

Alliance Formation in Civil Wars

Fotini Christia. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
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As recent and ongoing civil wars such as those in Syria, Central African Republic, Yemen, South Sudan and elsewhere demonstrate, the international community must improve its understanding of large-scale communal conflict as the first step toward crafting responses aimed at fostering sustainable political outcomes and ending the violence. Observing that long-lasting civil wars entail 'the rapid formation and disintegration of alliances among warring groups, as well as the fractionalization within them', Fotini Christia sets out to explain the shifting of alliances within the Afghan civil war, and to use that explanation as the basis for a broader theory on alliance formation and disintegration in multi-party civil wars (p. 3). Christia, an associate professor of political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, concludes that 'the relative power distribution between and within the various warring groups in a given conflict is the primary driving force behind alliance formation, alliance changes, as well as group splits and takeovers' (p. 4). Her analysis confirms the importance of understanding the political nature of civil wars and the fundamental desire among factions 'to be in a coalition large enough to attain victory while small enough to ensure maximum political payoffs' (p. 6).

The author conducted in-depth research on conflicts in Afghanistan and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and examined data on 53 multi-party civil wars (which she defines as involving three or more domestic actors) that occurred between 1816 and 2007. This data was relevant to 'the number and identity of warring factions, their alliance choices, and the degree and type of fractionalization they experienced', and was used to determine whether and how multi-party wars differ from other conflicts (p. 17). In Part I of her analysis she develops a theoretical framework that identifies relative power as the main determining factor for alliance formation and fractionalisation among warring groups. Although Christia acknowledges a role for ethnic, religious or ideological identities in the formation of wartime alliances, she argues that identity narratives are largely invented by elites to generate emotional and psychological support for political purposes. In Part II, in a chapter on the Afghan Communist–Mujahedin War (1978–89), the author observes that warring factions fought each other nearly as much as they fought the Soviets and their communist client government. She observes further that 'alliances tended to hold together when the opposing force was strong and would break apart over issues of strategy and postwar political control when the opposing force was weak' (p. 124). Part III uses the civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992–95 to demonstrate that these insights

apply more broadly to multi-party civil wars, while the 1941–45 Bosnian civil war serves to demonstrate the theory's relevance to civil wars driven by factors other than ethnic identity. Part IV extends the author's theory further still as Christia concludes that in all of the 53 multi-party civil wars considered in her research (comprising 397 warring parties), alliance behaviour was driven by relative power assessments and the fundamental desire of groups 'to be on the side that is victorious, while also ensuring that they get maximum possible returns from their deal as alliance partners' (p. 213).

Although some may argue that Christia's neo-realist framework is not comprehensive because it undervalues the ideological and psychological dimensions of civil wars, the author's argument is both persuasive and fundamental to understanding alliance formation and disintegration. The author's observation in the book's conclusion that the alliance shifts in Iraq's Anbar province in favour of the Iraqi government (and then against it) have been driven by relative power considerations seems to be borne out by events since the book's publication. Anyone interested in or responsible for policies aimed at resolving multi-party civil wars stands to gain from close consideration of Christia's argument.