Diversity and Diversion:  
How Ethnic Composition Affects Diversionary Conflict  

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Abstract  

How does a state’s ethnic composition affect its propensity to engage in diversionary conflicts? Recent empirical work has examined the political conditions under which domestic unrest compels an embattled leader to initiate conflict abroad. We remain largely uncertain, however, of what social or demographic characteristics make states particularly prone to diversionary behavior. This paper takes a first cut at addressing this gap, examining whether a state’s ethnic structure conditions its leader’s response to domestic discontent. Combining the expansive literatures on ethnic politics and diversionary war yields conflicting expectations here. I find that ethnically fragmented states are significantly more prone to initiating diversionary conflicts, and show that this dynamic is driven at least in part by the greater availability of “conflict opportunities” resulting from transborder ethnic kin groups. A brief case study illustrates these dynamics.  

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Are leaders of ethnically diverse or cohesive states more likely to respond to domestic political turmoil by lashing out and initiating conflict abroad? Do certain types of ethnic divisions produce stronger diversionary incentives? An enormous amount of theoretical and empirical work has assessed the conditions under which domestic unrest pushes leaders to initiate conflict abroad. But the expansive literature on diversionary conflict has focused on the domestic political or institutional conditions that either affect diversion. The social, cultural, and demographic characteristics that render states more or less prone to diversionary conflict have been completely ignored. This is potentially problematic. If diversionary conflict is essentially intended to quell social unrest, there is every reason to believe that the probability of diversionary behavior is conditioned by domestic social and demographic factors. International conflict may be more likely to bolster domestic political loyalties in states with certain types of populations. Leaders of such states would then more likely to resort to diversionary conflict in response to domestic turmoil. The vast literature on diversionary war has ignored this possibility.

I take a first cut at addressing this gap, examining how a state’s ethnic composition affects the likelihood that its leaders will respond to domestic unrest by initiating conflict abroad. I assess three causal pathways that could link ethnic composition to diversionary behavior. First, ethnic composition could affect the probability that a state’s population will “rally around the flag” in response to external conflict. If ethnic diversity impedes such unification, diversionary conflict should be less likely in ethnically fractured states (Coser 1956; Levy 1989). Second, ethnically fragmented states could be more prone to diversion because the existence of numerous transborder ethnic kin groups provides a ready source of “conflict opportunities” for embattled leaders to exploit in when seeking to divert. Third, ethnically divided states may be more domestically unstable, and thus face stronger incentives to resort to risky diversionary conflicts in response to domestic unrest.

I find strong support for the conflict opportunities argument. Below, I show that diversionary conflict propensities are significantly greater in ethnically fragmented states. Furthermore, diversionary conflicts disproportionately target states that are ethnically linked to the initiating state. Generally, these results demonstrate that social and demographic conditions significantly affect the likelihood of domestic unrest translating into diversionary conflict. More specifically, they show that ethnic fragmentation at home and transnational ethnic links abroad can significantly increase a state’s tendency toward diversionary behavior. These findings support the notion that diversion requires the availability of pre-existing “conflict opportunities” that leaders can escalate at their convenience. This nexus between ethnic politics and diversionary conflict is further supported with a brief illustrative case study of the 1998 dispute between Turkey and Syria.
1 Existing Literature

This section examines and critiques the literature on diversionary conflict, pointing out the surprising lack of empirical work examining the social and demographic conditions affecting the probability of diversionary conflict. I then discuss the literature on ethnic composition and domestic instability, highlighting its relevance to diversionary conflict.

1.1 Diversionary Conflict

The early empirical literature on diversionary conflict was notoriously inconclusive, and the topic remains disputed (Ostrom and Job 1986; James and Oneal 1991; Morgan and Bickers 1992; Meernik and Waterman 1996; Chiozza and Goemans 2011). Early quantitative studies found limited support for diversionary war theory despite its compelling logical foundations and several supportive case studies. More recent work has explained these mixed early findings by arguing that diversionary conflict is a highly conditional phenomenon. Domestic unrest has been shown to translate into incentives for international conflict only under specific circumstances. When such conditions are absent, domestic unrest may have no effect on conflict propensities, or may even incline toward peace.

For example, many have argued that strategic interaction and the behavior of potential adversaries can prevent embattled leaders from initiating diversionary conflicts. More specifically, likely targets of diversion can adopt a policy of “strategic conflict avoidance” and effectively deprive the troubled leader of any excuse for initiating a dispute (Smith 1996; Leeds and Davis 1997; Clark 2003; Chiozza and Goemans 2004; Fordham 2005; Tarar 2006). By strategically making concessions to vulnerable leaders, likely targets can defuse a potentially dangerous conflict before it begins. This strategic interaction has been invoked to explain the spotty empirical support for diversionary conflict theory (Leeds and Davis 1997).

More broadly, this literature holds that embattled leaders require adequate “conflict opportunities” in order for a diversionary conflict to occur (Meernik 1994, 2001; Mitchell and Prins 2004; Tir 2010; Mitchell and Thyne 2010). The argument essentially holds that diversion requires salient, if latent, conflicts that leaders can seize upon and escalate when they choose. Leaders who disingenuously provoke a conflict where none existed previously will appear unnecessarily aggressive and be further punished by their constituents. As such, when casting about for a potentially fruitful diversionary conflict, leaders of states that are engaged in more ongoing disputes will enjoy a greater number of escalation opportunities. More conflict opportunities should then increase the probability that domestic unrest results in international conflict.
The theoretical logic behind the strategic conflict avoidance and conflict opportunities literatures is extremely compelling, but future empirical work must more thoroughly flesh out its varying effects on dispute *initiation* and subsequent conflict *escalation*. Although strategic interaction may prevent diversionary conflicts from escalating to higher levels of violence, it may be less effective in preventing embattled leaders from initiating the dispute in the first place. Empirical work on the subject must directly model conflict opportunities and more clearly differentiate between dispute initiation and conflict escalation. The tests below begin this process, offering a clearer picture of how conflict opportunities affect the initiation, rather than escalation, of diversionary conflict.

In addition to the behavior of potential targets, a vast literature has specified the types of domestic institutional structures that either provide leaders with the strongest incentives to initiate diversionary conflicts or allow them the autonomy to use force for personal ends (Miller 1995; Gelpi 1997; Dassel and Reinhardt 1999; Pickering and Kisangani 2005, 2010; Kisangani and Pickering 2009; Lai and Slater 2006; Brule and Williams 2009; Johnson and Barnes 2011; Oakes 2012). Numerous studies have assessed the effects of regime type and whether democratic or authoritarian states are more likely to divert (Gelpi 1997; Miller 1999; Pickering and Kisangani 2005, 2010). Others have examined more specific institutional features, such as regime consolidation (Kisangani and Pickering 2009), executive accountability (Brule and Williams 2009; Johnson and Barnes 2011), or state extractive capacity (Oakes 2012). These studies have significantly enhanced our understanding of the domestic institutional conditions that promote or impede diversionary conflict.

Despite the enormous, cumulative contributions of this work, I argue that the literature to date has entirely neglected an important class of factors that might also condition the probability of diversionary conflict. More specifically, the existing literature has completely ignored domestic *social* or *demographic* conditions. We remain unsure of the degree to which a state’s broader social, cultural or demographic composition affects the propensity of its leaders to respond to unrest with diversionary force.

This oversight is highly problematic. Diversionary conflict, at the most basic level, is meant to strengthen a leader’s hold on power by either demonstrating her competence to key constituencies or generating a “rally ‘round the flag” effect within the population (Levy 1989; Richards et al. 1993; Downs and Rocke 1994; Goemans 2000). The ultimate goal of diversionary conflict is to create a broad reaction (i.e. perceptions of competence or increased nationalism) among large swathes of the population. Logically, the makeup of this population might affect the probability that it will respond to international conflict by rallying around the flag or updating their perceptions of the leader’s competence. If
diversionary conflict is ultimately meant to provoke a broad, mass-level reaction, it seems quite plausible that broad, mass-level social factors would condition how the population responds to crises, and thus a leader's propensity to divert. Certain types of populations may be more likely to respond favorably to diversionary conflicts. Leaders of these states should then be most likely to respond to domestic unrest by initiating conflict abroad.

1.2 Ethnic Composition and Diversionary Conflict

I examine the effect of one specific social factor – ethnic composition – on the probability that domestic unrest will result in diversionary conflict. Research on ethnic politics has torn down “primordialist” notions of ethnicity as fixed and exogenous, highlighting the importance of political and social context, agency, and practice in constructing ethnic identities and cleavages (Chandra 2012). Once constructed, ethnic identities can be sticky and slow to change. But importantly, even fluid or transient ethnic identities can create an extremely salient and effective source of political mobilization and collective action (Fearon and Laitin 2000).

The empirical literature on the relationship between ethnic structure and intrastate conflict is perhaps as inconclusive as the early work on diversionary war (Collier and Hoeffler 1998; Reilly 2000; Ellingsen 2000; Elbadawi and Sambanis 2002; Reynal-Querol 2002; Fearon and Laitin 2003; Blimes 2006; Cederman and Girardin 2007; Fearon, Kasara and Laitin 2007). Early studies examined the conflict-inducing effect of ethnic fractionalization, or the degree to which a state is fragmented into a large number of discrete, and potentially competing, ethnic groups.\(^1\) More competing groups, it was thought, created more ethnic cleavages and more groups that would likely become disaffected if excluded from power. Compelling anecdotal evidence led many to believe that ethnic fragmentation would significantly increase the probability of a state experiencing civil war or serious domestic political instability.

The empirical literature, however, has proven somewhat inconclusive. Different specifications of the crucial variables produced different results, but significant relationships between ethnic fractionalization and conflict were typically found to be weak and rather fragile (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Cederman and Girardin 2007; Fearon, Kasara and Laitin 2007). Important critiques of the fractionalization literature have pointed out that states with widely varying ethnic compositions can produce comparable fractionalization scores, while others have highlighted the problems of using temporally invariant codings of ethnic groups (Cederman and Girardin 2007). Related work

\(^1\)I use the terms “fractionalization” and “fragmentation” interchangeably.
convincingly pointed out that the theoretical mechanisms linking fractionalization to conflict were underdeveloped and unconvincing. In response, many scholars have asserted a non-linear, inverse-U shaped relationship between fragmentation and civil conflict (Collier and Hoeffler 1998; Esteban and Ray 2008). According to this school of thought, states with moderate levels of fractionalization are most likely to experience civil conflict. In highly cohesive states, ethnicity is simply not a source of conflict. And in highly fragmented states, the competing ethnic groups comprise too small a proportion of the population to make an effective claim for national leadership.

This led directly to important work demonstrating an impressively robust association between ethnic polarization and civil war (Reynal-Querol 2002; Montalvo and Reynal-Querol 2005; Esteban and Ray 2008). Polarization captures the degree to which a population is evenly divided between two competing ethnic groups. In highly polarized states, both ethnic groups are large enough to have a reasonable claim to control of the state, and can amass significant popular support for these claims. If either group is excluded from power, it will feel highly aggrieved and be able to marshal significant social and economic resources in airing its grievances and seeking redress. The theoretical logic linking polarization to conflict is more convincing, and empirical support for this proposition has been quite robust. Although most empirical work on ethnic politics has focused on the impact of fractionalization, it appears that ethnic polarization may be most relevant to domestic instability and social cohesion.

But how exactly do these disparate literatures speak to one another? Jaroslav Tir and Michael Jasinski (2008) have convincingly shown that embattled leaders can exploit ethnic cleavages for their own political survival, using diversionary force to repress domestic ethnic minorities. And importantly, domestic repression along ethnic lines may often supplement, rather than supplant, a diversionary strategy abroad (Enterline and Gleditsch 2000). The effect of domestic ethnic structure on international diversionary conflict propensities, however, has not yet been thoroughly examined.

2 Hypotheses

This section lays out the ways in which ethnic composition could affect a state’s diversionary conflict propensities. I flesh out several distinct theoretical logics and derive a series of competing hypotheses. But this first requires a brief discussion of the various ethnic structures implicated above.

First, ethnic fragmentation refers to the degree to which a state is evenly divided among a large number of discrete, and potentially competing or antagonistic, ethnic
groups. Fragmented states will encompass a large number of distinct groups, none of which comprise a disproportionately large segment of the population. Ethnic polarization, on the other hand, is the degree to which a state is evenly divided between two large ethnic groups that jointly comprise the bulk of the population. Ethnically polarized states essentially represent a bipolar distribution of ethnic identities. The previous section described the literature on ethnic structure and domestic conflict, arguing that ethnically polarized states appear to be more prone to instability. But how might these different ethnic structures affect diversionary conflict propensities?

I argue that a state’s ethnic composition could affect diversionary conflict propensities in numerous and multifarious ways. First, both ethnic fractionalization and polarization could decrease the probability of diversionary conflict by impeding the generation of a rally effect among a state’s population. Alternatively, ethnic fragmentation could increase the probability of diversionary conflict by creating more interstate conflict opportunities upon which leaders can seize when looking to divert. Ethnic polarization could also increase the probability of diversion by creating an unstable domestic political situation in which troubled leaders are forced to respond quickly and decisively to any signs of domestic unrest. This might lead them to initiate risky diversionary conflicts that more secure leaders could avoid. Additionally, leaders of ethnically polarized states might have faith in the ability of their large ethnic in-group to sustain them in power even after alienating ethnic out-groups through the pursuit of domestic repression and/or diversionary conflict against those groups’ foreign allies. Below, I flesh these logics out in greater detail and specify a series of testable hypotheses.

2.1 Ethnic Diversity and Social Cohesion

Early work on diversionary war relied on the social psychology literature on in-group/out-group dynamics and social identity theory. According to this theory, people form identities as members of “in-groups” and in opposition to excluded “out-groups.” The cohesion of an in-group is significantly increased during crises or periods of conflict against a widely shared out-group. Applying this theory to international politics, interstate conflicts are thought to generate a “rally around the flag” effect in which external threats create a heightened sense of nationalism and bolster support for political leaders. Systematic empirical work on the rally-inducing effects of international conflict has produced mixed results, although anecdotal evidence of this phenomenon is often compelling (Baker and Oneal 2001; Baum 2002; Groeling and Baum 2008).

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2This differs from polarization in the contentious politics literature, which focuses on the political/ideological distance or degree of conflict between groups.
These mixed results indicate that the likelihood of conflict creating a rally effect may depend on the type of conflict or the initiating state’s underlying social structure. Importantly, the psychological literature has argued that conflict only induces greater solidarity among groups with high prior levels of cohesion. In fractious or divided populations, specific adversaries will threaten some in-group members more than others and conflict with these adversaries will create widely disparate reactions within the population. In such cases, conflict will likely result in even greater levels of internal disunity, increasing domestic unrest than quelling it (Levy 1989). If divided societies will only be further riven by international conflict, leaders of such states have little hope of diversionary conflict producing a national rally effect.

The implications of this logic for ethnic politics and diversionary conflict are immediately apparent. Assuming ethnicity is a salient cleavage, baseline levels of national cohesion are likely to be comparatively low in both ethnically fractionalized and polarized states. Under such conditions, external conflict is unlikely to produce greater cohesion at the national level. One or a few ethnic groups may rally behind the government, but others will feel alienated and withdraw support for the leadership. In ethnically polarized states, where an excluded ethnic group might be quite large, this is an especially risky proposition. Fearing that conflict abroad would only deepen domestic tensions and further alienate a large portion of the population, leaders of ethnically divided states may forgo diversionary conflict. Essentially, the low prior level of social cohesion in both fractionalized and polarized states means that conflict is particularly unlikely to elicit a nation-wide domestic rally effect, and may in fact exacerbate domestic instability. Knowing this, leaders of both ethnically fractionalized and polarized states might be particularly unlikely to respond to domestic unrest by initiating conflict abroad. This logic yields the two “cohesion hypotheses.”

**Cohesion Hypothesis 1:** The positive effect of domestic unrest on interstate conflict should decrease in more ethnically fractionalized states.

**Cohesion Hypothesis 2:** The positive effect of domestic unrest on interstate conflict should decrease in more ethnically polarized states.

### 2.2 Ethnic Fractionalization and Conflict Opportunities

Alternatively, ethnically fragmented states might be more prone to diversionary conflicts because their fractured ethnic structures provide leaders with more international conflict opportunities. In highly fractionalized states and regions, political borders are unlikely to
reflect underlying social and demographic boundaries, and politically salient ethnic groups often straddle national borders. This is particularly the case in formerly colonized regions, where maps drawn by imperial powers produced political borders that are often orthogonal to ethnic boundaries. Benjamin Miller (2007) has argued that such “unbalanced” regions are particularly unstable and prone to conflict, with pervasive border disputes and crises constantly arising regarding the treatment of ethnic kin groups across borders. A wealth of recent work has shown that the existence of transborder ethnic groups increases the probability of both civil strife and interstate conflict (Davis and Moore 1997; Saideman 2002; Woodwell 2004; Salehyan 2008; Cederman et al. 2013).

This argument is directly relevant to diversionary conflict because it implies that state-level measures of ethnic fragmentation should correlate with region-wide patterns of persistent conflict and instability. And as mentioned above, conflict opportunity theory argues that domestic unrest will translate into diversionary conflict only when leaders can seize upon and escalate an already salient dispute. Leaders who concoct disputes where none existed previously will be seen as unnecessarily endangering national security and further punished by the population. But the ethnic tensions and persistent territorial disputes that arise in ethnically fragmented areas, where demographic boundaries are orthogonal to state borders, provide a ready supply of conflict opportunities. In regions where states are more ethnically coherent and transborder ethnic groups less common, embattled leaders are less likely to find a dispute to escalate when needed. When ethnic relations create a history of interstate discord, conflict opportunities are more readily available and domestic unrest is more likely to actually result in dispute initiation. Essentially, ethnic fragmentation and ethnically unbalanced regions should generate a ready supply of interstate conflict escalation opportunities that facilitate the initiation of diversionary conflict in response to domestic turmoil. This logic yields the first “opportunity hypothesis.”

**Opportunity Hypothesis 1:** The positive effect of domestic unrest on interstate conflict should increase in more ethnically fractionalized states.

Conflict opportunity theory, examined through the lens of ethnic politics, also produces testable predictions regarding the likely targets of diversionary conflicts. If a state’s ethnic composition contributes to its diversionary conflict propensities by supplying a large number of conflict escalation opportunities, then diversionary conflicts should

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3Indeed Africa and the Middle East are the regions most strongly correlated with high levels of ethnic fragmentation.
target states that are ethnically linked to the initiator. Ethnically fragmented states are disproportionately likely be involved in such latent disputes as a result of disagreements over border demarcation, treatment of ethnic kin groups by foreign governments, or external support of irredentist or separatist groups. And by the logic of conflict opportunity theory, diversionary conflicts initiated by these ethnically fragmented states should disproportionately target states that share ethnic ties with the initiator. I focus more specifically on target states with ties to ethnic groups that are an excluded minority in the initiating state.

There are compelling theoretical reasons why states tied specifically to excluded ethnic groups might make especially attractive targets for diversionary conflict. Diversion abroad can often go hand in hand with a strategy of scapegoating, and perhaps repressing, a leader’s domestic enemies (Gelpi 1997; Dassel and Reinhardt 1999; Enterline and Gleditsch 2000; Tir and Jasinski 2008). Diversionary conflict could reinforce this narrative by targeting the foreign allies supporting the excluded/scapegoated ethnic minority. Additionally, the poor treatment of these excluded minority groups could form the basis of an ongoing bilateral dispute or border conflict with the target state, even if the target is the aggrieved side (Gleditsch 2007; Cederman, Girardin and Gleditsch 2009; Cederman et al. 2013). State B could make a border claim based on the poor treatment of its ethnic kin in State A. State A’s leader, looking for a diversionary opportunity, could then escalate and potentially militarize this dispute, claiming that State B is infringing upon its sovereignty. These dynamics do not operate when ethnic groups are well-treated and politically protected in both states.

Conflict opportunity theory thus expects diversionary conflicts to target those states that host ethnic groups linked to excluded minorities in the initiating state. Such transborder ethnic groups, especially those that are excluded or repressed in the initiating state, are likely to present a readily exploitable conflict opportunity with the target state. This logic produces the second opportunity hypothesis.

**Opportunity Hypothesis 2:** Diversionary conflicts should disproportionately target states that host transborder ethnic kin of excluded minority groups in the initiating state.

### 2.3 Polarization, Instability, and Risk

Finally, contrary to the logic of Cohesion Hypothesis 2, an alternative dynamic could render leaders of ethnically polarized states more likely to initiate diversionary conflict in
response to domestic unrest. Recent empirical work has found that ethnically polarized states are most prone to domestic instability and violence (Reynal-Querol 2002; Montalvo and Reynal-Querol 2005). Highly fractionalized states are broken into so many discrete groups that no single faction can rally the collective action necessary to upset the political order or violently take on the government (Reilly 2000). Ethnically polarized states, however, are relatively evenly divided between two large ethnic groups, each of which can make a strong push for control over the government. This creates a potentially combustible domestic political situation.

But why would ethnically polarized states then be more likely to initiate diversionary conflict? Two distinct mechanisms could produce this outcome. First, an ethnically polarized state’s volatile demographic composition might make leaders more insecure and thus more likely to have to immediately resort to risky tactics in response to domestic unrest. Leaders of ethnically polarized know that they sit atop a political powder keg in which even minor unrest can quickly escalate into massive protests, revolution, or even civil war. Such leaders may be forced to react promptly and forcefully to domestic unrest, utilizing risky strategies in doing so. In many cases, this may result in the initiation of diversionary conflict. Leaders of ethnically tranquil states are less likely to have to resort to drastic measures, and can experiment with less risky strategies in responding to domestic discontent.

Second, because ethnically polarized states consist of comparatively large groups, they may facilitate ethnically homogeneous political coalitions. The bimodal ethnic distribution allows leaders to promote ethnicity as a salient cleavage without risking a cascade of ethnic fissures that might threaten the leader’s coalition. The leader’s large, ethnically coherent coalition is less likely to break apart when ethnic cleavages become salient. In ethnically fractionalized states, leaders must often appeal to multiple groups, and highlighting ethnic distinctions would risk unforeseen ethnic hostility spirals that could fracture the leader’s own coalition. But in ethnically polarized states, where a government can often rely on an ethnically cohesive winning coalition, leaders may be able to persecute and scapegoat domestic ethnic opponents without compromising the cohesion of their own supporters. Scapegoating may even increasing cohesion within their coalition (Tir and Jasinski 2008). Leaders of polarized states might trust in the ability of their large ethnic in-group to sustain them in power even after completely alienating a large ethnic out-group.

An embattled leader might then seek to bolster the cohesion of her in-group by

4The claim here is not that ethnically polarized states should initiate diversionary conflict more frequently than less polarized states. This could arise simply from the fact that polarized states experience more unrest. Rather, holding unrest constant, leaders of polarized states should be more likely to respond by initiating conflict abroad.
initiating conflict against the foreign allies of the ethnic out-group. Further alienating this out-group is not necessarily a deterrent, as the leader trusts that the support of her ethnic in-group is sufficient to maintain her in power. In a highly polarized state, after all, the leader’s in-group will likely constitute roughly half of the state’s overall population. Consolidating support among this key subset of the population may tighten an embattled leader’s grip on power. In highly fractionalized states, where each group is comparatively small, leaders must often appeal to multiple ethnic constituencies. Highlighting ethnic cleavages by attacking the foreign allies of a domestic ethnic out-group would risk a spiral of unforeseen ethnic hostility that could eventually fracture the leader’s diverse coalition. These two parallel mechanisms produce the “vulnerability hypothesis.”

**Vulnerability Hypothesis:** The positive effect of domestic unrest on interstate conflict should increase in more ethnically polarized states.

### 3 Data and Research Design

This section details the statistical tests assessing the hypotheses specified above. The dataset uses politically relevant directed dyad-years from 1948 - 2001 as the unit of analysis. I also subset the data by regime type, as diversionary conflict behavior may be conditioned by a leader’s institutional constraints (Miller 1995; Gelpi 1997).

The dataset was constructed using the EUGene software program (Bennett and Stam 2000).

#### 3.1 Dependent Variable

To measure conflict, I use the Correlates of War project’s data on Militarized Interstate Disputes (MIDs). A MID is defined as a “historical case in which the threat, display, or use of military force short of war by one member state is explicitly directed toward the government, official representatives, official forces, property, or territory of another state” (Jones, Bremer and Singer 1996; Ghosn and Bennett 2003; Ghosn, Palmer and Bremer 2004). Conflict initiation is a binary variable equaling one if the sender initiated a dispute against the target in that year. I only code dispute initiation in the first year of a MID.

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5 I code states with an aggregate Polity score of six or greater as democracies. All others are authoritarian.

6 Political relevance requires direct territorial contiguity or separation by only a river for all dyads that do not include a great power. Great powers are politically relevant to all other states.

7 Because a MID is coded for even the threat of force, I argue that strategic conflict avoidance will rarely wash out diversionary disputes. A target’s strategic behavior often begins only after the initiator has issued a threat. Although we must be wary of overinterpreting null results, the broad definition of a MID, which includes the threat of force, mitigates this concern.
3.2 Independent Variables

Testing the hypotheses above requires operationalizing and measuring four key concepts. In initiating states, I need to capture levels of domestic unrest, ethnic fractionalization, and ethnic polarization. In target states, I need to capture the existence of transborder ethnic groups linked to excluded minorities in the initiating state.

In order to capture a leader’s incentives to initiate diversionary conflict in the first place, I use a measure of mass unrest taken from Arthur Banks’ Cross-National Time-Series data (Banks 2012). Following conventional practice, I tally the total number of riots, strikes, and mass public demonstrations for each country-year. These public acts of discontent, even if not initially directed at the government, can be co-opted and redirected by regime opponents to destabilize the government. Unfortunately, reliable public opinion data are not available for most states over time. Alternative measures of leadership insecurity, including those based on economic performance, are highly problematic in that they do not directly capture unrest or discontent. Existing empirical work has also shown that under many circumstances leaders are not blamed for poor economic performance (Brule and Williams 2009; Johnson and Barnes 2011). Despite its flaws, Banks’ measure of mass unrest most accurately captures the theoretical construct of interest. I lag the unrest variable one year to ensure that it is causally prior to conflict.

Ethnic fractionalization is a notoriously difficult concept to define and measure. Even within small communities there can be vast differences of opinion regarding the precise division between ethnicities. I use James Fearon’s measure of ethnic diversity, which is derived from the CIA World Factbook and Encyclopedia Britannica and calculated using the Herfindahl index. This measure estimates the probability that two randomly selected individuals in a given state will belong to different ethnic groups (Fearon 2003; Fearon and Laitin 2003).

\[
EF = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^{N} \pi_i^2
\]  

(1)

where \( \pi \) is the proportion of the population represented by group \( i = (1, \ldots, N) \).

I use Jose Montalvo and Marta Reynal-Querol’s measure of ethnic polarization, which captures the degree to which a country is split between two equally powerful groups (Montalvo and Reynal-Querol 2005; Reynal-Querol 2002). Both highly cohesive and highly fragmented states register rather low values on ethnic polarization. But a state made up of only two ethnic groups of equal size (i.e. a fractionalization score of .5) would be coded as

\^{8}The supplementary materials present several robustness checks using alternative measures of ethnic fragmentation (Atlas Narodov Mira 1964; Selway 2011; Desmet, Ortuno-Ortin and Wacziarg 2012).
the most highly polarized. Polarization scores are determined using the formula:

\[ EP = 1 - \sum_{i=1}^{N} \left( .5 - \pi_i \right)^2 \pi_i / .25 \]  

Figure 1 visually depicts the relationship between fractionalization and polarization.

**Figure 1: Fractionalization vs. Polarization**

Finally, I measure whether potential targets share *ethnic ties* with excluded minorities in the initiating state. I use Ted Robert Gurr’s Minorities at Risk (MAR) data, which covers politically active communal groups in countries with populations greater than 500,000 (Minorities at Risk Project 2009). To be included, an ethnic group must have at least 100,000 members or constitute 1% of population, be “viewed as important” by members, and share some “distinguishing cultural features.” I code a dummy variable taking a value of one if the target state contains an adjoining or contiguous ethnic group linked to the sender state. This focuses on ethnic groups that are geographically linked to their kin abroad. Such contiguous groups are better able to offer support to their foreign kin, and are more likely to create a territorial dispute between the two states.
3.3 Controls

I also include a series of control variables capturing characteristics of both sender and target states. First, it is well-established that power is a central consideration in states’ decisions to use force. I therefore control for relative power within the dyad, measuring the sender’s share of aggregate dyadic power \([\text{sender} / (\text{sender} + \text{target})]\) according to the Composite Indicator of National Capabilities measure (Singer 1987). Second, an enormous literature has shown the significant effect of regime type on international conflict. I therefore control for the level of democracy in both the sender and target state using aggregate Polity scores (Democracy minus Autocracy), version 4.0 (Marshall et al. 2002). Third, repeated studies have shown geographic proximity to be a highly important predictor of dyadic conflict propensities (Bremer 1992; Vasquez 1995). I thus control for the distance between the two states, in thousands of miles, at their closest points. Fourth, I control for economic interdependence, as the interrupted commerce that results from interstate violence will seriously increase the costs of conflict. I therefore control for trade dependence by measuring the sender’s exports to and imports from the target state as a proportion of its overall international trade (Gleditsch 2002). I control for geopolitical compatibility using the unweighted dyadic s−score (Bennett and Rupert 2003). Politically incompatible states are more likely to have conflicts of interest and perceive one another as threats, increasing the probability of conflict. Lastly, the directed-dyadic setup requires that I account for cross-sectional dependencies in the data. In particular, due to a lack of military resources or political capital, a leader who has already initiated one conflict in a given year may be less likely to initiate another dispute against a separate target in that same year. As such, I control for whether the sender state initiated a separate dispute in that year.

3.4 Models

The high probability of temporal or cross-sectional data dependencies when using time-series cross-section data raises the possibility of correlated errors that would produce biased estimates (Beck, Katz and Tucker 1998). Following Carter and Signorino (2010), I include a peace-year variable capturing the number of years since the previous dispute within that dyad, as well as quadratic and cubic polynomials. These variables are not theoretically relevant, and are thus dropped from the presentation of results. I use logistic regression models because of the binary dependent variable. As described in the supplementary materials, the results are largely robust to alternative model and variable specifications.

The hypotheses specified above all posit a conditional relationship between domestic
unrest and international conflict. To assess these conditional relationships, I estimate a series of interaction effects to determine how the effect of unrest on conflict changes across different values of ethnic fractionalization, ethnic polarization, and target ethnic overlap. And because interpretation of interactive coefficients is notoriously treacherous, I also graph these conditional relationships (Brambor, Clark and Golder 2005).

4 Results

First, I test Cohesion Hypothesis 1 and Opportunity Hypothesis 1 by examining whether the effect of domestic unrest on international conflict is conditioned by a state’s ethnic fragmentation. Cohesion Hypothesis 1 expects the positive effect of unrest on conflict

<table>
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<th>Full Sample</th>
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<td>-.051***</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Share</td>
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<td>.368</td>
<td>.989***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.165)</td>
<td>(.309)</td>
<td>(.201)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sender Democracy</td>
<td>-.022***</td>
<td>-1.11</td>
<td>-.014</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.008)</td>
<td>(.069)</td>
<td>(.013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Democracy</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>-.03**</td>
<td>.04***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.009)</td>
<td>(.012)</td>
<td>(.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>-.328***</td>
<td>-.273***</td>
<td>-.398***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.039)</td>
<td>(.046)</td>
<td>(.062)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilateral Trade</td>
<td>.181</td>
<td>-.311</td>
<td>.433</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.657)</td>
<td>(1.49)</td>
<td>(1.688)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyadic S-Score</td>
<td>-.863***</td>
<td>-1.21***</td>
<td>-.442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.32)</td>
<td>(.457)</td>
<td>(.385)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Dispute</td>
<td>.068</td>
<td>-.095</td>
<td>.148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.121)</td>
<td>(.205)</td>
<td>(.143)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-1.97***</td>
<td>-1.12</td>
<td>-2.3***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.291)</td>
<td>(.82)</td>
<td>(.357)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ n = 65,337 \quad 31,788 \quad 33,549 \]

\[ \text{Wald } \chi^2 (\text{df}=14) = 803.87 \quad 527.56 \quad 464.79 \]

\[ \text{Pseudo } R^2 = .1901 \quad .2157 \quad .1849 \]

Logit estimates with clustered SEs in parentheses. Peace-year polynomials included, but not presented.

\[ * * * = p < .01; ** = p < .05; * = p < .1 \text{ (two-tailed)} \]
to decrease in more fragmented states, as leaders of such states are less likely to benefit from a rally effect. Opportunity Hypothesis 1 expects the opposite. Ethnically fragmented states are more likely to have a ready supply of conflict opportunities, including border disputes and concerns regarding the treatment of foreign kin groups, to draw upon. The positive effect of domestic unrest on international conflict should thus increase in more ethnically fragmented states. Cohesion Hypothesis 1 expects the interaction effect between unrest and fractionalization to be negative and significant. Opportunity Hypothesis 1 expects it to be positive and significant. Table 1 shows the results.

Table 1 offers strong support for Opportunity Hypothesis 1, and refutes Cohesion Hypothesis 1. The coefficients on the interaction terms are all positive and significant. The negative coefficients on the constituent Mass Unrest variable indicate that for ethnically cohesive states, domestic unrest actually reduces the likelihood of conflict initiation. But the positive interactive coefficients indicate that this effect becomes strongly positive for more ethnically fragmented states. Ethnically fractionalized states are much more likely to respond to domestic unrest by initiating conflict abroad. Figure 2, derived from the full-sample model, illustrates this effect.

Figure 2: Substantive Effect of Unrest Conditional on Ethnic Fragmentation

Next, assessing the Vulnerability Hypothesis and Cohesion Hypothesis 2 requires examining whether diversionary conflict is conditioned by ethnic polarization. As discussed
above, domestic political violence and instability are more likely in ethnically polarized, rather than fractionalized states. But the implications of this for diversionary conflict are unclear. As the Vulnerability Hypothesis argues, leaders of ethnically polarized states may be more likely to initiate diversionary conflict because they must quickly resort to such risky tactics in response to domestic unrest. Alternatively, as Cohesion Hypothesis 2 argues, leaders of polarized states may fear that international conflict will only deepen internal divides and create further unrest at home. Polarized states would then be less likely to respond to unrest by initiating diversionary conflict. The Vulnerability Hypothesis thus predicts a positive and significant coefficient on the interaction term, while Cohesion Hypothesis 2 expects a negative and significant interaction. Table 2 and Figure 3 present the findings.

Table 2: Effect of Mass Unrest Conditional on Ethnic Polarization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variables</th>
<th>Full Sample</th>
<th>Democratic</th>
<th>Authoritarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mass Unrest</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>.031</td>
<td>-.002</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.024)</td>
<td>(.026)</td>
<td>(.063)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Polarization</td>
<td>.938***</td>
<td>.984**</td>
<td>.747**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.282)</td>
<td>(.437)</td>
<td>(.339)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrest X Polarization</td>
<td>-.035</td>
<td>-.034</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.035)</td>
<td>(.038)</td>
<td>(.097)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Share</td>
<td>.527***</td>
<td>.276</td>
<td>.703***</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.163)</td>
<td>(.31)</td>
<td>(.202)</td>
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<tr>
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<td>-.014*</td>
<td>-.214***</td>
<td>-.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.008)</td>
<td>(.056)</td>
<td>(.012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Democracy</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td>-.024**</td>
<td>.043***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.009)</td>
<td>(.012)</td>
<td>(.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance</td>
<td>-.395***</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.038)</td>
<td>(.047)</td>
<td>(.055)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bilateral Trade</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>-.399</td>
<td>.402</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.641)</td>
<td>(1.49)</td>
<td>(.709)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyadic S-Score</td>
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<td>-1.14**</td>
<td>-.933**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.312)</td>
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<td>-2.12***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.347)</td>
<td>(.726)</td>
<td>(.436)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n</td>
<td>67118</td>
<td>33,088</td>
<td>34,030</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wald $\chi^2$ (df=14)</td>
<td>800.07</td>
<td>402.46</td>
<td>481.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pseudo $R^2$</td>
<td>.2093</td>
<td>.221</td>
<td>.2122</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Logit estimates with clustered SEs in parentheses.
Peace-year polynomials included, but not presented.
*** = $p < .01$; ** = $p < .05$; * = $p < .1$ (two-tailed)
The results in Table 2 and Figure 3 refute both hypotheses. The coefficients on the interaction terms are highly insignificant in all three models. The interactive coefficient is negative in the full sample and democratic models, as Cohesion Hypothesis 2 would predict. But this effect is far from significant ($p = .32$ in the full sample, $p = .38$ for democracies). The interactive coefficient is positive in the authoritarian sample, consistent with the Vulnerability Hypothesis. But this effect is again highly insignificant ($p = .61$). Figure 3 reinforces this conclusion. States with low levels of polarization appear to be marginally more subject to diversion, but again the effect is highly insignificant and offers little support for Cohesion Hypothesis 2.

Figure 3: Substantive Effect of Unrest Conditional on Ethnic Polarization

These results indicate that ethnic polarization has little effect on diversionary conflict. Ethnically polarized states may be more unstable domestically, but this does not prompt the leaders of such states to respond to unrest by initiating conflict abroad. The positive effect of polarization in all three models indicates that ethnic polarization does indeed make states more conflict prone. Ethnic polarization may create persistent unrest

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9The positive coefficient for the baseline unrest variable in the full sample and democratic models appears odd, given the negative effect of unrest shown in Table 1. States with a low fractionalization score should also register low on polarization, so at first glance, the baseline unrest coefficients should be similar. But importantly, as Figure 1 showed, highly fractionalized states will also produce a low polarization score. And as shown above, highly fractionalized states are extremely prone to diversion. The positive unrest coefficients in Table 2 thus reflect the highly fractionalized states, which outweigh the effect of low-fractionalization cases.
which then presents leaders with diversionary incentives more frequently. But in the face of unrest, leaders of ethnically polarized states do not behave differently from other leaders.

### Table 3: Effect of Mass Unrest Conditional on Ethnic Ties to Target

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Independent Variable</th>
<th>Full Sample</th>
<th>Democratic</th>
<th>Authoritarian</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mass Unrest</td>
<td>.008*</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.005)</td>
<td>(.005)</td>
<td>(.012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic Kin</td>
<td>.902***</td>
<td>1.13***</td>
<td>.819***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.136)</td>
<td>(.248)</td>
<td>(.151)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unrest X Kin</td>
<td>.026***</td>
<td>.022*</td>
<td>.021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.011)</td>
<td>(.012)</td>
<td>(.023)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power Share</td>
<td>.685***</td>
<td>.464</td>
<td>.756***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.154)</td>
<td>(.351)</td>
<td>(.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sender Democracy</td>
<td>-.024***</td>
<td>-.067</td>
<td>-.009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.008)</td>
<td>(.063)</td>
<td>(.012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target Democracy</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>-.037***</td>
<td>.028***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.008)</td>
<td>(.013)</td>
<td>(.009)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bilateral Trade</td>
<td>.407</td>
<td>-.394</td>
<td>.588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.578)</td>
<td>(.15)</td>
<td>(.644)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyadic S-Score</td>
<td>.253</td>
<td>-.139</td>
<td>.749*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.303)</td>
<td>(.48)</td>
<td>(.399)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fragmentation</td>
<td>.371</td>
<td>1.37***</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.251)</td>
<td>(.411)</td>
<td>(.309)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>-3.62***</td>
<td>-3.17***</td>
<td>-3.89***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(.305)</td>
<td>(.716)</td>
<td>(.364)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$n$ = 74,808 34,517 40,291

Wald $\chi^2$ (df=13) = 1063.35 411.27 694.25

Pseudo $R^2$ = .184 .2098 .173

Logit estimates with clustered SEs in parentheses.
Peace-year polynomials included, but not presented.

*** = $p < .01$; ** = $p < .05$; * = $p < .1$ (two-tailed)

Finally, Opportunity Hypothesis 2 predicts domestic unrest to translate into conflict primarily with states that are linked via transnational ethnic kin groups to excluded minorities in the initiating state. This logic holds that such ethnically linked states are more likely to present conflict opportunities for embattled leaders to exploit. Transnational ethnic kin links are likely to generate territorial disputes or issues arising from the meddling of foreign kin groups. Then, when a leader is facing incentives for diversionary conflict, these ethnically linked states present readily available and appealing targets. This strategy could operate alongside an attempt at repressing or scapegoating the domestic minority group. In sum, the effect of domestic unrest on international conflict should be positively conditioned by the existence of transnational ethnic ties with the target.

According to Opportunity Hypothesis 2, the coefficient on the term interacting unrest and
a target’s ethnic ties should be positive and significant. Table 3 presents the results.\textsuperscript{10}

The results in Table 3 generally support Opportunity Hypothesis 2. The interactive coefficient is positive and significant in both the full sample and democratic models.\textsuperscript{11} It is possible that authoritarian leaders may rely on repression to quell ethnic unrest at home, while democratic leaders must externalize the unrest and initiate conflict abroad. In all three models, TEK links are a highly significant predictor of dyadic conflict initiation. But the interactive effect indicates that ethnically linked states are particularly appealing targets for diversionary conflict.

**Figure 4: Substantive Effect of Unrest Conditional on Target’s Ethnic Kin**

![Figure 4](image)

Figure 4 illustrates this effect. In general, international disputes are disproportionately likely to target ethnically linked states. The dashed line is significantly higher than the solid line irrespective of mass unrest. But importantly, this difference is greatly expanded at higher levels of domestic unrest, as the gap between the lines increases at higher values on the x-axis. Essentially, an increase in domestic unrest is disproportionately likely to result in a dispute against target states with ethnic ties to the initiator. A two standard deviation shift in mass unrest from zero increases the probability of dispute initiation against targets with no ethnic links by only 9%, from .0036 to .0039.

\textsuperscript{10}Distance is highly collinear with the ethnic kin variable and is thus dropped.

\textsuperscript{11}p = .065 for democratic initiators.
But with respect to ethnically linked targets, the same shift in unrest increases the probability of dispute initiation from .0097 to .014, a nearly 44% increase. As a percentage, the conflict inducing effect of mass unrest is nearly five times greater against ethnically linked targets. In absolute terms, the effect is over 14 times greater. These findings support Opportunity Hypothesis 2, lending further credence to the notion that embattled leaders can only act upon diversionary incentives when they can draw upon existing conflict opportunities. Transnational ethnic links, it also appears, can often provide such opportunities.

5 Discussion

The empirical section above yields three specific findings. First, leaders of ethnically fragmented states are disproportionately likely to respond to domestic unrest by initiating conflict abroad. Second, disputes initiated during periods of domestic unrest are disproportionately likely to target states that are linked to the initiating state via transnational ethnic kin groups. This effect is driven primarily by democratic initiators.\textsuperscript{12} Third, ethnic polarization appears to have no consistent, systematic effect on diversionary conflict propensities. Broadly, these findings indicate that a state’s social and demographic makeup can affect its diversionary conflict propensities. They also show that diversionary conflict incentives are significantly conditioned by the availability of conflict opportunities. And importantly, transnational ethnic groups often create such opportunities, increasing the probability of unrest translating into international conflict. In short, ethnically fragmented states may be more likely to contain excluded ethnic groups, many of which oppose the government and receive support from abroad. These transnational ethnic ties may create friction between two states, providing the conflict opportunity necessary for an embattled leader to initiate a diversionary conflict.

These results refute the Cohesion Hypotheses, indicating that diverting leaders do not necessarily seek to unify the entire population behind them. Ethnic divisions do not impede diversionary conflict, and existing evidence indicates that the further exclusion of marginalized ethnic groups may actually be a primary goal of diversionary strategies (Tir and Jasinski 2008). In highly fractionalized states, an excluded group may be small enough that a leader can attack that group’s foreign allies without undue risk. In more polarized states, the alienation of an extremely large ethnic group may generate additional unrest, but the diverting leader can count on his large ethnic in-group to sustain his government. In short, the claim that prior cohesion is necessary for conflict to create a rally effect

\footnote{\textsuperscript{12}This may be due to authoritarian leaders’ ability to rely on domestic repression of ethnic opponents.}
cannot be directly applied to the state level. Leaders need only appeal to their key constituencies, and are not deterred by the prospect of alienating groups outside their coalition. Future work should examine the effect of a leader’s fluctuating popularity among different ethnic groups on international conflict.

Although the existing literature shows that ethnically polarized states are particularly prone to instability, this prior disposition does not appear to affect diversionary conflict propensities. Highly polarized states may experience instability more frequently, but leaders of such states do not disproportionately respond to unrest with belligerence. Essentially, a state’s prior disposition toward instability does not affect how its leaders respond in the face of such instability.

The supplemental materials present an extended series of robustness checks utilizing several alternative operationalizations of the key variables, including unrest, ethnic fragmentation, and conflict initiation, as well as alternative model specifications. The findings in support of conflict opportunity theory are impressively robust, largely mirroring the findings presented above.

5.1 Illustrative Case Study

Finally, in order to better illustrate the hypothesized dynamics and demonstrate the plausibility of a causal connection between ethnic politics and diversionary conflict, I will present a brief case study of the 1998 Turkey-Syria dispute over Syria’s support for Kurdish separatists in Turkey. This case nicely illustrates how the transnational dimensions of ethnic politics can affect the propensity of unpopular leaders to use force abroad. In particular, it shows Turkey’s embattled Prime Minister, in what was widely viewed as a diversionary tactic, dramatically escalating a long-simmering dispute with Syria regarding its support for the ethnic Kurdish separatist movement whose operations frequently straddled the Turkish-Syrian border.

In October 1998, Turkish Prime Minister Mesut Yilmaz directly threatened military force against Syria due to its support for the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK), which had been waging a violent secessionist campaign in Turkey. Syria had been sheltering PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan for years, and was using the organization as leverage in its territorial conflict with Turkey over the Hatay Province and an ongoing dispute over upstream water usage in the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Syria’s own Kurdish population, which numbered nearly three million and abutted the border with Turkey, facilitated the provision of support to the PKK and was directly linked with the territorial dispute over

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13Correlates of War MID # 4291. Although Turkey’s ethnic fractionalization score is actually below the global mean, the data do capture its ethnic ties to Syria and indicate that mass unrest was present in 1998.
Hatay (Olson 2001; James and Ozdamar 2009). By 1998 the PKK revolt in Turkey was nearly two decades old, resulting in roughly 30,000 deaths and costing the Turkish government over $100 billion (Sezgin 2002). Previous Turkish leaders had attempted on several occasions to persuade Hafez Al-Assad to cut off Syrian support for the PKK, but serious and sustained attempts at coercive diplomacy were largely absent.

In September and October 1998, however, Yilmaz’s domestic political fortunes deteriorated rapidly amid a series of massive domestic scandals linking his government to various criminal organizations (Olson 2001). Turkish officials were found to have been collaborating with several notorious organized crime syndicates and professional assassins in combating the PKK. Relatedly, ongoing efforts to privatize the Turkish Trade Bank were derailed over allegations of extensive mafia involvement. The confluence of these events, along with ongoing PKK attacks within Turkey, severely threatened Yilmaz’s already fractious coalition (Aras and Polat 2008). Amid these concurrent scandals, and with elections likely to be called within six months, Yilmaz escalated the long-simmering dispute with Syria. He directly threatened military action unless Syria ended its support for the PKK and ceased harboring Ocalan. Yilmaz belligerently threatened to “poke out the eye” of Syria unless it immediately ceased its support for the PKK. The Turkish military, he claimed, was prepared and “waiting for the order.” Additionally, the Turkish military conducted a series of exercises along the border and deployed 10,000 additional troops, along with several television crews, to the area (Aras 2012). The Chief of Staff of the Turkish military likewise declared that a “state of undeclared war” presently existed between the two states. The highly public (and publicized) nature of these threats, in addition to the graphic and bombastic language used, indicated that they were at least partially intended for domestic consumption. Robert Olson writes that the political fallout of its various scandals left the Yilmaz government “eager for a major distraction; the ‘undeclared’ war against Syria seemed to fit the need” (Olson 2001, 118). Turkey’s 1998 escalation of this long-running dispute was largely attributable to the domestic problems facing its leadership.

As an act of coercive diplomacy, the gambit was remarkably successful. Assad promptly agreed to Turkish terms, signing the Adana Accords on October 21, 1998. By the agreement, Syria officially designated the PKK as a terrorist organization, deported Ocalan from Syria, expelled an additional 400-500 PKK operatives, and closed down a series of PKK training camps in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley (Sezgin 2002; Aras 2009). Ocalan was captured in Kenya by Turkish intelligence in February 1999. But this important victory came too late for Yilmaz, whose government collapsed in January under the deepening pressure of its domestic scandals.
Although it did not save his government and did not result in the actual use of force, Turkey’s October 1998 escalation represents a classic diversionary dispute. The timing of Yilmaz’s escalation is primarily attributable to his domestic problems (Olson 2001). This case also nicely illustrates the importance of preexisting conflict opportunities for leaders looking to initiate a diversionary dispute. The underlying Turkey-Syria conflict had been ongoing for years, and was only escalated as Yilmaz’s domestic position deteriorated.\textsuperscript{14}

Lacking such a simmering dispute, Yilmaz would likely have been less able to respond to his domestic troubles through the use of force. Lastly, this case clearly illustrates how transborder ethnic populations can serve this crucial role in facilitating diversionary conflict (James and Ozdamar 2009). Syrian support for the PKK created a long-simmering dispute between the two countries, which was only escalated when a series of domestic scandals undercut Yilmaz’s fragile government. The Kurdish population that sat astride the Turkey-Syria border was a primary component of this ongoing dispute, and it was Syria’s support for the PKK that ostensibly provoked Turkey’s escalation. In short, Turkey’s fragmentation along ethnic lines and the existence of a bilateral dispute centered on the transborder ethnic Kurdish population was a crucial facilitating factor that enabled Yilmaz to provoke a crisis in response to his flagging domestic fortunes.

6 Conclusion

This paper has taken a first cut at assessing the degree to which diversionary conflict propensities are conditioned by social and demographic, rather than political/institutional characteristics of states. Building upon the expansive literatures on both diversionary and ethnic conflict, I showed that ethnically fragmented states are significantly more likely to respond to domestic unrest by initiating conflict abroad. But importantly, this does not appear to result from political instability or leaders’ tenuous hold on power in such countries. Ethnically polarized states, which prior work has shown to be more vulnerable to ethnic conflict and political instability, are not significantly more prone to diversion. My analysis also indicates that unrest is disproportionately likely to produce conflict against states with ethnic links to excluded minorities in the initiating state. This is likely due to the conflict opportunities presented by potentially troublesome foreign kin groups (Mitchell and Prins 2004; Tir 2010).

\textsuperscript{14}Indeed, Yilmaz’s domestic fragility may have rendered his threats too credible. Assad conceded so quickly that the dispute did not escalate to the point of generating a significant rally effect (Sezgin 2002). But a failed attempt at diversion is still a diversionary conflict. And Yilmaz’s behavior was indeed diversionary. Importantly, the dispute appears in the MID data despite Assad’s clear attempts at strategic conflict avoidance. Strategic interaction operated only in preventing greater escalation or a longer duration.
This paper fits within an ever-expanding body of work showing how domestic political forces shape international conflict propensities (Bueno de Mesquita et al. 2003). More specifically, it enhances our understanding of diversionary conflict by broadening the range of forces that we know to condition and constrain the diversionary incentives facing embattled leaders. It also highlights the important and underappreciated linkages between ethnic politics – both within and across borders – and international conflict. This paper can help policymakers anticipate and defuse interstate conflict by revealing precisely where and when unpopular leaders are likely to lash out abroad. In particular, it shows that even long-dormant ethnic conflicts can provide the conflict opportunities necessary for domestic unrest in one state to translate into international conflict. Potential targets that are ethnically linked to states with unpopular or embattled leaders must be especially proactive in order to deter or dissuade a potential diversionary conflict. By making concessions or moving quickly to align international support, potentially attractive diversionary targets can deprive embattled leaders of the conflict opportunities necessary for diversionary incentives to escalate into actual violence.
References


