“This fascinating book reaches striking and original conclusions about the dynamics of African rebel groups, with a particular concern for the Horn, but with much broader applications.”

Christopher Clapham, Centre of African Studies, University of Cambridge

“Insurgent Fragmentation in the Horn of Africa: Rebellion and Its Discontents combines a pathbreaking theoretical analysis of the fragmentation of rebel movements with a deep and detailed historical study of cases from the Horn of Africa to provide a fascinating account of a much-neglected topic. This is an essential contribution to the literature on the dynamics of civil wars.”

Alex de Waal, Tufts University

“Michael Woldemariam’s book offers a new and important explanation of rebel cohesion and fragmentation. By focusing on the impact of battlefield dynamics on rebel unity, Woldemariam helps us understand why insurgent cohesion is so challenging and prone to breakdown. His careful, deeply researched comparative evidence from Ethiopia and Somaliavaluably brings these fascinating cases into dialogue with the broader literature on political violence. This book deserves wide attention and engagement.”

Paul Staniland, University of Chicago

“Why do rebel organizations fragment and why does it matter? Drawing on a new database of fragmentation in 171 rebel organizations in sub-Saharan Africa (1946–2006), Woldemariam argues that fortunes on the battlefield hold the key to understanding these dynamics. When rebels lose territory, commitment problems push them apart. But even when they win, the reduced threat encourages fragmentation by weakening their incentives for continued cooperation. Ironically, therefore, rebel organizations are more likely to cohere during stalemates on the battlefield.”

Paul D. Williams, George Washington University

“Theoretically sound and empirically robust, this book is a definitive work on rebel fragmentation in the Horn of Africa. In a region where scholarship has long been tainted by partisan politics, Dr. Woldemariam presents a rare dispassionate analysis of the internal dynamics of insurgent groups in one of the most conflict-ridden regions of the world.”

Assefaw Bariagaber, Seton Hall University
When insurgent organizations factionalize and fragment, it can profoundly shape a civil war: its intensity, outcome, and duration. In an extended treatment of this complex and important phenomenon, Michael Woldemariam examines why rebel organizations fragment through a unique historical analysis of the Horn of Africa’s civil wars. Central to his view is that rebel factionalism is conditioned by battlefield developments. While fragmentation is caused by territorial gains and losses, counterintuitively, territorial stalemate tends to promote rebel cohesion and is a critical basis for cooperation in war.

As a rare effort to examine these issues in the context of the Horn of Africa region, based on an extensive fieldwork, this book will interest both scholarly and nonscholarly audiences interested in insurgent groups and conflict dynamics.

MICHAEL WOLDEMARIAM is an assistant professor of international relations at Boston University’s Pardee School of Global Studies. His research focuses on the dynamics of armed conflict, the behavior of rebel organizations, and postconflict institution building. He has special expertise on the Horn of Africa region, where he has traveled extensively. His research has been published in Terrorism and Political Violence, the Journal of Strategic Studies, and Nationalism and Ethnic Politics, and is forthcoming in a number of edited volumes. He has been a fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, the Bradley Foundation, the Truman National Security Project, and a research specialist with the Innovations for Successful Societies program at Princeton University.
Insurgent Fragmentation in the Horn of Africa

Rebellion and Its Discontents

Michael Woldemariam

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4.1 Shaebia – gains, losses, and the onset of fragmentation over time 183
This is a book about the politics of armed rebellion in the Horn of Africa. That I would write a book on this subject – instead of on parliaments in Western Europe, the political economy of development in China, or any number of other topics that concern political scientists – probably should come as no great surprise. My parents were young Eritrean refugees who fled the violence and insecurity that characterized their country’s long armed struggle for independence. Although I would not set foot in Eritrea until I was ten years old, a few years after that struggle had been won, my earliest childhood memories are of the revolution. I still remember, for instance, the long drives from our New England home to Washington, DC, where our family took part in protests designed to publicize the Eritrean cause; the birthday parties and weddings where my parents and their friends would loudly discuss the latest battlefield developments; or the Eritrean festivals in one American city or another, in which my young friends and I would reenact the bravery and fortitude of Eritrea’s independence fighters for an audience of gleeful Eritrean adults. Although the circumstances of my American birth sheltered me from the burdens of war in Eritrea, the long armed struggle left an indelible mark on my political consciousness and social sensibilities. It could really be no other way.

Graduate school at Princeton is where I channeled these experiences into an actual intellectual project. My decision to focus on the issue of factionalism and fragmentation within organized rebellion was really driven by two considerations. First, as a good social scientist, I noticed that there was a lacuna in the academic literature on civil war and political violence that needed to be filled. Second, the years after 2001 were a time in which Eritrea’s liberator turned ruling party – the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front/People’s Front for Democracy and Justice – had begun to lose its luster. This is not the place to litigate the policies and performance of the PFDJ, or explore why Eritrea has been mired in interlocking social, economic, and political crises in the years since 2001. And to be clear, all those that fought in the Eritrean
struggle – including many of those who paid with their lives – have this author’s deep respect and esteem. The important issue is that the post-2001 moment was one in which many Eritrean intellectuals began to question what they thought they knew about the long independence struggle, and the organization that had been at its center. Old, sanitized narratives, about the purity of the EPLF, its unity and coherence, and the unquestioned integrity of its leadership, were challenged. And many began to call for a more honest, and perhaps more subversive, historical rendition of the independence struggle. Had it not been for this emerging political frame, and the revisionism about an armed struggle that had shaped my political consciousness for so long, I am not sure factionalism and fragmentation would have been the themes that informed this book.

However I might have arrived at this book’s motivating questions, I owe huge debts to so many who helped me write it. In the interest of brevity, it is not possible to mention the countless family and friends who have, in one way or another, supported this project. I have learned, in the truest sense, that it takes a community to write a book.

First, I am hugely grateful to all of the interviewees who were kind enough to share some of their time with me, broker introductions to other informants, and provide me access to useful research materials. It was a privilege to hear their stories and learn from their lived experiences. I am particularly grateful to Gunter Schroeder for sharing with me a treasure trove of interview material he collected in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s.

At Princeton, I owe my biggest debt to my mentor, Prof. Jennifer Widner, who more than any other person taught me what it means to be a social scientist. Members of my dissertation committee – Mark Beissinger, Amaney Jamal, and Keren Yarhi-Milo – were also incredibly supportive and provided invaluable guidance on turning a doctoral thesis into a book manuscript. My friends and fellow graduate students Kristen Harkness, Jing Chen, and Vinay Jahawar also read significant portions of this project, and for that I am grateful. Finally, there is my dear friend Alden Young, who has probably heard and seen more versions of this book than he cares to remember. His perceptive intellect is spread across this book’s pages.

I spent a year at Penn State as a postdoctoral fellow further revising my dissertation project into a book. Douglas Lemke was my mentor at State College, and he has been an encouraging voice my entire academic career. D. Scott Bennett was chair of the political science department, and played a big role in bringing me to Penn State. His successor, Lee Ann Banaszak, also provided some much-needed positivity along the way, as did the director of African Studies, Kidane Mengisteab. The
good people at the Africana Studies Center – Lovalerie King, Tracy Beckett, and Dawn Noreen – made sure my fellowship year at Penn State was productive and smooth.

I have had the pleasure of serving as a faculty member at Boston University’s Pardee School of Global Studies during this book’s most critical stages. This has been a wonderful professional home with fantastic colleagues, and I could spend many pages thanking them all. I owe a particular debt of gratitude to our associate dean, Bill Grimes; the director of our African Studies Center, Tim Longman; and my ever-supportive faculty mentor, Houchang Chehabi. Dino Christensen, my colleague in the Department of Political Science, was kind enough to organize a seminar in which I was able to present the book’s main findings and solicit feedback. My thanks also go to a wonderful cohort of junior (and some now senior) faculty at Boston University: Manjari Miller, Noora Lori, Kaija Schilde, Jeremy Menchik, Renata Keller, Cornel Ban, Julie Klinger, and Min Ye.

Outside of Princeton, Penn State, and Boston University, many friends and colleagues have shaped my thinking on conflict and rebellion in Africa and the Horn. Will Reno was kind enough to visit me at Penn State and share his thoughts on the project. Terrence Lyons, Christopher Day, Awet Weldemichael, Dan Connell, Joe Woldense, Jennifer Riggan, Jason Mosley, Costa Pischedda, Christopher Clapham, Ruth Iyob, Rashid Abdi, Laura Hammond, Ken Menkans, Lee Cassanelli, Adan Abakor, Harry Verhoeven, Maimuna Mohamud, Peter Krause, Mia Bloom, and Jonathan Fischer have, in one form or another, made helpful observations and interventions that have had some bearing on this book. My interaction with some of these friends and colleagues was facilitated by my engagement with the Rift Valley Institute, a first-rate research organization that works on the Horn of Africa (among several other regions). Thus I owe its senior staff – in particular, John Ryle, Mark Bradbury, and Cedric Barnes – special thanks. Pythias Temesgen, my dear friend and godfather to my son, has read much of the manuscript and brought a critical eye to many of its main arguments. These individuals join a broad array of conference and research talk attendees that engaged my work and offered productive critiques.

Research support for this work has come in a variety of guises. Beyond Princeton, Penn State, and Boston University, I have benefited from the support of the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation and the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars. Brian Shevnaugh, Patricia Egessa, and Maddie Powell all provided invaluable research assistance. My editor at Cambridge, Maria Marsh, has done a superb job guiding this book manuscript to publication, as have several others at
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Of course, this book would not have been possible without the support of my loving family. My mom and dad, Saba Hadgu and Habte Woldemariam, have been the core guiding inspirations throughout my life. I owe them so much. My sister Selam Woldemariam read portions of the manuscript and made some important writing suggestions, while my other siblings Yonas and Leah provided moral support and plenty of laughs. I would also be remiss if I didn’t mention my extended family in Minnesota – aunts, uncles, and cousins – that have been important pillars of my life. It’s so large a group that I will not list them all here by name out of the sincere fear that I might leave someone out. They know I love them all dearly.

My wife, Adiam Belay, has been my rock – patient, supportive, and always able to put me at ease about my work and life when I am most anxious. I could not have finished this book without her love. I also owe her family some important debts. And then there is my son Adam, who came along just as I brought this book to a close. I’m glad to have concluded this chapter in life just in time to start a new one with him.

Finally, there is my grandfather, Hadgu Muhur. Sadly, he passed away as I was working on this book. He is greatly missed. He was an author in his own right, publishing some important Tigrinya-language texts on religion. I like to think I am continuing a family tradition.
Acronyms

ARDUF Afar Revolutionary Democratic Unity Front
ARPCT Alliance for the Restoration of Peace and Counter-Terrorism
ARS Alliance for the Reliberation of Somalia
EDU Ethiopian Democratic Union
EFLNA Eritreans for the Liberation of North America
ELF Eritrean Liberation Front
ENDF Ethiopian National Defense Forces
EPLF Eritrean People’s Liberation Front
EPRDF Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front
EPRP Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Party
FGS Federal Government of Somalia
ICU Islamic Courts Union
JVA Juba Valley Authority
NIF National Islamic Front
OLF Oromo Liberation Front
ONLF Ogaden National Liberation Front
SALF Somali Abo Liberation Front
SNF Somali National Front
SNM Somali National Movement
SPM Somali Patriotic Movement
SRRC Somalia Reconciliation and Restoration Council
SSDF Somali Salvation Democratic Front
TFG Transitional Federal Government (Somalia)
TLF Tigray Liberation Front
TNG Transitional National Government (Somalia)
TPLF Tigray People’s Liberation Front
USC United Somali Congress
WSLF West Somali Liberation Front