“Cohesive Stalemates” and the Logic of Insurgent Solidarity: Ethiopia’s Long War in Historical Perspective

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This paper uses original quantitative and qualitative data from Ethiopia's civil wars to develop and test a theory of rebel fragmentation. I argue that organizational performance affects the emergence of factional infighting in rebel organizations in unique and novel ways. While territorial losses increase the likelihood of fragmentation, so do territorial gains. The implication is that battlefield stalemates possess unique properties that promote organizational cohesion and provide the only sustainable basis for cooperation in war. I term such contexts "cohesive stalemates." The paper pushes the limits of an emerging literature on the internal politics of insurgent groups by demonstrating how the character and coherence of rebel organizations is highly sensitive to the ebb and flow of war.

In the first few months of 2009, Somalia’s primary anti-government insurgent group, Al Shabaab, was locked in a war of attrition with the UN backed, Transitional Federal Government of Somalia (TFG). It had been a long road for Al Shabaab, but the tide seemed to be turning in its favor. Scarcely three years before, in the wake of a debilitating Ethiopian offensive, Al Shabaab’s fortunes looked bleak; yet now, with the Ethiopians gone, and the TFG occupying no more than few city blocks of the capital Mogadishu, the insurgents had reason to be hopeful.

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Yet 2009 did not end on a high note for Al Shabaab. In late December, a dispute between two Mogadishu-based officials developed into a full-fledged organizational split that threatened to jeopardize Al Shabaab’s hard-fought gains. Though the organization’s Islamist ideology—with its emphasis on religious solidarity and devotion to cause—was designed to inoculate it from the sectarianism that plagued so many of Somalia’s militant groups in the past, Al Shabaab was proving to be no exception.

So what happened to Al Shabaab in the winter of 2009? What accounts for the outbreak of factional infighting and fragmentation in an ostensibly cohesive rebel group? Organized rebellion is a dangerous undertaking where death can be the price of failure. With such steep penalties, rebels have strong incentives to maintain organizational solidarity and preserve a united front, for if they cannot get along together, they may go down apart. Yet despite the incentives to cooperate, they often cannot: in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Liberia and Sudan, in conflicts large and small, rebels have waged war against external adversaries with much success, only to unravel from within.

Although rebel fragmentation is a ubiquitous feature of civil wars—both past and present—and is essential to understanding the duration (Cunningham 2006), intensity (Pearlman 2008), and outcomes of contemporary civil conflicts, there have been few systematic, theoretically driven analyses of this phenomenon. While historical and anthropological literatures on particular rebel organizations provide substantive insights, political science has relatively little to say. Of course, the paucity of research is not surprising, as the questions we ask are often driven by the data available.

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3 An unpublished data-set I have put together of over 170 African rebel organizations—presented at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington DC in August 2008—reveals that 33 percent of post-colonial African rebel organizations have yielded independent, fully operational splinter groups (Christia 2008) and (Mesquita 2008) are notable exceptions.
4 (Kalyvas, The Ontology of “Political Violence”: Action and Identity in Civil Wars 2003) makes a similar point, although framed somewhat differently. (Blattman and Miguel 2010) are more explicit about these omissions in the social science literature on civil war. (Johnson 2003) account of the Sudanese People’s Liberation Army is one historical account that delves deeply into the issue of rebel fragmentation.
In the face of critical security concerns rebel organizations have powerful incentives to feign organizational unity, withhold information, or misrepresent the facts. Even long after conflicts have concluded data is rarely reliable, as popular narratives, and the reputational concerns of the combatants themselves, weigh heavily on the way past events are remembered and retold.

This paper offers a modest corrective. It seeks to explain the occurrence of fragmentation within rebel organizations by offering a clear, falsifiable theory with explicit causal mechanisms. It then tests that theory through an analysis of original statistical data on Ethiopia’s civil wars, and a more comprehensive longitudinal case study of one of the major protagonists in Ethiopia’s civil conflicts— the Eritrean Liberation Front (1960-1982) – based on interviews with ex-combatants, color-coded district level maps, and extensive archival research. I conclude with a careful discussion of alternative explanations.

The evidence suggests that organizational performance structures intra-organizational cooperation, its maintenance, and its collapse. While significant battlefield losses – measured as a function of territory – encourage fragmentation by creating a series of pernicious commitment problems, gains drive fragmentation by exacerbating preference divergence. Somewhat counter-intuitively, stalemate or sustained periods of particularly slow marginal battlefield change, promote intra-organizational cohesion and solidarity. I dub these favorable conditions for intra-organizational rebel cohesion “cohesive stalemates.”

By describing how three very different military contexts – gains, losses, and stalemate – create different incentives for cooperation in war, and identifying the unique political implications of military stalemate, the paper pushes the limits of an emerging literature on the internal politics of organized rebellion. At a broader level, the paper provides a rare window into how the normal
processes of warfare affect the solidarity and commitment that is crucial to the trajectory of modern civil conflicts.

Organizations, Coalitions, and Elites

The framework I employ begins with the assumption that rebel organizations are amalgamations of identifiable groups that possess distinct interests. To a greater or lesser degree, they are coalitions united by the pursuit of a common goal – the violent contestation of state power – rather than an identical set of preferences.6

At the apex of each of these groups – respective coalition members if you will – are a class of elites who command the loyalty of rank and file sub-group members. Though the source of their authority differs, these elites engender allegiances that provide a capacity to mobilize those around them. Similar to what Charles Tilly’s has called “political entrepreneurs,” who “specialize in activation, connection, coordination, and representation” of particular intra-organizational constituencies, these individuals are the focal points of collective action, and thus cooperation in war hinges on their behavior (Tilly, The Politics of Collective 2003).7

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6 This view of rebel organizations as internally complex and heterogeneous has increasingly come into vogue in both academic and policy circles, and draws its intellectual inspiration from behavioral theories of the firm first developed by economists in the early 1960's. For an example of this work, see (Cyert and March 1963)

7 Of course, careful readers will note that the focus on organizational elites seems arbitrary and assumes more than it explains: surely, the motives and behavior of rank and file combatants are in many ways unique, and distinct from, the organizational elites who lead them. Can we assume away a unity of thought and action between elite and rank and file combatants? Robert Michels (Michels 1968), the well-known theorist of political organization, was the first to underline the most persuasive grounds for this assumption. To Michels, almost all political and social organizations converge on “oligarchy,” where a select few dominate decision making processes. The reason for this state of affairs, Michel contended, is because in large political organizations members must delegate decision making authority to elites in the interests of efficiency: Since mass participation in decision making would be unwieldy and chaotic, “oligarchy” is the only way to manage an organization’s affairs. In the context of rebel organizations, the implication of Michels’s argument is clear: rebels cede authority to sub-group elites who make strategic decisions on their behalf. Focusing on elite behavior within rebel organizations is warranted, the logic goes, because no organization – particularly military organization – can function without
The fragmentation of a rebel organization logically represents the rupture of an existing coalition, or in game theoretic terms, the *breakdown of a cooperative equilibrium* where an equilibrium is defined as “any state of affairs which no actor has an individual incentive to disturb” (Reeve 2003). Whereas at \( t+1 \) the constituent units of a rebel organization are able to adhere to the cooperative status quo, at \( t+2 \) they cannot, since it is no longer in the interests of one or more of the constituent units to do so.

The obvious question that follows from these representations – and the most important to this paper – is *why and how the conditions that sustained the cooperative equilibrium within a rebel organization in one period, no longer obtain in the next.* Without a theory of these shifting “conditions,” one cannot construct a theory of the breakdown of a cooperative equilibrium, and hence, fragmentation.

There are several implications that follow from the recognition that explaining rebel fragmentation requires a careful exposition of changes in the conditions that underpin the cooperative equilibrium within a rebel coalition. First, path dependent arguments that focus on the initial conditions that rebel organizations confront in explaining behavior downstream are ill suited to investigating the collapse of the cooperative equilibrium within a rebel organization. While path dependent arguments would be useful in understanding differences in the propensity of certain kinds of rebel groups to fragment, they cannot explain variation in fragmentation across time within groups since the causal variables they identify do not change temporally. ⁸

Second, the reverse is also true. While the framework adopted can explain temporal variations in the fragmentation of rebel organizations – that is, why these organizations fragment when they do – it is

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⁸ For the best example of this sort of work in the civil war literature see (Reno 2007) and (Weinstein, Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence 2007)
not particularly well-suited to explaining significant cross-sectional variation in the fragmentation of rebel organizations. Thus, I make no claims in this paper about why some kinds of rebel organizations, on average, fragment more than others.

Third, the model proposed is partial in that framing fragmentation as a breakdown of a cooperative equilibrium places analytic primacy on the “motives” and “incentives” to fragment, rather than the “capacity.” This is an important point. While rebel organizations can be viewed as a coalition of groups that voluntarily contract into a cooperative arrangement for the production of a joint good, they are “organizations” nonetheless; they possess hierarchies and the ability to sanction members who seek to disrupt the cooperative equilibrium. Thus, the fragmentation of rebel organizations is not simply about how the incentives to cooperate may change, but about the failure of power, threats, and coercion to enforce the organizational status quo. In other words, a complete theory of fragmentation would not only focus on the demand to fragment, but also its supply.

**Gains, Losses, and the Shifting Incentives to Cooperate**

So what exactly drives the breakdown of cooperative relations within rebel organizations?

Theories of punctuated equilibrium posit that environmental shocks are the central cause of dramatic organizational and institutional change.⁹ Such shocks produce “revolutionary” moments where the structures and processes of organizations, hitherto static, go into rapid and dramatic flux. This paper picks up on this general theme, by focusing on how military shocks create contexts conducive to factional infighting, fragmentation, and the rapid re-ordering of rebel groups.

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⁹ See (Gersick 1991), for a good review and application of this literature to organizations. The literature on punctuated equilibrium is vast. For a well-known application in American politics, see (Baumgartner and Jones 1993)
My core claim is that organizational performance affects the cohesion of rebel organization in novel and unique ways. More specifically, I argue that *ceteris paribus*, rebel organizations are most susceptible to fragmentation at two critical moments: the first, when they have incurred *significant* losses, and the second when they have achieved *significant* gains. The implication is that periods of military stalemate, or particularly slow, marginal battlefield change, tend to promote organizational cohesion and underpin organizational stability.

The language of “gain” and “loss” is not without import, for the argument proposes that what triggers cooperation breakdown is not so much the military position a rebel organization occupies in absolute terms – say near victory or failure – but rather the change in military position relative to some recent reference point or identifiable status quo. This is a critical if trying to predict exactly where in the evolution of a conflict rebel organizations fall apart.

**Gains and the Origins of Preference Divergence**

So what are the causal mechanisms linking situations of gain and loss, to the dependent variable of interest, fragmentation? My theory suggests the mechanisms differ depending on whether a gain, or loss, has been incurred.

In order to understand the basis of the argument we need to address the critical issue of actor preferences. My starting point is the work of Realists in the field of international relations, who argue that states have a hierarchy of preferences and seek to satisfy their core preference above, and sometimes at the expense, of all others. Arthur Stein (Stein 1990) typifies the insights of this perspective when he suggests that states have lexical preferences where actors “maximize in
sequence rather than make trade-offs…and thus choose an option that maximizes the main objective regardless of how it does on secondary ones.”

For Realists and the states they theorize about, this “main objective” is survival (Waltz 1979) (Mearsheimer 2001). Given the nature of the international system where “self-help” and “anarchy” are organizing principles, survival concerns must be paramount since failure to guarantee this objective can be fatal. For our purposes here, Realism’s key intuition is this: in insecure environments, where existential threats loom large, actors will strive to secure immediate survival above all else.

The intuition of IR Realists about hierarchical preferences is echoed in comparative politics. James Scott, in writing about the dynamics of peasant rebellion in South East Asia, notes that the political economy of peasant life is characterized by pervasive uncertainty about crop yields (Scott 1976). The precarious nature of food supply, in turn, leads the peasantry to a “security first” outlook in which they spurn risky innovation that could lead to large improvements in aggregate yields in favor of lower yields that guarantee survival. As with states in the Realist version of international politics, environments characterized by systemic insecurity, produce a behavioral logic wherein the management of security risk becomes an objective that supersedes all others.

Somewhat fortuitously, the idea of hierarchical preferences is the implicit basis of much of Realist theory about why alliances form and why they fall apart. Since survival is at the top of the hierarchy of objectives, states “balance against threats,” and thus “the internal cohesion of an alliance depends to a large extent on the intensity and duration of the threat” (Walt 1987). With a coalition’s raison
d’etre gone – guaranteeing security in an insecure environment – it becomes difficult for that
coalition to cohere.

Yet how is this relevant to understanding fragmentation within rebel organizations? My sense is that
ideas of hierarchical preferences and uncertainty about survival are useful in thinking about the
conditions that sustain cooperation in a rebel organization. Since civil wars are anarchic
environments where self-help is the rule, it may be the case that the constituent units of a rebel
organization – and by extension the leaders of these distinct units – are in a position analogous to
that of states in the international system. What this means, if we follow the comparison to its logical
conclusion, is that when rebel organizations face insecurity and uncertainty about short term,
immediate survival, its constituent units have incentives to ensure they maintain a united front. Since
the primary objective of members of rebel coalition is survival, the constituent units will put their
divergent preferences on a whole range of issues aside to face the common challenge.

Of course, wars can, and often do, turn quite rapidly. As rebel organizations incur military gains,
often quite rapidly through a set of major shocks, the conditions that sustained cooperation begin to
shift. Surging militarily, rebels no longer perceive grave uncertainty about immediate survival. As a
result, the hierarchy of objectives within a rebel organization is re-ordered. With immediate survival
guaranteed in the minds of rebels – a basic objective that everybody in the rebel coalition could unite
around – other issues about which rebels have heterogeneous preferences increase in importance
and dominate the issue arena. Under such circumstances, the incentives to cooperate have been
significantly altered. No longer pre-occupied with the common concern for survival, constituent
units of a rebel organization begin to take actions that undermine cooperation in ways that
heretofore they had not— approaching potentially divisive issues with greater vigor and intensity,
bargaining harder, and even resorting to coercion. *Ceteris paribus*, consensus gives way to division, and the cooperative equilibrium collapses.

In this scenario, the fragmentation of a rebel organization is one of preference divergence. Yet, critics may ask, preference divergence over what? The model is agnostic over what sort issues drive preference divergence precisely because the issues in contention vary across groups and within groups over time. As the comparative analysis will show, by dint of history and circumstance, the lines of cleavage within rebel organizations are often different; ideology, ethnicity, religion, personality conflicts, can all be raw material that determine the anatomy of a particular rebel organization. Yet the underlying issues over which preference divergence emerge are less important than the recognition that this divergence happens at certain moments and not others.

**Losses and the Origins of Commitment Problems**

The notion that actors within rebel organizations attempt to maximize outcomes on the core objective of survival, has implications for fragmentation in situations quite different from those in which rebel organizations have achieved significant military gains. However, the mechanism here is one of credible commitment rather than preference divergence.

What do we mean by credible commitment? Problems of credibility tend to emerge in situations in which one or more parties to a formal or informal agreement cannot reliably commit to performing the obligations that agreement entails in the future. According to Shepsle (1991), commitments can be credible in two possible ways. First, commitments can be *imperatively* credible if the participants are unable to do otherwise because either they will be coerced to do so by an external authority or lack the means and resources to ignore obligations. Second, and more important for the argument here, commitments can be *motivationally* credible if the participants expect to receive sufficient
rewards for them to honor the commitment at the time of performance – thus the commitment is incentive compatible and self-enforcing.

The constituent units of a rebel organization contract into an organizational arrangement on the understanding that in the production of violence for the pursuit of broad political objectives, they are maximizing on the core objective of survival in an insecure and uncertain environment. Thus at their core, rebel organizations are institutions that manage risk. Yet cooperation of this sort also entails possible costs. While rebel organizations and the coalitions that underpin them provide collective security, when they fail the future survival of its members can be imperiled.

Simply put, rebel organizations must be credible in demonstrating that they have a reasonable chance of surviving into the future. Seen in this light, the consequences of significant military losses for rebel organizations are obvious. With expectations about the future substantially altered, the constituent units of a rebel organization calculate that continuing to cooperate under the status quo will likely lead to their individual demise in the next period. As a consequence they seek to challenge the cooperative status quo, with fragmentation the frequent outcome. Since a rebel organization can collectively no longer credibly commit to providing basic benefits it was contracted to provide – survival – the risks of continued cooperation become prohibitively high.

Such an argument does not necessarily mean that those who challenge the status quo do better than if they continued to observe the cooperative equilibrium. In a world of perfect information, they would always do better. However, in the context of war in which incomplete information about capabilities is widespread – what Karl von Clausewitz famously called the “fog of war” (Clauswitz 1968) – what rebels believe to be the best course of action in preserving their survival and managing risk, may not be.
“Cohesive Stalemates” and the Origins of Cooperation

The implication of the arguments offered here, is that there is a static, stalemated middle ground where rebel organizations tend to cohere. Yet what exactly differentiates, at the micro-level, the stalemated military context from situations of gains and loss I have described? How does it affect the behavior of rebels?

The idea here, is that stalemated contexts are uniquely positioned to provide the basis for cooperation because it allows two conditions to be true: 1) organization members perceive that there is significant insecurity and are uncertain about survival and 2) organization members perceive that there is a reasonable chance that the organization can continue to provide the benefits it was contracted to provide if the constituent units of a rebel organization abide by the cooperative status quo.

Since survival is at the top of the hierarchy of objectives, cooperation in such contexts makes perfect sense: rebels can realize the obvious gains of cooperation, with the recognition that this cooperation will not imperil their survival in the future. Cooperation is thus incentive compatible and self-enforcing. Such contexts can be referred to as “cohesive stalemates.”

The obvious implication of such arguments is that there is a connection between the maintenance of cooperation in war and the origins of cooperation in war. Indeed, it would seem to make sense that the conditions that sustain a cooperative equilibrium will be similar to the conditions under which it originates.

As has already been suggested, rebel organizations and the coalitions that sustain them emerge because they allow potential organization members to maximize on the core objective of survival. Why? Applying the tenets of organizational economics, civil war theorists have recognized the value
of organization in capturing the benefits of economies of scale and reducing transaction costs (Weinstein, Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence 2007). My contention here is that rebels with heterogeneous preferences tend to coalesce under a hierarchical organizational framework when they are uncertain about future survival, but consider the new organizational framework to have a reasonable chance of surviving into the future. While the early evolution of a rebel organization does not resemble the situation of stalemate I have described, such contexts evoke similar perceptions about the uncertainty of immediate survival, but the plausibility that if the coalition stays united it can survive.

In fact, many observers of civil wars note that insurgents, in the early days of war, have the strategic advantage because they are first-movers; they can pick targets at their choosing, without having to deal with a military that is sufficiently deployed and prepared (Kalyvas, The Logic of Violence in Civil War 2006). Therefore insurgents feel as though there is a legitimate chance at success. At the same time, having never truly encountered the long arm of the state in its most serious and violent manifestations, there is uncertainty about the true military potential of the organization and ambiguity about the immediate survival of its members.11 Such an environment would seem to be fertile ground for cooperation as it engenders similar incentives to periods of military stalemate.

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11 This point is echoed by Che Guevara in his discussion of early “guerilla strategy”: “At the outset, the essential task of the guerilla fighter is to keep himself from being destroyed” (Guevara 1961, 15)
Diagram 1: Outline of Argument and Causal Mechanisms

Gains, Losses and Absolute Values

One should note that the theory I have outlined is fundamentally a theory about perceptions and expectations— in particular, rebel’s perceptions of military gains and losses, and their expectations about the future of the organization. When rebels incur losses they believe that the organization cannot survive, and when they achieve gains, they conjecture that problems of acute insecurity have been resolved. But it is important to note at a theory of perceptions and expectations that hinges on the language of gains and losses implies that what shapes rebel’s behavior is change relative to some reference point or status quo, rather than where a rebel organization sits in absolute terms. In other
words, in explaining the timing of fragmentation it matters less whether a rebel organization is close
to winning or losing, but rather, \textit{whether it is incurring a gain or loss at a given time.}

Yet does this make sense? Shouldn’t the absolute position of a rebel organization affect perceptions
and expectations about the nature of external threats and the sustainability of the organizational
status quo? My response is simple, but also counter-intuitive. Military stalemates – no matter where
an organization may sit along the continuum of victory to defeat – convey very specific information
to the constituent units of a rebel organization. On the one hand, the ability to maintain the military
status quo reflects organizational viability both now and in the future, and thus prevents the
emergence of commitment problems; yet on the other hand, the inability to make positive progress
suggests that the organization still faces very real collective threats, thus minimizing preference
divergence. Simply put, stalemated military contexts have unique properties, and provide the
conditions that make cooperation durable, irrespective of an organization’s absolute or overarching
military position.

This intuition is consistent with prospect theory, in which a key principal – as reflected in the work
of Kahneman and Tversky (Kahneman and Tversky 1979) and later echoed by political scientists like
Jervis (Jervis, The Implications of Prospect Theory for Human Nature and Values 2004) and
McDermott (McDermott 2004) – is that an actor’s absolute position is not as important in their
calculation of utility and welfare as a recent change in position.

Furthermore, it would seem to make sense that gains and losses convey important information
about the future prospects of rebel organizations, because military change indicates the direction an
organization is trending. Since in and of itself, absolute military position says little about trends,
rebels look to the direction of military change in forecasting and making crucial decisions about
cooperation.
Thus, a rebel organization that is close to defeat, but stalemated, will be less likely to fragment than an organization whose overall position is better but is incurring a significant loss. Similarly, a rebel organization that is on the verge of victory, but stalemated, will be less likely to fragment than an organization that is doing moderately well but has experienced significant recent gains.  

Having laid out my argument, the central hypotheses of the theory of gains and losses are as follows:

*H1: Gains and losses will be associated with fragmentation*

*H2: Stalemate will be associated with organizational cohesion*

**Data and Measurement**

The dependent variable this project seeks to explore is rebel fragmentation, defined as an “event where a segment of a rebel organization, formally and collectively exits that rebel organization and either a) establishes a new rebel organization, b) joins an existing rebel organization, or c) joins the incumbent government.” I view rebel fragmentation as a clearly identifiable manifestation of a breakdown of cooperation within a rebel organization, and thus a category of factional events that include other phenomenon such as coups, extra-judicial killings, extra-judicial purges/arrests, and insubordination. These events are characterized by their extra-legal nature, and sit outside the bounds of the normal, political processes of a rebel organization.

One should note that the theory of cooperation breakdown enumerated in the preceding pages cannot explain why, given the desire to alter the cooperative status quo, actors choose to fragment instead of launch a coup. Or why, for instance, dissatisfaction within rebel ranks is articulated through fragmentation instead of through more limited forms of insubordination. As breakdowns of

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12 The importance of relative change in battlefield position vs. the absolute battlefield position is reflected in Killcullen's (2010) discussion of the "win/loss ratio" as a metric in counter-insurgency warfare. According to Killcullen, the win-loss ratio tells us little about performance in war since rebels usually lose most engagements. In Killcullen's view, what is more important is relative change in win-loss ratio.
the cooperative equilibrium of a rebel organization, it is my contention that these factional events have the same sources and can be explained within the same framework. The case material illustrates this point, by showing how in cases of fragmentation, other factional events are tightly interwoven. In any case, it is important to note that a second level of explanation would be required to explain why, given the desire to alter the cooperative status quo we get the outcome of fragmentation rather than other forms of factionalism.  

Since fragmentation can sometimes, but not always, be an extended process, I code fragmentation as occurring in the year in which that process begins. By “begins,” I mean the first observable manifestation of factionalism that evolves into fragmentation. In many cases, cooperation breakdown occurs in such a way that fragmentation is automatic instead of the outgrowth of a drawn out process of factional infighting.

The independent variable of interest – a tripartite measure of gains, losses, and stalemate – is measured as a function of shifts in “territorial control” or “operational reach,” with the former the relevant metric in cases where an organization fights a conventional war and the latter the relevant metric in contexts where guerilla warfare is the primary tactic. The variable is measured at the conclusion of each year in which a rebel organization effectively operates, and evaluates the ebb and flow of war by placing a rebel organization into one of the three aforementioned categories. 

13 Indeed, other sections of the of broader project are devoted to outlining and testing this “second level of explanation”
14 “Operational reach,” for the purposes of this discussion, can be defined as territory in which a rebel organization demonstrates the ability to consistently launch attacks.
15 The reader may note that there is a noticeable similarity between the three substantive military contexts I describe and Mao’s “three stages of guerilla warfare”- there may be connections I have not completely thought through yet, but the similarity is entirely accidental
in the aggregate number of districts a rebel organization controls or is able to effectively operate within. In cases where expansion into a district only leads to partial control, these are also coded as gains. Furthermore, since the expansion or contraction into large cities or towns is also a “significant” territorial exchange, they are also coded as gains or losses. Territorial exchanges that do not meet this threshold are excluded and coded as stalemate.

**Figure 1** shows the annual variation on the key independent and dependent variables over time for the case I examine in this paper— the Eritrean Liberation Front (from this point on, I refer to the ELF by its colloquial name, ‘Jebha’). One can see that for Jebha, fragmentation never occurs in stalemate years.

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16 In the subsequent analysis of the former Ethiopian province of Eritrea, there are 54 districts or “woredas” (see appendix for list of districts). The remainder of Ethiopia is divided into 550 districts.

17 In the subsequent analysis this would exclude all population centers below 1200 individuals. However, in practical terms, there is a high level of co-linearity between district level exchange and the exchange of towns and cities.

18 In coding territorial shifts in the Ethiopian context, I use a range of available sources: archival material (American and British consular reports in particular), news reports, and interviews. Admittedly, evidence can be spotty in certain districts and during particular historical periods.

19 *Jebha* is the Arabic word for “front”
To give an indication of the broader relationship between independent and dependent variables across Ethiopia’s civil wars, I collected annual data on fragmentation and territorial gains/stalemate/losses of all 14 rebel participants in Ethiopia’s civil wars.\textsuperscript{20} For each rebel year, of which there are 223 total years, I code whether a rebel organization a) has experienced fragmentation, and b) whether it has experienced a significant territorial gain or loss, and then cross-tabulate these

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{20} Organizations identified using UCDP’s Non-State Actor Dataset}
variables to examine the extent to which fragmentation years and gain/loss years co-vary. Figure 2 displays this data in the form of a two by two matrix, with the rebel year as the unit of analyses. One can see that for a total twenty-seven fragmentation years, only three are also years in which there was territorial stalemate. Gains and losses would seem to be a necessary, but not sufficient condition for rebel fragmentation.

**Figure 2: Ethiopia’s 14 Rebel Organizations, 1960-2008: Cross Tab of Gains/Losses and Fragmentation (rebelf year as unit of analysis, 223 rebel years total)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Stalemate</th>
<th>Gain/Loss</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fragment No</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fragment Yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Yet this correlation raises another issue: since fragmentation itself is key source of losses in war, how do we know that there is not an endogenous feedback effect driving our results? It may be the case that an initial case of fragmentation spurs a chain of loss that locks an organization into a cycle of fragmentation. Given the possible endogenous relationship between our independent and dependent variables, there is no reason to think that an organization’s fragmentation at T1 and T5 are independent one another.

In order to account for this sort of endogeneity across rebel years, I analyze the data statistically using a random effects logistic regression model with rebel year as the unit of analysis.

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21 When an organization no longer retains any operational capacity in the country, it is dropped from the analysis.
Fragmentation takes a value of 0 or 1, while stalemate vs. gain/loss is also framed as dichotomous 0 or 1 variable. Crucially, a dichotomous measure of prior rebel fragmentation is included in order to investigate whether the correlation between fragmentation and gains/loss years is being driven by the endogeneity I have identified. Figure 3 presents these results.

Figure 3: Baseline Model of Rebel Fragmentation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Full Model</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gain/Loss</td>
<td>2.440901***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.6318165)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prior Fragmentation</td>
<td>-.3343384</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.4498132)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>223</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-3.445373</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***Significant at the .01 level, ** significant at the .05 level, and * significant at the .10 level

The results suggest that despite endogeneity concerns, gains and losses remain a robust predictor of rebel fragmentation. In fact, prior fragmentation actually reduces the likelihood that fragmentation will occur again in the future. Yet while this exercise provides a useful point of departure, by itself, it does not validate the causal claims I seek to make.\textsuperscript{22} With only one control in the model, it is likely

\textsuperscript{22} One should note that gain/loss years are unbalanced, with loss years accounting for close to 2/3 of the sample of gain/loss years. When the model is run by splitting gain and loss years, loss years remain marginally significant
that other confounding variables are driving our results. Furthermore, this sort of cross-sectional, time series analysis is suspect with an N of 223. And finally, our efforts ignore the sort endogeneity that results from “simultaneity” bias: since our unit of analysis is rebel year, one cannot be sure whether territorial gains and losses occurred before fragmentation, or whether fragmentation occurred before territorial gains and losses.

In order to resolve these issues, I subject one of the fourteen rebel organizations in the sample to careful process tracing in a conscious effort to both elucidate the causal mechanisms that link independent variables to outcomes, and carefully weigh competing explanations. In this vein, the primary empirical thrust of this paper is a longitudinal study of Jebha, a rebel organization that participated in a secessionist conflict in what at the time was Ethiopia’s coastal province of Eritrea. For reasons of space, I focus on Jebha between the years 1961-1977, and trace the organization through 4 periods—its early origins, a period of gain, stalemate, and loss. I therefore exclude the last five years of the organization’s life, and a very important episode of fragmentation in 1982, when Jebha was reeling from significant military losses. While I do not formally discuss this period, I do use it to grant added leverage in investigating alternative variables.

The paper uses an eclectic range of sources, but is primarily based on field work conducted in Ethiopia and Ethiopian and Eritrean diaspora communities in the US and Europe, throughout 2009. Over 70 interviews were conducted with a range of individuals, including ex-combatants, government officials, and civilians of varying partisan stripes who lived through the conflict. I’ve also utilized thousands of pages of archival material from the National Archives in Washington, DC,
Background to Rebellion

When the secessionist war in Eritrea came to a conclusion on May 24, 1991, it had been the longest running conflict on the African continent (see Figure 4 for old provincial map of Eritrea).

Although the insurgency began as little more than sporadic banditry, in the end, its protagonists would be engaged in the largest mechanized battles on the African continent since World War II.  

Figure 4: Provincial Map of Eritrea

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In a telling commentary to the BBC in the late 1980’s, the British historian Basil Davidson described the Ethiopian’s government’s defeat at Afabet, Eritrea in 1988 as “one of the biggest victories ever scored by a liberation movement since Dien Bien Phu in 1954” (Connell, Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution 1993, 228)
Any objective measure of the cost of the war illustrates this fact. Gebru Tareke estimates that Ethiopia’s civil wars, of which Eritrea was the central front, killed between 800,000 to 1 million people, roughly 2 percent of Africa’s second largest country (Tareke 2009, 132). This excludes the famine of 1984-85 – of which the war was the principle cause – in which another 1 million people died. If we assume that a total of 2 million people died as a consequence of the war, this would make war time deaths in Ethiopia 20 times larger than Bosnia, roughly double of the Iran-Iraq conflict, and a little more than equal to that of Afghanistan between 1979 and 2001.²⁵

The economic costs of the conflict were not minor either. Gayle Smith, a journalist who covered Ethiopia’s internal conflicts in the 1980’s, conjectured that at the height of the secessionist war in 1982, the Ethiopian government was spending 1.5 million a day in fighting the insurgents (Smith 1983, A22). When the military government of Colonel Mengistu Haile-Mariam finally lost power in May of 1991, it had accumulated a foreign debt of USD 9 billion in trying to find a military solution to Ethiopia’s civil wars (Tareke 2009, 137).

The major actors in the complex Eritrean drama – besides the central government – were two rebel organizations, the Eritrean Liberation Front (Jebha) and the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (Shaebia).²⁶ While both organizations were firmly committed to Eritrea’s secession from Ethiopia, they had a contentious relationship. Jebha was the first organization to emerge in 1960, and was the standard bearer for Eritrean independence until several splinter groups coalesced into Shaebia in February 1972. Shaebia’s emergence was a significant moment in the trajectory of the war, launching both Eritrean nationalist organizations into a bloody contest for supremacy from 1972-74. Despite its numerical superiority, Jebha was unable to eliminate its younger rival, and a somewhat uneasy détente between the two organizations ensued until 1980, when another dispute within the

²⁶ “Shaebia” is the Arabic term for “people” or “popular”
nationalist camp resulted in Jebha’s demise. Having eclipsed its parent organization, Shaebia defeated the Ethiopian military conclusively in 1991, and after a UN monitored referendum, declared an independent Eritrea. For the most part, this paper focuses on Jebha and leaves the relations between the two insurgent organizations untouched, except when these relations tell us something about the Jebha’s shifting military position. However, most histories of the Eritrean conflict focus a great deal on the dynamic between the two groups.

The origins of the secessionist conflict in Eritrea can be found in the arrival of the Italians on the Red Sea coast in the latter half of the 19th century. Prior to the Italian colonial state of Eritrea, “Eritrea” did not exist as a political or administrative entity. While most parts of lowland and coastal Eritrea, predominantly populated by Muslim tribes, had links to Ottoman, Egyptian, and Sudanic political authorities, the central highland plateau – predominantly populated by Orthodox Christians – had historical links with an expanding Ethiopian monarchy to the south. In a sense, Ethiopia’s coastal province of Eritrea, like other parts of Sahelian Africa, was the meeting point of two very different cultural entities: one Arab and Islamic, the other African and predominantly Christian. Importantly, these different cultural heritages mapped on to two very different modes of social organization and production, with the Muslim lowlands predominantly pastoral, and the Christian highlands a sedentary, rain fed agricultural economy. These different political, cultural, and economic legacies largely outlasted the Italian period, and as I show, were crucial to understanding Jebha’s internal politics.

Eritrea was administered by the British after World War II, and following a UN mandated inquiry into the future status of the territory, was federated with Ethiopia in 1952. While no referendum was

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27 Obviously, this is a very stylized account. Eritrea’s social and ethnic demography is far more complex—the territory technically has nine ethnic groups. For more complete accounts see (Negash, Italian Colonialism In Eritrea: Policies, Praxis, and Impact 1882-1941 1987) and (Pool 2001). The above comments were only meant to contextualize what many believe to be of the major cleavage in Eritrean politics. However, many other lines of cleavage had been relevant at different points in time, particularly “awaraja” or provincial/regional differences.
held on the issue, several political parties mobilized on different sides of the debate: the Muslim League and others largely rejected union with Ethiopia, while the Unionist Party, encouraged by the very powerful Orthodox Church, supported the idea. In the end, all major parties accepted the decision of the UN with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

In retrospect, most recognize that the Federation was destined to fail. The lengthy Italian colonial period, and the British Administration that had followed it, had substantially changed Eritrea: it had acquired an assembly, political parties, labor unions, a well-trained bureaucracy, commercialized agriculture and a manufacturing sector that was the most substantial in the Horn of Africa. By contrast, Emperor Haile Selassie’s Ethiopia – one of only two African countries to have never been colonized – had legal slavery until the mid-20th century, was feudal, and desperately poor. Furthermore, royal absolutism and federalism were a contradiction in terms.

Piece by piece, Haile Selassie destroyed the Federation, formally incorporating the territory as Ethiopia’s 14th province in 1961 amidst recriminations from several opposition parties. While much of Eritrea’s highland Christian population was persuaded on grounds of shared religious and cultural heritage, the Imperial Ethiopian Government (IEG) employed coercion as well. Opponents were jailed and killed, while others fled to neighboring countries.

For Eritrea’s Muslim lowlanders complete union with Ethiopia was a terrible proposition, and a quick glance at the make-up of Ethiopia’s governing class illustrates why. Of the top 26 officials within the Imperial Ethiopian Government in 1973 – ministers, commanders of the armed services, imperial

28 My assessment of this period is drawn from a large literature. See (Iyob 1995), (Selassie 1980), and (Gebremedhin 1989). For a somewhat different interpretation see (Negash, Eritrea and Ethiopia: The Federal Experience 1997)
29 Authors interview, Provincial Bureaucrat, Oct 11th, 2009. In this and prior discussions, interviewee had provided his recollection of events as early as the 1950’s
30 Pro-independence politicians like Idris Mohammed Adem, Ibrahim Sultan, and Woldeab Woldemariam all fled to Cairo during this period. Woldeab actually survived over four attempts on his life. See Issayas Tesfamariam interview with Nicole Saulsberry, Nov 7, 2002, www.shabait.com
provincial governors – not one was a Muslim. Of the 101 government officials that sat directly below those with major government portfolios – deputy ministers, administrators, division commanders – only 3 were Muslims.31 This, by the way, was in a country that was 50 percent Muslim and had more Muslims than every Arab country except for Egypt, Morroco, and Algeria (Woldegiorgis 1989, 73).

The IEG’s provincial administration in Eritrea largely reproduced the pro-Christian bias at the center. In 1965, for instance, both the Governor-General and his deputy were Christians, as were seven of the eight provincial governors. So were the Commissioner of police and his deputy. So were the seven top ranking military officers in the province. So were all 5 of the Governor-General’s cabinet, and both members of his secretariat. One could go on and on.32

Given the public face of Ethiopia’s administration in Eritrea and its overt discrimination against Muslims, it was no surprise that the rebellion that began in September 1961 found its home in the Muslim communities of western Eritrea.

Early Rebellion, Losses, and Fragmentation: Jebha 1961-1967

Jebha was organized by a collection of Muslim exiles in Cairo in July 1960 who were disenchanted with Haile Selassie’s willful disregard for the Federation, and felt that the only reasonable response was armed resistance. The three most prominent players in the organization’s early days were Idris Mohammed Adem, a former President of the Eritrean Assembly, Idris Glawedos, his close associate and a law graduate, and Osman Saleh Sabbe, an enterprising school master from the Massawa-Hirgigo area.

31 See Telegram 51 from Addis Ababa to State, date unclear, RG 59, Central Files 1970-73 “Potential Leaders Biographic Reporting List- 1973-74”
32 See Imperial Ethiopian Government, Governate General of Eritrea, Officials List, 1965
The Cairo triumvirate was an interesting, if somewhat odd grouping of Eritrean dissidents. As his position as former President of the Eritrean Assembly suggests, Adem was the political heavyweight of the three, and had garnered popular appeal in the lowlands for his early opposition to Haile Selassie’s subversion of the Federation. Glawedos, somewhat younger than his two associates, operated as the military brains behind Jebha’s early operations while Sabbe – the smooth talking, urbane scholar who would publish several Arabic texts on Eritrea – served as the intellectual and ideological force behind the movement, as well as its chief interlocutor in foreign capitals.

More important than these differences in background and disposition, however, was that while Adem, Glawedos, and Sabbe were all lowland Muslims, they represented very different ethnic constituencies: Adem was a Tigre-Beni Amir from Barka, Glawedos a Bilen from the Keren area, and Sabbe a Tigre Assuarta from the coastal area of Massawa-Hirgigo. Thus, from its earliest days, Jebha represented a coalition of Eritrea’s Muslim tribes.

In early 1961, the Cairo leadership appealed to Idris Hamid Awate of the Beni Amir tribe, a fiery local chief who had served with the Italians in Rome during World War II, and become well known for his bandit activities during the British period. Responding to the Cairo group’s call for armed resistance, Awate and a band of thirteen of his kinsman attacked Ethiopian police forces at a place called Mt. Adal west of the town of Agordat. The initial battle lasted for nearly seven hours, despite the fact that between Awate’s thirteen kinsmen there were only four guns.

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33 The Beni Amir are a Tigre tribe, all Muslim and pastoral, who reside on both sides of the Eritrean and Sudanese border. Most of the early fighters were drawn from among this tribe.

34 Drawn from “Hamid Idris Awate: The Spirit of Defiance,” www.awate.com. One should note that the inclusion of Awate’s band created yet another relevant political cleavage in the organization: that between the external leadership in Cairo and locally organized fighters in the field.
Life was hard for the first group of fighters. Few in number, and lacking adequate armaments, the early Jebha contingents sought to avoid major confrontations with the Ethiopian police and the few army regulars in the province. As one early fighter noted,

“We were short of literally everything. We were few in number; carried very few rifles; had no ammunition stock and space for movement was very limited and we had to suspect most people in the villages. For security reasons, we were covering very long distances in a single day, mainly in Barka, Gash, and Setit. We were nowhere and everywhere at the same time... The first three years were terribly difficult.”

Where Jebha fighters engaged enemy forces, it was usually in the form of ambushes designed to capture caches of arms and ammunition. For example, during an operation at the end of 1963 Jebha commandos hijacked a bus and drove it into the town of Haicota where they took the Ethiopian police station by surprise. In the end, the rebels escaped with thirty-two guns and twelve hand grenades. Other less daring ventures were an ambush of an Ethiopian convoy in Telay in mid-1963 where seventeen guns were captured, and an ambush at Ansaba that same year, where twenty-three more guns were seized. While such early successes seem trivial in retrospect, they were vital to the early survival of the relatively isolated Jebha contingent.

Despite operational challenges, morale amongst the Jebha’s early recruits was high. Not only were the early batch of fighters deeply committed to the cause, but they were buoyed by the Ethiopian

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35 See Eritrean Newsletter, issue no. 44, Sept. 1981, “Interview with Mohammed Ibrahim Bahdurai”
36 Much of the discussion of the early operations of the ELF is drawn from “From the Experiences of the Eritrean Liberation Army,” www.nharnet.com. Most of this information, in turn, is drawn from an Arabic language book published by Jebha leaders Abdullah Idris and Mohammed Hasab, “Experiences of the ELA: 1961-1981.” For other good accounts see (Markakis 1987, 104-45). Both (Markakis 1987) and (Tareke 2009) dispute the official ELF accounts, and argue that Idris Awate had no formal links with the external leadership until after the rebellion started.
37 As a general point, nearly all of the Jebha fighters I interviewed revealed themselves to be deeply committed to the cause of Eritrean self-determination. Unlike Renamo or the Tamil Tigers, there was no forced recruitment. Somewhat paradoxically, a movement that suffered from significant episodes of factionalism, had a membership that was highly dedicated to the cause.
administration’s clumsy response to the outbreak of hostilities. Dismissing the rebels as “shifta,”38 the Ethiopian government decided to deploy only provincial police to deal with the attacks, instead of regular army units who were better equipped to deal with the demands of counterinsurgency (Erlich 1983, 35).

As Jebha began to make a name for itself amongst the relatively friendly Muslim communities of the western lowlands, recruitment began to increase. Two groups were particularly important during this phase. The first was a contingent of Eritreans who had served in the Sudanese army, who brought with them the formal military expertise that Jebha desperately needed. Of this group, were Mohamed Idris Haj, Omar Izaz, Abu Tiyarra, and Abu Rijeila, all of whom became important military commanders during the 1960s and 1970s. A second contingent was a group of Muslim Eritrean policeman who defected to the rebels and brought with them not only technical expertise, but an intimate understanding of the enemy and its strategy.39

By the end of 1963 Jebha had 250 men under arms, and by the end of 1964, they had around 800. Additionally, the leadership in Cairo had achieved some success in attracting external aid, particularly from Baathist regimes in Syria and Iraq, which was then funneled to fighters in the field by land and sea.40

By 1965, Jebha’s began to successfully recruit beyond the pastoral communities of the western lowlands. Among the new sectors to join the nationalist organization were urban, predominantly Muslim recruits from the coastal area of Massawa-Hargigo, an increasing number of Christian students from the highlands, and younger, foreign trained militants of various ethnic and religious backgrounds. In order to accommodate this new diversity, Jebha sought to reorganize along ethnic

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38 Shifta is the Amharic word for “bandit”
39 “From the Experiences of the Eritrean Liberation Army,” www.nharnet.com and (Markakis 1987)
40 “From the Experiences of the Eritrean Liberation Army,” www.nharnet.com and (Markakis 1987)
and tribal lines in 1965 and 1966. Using Algeria’s AFLN as a model, the Cairo triumvirate – which had now relocated to Khartoum after running afoul Egyptian President Gamel Abdel-Nasser – established five zonal commands, in which commanders and recruits from the ethnic and tribal constituencies that resided within these zones were given responsibility for operations (Markakis 1987) (Iyob 1995) (Pool 2001). Although designed to promote the effective use of local resources while enhancing the operational flexibility of local commanders, Jebha’s restructuring effectively tribalized the organization, discouraging coordination across zonal units and undermining the development of solidarity across Jebha’s ethnic and tribal groupings.

As growth and internal differentiation progressed, the Ethiopian government became increasingly alarmed. The very limited expansion of Jebha activities onto the economically vital highland Christian plateau, which was linked to Jebha’s recruiting successes amongst historically pro-Ethiopian Christian communities and its successful extortion of local merchants and wealthy farmers, was a particular cause for concern, and spurred the Ethiopian government to action.

In 1965 Gov. Gen. Asrate Kassa assembled a paramilitary force exclusively comprised of Christian Eritreans called Commandis 101. Trained in the latest counter-insurgency techniques at an Israeli run military academy in the highland town of Decamhare, the Commandis became a formidable force, consistently bearing the brunt of counter-insurgency responsibilities in the rural parts of the province, while regular military units – mostly comprised of soldiers from Ethiopia proper – remained garrisoned in the major towns. The Commandis close connection with Christian communities in the highlands made them very effective, and their presence made it virtually
impossible for Jebha to establish an effective presence on the highland plateau until 1974 when the monarchy collapsed.\textsuperscript{41}

While the emergence of the Commandis signaled that tougher times were on the horizon for Jebha, it was a major Ethiopian Army offensive in March of 1967 that nearly crippled the young insurgency and unleashed an orgy of factional conflict within Jebha’s ranks. What the Ethiopians had long treated as a problem of policing, now became an issue of full-fledged counter insurgency. Consistent with this strategic shift, the government redeployed two extra brigades of army regulars to the province, and launched a series of crisp offensives that were as brutal as they were effective. Jebha units acquitted themselves poorly, as the five zonal commands were so decentralized that they were unable to coordinate any meaningful resistance. Attempting to exploit Jebha’s organizational weaknesses, the Ethiopians employed infantry, armor, and aerial bombardment to strike and isolate each zone, moving west from the highlands through Gash-Barka, and then north-eastwards towards Keren in an attempt to strangle retreating Jebha units. Confused and bewildered, Jebha cadres fled in a haphazard and disorganized fashion, leaving the predominantly Muslim communities that had given them food and shelter to face government troops that heretofore they had never really encountered in great numbers.

The result was predictable. The Ethiopian’s created strategic hamlets of 3000 inhabitants each to cut the rebels off from the population. They burned villages and massacred civilians, causing over 20,000 civilians to flee to Sudan, the first refugee wave of many that would follow over the course of the next 24 years. The discontent among the population was palpable, especially among women. As former Jebha cadre Haile Woldense recalls

\textsuperscript{41} Airgram 18 from Asmara to State, March 2, 1970, RG 59, Central files “Eritrean Commando Police Now at Full Strength.” Also, authors interview, Jebha Intelligence Officer, Sept 11, 2009
“So the first protests came from the mothers. This is very important. The mothers were saying: ‘We are feeding the fighters while leaving our children hungry. But when the enemy came, rather than at least not be inside to give a pretext for the enemy to burn the village, the worst thing the ELF (Jebha) fighters were doing was they stayed in the villages, fired some shots, and then escaped. And they wouldn’t even try to do some fighting so the elderly, the children, and the mothers could get out.’

And of course a lot of people went to the Sudan and they were saying that the fighters had no performed well. There was no support.” (Connell, Conversations with Eritrean Political Prisoners 2005, 48-49)

For an organization that had traded on its popular appeal in the western lowlands, this was a devastating development. Yet the poor showing in combat was not all Jebha’s fault. The Ethiopian offensive, either by intention or happenstance, coincided with the Six Day Arab-Israeli War of June 1967, in which Jebha’s Iraqi and Syrian allies were thoroughly trounced. The result of developments in the Middle East was two-fold: not only were Jebha’s Arab benefactors no longer in a position to offer the support that they had provided previously, but the Israeli’s were able to close shipping lanes in the Red Sea. Ominously, Jebha was incurring acute shortages of supplies at precisely the moment that they could least afford them.42

Even Jebha sources signal that 1967 was a tough year. In otherwise effusive historical publication, Jebha writers noted that in 1967

“The very continuation of the revolution was in danger….Fighters in the field, who had little food and arms supplies, were being overwhelmed with desperation.”43

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42 INR Memo, George C. Denney to Acting Secretary, April 1, 1968, RG 59, Central Files “Ethiopia: Kagnew and the ELF.” Also see Airgram 174, Asmara to State, Oct 9, 1968, RG 59, Central Files, “The ELF and Kagnew: An Assessment.” See also Jeffrey Lefebvre, “Middle East Conflicts and Middle Level Power Intervention in the Horn of Africa, Middle East Journal, Summer 1996

Detailed American declassified intelligence reports from the period largely echo these observations, noting that Ethiopian military efforts during 1967 had been “consistent success story” and that Jebha had seen “a loss of momentum.” These reports go on to say, given the success of the 1967 offensive, the Ethiopian military would phase out of the province the majority of army regulars—some 6000 in all.\textsuperscript{44} To Ethiopian authorities, the insurgency in Eritrea had been dealt a severe blow.

In territorial terms, Jebha’s losses were significant. On the eve of the offensives of March 1967, Jebha’s guerilla army effectively operated in about half of the country—in Sahel, Barka, Gash-Setit, Seraye, and parts of Hamasein province.\textsuperscript{45} After the Ethiopian offensives, Jebha units were forced to operate in a small, largely uninhabited corner of land in northern Sahel bounded by the Sudanese border to the west and the Red Sea to the east. While Jebha had lost popular support and credibility, its territorial losses were truly astounding. What had been an organization with national scope was now confined to a dusty outpost in a remote, strategically irrelevant district that had more hyenas than people. \textbf{Figure 5} and \textbf{Figure 6} provide district level maps that give an indication of the size of Jebha’s territorial losses in 1967.

\textsuperscript{44} Airgram 174, Asmara to State, Oct 9, 1968, RG 59, Central Files, “The ELF and Kagnew: An Assessment”

\textsuperscript{45} These are the names of Eritrean provinces, of which there are nine
In the wake of the Ethiopian offensive, the breakdown in cooperation amongst Jebha’s membership was almost immediate, and largely played out along sectarian lines.\textsuperscript{46} Osman Hishal, Deputy Commander of the 5\textsuperscript{th} zone, summarily executed twenty-seven Christians for failing to perform their duties during the Ethiopian offensive. For Hishal, and many Muslim lowlanders like him, the influx of Christians into Jebha raised the prospect of penetration by the Ethiopian authorities. The successful Ethiopian offensive, and the territorial losses it wrought, represented Christian collusion with the Ethiopian government. Significantly, the executions were carried out without the approval of the zone’s commander, Woldai Kahsai, who himself was a Christian. (Markakis 1987)

\textsuperscript{46} INR Memo, Thomas Hughes to Secretary, April 8, 1969, RG 59, Central Files, “Ethiopia: ELF takes a Radical Turn” - memo draws direct connection between military failures of 1967 and out- break of “internecine fighting”
The summary executions served as a trigger: Woldai Kahsai, who was in the Sudanese-Eritrean border town of Kassala at the time, took a contingent of Christians and defected to the Ethiopian embassy in Khartoum. For the remaining Christian cadres within the 5th zone, the defection of their commander was too much to bear. In an effort to build a coalition Christian cadres appealed to many new arrivals from the 3rd and 4th zones, and together these constituencies began to demand reform. Criticisms were leveled at the external leadership in Khartoum, who were accused of absenteeism, at the zonal command structure, that lacked coordination, and at a nationalist program that was Arab centric and tended to exclude Christians. Calls for reform evolved rapidly into open insubordination as units in the field began to make efforts to re-organize independently of the external leadership.
What followed in the months ahead was an incredibly complex set of maneuvers between the external leadership, their supporters in the field, and the reformers. Politically attuned and ever resourceful, the triumvirate of Adem, Glawedos, and Sabbe attempted to block reforms that would inevitably reduce their power. In a series of meetings in 1968 and 1969 that were ostensibly designed to reform the organization, they were able to mobilize support and successfully infiltrate the ranks of the reformers. Many were purged and killed. Interestingly, as this process played out, open splits emerged amongst the external leadership as well.

Indeed, as Jebha descended into internal chaos, the military picture did not get much better. At Hal in 1968, Jebha units from the 2nd zone suffered some of the organizations worst losses of the war. For Sabbe, who had been Jebha’s most prolific fundraiser abroad, the writing was on the wall. In 1969 he broke with leadership and created what he called the “General Secretariat” in Amman, Jordan, and actively began to encourage others to defect from Jebha ranks.

In the field, the losers of the factional disputes at the meetings of 1968 and 1969 exited the organization in a bid for self-preservation. A group of Christians under the direction of Abraham Tewolde set out for the Ala plains in the eastern part of the highlands, while a collection of younger cadres from the Massawa-Hirgigo area, many foreign trained, were reorganized by Sabbe in Yemen. Yet another faction, led by Adam Saleh, set off for the Obel River to re-organize. It was these diverse and disenchanted elements who would form the nucleus of Shaebia in 1972.

47 The departure of Adam Saleh and what became known as the “Obel Group” is quite interesting, because this group could not properly be considered reformers given their ideological orientation. Their departure, more than anyone else, signals what I am trying to argue, which is that this episode of factionalism was largely a result of Jebha’s military failures.

48 The preceding four paragraphs are drawn from a range of historical works (Markakis 1987), (Iyob 1995), (Pool 2001). For a primary account of these events see “Nhanan Elaman,” which can be translated as “We and Our Objectives.” The manifesto was written by Christian dissidents who split from Jebha in the early 1970’s.
The episode of 1967-68 is telling in many respects. For Hishal, who triggered the factional infighting, Jebha could not go on as it once did. Whereas he and others like him had been willing to cooperate with their Christian comrades in better times, the debacle of 1967 broke down the credible commitments between these groups. The response of the Christians and their allies was in part a direct reaction to these killings, but also a recognition that the organization was failing. Their criticisms of the decentralized zonal system were a telling indication of the latter. In any case, once the initial breakdown of cooperation occurred, factional infighting spiraled out of control, diffusing and incorporating broader cross-sections of the organization. Fragmentation was the end result.

While this factional moment was complex, involving a range of decisions and strategic calculations that should be examined more closely, one thing is clear: Jebha’s performance failures were a key driver of factional infighting, and one cannot understand the events of 1967 without accounting for the context of territorial loss in which they occurred.

**Slow Recovery, Stalemate, and Unity: Jebha 1969-1973**

After the military failures of 1967-68, and the torrent of factional infighting that it produced, Jebha began a slow, halting recovery. Though the Ethiopian offensive had drastically curtailed Jebha’s operations in many parts of the country, in the long term, it had done little to permanently damage the guerilla army’s structure. In addition, supplies from Arab supporters resumed at higher levels in the years after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, serving to sustain and enhance Jebha’s operations (Lefebvre, Middle East Conflicts and Middle Level Power Intevention in the Horn of Africa 1996).

Under the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (PLO) advisement, Jebha began to expand its tactical repertoire. Intent on capturing headlines, Jebha destroyed Ethiopian commercial jetliners as far afield as Karachi, Rome, and Frankfurt in 1969 and early 1970. Vital transport routes like the
Asmara-Massawa and the Asmara-Tessenei roads became hazardous to travel, as Jebha did its utmost to exact an economic price for Ethiopia’s occupation. Foreigners were kidnapped or detained, including the US counselor in Asmara, and in November 1970 the most senior military commander in the province – Teshome Ergetu – was killed in ambush on the Asmara-Keren road. The United States, which had a large signals installation in Asmara, began to worry about the security of over 2000 American personnel who operated the installation. Surprised by Jebha’s staying power, the Ethiopians declared martial law over the province in 1970, and in 1971 replaced the civilian Gov. General with a military man and a known hardliner, General Debebe Haile-Mariam.

After the First National Congress at Arr in 1971, comprised of 500 delegates elected by the field units themselves, Jebha’s re-organized the zonal commands into a more centralized administrative structure. With a new, more rational system of command and organization, and between 1500-2000 trained fighters, Jebha seemed rejuvenated. Yet despite these new realities, Jebha faced far from a rosy scenario: the splinter groups of 1967-68, despite numerous conciliatory gestures, refused to rejoin. With their hand forced, Jebha leaders attempted to liquidate these splinter elements in 1972, declaring in the First Congress Political Programme that the “Eritrean field can only tolerate one
Despite its resource advantages Jebha was unsuccessful, and instead of directing the balance of its forces against the Ethiopians, began a costly war with its co-nationalists. Also of critical importance during this period was the Sudanese closure of overland routes into western Eritrea, and Jebha offices in Kassala and Khartoum. Prompted by Ethiopia’s support of a peace agreement that ended the first phase of the Sudanese civil war in 1972, Sudan’s actions caused great hardship for Jebha cadres, as Sudan had been a key conduit of Arab arms into Eritrea, a rear base for Jebha’s military operations, and home to the now tens of thousands of Eritrean refugees that served as Jebha’s core supporters. Indeed, Sudan’s actions were symptomatic of its wider ambivalence about Jebha, and presaged the rocky relationship it would have with the Eritrean nationalist movement throughout the late 1970s and 80s.

In any case, the position of the Ethiopian military in the province was simply too strong to be challenged. Backed by their erstwhile American and Israeli supporters, the chance that the Ethiopian military would incur significant losses at the hands of an increasingly bold, but outgunned band of rebels was remote. At the same time, the Ethiopian’s seemed unable to make any major military breakthrough, if in fact there was one to be had. American intelligence assessments from the period, in a telling series of memos, describe what can only be interpreted as a stalemate d military situation in the early 1970’s, noting that the insurgents “lack the ability to win a decisive victory” but that the

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52 ELF 1st National Congress Political Programme
53 See (Pool 2001) for the dynamics of this conflict, as well as (Markakis 1987). Also, authors interview, Shaebia Commander, May 28, 2009- commander noted that during the 1972-74 war between Jebha and Shaebia, the Ethiopian’s barely launched any attacks against the rebels, and were largely content to watch the rebels fight amongst themselves
54 See (Lefebvre, Arms for the Horn: US Security Policy in Ethiopia and Somalia 1953-1991 1991) for the best and most complete discussion of this support
Ethiopian army had no chance to “break the stalemate without substantially expanding and improving its counter insurgency efforts.”

Such assessments were reflected in territorial terms. While Jebha had made some initial, very slow recoveries in Western Eritrea, and was able operate in Barka, Gash-Setit and parts of Semhar along the Asmara-Massawa road by 1970, these shifts were a pittance compared to the losses it had incurred in 1967-68. Furthermore, between 1970 and 1973, there was no perceptible change in the territory over which Jebha was able to operate. Interestingly, this period was characterized by an absence of factional infighting or fragmentation within Jebha ranks, a fact that is more striking when one considers the potentially divisive organizational elections held at Arr in 1971.

In this context, it is clear that territorial stalemate served to underpin cooperation within Jebha ranks, providing the basis of what I have identified as a “cohesive stalemate.” While Jebha cadres – and the elites who led them – had reason to believe that the organizational status quo was sustainable, the threat to their collective security loomed large. Such fertile conditions for cooperation, however, were about to quickly change.

Gains and Fragmentation: Jebha 1974-77

The Ethiopian Revolution of 1974 substantially altered the dynamics between Jebha and the Ethiopian government. The literature on the Ethiopian Revolution is vast, and I do not wish to recount all of it here. In short, following a set of army mutinies (the first in Eritrea), a series of strikes in Addis Ababa, and student protests, the monarchy of Haile Selassie was overthrown. A cabal of junior military officers called the Derg, ostensibly Marxists, took power in the chaos of mass

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55 INR Research Study, T. Murphy, May 10, 1973, RG 59, Central Files, “Ethiopia: Eritrean Liberation Front Persists Despite Weakness.” - the report also went on to say that “The ELF is not likely soon to jeopardize Ethiopian control over Eritrea, but the movement is not dead.” See also INR Research Study, A. Palmer, Feb 24, 1972, RG 59, Central Files, “Ethiopia: Status of Eritrean Liberation Front.”

56 See (Clapham 1990) and (Keller 1991)
While the causes of the revolution were deep and complex, and the insurgency in Eritrea was only a minor factor.

Somewhat ironically, the military’s takeover exacerbated political instability in Addis Ababa, sparking a series of battles between the Derg and the student movement for control of the government, as well as a sequence of major confrontations within the Derg. Under siege by its external and internal opponents, the military became paralyzed and unable to prosecute the war in Eritrea.

As the central authorities in Addis began to devour themselves, Jebha managed to strike a tactical alliance with its splinter groups which by then had been consolidated into an organization called “Shaebia.” The insurgents took the initiative, and began to expand from one district to the next. In early 1975 the nationalist organizations made real breakthroughs, not only penetrating the Christian highland plateau, but attacking the provincial capital of Asmara—Eritrea’s largest city and the second the largest urban center in Ethiopia. For three days at the end of January, the city was on fire. In the streets, the rebels fought running battles with government forces.

While Jebha failed to seize the city, the Asmara raids signaled a major transformation in the direction and scale of the war. The Ethiopian response in the aftermath of the fighting was as tragic as it was consequential. Angry government soldiers went on a rampage, dragging people out of their homes and murdering them. Youths were garroted with piano wire and disappeared. Stores and businesses were looted. The social and political order in Eritrea’s cities and towns was beginning to break down.\(^{58}\)

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\(^{57}\) *Derg* means “committee” in Amharic

\(^{58}\) For a systematic accounting of these atrocities, see (de Waal 1991)
In the months ahead, terror became the mainstay of the Ethiopian Army in Eritrea. The degree of brutality that the Marxist military regime was willing to apply – particularly on the Christian highland plateau – was like nothing Eritrean civilians had seen during the Haile Selassie era.  

That many of Eritrea’s youths faced pervasive insecurity in government controlled urban areas at precisely the time that the government seemed to be teetering on the brink of collapse triggered mass defection to the rebels. While Muslims had always gravitated towards the secessionist movement, Christian youths flocked into Jebha in ways that had never been seen before. In 1975, an organization that was no more than 2000 people took in nearly 10,000 recruits. 1976-77 saw a similar spike in recruitment. Jebha’s training camps and infrastructure could barely keep pace with the expansion in numbers. In his memoirs, former Derg Governor of Eritrea Dawit Wolde Giorgis captures the sentiment of the time quite clearly when he writes:

“More men and women fled to join the movements. With indiscriminate death all around, it was either stay and die, or flee and fight. Anywhere from 300 to 800 people slipped out of the cities each month to join the rebels. Only the aged, the sick, the weak, and those with connections to the military in Asmara were left behind. Out of a total population of over 200,000 in 1974, Asmara dwindled to less than 90,000 people in 1977. Many of those remaining spent their nights in the churches for fear that they would be dragged out of their beds and killed by the death squads. The rest of the major towns were also virtually abandoned.

Another individual, who actually made the decision to join Jebha during this tumultuous period, puts it even more succinctly when he says:

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59 Authors interview, Provincial Bureaucrat, Oct 11th, 2009
60 (Goodwin 2001) comparative analysis of revolutions makes exactly this sort of argument
61 Authors interviews, Jebha fighters, April 22, 23, and May 3, 2009. Many of these fighters indicated that Jebha officials often asked new recruits to wait before leaving home to join Jebha camps, because the organization simply lacked the capacity to absorb all of them so quickly
“The way the Ethiopians were treating the public provided a good ingredient to leave and join the revolution. They were torturing people; younger people were the main targets, killing them in the streets. So I decided to join the revolution and fight for my country, instead of dying in the streets like my other friends.”

Many of the urbanites who joined Jebha during this period were relatively well educated and brought with them valuable technical skills—clerks, accountants, doctors, and mechanics. Heavy equipment and trucks were captured from retreating government forces, a shift in logistics that allowed Jebha to seamlessly transition from guerilla warfare to conventional combat. By 1977, nationalists had captured nearly 90 percent of Eritrea and every major town except Asmara, Barentu, and Massawa, although Jebha only controlled a little over half of the province (see Figures 7 & 8).

Combined, Jebha and Shaebia outnumbered the 20,000 Ethiopian combat troops stationed in Eritrea (Connell, Against All Odds: A Chronicle of the Eritrean Revolution 1993). Fortuitously, or perhaps by design, the Somali regime of Mohammed Siad Biarre took the opportunity to wage an offensive of his own against the Ethiopian government, penetrating deep into the Ethiopia’s southeastern province of Ogaden. Meanwhile, separate insurgencies had spontaneously appeared in nearly all of Ethiopia’s other 13 provinces.

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62 Authors interview, Jebha fighter, April 22, 2009
It was ironic that as Jebha was achieving significant territorial gains, it descended into bloody factional infighting. The trigger was the 2\textsuperscript{nd} National Congress in May 1975, where Vice-Secretary General Hirui Tedla Bairu – an individual popular in Christian circles whose father was a prominent unionist and former Ethiopian Ambassador to Sweden \footnote{Authors interview, Jebha fighter, June 10, 2009} lost his post in an election marked by rancor and recriminations. Herui had earned the disfavor of many of the more hard line conservative Muslim elements of the leadership, \footnote{Abdullah Idris is often listed as one of these people} many of whom were linked to the Iraqi Baathist party, for his overtures to Shaebia on issues of nationalist unity. With the prodding (and perhaps threats) of the Iraqi representative at the 2\textsuperscript{nd} National Congress, Abu Ala, members of the leadership...
voted Herui out of power. Herui himself claimed that the whole process was rigged, arguing that his ballots were thrown and that the elections should have been direct instead of tiered— as had been the case during the election of 1971. Interestingly, many of the actors that sought to oust Herui from the leadership in 1975 as Jebha was surging, had been among those who supported his candidacy in 1971 in the hope that he could attract Christian support. The incentives to cooperate seemed to have changed.

Added to this combustible mix, was the issue of the political status of the thousands of new, mainly Christian recruits who were swelling Jebha’s ranks. By this point, most of these recruits were in three major training camps in Jebha rear bases in Barka, and were demanding that they be given equal representation at the Congress and allowed to elect delegates. Yet many in the leadership argued that as newcomers, these recruits should not be granted equal voting status with older, mostly Muslim members. In the end, the votes of these new recruits were counted at 1/3rd of those of older members, and while substantially affecting the outcome of the 1975 elections, the feeling that Christian influence was being deliberately limited was widespread. After all, Christians were now the majority within Jebha.

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65 Authors interview, Jebha intelligence officer, Sept 11, 2009. Also see (Medhanie 1986)
66 Authors interview, Jebha intelligence officer, May 19 and Sept 11, 2009
Voted out power, Herui was upset. Had he let the issue rest, the conflagration that was to come may have been averted. Instead, he went to the camps and sought to mobilize support, accusing the leadership of willfully trying to suppress Christian aspirations. Facing severe sanctions from the Jebha’s Central Committee, Herui went to Sudan and founded a new group called the Eritrean Democratic Movement (EDM) or Ma Ma Gu.

Responding to these events, Christian fighters in the field began to challenge the leadership on a whole range of issues. Chief among these was the relationship between Jebha and Shaebia and the issue of nationalist unity, which many Christian members deeply desired. The agitation, with the support of several Christians in the leadership organs of Jebha, rapidly spread through several units,

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Shaebia had a large Christian base, and many, if not most, of its core leaders were Christian
forcing the leadership to hold open seminars to defend their policies. This was to no avail, as
druculent fighters demanded a fresh Congress to debate many of the major policy issues Jebha now
faced, and published a manifesto formally declaring themselves the “Revolutionary Democrats.”
Exemplifying the wide division that was now emerging within Jebha ranks, opponents of the
insurrectionists responded by giving them the pejorative title of “Falool.”

By the summer of 1977, as Jebha seized major towns like Adi Keih, Agordat, and Mendefera, Falool
had become open insubordination. With few alternatives, Chairman Ahmed Nasser and military
chief Abdullah Idris decided to disarm the rowdy elements, launching an attack on a unit dominated
by Falool members, Brigade 149. However, the attack failed to resolve the situation, as by this late
hour Falool had mushroomed into a much larger phenomenon. In response, Falool killed two
members of the leadership in an ambush in Danakil—Abdul Kadir Ramadan and Ali Mohammed
Ibrahim.

All-out war ensued. Yet outmaneuvered and unable to mobilize a critical mass of support, Falool’s
play for power largely failed. Facing complete destruction at the hands of the leadership and its
supporters, Falool elements fled to the Ala plains. Surrounded by both Jebha and Shaebia forces,
they defected to Shaebia in the summer of 1977 largely out of desperation, nearly 2000 in all.

The EDM and Falool episode is instructive. That Herui Tedla Bairu – and by extension some of the
Christian interests he represented – was deliberately excluded from the leadership in 1975 by those
who had been eager to include him in 1971 raises many questions. What changed? As Jebha began

68 “Falool” is the Tigrinya word for “anarchists”
69 Part of Falool’s problem was that key Christian leaders, like Seyoum Ogboamichael, mobilized against them. In
fact, it was Ogboamichael who coined the well known jibe against Falool “ha hu b el faloolay ab seretna metse,”
which basically means “Learn your ABC’s Falool, and return to the battlefield.”
70 Most of the information in the preceding 5 paragraphs is drawn from Authors interview, Jebha Intelligence
officer, May 19 and Sept 11, 2009 and Saleh AA Younis Interview with H. Tedla Bairu, Jan 1, 2001,
www.awate.com. See also (Markakis 1987) and (Medhanie 1986)
to make serious gains in 1975, the pro-Baathist elements in the leadership saw little incentive to
maintain the cooperative status quo. At the same time, Herui was becoming increasingly aggressive
on the issue of unity with Shaebia and took steps (including holding private meetings with Shaebia
leaders) that many hardliners could not countenance.

For others who were dragged into the dispute, the battlefield victories seemed to generate
brinkmanship and provocation. One wonders whether, if it had been 1971 in the midst of military
stalemate, Falool ideologues would have rose up in open insubordination against their superiors.

Nearly 25 years later, Herui himself summed up the dynamic best, commenting that “The first error
was made, I believe, when we did not assess our situation properly. We were slightly blinded; we were victims of our
own success.”

As the war went, so went cooperation.

Alternative Arguments

Of course, it is difficult to ascertain whether the arguments made in this paper are valid without
carefully weighing alternative hypotheses. In this section, I evaluate several competing explanations
that could plausibly account for variation on the dependent variable of interest, fragmentation. In
addition to the two moments of fragmentation discussed in this paper, Jebha also fragments in 1982
after a bitter military confrontation with Shaebia—a case of fragmentation I include in this
discussion for analytical leverage, and that led to Jebha’s final expulsion from the Eritrean theatre. It
should also be noted that while some of the alternative variables discussed may affect fragmentation
by shaping the possibilities of gains and losses, taken alone they cannot explain the variation on the
dependent variable we observe.

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71 Authors interview, Jebha intelligence officer, May 19 and Sept 11, 2009
State Repression and Counter-Insurgency Strategies

A number of researchers have argued that state repression and counter-insurgency operations impact the internal cohesion of rebel organizations, although there is a difference of opinion regarding the exact nature of this causal relationship. Shapiro (2008) argues that high levels of state repression force insurgents to decentralize their operations, and thus reduce a leader’s control over subordinates. More intuitively, it also seems as though increases in state repression increase the extent to which potential dissident factions believe that the rebellion cannot succeed, and therefore encourage fragmentation.

If these theories are correct, we would expect increases in the coercive resources that the Ethiopian government deployed against Jebha to be correlated with their fragmentation. Using standard, but very blunt measure of state repression – measures of numerical preponderance – we can see that significant increases in the coercive capacity of the Ethiopian state do not explain the three incidences of cooperation breakdown cited in this paper (Figure 9 &10). While troop levels and military expenditures dramatically increased in 1977-78 – with the first real effect of these increases being felt in June of 1978 during the Derg’s First Offensive – these increases cannot explain much of the variation on the dependent variable. Jebha’s fragmentation in 1967-68, and the emergence of EDM/Fallool during 1975-1977, largely predated the huge increases in the coercive resources of the Ethiopian state in 1977-78. Furthermore, Jebha’s disintegration into three groups in 1982 occurred a full 4 years after this increase.
Interestingly, many have argued that battlefield outcomes and state power have less to do with numerical preponderance and more to do with military technology.\(^73\) Therefore major increases in the technology employed by the Ethiopian military, rather than numerical preponderance, should roughly correlate with Jebha’s fragmentation.

\(\text{Figure 9: Size of Ethiopian Armed Forces 1960-1991 (in tens of thousands)}\)

\(\text{Figure 10: Ethiopian Military Expenditures in USD Dollars (in hundreds of millions)}\)

\(^{73}\) (Biddle 2004, 16-17) collectively calls these explanations “Dyadic Technology Theory”
Although a full discussion of the equipment employed by the Ethiopian military is beyond the scope of this paper, a good proxy for variation in technology employed by the Ethiopian state over time would seem to be arms transfers from the major producers of military technology during the Cold War, the US and the Soviets. Figure 11 charts this variation. As one can see, the huge spike in Soviet arms transfers to Ethiopia in the late 1970’s explains only one episode of Jebha’s fragmentation, which is 1982.

Figure 11: US and Soviet Arms Transfers to Ethiopia 1960-1991 (in millions)

However, there are strong reasons to think we should take a closer look at state repression. Biddle (Biddle 2004) persuasively argues that numerical preponderance and technology are poor predictors of war outcomes because they tell us nothing about how effectively coercive resources are used. Furthermore, it seems self-evident that numerical preponderance is endogenous to the performance of the government’s counter-insurgency operations: if the state has failed to curb the activities of the rebels, or the rebels are surging, state authorities are forced to ramp up their coercive capacities.

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74 See (Westad 2007) for what is by far the most well sourced account of superpower involvement in Ethiopia.
Lastly, the Ethiopian state has historically had many internal and external opponents, so increases in numerical preponderance may be an artifact of developments unrelated to the insurgency in Eritrea.

A better, albeit imperfect measure of state repression would be to look at major Ethiopian government offensives against Jebha between 1960-1982, and examine the extent to which fragmentation occurred during, or directly following, such offensives. Of course, not all offensives achieve a degree of success, but if theories about state repression are true, fragmentation should be preceded by a major government offensive that has achieved some success.

My research suggests that there were roughly four major offensives against Jebha in Eritrea, with the first occurring in 1967, and the last occurring in 1979. Figure 12 (appendix) lists these offensives, provides details on each, roughly approximates their outcomes, and lists whether they were followed by fragmentation. One can see from the table that the occurrence of major government offensives does not explain much—particularly the events of 1975-77.

Of course, successful counter-insurgency efforts are not solely comprised of coercion. Some governments have successfully split rebel organizations by offering political or economic incentives that persuade particular segments to defect or provide an issue of contention within rebel ranks. Such arguments are closely related to theories about “spoilers” and peace negotiations that split rebel organizations between those that seek to cooperate with the government, and those who want to continue war (Stedman 1997). Yet in the Eritrean context, these sorts of explanations are not convincing. First, the Ethiopian government had virtually no official contacts of any consequence with Jebha until the monarchy was overthrown in 1974. Until that point, the Ethiopian government largely communicated with Jebha indirectly through community elders who would relay messages
between the two sides. In fact, until the mid-1970’s, the Ethiopian government largely denied there was even an insurgency in the province of Eritrea. Therefore, it does not seem likely that serious government efforts to split the rebels could have been made before 1974, and thus such efforts could not explain the splits of 1967-68.

Even after the precipitous demise of the monarchy in 1974, and despite the rhetoric of the new Marxist military government in Addis Ababa, few actual efforts were made to encourage defection from Jebha through the provision of political or economic incentives. Figure 13, which is data from Minorities at Risk’s Discrimination data-set, shows there was little variation in the degree to which the political institutions of the Ethiopian state discriminated against Eritreans (see appendix for explanation of criteria).

However, an honest history should note that the Ethiopian government periodically offered amnesty to enemy combatants. Yet in practice, these efforts were open-ended instead of time bound, and as such, cannot explain temporal variation in fragmentation. Furthermore, it is doubtful whether amnesty, in the absence of extra political or economic benefits, would be sufficient to trigger defection amongst those who have taken such high-risks to obtain political or economic benefits through war.

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75 For instance, in cases where the government and Jebha were seeking to negotiate the release of foreigners whom Jebha had detained
76 Airgram, Asmara to State, May 4, 1970, RG 59, Central Files, “ELF Defections”. Also, Interview with Jebha fighter, May 3, 2009- Described incessant Ethiopian radio broadcasts and loudspeakers across the front lines designed to encourage defection. Not surprisingly, the tactic was ineffective
Another point to consider, and perhaps the most compelling rebuttal against arguments about state efforts to politically co-opt the rebels, is that if these sorts of theories are true, we would expect all splits of rebel organizations to result in defection to the government. However, we know from the historical analyses that this is not the case. In fact, of the eleven identified groups that split from Jebha, only one group defected to the government.

**External Support and Control**

Another explanation for the occurrence of factional infighting and fragmentation within rebel organizations is the presence of a strong external backer who can enforce cooperation and provide leaders with the material tools necessary to forge (and sometimes coerce) organizational unity. If such a theory were true, we would expect shocks in external support to roughly correlate with the fragmentation of Jebha.
Yet the reality is that this is a weak explanation in the Eritrean context. While it is difficult to accurately assess the degree to which states materially supported Jebha, a brief historical commentary is illuminating.

There were a broad collection of state and non-state actors that provided material support to Jebha over its 22 year armed confrontation with the Ethiopian government. The historiography of the war in Eritrea often understates the degree of external support that the rebels received, yet given the extent to which the revolution became an extension of Arab-Israeli conflicts, intra-Arab rivalries, and Cold War politics, the external dimension is hard to ignore.

Early support for Jebha came from Egypt, which allowed radio broadcasts and the leadership to organize openly in Cairo. By 1963, the Egyptians, who for political reasons opposed the dismemberment of Ethiopia, withdrew their support, only to be replaced by the recently transformed radical Baathist states of Iraq and Syria (Erlich 1983).

Throughout the 1960’s, the Iraqis and Syrians were Jebha’s most committed supporters, channeling much of their financial and military aid to the field through Jebha’s external leadership and providing Jebha members with valuable training in their military academies. During the 1960’s, Jebha radio broadcasts from Damascus and Bagdad railing against imperial Ethiopia’s oppression of its Eritrean minority were the primary mediums through which the Eritrean struggle was publicized on the international stage. For the Arab Baathist states, the war in Eritrea pitted a Muslim minority against a Christian dominated empire, and thus on grounds of religious affinity, was deserving of Arab support. If this were not reason enough to support Jebha, the Arabs had the strong suspicion –

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77 See INR Research Study, Alison Palmer, Feb 22, 1971, RG 59, Central Files “Ethiopia- Foreign Aid to the Eritrean Liberation Front” report implicates nearly 16 countries in supporting ELF at one point in time or another
78 Because the official position of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) was that Africa’s colonial borders were sacrosanct, Egypt feared alienating its African partners by supporting Eritrean nationalists. Furthermore, because of concerns over the Nile, Egypt did not want to encourage South Sudan’s secession by legitimizing the practice
which was correct – that the Ethiopians had a secret, albeit very close security partnership with the
Israeli’s (Lefebvre, Middle East Conflicts and Middle Level Power Intevention in the Horn of Africa
1996).

For its part, neighboring Sudan, by virtue of ethnic kinship with Eritrea’s western lowlanders -
particularly the Beja and Beni Amir tribes that occupy eastern Sudan and much of adjoining parts of
Eritrea – border issues, and pressure from its Arab neighbors, also supported the cause of Eritrean
nationalism, allowing Jebha to establish its executive in Khartoum and a field command in Kassala.

Despite the fact that Ethiopia devoted substantial time and energy to stopping the flow of personnel
and arms from radical Arab states into Eritrea, such efforts were largely unsuccessful. Recognizing
that Eritrea’s 600 mile Red Sea coast was simply too long to effectively police, Jebha’s Arab
supporters would drop shipments of arms along the coast – with the friendly regime of South
Yemen as the conduit – where they would be picked up by Jebha militants who were waiting at pre-
determined locations. On many occasions, Jebha would use local fishermen to ferry weapons to the
coast and successfully avoid the interdiction efforts of the Imperial Ethiopian Navy. ⁷⁹

This was by no means the only way that men and material were moved by the rebels into Eritrea in
the 1960’s and early 1970’s. Overland routes through Kassala were often utilized, as were direct
overland routes from Port Sudan, where much of the arms and munitions from the Arab world
destined for the rebels arrived⁸⁰. Furthermore, at the primary Eritrean port of Massawa, Jebha leader
Osman Saleh Sabbe had constructed a clandestine network of customs officials who allowed crucial
supplies to slip through to the rebels (Pool 2001).

⁷⁹ Airgram, Addis to State, June 14, 1971, RG 59, Central files, “Dhow Activity in Eritrean Waters”
⁸⁰ Authors interviews, Jebha intelligence officer, May 19 and Sept 11, 2009 and Shaebia intelligence officer, August
11, 2009
Even in cases where neighboring states – like Sudan in 1972 or North Yemen – were reluctant to support Jebha, the inability of these states to control their own borders, as well as private pressure from more committed Arab states, rendered this reluctance inconsequential.\footnote{Airgram, Sanaa to State, Jan 24, 1973, RG 59, Central Files, “Ethiopia–Yemen: IEG efforts to prevent VARG assistance to Eritrean Liberation Front}

As previously noted, the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 crippled, at least temporarily, the militaries of Jebha’s most significant benefactors in Damascus and Bagdad. Coupled with the closure of the Red Sea by Israel, Jebha faced a real shortage of arms and equipment, a shortage that coincides nicely with Jebha’s first split.

Yet by the end of the 1960’s, the flow of external support resumed, with new additions. A revolution in Libya that brought Muammar Gaddafi to power provided yet another external patron in the region. US intelligence also reported PLO involvement in Eritrea in the early 1970’s, and attributes the rise in urban terrorism, hijackings, and kidnappings during this period to this support. Even the Chinese provided material support to the rebels in Eritrea, including the training of over thirty Jebha cadres in mainland China in 1967.\footnote{Future leaders of Shaebia Issayas Afeworki and Ramadan Mohammed Nur, who were part of Jebha at this point, both went to China during this period}

After the 1967 war, it does not seem that Jebha incurred any significant loss of external support. Although the commitment of certain external sponsors was idiosyncratic (the Sudanese), and Cold War re-alignments wrought significant changes in external backing (Libya and Yemen in 1976), there were always states in the region who were all too willing to fill the void. In fact, the loss of support from several radical Arab states after the overthrow of the Ethiopian monarchy created new opportunities, bringing a number of conservative Arab states to Jebha’s aid.\footnote{Telegram, Jidda to State, Feb 24, 1975, RG 59, Central Files, “Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, and the United States”} Indeed, by the late 1970’s and 1980’s there was a growing significance of Saudi petro-dollars in the Eritrean field, much
of it encouraged by Reagan administration. (Lefebvre, Middle East Conflicts and Middle Level Power Intervention in the Horn of Africa 1996). Thus, it is hard to see how a loss of external support could explain Jebha splits in 1975-77 and 1981-82.

To drive this point home further, de-classified dispatches from US embassy officials in Khartoum reported interesting information in March of 1975, directly prior to the divisive Jebha Congress of May 1975 that began the organization’s fragmentation:

“According to a diplomatic colleague, whose own source is a regional arms dealer, GOS (Government of Sudan) has permitted shipment of substantial quantity of arms to transit Sudan on the way to Eritreans. Specifically, source reported that 51 tons of anti-tank and anti-aircraft rockets and small arms, originating in Syria and Iraq, have recently arrived in Khartoum by air. Packing crates, which arrived labeled ‘vegetables,’ were allegedly relabeled ‘school supplies’ to better account for weight by Sudanese security forces before arms permitted to continue to destination in Eritrea.

While story is inconclusive, it echoes earlier reports of same tonnage of arms arriving in early December (1974), and lends weight to Ethiopian conviction that GOS is indeed assisting in supplying arms and ammunition to Eritreans.”

If this were not evidence enough, the participation of Abu Ala, Iraqi director of the Department of Palestinian Affairs and Liberation Organizations, in the Jebha Congress of 1975, suggests that external support, or lack of it, was not the relevant causal factor in Jebha’s fragmentation at that time.

**Organizational Structure, Centralization, and Control**

It is also reasonable to assume that rebel organizations that possess fairly decentralized command and control structures are more likely fragment. Thus shifts in organization towards more

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84 Telegram 50, Khartoum to State, March 13, 1975, RG 59, Central Files, “Arms Shipment to Eritrea”
decentralized administrative structures could map onto incidences of fragmentation and be driving my results. Since there is no consensus in the literature on how to measure organizational centralization/decentralization, and the concept is often misused in studies of civil war,\(^8\) I prefer to outline Jebha’s institutional evolution.

When Jebha launched the insurgency in Sept of 1961 in Eritrea’s Barka province, it was led by a self-appointed Provisional Executive Committee of three who were based out of Cairo- Idris Mohammed Adem, Idris Glawdewos, and Osman Saleh Sabbe. While there is little information about Jebha’s early organization, communication between the Cairo triumvirate and fighters in the field was likely limited, and as such, fighters probably operated with a broad degree of autonomy.

In 1962, the Provisional Executive Committee was replaced by the Revolutionary Command (RC), which consisted of the Cairo three as well as a twelve member Executive committee comprised of Eritrean exiles from Sudan, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia. In 1965, the growth of the organization in the field from a small band of fighters to nearly 1000 required a more formal structure. After meetings held in Khartoum in which Adem, Sabbe, and Glawedewos were confirmed as leaders of Jebha, the three moved their operations to Khartoum while also opening a field command in Kassala that oversaw military affairs. The leaders of Jebha decided that the best mode of organization in the field would be zonal structure, largely decentralized, and based on the experience of the AFLN in Algeria. Initially, Jebha consisted of four zones, each of which drew their leadership and rank and file membership from the geographic area in which they operated. The predictable result was that the zonal system tended to reproduce the ethnic, religious, and regional divisions of Eritrean society. In 1966, an increasing influx of Christian’s from the central plateau necessitated a fifth zone, dubbed the “Christian zone.” By virtue of kinship, Adem, Sabbe, and Glawedewos had particularly strong

\(^8\) (Johnston 2008) makes a similar point in his discussion of insurgent organizational structure in Liberia and Sierra Leone
kinship links with the first, fourth, and second zone respectively, and ties of patronage bound these leaders to each of these zonal commands quite closely.

Yet ties of patronage and kinship with the external leadership notwithstanding, the zonal system largely lacked coherence. Zonal leaders treated the areas in which they operated as personal fiefdoms, and operated independently of one another. More importantly, the zonal system created a competitive dynamic, a trend that was only exacerbated by rivalries amongst the external leadership.

It was in this context that Jebha fragmented in 1967, and thus organizational decentralization would seem to be a good explanation for cooperation breakdown. However, a discussion of what Jebha’s organization looked like on the eve of the divisive congress of 1975 suggests that this sort of explanation is inadequate in explaining the breakdown of cooperation that ensued.

By 1971, Jebha had gone through a major transition, the result of which was a radically different organizational structure based on Leninist principles of democratic-centralism. Recruitment, training, and personnel issues were now centralized. A two tiered leadership was elected by a fighter’s congress, with a Revolutionary Council of 13 and an executive committee of 19. Importantly, the executive organs were now in the field in close proximity to the units they commanded. A Secretary-General was empowered with day to day responsibilities for management while a set of committees in the executive bodies were set up for centralized policy making. Furthermore, Jebha set up a secret internal Marxist party to enforce discipline and ideologically train new members.  

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86 This section is drawn from a wide range of sources. See (Markakis 1987) and (Medhanie 1986). Also, author’s interview with Shaebia intelligence officer, August 11, 2009. A fantastic primary source document that details Jebha’s organizational structure is (The Eritrean Revolution: 16 Years of Armed Struggle 1977)
Thus Jebha was relatively centralized on the eve of the explosion of factionalism in 1975, a situation that persisted through the factional events of 1982. Thus, a theory of organizational centralization vs. decentralization would not seem to explain much here.

**Organizational Size and Complexity**

One of the more compelling competing explanations has to do with organizational size and complexity. Building on Olson’s famous insight that collective action is difficult in groups that are either large, and, or socially differentiated (Olson, The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups 1965) (Olson, The Rise and Fall of Nations: Economic Growth, Stagflation, and Social Rigidities 1982), it may be the case that Jebha’s size and social complexity affected its fragmentation.

However, Jebha’s aggregate size is a weak explanation for its fragmentation. Figure 14 is a bar chart that illustrates the size of Jebha during its three moments of factionalism and fragmentation. One can see that Jebha fragmented when it was both relatively large, and relatively small.

Nor was a rapid and dramatic increase in membership, relative to the size of Jebha at a particular point in time, responsible for fragmentation. While the fragmentation of 1967-68 and 1975-77 coincided with rapid increases in membership, the fragmentation of 1982 did not.

Finally, while increases in Jebha’s diversity would seem to be central to the story of its fragmentation, Jebha likely became a less diverse organization after the departures of Herui Tedla Bairu and Falool in 1975 and 1977 respectively. How then does one explain the events of 1982? Indeed, the new equilibrium reached after the factional cataclysms of the mid 1970’s was built on a much narrower ethnic, religious, and ideological base.

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87 These are best estimates, and a rough average of numbers provided by available non-Jebha sources
A final issue to consider is whether processes of factionalism and fragmentation are triggered by where a rebel organization sits in absolute terms, rather than change in position—i.e. significant gains or losses. In particular, it may be that gains and losses are masking the effect of being near victory, or near total defeat. One could well argue that as a rebel organization approaches either of these points, they hit a threshold beyond which cooperation becomes very difficult.

In order to get a handle on this issue, I measure Jebha’s annual military position in absolute terms by placing the organization in one of five categories annually: Jebha is given a 1 if it occupies less than 20 percent of the province, a 2 if it occupies 20 to 40 percent, a 3 if 40 to 60 percent, a 4 if 60 to 80 percent, and a 5 if 80 to 100 percent. If Jebha is still in its guerilla phase, I look at effective operational reach, rather than control. **Figure 15** is a graph that depicts the trends in Jebha’s
territorial position with the numbers that sit on the trend line indicating both the absolute position of Jebha and exactly when fragmentation occurred.

Figure 15: Territorial Control and Operational Reach—Jebha 1960-1982

If absolute military position was the relevant variable causal variable, and gains and losses masked its effect, when we would expect both Jebha to fragment in category 1 and category 5—near defeat and near victory respectively. At the very least, we would not expect to see fragmentation in the middle, category 3. Yet as the graph demonstrates, this is simply not the case. In fact, the only cases of fragmentation that we see are in categories 1-3. Therefore, it is hard to argue that my theory of relative gains and losses masks the effect of being on the brink of victory, or the precipice of defeat.  

88 Of course, this chart does not nail this point very well, since Jebha does not demonstrate the full variation on levels of absolute control. It may be the case that as Jebha passes category three it hits a threshold above which intra-organizational cooperation is difficult. However, the six other cases I use help validate this argument much better. Indeed, not every case can perfectly highlight every nuance of the argument.
Conclusions

It should be noted that the above discussion is not meant to be conclusive with respect to alternative explanations. In the interest of space, I have highlighted those that are most theoretically compelling. However, what this paper has tried to demonstrate is that the occurrence of factional infighting and fragmentation is contingent on organizational performance in unique and novel ways. While the statistical data illustrates a relationship between rebel fragmentation and gains and losses in the context of Ethiopia’s civil wars, careful historical analysis of Jebha – using original interviews with ex-combatants, color coded district level maps and archival sources – highlights the plausibility of the dual causal mechanisms of credible commitment and preference divergence. The counter-intuitive conclusion is that stalemate, or periods of slow, marginal battlefield change, promote cohesion and are the only sustainable basis for cooperation in war. I refer to such contexts as “cohesive stalemates.”

Obviously, the theory and mechanisms proposed require further testing and evaluation against a larger sample of cases. More precise and accurate measures that capture the full variation in the magnitude of gains and losses would make for a more compelling argument. Furthermore, since this is a ceteris paribus argument, we need to carefully consider variables that may interact with the processes and mechanisms that I have identified in this paper. Many of these issues are taken up in other parts of what is a larger project. Yet these conceptual and empirical difficulties notwithstanding, the broad array of evidence marshaled provides a compelling window into the internal politics of organized rebellion, and demonstrates that while territorial gains and losses create contexts conducive to factional infighting and fragmentation, military stalemates possess unique properties that enhance cooperation. In the final analysis, it is war, its ebb, and its flow, that determine when and how rebels cooperate.
## Appendix

**Figure 12: Major Ethiopian Offensives against Jebha 1960-1982**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Fragmentation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1967</td>
<td>First major deployment of Ethiopian regulars to Eritrean theater (2nd Division). The offensive largely consisted of a series of sweeps into western provinces of Gash and Barka that were a locus of Jebha activity, as well as aerial bombardment. The Ethiopians also created strategic hamlets to isolate population from the rebels. The offensive created first major dislocations of the war with over 60 thousand fleeing to Sudan. In the short term, the offensive was largely credited with curbing Jebha activities in the western lowlands, although by 1969, Jebha activity was on the increase.</td>
<td><strong>Moderate Success</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Took place after the assassination of Major General Teshome Ergetu, commander of the 2nd Division. In a reprise of 1967 attacks, Ethiopian military also declared martial law over the province and replaced the civilian governor-general, Asrate Kassa, with a military man, General Debebe.</td>
<td><strong>Failure</strong></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1976</td>
<td>Known as the “Peasant March,” this offensive was put together in a few short months, and consisted of 50 thousands poorly trained peasants between the ages of 16 and 60. Most were actually in their 40’s. The Ethiopian’s largely telegraphed the offensive, and Jebha, Shaebia, and their allies the Woyane, defeated most of the peasant contingents in Tigray before they even entered the province of Eritrea.</td>
<td><strong>Failure</strong></td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1978-79</td>
<td>Actually consisted of 5 offensives, the first of which began in June of 1978. The first set of offensives were highly successful, as an Ethiopian army of 100,000 troops launched attacks from rear bases in Tigray, as well as from garrisons in Asmara, Barentu, and Massawa. Jebha and Shaebia gains of 1974-1978 were reversed, and both groups were relegated to small base area in the Sahel mountains of northern Eritrea. The second set of offensives failed to dislodge Jebha and Shaebia from their base area in the Sahel mountains.</td>
<td><strong>Moderate Success</strong></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Eritrea’s Districts (City of Asmara counted as one district instead of four)

Adi Keih
Adi Qwala
Adi Teklezan
Adobha
Afabet
Akurdet City
Are’eta
Areza
Asmat
Asmara
Assab City
Barentu City
Berikh
Central Southern Red Sea
Dahlak
Dbarwa
Dekemhare
Dghe
Elabered
Emni Haili
Foro
Forto
Ghala Nefhi
Ghela’elo
Gheleb
Ghinda’e
Gogne
Goluj
Habero
Hagaz
Halhal
Hamelmallo
Haykota
Karura
Keren City
Kerkabet
Logo Anseba
Mai-Aini
Mai-Mne
Massawa
Mendefera
Mogolo
Molqi
Nakfa
Segeneiti
Sel'a
Sen'afe
Serejaka
Shambuko
She'eb
South Southern Red Sea
Tesseney
Tserona
Upper Gash
Minorities at Risk Discrimination Dataset (coding criteria)

Political Discrimination Index

0 No discrimination
1 Neglect/remedial policies:
Substantial under-representation in political office and/or participation due to historical neglect or restrictions. Explicit public policies are designed to protect or improve the group’s political status.

2 Neglect/no remedial policies
Substantial under-representation due to historical neglect or restrictions. No social practice of deliberate exclusion. No formal exclusion. No evidence of protective or remedial public policies.

3 Social exclusion/neutral policy
Substantial under-representation due to prevailing social practice by dominant groups. Formal public policies toward the group are neutral or, if positive, inadequate to offset discriminatory social practices.

4 Exclusion/repressive policy
Public policies (formal exclusion and/or recurring repression) substantially restrict the group’s political participation by comparison with other groups. (Note: This does not include repression during group rebellions. It does include patterned repression when the group is not openly resisting state authority.)

Economic Discrimination Index

0 No discrimination
1 Neglect/remedial polices
Significant poverty and under-representation in desirable occupations due to historical marginality, neglect, or restrictions. Public policies are designed to improve the group’s material well-being.

2 Neglect/no remedial policies
Significant poverty and under-representation due to historical marginality, neglect, or restrictions. No social practice of deliberate exclusion. Few or no public policies aim at improving the group’s material well-being.

3 Social exclusion/neutral policy
Significant poverty and under-representation due to prevailing social practice by dominant groups. Formal public policies toward the group are neutral or, if positive, inadequate to offset active and widespread discrimination.

4 Exclusion/repressive policy
Public policies (formal exclusion and/or recurring repression) substantially restrict the group’s economic opportunities by contrast with other groups.
Works Cited


