

Factionalization From Below: The Case of Palestinian Fatah

Moran Stern
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Abstract:

Existing scholarship on the conditions under which rebel groups fragment points to the group's leadership structure. Rebel groups with factionalized leadership and decision making structure are more likely to splinter. Conversely, rebel groups that have centralized leadership and decision making structure are less likely to splinter. The scholarship's focus on leadership structure systematically omits the most important social stratum that drives the emergence of factions: the junior cadres. I argue that having centralized leadership and decision making structure galvanizes the emergence of factions by the rebel group's junior cadres. A rebel group with a centralized decision making structure tends to inhibit the access of junior cadres to leadership positions and, consequently, restrict their ability to affect the organization from *within*. As grievances among disenfranchised members intensify, some act independently and factionalize. Using the case of Palestinian Fatah, I show that a rebel group with a centralized decision making structure is *not* resistant to factionalization. Rather, factions are driven by disenfranchised junior cadres and not as a result of inter-leadership disputes as the current literature argues. I test my expectations using several originally constructed datasets on Fatah factions between 1959 and 2019, as well as personal interviews with Fatah junior cadres, and find strong evidence in support of my arguments.