

Window Theory of Inter-rebel War

(Theory chapter from book manuscript Costantino Pischedda, *War Among Rebels: Why Rebel Groups Clash*).

But when dominions are acquired in a region that is not similar in language, customs, and institutions, it is here that difficulties arise; and it is here that one needs much good luck and much diligence to hold on to them.

Niccolò Machiavelli¹

Rebel groups exist in an anarchic environment: there is no overarching authority enforcing agreements among them, as they have challenged the state's monopoly of organized violence. Much like sovereign states in the world envisioned by realism in international relations theory, insurgent organizations have to rely on themselves and cooperation with other self-regarding actors to survive and achieve their goals. This characterization is arguably more fitting for civil wars than for the international system: in civil wars, the balance of power game is played especially hard and participants frequently "fall by the wayside," i.e., they are destroyed.² By contrast, "state death" (that is, the formal loss of foreign policymaking power to another state) is a rare occurrence.³ Balance of power logic would lead one to expect rebel groups to be natural

¹ Niccolò Machiavelli (trans. and ed. Peter Bondanella), *The Prince* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 10.

² Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, p. 118.

³ Fazal identifies nine instances of state death in the years 1946-1992, only two of which occurred through interstate war and conquest. Tanisha Fazal, "State Death in the International System," *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (Spring 2004): 311-344. Conversely, rebel groups' violent demise is frequent. See, for example, Timothy Wickham-Crowley, *Guerillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes since 1956*

allies, given that they typically face a stronger common enemy. So why do inter-rebel wars break out?

This chapter lays out my answer: window theory of inter-rebel war. Rebel groups initiate inter-rebel war when facing windows of opportunity to get rid of weaker coethnic rivals on the cheap or windows of vulnerability produced by a sharp decline in relative power.⁴ The next section detail the combination of material factors (the inter-rebel balance of power and the level of government threat) and ideational factors (rebel groups' ethnic identities) that shape the rebel calculus and give rise to windows of opportunity and windows of vulnerability. A discussion of my approach to testing window theory with case studies follows.

Window Theory of Inter-rebel War

Window theory stems from two simple conjectures. First, rebel groups may have various strategic motives for resorting to violence against one another. Second, the costs of doing so vary, rather than always being prohibitively high. Therefore, in some circumstances, the benefits of acting upon those motives and starting inter-rebel war may be worth the costs. My argument identifies factors shaping rebel groups' calculations (both strictly military considerations and the existence of shared ethnic identities between rebel groups) and specifies the conditions under which inter-rebel war is likely to ensue, namely when windows of opportunity and windows of vulnerability open up.

(Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 16; Daniel Byman, *Understanding Proto-Insurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007), p. 1.

⁴ My dependent variable (that is, the phenomenon I intend to explain) is the onset of inter-rebel war. The closing of windows of opportunity and vulnerability should increase the probability of termination of inter-rebel war too, but there may be an element of inertia associated with emotions of fear and vengefulness produced by infighting and with psychological bias (having committed to initiating inter-rebel fighting, rebel leaders may be slow in updating their initial belief that they could easily defeat a rival or they had a chance to forestall the decline of their group in the face of contradictory evidence).

Motives for inter-rebel war are a function of conflicts of interest among rebel groups, resulting from ideological differences, disagreements over strategy, different priorities, and overlapping ambitions. Even groups with the same “strategic goals” (e.g., regime change) can have conflicting “organizational goals” (e.g., increasing their respective membership and funding).⁵ While typically having similar strategic goals, coethnic rebel groups tend to have especially immediate and intense conflicts of interest about organizational goals: they aspire to control the same population and know that they could absorb with relative ease the resources of defeated coethnic rivals, which in turn would improve their chances in the fight against the government. Thus coethnic rivals may represent existential threats as well as pose serious obstacles to growth for one another: both defensive and expansionary motives predispose rebel groups to resort to force to destroy or at least weaken coethnic rivals. By contrast, non-coethnic rebel groups lack intrinsic, powerful motives for fighting one another: they do not necessarily have overlapping bases of support and they have little reason to believe they will be able to easily absorb the resources of a defeated group.

In terms of costs, the possibility that inter-rebel war might weaken the rebels and expose them to a devastating attack by overwhelmingly powerful government forces generally looms large. By contrast, when the government is faring poorly on the battlefield, infighting could entail major opportunity costs of forgoing significant gains and even outright victory against the incumbent. The costs of inter-rebel war can be relatively low, however, for a group enjoying marked superiority over its rival(s) and facing a strong government that is nonetheless unwilling or unable to intervene rapidly and take advantage of infighting. In fact, the government’s

⁵ Peter Krause, “The Political Effectiveness of Non-State Violence: A Two-Level Framework to Transform a Deceptive Debate,” *Security Studies* 22, no. 2 (2013): 259-294. See also Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymour, “Shirts Today, Skins Tomorrow.”

aggregate military superiority does not translate automatically into an ability or willingness to launch well-timed, decisive offensives against rebels engulfed in infighting, due to political, logistical, and military constraints to power projection.

Both windows of opportunity and windows of vulnerability are situations in which the expected benefits of inter-rebel war outweigh the costs for the initiator.⁶ Windows of opportunity entail high expected benefits and low costs for the group launching a hegemonic bid (the center-south quadrant in Figure 1 below): by quickly and cheaply destroying a weaker coethnic rival (or rivals) without exposing itself to an unacceptably higher risk of government victory and without forgoing opportunities to make major gains against the incumbent, the would-be hegemon at the peak of its power expects to lock in its dominant position and experience the major benefits of removing the long-term threat posed by coethnic rivals and absorbing their resources.⁷

A rebel group that is relatively weak and/or confronts a significant government threat may also resort to inter-rebel aggression to forestall the deterioration of its power relative to a coethnic rival when no other solution appears possible – a gamble for resurrection in the face of a window of vulnerability. The “gambler” may hope to inflict a debilitating blow on its adversary or to conquer militarily strategic territory, whose control would radically alter the inter-rebel balance of power. Importantly, gambles for resurrection are not limited to the initiation of

⁶ It should be noted that window theory does not assume that rebel groups hold deep-seated hegemonic preferences, although rebel groups aspiring to become ethnic hegemonies for greed or ideological reasons plausibly exists (how common those are is an open empirical question). My argument relies on more minimalistic assumptions about rebel groups’ preferences: they care about surviving, succeeding in the fight against the government, and at least preserving their degree of influence in the community they claim to represent. The pursuit of hegemony follows from the fact that the existence of powerful coethnic rivals potentially threatens all three of these objectives.

⁷ How quickly and cheaply is enough depends on the power of the government, in addition to the extent of its power projection constraints. In the typical scenario of limited government threat – when the incumbent is overall militarily superior but faces contingent constraints to power project – an inter-rebel war lasting more than a few months would probably be considered too risky. By contrast, in situations in which the government is in fact weaker than the strongest rebel group, the latter would face a very broad window of opportunity and thus could afford a longer inter-rebel fight while also engaging in a relatively intense fight against the government.

violence, but also include remedial courses of action with a high probability of provoking a violent response by the rival, such as creating a *fait accompli* by deploying forces in strategic disputed territory.⁸ The ensuing boost to the power of the gambler would create a window of vulnerability for its rival, prompting it in turn to violently oppose the *fait accompli* rather than acquiesce.

Windows of vulnerability are characterized by both high expected costs and benefits (the north-west quadrant in Figure 1). The prospect, however remote, for a rebel group to reduce the urgent threat posed by a rising coethnic rival by picking up a fight with it may warrant paying the steep costs and running the serious risks involved in inter-rebel war in the absence of a favorable balance of power and/or of a limited government threat. Desperate times call for desperate measures.⁹

Both hegemonic bids and gambles for resurrection follow a “better-now-than-later” logic, albeit with an important difference.¹⁰ Whereas gambles for resurrection represent a rebel group’s response to a relative decline in power, hegemonic bids are efforts to consolidate a group’s dominant position before a window of opportunity closes, even if there is no indication of an imminent deterioration of the balance of power or intensification of government threat.

Shifts in the inter-rebel balance of power may have various causes. Some rebel groups may be better than others at mobilizing the population and recruiting, due to the resonance of their political message or their particular effectiveness in rewarding their affiliates or intimidating their rivals’ supporters. Moreover, due to unit-level factors beyond window theory,

⁸ Dan Altman, “By *Fait Accompli*, Not Coercion: How States Wrest Territory from Their Adversaries,” *International Studies Quarterly* 61, no. 4 (December 2017): 881–891.

⁹ The argument should be especially relevant to relatively cohesive rebel organizations, as significant leadership divisions or indiscipline among the rank and file may hinder a response to the imperatives of window theory.

¹⁰ Levy, “Declining Power and the Preventive Motivation for War.”

like the personality of their leaders, their ideology or organizational culture, some rebel groups may be particularly inclined to engage in coercive diplomacy, resorting to threats and limited use of force to extract concessions from other groups, thus incrementally expanding at their expense. Furthermore, rebel organizations may see their growth propelled by presence of profitable resources (e.g., smuggling networks, drug cultivation, oil, precious metals and gems) in territory they control. Third parties can also affect the inter-rebel balance of power; foreign largesse may fatten some groups, while others may starve as their external lifeline is cut off. Moreover, an imminent direct external intervention in support of rivals may raise the prospect of a group's sharp decline in relative power.

Figure 1.1 Window Theory

		benefits of inter-rebel war (for initiator)		
		urgent coethnic threat reduction (war against coethnic)	more resources/long-term coethnic threat reduction (war against coethnic)	negligible (war against non-coethnic or extremely weak coethnic)
costs of inter-rebel war (for initiator)	high	windows of vulnerability → gamble for resurrection	no window → no war	no window → no war
	low	windows of opportunity and vulnerability → "hybrid" war	window of opportunity → hegemonic bid	no window → no war

NOTE: The shaded quadrants correspond to scenarios in which window theory predicts inter-rebel war.

Rebel groups launch hegemonic bids without delay when a window of opportunity opens. By contrast, gambles for resurrection are responses of “later resort.”¹¹ Insurgent leaders typically would go to considerable lengths in search of a less risky way out of their predicament, for example engaging in diplomatic initiatives to break hostile encirclements and gain new allies, experimenting with different mobilization strategies in the face of dwindling popular support, striving to improve their cohesion and battlefield effectiveness, or even trying to coerce adversaries (without resorting to all-out fighting) into making concessions that would forestall relative decline.

A rebel group may face both types of windows at the same time if it fears falling from its current position of superiority to helpless weakness vis-à-vis a coethnic rival. A blend of window of opportunity and vulnerability logics would then drive the rebel group to initiate what I call, for lack of a better term, a “hybrid” inter-rebel war: though it may reasonably hope to achieve a quick and cheap inter-rebel victory, the group would also be spurred into action by the dangers lying ahead and thus accept significantly more risks and costs than would be warranted in the absence of a window of vulnerability (see the south-west quadrant in Figure 1).¹² One scenario in which we should see a hybrid inter-rebel war is when a rebel group that was so weak as not to represent a meaningful threat for a stronger coethnic group (i.e., the former group was below a threshold of extreme weakness that I operationalize in the next section) experiences rapid growth: the stronger rebel group would then be tempted to stamp out the weak but quickly growing rival.

¹¹ I am paraphrasing Alexander B. Downes’s “tactic of later resort.” Downes, “Desperate Times, Desperate Measures: The Causes of Civilian Victimization in War,” *International Security* 30, no. 4 (Spring 2006): 152–195.

¹² I define this type of inter-rebel war in terms of its causes (a mix of window of opportunity and window of vulnerability), rather than any distinct form the violence takes.

Window theory predicts no inter-rebel war between non-coethnic rebel groups or when a rebel group has already established itself as the ethnic rebel hegemon (east quadrants in Figure 1). Moreover, inter-rebel war should not occur when a clash between coethnic rebel organizations likely would be too costly (due to a rough inter-rebel balance of power and/or a serious and immediate government threat) and there is no clear power trend in favor of any organization (north-center quadrant).

An important quality of window theory of inter-rebel war is that it provides an explanation for both the fundamental decision to engage in inter-rebel war and the timing of its initiation: a mix of expansionary ambitions and fear induced by shared ethnic identity constitutes the underlying motive for inter-rebel aggression, while the relative power among rebel groups and the level of threat posed by the government influence decisions about timing. By contrast, other arguments using the metaphor of windows of opportunity often only provide an explanation for when, but not why, war occurs.¹³

While my argument is about the causes of inter-rebel war, it also has implications for the outcomes of clashes between rebel groups. As window theory does not assume a systematic bias in rebel leaders' assessment of the balance of power and threat environment, on average hegemonic bids should be successful, given that they are launched by a preponderant rebel group in a context of limited government threat.¹⁴ Conversely, gambles for resurrection should fail

¹³ For a critique of Stephen Van Evera's *Causes of War* along these lines, see Richard K. Betts, "Must War Find a Way: A Review Essay," *International Security* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 166-198, in particular pp. 174-175.

¹⁴ Not all hegemonic bids, of course, will be successful, as not all safe bets pan out. Leaders may miscalculate, misperceive, or make mistakes in the execution of sensible plans, and information about important factors may simply not be available (for example, intangible elements in the balance of power like the adversary's actual force employment or the cohesion of untested units). Moreover, as Clausewitz famously observed about war in general, there may well be a pervasive element of inherent unpredictability in inter-rebel war outcomes. See Carl von Clausewitz (Michael Howard and Peter Paret, eds. and trans), *On War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976),

more frequently, as they represent desperate attempts by increasingly vulnerable groups to improve their difficult position.

I now turn to a more detailed discussion of the factors shaping the cost-benefit calculus of rebel groups – coethnicity, government threat, and the inter-rebel balance of power.

Coethnicity and the benefits of inter-rebel war

Coethnicity provides defensive and expansionary motives for inter-rebel war, as it holds the promise of both an improved threat environment and a larger resource pool for the initiator.

As a result of overlapping ambitions to control the same ethnic community, coethnic rebel groups tend to see each other as direct competitors and thus as obstacles to their goals and even as existential threats. Coethnic organizations might interfere with their respective mobilization efforts and derail the struggle against the government by spoiling negotiations, reducing the clarity of demands and the credibility of threats to the incumbent,¹⁵ and they may even flip to the government's side. A rebel group would therefore consider using force to reduce the threat posed by a coethnic rival. Refraining from doing so at an opportune moment may mean not only forgoing a chance to address the problems just discussed, but also exposing itself to the future risks of an attack by the rival or of having to make unpalatable concessions to it.

The high level of perceived threat that characterizes relations among coethnic rebel groups is compounded by the “cumulativity” of their resources – that is, these resources can be extracted at low cost and their possession allows a group to protect itself and grow stronger.¹⁶ When a rebel organization wipes out a coethnic rival, it can often coopt large segments of the latter's membership. More important, the organization that prevails in the inter-rebel fight is

¹⁵ Krause, *Rebel Power*.

¹⁶ On resource cumulativity and interstate war, see Van Evera, *Causes of War*.

likely to be able to recruit and extract resources at a relatively low cost from the coethnic population previously under its rival's control: undisputed access to a rebel group's ethnic support base is the key resource, as waging guerrilla warfare (the most common way in which insurgents fight) typically does not require large armies. A pliable support base can provide intelligence, safe havens, money, and logistical support, in addition to recruits. Moreover, some elements of defeated groups may be considered irreconcilable, making less experienced but more reliable new recruits preferable. Thus achieving hegemony through a quick and cheap fight against coethnic rivals holds the prospect of strengthening the victor for its ongoing fight against the government.

By contrast, an organization perceived by the social base of support of a defeated organization as an out-group, or worse as a "foreign occupier," is likely to experience difficulty with recruitment and extraction activities and will have to devote substantial resources to policing the population, potentially leading to a net drain of its resources.¹⁷ The point is not that foreign occupiers simply cannot recruit and elicit support from the population in the occupied territories, but rather that extraction costs are likely to be high.¹⁸ For this reason, the existence of

¹⁷ As Stephen Van Evera points out, "often resources empower their current owners but not a conqueror, or they empower the conqueror at a discount." Van Evera, *Causes of War*, p. 107. The most thorough discussion of cumulativeness in the context of foreign occupations (in particular of industrial countries in the 20th Century) is Peter Liberman, *Does Conquest Pay? The Exploitation of Occupied Industrial Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

¹⁸ Kalyvas, for example, reports various instances of pro-government militias recruited from rebellious ethnic groups. See Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Ethnic Defection in Civil Wars," *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 3 (August 2008): 1043-1068. My argument is consistent with the long-standing view among scholars and practitioners of insurgency that to be viable rebel organizations cannot rely exclusively on coercion, but also need some degree of consent from the civilian population under their influence, to be elicited through a mix of indoctrination and public good provision. I contend that being able to present itself as a defender of the ethnic community against the ethnic-other forces of the government facilitates enormously the rebel group's task of gaining civilian consent to its rule. See, among many others, Mao Zedong (Samuel B. Griffith trans.), *On Guerrilla Warfare* (New York: Praeger, 1961); Zachariah C. Mampilly, *Rebel Rulers: Insurgent Governance and Civilian Life during War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011); and Anna Arjona, "Civilian Resistance to Rebel Governance," in Ana Arjona, Nelson Kasfir, and Zachariah Mampilly (eds.), *Rebel Governance in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

long-term conflicts of interest between non-coethnic rebel groups (for example, about the distribution of power among a country's ethnic groups) does not tend to prompt inter-rebel war: their settlement is better left to the postwar phase, as infighting would disproportionately benefit the government.¹⁹ It should also be noted that that window theory does not assume civilians to be indifferent about cooperating with, joining, or being under the control of different coethnic rebel groups: inhabitants of a certain area may well have a preference for a given rebel group over its coethnic rivals. The argument, rather, posits that once her preferred coethnic organization no longer exists, the average individual should be relatively willing to cooperate with and join another existing coethnic organization, but not non-coethnic organizations.

As an illustration, compare ISIS's experience in dealing with Sunni Arabs, on the one hand, and Kurds, on the other. ISIS's Sunni Arab constituency in Iraq initially welcomed the Jihadist fighters as liberators from the oppression of the Shia-dominated Iraqi army. A Sunni resident of Mosul summarized the attitude of many inhabitants of Iraq's second largest city towards ISIS fighters thus: "We thought they were Sunnis who had come to help their fellow Sunnis."²⁰ By contrast, Kurds living in the outskirts of Mosul fled their homes before ISIS's arrival.²¹ Moreover, ISIS's internal documents indicate that it perceived Syrian Kurds as a fifth column for the US-led coalition and the Kurdish-dominated Democratic Union Party (better

¹⁹ In practice, the existence of ethnically-mixed areas reduces the sharpness of the distinction between pairs of coethnic rebel groups (relatively prone to inter-rebel war) and non-coethnic groups (less prone to inter-rebel war). Non-coethnic rebel groups may violently vie for control of an area where their respective potential supporters live intermingled. Unchallenged control of this area would offer the benefit of mobilizing and extracting resources from coethnics, but may also entail the significant costs of policing a potentially hostile ethnic-other population or forcing it to leave (with the associated political and image negative consequences). Therefore, inter-rebel war should be less likely between non-coethnic rebel groups whose distinct popular bases of support are partially intermingled than between coethnic rebel groups; and inter-rebel war should be more likely between non-coethnic rebel groups whose potential supporters live in ethnically-mixed areas than between non-coethnic rebel groups whose supporters inhabit different geographical areas.

²⁰ Adnan R. Khan, "Life Under ISIS: Four Stories of Terror Endured," *Maclean's*, December 14, 2016.

²¹ *Ibid.*

known by its Kurdish acronym PYD), prompting the Islamic State's decision to expel the Kurdish population from key areas under its control.²²

What are the microfoundations of the cumulativeness of resources controlled by coethnic rebel groups? An individual's propensity to join and support coethnic rebel organizations can be traced to ethnic parochialism, the tendency for people to be particularly cooperative with and favor members of their ethnic group.²³ As a result, in ethnically heterogeneous clientelist democracies and electoral autocracies, elections are often ethnic censuses, as ethnicity provides a remarkably precise predictor of voting behavior;²⁴ and patronage is distributed along ethnic lines.²⁵ Moreover, developing countries' rulers often resort to "ethnic stacking" (i.e., filling key government and military positions with coethnics) to ensure the loyalty of the security apparatus.²⁶

While these empirical patterns are widely acknowledged, there is much debate over their causes. The dominant view in political science holds that individuals cooperate with coethnics because of the prospect of material gain. In particular, agreements between coethnics are more

²² Aymenn al-Tamimi, "The Islamic State and the Kurds: The Documentary Evidence," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 8 (September 2017): 33-38.

²³ Nicholas Sambanis, Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl, and Moses Shayo, "Parochialism as a Central Challenge in Counterinsurgency," *Science* (May 2012): 805-808.

²⁴ Robert H. Bates, "Ethnic Competition and Modernization in Contemporary Africa," *Comparative Political Studies* 6, no. 4 (January 1974): 457-484; Nicolas van de Walle, "Presidentialism and Clientelism in Africa's Emerging Party Systems," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 41, no. 2 (June 2003): 297-321; Kanchan Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed: Patronage and Ethnic Head Counts in India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Karen E. Ferree, "Explaining South Africa's Racial Census," *Journal of Politics* 68, no. 4 (November 2006): 803-815.

²⁵ Corstange, *The Price of a Vote in the Middle East*; Raphaël Franck and Ilia Rainer, "Does the Leader's Ethnicity Matter? Ethnic Favoritism, Education, and Health in Sub-Saharan Africa," *American Political Science Review* 106, no. 2 (May 2012): 294-325.

²⁶ James T. Quinnivan, "Coups-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24, no. 2 (Fall 1999): 131-165; Theodore McLauchlin, "Loyalty Strategies and Military Defection in Rebellion," *Comparative Politics* 42, no. 3 (2010): 333-350; Philip Roessler, "The Enemy Within: Personal Rule, Coups, and Civil War in Africa," *World Politics* 63, no. 2 (April 2011): 300-346; Julien Morency-Laflamme and Theodore McLauchlin, "The Efficacy of Ethnic Stacking: Military Defection during Uprisings in Africa," *Journal of Global Security Studies* (forthcoming).

easily enforced because of their especially dense social networks facilitating information flows.²⁷ Moreover, given their relative visibility and stickiness, ethnic markers can be used by individuals as quick and crude information shortcuts to gauge the likely behavior of their counterparts; if people come to believe that coethnics tend to cooperate with one another, ethnic favoritism becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.²⁸ A second view, rooted in social identity and political socialization theories, posits that individuals have genuine, emotionally laden attachments to their ethnic group.²⁹ These attachments prompt people to support organizations representing their ethnic group's interests even at high personal costs, in particular during large-scale ethnic violence.³⁰

Window theory of inter-rebel war is agnostic about the relative importance of the two families of mechanisms described above: both are likely to operate simultaneously, making individuals more willing to join and cooperate with coethnic rebel organizations, and thus contribute to promote inter-rebel war.³¹ After rebel group A's defeat of coethnic rival B, the latter's supporters would tend to be drawn to group A in the expectation that it would be a

²⁷ James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Explaining Interethnic Cooperation," *American Political Science Review* 90, no. 4 (December 1996): 715–735; and James Habyarimana et al., *Coethnicity: Diversity and the Dilemmas of Collective Action* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009). Contrary to the prevailing view, in a field experiment in two Ugandan villages Larson and Lewis find that ethnically homogenous networks are less dense than diverse ones. The study confirms that information does spread more widely through ethnically homogenous networks, but that is due to the higher willingness of individuals to share information with coethnics. See Jennifer M. Larson and Janet I. Lewis, "Ethnic Networks," *American Journal of Political Science* 61, no. 2 (April 2017): 350–364.

²⁸ Daniel N. Posner, *Institutions and Ethnic Politics in Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Chandra, *Why Ethnic Parties Succeed*; Henry E. Hale, "Explaining Ethnicity," *Comparative Political Studies* 37, no. 4 (May 2004): 458–485; and Corstange, *The Price of a Vote in the Middle East*.

²⁹ On social identity theory, see Henri Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981). On political socialization theory, see, for example, Keith Darden, *Resisting Occupation: Mass Schooling and the Creation of Durable National Loyalties* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

³⁰ Donald L. Horowitz, *The Deadly Ethnic Riot* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 553–554; Roger D. Petersen, *Understanding Ethnic Violence, Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Ashutosh Varshney, "Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Rationality," *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 1 (March 2003): 85–99.

³¹ For an example of theorizing about ethnic in-group bias that emphasizes emotional attachments but does not see them as incompatible with calculations about individual material interests, see Nicholas Sambanis and Moses Shayo, "Social Identification and Ethnic Conflict," *American Political Science Review* 107, no. 2 (May 2013): 294–325.

bulwark against a government controlled by ethnic-others threatening the security, well-being, and dignity of their ethnic community. Moreover, rebel group A's members would be able to tap into ethnic information networks, making threats of punishment and promises of rewards credible, which in turn would facilitate control of the population previously under rebel group B's sway.

An important question about coethnicity remains to be addressed: Why doesn't the cooperation-inducing effect of shared identity among individuals extend to relations among rebel leaders, thus failing to discourage inter-rebel war? The answer lies not in different degrees of ethnic identification or biases between rebel leaders and followers – the former may well be as ethno-parochial as (or even more than) the latter. Rather it has to do with leaders' distinctive outlooks and incentive structures. Insurgent leaders are uniquely placed to grasp the constraints and incentives provided by their strategic environment. The brutal facts of rebel life stare rebel leaders in the eyes and induce them to adopt a strategic and consequentialist outlook: the imperatives of organizational survival and success in the struggle against the government warrant a dispassionate and forward-looking approach to inter-rebel relations and justify actions towards coethnics that would not be acceptable in inter-personal relations.³² Moreover, the personal interests of leaders are particularly closely intertwined with those of their organization: even if they are genuinely committed to the wellbeing of the broader ethnic community, leaders stand to benefit more than coethnic rank-and-file or civilians from their organization's survival and

³² As Jervis noted in the different context of the divergence of policy views between US presidents and their advisors, "Role rather than individual difference can explain the discrepancies." Robert Jervis, "Do Leaders Matter and How Would We Know?" *Security Studies* 22, no. 2 (2013): 153-179, p. 159. There may also be a selection dynamic at play. People that have more of a psychological predisposition for "Realpolitik" thinking (or "Machiavellism") may be more likely to rise through the ranks of a rebel organization by sidelining their internal rivals. On Realpolitik psychological orientation, see Brian Rathbun, "The Rarity of Realpolitik: What Bismarck's Rationality Reveals about International Politics," *International Security* 43, no. 1 (Summer 2018): 7-55.

success; thus rebel leaders should be inclined to use force against coethnic rival organizations in the advancement of their organization's interests.

Government threat, balance of power, and the costs of inter-rebel war

Inter-rebel war also has its costs. Besides the direct expenditure of blood and treasure, these consist of increased vulnerability to the incumbent and forgone opportunities to make military gains against it. In particular, the government could take advantage of the situation and attack the squabbling rebels, or it could let them bleed one another white and then take on the debilitated victor.³³ Moreover, inter-rebel fighting could push the group that is losing to turn to the government for help, strengthening the counterinsurgency effort. Inter-rebel war may also entail major opportunity costs if it diverts resources from the anti-government struggle when a sustained effort could bring about important territorial gains or even victory for a rebel group (or multiple groups), thus offering a chance for the incumbent to regroup.³⁴

The costs of inter-rebel war should be low, however, when three conditions are jointly present: (1) there is an imbalance of power among rebel organizations, (2) the government does not represent a serious and immediate military threat, but (3) it is not so weak as to suggest major

³³ Geoffrey Blainey makes this point in the context of interstate war with the parable of fighting waterbirds and the opportunistic fisherman. Richard Rosecrance labels the loss of relative power to a third party sitting on the sidelines as the "dilemma of the victor's inheritance." See Blainey, *Causes of War* (New York: Free Press, 1973), pp. 57-62; Rosecrance, *Rise of the Trading State* (New York: Basic Books, 1986), p. 34.

³⁴ I do not consider situations characterized by the occurrence of negotiations with the government as entailing significant opportunity costs for a rebel group in a position to launch a hegemonic bid. This is because the existence of coethnic competitors can trigger spoiling behavior, as weaker groups try to derail a peace process that risks marginalizing them. Moreover, the stronger rebel group would be able to extract more concessions from the government once in a hegemonic position. See Wendy Pearlman, "Spoiling Inside and Out: Internal Political Contestation and the Middle East Peace Process," *International Security* 33, no. 3 (Winter 2008/09): 79-109; Krause, *Rebel Power*.

opportunity costs. In the face of these low costs, the more powerful group may be tempted to wipe out its coethnic rival(s) to become the rebel hegemon.³⁵

The government is typically the strongest warring party, but this superiority does not mean a constant willingness and ability to unrestrainedly bring to bear its military power. Political, military, and logistical constraints may limit government power projection, so that it may not represent a serious and immediate threat to the rebels. In some instances, the low level of government threat faced by an insurgent movement is largely beyond the incumbent's control, as when security forces are busy dealing with a foreign enemy, paralyzed by internecine struggle, or simply in the midst of logistical preparations and training for a future major offensive. In others, the government may consciously adopt a low-threat stance, as putting maximum pressure on the rebels is not a top priority. As Paul Staniland notes, "States are often content not to devote their full resources to internal war."³⁶ For example, the prospect of high domestic political costs deterred the Indian government from launching large-scale offensives against the United Liberation Front of Asom and the Naxalite insurgents for a long time.³⁷

Rebel groups can gauge whether the government poses a serious and immediate threat based on recent or ongoing battlefield trends and troop deployments, as well as on intelligence about the incumbent's plans. The typical scenario of serious and immediate threat would be when the government is engaged in (or about to launch) a major offensive. Even if government

³⁵ Under these circumstances, the image costs in the eyes of the relevant ethnic community of committing "fratricide" are likely low too: the decisive fight will be over quickly, and the hegemon will be in a favorable position to emphasize the importance of unity against the government. Hegemonic bids, therefore, have something in common with Machiavelli's "well used cruelties," which "are carried out in a single stroke, done out of necessity to protect oneself and then are not continued, but are instead converted into the greatest possible benefits for the subjects. . . . Those who follow the first method [well used cruelties] can remedy their standing both with God and with men." Machiavelli, *The Prince*, pp. 33-34.

³⁶ Paul Staniland, "States, Insurgents, and Wartime Political Orders," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 2 (June 2012): 243-64, quotation from p. 253.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

forces are not making major territorial headway, an intense fight in which the insurgents are stretched thin to resist the government's onslaught would not represent a permissive environment for inter-rebel fighting: diverting resources to inter-rebel war (even if short and decisive) may pave the way for the government's battlefield success. By contrast, in a context of sporadic, limited clashes, insurgent leaders may see the diversion of resources to inter-rebel fighting as entailing an acceptable short-term increase of vulnerability.

The typical scenario of high opportunity costs is one in which a rebel group is poised to capture important territory from the government or victory appears within reach if it sustains maximum pressure against the government. In these situations, inter-rebel war should be deterred by the prospect of forgoing major military gains.

The inter-rebel balance of power affects the prospective costs of inter-rebel war, too. Attacking weaker rebel groups promises a cheap victory. By contrast, groups of comparable strength are likely to put up a serious fight. The ensuing long war of attrition would likely weaken the rebel camp as a whole, thus creating the conditions for a successful government offensive. Therefore, a favorable inter-rebel balance of power is a requirement for launching a hegemonic bid.³⁸ By contrast, rebel groups gamble for resurrection when facing an unfavorable distribution of power and/or a serious and imminent government threat, that is, when inter-rebel war is likely to be very costly.

³⁸ Following analogous reasoning, Copeland argues that in multipolar international systems a great power would launch a hegemonic bid only when markedly superior to all the other states, lest sideliners take advantage of the inevitable weakening of the aspiring hegemon in the lengthy and costly bilateral wars that it would have to wage sequentially against comparably powerful states. By contrast, in bipolar systems hegemonic bids may occur even when the two great powers have roughly equal power. Dale Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, pp. 15-20.

Questions about window theory

This discussion may have prompted a few questions about window theory, which I now address.

First, what prevents coethnic rebel groups from finding a negotiated solution to their conflicts of interests?³⁹ The answer, in a nutshell, is: coethnic rebel groups' intense fears that any agreement reached today to avoid inter-rebel war may just amount to a scrap of paper tomorrow, i.e., the so-called commitment problem in anarchy. In the presence of a window of opportunity, the only acceptable alternative to launching a hegemonic bid for the stronger group would be the de facto capitulation of its weaker coethnic rival, lest the latter come to pose a serious threat under changed circumstances. On its part, the weaker group would reject these terms, as fighting holds the prospect (albeit dim, given the imbalance of power) of a better outcome than negotiating itself out of existence.

When facing a window of vulnerability, the group in relative decline should be willing to remain at peace if offered credible guarantees that its core interests would not be trampled over by its coethnic rival down the road. However, the underlying shift in the balance of power would undermine the credibility of promises to that effect, given that the rising group would have an incentive to renege on them later on. The declining group may not only (or even primarily) be concerned about the risk of an eventual attack by its coethnic rival, but also by the prospect of having to make unpalatable concessions in the future due to a deteriorating bargaining position. While these concerns could be assuaged if the declining group acquired some asset (such as a territory with strategic value) capable of propping up its strength, the rival would be likely to oppose violently such as a development: with roles reversed, in this scenario the hitherto

³⁹ This is the motivating puzzle of the rational choice study of war: given that fighting is costly (and assuming risk neutrality or aversion), rational actors should agree on a peaceful division of the prize that leaves all better off than if they had settled the dispute with force. See Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War."

declining power could not commit not to take advantage of its new-found source of power in the future.⁴⁰ Thus a group's attempt to escape its window of vulnerability with a fait accompli acquisition of strategic territory risks creating a window of vulnerability for its rival and therefore a new, war-provoking commitment problem.

The commitment problem is inherently less intense in relations between non-coethnic rebel groups, due to their less stark and immediate conflicts of interest and the difficulty for rebels of mobilizing a non-coethnic population. Rebel group C would have less of a reason to be concerned about a power shift in favor of non-coethnic rebel group D, as D would not have a strong incentive to try to squeeze C out the rebel camp or to attack it. By contrast, a non-negligible commitment problem between coethnic rebel groups would exist even in the absence of windows of opportunity and vulnerability: there is always the *possibility* of future changes in the inter-rebel balance of power and the level of government threat. However, inter-rebel war between coethnic groups in the absence of windows of opportunity and vulnerability is generally deterred by its prohibitively high costs relative to the benefits.

Second, in contexts with more than two coethnic rebel groups, should we expect hegemonic bids only when the preponderant organization can marshal greater military power than all others combined? No, a large, unambiguous margin of superiority vis-à-vis the "second-ranked" rebel group would typically be sufficient, as serious collective action and coordination problems are likely to hamper joint defensive efforts against the would-be hegemon.⁴¹ Each of the other weaker rebel groups has an incentive to sit on the sidelines or limit its contribution in

⁴⁰ This is a specific variant of the commitment problem arising when actors negotiate over objects that are themselves a crucial source of bargaining power. Fearon, "Rationalist Explanations for War," pp. 408-409; Powell, "War as a Commitment Problem," pp. 185-188.

⁴¹ Copeland makes the same point about the initiation of major war when there are more than two great powers in the international system. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*, pp. 23-24.

the hope that someone else “catches the buck.” Moreover, for any given level of contribution to the coalition, coordination problems at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels are likely to arise, thus reducing its military effectiveness.⁴²

Third, do windows of opportunity for one group correspond to windows of vulnerability for other groups? The answer: typically not, but it may happen. When that is the case, we should be more likely to see a hegemonic bid than a gamble for resurrection, given that, as noted above, gambles for resurrection are responses of later resort. The reason why normally the two types of windows will not coexist is that a window of vulnerability is not merely a situation in which a rebel group faces the risk of attack by a stronger coethnic rival; rather, it entails a clear prospect of a drastic deterioration of the group’s power relative to a rival, which induces the declining group into now-or-never thinking. Under these circumstances (and in the absence of a major first-strike advantage) the rebel group experiencing a relative rise would not face a window of opportunity to attack; it would have instead an incentive to refrain from using force while its power grows.

A possible scenario in which a window of opportunity for a rebel group would correspond to a window of vulnerability for others is one in which a group has sufficient power to take on its weaker coethnic rivals sequentially and would then grow stronger by absorbing the resources of one rival at the time: the preponderant rebel group would then face a window of opportunity while the other groups would face a window of vulnerability, due to their prospect of

⁴² While, to my knowledge, there are no studies on these topics in the context of civil wars, the literature on buck passing and the collective action problem in international alliances is vast; see, in particular, Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, pp. 164-165; Barry R. Posen, *Sources of Military Doctrine* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1984), pp. 63-64; Walt, *Origins of Alliances*; Thomas J. Christensen and Jack L. Snyder, “Chain Gangs and Passed Bucks: Predicting Alliance Patterns in Multipolarity,” *International Organization* 44, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 137-68; Glenn H. Snyder, *Alliance Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997). On coalitional warfare in international politics, see Patricia A. Weitsman, “Alliance Cohesion and Coalition Warfare: The Central Powers and Triple Entente,” *Security Studies* 12, no. 3 (2003): 79-113.

further decline after each bilateral fight. However, a hegemonic bid would be more likely than a gamble for resurrection in this scenario, as the weaker groups would be reluctant to act until less risky paths out of their quandary have been ruled out. Moreover, the declining rebel groups would experience collective action problems in mounting a joint attack, while the would-be hegemon would have an incentive to act swiftly.

Fourth and final, why should we expect coethnicity to have a different effect on inter-rebel relations than other forms of co-constituency, such as those based on social class and ideology? My answer stems from both theoretical and empirical considerations. Empirically, the literature documenting systematic in-group bias in a variety of political outcomes – voting, patronage distribution, and stacking of the security apparatus – emphasizes ethnic rather than other types of cleavages.⁴³ Theoretically, three distinct, but complementary, evolutionary processes suggest that ethnic identity should have an especially powerful effect on individual behavior in ethnic civil wars: kin favoritism (or inclusive fitness), culture-gene coevolution, and group selection through war.

A predisposition for preferentially caring for one's kin (among humans and other animals) is adaptive as it helps spread one's genes and thus the predisposition itself.⁴⁴ Several theorists envision ethnic parochialism as an extension of kin favoritism through widening circles of attachment, from the nuclear and the extended family to the tribe and then the broader ethnic community.⁴⁵ As humans have spent almost all their time on earth as hunter-gatherers in

⁴³ See footnotes 23-26 above.

⁴⁴ On kin selection, see William D. Hamilton, "The Genetical Evolution of Social Behaviour," *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 7, no. 1 (1964): 1-16; Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976); Steven Pinker, *How the Mind Works* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997).

⁴⁵ Gary R. Johnson, Susan H. Ratwik, and Timothy J. Sawyer, "The Evocative Significance of Kin Terms in Patriotic Speech," and Wolfgang Tönnemann, "Group Identification and Political Socialisation," both in Vernon Reynolds, Vincent Falger, and Ian Vine, (eds), *The Sociobiology of Ethnocentrism: Evolutionary Dimensions of Xenophobia, Discrimination, Racism and Nationalism* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987); Azar Gat, *Nations: The Long History and Deep Roots of Political Ethnicity and Nationalism* (New York: Cambridge

extended family groups (clans), in turn part of larger endogamous groups characterized by egalitarian relations among members and a shared culture (tribes), “What proved adaptive then constitutes our biological inheritance.”⁴⁶ Though blood ties among members of the tribe were not nearly as close as those among family members, dense networks of intra-tribe marriages ensured that there would be much closer kinship among in-groups than with out-groups, and thus a corresponding in-group favoritism. The kin-favoritism basis for ethnic parochialism was significantly strengthened by a cultural twist. As in ancestral times culture was local and tightly correlated with kinship, tribe-specific culture worked as an efficient and reliable cue for recognizing relatively close kin.⁴⁷ Today’s ethnic groups can be thought of as quasi-tribes – larger groups of individuals sharing a sense of common descent and culture – capable of harnessing our evolved tribal psychology.

Culture also played an independent role in shaping our ethnically parochial minds. From early on in our evolutionary history, humans have been a uniquely cultural species, whose ability to learn from others shaped individuals’ life chances and in turn directed genetic evolution – a dynamic known as culture-gene coevolution.⁴⁸ As culture began to accumulate over generations, a key “selection pressure on genes resolved around improving our psychological abilities to acquire, store, process, and organize the array of fitness enhancing skills and practices that became increasingly available in the minds of the others in one’s group.”⁴⁹ Natural selection thus endowed us with a tendency to preferentially interact with those that share our tribal/ethnic

University Press, 2013). See also Bradley A. Thayer, *Darwin and International Relations: On the Evolutionary Origins of War and Ethnic Conflict* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2004), ch. 5.

⁴⁶ Gat, *Nations*, p. 29.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 31-33; Colin J. Irwin, “A Study in the Evolution of Ethnocentrism,” in Reynolds, Falger, and Vine, (eds), *The Sociobiology of Ethnocentrism*.

⁴⁸ Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success*.

⁴⁹ Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success*, p. 57.

markers regardless of genetic relatedness, as these individuals would be more likely to possess locally relevant, fitness enhancing know-how.

Through culture-gene coevolution, we also acquired a “norm psychology” that made us attentive to the existence of norms regulating the social world and reputations for norm-following as well as eager to detect and punish violators, in particular if coethnics.⁵⁰ Violent inter-tribe conflict – war – may have contributed to spread norms requiring pro-social behaviors within the group (e.g., extended reciprocity in sharing game) through a process of group-level *cultural* selection. Archeological and anthropological evidence suggests that war was very frequent and deadly among ancestral humans;⁵¹ tribes with social norms fostering internal cooperation would have fought more cohesively on the battlefield, and thus driven out, eliminated, or assimilated tribes with different norms.⁵² Moreover, through a process of group-level *gene* selection, war may have facilitated the spread of the trait of “parochial altruism” – a combination of hostility towards outsiders and willingness to help members of one’s tribe/ethnic group at a cost to oneself.⁵³ Ancestral tribes with a prevalence of parochial altruists would tend to be involved in war and to prevail in it, due to superior numbers of committed fighters. Parochial altruism would then proliferate, as battlefield success offered group members both a higher chance of survival and more opportunities for reproduction. Without war, willingness to sacrifice for group members may not have proven adaptive, as it would have had the effect of

⁵⁰ Ibid., chs. 4-5, 9 and 11.

⁵¹ Lawrence H. Keeley, *War before Civilization: The Myth of the Peaceful Savage* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Azar Gat, *War in Human Civilization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis, *A Cooperative Species: Human Reciprocity and Its Evolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁵² Henrich, *The Secret of Our Success*, ch. 10.

⁵³ Bowles and Gintis, *A Cooperative Species*, ch. 8.

selecting out individuals that possessed the trait faster than helping them through higher group survival and reproduction rates.⁵⁴

In sum, in the course of our long history as members of tribes – egalitarian groups knit together by blood and marriage ties as well as a common culture and frequently engaged in violent inter-group conflict – evolution has equipped us with a propensity to offer preferential treatment on the basis of shared ethnicity rather than other types of identity. There may well be instances in which other types of identities take on a quasi-ascriptive character and operate similarly to ethnicity.⁵⁵ However, based on the theory and evidence discussed, I posit that this should be the exception rather than the rule. In the following chapters, I assess empirically the effect of shared political ideology as an alternative explanation for inter-rebel war.

Importantly, the fact that our ethno-parochial psychology has deep evolutionary roots does not imply that existing ethnic groups are timeless monoliths. To the contrary, they are shaped by processes of social construction, thus both their boundaries and cultural content can change over time. Moreover, individuals’ ethnic repertoires often include multiple identities (one can be simultaneously, say, Sardinian, Italian, European, and white), whose relative salience may vary based on the situation. Nonetheless, it makes sense to speak of rebel organizations affiliated with specific ethnic groups when insurgents make claims on behalf of and recruit from those ethnic groups: large-scale violence across ethnic lines heightens the salience of the

⁵⁴ Similarly, without inter-group hostilities parochial individuals would have been at a disadvantage compared to “tolerant” group members, as the former would have forgone opportunities for beneficial exchange with outsiders.

⁵⁵ After all, the minimal group school points out that it is possible to induce in-group bias by dividing subjects in laboratory-created groups based on trivial criteria such as the tendency to under-estimate or over-estimate the number of dots on a screen. See Tajfel, *Human Groups and Social Categories*. In some civil wars (in particular, those in Russia and Spain in the first half of the 20th Century), ideological identities have proven both relatively easy to observe and hard to change, thus resembling ethnic identities. See Kalyvas, “Ethnic Defection in Civil Wars;” and Laia Balcells, *Rivalry and Revenge: The Politics of Violence during Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

corresponding identities and hardens ethnic boundaries, thus justifying an assumption of ethnic groups as exogenously given for my theoretical purposes.⁵⁶

Testing Window Theory with Case Studies

Convincingly testing window theory requires paying heed to fine-grained measures of belligerents' capabilities and battlefield developments as well as to rebel groups' mobilization bases. Thus this book puts particular emphasis on case studies of various civil wars, presented in the following three chapters. (Chapter 6 uses statistical analysis to test, on a broader range of civil wars, a specific implication of window theory – that coethnic rebel groups should be particularly prone to infighting.)

Windows of opportunity and windows of vulnerability shape rebel groups' behavior indirectly, through the perceptions and beliefs of their leaders. Thus, the ideal evidence for testing my argument is information on rebel leaders' calculus.⁵⁷ Window theory would be strongly supported by evidence that (1) rebel leaders launched an attack as a result of their perception of an opportunity to cheaply eliminate weaker coethnic rivals or of an urgent need to forestall a decline in power relative to a coethnic competitor despite the potential steep costs; and (2) they refrained from attacking when comparable opportunities and vulnerabilities were absent.

I gathered relevant data by conducting extensive interviews with individuals who had taken part

⁵⁶ On the tendency of violence to enhance the salience of ethnic categories and reinforce ethnic boundaries, see, among many others, James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Violence and the Social Construction of Ethnic Identity," *International Organization* 54, no. 4 (Autumn 2000): 845–77; Steven I. Wilkinson, *Votes and Violence: Electoral Competition and Ethnic Riots in India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Moses Shayo and Asaf Zussman, "Judicial Ingroup Bias in the Shadow of Terrorism," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 126 (2011): 1447–84; McDoom, "The Psychology of Threat in Intergroup Conflict."

⁵⁷ For similar reasoning about testing theories of inter-state war emphasizing the balance of power as explanatory variable, see William C. Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); and Copeland, *The Origins of Major War*.

in (or were directly informed about) rebel groups' decision-making.⁵⁸ I address concerns about subjects' (conscious or unconscious) biases and defective memories by triangulating information across interviewees that belonged to different organizations (and thus presumably had divergent incentive structures) and with accounts provided in rebel publications and the secondary literature.⁵⁹

Information from the secondary literature is useful not only for cross-checking purposes, but also for coding the existence of windows when data on rebel leaders' assessments of the inter-rebel balance of power and government threat are not available.⁶⁰ In the absence of

⁵⁸ On the method of interviewing elites in general, and the importance of triangulating evidence in particular, see Layna Mosley (ed.), *Interview Research in Political Science* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013); H. J. Davies, "Spies as Informants: Triangulation and Interpretation of Elite Interview Data in the Study of Intelligence and Security Services," *Politics* 21, no.1 (2001): 73-80. In research on specific policy decisions there is typically a narrow population of relevant interviewees and thus random sampling is not advisable. See Oisín Tansey, "Process Tracing and Elite Interviewing: A Case for Non-Probability Sampling," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 40, no. 4 (October 2007): 765-772; Julia F. Lynch "Aligning Sampling Strategies with Analytic Goals," in Mosley (ed.), *Interview Research in Political Science*. See the Online appendix for details on my "snowball" approach to finding appropriate interviewees and a complete list of my interview subjects.

⁵⁹ On motivated and cognitive biases, see Robert Jervis "Understanding Beliefs," *Political Psychology* 27, no. 5 (2006): 641-663. On hindsight bias, see Baruch Fischhoff, "Hindsight≠Foresight: The Effect of Outcome Knowledge on Judgment Under Uncertainty," *Journal of Experimental Psychology* 1, no. 3 (1975): 288-99; and Hartmut Blank, Jochen Musch and Rüdiger F. Pohl, "Hindsight Bias: On Being Wise After the Event," *Social Cognition* 25, no. 1, (2007): 1-9. Perhaps the most profound objection to using decision-makers' accounts as evidence comes from the experimental finding that much individual behavior is driven by unconscious feelings, preferences, and processes, and that actors' causal accounts of such behavior are no more accurate than those provided by outside observers. See Timothy D. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004). However, this finding has not gone unchallenged on theoretical and empirical grounds. See K. Anders Ericsson and Herbert A. Simon, "Verbal Reports as Data," *Psychological Review* 87, no. 3 (May 1980): 215-251; and Igor Gavanski and Curt Hoffman, "Awareness of Influences on One's Own Judgments: The Roles of Covariation Detection and Attention to the Judgment Process," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 52, no. 3 (1987): 453-463. Moreover, Wilson himself acknowledges that "Often the conscious system gets it right" and "that people correctly recognize that their behavior was caused by situational demands" when "situational constraints or incentives are obvious." Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves*, pp. 128 and 207.

⁶⁰ In the jargon of political science, my case study inferential strategy combines process tracing and within-case congruence procedure. Process tracing involves reconstructing the chain of events and decisions leading to the outcomes of interest to see if it is consistent with the theory's observable implications. Congruence procedure consists in examining whether the independent variable (windows of opportunity and vulnerability) and dependent variable (inter-rebel war) covary as the theory suggests, holding constant background features of the case. See Andrew Bennett and Jeffrey T. Checkel (eds.), *Process Tracing: From Metaphor to Analytic Tool* (New York:

information on rebel leaders' perceptions of the defining features of windows, I adopt the following coding criteria to identify them (independently of whether inter-rebel war occurred). I measure the inter-rebel balance of power along four dimensions: (1) rebel groups' number of fighters; (2) their access to weapons; (3) their organizational cohesion (measured as relative absence of splits and feuds among leaders and pervasive indiscipline among the rank and file); and (4) their tactical-operational skills (proxied by previous battlefield experience and reports of battlefield prowess).⁶¹ As extant theory does not provide clear indications about their relative importance of these aspects of rebel military power, I consider a rebel group stronger if it starkly outranks rivals in a net number of dimensions of power for which I have information.⁶² I code a sharp shift in rebel relative power – a key element of windows of vulnerability – if there is evidence of an unmistakable trend in flows of recruits or weapons or an impending international intervention in favor of specific rebel groups.

In cases in which rebellion takes the form of guerrilla warfare, I code a low-level of government threat if insurgents typically initiate contacts with security forces (by launching hit-and-run attacks), which implies that the rebels can choose when and where to fight and thus control the pace of their losses. In conventional warfare, a permissive threat environment typically would be characterized by static battle lines, which, based on previous interactions, the

Cambridge University Press, 2014); and George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*, pp. 181-204.

⁶¹ On organizational cohesion as an aspect of insurgent military effectiveness, see Paul D. Kenny, "Structural Integrity and Cohesion in Insurgent Organizations: Evidence from Protracted Conflicts in Ireland and Burma," *International Studies Review* 12, no. 4 (2010): 533-555;" and Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion*, pp. 2-3. On tactical-operational skills as drivers of battlefield outcomes (in both interstate wars and fights involving non-state actors), see Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

⁶² For example, if information is available on two dimensions of relative power, I code a group as stronger if starkly superior in at least one dimension and at least roughly equal in the other dimension.

insurgents know they can comfortably defend in the absence of a significant government escalation.

I code high opportunity costs of inter-rebel war if a rebel group has just made substantial territorial gains or conquered several towns (suggesting a clear favorable battlefield trend, which the insurgents should be wary to jeopardize) or is engaged in an offensive to take a major town or an area on an international border (suggesting the prospect of making strategic gains against the incumbent).

Finally, I consider a rebel group as below the threshold of extreme weakness, making its continued existence tolerable to the ethnic rebel hegemon, if it has less than three times as many fighters as the most powerful coethnic rebel group (i.e., the hegemon) and there are no immediate prospects of rapid growth, which would typically be the case if the group operates in areas under the control of the hegemon or in sparsely populated areas, and has no access to external support.⁶³ The same holds for relations between coethnic rebel groups other than the hegemon. For example, the second strongest rebel group would typically tolerate a group that is at least three times as small in the absence of evidence that it is about to rapidly grow. I adapt this coding criterion from Krause's approach to identifying hegemonic national liberation movements, requiring at least a 3-1 power advantage for the strongest group over each of the others. Krause notes that international relations scholars typically require that a state be 50-80% as strong as the most powerful state in the international system to be considered a great power, but he suggests that a much starker measure of dominance is appropriate in the context of

⁶³ I use a unidimensional measure of extreme weakness because, unlike for group membership, there are no obvious ways to establish that a group enjoys three times the level of tactical-operational skills or cohesion as another group. Moreover, often the secondary literature reports very little information, besides their tiny size, about marginal rebel organizations.

national liberation movements and civil wars, as the balance of power among non-state organizations is much more volatile than among states.⁶⁴

Selection issues

This book is about multi-party civil wars, which are a subset of all civil wars. Various processes determine the number of active rebel groups and thus whether a given armed conflict is selected into the universe of multi-party civil wars. What are the implications of this selection for my argument and analysis? Different rebel groups may be expressions of distinct social cleavages, ethnic or otherwise, and the corresponding preferences about distribution of power and wealth as well as public policy.⁶⁵ For example, in the late 1980s the Uganda People's Army (UPA) and the Lord Resistance Army (LRA) mobilized the politically discriminated Iteso and Acholi ethnic groups, respectively, while the Communist Party of Nepal-Maoist took up arms in 1996 after breaking away from the United People's Front, which had hitherto pursued class struggle with nonviolent means.⁶⁶

Perhaps more surprising to some readers, often civil wars feature multiple rebel organizations representing the same ethnic community. This is because, as Staniland has shown, would-be rebel leaders typically build their organizations atop preexisting social networks that

⁶⁴ Krause, *Rebel Power*, pp. 18 and 206. Analogously, Daniel Corstange operationalizes "ethnic monopsony" as a situation in which a political constituency defined along ethnic lines is dominated by one vote-buying party, rather than complete absence of any other party tapping into that pool of ethnic votes. See Corstange, *The Price of a Vote in the Middle East: Clientelism and Communal Politics in Lebanon and Yemen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁶⁵ David E. Cunningham, "Veto Players and Civil War Duration," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4 (October 2006): 875-892; Hanne Fjelde and Desirée Nilsson, "The Rise of Rebel Contenders: Barriers to Entry and Fragmentation in Civil Wars," *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no. 5 (2018): 551-565.

⁶⁶ Janet I. Lewis, "How Does Ethnic Rebellion Start?" *Comparative Political Studies* 50, no. 10 (2017): 1420-1450; Jennifer Larson and Janet I. Lewis, "Rumors, Kinship Networks, and Rebel Group Formation," *International Organization* 72, no. 4 (Fall 2018): 871-903; B.C. Upreti, "The Maoist Insurgency in Nepal: Nature, Growth and Impact," *South Asian Survey* 13, no. 1 (2006): 35-50.

are embedded in a broader ethnic group, such as political parties, religious organizations, kinship ties, and veteran associations.⁶⁷ For example, the Jammu and Kashmir Liberation Front (JKLF) and the Hezb-ul-Mujahideen (HuM) – both claiming to fight on behalf of the Muslim population of India-controlled Kashmir – were built on a network of members of the Islamic Students’ League and the religious organization/political party Jamaat-e-Islami, respectively, which had existed long before the onset of armed conflict. Moreover, existing rebel groups may fragment giving rise to coethnic splinters.⁶⁸ Multiple rebel groups splintered off the JKLF in the early 1990s amidst leadership disputes and a membership hemorrhage.

The presence of more than one rebel organizations affiliated with the same ethnic community could be the result of particularly strong underlying tensions, leading to organizational splintering or prompting the independent emergence of multiple rebel groups; these tensions, in turn, could be the driver of inter-rebel war among coethnic rebels, rather than shared ethnicity per se, potentially introducing a selection bias in my analysis.⁶⁹ In practice, two sets of considerations suggest this is unlikely to be a serious problem. First, the existence of multiple organizations affiliated with the same ethnic group is the rule, rather than the exception: the average number of organizations in self-determination movements in a given year characterized by a civil war in the period 1960-2005 was 4.8, while only in less than one out of

⁶⁷ Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014). On the determinants of fragmentation in self-determination movements, see Lee Seymour, Kristin Bakke, and Kathleen Cunningham, “E Pluribus Unum, Ex Uno Plures: Competition, Violence, and Fragmentation in Ethnopolitical Movements,” *Journal of Peace Research* 53, no. 1 (2016): 3–18.

⁶⁸ Kenny, “Structural Integrity and Cohesion in Insurgent Organizations;” Victor Asal, Mitchell Brown, and Angela Dalton, “Why Split? Organizational Splits among Ethnopolitical Organizations in the Middle East,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (2012): 94–117; Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*; Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion*; Henning Tamm, “Rebel Leaders, Internal Rivals, and External Resources: How State Sponsors Affect Insurgent Cohesion,” *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2016): 599-610; Michael Woldemariam, *Insurgent Fragmentation in the Horn of Africa: Rebellion and its Discontents* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

⁶⁹ Christopher H. Achen, *The Statistical Analysis of Quasi-Experiments* (Berkeley, CA: Berkeley University Press, 1986), pp. 73-81.

five self-determination movement-years in a civil war context there was just one active organization.⁷⁰ The high frequency of fragmented ethnic movements suggests that studying civil wars with multiple rebel groups from the same ethnic community does not automatically imply selecting cases with an exceptional propensity to inter-rebel war among coethnics. Second, in as much as it is plausible that intra-ethnic tensions are particularly high when coethnic rebel groups emerge from an organizational schism rather than as separate organizations from the outset (a divorce may produce more bitterness than an engagement that never takes place), I can assess the split-induced intra-ethnic tensions as an alternative explanation in both case studies and statistical analysis by taking into account rebel groups' origins.

Competing explanations

In the following chapters, I assess how well window theory can explain the observed pattern of inter-rebel war compared to competing explanations. Christia's minimum winning coalition represents a clear alternative to window theory, suggesting that rebel groups, spurred by the survival imperative under anarchy, would ally with one another when facing a stronger government.⁷¹ From this perspective, inter-rebel war should occur only when at least one rebel group has a clear margin of military superiority vis-à-vis the government. Krause's argument about the internal dynamics of national liberation movements with competing organizations suggests an alternative power-driven explanation for infighting: relatively weak rebel groups (which he dubs "challengers") should tend to be the initiators of inter-rebel war in the hope that

⁷⁰ Author's calculations based on data on self-determination movements worldwide from Seymour, Bakke, and Cunningham, "E Pluribus Unum."

⁷¹ Christia, *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars*.

the ensuing shake-up of the intra-movement balance of power would allow them to climb to a position of dominance.⁷²

Arguments positing the unconditional power of shared ethnic identity to draw people together in the context of large-scale violence suggest a potential explanation for the *absence* of inter-rebel war: regardless of what specific factors drive rebel organizations to fight one another, coethnicity should reduce the risk of inter-rebel war, as intra-ethnic solidarity and hostility toward out-groups should promote cooperation and suppress conflict among coethnics.⁷³

Other alternative explanations focus on individual rebel leaders' characteristics and rebel groups' features (in particular, their degree of internal cohesion and ideology). Leaders' worldview, temperament, personality, and mental health may affect the propensity of their organizations to engage in inter-rebel war.⁷⁴ For example, highly insecure or aggressive leaders may embark on more inter-rebel wars than, say, empathic ones. Decentralized or undisciplined organizations may be especially prone to inter-rebel war as skirmishes initiated by foot soldiers or low-level commanders might escalate to the point of engulfing entire organizations. Conversely, groups lacking tight centralized control may be less likely to experience inter-rebel war as their leaders' decision to attack another organization may not be carried out by their subordinates on the ground.

Certain ideological leanings may predispose rebel organizations to violence in their relations with any rebel group or only with groups embracing different ideologies, regardless of ethnic identities. For instance, Islamist rebel groups may be generally prone to inter-rebel

⁷² Krause, *Rebel Power*.

⁷³ This line of thinking can be inferred from the ethnic security dilemma literature. Posen, "The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict;" Kaufmann, "Possible and Impossible Solutions to Ethnic Conflict."

⁷⁴ For a review of arguments about the effects of leader-level attributes in international politics, see Jervis, "Do Leaders Matter and How Would We Know?"

aggression or only when dealing with secularly oriented organizations. It may also be that ideology conditions the effect of shared ethnic identity, prompting coethnic organizations to turn against one another only when they hold different ideological visions for their ethnic community.⁷⁵ Conversely, a shared ideology could have a comparable effect as shared ethnicity, pushing rebel groups with overlapping ideologically defined constituencies to compete with and fight one another. A further variant of the ideological argument centers on the distinction between rebel hardliners (“hawks”) and moderates (“doves”) as the source of disagreement that may escalate in inter-rebel war.⁷⁶

As discussed in the previous section, the path through which multiple coethnic organizations come into existence may also offer an alternative explanation for the inter-rebel war. In particular, it may be that organizations that emerge from the fragmentation of a preexisting organization are particularly prone to infighting, as a result of the tensions produced by the splintering process or those that brought it about in the first place.

A different set of alternative explanations focuses on other actors: third-party states and the incumbent. Both actors could try to induce inter-rebel violence or cooperation by deploying carrots and sticks at their disposal (e.g., promises of aid or recognition, threats of increased military pressure or reduced support).⁷⁷ The incumbent could also bring about inter-rebel war by

⁷⁵ Kocher and coauthors argue that ideological differences along the left-right spectrum determined in which of two opposing camps self-proclaimed nationalists in occupied France ended up – those cooperating with the Nazis and those violently resisting them. Matthew A. Kocher, Adria K. Lawrence, and Nuno P. Monteiro, “Nationalism, Collaboration, and Resistance: France under Nazi Occupation,” *International Security* 43, no. 2 (Fall 2018): 117–150.

⁷⁶ This distinction can be conceptualized in terms of the nature and scope of groups’ policy goals (e.g., autonomy rather than independence) or of their willingness to pay costs and run risks to achieve their full objectives rather than accepting less extensive concessions from the government. See Stephen Stedman, “Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes,” *International Security* 22, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 5-53; Andrew Kydd and Barbara Walter, “Sabotaging the Peace: The Politics of Extremist Violence,” *International Organization* 56 no. 2 (Spring 2002): 263-96; Ethan Bueno de Mesquita, “Conciliation, Counterterrorism, and Patterns of Terrorist Violence,” *International Organization* 59, no. 1 (January 2005): 145-76.

⁷⁷ For an argument about how third-party states can affect inter-rebel relations by attenuating commitment problems among rebels, see Navin A. Bapat and Kanisha D. Bond, “Alliances between Militant Groups,” *British Journal of*

creating the perception that some rebel groups are in cahoots with it, thus increasing distrust inside the rebel movement.⁷⁸ Alternatively, a rebel group may attack a rival in the hope of government concessions, as a reward or as an acknowledgment of the group's strength signaled by success in inter-rebel war.⁷⁹

Window theory emphasizes the cumulativeness of human resources coethnic rebel groups compete over, but natural resources may offer an alternative explanation for inter-rebel war.⁸⁰ Regardless of their ethnic or ideological backgrounds, rebel groups may clash for control of assets such as oil and diamond fields, drug cultivation, and contraband routes, as these resources, besides potentially enriching their leadership, may significantly affect the outcome of the anti-government struggle by enabling the purchase of more and better weapons as well as recruitment and retainment of large numbers of fighters.

It is important to note that while some alternative explanations are incompatible with window theory, others are not necessarily so. In particular, evidence that rebel groups followed minimum winning coalition logic, fighting one another only if one rebel organization was stronger than the government and without regard to ethnic identities, would falsify my argument. Similarly, if intra-ethnic solidarity appeared to suppress, rather than propel, inter-rebel

Political Science 42, no. 4 (October 2012): 793-824. Tamm shows that carefully targeted external support can affect the balance of power among factions *within* rebel organizations. The same dynamic should apply to the balance of power between rebel organizations. This form of external influence could affect the prospects of inter-rebel war by creating windows of opportunity and windows of vulnerability, but it does not amount to a distinct alternative explanation, as infighting would occur through the mechanisms envisioned by window theory. See Tamm, "Rebel Leaders, Internal Rivals, and External Resources."

⁷⁸ For an argument about how government strategies may create fissures within rebel movements, see Patrick Johnston, "Negotiated Settlements and Government Strategy in Civil War: Evidence from Darfur," *Civil Wars* 9, no. 4 (2007): 359-77. On "wedge strategies" in international politics, see Timothy W. Crawford, "Preventing Enemy Coalitions: How Wedge Strategies Shape Power Politics," *International Security* 35, no. 4 (Spring 2011): 155-189.

⁷⁹ Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour, "Shirts Today, Skins Tomorrow;" Cunningham, *Inside the Politics of Self-Determination*, pp. 130-131. These studies suggest that this dynamic should be more likely the higher number of coethnic organizations, so in the statistical analysis presented in chapter 6 I control for the number of coethnic rivals.

⁸⁰ Fjelde and Nilsson, "Rebels against Rebels."

competition, window theory would be falsified. By contrast, evidence that rebel groups, say, with certain ideological leanings, decentralized organizational structures, or aggressive leaders are distinctively prone to inter-rebel war would not necessarily falsify window theory. My argument would be falsified only if these extraneous factors were so powerful as to prevent inter-rebel war in the presence of windows or to bring it about in their absence.

The same holds for alternative arguments pointing to the influence of the incumbent or third-party states on relations among rebel groups: these actors' influence on inter-rebel relations is unproblematic for my argument, as long as it does not tend to overcome the effects of windows of opportunity and windows of vulnerability. In fact, window theory envisions specific ways in which third-party states and the incumbent can affect the risk of inter-rebel war – by influencing the balance of power among rebel groups and their threat environment and thus the presence of windows of opportunity and windows of vulnerability. The fact that groups may mistrust one another because of the possibility (or actual fact) that they are in contact with the government (and may at some point even cooperate with it to other groups' detriment) is also fully consistent with window theory, as the risk of defection is one of the reasons, postulated by my argument, why coethnic rebel groups may see one another as threatening. Window theory would be falsified only if fear of defection caused inter-rebel war regardless of the presence of windows of opportunity or windows of vulnerability.

Summary of the Argument

Inter-rebel wars erupt when an insurgent organization faces a window of opportunity or vulnerability, while inter-rebel peace tends to prevail in the absence of windows. Windows of opportunity require three conditions: (1) an imbalance of power among coethnic rebel groups, (2)

a limited government threat, and (3) low opportunity costs (i.e., the rebels are not poised to make major strategic gains against the government on the battlefield). In this situation, a relatively strong rebel group will be tempted to launch a hegemonic bid to get rid of a direct competitor.

Windows of vulnerability arise when a rebel group that is relatively weak and/or faces a high government threat experiences a sharp power decline relative to a coethnic rival, which cannot be forestalled by peaceful means. The group will then be tempted to gamble for resurrection – i.e., initiate a course of action likely to set it on a collision course with the rival or directly use force against it – in a desperate attempt to improve its difficult situation. When a rebel group faces windows of opportunity and vulnerability at the same time, we should expect a hybrid type of inter-rebel war, driven by both the allure of establishing hegemony on the cheap and the pressing need to prevent relative decline. Far from being a mere façade for material calculations, rebel groups' shared ethnic identity provides both defensive and expansionary motives for inter-rebel war, as it affects rebel groups' threat perception and ability to expand resources at their rivals' expense.