Alliance formation in civil wars, by Fotini Christia, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, 343 pp., $32.99 (paperback), ISBN 9781107683488, $95.00 (hardback), ISBN 9781107023024

Despite having become something of a platitude, it is understood to be a fact that the majority of violent conflicts since the end of the Cold War are not between states, but are civil wars, fought often only indirectly over the control of territory per se but primarily over ideational differences, be they ethnic, religious, ideological, or a combination thereof. However, experience from the complex dynamics of ever-shifting alliances, fractionalization, and ethno-nationalist elites manipulating group identities for their own material ends in the wars of the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union, Western, Central, and Eastern Africa, the Middle East, and Central Asia have led scholars to question whether these ideational conflicts should be considered separate phenomena at all. Indeed, it has been argued that Robert Kaplan's infamous "ancient hatreds" (in his *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History*, 1994) obscure conflict causes and patterns that neo-realists claim remain universally valid for all conflicts since the early nineteenth century: that is, all conflict in the anarchic international system is about the egoistic and rational pursuit of material interests. Although addressing the causes of these conflicts only indirectly, Fotini Christia's *Alliance Formation in Civil Wars* aims to be the most contemporary and comprehensive contribution to this debate.

Christia, an associate professor in politics at MIT, takes the complex dynamics of alliance formation between ethnic groups and fractionalization within them in Afghanistan and Bosnia as a starting point to generate a general, universally applicable theory of identity conflicts since the dawn of the modern international system. As someone who has a less intimate knowledge of the Afghanistan case, I thought her discussion of the conflict dynamics in Afghanistan more compelling than her section on Bosnia; in particular, the account of how shifting alliances and fractionalization within what then became the "Northern Alliance" had first led to the Taliban dominating most of the country by the second half of the 1990s is most illuminating. The problem with the study, it can be argued, is the instrumentalist theory Christia derives from these case studies and then tries to verify by application to large *n*-studies on civil wars from 1816 to the present. From the outset, matters are portrayed as overly straightforward. Rather than bothering with complex social theories on identity formation, the author claims:

> we are arguably going to be just as well off going with one rule alone: the expectation that warring groups will aim to side with the winner, so long as they can have a credible guarantee that the winner will not strip them of power once victory is accomplished; (p. 3)

in other words, the complex dynamics of alliance formation and fractionalization in civil wars can be exclusively reduced to the egoistic and rational pursuit of material interests by local ethno-nationalist elites and "identity entrepreneurs". Consequently, the whole arsenal of neo-realist/Rational Choice Theory explanatory models that come with such an approach is deployed, from the often belabored security dilemma, to bandwagoning, to a so-called minimum winning coalition logic. Ideational factors are posited to be endogenous to these conflicts, and parties' social identities, beyond constituting the group as a primordialist pre-given, are relegated to the political sphere only where they serve as convenient tools for ethno-nationalist elites to justify their actions ex post. "Elites pick their allies first based on tactical dictates, and then look to their identity repertoire for characteristics they share with their new friends … that would allow for the construction of justifying narratives" (p. 46). As has been pointed out elsewhere for so narrow

and social reductionist an instrumentalism, its logic is not only overly simplistic and tautological, the masses are treated as "passive creatures prone to easy manipulation ... they are largely viewed as homogeneous, ignorant, dependent conglomerates, with child-like qualities" (Malešević, *The Sociology of Ethnicity* (2004), p. 123). It simply fails to capture, in Benedict Anderson's famous words, "the fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings" (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Spread and Origins of Nationalism* (2006), p. 7). Equally questionable is Christia's openly professed primordialism that treats ethnic groups as "relatively fixed" pre-givens (p. 8), or at best Wendtian corporate identities, without once elaborating why such presumptions can be epistemologically made or why, despite all these shifting alliances, fragmentations and fractionalizations, it is still ontologically tenable to treat those ethnic groups as fixed, substantive, and distinct units of analysis.

The strong point of this study is clearly its empirical dimension. The data the author has painstakingly collected and the sheer number of interviews conducted in field research in Afghanistan and the Western Balkans over the course of almost a decade – often under extremely testing conditions – is truly impressive. The theoretical value of its contribution to the field of conflict studies may have greater appeal for International Relations scholars in North America with a more pronounced rationalist/positivist bent. Contrary to Christia though, "reflectivists" such as myself would argue that ultimately, all identity conflicts are fought over competing but constructed belief systems, in the case of ethnic conflicts caused by and part of an ethnicized discourse, in which politics of ethnic division are performatively enacted by elites and the masses alike. We scholars trying to make sense of these conflicts are co-protagonists, in so far as we contribute to their enactment through our narratives of their causes, patterns, and dynamics, through portraying the conflict we set out to study in a specific way. Whether one subscribes then to a given narrative of these ethnic conflicts, as with, for example, Christia's instrumentalist account, is as much a subjective matter of belief as is a constituency believing in the ethnicized political rhetoric of the ethno-nationalist elites this book puts center stage.

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An enemy we created: the myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda merger in Afghanistan, by Alex Strick Van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2012, notes, definitions, biographies, bibliography and index, i-ix + 538 pp., US$35 (hardback), ISBN 978-0199927319. US$24.95 (paperback), ISBN 978-0199325252

This volume sheds light on the relationship of two highly secretive terrorist organizations, the Afghan Taliban and al Qaeda. Two young European researchers – allegedly the only Westerners to have lived in Kandahar, and to have shared apartments with Afghan friends for some five years – are refuting media claims that the Afghan Taliban and al Qaeda "represent a broad-based ideological movement ... have shared histories, have inter-married and [Afghan Taliban] pose an equal if not greater threat [than the al Qaeda] to international

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