

Unity and Fragmentation in Syria's Rebellions

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explain the dramatic fragmentation of the rebel movement in Syria's ongoing civil war. With hundreds of operationally distinct rebel groups organized into multiple, shifting blocs, Syria represents an extreme outlier among all cases of rebel fragmentation studied by conflict scholars. As such, it is critical that our explanations of rebel fragmentation adequately explain this case. Yet more than six years after the 2011 uprising, no consensus explanation has emerged. Existing explanations are overly focused on external factors, such as state and private financing, and are inadequately attentive to the history of state-society interactions within Syria. This paper addresses this lacuna through a structured case-comparison of Syria's relatively unified 1976–1982 Islamist uprising and the fragmented 2011–present Arab Spring uprising. I argue that rebel movements built on broad, mass-mobilizing social networks are likely to remain unified, while those built on small, disconnected dissident networks are likely to fragment. In Syria, the al-Assad regime responded to the 1982 Homs uprising by dismantling the Muslim Brotherhood, infiltrating and splintering opposition groups, and sponsoring small salafist networks. In short, Syrian state policy atomized civil society in the decades prior to 2011, leading to an intensely fragmented civil war.

Introduction

This paper seeks to explain levels of rebel movement fragmentation in two matched Syrian cases: the unified 1976–1982 Islamic rebellion and the fragmented 2011 Arab Spring rebellion. My focus on the Arab Spring rebellion is not surprising: with hundreds of operationally distinct rebel groups organized into multiple, shifting blocs, Syria represents an outlier among cases of rebel fragmentation studied by conflict scholars. The lack of a hegemonic rebel group has hobbled insurgent success (Krause 2014, pp. 72–4), and the rebels’ fragmentation contributes to the civil war’s high levels of violence (Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymour 2012; Fjelde and Nilsson 2012), its protracted nature, and the small prospects of peace in the near future (Pearlman 2009). Waves of Syrian refugees, dislodged not only by the Assad regime’s brutality but also by internecine fighting between rebel factions, confront the contemporary world with its most serious humanitarian crisis, and refugees’ hopes of seeking asylum in Europe have impacted the political systems of western nations. As such, it is critical that our explanations of rebel fragmentation adequately explain this critical case.

Given the salience of this case, it is unsurprising that a great deal has been written about it, both within and outside of academia. Yet more than six years after the 2011 uprising, no consensus explanation for the Syrian rebels’ fragmentation has emerged. Meanwhile, few extant studies have explicitly compared the 2011 rebellion to its 1976–1982 forerunner.¹ This is unfortunate for two reasons. First, the two cases’ structure and dynamics are similar, which should not surprise us as both conflicts pit the same protagonists against each other: the Assad family’s dynastic regime and a rebel movement based in the Sunni majority, largely committed to the Islamicization of the state. Comparing such similar cases provides a unique opportunity to explain why certain outcomes varied. Second, the lack of attention to the 1976–1982 rebellion is unfortunate because its defeat had consequences that profoundly affected the course of the present civil war. Scholars cannot explain the current rebel movement’s fragmentation without understanding how the Assad regime sought to dismantle the earlier rebellion’s civilian constituencies.

Drawing on theories of rebel social bases and civilian constituencies introduced by Staniland (2014) and Mosinger (2017), I argue that rebel movements built on broad, mass-mobilizing social networks are likely to remain unified, while those built on small, disconnected dissident networks

¹I am aware of only Lund (2011) and Celso (2017).

are likely to fragment. The 1976–1982 Syrian rebel movement drew on the Muslim Brotherhood, a moderate broad social network, in order to construct an umbrella group encompassing almost all rebel actors. After the Assad regime crushed the movement at Homs in 1982, the regime sought to demobilize its Sunni opponents by dismantling the Muslim Brotherhood, infiltrating and splintering opposition groups, and sponsoring small Salafi networks. In short, Syrian state policy atomized civil society in the decades prior to 2011. When Sunnis rose in rebellion for a second time in 2011, they did so from scattered dissident networks, *not* from one single cross-cutting social network. This, in turn, has led to an intensely fragmented civil war.

The paper proceeds as follows. First, I present my research design, a most-similar systems case comparison, along with an overview of the evidence used in the case studies. Then I analyze my first case: the 1976–1982 Islamist rebellion. I score my main independent variable, civilian constituency composition, and trace its impact on rebel fragmentation over the course of the conflict.² In short, the rebel group that initiated the conflict, the Fighting Vanguard, was embedded in a broad civilian network, the Muslim Brotherhood, and as civilian mobilization rose, it “tipped” the Muslim Brotherhood into participation. All rebel actors subsequently negotiated an umbrella group led by the Muslim Brotherhood. After assessing competing hypotheses, I analyze the interlude between the two cases, in which the Assad regime dismantled the Muslim Brotherhood and similar networks. A second case study of the 2011 Arab Spring rebellion follows. Here I show the first-moving rebel group, the Free Syrian Army, failed to mobilize its potential civilian constituency. Meanwhile, Islamist activists, lacking a broad social network (such as the Muslim Brotherhood) through which to coordinate their activity, built dozens of rebel groups on top of small dissident networks. A fragmented civilian constituency thus helps explain the Arab Spring rebellion’s fragmented rebel movement.

Research Design

I test my theory, which holds that rebel movements built on constituencies of small dissident networks tend to fragment while those built on constituencies with broad social networks tend to

²For the first case, I do this in its own section, while in the second, I do so in my discussion of each of the major categories of rebel groups, as the fragmented nature of the rebel movement does not lend itself to a single unified narrative.

unify, against two common explanations drawn from the literature: state repression and external support. I do not rigorously analyze other explanations from the literature on rebel fragmentation, such as, *inter alia*, geography, state capacity, democratic regimes, ethnic fractionalization, concessions and peace negotiations, and ideological diversity (see especially Seymour, Bakke, and Cunningham (2015)). However, most such factors are either not applicable to the Syrian cases or are controlled for by the comparative case design.

Civilian constituency composition

Hypothesis 1a: Rebel constituencies composed predominantly of small dissident networks are more difficult to monopolize, making a fragmented rebellion more likely.

Hypothesis 1b: Rebel constituencies that contain broad social networks are more readily monopolized, making a unified rebellion more likely.

Rebel civilian constituencies, which rebels rely on for resources and recruitment (Parkinson 2013, p. 418; Sarbahi 2014), are often large and diverse enough to support multiple rebel organizations (Gates 2002; Mosinger 2017). From this I hypothesize that rebel movements fragment when a single rebel group fails to monopolize the loyalty of its potential civilian constituency. When rebel groups are built on small dissident networks or otherwise unable to invest in building durable ties to civilian networks, they may fail to incorporate potential civilian support—that is, they are unable to “corner the market” on anti-regime civilian loyalties. In this case, other violent entrepreneurs may draw on latent civilian support to mobilize competing rebel groups.

In contrast to small dissident networks, broad social networks may aid and even push distinct rebel organizations to join together under umbrella organizations, unifying the rebel movement as a whole. Broad social networks proffer cross-cutting ties that may traverse a rebel movement’s entire civilian constituency, and often draw upon more deeply-rooted sources of legitimacy than a rebel movement. Thus, when broad civilian networks mobilize in favor of the rebel movement, they can help rebels to overcome collective action problems by serving as a focal point, aiding inter-factional communication, and monitoring inter-factional commitments. Alternately, they may *impel* rebel groups to join forces by monopolizing moral authority and re-directing civilian loyalties. Where

rebel groups are small, they may be subsumed into a much larger uprising, whose center of organizational gravity shifts to the civilian networks. Where rebel groups are stronger, they still encounter a mix of incentives and resources to join forces when broad civilian networks mobilize. Put more expansively, broad social networks can help erode potential factional boundaries in rebellions—a role sometimes played by the Catholic Church (in the Vendée (Tilly 1964, p. 252), in El Salvador (Wood 2003, p. 92), in Nicaragua (Foroohar 1989), and elsewhere), or networks of Islamic scholars (such as the Taliban in Afghanistan (Matinuddin 1999), or mass civil society organizations (as in Guatemala or South Africa (Althoff 2014, pp. 84–88, 98–100; Seekings 2000; Walsh 2012)).

State repression

Hypothesis 2: State repression may provoke rebel leadership disputes and splits, making a fragmented rebel movement more likely.

There is something approaching consensus in the literature that under some conditions state repression causes rebel movement fragmentation. State repression has been held to cause rebel group splintering through several mechanisms, all of which involve stirring conflict between rebel subgroups or rebel elites (Christia 2012; McLaughlin and Pearlman 2012; Seymour, Bakke, and Cunningham 2015; Staniland 2014). Fotini Christia’s (2012) *Alliance Politics in Civil War* presents the most fully-fleshed out mechanism. Drawing on a rich set of empirics from the Afghan civil war, she argues that asymmetric battlefield losses across a rebel group’s constituent subgroups promote internal coups and splinter groups. In this telling, battlefield defeats cause local elites to worry about their subgroup’s survival, leading “to disputes over strategy that map on to preexisting subgroup cleavages” (p. 44). A greater number of authors cite decapitation strategies, in which state forces shatter the rebel leadership, as responsible for splinter groups. McLaughlin and Pearlman (2012, p. 44) hold that the state’s “repressive measures, such as jailing, exiling, or killing leaders,” serves as an external shock that allows constituent subgroups to renegotiate an ethnic or nationalist movement’s “institutional equilibrium” (that is, “the distribution of power and resources” within the movement)—but only if they considered the previous equilibrium unsatisfactory. Staniland (2014, p. 47) likewise argues that if the counterinsurgent state “is able to regularly arrest or kill key [rebel group] leaders, central processes will decay and perhaps collapse altogether” because

“trust and cooperation will break down,” with organizational splits to follow.

External support

Hypothesis 3: Fungible external support to a rebel movement may lead to opportunistic independent mobilizations and splits, while unbalanced external support may lead to leadership disputes and splits, making a fragmented rebel movement more likely.

External support, such as the provision of funding, arms, logistical support, cross-border sanctuaries, or other resources, may engender independent mobilizations and rebel splits or unity and umbrella groups by changing the structure of incentives within rebel groups, or within society as a whole (Lounsbury 2016; Mosinger 2017; Tamm 2016a; Weinstein 2007). Weinstein (2007) first argued that, like any other exploitable resource, external support may encourage opportunistic mobilization by dissident networks or splintering by rebel subgroups eager to gain a larger share of resource flows. It simultaneously lowers the start-up costs for splinter factions, which may be much smaller and weaker than the rebel group they leave. This is especially likely when external support comes in the form of fungible goods such as funding and arms which can easily be spread among multiple groups (Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed 2015). By contrast, non-fungible resources such as cross-border sanctuaries may encourage rebel unity by providing rebel groups with space to build deeper organization structures (Mosinger 2017).

Rebel splits or unity may also be contingent on the external sponsor’s policy. Intervening states may try to foster rebel unity as a precondition or a consequence of their support (Lounsbury 2016; Tamm 2016a). Tamm (2016a) argues that external sponsors may direct all their support to a single rebel leader, strengthening him and encouraging unity around that leader. However, sponsors may also fund an internal rival to the rebel leadership in order to punish group behavior at odds with the sponsoring state’s policy. By altering the balance of power between contending rebel leaders—particularly when producing an evenly matched balance—external sponsors can engineer rebel splits. Lounsbury (2016), by contrast, finds no statistical relationship between external intervention and group splintering, but does find evidence that pro-rebel intervention causes rebel groups to merge or form umbrella groups.

Comparative case methods

This paper follows a most-similar systems design (Gerring 2006, pp. 131–139), comparing the 1976–1982 Islamist rebellion with the 2011 Arab spring rebellion in Syria. Because both cases center on mass Sunni uprisings in the same country and against the same dynastic regime, they possess strong structural similarities. However, they vary on my central explanatory factor: the rebel groups in 1976–1982 were embedded in a broad civilian network (the Muslim Brotherhood), while the rebel groups from 2011-present were based in a large number of small, and usually local, dissident networks. Alternative explanatory variables (H2 and H3) do not exhibit significant variation. Further, many omitted variables are controlled for by comparing two cases in the same country, including geography, the type and extent of sectarian grievances, regime type and strength, and some characteristics of the international context.

Data for this paper were collected from primary and secondary sources, journalistic accounts, and situation reports by military and government practitioners. My study of the 1976–1982 Islamist rebellion relies heavily on Raphael Lefèvre’s (2013) and Alison Pargeter’s (2013) scholarship, as they had access to interviews with principals and documents that were otherwise unavailable. I also draw on a unique narrative account and analysis by Abu Musaab al-Souri (*Lessons Learned from the Jihad Ordeal in Syria*), a participant in the rebellion and later al-Qaeda’s chief military theorist, that was captured by US forces in Afghanistan in 2002. However, because of the Islamist rebellion’s total defeat and a scarcity of contemporary press coverage, much about the uprising remains unknown or uncertain. Even al-Souri writes that he can make few “[o]bservations on the jihad experiences of the field commanders and Army officers on the inside: We do not have sufficient data on the experiences of these brethren since few of them survived” (al-Souri n.d., p. 15). By contrast, a surfeit of journalistic accounts, scholarly analysis, and even survey evidence exists for the 2011 uprising, and I make liberal use of these. Less certain are data on pre-existing jihadi networks within Syria. My discussion of the 2011 case is limited to the first two years of the civil war, up to the emergence of ISIL in April-May of 2013, by which point the rebel movement had reached its highest level of observed fragmentation.

1976–1982 Islamist rebellion

This section considers the first case, the 1976–1982 Islamist rebellion in Syria. My theory successfully explains this case. The Islamist rebellion remained relatively unified throughout: at first only a small group, the Fighting Vanguard, fought the Assad regime, but as other aggrieved actors joined the rebellion, they were able to negotiate an umbrella group based on the broad social network in which they were all embedded, the Muslim Brotherhood.

Scoring the dependent variable: rebel unity

I score the Islamist rebel movement as unified, or comprised of one effective rebel group, during most of the period of active conflict between 1976 and 1982. From 1976 until October 1979, the movement consisted of only one small group, the Fighting Vanguard. In October 1979, the Muslim Brotherhood joined the rebel movement, and for a little over a year the rebel movement consisted of two groups (Lefèvre 2013, p. 115–19). However, in December 1980 the factions hastened to form an umbrella group with a shared command.

Building rebellion through a broad social network

This section traces rebel movement fragmentation from the onset of conflict between the Assad regime and the Islamist rebel movement to its final defeat at Hama in 1982. The 1976–1982 Islamist rebel movement could avail itself of a large potential civilian constituency: the Sunni majority, 72.7% of Syria’s population at the time.³ This vast constituency, like a large market, could in theory support multiple rebel organizations. Nonetheless, the Islamist rebel movement largely avoided fragmentation, despite mass violence and substantial external support from diverse actors. I argue that its civilian constituency’s composition explains the rebel movements unity: the movement began with a rebel group, the Fighting Vanguard, that was embedded in a broad social network, the Muslim Brotherhood. As anti-regime mobilization climbed, the Muslim Brotherhood was induced to join the rebellion, and gathered anti-regime actors into an umbrella group.

The Islamist movement, along with many sectors of Syrian civil society, grew and radicalized due to sectarian Sunni resentments against Alawi minority rule throughout the 1960s and 1970s.

³According to the 1943 census (Batatu 1999, p. 164). 2011 estimates are similar: 10 to 12% Alawi, 65% Sunni (Hokayem 2013, p. 17).

The Ba'ath Party, which took power in a 1963 coup, promoted a secular, socialist, pro-rural platform that alienated conservative Sunnis and middle class urban merchants (Lawson 1982). More transgressive by far, the Ba'ath Party promoted Alawis, prior to the coup a politically and economically marginalized community, over traditional elites. Anti-regime civilian mobilization began shortly after the Ba'athist coup in 1963, periodically taking the form of sectarian communal street riots that left both Sunnis and Alawis dead (Lia 2016).

The Fighting Vanguard

In the mid-1960s, a charismatic street protest leader and Muslim Brother, Marwan Hadid, founded the *al-Taliyah al-Muqatila*, or Fighting Vanguard (Lia 2016, p. 545). The Fighting Vanguard was an Islamic revolutionary group, intending to overthrow the Ba'ath regime and replace it with an Islamic one. It was “situated on the fringes of the Ikhwan [Muslim Brotherhood]” and recruited fighters directly from “mosques, universities and even high schools” (Lefèvre 2013, p. 106)—that is, the main social institutions of the Muslim Brotherhood’s broader Sunni constituency. Although some Brotherhood branches expelled known Fighting Vanguard members, their membership mostly overlapped or were connected by kinship and “personal friendships” (Lefèvre 2013, pp. 82, 123–24). These personal friendships apparently extended to the leaders of their respective organizations, Hadid and his former high school teacher (and Muslim Brotherhood leader after 1975), Adnan Saadeddine (Pargeter 2013). For his part, Saadeddine insisted that Hadid “stayed in the Ikhwan and he didn’t leave it. We never kicked him out. But he had a wing that behaved the way it saw fit—it had nothing to do with the leadership” (Pargeter 2013). Hadid’s organization also may have benefited from Brotherhood funding. The Fighting Vanguard’s goal was not to compete with the Muslim Brotherhood, but rather, as indicated by its name, to serve as the Muslim Brotherhood’s revolutionary vanguard.⁴ And crucially for the theory advanced in this paper (H1b), the Fighting Vanguard was not disconnected from, but was rather deeply enmeshed within the Muslim Brotherhood’s broader social network.

⁴One former member told Lefevre (2013, p. 102), “Sheikh Marwan was an enthusiastic member of the Ikhwan but he was not very respectful of the organization’s rules; he wanted the Brotherhood to think less and act more,” he added. “In other words, he ambitioned to revolutionize our organization.”

The Muslim Brotherhood: a broad social network converted to rebel organization

As the Fighting Vanguard began its attacks against the regime, the *Jam'iyat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*, or the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, had not yet mobilized as part of the rebel movement. Rather, it was a broad social network, and a relatively moderate one. Yet the organization would be transformed, first by rising anti-regime mobilization and then by indiscriminate regime violence, into a rebel group.

Itzchak Weismann writes that, “[t]he Muslim Brothers Society is indisputably the foremost socioreligious association in the Arab world” (Weismann 2010, p. 1). The Syrian chapter, founded in 1946 and modeled after its Egyptian forebear, merged several geographically diffuse *jam'iyat* (or Islamic societies) into a national organization. The *jam'iyat* had been “composed mostly of intellectuals and students and focused their activities primarily on cultural, social and sporting events” (Pargeter 2013) and the Muslim Brotherhood expanded upon this core constituency while branching out into political activism and public goods provision. The Brotherhood promoted a greater emphasis on Islam in Syria, yet its political stance was moderate for most of its existence, and its leaders’ rhetoric (particularly that of leader Issam al-Attar) embraced democracy, constitutionalism, and respect for religious minorities. The Syrian chapter’s membership was not nearly as large as the mass-mobilizing Egyptian chapter, which could claim millions of members, but it still sat squarely at the center of Islamic life. “[A] young ideologue of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Said Hawwa. . . set up a nationwide network of *ulama* dedicated to enhancing coordination amongst all Islamic actors,” and Brotherhood president al-Attam, as the mosque preacher at the University of Damascus’s Faculty of Islamic Law, delivered “Friday sermons [that] were listened to by tens of thousands of pious Syrians” (Lefèvre 2013, pp. 48, 92). While the Brotherhood was an occasional political actor during periods of relatively open party competition, its main roles were in social and economic public goods provision:

The Syrian Brotherhood set up its own Workmen’s Committees tasked with creating cooperative companies in which all workers participate and share profits. In addition, the Ikhwan was involved in offering loans to help small craftsmen open shops. It also assisted poor working men by providing them with medical care and offering illiterate people

a free education. In the Damascus trade unions, the Muslim Brotherhood's influence was growing... By the early 1950s, the social and economic activities of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood covered so much of Syrian life that, according to one analyst, the organization had become "a state within a state" (Lefèvre 2013, p. 94).

In short, the Muslim Brotherhood was a broad social network that could draw on a vast array of ties linking distinct social classes and groups within Syria's Sunni majority: "what made the scale of the Hama revolt possible was the strong local alliance struck between Akram al-Hawrani's powerful peasant movement, the urban merchants, the Ikhwan and the rural notables" (Lefèvre 2013, p. 59). It could also draw on a high level of perceived legitimacy and a broadly popular ideological stance, a "simple message, which held that Islam was a comprehensive ideology that permeated every aspect of life, and [...] its members were viewed as the guardians of tradition in a changing world" (Pargeter 2013).

In the mid-1970s, anti-regime mobilization increased markedly. In 1975, a radical Hama-based faction of the Muslim Brotherhood, led by Adnan Saadeddine, gained control of the organization and membership surged—"its membership in Aleppo did not exceed 800 in 1975 but had by 1978 swollen to an estimated maximum of 5,000 to 7,000" (Batatu 1999, 273)—and by some estimates its national membership reached as many as 30,000 (Lund 2011, p. 10). Meanwhile, the Fighting Vanguard also saw a surge of new recruits during this period of sharply mounting anti-regime mobilization (Lefèvre 2013, 106).

Tipping a broad social network

Even as it cycled through different leaders, during the 1970s the Fighting Vanguard carried out an assassination campaign against prominent representatives of the Ba'ath regime, hoping "to trigger government retaliation that would ultimately convince the Brotherhood's leadership of the inevitability of armed struggle" (Lefèvre 2013, p. 102). The campaign reached its violent climax in June 1979 with the stunning assault on the Syrian Army's Artillery School in Aleppo. The Ba'ath regime's response was swift and uncompromising. Lumping the Muslim Brotherhood together with its radical offshoot, the regime unleashed a withering wave of repression.⁵ Just as the Fighting

⁵ "The Syrian government saw this as an opportunity to demolish the Muslim Brotherhood, and forever," concluded an anonymous al-Qaeda document captured in Osama Bin Ladin's home, quoted in Lefevre (2013, p. 111).

Vanguard had intended, the Muslim Brotherhood was pushed into fighting; in October the Muslim Brotherhood leaders decided to declare a “jihad” and form a military wing (Lefèvre 2013, pp. 115–19). In April 1980, the regime had to subdue Aleppo by force “when for several weeks nearly two-thirds of the city broke loose from the regime’s control” (Batatu 1999, p. 269), and in June militants (likely with the Fighting Vanguard) made an attempt on Hafez al-Assad’s life (Lund 2011, p. 10). The cycle of escalatory retaliation continued with the government’s promulgation of 1980’s Law 49, declaring membership in the Muslim Brotherhood a crime punishable by death, forcing the Muslim Brotherhood’s and the Fighting Vanguard’s leadership into a Jordanian exile.

Negotiating rebel unity

For a little over a year, the Islamist rebel movement effectively had two rebel groups, the Fighting Vanguard and the Muslim Brotherhood, though cooperation on the ground between the factions began immediately. In December 1980, in response to growing regime violence, the Islamist movement formed a Joint Command representing the Fighting Vanguard and two factions of the Muslim Brotherhood.⁶ The Islamist Joint Command contained four members from each group, for a total of twelve (Lefèvre 2013, p. 118).

Apparently, other dissident networks joined the rebellion at this point (although the available sources do not reveal much about their identity): Abu Musaab al-Souri complained that the Islamist “arena was saturated with organizations with intermingled principles, loyalties and affiliations” (al-Souri n.d., p. 5). However, these organizations fought under the Joint Command. Even the critical al-Souri allows that “the majority of the Moslem and mujahideen youth converged on the ‘Moslem Brotherhood organization’” and that disparate rebel actors including “the field commanders of Hamah, Damascus and the army officers of the failed coup” gave the Joint Command their “pledge of allegiance” (al-Souri n.d., pp. 12, 31). Given the intensifying confrontation,

the Syrian Ikhwani united even further. After years of acrimony, the various factions of the movement came together in a show of unity not seen since the 1960s... As Obeida Nahas explained, ‘At that time all the Ikhwani were in the same shoes and they joined forces with the Fighting Vanguard.’ He also asserted that at the height of the violence,

⁶The more moderate Damascus branch had distanced itself from the radical “northern alliance” branches of the Brotherhood in the internal struggles alluded to earlier.

‘It came to a point where one couldn’t draw a line between the two factions’ (Pargeter 2013).

The Islamist organizations seized control of Hama, long a bastion of conservative Islamist sentiment in February 1982. Militarily, they were no match for the regime’s strength, particularly given the Ba’ath Party’s strategy of urban destruction. Entire sections of Hama were shelled into rubble, with an estimated loss of life between 10,000 to 40,000, many if not most civilians (Pargeter 2013). The rebel movement collapsed, leaving the Muslim Brotherhood’s leadership exiled.

This paper contends that rebelling broad social networks will incentivize or impose rebel movement unity. The Muslim Brotherhood did so though its dual role as both a rebel group and a broad social network. Given the Brotherhood’s involvement in all aspects of Sunni life from education to trade unions (Lefèvre 2013, p. 94), it is not surprising that a wide array of subordinate organizations gave it their “pledge of allegiance” (al-Souri n.d., p. 12). As did the Fighting Vanguard, whose radical constituency was a subset of the Muslim Brotherhood’s vast Sunni constituency. The successful rebel group seeks to set up a “counter-state” (Wickham-Crowley 1991, p. 35); the Muslim Brotherhood was already a “state within a state” (Lefèvre 2013, p. 94). Even the more radical actors conceived themselves as acting for and through its networks, easing the Brotherhood’s path to unifying the rebellion.

Alternate explanations

Other explanations do not adequately explain levels of rebel movement fragmentation over the course of the Islamist insurgency and uprising. State repression (H2) is most successful. The rebel movement did not fragment when it suffered leadership decapitations (Staniland 2014), though they may have played a role in stoking leadership disputes. The Fighting Vanguard did not split following the capture of founder Marwan Hadid in June 1975,⁷ but Adnan Uqlah did take power in an internal coup following Hadid’s successor Abd-us-Sattar az-Za’im’s death in mid-1979. The data are not detailed enough to know whether battlefield losses were unevenly distributed, but Hanna Batutu reports that the state employed high levels of violence throughout the conflict, including “the sealing off of entire neighborhoods, house-to-house searches, mass arrests, fighting

⁷Hadid died in prison under disputed circumstances one year later (Batatu 1999, p. 265).

from building to building in narrow alleys, killing prisoners in their cells, shooting noncombatants dragged into the streets from their homes, and at Hamah in 1982 indiscriminate bombardments by artillery and helicopter gunships and the leveling-to the ground of whole sections of the northern and eastern parts of the city” (Batatu 1999, p. 273). Violent repression pushed the factions closer together rather than dividing them further, and as we shall see, an identical regime strategy will have no such effect on the 2011 rebel movement.

External support (H3) more clearly fails to explain levels of rebel fragmentation. The Muslim Brotherhood drew on its longstanding international networks and, like many rebel groups seeking domestic and international legitimacy, engaged in extensive diplomacy (Huang 2016). As a result, the rebel movement was awash in fungible resources—they had at least 15,000 machine guns and “hundreds of millions of dollars at their disposal, they had access to regional and international media outlets, many Moslem and non Moslem countries provided political and military aid” (al-Souri n.d., p. 12)⁸—gleaned from a spectrum of neighboring states—Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan—harboring regimes committed to wildly divergent ideologies and interests within Syria (Lefèvre 2013, p. 129). This predicts a highly-fragmented movement; nonetheless, the Islamist rebels worked towards unity during this influx of external resources. An alternative perspective might argue that the rebels unified as the Muslim Brotherhood’s successful diplomacy allowed it to capture the bulk of the external resource and thereby dominate the rebel movement (Tamm 2016a), yet in fact, during this period the Muslim Brotherhood’s fighting strength vis-a-vis the Fighting Vanguard slipped so much during this period that the Fighting Vanguard came to be called the “Internal Muslim Brotherhood” (Lefèvre 2013, p. 119).

In sum, the most commonly cited alternative explanations for rebel fragmentation cannot explain this case. The 1976–1982 Islamist rebellion achieved a high degree of unity *in spite of* mounting state repression and diverse, fungible flows of external resources. The rebel movement united because each rebel faction—the Fighting Vanguard, and the Hama and Damascus wings of the Muslim Brotherhood—was enmeshed within the same broad civilian network.

⁸“Hundreds of millions of dollars” must be an exaggeration either on al-Souri’s part or his translator’s.

Interlude: dismantling broad social networks

The 1976–1982 Islamist rebellion and the 2011-present rebellion exhibit substantial similarities in many of the factors hypothesized to cause rebel fragmentation and unity. Nonetheless, they express nearly opposite scores on the dependent variable: the earlier movement was largely unified, and the latter movement profoundly fragmented. I explain much of this variation by showing how the network structure of Syrian civil society changed between the two rebellions (H1). Crucially, prior to the 2011 rebel movement, the Assad regime dismantled the Muslim Brotherhood and other broad social networks in Syrian civil society. Thus, as anti-regime mobilization accelerated, large numbers of dissident networks mobilized as rebel groups. However, as broad social networks had been suppressed, they were unavailable to play the role they did in 1980 in unifying the rebel movement.

To understand how the regime dismantled broad social networks, we must analyze how the Hama uprising shocked the regime and led to dramatic shifts in its strategies for social control during the thirty-year interlude between the two conflicts. I emphasize four political and social regime policies during the interlude, and their consequences: First, due to sustained regime repression, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood went “from being the most important Ikhwani branch after the Egyptians to little more than the shell of a leadership in exile.” (Pargeter 2013). Second, the regime jealously prevented Islamists from establishing a successor broad social network via a mix of repression and co-optation of prominent Sunni clerics. Third, the regime simultaneously cultivated and isolated small jihadist networks dedicated to transiting foreign fighters through Syria to battlefields in Iraq. Finally, unable to completely eliminate its domestic opposition the regime pursued a strategy of infiltrating, isolating, and fragmenting its potential opponents in civil society. The sum of these four strategies was not to eliminate opposition but to atomize it: the post-Hama Ba’athist strategy for governing Syria hinged on the suppression of broad social networks (understood by the regime as the source of effective collective action) and sponsoring a proliferation of small potentially dissident networks.

After the revolt was definitively crushed at Hama, the regime attempted to dismantle the Muslim Brotherhood’s organization root and branch. Most significantly, regime repression cost the Muslim Brotherhood the means to maintain organic links to its many former constituencies inside Syria. As

Emile Hokayem (2013, p. 94) summarizes, “Its leadership operated in exile and membership in the organisation was punishable by death. It could not run for elections, did not have representatives in professional bodies, could not be involved in charity work or overtly control mosques.” Within a few years, an organization that had commanded the allegiance or at least sympathies of tens of thousands of Syrians all but ceased to exist inside Syria. Within a decade, the Assad regime was assured enough to begin releasing some of its thousands of former Muslim Brotherhood prisoners, in waves, always under the watchful eyes of the *mukhabarat* secret police, and typically under the condition that, as with former MB leader Abu Guddha, “[they] busy [themselves] with matters of education and religion and avoid all political activity” (Zisser 2005, p. 52). By the early 2000s, the movement had been rendered “irrelevant,” and when its leaders in exile “published the draft of the ‘Covenant of National Honor for Political Activity’ (Mithaq Sharaf Watani Lil-‘Amal al-Siyasi),” it mainly served “probably to remind everyone of [the Muslim Brotherhood’s] existence” (Zisser 2005, p. 56).

The Assad regime worked deliberately to prevent a successor organization to consolidate in the Muslim Brotherhood’s place, primarily by coopting Sunni networks and promoting an official regime Sunnism. The regime acquired and fostered “relationships with Sunni leaders who would be willing to assume positions of public religious authority but simultaneously to be distinctly non-political and acquiescent to government expectations regarding the private practice of moderate Sunni Islam” (Lister 2016b, p. 27; see also Landis and Pace 2007, p. 51; Zisser 2005). In the 1990s the regime allowed and sponsored the proliferation of Islamic schools run by compliant scholars, “some of them even named after the president, (*Madaris al-Asad li-T‘alim al-Qur’an*)” (Zisser 2005, p. 49). It also promoted loyalists into the same positions once occupied by Muslim Brotherhood leaders. The most prominent example was Sheikh Muhammad Sa‘id Ramadan al-Buti, who “made his first gestures of support for the regime during the 1979-82 insurgency: whereas most of his senior colleagues were either silent or supportive of the opposition, he vocally condemned the attacks carried out by Islamic militants... In exchange for helping the regime to defeat its Islamic opponents, al-Buti was endowed with informal leadership over Syrian Islam” (Pierret 2013).⁹ Al-Buti enjoyed regime sponsorship, including a popular program on Syrian television, and in 2008,

⁹At this point, al-Buti was the dean of the faculty of Sharia at the University of Damascus, the same position held by former Muslim Brotherhood leader Issam al-Attar two decades earlier.

he became the preacher at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, the same position held by former Muslim Brotherhood leader Issam al-Attar in the 1960s. After the 2011 uprising, “his support for the regime gradually became unconditional and, above all, unlimited. A few days before his assassination [by unknown agents in 2013]... al-Buti was still encouraging the faithful to wage jihad in the ranks of the ‘heroic’ Syrian Arab Army, which he once compared to the Companions of the Prophet, in order to defeat the ‘global conspiracy’ against Syria” (Pierret 2013). This strategy of co-opting the mainstream Syrian *ulama* could not, perhaps, mobilize Islamic sentiment in favor of the regime; its goal was rather to demobilize organized opposition from Islamic sectors. In sum, the regime “open[ed] up to Islamists in the hope of drawing them in and under [its] control” (Lister 2016b, p. 31), to shift the ideological composition of Syrian Islamism towards quietism, to control influential nodes within mainstream Islamic networks (and in the process implicate them in the regime’s repression), and to isolate pockets of anti-regime sentiment from one another.

Despite the regime’s best efforts, it proved impossible to eliminate all zero- and low-threshold activists: “[t]he absence of the MB created an opening for loosely organised but better funded Salafi groups” (Hokayem 2013, p. 94). The broad Islamic revival chronicled by Zisser (2005) and Alhaj (2010) was accompanied by “[j]ihadist militancy... growing roots in the southern city of Deraa and in the northern cities of Idlib and Aleppo” (Lister 2016b, p. 32). In response, the regime paralleled its strategy of simultaneously co-opting and fragmenting moderate Sunni networks with an analogous strategy for Syrian jihadi elements. Specifically, they sought to buy off domestic extremists by re-directing and sponsoring Islamic extremism abroad. Syrian intelligence sponsored, funded, and trained networks dedicated to exporting Islamist fighters to combat American soldiers in Iraq (and later to Lebanon):

The explosive start to the conflict in Iraq had therefore led to a rapid establishment of foreign-fighter recruitment and facilitation networks in Syria... [t]he dominant actor in maintaining the durability of these foreign fighter networks—Syria’s military intelligence, led by Assad’s brother-in-law Assef Shawkat—had an express interest in ensuring that these hundreds and thousands of jihadists, many of whom definitively sought martyrdom, did not remain on Syrian territory for long (Lister 2016b, 35–36).

This approach served a number of policy goals, both foreign and domestic.¹⁰ First, it allowed the Syrian government to indirectly strike at American invaders and thereby claim its "resistance credentials" as defender of Arab and Muslim lands—a pillar of Ba'athism's international and domestic legitimization Leenders and Heydemann 2012, p. 141. Second, by supporting Islamist extremists focused externally, the regime created incentives for the extremists to avoid waging jihad in Syria, lest they lose a valuable state sponsor. Third, it provided an escape valve of sorts for homegrown Syrian jihadists, who could be channeled outside of Syria. Finally, it allowed the regime to infiltrate the very jihadi networks they were supporting, allowing them to gather information on them, to keep them small and isolated from one another, and allowing intelligence to dismantle any network that grew strong enough to pose a threat to regime stability. As General Intelligence director Ali Mamlouk claimed during this period, "In principle, we don't attack or kill [jihadists] immediately. Instead, we embed ourselves in them and only at the opportune moment do we move" (quoted in Lister (2016b, p. 33)).

However, this was a dangerous policy with clear risks. During the early 2000s, the regime could manage "the spread of isolated militant cells" that "command[ed] very little popular support in a Syrian street still wary of the violent clashes between Islamists and the regime in the early 1980s" (Landis and Pace 2007, p. 52). However, by tolerating the proliferation of low-threshold networks organized around the production of political violence and with strong links to international pools of foreign fighters, regime policy itself created a large number of potential dissident networks. In doing so, the regime sowed the seeds of the fragmented, foreign fighter-dominated Islamist component of the 2011-present Syrian insurgency. Domestic terrorist attacks related to these networks date back to 2004, when an "unprecedented," "almost unheard-of" terrorist attack on a United Nations building shattered Syria's "tightly-policed calm" (BBC News 2004; Penketh 2004); the attack was carried out by militants returning from fighting in Iraq (Zisser 2005). As a result of incidents such as these and the al-Assad regime's desire to normalize its relations with Western powers,

most of the Levantine jihadi networks crisscrossing Syria were shut down after around 2008. As part of an under-the-table understanding with the USA, Iraq, and other governments, jihadi activists were run out of the country, jailed, or killed, and border

¹⁰See Kapur and Ganguly 2012 and Tamm (2016b) for comparable domestic and international logics of supporting foreign rebels.

controls were tightened. These years also saw a hardening of the regime's attitude to Islamism in general, and increased pressure on the indigenous Syrian salafi groups. Many former Iraq fighters were rounded up and jailed in the Seidnaia prison outside Damascus (Lund 2013, p. 8).

While these networks may have been shut down, they could not be fully extinguished, and they played a critical role in mobilizing both domestic and foreign Islamist groups as the 2011 uprising deepened into civil war.

Finally, the Assad regime took a sledgehammer approach to civil society and the secular opposition, employing fragmentation as a technology of control. The regime demobilized opposition by enforcing "a politics of public dissimulation in which citizens act *as if* they revere their leader," which, *inter alia*, "occasions the enforcement of obedience; it induces complicity by creating practices in which citizens are themselves 'accomplices,' upholding the norms constitutive of Asad's domination; *it isolates Syrians from one another* [emphasis mine]; and it clutters public space with monotonous slogans and empty gestures" (Wedeen 1999, p. 6). By enforcing a widespread, if incomplete, compliance with claims that were *prima facie* literally unbelievable ("Asad is the country's 'premier pharmacist,'" (Wedeen 1999, p. 1)), the public cult rendered organized anti-regime collective action more difficult to achieve and sustain.

However, the Assad regime did not rely solely on semiotic domination. Another favored technique was to infiltrate opposition groups with the specific intention of fomenting fragmentation. As Landis and Pace (2007, pp. 49–50) describe it,

Civil society in Syria is a wasteland. Even at the height of Bashar's reformist fervor, the regime refused to license dissident groups, choosing instead to tolerate their illegal operation until political convenience dictated otherwise... Contrary to the popular presumption, Syria does not suffer from a shortage of oppositional political parties. In fact, the problem is that there is a glut of these parties, despite the fact that all of them are technically illegal. Strawman parties, consisting of two or three political entrepreneurs, are being formed with such frequency that people have stopped keeping track. The combination of security pressures and lack of internal democracy have rendered the parties brittle and prone to splintering. *State agents easily infiltrate parties, foment internal*

discord, and form breakaway parties with disaffected members [emphasis mine].¹¹

The four components of the Assad regime’s policy discussed above are clearly iterations of a unified underlying strategy: lacking the strength to eliminate opposition through wholesale domination of civil society, the Syrian regime settled on a divide-and-rule strategy, aimed at breaking opposition actors down to the smallest possible unit—that is, atomizing and isolating the opposition. It is also worth reemphasizing here that the regime adopted these policies as a direct response to the Hama uprising, in order to render the collective action achieved by the Fighting Vanguard and the Muslim Brotherhood impossible to reproduce in the future. To that end it succeeded only partially.

2011 Arab Spring rebellion

The 2011 Arab Spring bears strong structural similarities to the 1976–1982 Islamist rebellion. Both rebellions occurred due to intense sectarian grievances (with much the same content) and extensive civilian mobilization, both rebellions suffered mass, indiscriminate state repression (H2), received significant, fungible external support (H3), and were fought by rebels with diverse ideologies ranging from democratic to salafist. At a more basic level, both rebellions were in the same country, had largely the same communal composition (Sunni Arabs), and fought the same regime (the Assad dynasty). Nonetheless, they exhibit nearly opposite scores on the dependent variable: the various actors in the 1976–1982 rebellion managed to unify under the umbrella of the Muslim Brotherhood, while those of 2011 remain profoundly fragmented. To understand why, I emphasize variation in the network structure of each rebellion’s civilian constituency. The 2011 rebel movement was initiated by a rebel group based in disparate local networks, the Free Syrian Army, structurally dissimilar to the internally unified Fighting Vanguard (H1). Unlike its predecessor, the FSA was unable to expand from its initial constituency as civilian mobilization rose. Second, thirty years of regime policy had dismantled broad social networks like the Muslim Brotherhood, meaning that rebel groups could not draw on them to build umbrella groups.

¹¹Aron Lund (2012, p. 22) agrees with this assessment, writing that “the opposition landscape is so fragmented and disconnected, that there is little clarity even among activists themselves about what groups and coalitions are truly effective or enjoy popular support. All organized groups are small, and a prominent individual dissident’s word will often carry greater weight than that of a political party with hundreds of members.” Lund also wrote a (pre-uprising) 2010 book on the Syrian opposition, and so is unlikely to be projecting backwards.

Scoring the dependent variable: rebel fragmentation

The Syrian Arab Spring rebellion was *highly fragmented* nearly from its onset. A conservative counting from 2013 included seven major groups and umbrellas:¹² the FSA, the Jabhat al-Nusra, the Syrian Islamic Liberation Front, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, the Syrian Islamic Front, the Ahfad al-Rasoul Brigades, and the Asala wa al-Tanmiya Front. Meanwhile, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)'s "index of armed groups recorded as many as 1,000 operating in Syria by late 2012, of which only around half proclaimed their adherence to the FSA" (Hokayem 2013, p. 84). In the dataset constructed by Mosinger (2017), Syria's rebel movement in 2013 was the most fragmented in the sample by a significant margin, surpassing the 1980s Afghani mujehdeen rebels for this dubious distinction. The limited evidence available suggests that the Syrian rebel movement may be the most fragmented in history.

Building rebellion through deserters and dissident networks

This section traces the fragmentation of the 2011-present Arab Spring rebellion. The rebellion's fragmentation in mid-2012 is somewhat puzzling, as the first-moving rebel group, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), rapidly consolidated its advantages: a large size, high military capacity, and international recognition and support. However, it was formed not on top of broad, cross-cutting social networks, but makeshift local networks of Syrian Army deserters. Due to both poor training in asymmetric warfare and poor policy, the FSA proved unable to expand rapidly beyond this initial constituency, leaving most civilian dissidents seeking to take up arms against the regime outside their ambit. Meanwhile, as anti-regime civilian mobilization spread in a revolutionary cascade, second-moving Islamist rebel groups mobilized. These groups seized on the opportunity afforded by the FSA's failure to monopolize its potential civilian constituency: they recruited civilians and grew rapidly. However, with the Muslim Brotherhood dismantled, the Islamist groups formed within small, disconnected dissident networks and managed only limited steps toward cooperation. As a result, the rebel movement quickly fragmented and remained so over time.

The ongoing civil war in Syria began with large-scale protests molded on similar protests events in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and other Arab nations. The Syrian regime faced little organized ac-

¹²These groups and umbrellas were identified as the largest by BBC News' Guide to the Syrian rebels (2013), and cross-checked with other sources used in this paper.

tivity in the first three months after protests swept Tunisia and Egypt, but the security forces' ham-handed and disproportionate response to anti-regime graffiti in Deraa—imprisoning and torturing the responsible schoolboys—proved the spark that set off a revolutionary cascade (Hokayem 2013, p. 15, Pearlman 2016). Early mobilization in rebellious cities like Deraa and Homs were spearheaded by densely interconnected but local "clan-based networks [which] partly overlap with labour migration networks, cross-border networks and criminal or extra-legal networks" (Leenders and Heydemann 2012, p. 146). The resulting protests were leaderless, their underlying networks lacked "brokers" between different centers of protest, and were thus far more fragmented than broad, formal associational networks such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Local councils and committees began to spring up that "rarely had organizational ties to the old political groups" and "generally do not initiate demonstrations themselves" (Lund 2012, p. 38). As regime repression deepened in early 2012 "the militarisation of the revolution further divided and marginalised activists, whose means and organisation paled in comparison to those of the rebels" (Hokayem 2013, p. 70). As with the 1976–1982 uprisings, the sectarian divide quickly became the central cleavage around which communities mobilized, in spite of the best efforts of civilian activists in 2011.

The Free Syrian Army

The Free Syrian Army (FSA), a loose-knit rebel group principally composed of Syrian Army deserters willingly or unwillingly re-mobilized as hometown militias, was the first armed rebel organization to emerge publicly during the Assad regime's crackdown on protest in the summer of 2011 (Lister 2016a, pp. 7–9).¹³ For the first six months or more, it was the only well-organized rebel group engaged in combat with the government (most visibly during the battle for Homs in January and February of 2012). Its large size, nationwide reach, and rapid consolidation of international legitimacy led some contemporaneous observers to conclude that the FSA represented both a unified Syrian rebel movement and an existential threat to the Assad regime.¹⁴ However, as the conflict dragged on, it became clear that the FSA had failed to consolidate its hegemony over the rebel movement. Moreover, many of the FSA's constituent battalions appeared to have little more than a nominal, transactional relationship with the group's alleged hierarchy, often shifting in and out from

¹³It was preceded by an initially non-violent organization of defecting Syrian Army officers called the Free Officer Movement (FOM). The FOM merged into the FSA in short order.

¹⁴See, for example, analyst Jeffrey White's (2011) description.

underneath the FSA umbrella in a manner reminiscent of factional realignments in the Somalian civil war (Seymour 2014).

What explains the FSA’s inability to impose unity on the Syrian rebel movement by monopolizing it despite its head start, rapid growth, and large size? In short, the FSA was rapidly assembled from weakly-connected local networks of defecting Syrian Army conscripts, and failed to expand beyond this initial constituency. I argue that there are two main reasons for this failure. First, a “horizontal” pattern of defections from the Syrian Army meant that few officers, or even recruits highly committed to combating the regime, joined the fledgling FSA (Albrecht and Ohl 2016, pp. 47–8). The resulting leadership deficit crippled cooperation among the independently-formed FSA battalions, and discipline within them. Second, FSA units deliberately eschewed mobilizing civilian dissidents, although such dissidents were plentiful and eventually joined or formed competing rebel groups. In sum, the FSA lacked the ability to forge ties with unconnected civilian dissident networks and was neglectful of the necessity of doing so.

Horizontal patterns of defection

The still small literature on military defection has taken a great interest in both Syrian cases presented in this paper. McLauchlin (2010) argued that the Assad regime’s reliance on co-ethnics during the 1976–1982 Islamist rebellion helped insure the loyalty of Alawi soldiers, while leaving the soldiers from the Sunni out-group vulnerable to “desertion cascades.” This pattern would reoccur after the 2011 Arab Spring uprising, with the nearly 300,000 strong Syrian Army reduced in size and ever more reliant on a 60,000 men Alawi core (Makara 2013). The dynamics of desertion in 2011 and 2012 may have differed in one crucial respect: after the Islamist rebellion, the Assad regime became even more dependent on Alawi officers as a means of “coup-proofing;” by the time of Hafez al-Assad’s death in 2000, approximately 90% of all officers were Alawi (McLauchlin 2010, p. 341). As Hokayem (2013, p. 61) points out, no whole large unit defected in its entirety and almost no high-ranking officers or elite troops were among the deserters. Rather, an individual-level decision to defect was repeated tens of thousands of times. Thus, the Syrian Army dissolved from the feet up (its Sunni conscripts deserted in a constant, debilitating trickle) while the head stayed put (its Alawite officer core stayed loyal to their co-ethnic regime). This pattern of division between conscripts and officers, which Albrecht and Ohl (2016) label “horizontal” desertions, contrasts with

traditional, “vertical” military splits, in which whole brigades under different commanders pledge loyalty to opposite sides of a conflict.

Albrecht and Ohl (2016, p. 40) correctly associate horizontal desertions with the “emergence of militias,” although they do not specify the mechanism linking the two phenomena in detail. The following section seeks to fill in that gap. A key point is that most Syrian Army deserters returned to their hometowns prior to mobilizing (or being forced to mobilize by regime violence) as homegrown brigades of the Free Syrian Army (Littell 2015, p. 140). This pattern accords with another excellent study by McLauchlin (2014), which found that soldiers in the Spanish Civil War were more likely to desert if their hometown lay in mountainous terrain—that is, terrain more difficult for the regime to control and police. Similarly, desertions from the Syrian Army only began to pick up steam as the regime began to lose control of rural territory where most Sunni conscripts originated (Albrecht and Ohl 2016, p. 48). Thus, the FSA units forming in villages and urban neighborhoods across Syria were not equivalent to any pre-existing Syrian Army unit, as these had not been organized geographically. To employ a geological metaphor, much of the Syrian Army faded away, as if by erosion, and a vast number of new FSA units formed out of the particulate, as if by accretion. This individuated process (and the lack of high-ranking deserting officers) meant that the deserters could make use of little preexisting hierarchy, structure, or organizational principles. In Staniland’s (2014) terminology, the FSA was a “parochial organization,” in which units were embedded locally but lacked links between unit leaders or an authoritative central command.

Stagnation by policy

Above and beyond their lack of internal cohesion or hierarchy, the *ad hoc* leaders of most FSA units conformed to a catastrophic error: worried about being tagged by potential Western sponsors as Islamist or terrorists, they eschewed mobilization of civilian dissidents for fear that radical Islamists would infiltrate and delegitimize their organization. Journalist Jonathan Littell reports that this was a major preoccupation among the best organized FSA units in Homs in early 2012, writing that “[t]he FSA is afraid of showing that there are civilians who joined their ranks. For them that would be giving credit to the regime’s claims of ‘terrorism.’ Strong paranoia on that level” (Littell 2015, p. 127). Thus, for about a year the FSA was composed primarily of army defectors. For example, the Military Council of one of the FSA’s most capable units, the al-Farouk Brigade, contained only

three civilians out of twenty-four members (Littell 2015, p. 90). Interviews conceded to Littell or to other journalists at the time (for example, Vice's Robert King (2012)) make clear that the low civilian to defector ratio held for much of the FSA.

The collective emphasis on recruiting Syrian Army deserters created significant problems for sustained expansion. The FSA's main recruitment pool was also its battlefield opponent, leading to difficulties gauging recruits' commitment to fight for the rebels. In one example, after a firefight with the FSA, "two soldiers fled; wounded, they were captured, and it's only at that point that they said: 'We're with you.' But the FSA considers them prisoners [and not deserters]" (Littell 2015, p. 105). Another example illustrates the dangers of attempting to recruit among enemies: "Abu Saadu, who had gone to speak with the mukhabarat soldiers at a post to convince them to join the FSA. One mukhabarat put down his gun and told him: 'OK, I'll join you.' Abu Saadu approached and the mukhabarat took out a hidden pistol and killed him with a bullet to the eye" (Littell 2015, p. 134). Perhaps most importantly, Syrian Army deserters who joined the FSA uniformly insisted that they had not taken part in violent repression ("I did not participate in the killing," "I did not kill anyone" (King 2012)) yet with the passage of time these protestations of innocence become less believable ("Claims he never shot at the crowd, that he hid. That doesn't seem very credible, given he was in operations for four months" (Littell 2015, p. 145)). Thus, what had been a permeable division between sides at the beginning of the conflict hardened as time passed, because new rebel recruits faced steadily increasing doubts regarding their loyalty to the rebellion.

At the extreme end, the FSA employed coercive and ineffective recruiting tactics. One rebel fighter told Littell that Bedouin FSA units "catch Army soldiers on leave and give them the choice: join the FSA or die" (Littell 2015, p. 209). Littell witnessed another example:

[T]hey have surrounded a building full of Army soldiers. There must be forty men in it, it's in the tower under construction next to the blue tower. The FSA is going to bring a loudspeaker to try to convince them to change sides... 'Alaa explains their plans for the soldiers surrounded in the building: they're going to mine the supporting pillars, then give them a choice between coming over to their side, or being blown up (Littell 2015, p. 214).

Needless to say, recruiting tactics such as these were unlikely to promote enduring loyalties and

internal discipline that results from recruitment based on “social endowments” (Weinstein 2007).

Though most FSA units conceived of their original role as protecting the Syrian civilian activists whose protests had brought about the political crisis, they largely refrained from recruiting these activists. Analyzed through the prism of Hypothesis 1 (civilian constituency composition), that meant that the FSA left all possible civilian dissident networks outside their organization—some Islamist, but most not. Dissidents harboring grave anti-regime resentments—and there were a great many—had little choice but to join or start a non-FSA faction in order to fight the regime. Many such civilian recruits joined Islamist factions not out of commitment to Islamist principles, but rather the growing perception that Islamist groups were more disciplined, more devoted to civilian mobilization and public goods provision, and more militarily effective than FSA groups (Lister 2016a, p. 9).

Islamist rebel groups

Islamist rebel groups began to form quietly in mid-2011 alongside the FSA, but their marginal size (and lack of battlefield presence) for the first year of the civil war meant that their presence was little noted in western media at the time. While diverse, most Islamist groups share two important commonalities. First, most draw on social links and an appealing ideology to recruit. Second, due to the Assad regime’s efforts in dismantling broad Islamist network, the Islamist rebels instead mobilized from small initial networks which lacked strong horizontal links even to other similar networks.¹⁵ This first attribute suggests that Islamist groups should have quickly expanded and consolidated, helping to reduce the rebel movement’s overall fragmentation. The second attribute explains why most were unable to do so.

Surveying the scholarly, journalistic, and military accounts of Syrian Islamic rebel factions, I identify three types of Islamist rebel groups, which I label nationalist salafi,¹⁶ foreign salafist-jihadi, and homegrown. First, most nationalist salafi rebel groups appear to have mobilized from within the pre-existing, though regionally confined, salafist networks that the Syrian state had alternately tolerated, infiltrated, and dismantled, as discussed above. The continual reappearance in rebel leadership positions of former salafi inmates at the Seidnaia prison provides some evidence

¹⁵They are also, it is important to note, ideal types: most Islamist rebel groups on the ground are complex admixtures of nationalist Salafi, foreign Salafist-jihadi, and homegrown groups.

¹⁶Following Aron Lund (2013, p. 14).

for this common origin. Seidnaia was the prison for political prisoners discussed above, in which the al-Assad regime deposited Islamists and Syrian fighters returning from Iraq after breaking up semi-state-sponsored transnational jihadi networks in 2008. In early 2011, the regime released thousands of Islamist political prisoners in a mass amnesty, perhaps as a sop intended to satisfy Sunni Islamist activists, or perhaps as a dirty trick intended to sow Islamist extremists among the as-yet non-violent protest movement, to delegitimize the movement in international eyes and justify a violent crackdown (Lister 2016b, p. 53). Whatever the regime's motivation, the released prisoners reportedly founded many if not most of the most significant domestic Islamic salafi groups. For example, Arond Lund (2013), surveying the nationalist salafi groups that merged under the powerful Syrian Islamist Front (SIF) umbrella, identifies former Islamist prisoners of Seidnaia prison in the leadership of the groups Ahrar al-Sham (Syria's largest domestic Islamist group), Liwa al-Haqq, Harakat al-Fajr, Katibat Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb.

Foreign salafist-jihadi rebel groups originated somewhat later within the international jihadi movement in various arenas of combat outside Syria's borders. The networks within which these rebel groups mobilized had one foot firmly planted in geographically dispersed hotbeds of jihadi migration—Turkey, Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Chechnya, and others—while the other foot, was likely planted in the same disparate, semi-dismantled Syrian jihadi networks already discussed. These networks were, after all, constructed in order to ferry foreign fighters from these locations through Syria.¹⁷ As such there is a great deal of overlap and isomorphism among nationalist salafi and foreign salafist-jihadi groups: they promote similar ideologies, often recruit from the same domestic civilian constituencies, and both typically seek strong ties with local communities based on public goods provision. Jabhat al-Nusra in particular “enforced discipline on its fighters and distributed food and other essential goods, gaining support particularly in Aleppo and northern parts of Syria” (Hokayem 2013, p. 92); while Lund (2013, p. 25) reports that the SIF clothed, housed, and fed civilians and refugees in Idleb, Aleppo, Homs, Deir al-Zor and the rural Latakia Governorates.¹⁸ As

¹⁷This is based on supposition rather than strong data because, as already noted, few detailed data are publicly available about pre-war Syrian jihadi networks. In February 2012, Lieutenant Colonel Joel Rayburn, a former aide to General Petraeus, did explicitly link the foreign salafist-jihadi groups to the state-sponsored cross-border Syrian networks, noting that “[t]here is surely not in modern history a more perfect example of blowback than what is happening now in Syria, where Al Qaeda in Iraq's operatives have turned to bite the hands that once fed them” (Lister 2016b, p. 47).

¹⁸As Ahmad (2015) demonstrates, Islamist rebels' advantage in public goods provision may also extend to business elites, who may fund rebellion in turn.

a result, both nationalist salafi and foreign salafist-jihadi groups have been successful at recruiting within civilian dissident networks neglected by the FSA.¹⁹

Finally, many smaller Islamist groups first emerged in rural towns or urban neighborhoods as a homegrown collection of youths and regional notables oriented towards local defense. These homegrown battalions may be thought of as the civilian mirror image of the FSA battalions composed of military deserters. Small battalions formed initially for the purposes of communal or neighborhood defense. As Ghaith Abdul-Ahad (2013) reports, “[m]any of the battalions dotted across the Syrian countryside consist only of a man with a connection to a financier, along with a few of his cousins and clansmen,” and while many such battalions remain locally rooted, others went on to “become itinerant fighting groups, moving from one battle to another, desperate for more funds and a fight and all the spoils that follow.” These groups often assumed the FSA label, at least initially, but critically they lacked any ties to the tenuous FSA infrastructure that allowed a modicum of coordination between deserter-based FSA units. As the FSA’s battlefield effectiveness waned and its infrastructure began unraveling over time, the homegrown battalions often adopted Salafist identities instead, while remaining autonomous.

To sum up, while most Islamist rebel groups invested far more heavily in civilian mobilization than the FSA, they each mobilized independently from within small, disconnected jihadist networks. This stands in stark contrast to how the Islamist rebel movement was structured during the 1976–1982 rebellion. In the earlier rebellion, Syrian Islamists were embedded within a single broad social network, the Muslim Brotherhood. When this network mobilized, it was able to command the loyalty of what otherwise might have been disparate anti-regime actors. This helps explain why the 2011 Islamists were significantly more fragmented than their forebears.

Explaining the 2011 Uprising

Hypothesis 1b argues that even vary large rebel movements may unify when they are built on top of broad social networks. By contrast, they fragment when built on top of disconnected and

¹⁹As Charles Lister points out, Jabhat al-Nusra has been deeply influenced by the writings of Abu Musaab al-Souri, who counseled that “the priority is to establish deep ties with local communities, even if that requires flexibility in some [Islamic] principles’... Within Jabhat al-Nusra’s context, that meant placing the focus on fighting the Assad regime (and not rival or non-Islamic factions), maintaining a pragmatic interpretation and implementation of the sharia (avoiding extremism), and acting as a social movement rather than solely a military force (being of service to society)” (Lister 2016b, p. 67).

locally-delimited dissident networks (H1a). This framework helps to explain Syria's dramatic rebel fragmentation. The FSA was incapable or unwilling to systematically expand beyond its initial recruitment pool of Syrian Army deserters. Meanwhile, as insurrection spread, dissident networks of all stripes mobilized, and I contend here that had there existed suitable broad social networks, they would have mobilized as well. Yet Syria had a unique recent history of state-society interactions; and regime policy for three decades had multiplied dissident networks while suppressing broad social networks. Thus, no broad social network existed that could link the constituencies of distinct rebel groups and push them towards forming a comprehensive umbrella group.

Explaining why the FSA failed to monopolize the movement

My strategy for testing these hypotheses is based on cross-case comparison between the 1976–1982 Islamist rebellion and the 2011-present uprising. The 1976–1982 rebellion was initiated by a rebel group, the Fighting Vanguard, whose recruitment efforts expanded in tandem with rising civilian mobilization. Specifically, it was adept at identifying and incorporating civilian dissidents, which prevented competing groups from mobilizing. By contrast, the Free Syrian Army was, despite its significant first-mover advantages (quick growth, impressive manpower, and geographic reach), unable to expand beyond its initial constituency of defecting Syrian Army soldiers. This was due to its weak central command, its nebulous ideological identity, and above all else, its policy-based failure to incorporate civilian dissident networks. Because the Free Syrian Army was unable or unwilling to recruit most civilian dissidents, they joined or formed competing groups, leading to a far more fragmented rebel movement.

Had the FSA mobilized civilian more successfully, the theory presented in this paper suggests it may have monopolized much of the rebel movement, with nationalist salafi and foreign salafist-jihadi groups occupying a mere extremist fringe. There is ample evidence that civilian dissidents, while harboring grievances against the regime and a decidedly Sunni identity, were not motivated by uncompromising salafi principles and thus were potential FSA recruits. First, although many jihadist networks sprang up across Syria throughout the early 2000s, the vast majority of jihadist recruits transited by the networks were not, in fact, Syrian: only 8% of the fighters that passed through one border crossing were of Syrian origin, for example (Lister 2016b, p. 39). One may surmise from this that in spite of the Islamic resurgence in Syria, Islamic militancy remained on

the whole unpopular in Syria as compared to neighboring states. Second, as already noted, several analysts affirm that Islamist rebel groups gained popularity among recruits not so much due to their ideological stance but rather their public goods provision, their “self-presented independence and internal cohesion,” and their “superior military capabilities” (Lister 2016b, p. 85). Third, as noted above, many Islamist groups adopted an Islamist stance primarily to gain access to financiers in the Gulf. Finally, a valuable 2014 study of Syrian rebels by Mironova, Loubna, and Whitt (2014), based on survey data of 300 current FSA and 50 Islamist fighters (primarily from Ahrar al-Sham and Jabhat al-Nusra), concludes that FSA and Islamist recruits do not systematically differ:

Syrian fighters are joining Islamist groups primarily for instrumental purposes. Islamic groups are perceived as better equipped, led, and organized... Religious ideation is secondary or even a tertiary motivation for joining. Many Islamists and moderate FSA fighters are risking their lives for similar reasons: to take revenge against al-Assad forces (79% FSA vs. 79% Islamists), to defeat the al-Assad regime (69% FSA vs. 90% Islamists), and to defend their communities (71% FSA vs. 84% Islamists)... In interviews with fighters who first joined FSA and then switched to Islamist brigades, almost all mentioned non-religious reasons: “My friends left my old group and I left with them,” “I didn’t like people in my old group,” “My friend got injured and they didn’t support him,” “I was with my old group [FSA] until I fought with Ahrar al-Sham. I liked their way of treating fighters and I joined.”²⁰

In sum, civilian dissidents were not predestined to join Islamist rebel groups. They did so because the FSA failed to recruit them, not because they were unwilling to join the FSA.

These civilian dissident networks that could have, but were not, incorporated by the FSA eventually joined or even founded competing Islamist rebel groups. There is strong evidence of this occurring in Syria, and the evidence is especially compelling as it comes from a least-likely case (Gerring 2006, p. 115).²¹ Littell makes clear from his experiences during the Baba Amr uprising in Homs that the Free Syrian Army fighters had strong interpersonal relations with one type of civilian

²⁰Mironova, Loubna, and Whitt do argue that recruits are radicalized by political education and group socialization once they’ve joined an Islamist group, implying a path dependence to the FSA’s initial failure to mobilize civilian dissidents.

²¹Or rather, a least-likely within-case observation.

dissident: the student and online activists driving the large-scale non-violent protests against the regime. Littell depicts FSA fighters escorting the activists, forming protective cordons around them, and maintaining safe houses from which the activists could communicate online. If any civilian dissident network were likely to be incorporated into the FSA, it was this one. Yet in Aron Lund's (2013, p. 32) discussion of Katibat al-Ansar, a moderate faction within the nationalist salafi umbrella, the Syrian Islamic Front, he reports that this is not the case:

According to Abu Ezzeddin, Katibat al-Ansar also stands out among the rebel factions in Homs for its high percentage of university students and professionals with a middle class background, *many of whom had been activists and leaders in the early non-violent protest movement in Homs* [emphasis mine]... After the Baba Amr offensive in February 2012, many were forced to flee their neighborhoods to the old city of Homs, *where they joined up with local activists*. It was at this point that Katibat al-Ansar was created.”

This least-likely case example of the incorporation-failure mechanism suggests that it may have occurred numerous times throughout Syria, wherever the FSA refused to or failed to recruit civilian dissidents. These dissidents joined or formed other rebel groups, most of them Islamist to some extent, leaving Syria's rebel movement profoundly fragmented.

Explaining why Islamist groups failed to unify

Hypothesis 1b proposes that a broad social network, if “tipped” to support a rebellion, is capable of subsuming both disparate dissident networks and rebel organizations under an umbrella. As already investigated in detail in this paper's first case study, the Muslim Brotherhood served precisely this function during the 1976–1982 Islamist rebellion. The three constituent factions of the Joint Command ranged from the Damascus branch's democratic Islamism to the Fighting Vanguard's radical jihadism. However, as discussed above, the Assad regime dismantled the Muslim Brotherhood and other broad social networks in that rebellion's aftermath. Thus, disparate dissident networks remained disparate.

This explanation would be undermined if broad social networks could be identified in the 2011 rebellion, yet were not associated with umbrella groups. It would be strengthened if (semi-) broad social networks underlay at least some of the umbrella groups that have formed in Syria. There

is evidence for the latter: even in the 2011 Arab Spring rebellion, the remnants of the Muslim Brotherhood still continued to perform according to the civilian constituencies expectation for broad social networks. Despite thirty years of regime attempts to stamp out the Muslim Brotherhood, its once-constituent networks continued to demonstrate their mobilizing power in the 2011 uprising: Ahrar al-Sham, the largest nationalist salafi rebel group with over 10,000 militants (and hegemon of the SIF umbrella, the largest nationalist salafi grouping, with 30,000 militants, nearly a third of the total rebel movement) in 2013, likely owed its growth to its “early success in absorbing former Brotherhood families in the Idleb and Hama regions” (Lund 2013, p. 30). This suggests that, absent the Syrian regime’s suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood, it might have been able to gather a much greater proportion of the total opposition under its umbrella.

There is also comparative evidence that the Muslim Brotherhood has continued to play a major role in uniting opposition movements during the Arab Spring. Both Libya and Syria, two countries that had violently suppressed the Muslim Brotherhood over decades, face highly fragmented civil wars in the wake of Arab Spring protests. Meanwhile, though protracted political violence and unrest in Egypt does not qualify as a civil war, there can be no doubt that the Islamist forces there are largely loyal to the Muslim Brotherhood, with other jihadist militant groups playing a relatively minor role.²² If the Muslim Brotherhood had remained the dominant broad social network within Syria’s Sunni community, as it had been prior to 1982, it is likely to have monopolized the rebel side of Syria’s master cleavage by drawing relatively disparate domestic actors into an umbrella. While foreign jihadist groups would still have penetrated Syria, they would be unlikely to recruit many Syrians, and thus would struggle to grow as large as the Jabhat al-Nusra or (later) ISIL. However, in the absence of a broad social network, foreign jihadist groups did penetrate Syria, and domestic dissident networks spawned a variety of independent groups, leading to a fragmented rebel movement.

Alternate explanations

Other hypotheses exhibit less explanatory power. There is little support for state repression (H2) as the two cases exhibit little variation on this measure. H3 (external support) correctly predicts a

²²Most significantly, domestic and foreign jihadist groups predominate in a small regional insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula. Meanwhile, the fact that Egypt has not descended into civil war like its neighbors may be attributable to the quietism of the MB’s older, conservative leadership (al Anani 2007).

fragmented rebel movement, and is also supported by causal process observations. However, only Hypothesis 1 correctly predicts both the Islamist rebellion and the Arab Spring rebellion.

H2 (state repression) does not adequately predict Syria's fragmentation. The al-Assad regime's response to the 2011 uprising was scripted after its successful suppression of the 1982 uprising: severe and indiscriminate violence. However, as we have seen, the opposite outcome occurred. Schulhofer-Wohl (2014) argues that severe state repression might have led the 2011 rebel movement to intentionally choose fragmentation, as "the armed opposition formed within a strategic environment favoring the creation of autonomous groups with loose, decentralized relationships. The initial extreme military asymmetry favoring the Assad regime meant that a dominant, hierarchical group would have led the opposition to a swift demise." This argument doesn't seem to fit other historical cases (most victorious rebel movements have had a dominant, hierarchical group despite suffering from military asymmetry at conflict onset), and it is conceptually dubious (military decentralization and command hierarchy are two different things, not two different ends of the same spectrum). Nicaragua's FSLN and Colombia's FARC are examples of militarily decentralized groups that nonetheless maintained a hierarchical central command; this was a major element in what made both groups so formidable.) The argument is also undermined by Schulhofer-Wohl's seemingly contradictory argument that, after the regime faced major setbacks, "relative security from the regime removed that principal driver of cooperation between groups: The pressing, common military threat," which suggests that state repression should incentivize unification.

H3 (external support) helps explain Syria's rebel fragmentation, yet its role is often overstated in popular accounts. It is true that vast sums of resources have flowed into Syria from external state and non-state actors. This support has been both fungible and, as time wore on, evenly spread between many different actors. However there is also evidence that the diversification of external support follows, rather than explains, the FSA's failure to monopolize the rebel movement. Thus, the external support hypothesis may help explain why the rebel movement eventually fragmented to such a remarkable degree, but unlike my theory, it cannot explain why the rebel movement first fragmented.

While fungible external support arrived throughout 2012, it was unbalanced (most went to the FSA) and in insufficient quantities to explain the fragmentation of the rebel movement that began to take hold in mid-2012. The external support that did arrive came in coordinated fashion

from state sponsors and “a large majority of this money was destined for armed groups affiliated to the FSA—a general trend that would continue throughout much of 2012” (Lister 2016b, p. 70). Meanwhile, “the sums raised were however incommensurate with needs and expectations” (Hokayem 2013, p. 73).

More importantly, for the first year of the conflict, the materiel already available to rebel groups within Syria dwarfed that originating from abroad, as “in parallel with a thriving black market, much of the weaponry that fuelled the conflict was available or acquired locally: defectors fled with their arms, regime caches and barracks were raided, corrupt officers sold arsenals, workshops produced ammunitions and rockets” (Hokayem 2013, p. 84). In a comprehensive report on revenue sources in the Syrian civil war, Hallaj (2015, p. 3) reports that “[d]espite claims by the government of foreign involvement in the opposition movement from its inception, most activity was, at first, self-financed locally.” Rather than external financiers, rebel groups initially relied on revenue from *looting* (of factories, department stores, and archaeological artifacts), as well as kidnapping and smuggling. Only after battlines stabilized and local resources were exhausted—you can’t loot the same factory twice—did rebel groups begin relying extensively on external resources. By this time, the rebel movement was already dramatically fragmented.

In fact, compared to the Arab Spring rebellion, the earlier 1976–1982 rebellion had relied more exclusively on external support from the start. As discussed above, the Muslim Brotherhood raised millions of dollars in fungible resources from diverse state and private actors—yet did not fragment. We can make sense of this drawing on Paul Staniland’s (2012) argument that socially coherent and organizationally robust rebel groups benefit from external support, whatever its origins; while already socially divided and organizationally weak rebel groups may be torn apart by it. Crucially, because the Muslim Brotherhood was already cohesive and the hegemonic organization within the Syrian rebel movement, it managed to monopolize external flows. By contrast, the FSA was neither socially coherent nor organizationally robust, which allowed the mobilization (or splintering) of a large number of other rebel organizations that then went in search of their own source of foreign financing (Hokayem 2013, p. 84).

The external support hypothesis may contribute to an explanation of the extreme fragmentation reached in 2013, after hundreds of homegrown, nationalist salafi, and foreign salafi-jihadist groups had already mobilized. These sought funding from wealthy individuals long active in in-

ternational Islamist and jihadi networks. This influx of “private finance was unevenly and erratically distributed, based largely on personal relationships rather than along strict organisational lines. As such, early money ended up in the coffers of many different groups” (Lister 2016b, p. 58). Once the pattern was established, it encouraged opportunistic splintering and independent mobilization—that is, an endogenous vicious cycle of fragmentation and foreign funding.²³ In blog posts,²⁴ political scientists Wendy Pearlman and Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl emphasized the diversity of external sponsors and “[a] hesitant U.S. role” for the Syrian rebel movement’s fragmentation (Pearlman 2013).²⁵ A “bonanza of uncoordinated financing, from an array of states within the region and private individuals” meant that “[p]atrons’ competing agendas duplicate themselves within the Syrian struggle” (Pearlman 2013; Schulhofer-Wohl 2014). At the extreme, this process lead to the proliferation of marginal groups matching Ghaith Abdul-Ahad’s description (quoted above) of a man with a financier, and his clansmen and kinsmen.

That said, the sequencing presented here does not support the notion that diverse funding sources were responsible for the initial fragmentation of the Syrian rebel movement. Most early rebel revenue came from local sources—looting, kidnapping, and smuggling—which are available in most armed conflicts and thus cannot explain Syria’s unusual fragmentation. Such early external support as did arrive favored the FSA, and thus might have been expected to help it ward off rivals. Syria’s rebel movement was highly fragmented *prior* to the emergence of substantial and diverse revenue flows. Later private finance appears to have followed demand from mobilizing Islamist groups even as it helped more such groups mobilize.

External support also fails to explain why some of the other battlefields favored by international jihadists exhibit far less rebel fragmentation than Syria. This particularly applies to Afghanistan: although the modern Islamist foreign fighter movement originated in and directly descends from the deeply fragmented 1980s Afghan civil war (Hegghammer 2011), the deeply-rooted Taliban, founded by a broad social network of Islamic scholars and students, now dominates the rebel movement there. Thus, external support is part, but by no means all, of the explanation for the Syrian rebel movement’s fragmentation.

²³See Weinstein (2007) for more on this dynamic.

²⁴I am unaware of any manuscript- or chapter-length treatment of the causes of fragmentation in the Syrian rebel movement prior to this paper.

²⁵See also Berti and Paris (2014, p. 27): “[F]ragmentation simultaneously reflects and enhances the shifting geostrategic dynamics in the Middle East.”

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates both the explanatory power of analyzing rebels' civilian constituencies but also reveals some of its limitations. With Olson (1965), I emphasize that collective action is difficult and becomes more difficult as a movement grows; like Roger Petersen (2001) and Paul Staniland (2014) I assert that rebel organization has a strong social basis. As such, the extent of contemporary Syria's rebel fragmentation cannot be understood without examining the dissident networks that produce rebel groups and the broad civilian networks in which they may, or may not, be embedded. However, the 2011 Syrian case also shows how important the state's role can be in defining social structure and manipulating mobilization.

The distribution of dissident networks and broad social networks, as well as the pace and distribution of mobilization, heavily reflects both *longue durée* sociopolitical developments and state-society interactions. Scholars of conflict may find guidance here from accounts of peacetime civil society and political institutions (Berman 1997, Putnam, Leonardi, and Nanetti 1993, Varshney 2001). This paper particularly emphasizes the role of state policy in shaping networks prior to conflict and theorizes its role in mobilizing (or demobilizing) mass discontent. As Bates (2008, p. 6) notes, "I can find no way of analyzing the origins of insurrection without starting with the behavior of governments." Though this paper argues that, in the first instance, rebel movement fragmentation results from the sort and extent of networks that comprise its constituency, it also argues that, in this case and likely others, the shape of those networks resulted from purposive state behavior. In this way, this paper argues that the internal dynamics of insurrection owe as much to government behavior prior to conflict as they do the "civilian constituency" or "social base" of the insurrection itself (Mosinger 2017; Staniland 2014).

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