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 by means of a a structured case comparison with the relatively unified 1976–1982 Islamist uprising. With hundreds of operationally distinct rebel groups, the Syrian conflict represents an extreme outlier among all cases studied by conflict scholars. As such, it is critical that our explanations of rebel fragmentation adequately explain this case. Drawing on social-organizational theories of rebellion, I argue that rebel movements built on broad, mass-mobilizing social bases unify, while those built on small, disconnected dissident networks fragment. After 1982, the al-Asad regime responded to the Islamist 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 differing levels of rebel movement fragmentation in two paired Syrian cases: the cohesive 1976–1982 Islamic rebellion and the fragmented 2011 Arab Spring rebellion. My focus on the Arab Spring rebellion is unsurprising: 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, 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 (Akcinaroglu 2012), and the small prospects for peace in the near future (Best and Bapat 2018; Pearlman 2009; Rudloff and Findley 2016). Waves of Syrian refugees, dislodged not only by the Asad 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 gaining asylum in Europe have impacted the political systems of western nations. The Syrian conflict continues to pose grave implications for both human and global security (Englehart 2016). As such, our explanations of rebel fragmentation must adequately explain this critical case.

Given the salience of the case, it is unsurprising that journalists, academics, and policymakers have written a great deal about Syria. Yet more than seven 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, as both conflicts pit the same antagonists against each other: the Asad family's dynastic regime and a rebel movement predominantly recruited from Syria's Sunni majority. Comparing such similar cases provides a unique opportunity to explain why certain outcomes varied. Second, the defeat of the 1976–1982 rebellion had consequences that

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1. I am aware of only Lund (2011) and Celso (2017). Neither seek to explain variation in rebel fragmentation.

profoundly affected the course of the present civil war. Scholars cannot explain the current rebel movement's fragmentation without understanding how the Asad regime sought to dismantle the earlier rebellion's civilian constituencies.

Drawing on social-organizational theories of rebellion, my study of Syria distinguishes between rebel movements based within broad, mass-mobilizing social bases and those built from small, disconnected dissident networks.[2] Consistent with this framework, I find that the underlying social base in each case determined whether Syria's armed opposition would remain cohesive or fragment into many competing factions. However, unlike previous research which largely confines analysis to the role played by social networks during mobilization and war, I push the causal narrative back further in time.[3] In this paper, I examine Syrian state-society interactions during the decades prior to each uprising, and demonstrate how contention between the Asad regime and Syrian civil society shaped starkly different rebellious social bases in 1976 and 2011.

Specifically, the leaders of the 1976–1982 Syrian rebel movement successfully constructed an umbrella group encompassing almost all rebel actors by drawing on the Muslim Brotherhood, a moderate broad social network. After the Asad regime crushed the rebels at Hama in 1982, the regime sought to demobilize both its Islamist and secular 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 Syrians rose in rebellion again in 2011, they did so from scattered dissident networks, *not* from a single cross-cutting social base. 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

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2. See Petersen (2001), Parkinson (2013)), Staniland (2014), and Mosinger (2018). I define a broad social base as an extensive, multi-class, formally or semi-formally organized group with pre-existing roots in society. A dissident network is a small, relatively homogeneous group of activists or "low-threshold" individuals (in Petersen 2001, 48-49).

3. For a welcome exception, see Reno (2011).

analyze my first case, the 1976–1982 Islamist rebellion, by tracing how the Muslim Brotherhood's broad constituency reduced rebel fragmentation over the course of the conflict. Then I analyze the interlude between the two cases, in which the Asad regime dismantled the Muslim Brotherhood and similar networks. A second case study of the 2011 Arab Spring rebellion follows. Here I show how the first-moving rebel group, the Free Syrian Army, failed to mobilize a comparable civilian constituency. Meanwhile, civilian and Islamist activists, lacking a broad social base (such as the Muslim Brotherhood) through which to coordinate their activity, built dozens of rebel groups on top of local dissident networks. A fragmented social base thus explains the Arab Spring rebellion's fragmented rebel movement. For each case, I test this theory against two common explanations drawn from popular and scholarly writings on the Syrian conflicts: state repression and external support.

Social Bases and Rebel Fragmentation

This paper seeks to explain differing levels of rebel fragmentation in Syria's 1976–1982 Islamist rebellion and its 2011 Arab Spring rebellion. I adopt Bakke, Seymour, and Cunningham's (2012, 66) multidimensional conceptualization of rebel fragmentation as "(1) the number of organizations in a movement; (2) the degree of institutionalization across these organizations; and (3) the distribution of power among them," and score each dimension for both cases. In analyzing the causes of rebel fragmentation, I emphasize rebel civilian constituencies and "social bases," two concepts adopted from the socio-organizational literature on rebel movements.[4]

Rebel civilian constituencies, on which rebels rely for resources and recruitment (Parkinson 2013, 418; Sarbahi 2014), are often large and diverse enough to support multiple rebel organizations (Gates 2002; Mosinger 2018). Thus, 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

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4. See especially Staniland (2014).

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 bases proffer cross-cutting ties that may traverse a rebel movement's entire civilian constituency (Staniland 2014, 26–28), and often draw upon deeply-rooted sources of legitimacy. Thus, when broad social bases mobilize in favor of a 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.

Comparative Case Methods

My study follows a most-similar systems case comparative design (Gerring 2006, 131–139): both cases center on mass uprisings in the same country and against the same dynastic regime; however, they vary on my central explanatory factor. Specifically, the rebel groups in 1976–1982 were embedded in a broad social base (the Muslim Brotherhood), while the rebel groups from 2011-present formed within numerous small, local dissident networks.

State violence and external support are also commonly cited to explain rebel fragmentation—especially in Syria.[5] I carefully assess the roles played by these alternative explanations. As I will show, each case in this study exhibited high (though not identical) levels of violence and external support. Thus, at best these factors can only offer partial explanations of the divergent outcomes. To further control for their variation across cases, I employ process tracing to investigate to what extent they contributed to rebel fragmentation. I do not rigorously analyze other explanations from the literature on rebel fragmentation, such as, *inter alia*, geography, state capacity, democratic regime type, ethnic fractionalization, concessions

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5. On state violence, see Christia (2012), McLauchlin and Pearlman (2012), Seymour, Bakke, and Cunningham (2015), and Staniland (2014); on external support, see Mosinger (2018), Olson Lounsbery (2016), Tamm (2016), and Weinstein (2007).

and peace negotiations, and ideological diversity, and certain characteristics of the international context (see especially Seymour, Bakke, and Cunningham 2015). However, most such omitted variables are either not applicable to the Syrian cases or are controlled for by the comparative case design.

Nonetheless, at least three factors differ which may have impacted the outcome of interest. First, the Ba'th Party's popular support base, traditionally located in the rural peasantry (Batatu 1999; Heydemann 1999; Hinnebusch 1990; Perthes 1995), shifted towards urban capitalists and the middle class after liberalizing economic reforms under Bashar al-Asad (Haddad 2012). Rural grievances accumulated, and "Assad's neglect of the rural areas provided the Islamist opposition with a mobilizable mass base they had lacked in the 1980s." (Hinnebusch et al. 2015, 306) Accordingly, during the 1976-1982 conflict, armed rebellion concentrated in Syria's cities while in 2011, it swept through the countryside. Yet there is no *ex ante* reason to suppose rural rebel movements should be less unified; on the contrary, scholars and practitioners of insurgency point to strong rural networks as a vital resource in building cohesive rebellions (Kalyvas 2004, 174–176; Wickham-Crowley 1991b, 138–140). The question then becomes whether rebel leaders can avail themselves of "horizontal ties" connecting disparate, "parochial" centers of rebellion (Staniland 2014, 21–22, 30).

Second, and relatedly, the Arab Spring uprising saw a greater extent of both civilian and armed mobilization. The earlier Islamist rebellion did achieve the "[m]obilization of wide mass support against the regime" and the Ba'th perceived the uprising in existential terms (Hinnebusch 1990, 294); the regime faced a simultaneous unarmed challenge from the secular and civil opposition, "influential civil society leaders—intellectuals, union activists, religious clerics, journalists and many others," and the National Democratic Gathering (NDG), a 1979 union of five illegal opposition parties (Lund 2011, 9–10). Nonetheless, many more people, cutting across more ethnic and sectarian lines, and covering a much greater geographical extent, mobilized in 2011.[6] A more mobilized populace may support more rebel groups,

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6. It is important to note that the mass Arab Spring demonstrations crossed sectarian lines, and pro-democracy activists explicitly rejected sectarianism (Yassin-Kassab and al Shami 2016, 48–49, 63–65). The

much as a larger market may support more firms.

Yet we may compare solely the *Islamist component* of each uprising to help mitigate this concern. Even within the homegrown 2011 Islamist opposition (i.e. the "nationalist Salafis"), we observe dozens of factions divided into at least two major umbrellas and several smaller ones.[7] This stands in stark contrast to the earlier, cohesive Islamist movement centered on the Muslim Brotherhood. As mobilization *within* the Islamist opposition was comparable across the two cases studied here, greater mobilization alone cannot explain the variation in the Islamists' fragmentation.

Third, while rebels in both cases received fungible, uncoordinated external support, flows of foreign resources were substantially greater during the Arab Spring rebellion. Not only have a multiplicity of state actors intervened in the ongoing conflict, external support has arrived from "four *types* of actors: states, diasporas, refugees, and other [neighboring] insurgencies [emphasis added]" (Byman 2013, 981), while "[t]otals are estimated in the millions and perhaps billions of USD" (Baylouny and Mullins 2017, 5).[8] To account for this difference, I turn to process-tracing (one of the "defining features" of controlled case comparisons Slater and Ziblatt 2013, 4). In particular, I pay close attention to sequencing (did rebel fragmentation precede or follow the influx of foreign support?). Indeed, the Arab Spring uprising fragmented *prior* to the arrival of substantial foreign monies, when most groups were self-funded via looting, kidnapping, and smuggling.

Finally, the reader should note that, while my account focuses on structural changes over time, in the Arab Spring case I also highlight agency, contingency, and strategic interaction between regime and opposition, where different decisions made at key junctures might have produced a more unified rebel movement. For this I rely on careful counterfactual reasoning

armed uprising that followed, however, drew primarily from a Sunni constituency. For most Syrians caught up in violence, I understand sectarian identity "as an ordering device or principle, not as a crucial motivating force" (in Mueller 2000, 62), and hold that hardened sectarian divisions did not cause conflict, but were deliberately "provoked and manipulated" by both regime and Islamists after conflict onset (in Yassin-Kassab and al Shami 2016, 110).

7. See Crenshaw (2014), Lund (2013), and Gade et al. (2018).

8. Even the Asad regime itself has purchased oil looted by its erstwhile rebel enemies (Ocakli and Scotch 2017, 80).

(Levy 2015).

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 and Alison Pargeter's scholarship, as they had access to interviews with principals and documents that were otherwise unavailable (Lefèvre 2013; Pargeter 2013). I also draw on a unique narrative account and analysis by Abu Mus'ab al-Suri (n.d.), a participant in the rebellion and later al-Qaeda's chief military theorist (Cruickshank and Ali 2007, 3). 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-Suri (n.d., 15) 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." By contrast, a surfeit of journalistic accounts, scholarly analysis, and even survey evidence exists for the 2011 uprising. I limit my discussion of the 2011 case to the first two years of the civil war, by which point the rebel movement had reached its highest level of observed fragmentation.

1976–1982 Islamist Rebellion

This section considers the 1976–1982 Islamist rebellion in Syria. Though not completely unified, the Islamists achieved significant coordination. The Islamist rebellion began in 1976 with attacks by a small extremist group, the Fighting Vanguard. The Ba'th regime's violent, indiscriminate response pushed the Muslim Brotherhood as a whole into the rebel movement in October 1979. The Muslim Brotherhood's regional branches, though long at odds with each other, hastened to coordinate their actions with each other and with the Fighting Vanguard (Lefèvre 2013, 115–119). In December 1980 the factions formed an umbrella structure, the Joint Command, that lasted until the end of the conflict. The Command

was beset by internal rivalries; however, these played out within the institutional framework of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Joint Command, rather than between organizationally distinct groups (Hinnebusch 1990, 282).

The formation of a Joint Command is somewhat puzzling. At its peak, the 1976–1982 Islamist rebel movement counted as many as 30,000 militants and countless more sympathizers in Syria's Sunni majority (286).[9] This constituency, like a large market, could in theory support multiple rebel organizations. Nonetheless, the Islamist rebel movement coalesced around a common set of institutions. I argue that its civilian constituency's composition explains the rebel movement's cohesion: the movement' first-moving rebel group, the Fighting Vanguard, was embedded in a broad social base, the Muslim Brotherhood. When the Muslim Brotherhood joined the rebellion, it enmeshed all anti-regime actors into the umbrella structure.

The Muslim Brotherhood: a State-Within-a-State

The *Jam'iyat al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*, or Muslim Brotherhood, "is indisputably the foremost socioreligious association in the Arab world" (Weismann 2010, 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, 68); the Muslim Brotherhood expanded upon this core role while branching out into political activism and public goods provision. Though smaller than the mass-mobilizing Egyptian chapter, which could claim millions of members, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood still sat squarely at the center of Islamic life. "[A] young ideologue of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Said Hawwa... set up a nationwide

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9. Note that in both cases compared in this paper, the Ba'th regime, though led by an Alawi president and military core, maintained substantial popular support among Sunnis. Not all Sunnis were potential supporters of the Brotherhood; rural Sunnis, middle-class Sunnis, and many moderate alim tended to support the regime. Class and clientalism usually trumped sect in pre-war Syria. See especially Batatu (1999, 244–247, 271) and Hinnebusch (1990, 150, 152).

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, 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 co-operative 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" (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" (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, 69). These attributes made the Muslim Brotherhood an ideal social base for constructing an "integrated" insurgency (Staniland 2014).

The Fighting Vanguard

In the mid-1960s, a charismatic street protest leader and Muslim Brother, Marwan Hadid, founded an Islamist revolutionary group, the *al-Tali'a al-Muqatila* [Fighting Vanguard], intending to overthrow the Ba'th regime and establish an Islamic one (Lia 2016, 545). Rather than compete with the Muslim Brotherhood, the Fighting Vanguard sought to radicalize it and bring it to power. It was "situated on the fringes of the Ikhwan [Muslim Brotherhood]" and recruited fighters directly from "mosques, universities and even high schools" (Lefèvre 2013, 106). Although some Brotherhood branches expelled known Fighting Vanguard members, their membership mostly overlapped or were connected by kinship and "personal friendships" (82, 123–24).[10] These personal friendships extended to the leaders of their respective organizations: Hadid's former high school teacher, Adnan Sa'd-ud-Din became the Muslim Brotherhood's leader after 1975 (Pargeter 2013) . Sa'd-ud-Din later 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" (82).[11] Crucially, the Fighting Vanguard was deeply embedded within the Muslim Brotherhood's broader social base: "at the local level, the intermeshing between the MB and the Combatant Vanguard militants in the northern cities meant that members were not always entirely sure to which organization their local cell belonged" (Lia 2016, 545).

In the mid-1970s, anti-regime mobilization increased markedly. In 1975, a radical Hama-based faction of the Muslim Brotherhood, led by Hadid's former teacher Adnan Sa'd-ud-Din, 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, 10). The Fighting Vanguard also saw a surge of new recruits (Lefèvre

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10. C.f. to "quotidian ties" cited by Parkinson (2013) as crucial for sustaining rebellious collective action.
11. One former member said, "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" (Lefèvre 2013, 102).

2013, 106). The Vanguard and Brotherhood's ties to traditional Islamic educational networks facilitated their expansion among secularly-educated youth: "The Islamist opposition recruited extensively among the study circles of the ulama, particularly those whose da'wa [proselytism] was aimed at young educated members of the middle class," as "the similar sociological profiles of their members facilitated movements between educational and political–military groups" (Pierret 2012, 66–7).

The Fighting Vanguard carried out an assassination campaign throughout the 1970s against prominent representatives of the Ba'th regime, hoping "to trigger government retaliation that would ultimately convince the Brotherhood's leadership of the inevitability of armed struggle" (Lefèvre 2013, 102). The campaign reached its violent climax in June 1979 with a stunning assault on the Syrian Army's Artillery School in Aleppo, leaving 83 Alawi soldiers dead (Lia 2016, 547). Lumping the Muslim Brotherhood together with its radical offshoot, the regime unleashed a withering wave of repression; in response the Muslim Brotherhood leaders declared "jihad" and formed a military wing in October 1979 (Lefèvre 2013, 115–19).

Negotiating Rebel Unity

Cooperation on the ground between the Fighting Vanguard and the Muslim Brotherhood began immediately, leading to the creation of a Joint Command in December 1980.[12] According to Umar Abd-Allah, Muslim Brotherhood leaders "'Adnān Sa'd-ad-Dīn and Sa'id Hawwā are said to have set the process of unification in motion early in 1980, using their numerous contacts throughout Syria" (Abd-Allah 1983). The Joint Command contained four members from each group, for a total of twelve (Lefèvre 2013, 118). Even the Fighting Vanguard's al-Suri, though highly critical of the Muslim Brotherhood management of the conflict, concedes that "the majority of the Moslem and mujahideen youth converged on the 'Moslem Brotherhood organization'" and that disparate rebel actors including "the

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12. The moderate Damascus branch had distanced itself from the radical "northern alliance" branches of the Brotherhood in the internal struggles alluded to earlier.

field commanders of Hamah, Damascus and the army officers of the failed coup" gave the Joint Command their "pledge of allegiance" (al Suri, n.d., 12, 13). 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, 'It came to a point where one couldn't draw a line between the two factions' (Pargeter 2013, 87).

The Islamist organizations seized control of Hama, long a bastion of conservative Islamist sentiment in February 1982. The Asad regime responded with a now-infamous massacre. 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 (Lia 2016). The rebel movement collapsed, leaving the Muslim Brotherhood's leadership exiled.

This paper contends that strong social bases are important for achieving and maintaining unified rebel movements. Given the Brotherhood's involvement in all aspects of Sunni life from education to trade unions (Lefèvre 2013, 94), it is unsurprising that a wide array of subordinate organizations flocked to its banner. As did the Fighting Vanguard, whose radical constituency was a subset of the Muslim Brotherhood's larger Sunni constituency. The successful rebel group seeks to set up a "counter-state" (Wickham-Crowley 1991a, 35); the Muslim Brotherhood was already a "state within a state" (Lefèvre 2013, 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. The rebel movement did not fragment after suffering leadership decapitations or battlefield losses. 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 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" (Batutu 1999, 273).

Violent repression pushed the factions closer together rather than dividing them further , but an identical regime strategy had no such effect on the 2011 rebel movement.

External support also fails to explain levels of rebel fragmentation. The Muslim Brotherhood drew on its longstanding international networks to seek support from state and private backers. As a result, the rebel movement was awash in fungible resources—the Brotherhood 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 Suri, n.d., 12)—gleaned from a spectrum of neighboring states harboring regimes committed to wildly divergent ideologies and interests within Syria (Lefèvre 2013, 129). Hinnebusch cites material support from Syria's urban bourgeoisie (the Muslim Brotherhood's strongest domestic constituency),[13] Jordan, Iraq, "the Lebanese Kaitab, the Turkish National Salvation Party, and Arafat's PLO," Egypt, possibly Saudi Arabia (and certainly "Saudi private sources"), perhaps the United States, and private backers connected to the Brotherhood's many foreign branches (Hinnebusch

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13. See also Heydemann (1999, 157–8 and 206–8).

1990, 290).[14] This predicts a highly-fragmented movement; nonetheless, the Islamist rebels worked towards unity during this influx of external resources.

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.

Interlude: Dismantling Broad Social Networks

Though the 1976–1982 Islamist rebels organized an umbrella group despite state repression and external resource flows, Arab Spring rebels could not overcome their profound divisions. What explains these differing outcomes? I argue that the Hama uprising shocked the Asad regime and led to dramatic shifts in its strategies for social control during the thirty-year interlude between the two conflicts.[15] Specifically, in order to inhibit opposition collective action, the Asad regime dismantled the Muslim Brotherhood and fragmented other potential sources of dissent in Syrian civil society. Thus, as the Arab Spring swept through Syria, revolutionaries could not count on a cross-cutting social base like the pre-1982 Muslim Brotherhood.

I emphasize four political and social regime policies during the interlude between rebellions, 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, 65). Second, the regime jealously prevented Islamists from establishing a successor broad social network via a mix of repression and co-option 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 oppo-

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14. See also Lia (2016, 549–550).
15. See also Haddad and Wind (2014).

nents in civil society. The sum of these four strategies was not to eliminate opposition but to atomize it: the post-Hama Ba'thist 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 radical networks.

After crushing the revolt 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, 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 all but ceased to exist inside Syria. Within a decade, the Asad regime was assured enough to begin releasing 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, 52). By the early 2000s, the movement had been rendered so "irrelevant" that when its leaders in exile released a new political manifesto, it mainly served "to remind everyone of [the Muslim Brotherhood's] existence" (56).

The Asad regime worked deliberately to prevent a successor organization to consolidate in the Muslim Brotherhood's place. It disarticulated the capitalist and religious classes through "a 'leveling egalitarianism,' where most social sectors were partially represented, partially repressed, and partially provided for by a distributive state" (Haddad and Wind 2014, 399). Even as the regime pursued economic liberalization to woo business elites (once financially supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood), "official institutions of the business community were suppressed and contained in favor of emerging informal state-business networks. . . [W]hat might have been a powerful coalition of business actors/interests has disseminated into many

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smaller independent groups with little political power" (Haddad 2012, 12). Public gatherings of more than five people were illegal, while, as one dissident noted, "there are hundreds of mosques in Damascus but not a single meeting hall for secular people" (Wieland 2012, 150).

Similarly, the Ba'th coopted Sunni religious networks and promoted an official regime Sunnism. In this it relied on "the principle of selection among existing clerical networks: whereas loyal groups were favoured, rebellious ones were marginalised, or destroyed" (Pierret 2012, 98). 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, 27).[16] Whereas the Muslim Brotherhood found mosque-based study groups its most fertile recruiting ground, loyalist alim received "a near-monopoly" on religious education after 1982 (Pierret 2012, 74). 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, 49). It promoted loyalists into leadership positions once occupied by Muslim Brotherhood sympathizers, most prominently Sheikh Muhammad Sa'id Ramadan al-Buti, a regime ally during the 1979-82 insurgency: "In exchange for helping the regime to defeat its Islamic opponents, al-Buti was endowed with informal leadership over Syrian Islam" (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 sought 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 Islamic activism: "[t]he absence of the MB created an opening for loosely organised but better funded Salafi

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16. See also Landis and Pace (2007, 51) and Zisser (2005).

groups" (Hokayem 2013, 94). A broad Islamic revival chronicled by Pierret (2012), 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, 32). In response, the regime paralleled its strategy of simultaneously co-opting and fragmenting moderate Sunni networks with an analogous strategy for Syrian jihadist elements. Specifically, it sought to buy off domestic extremists by re-directing and sponsoring Islamic extremism abroad:

> 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 Asad'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 (35–36).

The *mukhabarat* thoroughly controlled jihadist networks, from those formed in Saydnaya Prison where "Syrian intelligence services could identify new recruits, and from which they could gather information about Islamist networks," to their cultivation of bought-and-paid Salafist firebrands like imam Abu al-Qa'qa' "who offered a rallying point for the radical circles of Aleppo, facilitated their identification by security forces, and directed popular discontent toward external targets," to the fighter smuggling networks themselves, where one jihadist recruit discovered that even the "underground society in which dozens of jihadi militants moved from one house to another in the Syrian capital was a sham" controlled by Syrian intelligence (Rougier 2015, 90–91, 96, 93).

This strategy served a number of foreign and domestic policy goals. 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'thism's international and domestic legitimization (Leenders and Heydemann 2012, 141). Second, by supporting

Islamist extremists focused externally, the regime created incentives for extremists to avoid waging jihad in Syria, lest they lose a valuable state sponsor, and channeled them abroad. Finally, it allowed the regime to keep jihadist networks small and isolated from one another, and 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" (Lister 2016b, 33). Yet 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, 52). However, by tolerating the proliferation of radical networks with strong links to international pools of foreign fighters, regime policy itself sowed the seeds of the fragmented, foreign fighter-dominated Islamist component of the 2011-present Syrian insurgency.

Finally, the Asad regime took a sledgehammer approach to civil society and the secular opposition, employing fragmentation as a technology of control (Perthes 1995, 261–262). The regime demobilized opposition by enforcing "a politics of public dissimulation in which citizens act *as if* they revere their leader," which "*isolates Syrians from one another* [emphasis mine]; and [. . .] clutters public space with monotonous slogans and empty gestures" (Wedeen 1999, 6). By enforcing a widespread, if incomplete, compliance with claims that were *prima facie* literally unbelievable ("Asad is the country's 'premier pharmacist,'" (1)), the public cult rendered organized anti-regime collective action more difficult to achieve and sustain.[17]

However, the Asad regime did not rely solely on semiotic domination. It employed the same mixed strategy of co-option described above to fragment civil society. After Bashar al-Asad succeeded his father in 2000, Syria experienced its own Hundred Flowers Campaign, when the regime briefly permitted—or lured—an organized Civil Society Movement to push

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17. Wedeen (1999, 33–35) points to the 1982 massacre at Hama as a crucial turning point in the development of Hafez al-Asad's public cult.

the bounds of acceptable discourse, only to repress, imprison, and exile its activists in 2001 (Wieland 2012, 45–48). This left behind only Islamists and "'sub-political' single issue groups... the notion of civil society itself had become a taboo" (150). Only ten years later, links between the Civil Society Movement "and the new [Arab Spring] opposition were slight, if they existed at all" (183). Tellingly, *mukhabarat* infiltrated opposition groups intending to foment fragmentation. As Landis and Pace (2007, 49–50) describe it,

> Civil society in Syria is a wasteland... 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 added].

The four components of the Asad regime's policy discussed above are 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 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

By every measure on Bakke, Seymour, and Cunningham's (2012, 66) rubric, the Syrian Arab Spring rebellion is *highly fragmented*: it consists of at least hundreds of autonomous organizations, with power divided evenly between a half dozen major coalitions, and little by way of commonly-accepted institutional frameworks. A conservative counting from 2013 included seven major groups and umbrellas:[18] 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, 84). In the dataset constructed by Mosinger, Syria's rebel movement in 2013 was the most fragmented in the sample by a significant margin, surpassing the 1980s Afghani mujehedeen rebels for this dubious distinction (Mosinger 2018). The limited evidence available suggests that the Syrian rebel movement may be the most fragmented in history.

What explains this extraordinary fragmentation? Indeed, the Arab Spring rebellion's fragmentation in mid-2012 is especially puzzling, as its first-moving rebel group, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), rapidly consolidated several 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. With no roots in a pre-existing civilian social base, the FSA proved unable to expand rapidly beyond this initial recruitment pool, leaving civilians seeking to take up arms against the regime outside their ambit. Meanwhile, second-moving local and Islamist rebel groups seized on the opportunity afforded by the FSA's failure: they recruited civilians and grew rapidly. However, with the Muslim Brotherhood dismantled, Islamist groups formed within small,

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18. These 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.

disconnected local or dissident networks, and managed only limited steps toward cooperation. As a result, the rebel movement quickly fragmented and remained so over time.

Protest and Militarization

The Syrian civil war with large-scale protests molded after popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and other Arab nations. In February 2011, security forces' disproportionate response to anti-regime graffiti in Deraa—imprisoning and torturing the responsible schoolboys—sparked a revolutionary cascade (Hokayem 2013, 15; Pearlman 2016). Early mobilization in rebellious cities like Deraa and Homs was decentralized, with its underlying social base a bricolage of 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, 146). The resulting protests lacked leaders and "brokers" between different centers of protest. In contrast to Egypt and Tunisia, "no independent national trade union movements formed during the Syrian uprising" (Butcher, Gray, and Mitchell 2018, 307). Local Coordination Committees (LLCs) began to spring up that "rarely had organizational ties to the old political groups" and "generally do not initiate demonstrations themselves" (Lund 2012, 38). This organic process meant that, in the words of one activist, "we didn't know everyone involved; we couldn't check them or trust them absolutely" (Yassin-Kassab and al Shami 2016, 59). 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, 70).

The Free Syrian Army

The first publicly visible rebel organization, the Free Syrian Army (FSA), took shape in the summer of 2011 as deserting Syrian Army soldiers banded together into loosely-linked

hometown defense militias (Lister 2016a, 7–9).[19] 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 Asad regime.[20] 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 possess little more than a nominal, transactional relationship with the group's alleged hierarchy, often shifting in and out from underneath the FSA umbrella in a manner reminiscent of factional realignments in the Sudanese civil war (Seymour 2014). Some analysts even concluded that the FSA had been more a slogan than a structure (Lister 2016a, 17).

What explains the FSA's inability to impose unity on the Syrian rebel movement 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. 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, 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 operational ties with civilian dissidents and was neglectful of the necessity of doing so.

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19. It 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.
20. See, for example, description in White (2011).

Horizontal Patterns of Defection

The still small literature on military defection has taken interest in both Syrian cases presented in this paper. McLauchlin (2010) argued that the Asad 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). By the time of Hafez al-Asad's death in 2000, approximately 90% of all officers were Alawi (McLauchlin 2010, 341). These coup-proofing measures partially worked: no whole large unit defected in its entirety and almost no high-ranking officers or elite troops were among the deserters.[21] Rather, an individual-level decision to defect was repeated tens of thousands of times (Hokayem 2013, 61). 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).

Albrecht and Ohl (2016, 40, 47–48)associate such "horizontal desertions"[22] of rank-and-file soldiers with the "emergence of militias," although they do not specify the mechanism linking the two phenomena. 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, 140). Like Republican soldiers during the Spanish Civil War (McLauchlin 2014), Syrian soldiers deserted when their hometowns lay in physical or human terrain that was hostile to the regime. Here the collapse of the Ba'th Party's popular support in its old cross-sect peasant constituency proved critical: desertions from the Syrian Army picked up steam as the regime lost control of rural territory where most Sunni conscripts originated

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21. Co-ethnicity was not the only key factor: the regime also reportedly killed family members of defecting officers in order to deter additional defections ("Syria" 2012).

22. As opposed to"vertical" military splits, in which whole brigades under different commanders pledge loyalty to opposite sides of a conflict.

(Albrecht and Ohl 2016, 48; Yassin-Kassab and al Shami 2016, 84). Thus, the FSA units forming in villages and urban neighborhoods across Syria were not equivalent to pre-existing Syrian Army units, 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

Compounding 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, 127). As the U.S. began 'vetting' FSA units for potential military aid, this incentive intensified. In September 2012 Paul Schemm (2012) reported that an FSA media center displayed "extreme sensitivity to the topic" of foreign jihadist fighters; one rebel told him, "This revolution means everything to me, and if the world thinks that al-Qaida is involved, it is finished."

Consequently, the FSA failed to cultivate a civilian social base, with most FSA brigades recruiting only army deserters during this critical early period (Yassin-Kassab and al Shami 2016, 94).[23] For example, the Military Council of the FSA's al-Farouk Brigade contained

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23. Many locally-formed civilian groups claimed allegiance to the FSA, without necessarily implying operational coordination.

only three civilians out of twenty-four members (Littell 2015, 90). Conversely, the civilian activist leadership of the Local Coordination Committees collectively "decided to oppose militarisation, not to become involved with the armed uprising, but at the same time to build relationships with whatever armed groups appeared" (Yassin-Kassab and al Shami 2016, 93).[24] Neither the FSA nor the LCCs provided civilians with pathways to armed mobilization, but civilians mobilized anyway. And by necessity they did so locally, outside of the fragile, new, decentralized national structures discussed above.

The FSA's 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, 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" (134). Syrian Army deserters who did join 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," in 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," in Littell 2015, 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

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24. Relationships between LCCs and armed groups were as likely to be adversarial as cooperative; for example, LCCs documented and publicized FSA human rights violations (Yassin-Kassab and al Shami 2016, 125).

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, 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 (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). Rather, they bear more in common with coerced soldiering and kidnapping employed by predatory rebel groups such as the Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda. Though relatively few FSA fighters were recruited at gunpoint, a substantial proportion were forced to join the FSA to avoid regime retaliation for desertion. Thus, as the conflict stretched on and the al-Asad regime survived the initial uprising, many Syrian Army deserters discovered they had little ability to "free-ride" by sitting out the uprising (Kalyvas and Kocher 2007). Such FSA recruits were unlikely to share a deep commitment to the rebel cause with those who joined rebel groups voluntarily. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the FSA struggled with discipline and predatory behaviors from many of their brigades, who have been accused of "looting private property and businesses, engaging in vigilante justice, crimes and abuses, and alienating the local population by expecting preferential treatment" (Hokayem 2013, 92).

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. That meant that the FSA left large numbers of civilian dissidents outside their organization. Civilians seeking revolution, revenge, or security under arms had little choice but to join or start non-FSA factions.

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Homegrown Rebels

The FSA's disinclination to arm civilians led civilians to arm themselves. Many smaller armed groups first emerged in rural towns or urban neighborhoods as a homegrown collection of youths and regional notables oriented towards local defense. As one such fighter recalled, "It was a matter of self-defence. Everyone defended his own home, his own alley. Brigades were formed by the residents of one neighbourhood, or by a group of men who worked together. It was a spontaneous process" (Yassin-Kassab and al Shami 2016, 79).

These groups often assumed the FSA label, at least initially, but critically they lacked ties to the tenuous FSA infrastructure. As the FSA's battlefield effectiveness waned and its infrastructure began unraveling over time, the homegrown battalions often adopted Salafist identities instead to appeal to private financiers. Ultimately, "[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" (Abdul-Ahad 2013). Yet this outcome was not inevitable. As Timothy Wickham-Crowley wrote of Latin American rebels' more successful efforts to mobilize the peasantry, "much depended on who 'got there firstest with the mostest'" (Wickham-Crowley 1991b, 251). The Free Syrian Army never got there at all, and barely tried to.

The Islamists' Recruitment Pool

Had the FSA mobilized civilians 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, were not motivated by uncompromising Salafi principles and thus were potential FSA recruits. First, in spite of an Islamic resurgence in Syria, Salafi militancy remained deeply unpopular in Syria as com-

pared to neighboring states (Pierret 2012, 141–143). Second, Islamist rebel groups gained recruits more for their public goods provision, their "self-presented independence and internal cohesion," and their "superior military capabilities" (Lister 2016b, 85),[25] rather than their ideological stance. Third, as noted above, many Islamist groups adopted an Islamist stance primarily to gain access to financiers in the Gulf. Finally, a valuable 2014 survey of Syrian rebels by Mironova, Loubna, and Whitt 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-Asad forces (79% FSA vs. 79% Islamists), to defeat the al-Asad 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" (Mironova, Loubna, and Whitt 2014).[26]

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. In one telling example, Aron Lund describes of Katibat al-Ansar, a moderate faction within the SIF, composed of "activists and leaders in the early non-violent protest movement in Homs" (Lund 2013, 32); these civilian activists worked side-by-side with the FSA in Baba Amr but

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25. See Heger, Jung, and Wong (2017) on the link between rebel public goods provision and internal cohesion.

26. Mironova, 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.

were evidently left unrecruited.[27] Islamist groups thus benefited from a large recruitment pool; however, they suffered from a fragmented social base.

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 existence 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 for recruitment. Second, due to the Asad regime's efforts in dismantling broad religious networks, the Islamist rebels instead mobilized from small initial networks which lacked strong horizontal links even to other similar networks. 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.

Two types of Islamist rebel groups emerged by mid-2012: nationalist Salafi and foreign Salafist-jihadi organizations.[28] Many nationalist Salafi rebel groups seem 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 Saydnaya prison provides some evidence for this common origin. In early 2011, the regime released thousands of Islamist political prisoners in a mass amnesty, most likely to sow Islamist extremists among the as-yet non-violent protest movement, delegitimize the activists in international eyes, and justify a violent crackdown (Yassin-Kassab and al Shami 2016, 120). The released prisoners founded many of the most significant domestic Salafi groups: Aron Lund (2013), surveying the nationalist Salafi groups that merged under the powerful Syrian Islamist Front

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27. See Littell (2015).

28. Following Lund (2013, 14). These are ideal types: most Islamist rebel groups on the ground are complex admixtures of nationalist Salafi, foreign Salafist-jihadi, and homegrown groups.

(SIF) umbrella, identifies former Islamist prisoners of Saydnaya prison in the leadership of Ahrar al-Sham (Syria's largest domestic Islamist group), Liwa al-Haqq, Harakat al-Fajr, and Katibat Hamza bin Abdelmuttaleb.[29]

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, originally constructed in order to ferry foreign fighters from these locations through Syria. The largest jihadist group, Jabhat al-Nusra (renamed Jabhat Fateh al-Sham in 2016), offers a case in point: though the group is animated by Salafist-jihadi ideals and heavily recruits among foreign jihadists, Rich and Conduit (2015) argue it should be considered a local Syrian group as it was founded by Syrian-born returnees from Iraq's conflict.

In sum, while most Islamist rebel groups invested far more heavily in cultivating social bases than the FSA, each mobilized independently from 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.

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29. These four groups, particularly after the consolidation of smaller factions into the Katibat Hamza, represent far more than half the SIF's manpower, and biographical information about other SIF rebel groups' leaders remain mostly unknown. Aside from an unspecified number of former Saydnaya prisoners, Lund also identifies a homegrown commander, a businessman, two army deserters, and a "young religious scholar from a military family" as occupying leadership roles in these and other SIF rebel groups.

The Fragmented Islamist Social Base

A broad social base can subsume disparate dissident networks and rebel organizations under an umbrella. The Muslim Brotherhood served precisely this function during the 1976–1982 Islamist rebellion, when the the Joint Command incorporated diverse factions ranging from the Damascus branch's democratic Islamism to the Fighting Vanguard's radical jihadism. However, as discussed above, the Asad regime dismantled the Muslim Brotherhood and other broad social networks in that rebellion's aftermath. Thus, disparate Islamic networks could draw on few trust-bearing social ties with other rebellious actors—even those sharing a similar ideology.

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 continued to perform the mobilizing function expected of social bases. Ahrar al-Sham, the largest nationalist Salafi rebel group and hegemon of the SIF umbrella, owed its growth to its "early success in absorbing former Brotherhood families in the Idleb and Hama regions" (Lund 2013, 30). Absent the Syrian regime's suppression of the Muslim Brotherhood, it likely would have gathered a much greater proportion of the total opposition under its umbrella.

Comparative evidence from other Arab Spring cases further strengthens this counterfactual. 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, Islamist forces there have largely remained loyal to the Muslim Brotherhood, with other jihadist militant groups playing a minor role.

Alternate Explanations

Other hypotheses exhibit less explanatory power. In both cases compared in this study, the Asad regime employed indiscriminate repression, yet this drove 1976–1982 Islamist rebels to overcome their divisions. Both Islamist and Arab Spring rebel movements received extensive external support, yet again with differing outcomes. Only the nature of underlying social bases correctly predicts both the Islamist rebellion and the Arab Spring rebellion.

State repression does not adequately explain the Arab Spring rebellion's fragmentation. The Ba'th regime's response to the 2011 uprising was scripted after its successful suppression of the 1982 uprising: large-scale and indiscriminate violence. However, the two cases exhibit opposite outcomes. 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 Asad regime meant that a dominant, hierarchical group would have led the opposition to a swift demise." Yet other scholars argue that victorious rebel movements tend to have a dominant, hierarchical group despite suffering from military asymmetry at conflict onset (Krause 2014). An alternative perspective views indiscriminate state repression as incentivizing "cooperation under fire" among rebel factions (Staniland 2014, 50–51). This captures an important dynamic among Islamist factions from 1979 to 1982, but no similar process unified Arab Spring factions. Taken together, these two cases support McLauchlin and Pearlman's (2012) contention that repression shocks accelerate centripetal or centrifugal tendencies already present in a rebel movement.

External support helps explain Syria's rebel fragmentation, yet its role is often overstated in popular accounts. Baylouny and Mullins are certainly correct that the vast sums of resources flowing into Syria from "[e]xternal sponsors simultaneously fragmented the opposition and encouraged an Islamization and regionalization of that opposition" from 2013 onwards. This support has been both fungible and, as time wore on, evenly spread between

many different actors. Rebel groups sought funding from wealthy individuals long active in international Islamist and jihadi networks. According to this narrative, "financial incentives, unchecked and from multiple patrons—both states and individuals—resulted in opportunistic behavior among the Syrian opposition. Catering to sponsors and seeking personal gain significantly changed the character of the opposition, resulting in more divisions and changes in ideology" (Baylouny and Mullins 2017, 3).[30] This pattern encouraged opportunistic splintering and independent mobilization—that is, an endogenous vicious cycle of fragmentation and foreign funding.

However, there is also evidence that this diversification of external support *follows*, rather than explains, the rebel movement's initial fragmentation in early- to mid-2012.[31] External support prior to that point (the *terminus ante quem* in our search for the cause of the Syrian rebels' fragmentation) arrived 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, 70). Meanwhile, "the sums raised were however incommensurate with needs and expectations" (Hokayem 2013, 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" (84). In a comprehensive report on revenue sources in the Syrian civil war, Hallaj (2015, 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

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30. See also Berti and Paris (2014, 27) and Pearlman (2013). Similarly, Byman (2013, 995) concludes that "outside support has made rebels more formidable, but it has also decreased their incentives to cooperate."

31. As Baylouny and Mullins (2017, 30) write, "Money did not accomplish this [fragmentation] alone—other factors were clearly present." My goal is not to displace this common explanation but to identify those other factors and demonstrate how they acted in combination with external support.

artifacts), as well as kidnapping and smuggling.[32] Only after battle-lines 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.

The 1976–1982 rebellion relied extensively on external support without experiencing fragmentation comparable to that plaguing the Arab Spring rebels. We can make sense of this by drawing on Paul Staniland's 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 (Staniland 2012). Crucially, because the Muslim Brotherhood was already the hegemonic organization within the Syrian rebel movement, it monopolized external flows from diverse sources. By contrast, the FSA was neither socially coherent nor organizationally robust, which allowed the mobilization (or splintering) of countless other rebel organizations that subsequently sought own source of foreign financing (Hokayem 2013, 84). Accentuating this, more recent scholarship has cast doubt on the conventional wisdom that external support, whether from a single or many sources, impacted the cohesion of Syrian rebel groups on the ground. Thomas Pierret, surveying Islamist groups backed by a wide range of sponsors, found that underlying "social structure" determined whether groups would fragment: "In all cases, the independent variable determining the success or failure of these groups [in avoiding fragmentation] has not been the level of external support they receive, but the nature of their leadership: tightly knit networks of long-standing partners on the one hand, as opposed to loose ad hoc coalitions on the other hand" (Pierret 2016, 26, 28).

Beyond the Syrian cases, 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

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32. Similarly, the 1976–1982 rebels had "sometimes turned to bank robberies, muggings and theft to finance their activities" (Lia 2016, 548).

(Hegghammer 2010), the deeply-rooted Taliban, founded by a broad social network of Islamic scholars and students, now dominates the rebel movement there. External support is part, but by no means all, of the explanation for the Syrian rebel movement's fragmentation.

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 and Paul Staniland I assert that rebel organization has a strong social basis (Petersen 2001; Staniland 2014). As such, the extent of contemporary Syria's rebel fragmentation cannot be understood without examining how recruitment patterns and social bases affected the movement's organizational trajectory. 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, reflects 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. Though this paper argues that, in the first instance, rebel movement fragmentation results from the sort and extent of networks that comprise its social base, it also argues that purposive state behavior can alter the shape of those networks. 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 "social base" of the insurrection itself (Staniland 2014).

Finally, this paper allows for a reassessment of FSA tactics and US policy in Syria. The structural dimension to my argument suggests that, given decades of regime policy towards

civil society, little could have been done to avoid a fragmented Syrian rebel movement. However, my discussion of strategic interaction suggests that much could have been done to make the rebel movement *less* fragmented. I point to two critical, interrelated errors. First, FSA units might have pursued a strategy of local embedding by aggressively recruiting civilians (most of whom had, after all, performed mandatory military service), officially incorporating civilian networks (especially Islamic networks), and building governance structures in liberated territory (rather than outsourcing governance to civilian LCCs). Disembeddedness from local communities may help explain many FSA units' later indiscipline and predation when economic opportunities arose. By contrast, domestic and foreign jihadists returning from far-flung theaters drew on decades of experience in Islamist guerrilla movements, allowing them to mobilize civilians even in areas with substantial FSA presence. Nonetheless, neither set of actors could unify Syria's fragmented civilian constituencies.

Second, I agree with analysts and Syrian activists that inadequate military aid, especially in the early stages of militarization, damaged efforts to consolidate the rebel movement (Lister 2016b, 2; Yassin-Kassab and al Shami 2016, 87, 193–4). The US vetting program, and the FSA's concomitant preoccupation with Islamist infiltration, squandered the FSA's first-mover advantages. Drawing on lessons learned in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Egypt but incorrectly applied to Syria, the US sought to keep weapons from radical Islamist groups. In fact, Syrian Islam was uniquely moderate and Islamic networks could have been harnessed as a cohesive mobilizing force. Moreover, by assuming armed groups held fixed ideological preferences, the vetting program neglected an opportunity to *shape* those preferences: most armed groups ultimately molded their ideology after that of their external sponsors. Rather than keeping arms from radical Islamists, the vetting program vacated the field to them. An abundance of caution, rather than foolhardiness, produced the very outcome US policymakers and Syrian activists most feared.

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