale behind alliance formation and group fractionalization is the same, suggesting that certain strategic choices relating to civil war processes are independent of the conflict's character. I also engage the level of analysis issue that has become quite contentious in recent civil war scholarship.<sup>7</sup> Rather than studying these conflicts at a macro level (i.e., societal cleavages) or a micro level (i.e., individual incentives), I try to link the two levels analytically by focusing on the interactions between them. Specifically, I find that the key actors vis-à-vis warring group alliance formation and fractionalization are often local elites, operating at a "meso level" that links the national-level cleavages with individual-level motivations. Additionally, whereas most existing works focus only on the motivations for starting or ending civil wars, I explicitly theorize the motivations of warring actors during the conflict itself, highlighting how concerns about survival and division of postwar political control drive alliance choices and group fractionalization.

In addition to the theoretical contributions outlined earlier, a theory on civil war alliance formation is also interesting from a methodological perspective. The dynamic of interaction between three or more actors tends to be under-theorized in the field, including in theories of civil war, partly because a bipolar frame of reference is easier to conceptualize but also because many modeling approaches, including game-theoretic ones, get much more cumbersome with the addition of a third actor. A work on alliance formation and group fractionalization can provide a framework for better understanding the different dimensions of multi-actor interactions, moving us beyond binary approaches.

Apart from their theoretical and methodological importance, the questions of how groups ally and why they fractionalize have clear policy implications. In a multiethnic state at war with itself, a group's access to resources and capabilities is conditioned by the behavior of other groups and by the group's own internal stability, thus making alliance strategies and group fractionalization important. The theory presented in this book reveals the forces that determine these choices and outcomes, and in turn shows what policy instruments can be used to prevent fighting or bring an ongoing conflict to an end.

For example, a better understanding of alliance behavior and group fractionalization in the 1992–1998 Afghan civil war would have illuminated the reasons behind the coalitions between sworn enemies (such as the Pashtuns and the Hazaras), would have predicted fragmentation within the Hazara and Uzbek forces, and would have, in turn, anticipated the Taliban's victory. In Iraq, if the international community was more astute to alliance and

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Kaufmann (1996a); Sambanis (2001); Buhaug, Cederman, and Rod (2006); Cederman and Girardin (2007); and Toft (2010).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Elbadawi and Sambanis (2000); Kalyvas (2003, 2006); Downes (2008); Fearon (2004); Humphreys and Weinstein (2006); and Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay (2004).

fractionalization dynamics, it might not have been surprised when the Sunni tribes dropped their alliance with Al Qaeda, leading to the emergence of the Sons of Iraq – an initiative among Iraqi tribal leaders that precipitated an end to mass violence. Errors in diplomacy, stemming from a faulty understanding of the origins of intergroup alliances and the causes of within-group instability, have undoubtedly led to the perpetuation of these wars and resulted in hundreds of thousands of civilian casualties. A sounder grasp of civil war alliance and fractionalization dynamics would have arguably allowed for fewer grave policy errors and faster ways to peace. The policy implications of this work therefore pertain to conflict prevention and termination, as well as postconflict state-building initiatives.

Having provided an overview of the basic goals and contributions of this book, I proceed to outline the theoretical argument, discuss the relevant definitions and scope conditions, and offer a road map for what follows.

#### THE ARGUMENT

In this book, I argue that alliance formation is tactical, motivated by a concern with victory and the maximization of wartime returns as anticipated in the political power sharing of the postconflict state. In principle, all groups want to be in a coalition large enough to attain victory while small enough to ensure maximum political payoffs. In practice, however, given the multitude of players and the chaos inherent in civil war, this outcome proves difficult to secure. A major reason for this is that commitment problems – the inability of actors to credibly commit not to exploit one another later – are inherent in warring group interactions.<sup>8</sup> More specifically, while much of the literature has focused on commitment problems as a barrier to rebel groups reaching negotiated settlements with the state, commitment problems will also make groups wary of winning the war as a weaker alliance partner. Because there is no third party that can credibly enforce the agreed-on division of political control, the weaker party will often prefer to defect and prolong the war rather than risk being double-crossed at the hands of the stronger ally upon the war's conclusion, which may involve violent purges and political subordination. The implication of this dilemma is that unless one group is powerful enough to win the war on its own, the conflict will degenerate into a process of constant defection, alliance reconfiguration, and group fractionalization, as groups maneuver in an effort to win the war while ensuring they do not get victimized at the hands of the strongest actor left standing.

Contrary to identity-based arguments, race, language, religion, or ideology do not appear to guarantee in any enduring way the formation of alliances. Instead, elites of the warring parties pick their allies based on power considerations and then construct justifying narratives, looking to their identity repertoires for characteristics shared with their allies and not shared with

<sup>8</sup> On commitment problems, see Fearon (1995, 1998); Lake and Rothchild (1996); Walter (1997); and Powell (2006).

their foes. Likewise, local elites can make a similarly instrumental use of identity narratives when justifying whether or not to stay subservient to their group's leadership. This argument, which is consistent with a large body of research in comparative politics that shows elites strategically manipulate identity categories for political purposes,<sup>9</sup> nonetheless suggests that identity attributes do have psychological and emotional import for the rank and file – hence the reason elites constantly invoke them. In other words, while identity factors do not determine alliance choices, the fact that leaders feel compelled to justify their choices in these terms implies identity narratives are useful for public consumption. My view is essentially an instrumentalist one: Wartime alliances, and the groups that comprise them, are not merely imagined but rather constantly reimagined communities.<sup>10</sup> Given that there is nothing intrinsic about these alliances, the identity narratives that appear on the surface to hold them together are simply “invented traditions” developed by elites.<sup>11</sup> When power considerations call for it, these communities and traditions will be cast aside and new ones imagined in their place.

More specifically, the argument of this book is that alliance formation takes place through two mechanisms, both of which rely on relative power rather than identity as the key explanatory variable. The first mechanism is the evolution of the relative power balance between groups. As groups lose battles or come out of them victorious, other groups are confronted with survival choices on whether to flock to them or abandon them. In making these choices, leaders consider their relative power both within and across alliances: While they desire to be on the winning side, commitment problems make them wary of winning the war as a weaker alliance partner. Such alliance changes occur more frequently in conflicts where relative power is more or less balanced between the various warring groups, because in these conflicts small changes in a single group's relative power can significantly alter the incentives of other groups to align with it or against it. Conversely, in conflicts where power is unevenly distributed, small shifts in the power distribution are unlikely to spur such alliance changes. The implication of this logic is that we should expect to see more alliance changes in multiparty civil wars in which there is a rough balance of power, as opposed to those conflicts in which power is unevenly distributed. In other words, conflicts involving a strong government force (i.e., Guatemala) should see less volatility in alliances than conflicts involving a weak government (i.e., Lebanon).

A second mechanism that drives alliance choice is warring group fractionalization. The uncertainty and complexity of intergroup relations in multiparty civil wars are to a certain extent mirrored at the level of intragroup relations, between the various subgroups that comprise these groups. These subgroups

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Bates (1974); Kasfir (1979); Gagnon (2004); Posner (2004, 2005); and Wilkinson (2006).

<sup>10</sup> Anderson (1983).

<sup>11</sup> On “invented traditions,” see Hobsbawm (1984); see also Brass (1974) and Wedeen (1999).

tend to be led by local elites – a critical unit of analysis in this book – and differ from each other along regional lines; they may also have leadership disputes between them that predate the war. Critically, these subgroups exist and are identifiable prior to the onset of war: They are not endogenous products of the conflict. Bonds between subgroups are stronger than bonds between allied warring groups because of a combination of increased trust, in-group bias, and institutionalized sanctioning and enforcement mechanisms. However, even the bonds between subgroups with the same identity repertoires are not immune to fractures when subgroup survival is threatened.

In this context, battlefield wins will foster intragroup cohesion by convincing local elites that they are on the winning side. On the other hand, battlefield losses, which are typically borne unevenly between the various subgroups, will shake the confidence of these local elites and will frequently encourage fractionalization along the preexisting regional or leadership cleavages. Fractionalization, in turn, is a form of relative power change, regardless of whether (1) a splinter faction joins up with an opposing group (increasing that group's power at the expense of the group it left), (2) a splinter group strikes out on its own (breaking the overall power distribution into smaller units), or (3) a group is taken over by a dissatisfied faction (decreasing that group's relative power as the turmoil rages). The resulting change in the intergroup distribution of power will spur alliance shifts, as groups seek to form updated, optimally sized coalitions.

What, then, are the observable implications of these mechanisms at work? We can observe our dependent variables – alliance choices and changes, and within-group splits and takeovers – fairly easily, and the independent variables – relative power shifts and identity cleavages – can be observed as well. But how can we know which independent variable has more explanatory power vis-à-vis the dependent variable when we expect to observe both power shifts and seemingly compelling identity narratives?

The fact that ethnic, linguistic, regional, religious, and (to a lesser extent) ideological identities are presumed to stay relatively fixed – at least given the rather short timescale of civil wars – allows this book's theory to be falsifiable. If identity commonalities or dissimilarities explained intergroup alliance choices and intragroup cohesion, then we would see relatively few alliance changes and little group fractionalization in these conflicts. Alliance patterns and groups would be fairly stable, as they would be constructed around relatively immutable cleavages. As I demonstrate, however, that is quite the opposite of what we see within the empirical scope of this book. The empirical chapters show alliances constantly shifting and groups perpetually at risk of internal splits and takeovers. Dramatic identity narratives arise in proximity to these events, but as soon as another disruption to the intergroup or intragroup equilibrium takes place, those narratives are abandoned and new narratives spring up. The capriciousness of these narratives suggests they are not a key explanatory variable, and that relative power changes are really doing the work behind alliance changes and fractionalization.



Figure I.1 illustrates two of the theory's observable implications with basic descriptive information about the multiparty civil wars that will be the focus of this book. We see that the numerous identity cleavages in these conflicts were not stable predictors of intergroup and intragroup dynamics. While these cleavages can be assumed to have remained more or less constant for the duration of the war, these conflicts saw an average of roughly 0.33 alliance shifts per year, while an average of 46 percent of the original warring parties in each conflict suffered some form of internal fractionalization.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, these numbers are not driven by extraordinary rates of shifting or fractionalization in just a few unusual conflicts. Rather, these phenomena are ubiquitous among multiparty conflicts. As the left panel of Figure I.1 shows, not only did the average multiparty conflict see fractionalization (at least once and oftentimes more) of about half of the original groups, but this percentage is roughly normally distributed and very few conflicts escaped some degree of fractionalization. Of fifty-three multiparty conflicts assessed here, only six (11 percent) did not experience any fractionalization. The right panel of Figure I.1 shows that alliance shifts, too, were frequent. Of the fifty-three multiparty civil wars, forty-five (85 percent) experienced at least one alliance change during their course, and twenty-seven (51 percent) experienced three or more alliance shifts during their course. These rough statistics tell us two things. First, fractionalization and alliance change are so common that a picture of war that does not include them is incomplete. Second, given that identity-based cleavages cannot change quickly enough to explain these rates of breakdown among groups, clearly something more than identity cleavages was at work in these chaotic conflicts.

The implication of this book's theory is that by closely observing relative power changes in multiparty conflicts, we can make reasonable predictions about which groups will ally with one another, and about which groups will suffer internal instability. One of the main goals of this work is to increase the feasibility and accuracy of such predictions.

#### DEFINITIONS

By "civil war" I mean an internal armed conflict, directed against the government of a sovereign state, which has caused at least 1,000 cumulative battle-related deaths.<sup>13</sup> Extending from Walt's (1987) definition of interstate alliances,

<sup>12</sup> These are simple averages weighing each conflict equally. If one weighted alliance shifts by war duration, the average would be 0.25 alliance shifts per year, and if one weighted fractionalization by number of groups at onset, the average would be 48% of warring parties facing fractionalization.

<sup>13</sup> The other major type of internal armed conflict studied in the academic literature is the "minor armed conflict," defined as the one that has caused between 25 and 1,000 battle-related deaths (see Sambanis (2004) on the debate over the proper death threshold). I chose the high death threshold not only because more deadly conflicts are more policy-relevant, but also because more intense conflicts are more likely to have a multiplicity of warring groups, allowing the extensive study of inter- and intragroup dynamics.

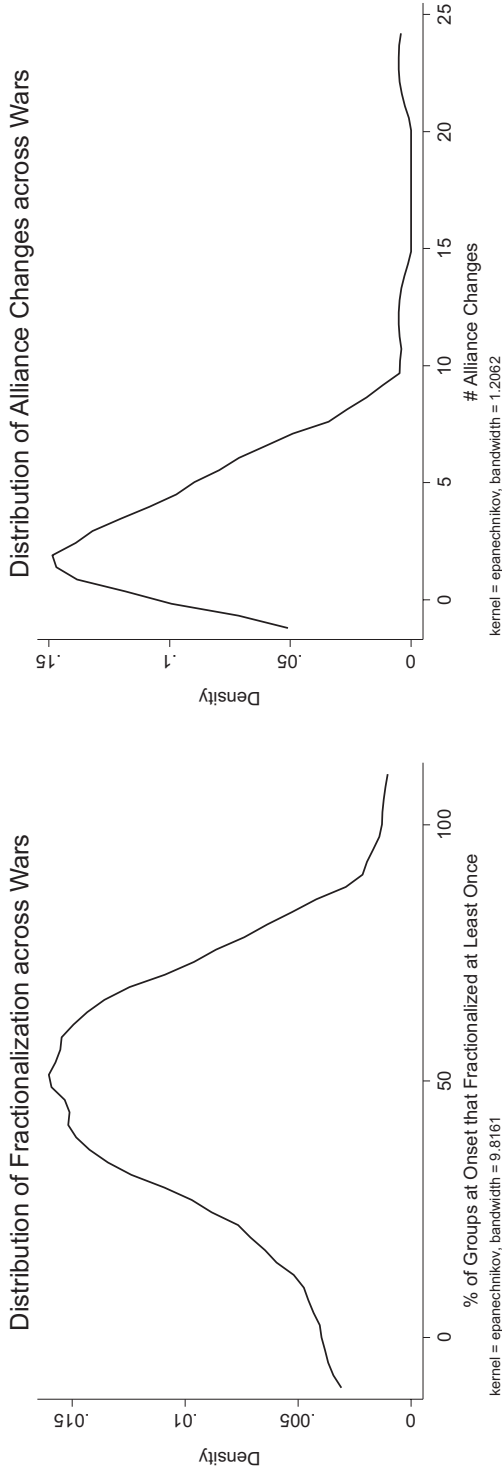


FIGURE I.1. Fractionalization and Alliances in Multiparty Civil Wars