

Informal Cessation: Rethinking How Civil Wars End

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July 28, 2026

Abstract

When do belligerents stop fighting without formal settlement? Existing research emphasizes decisive victories and institutionalized peace agreements as the primary pathways to durable peace, yet most civil conflicts end through neither. I expand the framework of civil war outcomes by conceptualizing *informal cessation*. When formal settlements suffer from severe commitment problems or lack credible enforcement, informal bargains allow rebels to retain enough coercive capacity to make credible the state's promise not to resume fighting. Yet this creates a toleration dilemma: allowing rebels to remain armed preserves the risk of future challenge. Using logistic and multinomial models on 2,158 dyad-years and 223 informal cessations (1960–2020), I find that informal cessation is significantly more likely when rebels are relatively weak and pursue bounded, peripheral territorial demands. Under these conditions, rebels accept informal concessions while posing an acceptable threat, making informal cessation a stable and prevalent alternative to formal settlement or decisive victory.

*Clements Center for National Security, University of Texas at Austin. Acknowledgements: For this chapter specifically, many thanks for helpful feedback in the preparation of this manuscript go out to David A. Lake, Jakana L. Thomas, Philip Roeder, Branislav Slantchev, Christina J. Schneider, Benjamin Acosta, Reyko Huang, Michael Rubin, Jesus E. Rojas Venzor, Alex R. Zhao, Yujia Wan, Rachel Yu, the participants of the International Relations Workshop at UC San Diego, panel participants and discussants at APSA 2025 and PSSI 2024. This work received support from the Institute for Humane Studies under grant nos. IHS017270 and IHS018297. Submitted as Chapter 2 of my dissertation *No War, Yet No Peace: Informal Cessation in Civil Conflict* at the University of California San Diego. For supplemental materials see the Online Appendix.

1 Introduction

In 1996, fighting between the Iraqi state and Kurdish Peshmerga halted without a peace accord, disarmament, or institutional reforms. Instead, Baghdad tacitly tolerated Kurdish control over the North. Violence remained minimal for more than a decade.¹ This is not an anomalous example. Across the post-1960 era, the majority of civil conflict episodes have ended not in decisive victories or formal settlements, but in such informal cessations: non-codified outcomes in which both sides remain armed but choose not to fight. When and why do governments and rebels opt for this kind of settlement?

Despite its prevalence, such outcomes remain largely absent from the study of civil war termination. Existing scholarship centers around two canonical endpoints: decisive victories that eliminate one side (Licklider, 1993; Toft, 2010a) or formal settlements that institutionalize powersharing or disarmament under external guarantees (Doyle and Sambanis, 2006; Fortna, 2018; Hartzell and Hoddie, 2003; Matanock, 2020; Walter, 2002). These frameworks implicitly treat other outcomes as failures of conflict resolution or inherently transitory (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Lake and Rothchild, 2005). Explaining when and why such informal cessations occur requires rethinking not only how wars end, but also how states and rebels construct political order without formal peace.

I conceptualize *informal cessation* as a distinct mode of civil war termination, analytically separate from decisive victories and formal settlements. Unlike victories, informal cessation involves the persistence of both actors and a mutually agreed post-war order. Yet, different from negotiated peace agreements, informal cessation lacks a formal deal. Considering variation in conflict outcomes along two dimensions, formality and actor persistence, I locate informal cessation within existing frameworks of civil war termination. Differentiating it from incidental declines in violence, I expand the framework to capture this systematic

¹Correspondence between Kurdish leadership, Henry Kissinger, and the US intelligence apparatus reveal how the KDP and Iraqi regime frequently straddled the thin line between coexistence and re-escalation. Several times, the sides engaged in negotiations that were believed non-credible but which provided mutual opportunities to update beliefs about the nature of demands. Ultimately, the sides managed to tacitly cease fighting and co-exist quite durably.

and predominant class of outcomes in which informality and restraint are strategic rather than incidental.

Informal relationships are pervasive in both domestic and international politics (Abbott and Snidal, 2000; Helmke and Levitsky, 2012; Koremenos, 2005, 2013; Leeds, 2003; Lipson, 1991). States co-opt armed groups to reduce violence (K. G. Cunningham, 2011; Driscoll, 2015; Lee, 2022; North et al., 2009) or enter limited cooperation with armed groups when ideological and political interests align (Staniland, 2021). Both societies and states often prefer flexible and reversible arrangements that preserve autonomy and minimize binding commitments (Paine, 2022; Scott, 2009). De facto rebel governance and informal territorial control are common empirical realities (Florea, 2014; Florea and Huang, 2025). Yet, these arrangements are typically interpreted as evidence of failed conflict resolution or state weakness.² Informal cessation highlights the underlying logic that connects these strands of research.

Informal cessation is a strategic choice. I argue that informality becomes attractive precisely where formal settlements are difficult to achieve, non-credible, and otherwise dependent on external enforcement that is often unavailable. Typically, we assume formal settlements require rebels to disarm making them vulnerable to betrayal (Fearon, 1995a; Walter, 1997). Informal cessations forgo disarmament explicitly, leaving rebels able to deter defection by the government. The challengers' capacity for direct enforcement makes informal powersharing concessions credible (Meng and Paine, 2022; Paine, 2024; Powell, 2024). On the other hand, the government grants only de facto concessions that induce rebels to lay down some arms without locking themselves into binding or precedent-setting institutional reforms. In turn, informal bargains are not failed settlements but deliberate strategies in the context of severe commitment and enforcement problems.

But this solution generates a “toleration dilemma.” Informal cessation is credible

²This interpretation of rebel territorial control as failed peace also serves as the basis for conclusions about the difficulty of resolving territorial conflict (Bormann and Savun, 2018; Johnson, 2008; Walter, 2003, 2009). This difficulty, however, pertains to formal settlement specifically. Instead, informal territorial arrangements may be the more common outcome for these territorial conflicts.

because rebels remain armed, thereby solving the state’s credibility problem by providing a direct means of enforcement (Paine, 2024; Powell, 2024). At the same time, this arrangement does not resolve the rebels’ credibility problem. The very coercive capacity that rebels can use to defend their rights also preserves the possibility of future challenge. While informal cessation is common, this dilemma makes it not universally likely.

Informal cessation requires that both actors find informal cessation mutually tolerable. It is most likely when states can minimize the threat posed by tolerated challengers and rebels are willing to lay down some arms for informal concessions. I identify two conditions under which both sides have incentives to end a conflict informally: relative rebel weakness and territorial conflicts with bounded, peripheral demands. Weaker rebels require fewer concessions to stand down and pose less risk to central authority if they persist.³ Similarly, rebels with limited territorial goals can be satisfied through tacit recognition of local control, allowing both sides to disengage without formal concessions. Together, this creates the conditions under which governments extend informal deals to less threatening rebels, and rebels are willing to accept a non-codified agreement in exchange for restraint.

I construct a dataset of 2,158 conflict dyad-year observations from 1960 to 2020, including 609 conflict terminations and 223 informal cessations. I estimate logistic and multinomial regression models comparing informal cessation with ongoing conflict as well as alternative outcomes, including government victory, rebel victory, and formal peace settlements. These models incorporate measures of rebel strength and territorial demands, as well as characteristics of the contested territory. The findings support the theoretical argument. These results are robust across alternative measures of rebel strength, model specifications, increasingly restrictive durability thresholds, and controlling for state capacity.

The contributions of this paper are threefold. Conceptually, it defines and elevates informal cessation as a distinct and widespread mode of conflict termination, bringing cases previously relegated to residual categories into the core of civil war studies and restoring

³In contrast, recent literature shows that militarily capable rebels often invite equally powerful counter-mobilization leading to longer and more intense wars (Balcells and Kalyvas, 2025).

the strategic agency of armed actors. Theoretically, it shows how informality creates a self-enforcing alternative to formal peace agreements that lack credible enforcement. Empirically, it identifies a systematic class of cases and introduces novel data that distinguish informal cessation from other forms of “fading out.” This empirical contribution enables a more complete understanding of how civil wars end, with implications for the study of conflict termination, duration, and post-conflict peace.

This study also has several broader implications. First, it redefines how we think about civil war outcomes more broadly. Recognizing informal cessation as a strategic and prevalent outcome invites scholars to revisit longstanding questions and pose new ones: why do leaders choose informal arrangements over formal settlements, how do foreign actors shape incentives for informal deals, and under what conditions do informal arrangements endure or collapse.

Second, it expands theories of enforcement and credibility by showing that conflict can end without formal deals and external guarantors. Credibility is not inherently tied to formality. Formal models of bargaining and conflict demonstrate that what matters is not whether a deal is codified but whether it is enforceable once actors converge on mutually acceptable deals (Powell, 1996; Slantchev, 2003). This insight is particularly important as global powers increasingly disengage from liberal tools of conflict resolution, making external enforcement less available and increasing the relevance of self-enforcing arrangements. The results are consistent across time, suggesting less impact of normative changes in the international system that have been related to the conduct of war (Howard and Stark, 2017).

Third, it offers a new interpretation of so-called “difficult to resolve” conflicts, especially territorial and secessionist wars. While others have shown that formal settlement in these cases is unlikely given governments’ incentives to resist secessionist demands (Walter, 1997, 2003), rebel territorial control may instead reflect a requirement of direct enforcement for credible territorial arrangements. Informality here is not intractability but a structural response to the credibility problem itself. This reinterpretation also speaks to debates on

decentralization and conflict reduction: if informal cessation frequently involves de facto territorial arrangements, conflicts that appear resistant to resolution may in fact be cases where decentralization is already operating outside the formal institutions scholars typically observe (Cederman et al., 2015).

Finally, it links civil war termination to recent debates on powersharing under weak or authoritarian institutions (Meng and Paine, 2022; Meng, Paine, and Powell, 2023). Applying the logic of domestic powersharing to civil war, retained coercive capacity renders informal outcomes self-enforcing in the absence of external guarantors and in the context of non-credible promises of formalization (Paine, 2024; Powell, 2024). In turn, what we have long treated as the absence of an outcome may in many cases be a deliberate strategy under weak institutions.

2 Informal Civil War Outcomes

Civil war termination is primarily understood through two canonical outcomes: Decisive victory eliminates the opponent’s capacity to resist and allows the victor to impose a new political order, while negotiated settlements end violence under conditions of stalemate or mutual exhaustion (Leventoglu and Slantchev, 2007; Licklider, 1993; Luttwak, 1999; Mason et al., 1999; Meng and Paine, 2022; Slantchev, 2003; Toft, 2010a; Zartman, 2000). Stalemates are rarely treated as termination outcomes and are instead viewed as transitional conditions, while draws are viewed as synonymous with negotiated settlements (Greig et al., 2018; Mason et al., 1999; Zartman, 2000). As a result, large-N studies focus primarily on whether conflicts end in victory or settlement, and the probability or the timing of settlements (Pechenkina and Thomas, 2022; Preston, 2004; Prorok, 2016; Silverman et al., 2024). These outcomes have come to define the dominant analytical framework for understanding how civil wars end.

Recent research on ceasefires has expanded attention to intermediate forms of conflict

management. Ceasefires occur in nearly half of ongoing civil wars and serve diverse functions, including facilitating humanitarian access, managing violence, and enabling negotiations (Clayton, Nathan, et al., 2021; Clayton, Nygård, et al., 2023; Clayton and Sticher, 2021; Zartman, 2000). This work emphasizes how conflict parties commit to suspending violence short of resolution and has generated new insights into when ceasefires emerge, persist, or collapse (Clayton, Nygård, et al., 2023). Yet, ceasefires are typically conceptualized as temporary arrangements within ongoing conflicts or as steps toward settlement, rather than as termination itself.⁴

This emphasis on decisive and formal outcomes contrasts sharply with observed patterns of civil war termination. The UCDP/PRIO Conflict Termination Dataset identifies six outcome categories: government victory, rebel victory, formal ceasefire, formal peace settlement, actor ceases to exist, and fading out (Kreutz, 2021). Figure 1 shows the occurrences of conflict termination types between 1960 and 2020. “Fade-outs” constitute a substantial and growing share of civil war terminations over time. In total, 55.6% of terminated conflict episodes do not end with clear government victory, rebel victory, or formal settlement. Nearly half of all civil conflicts since 1960, representing 45.6% of cases, are coded as having “faded out.” Without distinguishing incidental declines in violence from strategic, non-decisive outcomes, we remain unable to theorize a large share of civil war terminations.⁵

Despite constituting a substantial share of all civil war endings, cases of fading out

⁴New ceasefire data enables systematic analysis of when ceasefires emerge, how long they last, and when they collapse. Explanations for ceasefires draw on multiple theoretical perspectives. Conflict ripeness theory suggests ceasefires emerge when war costs make negotiation more attractive, while strategic accounts emphasize that actors may use ceasefires opportunistically to regroup or rearm (Clayton, Nygård, et al., 2023; Min, 2020, 2025). These contrasting dynamics highlight the importance of distinguishing between different types of ceasefires and identifying the conditions under which they produce durable reductions in violence, similar to informal cessations.

⁵The UCDP/PRIO codebook defines fade-outs as cases in which: “conflict activity continues but does not reach the UCDP threshold with regards to fatalities. There is no information in this dataset regarding the group-specific circumstance for when fighting reduces to below the UCDP battle-deaths threshold. In some cases it may be because of successful military operations by the counterpart (similar to victory), but it could also be for a strategic reorientation towards the use of nonviolent or nonfatal methods, to explore the possibility of negotiations, organizational reorganization, or intra-rebel fighting, or a combination of these factors.” This study distinguishes among these group-specific processes to identify cases of strategic informal cessation.

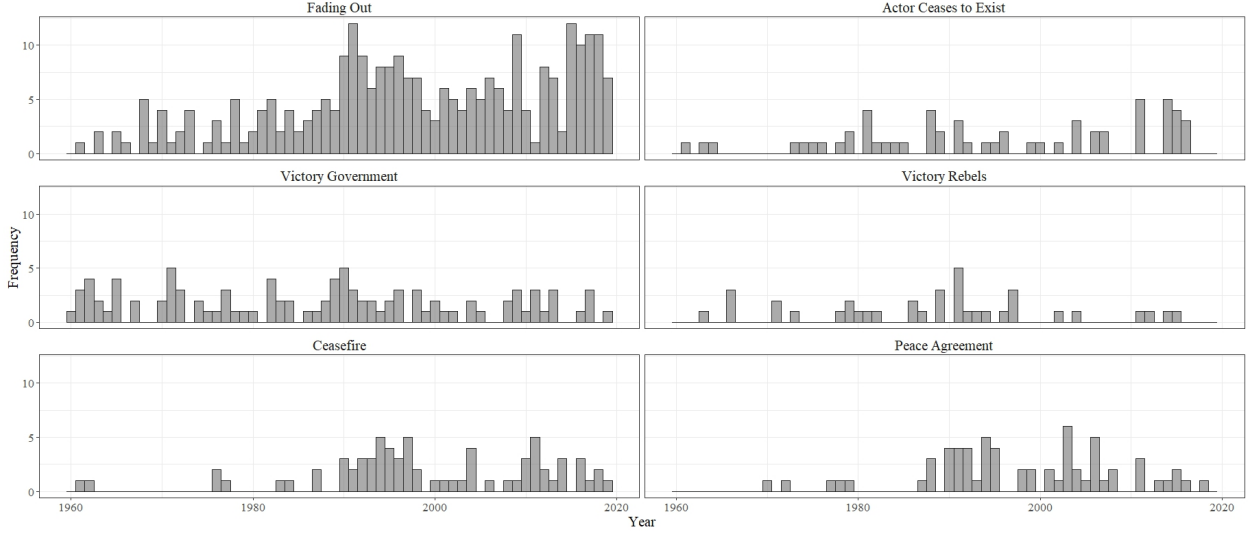


Figure 1: Frequency of termination types for all civil conflicts (1960-2020).

are often subsumed within residual categories of “other” or “unresolved,” treated as rebel inactivity or temporary pauses in violence, or excluded from analysis altogether (Balcells and Kalyvas, 2014; Kreutz, 2015; Licklider, 1993; Lyall and Wilson III, 2009; Reiter, 2010; Silverman et al., 2024; Walter, 2003). This residual treatment reflects a broader tendency to view informal conflict termination as incidental petering out of violence driven by exhaustion, resource depletion, or organizational demands. When violence declines without decisive resolution, termination is often treated as the absence of outcome rather than as a strategic choice.

Informal conflict endings are widely assumed to be temporary and inherently unstable. Without decisive victory or formal settlement, existing frameworks expect armed actors to resume fighting once conditions improve (Lake and Rothchild, 2005). Yet many cases of informal cessation do not quickly relapse into violence. Fewer than half return to civil war (47.8%), and even among those that do, violence often remains dormant for a decade or more.⁶ These patterns demonstrate that informal cessations can endure for extended periods, challenging the assumption that they are mere lulls.

Related literatures examine sustained nonviolent coexistence between states and armed

⁶See Appendix .

nonstate actors but do not conceptualize these arrangements as civil war outcomes. Research on rebel co-optation shows that states may tolerate armed groups through informal arrangements that reduce violence while allowing rebels to retain organizational autonomy and coercive capacity, but treats these arrangements primarily as instruments of authoritarian governance (Driscoll, 2015; Lee, 2022; North et al., 2009; Staniland, 2021). Others acknowledge the frequent involvement of nonstate actors in governance, hybrid political orders, and areas of limited statehood (Arjona et al., 2015; Bapat, 2012; Berti, 2016; Risse and Stollenwerk, 2018; South, 2018; Staniland, 2012). Scholarship on *de facto* states similarly examines cases in which armed groups maintain durable territorial control without formal independence but it typically attributes their emergence to military stalemate or state weakness rather than to strategic restraint between adversaries (Florea, 2014, 2017; Florea and Huang, 2025). Such arrangements are implicitly interpreted as reflecting the inability to reach formal agreement, rather than the agreement itself. Our current framework fails to capture cases of strategic restraint and cannot distinguish them empirically from incidental declines in violence.

To address this gap, I expand the framework of civil war outcomes to include cases in which violence ends through tacit agreement, which I term *informal cessation*.⁷ Introducing this outcome category captures a class of terminations currently subsumed under the label of “fading out.” To situate informal cessation alongside canonical outcomes, I introduce a two-dimensional typology that distinguishes termination outcomes based on (1) whether both actors persist and (2) whether their post-conflict relationship is governed by formal or informal arrangements.

The first dimension, *persistence*, captures whether one actor eliminates its opponent or whether both actors persist after violence ends. At one end lies decisive military victory, in which one side eliminates or subordinates its rival and unilaterally imposes a post-war

⁷By “agreement,” I do not imply any specific negotiated or bargained outcome or mutual affirmation of any type of powersharing, territorial or otherwise. Here the term is used in a basic sense indicating that if violence subsides both actors must have tacitly agreed to accept this, and if anything to forgo further military pursuit of their opponent.

order. Though relatively rare (25.5% of episodes), victory is generally understood as the preferred outcome for either opponent. Regimes seek to reassert a monopoly on force and consolidate authority, whereas rebels aim to overthrow the state or achieve secession. At the other end are negotiated settlements, where both sides persist and jointly agree to a codified post-war order. These outcomes, too, are uncommon (12% of episodes), but are often viewed as the most credible pathway to durable peace because they institutionalize mutual commitments and reduce incentives for renewed conflict.

Introducing *formality* as a second dimension captures whether the cessation of violence is governed by codified agreements or sustained through informal restraint. Negotiated settlements occupy the quadrant in which both actors persist and formal arrangements structure their relationship. Informal cessations, by contrast, occur when both actors remain organizationally intact but the cessation of violence is not governed by formal agreements or institutionalized commitments. Instead, armed actors retain coercive capacity while refraining from sustained violence, often establishing durable patterns of coexistence without formalizing their relationship.

Table 1 illustrates this conceptualization of civil war outcomes across the two dimensions: actor prevalence (y-axis) and formality (x-axis). Informal cessations occupy the quadrant in which both actors persist but their relationship remains informal and uncoded. These cases differ from outcomes involving actor disappearance or organizational collapse, in which one side ceases to exist as a coherent challenger.⁸ It is precisely in this quadrant that the majority of real-world cases of civil conflict termination fall (more than 36%). Expanding our current framework puts informal cessation on equal footing with canonical outcomes and enables us to theorize when it occurs, and how it compares to victory and formal settlement.

⁸Cases in which armed groups fracture, merge, or are defeated in conflict with other armed groups are considered in this alternative category. These cases are distinguished from informal cessation as (a) the outcome is not a strategic choice by both sides, and (b) the other actor does not retain the capacity for further fighting.

Table 1: Typology of Formal and Informal Conflict Outcomes

	Formal	Informal
One Actor Persists	Decisive Victory (22%)	Other (18.7%)
Both Actors Persist	Negotiated Settlement (22.1%)	Informal Cessation (36.6%)

2.1 Defining Informal Cessation

Informal cessations share four defining features: (1) the cessation of hostilities, (2) the continued, armed, and autonomous existence of both state and nonstate forces, (3) the absence of formal, written agreements to determine the post-conflict order, and (4) restraint or the continuous choice of non-violence by otherwise capable actors.

First, informal cessation is characterized by a *cessation of hostilities*. A drop of violence below the threshold of 25 battle-related deaths per year is commonly considered to mark the “end” of a civil conflict episode (Kreutz, 2010, 2025).⁹ Datasets and large-N studies use this cutoff to differentiate between ongoing conflict years and non-conflict periods. Yet, a decline in battle-deaths does not imply a total absence of violence or that the armed challenger no longer exists. For example, after the mid-1990s, Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga and the central government entered a long period of de facto calm without a formal ceasefire, as Baghdad tolerated Kurdish territorial control. By contrast, the Israel– Hamas conflict illustrates shorter-lived cessations. Each time, after major escalations in 2009, 2012, and 2014, violence subsided informally for several years before resuming. Whether durable or temporary, the onset of informal cessation is marked by the observable decline of hostilities

⁹Battle deaths are difficult to measure precisely and should be interpreted as estimates rather than exact counts. Most available data are derived from event-based reporting that aggregates media, NGO, and government sources, which can introduce reporting bias, undercounting, or uneven coverage across conflicts and time periods. Recent work has highlighted these challenges and the potential biases in conflict event data (e.g., Shaver et al., 2023). Despite these limitations, the UCDP battle-related deaths dataset remains the most widely used and systematically compiled measure of conflict lethality. Following common practice in the civil war literature, I employ these data as a standardized proxy for conflict intensity while recognizing the inherent margins of uncertainty in such estimates.

below this threshold.¹⁰

Second, it requires that *both actors persist*. Informal cessation involves the continued activity of both the regime and the armed challenger as politically and militarily viable entities. Neither side is eliminated or fully disarmed. This distinguishes informal outcomes from either victory or total collapse, and from non-conflict cases where armed groups disband without government interaction. For instance, Colombia's Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL) maintained armed capacity even after retreating from large-scale confrontation in the early 1990s, while the state refrained from seeking its outright elimination. Similarly, the Ejército Popular Revolucionario (EPR) in Mexico has persisted with modest armed capacity since the late 1990s, coexisting with state forces despite periodic clashes. Informal cessation excludes cases in which one party is eliminated or demobilized, due to factors external to the conflict dyad.¹¹ These cases illustrate that informal cessation remains conceptually distinct from victory, collapse, or disbandment as actors remain autonomous, armed, and able to fight again if conditions shift, deter aggression, or defend previously secured spoils.

Third, informal cessations lack *formal agreements*. Unlike ceasefires or settlements, which codify timelines, monitoring mechanisms, or concessions, informal cessations lack institutionalized terms. For example, archival evidence from Iraq in the 1960s shows Kurdish leaders repeatedly signaled willingness to accept limited autonomy, yet rejected formal accords on the grounds that regime promises were not credible (DOS 1963). In Sudan, SPLM/A factions often halted fighting through tacit local understandings rather than written accords, producing informal but real reductions in violence. These outcomes are ambiguous, harder

¹⁰While stability may seem relevant, I deliberately refrain from making durability a definitional criterion. Informal cessation begins when violence drops below the threshold, both actors persist, and no formal arrangement governs coexistence. Its durability is a subject for analysis rather than definition.

¹¹This distinction is crucial for capturing outcomes that reflect genuine informal bargains rather than one-sided erosion of capacity. I therefore exclude cases in which hostilities cease because one actor collapses, is militarily defeated, disbands, or relocates into exile due to factors external to the dyad. Such cases do not reflect reciprocal restraint but the disappearance of an opponent. At the same time, these instances remain important for future research. They raise questions about how insurgent collapse, when such collapse is indicative of a *de facto* victory by the state, or reflects a mere reorganization or reshuffle of rebel actors, and whether the absence of a challenger produces more durable peace or simply masks conditions for later mobilization.

to quantify, and less visible than formal settlements, but also more adaptable to contexts of political uncertainty, mistrust, or weak enforcement capacity.¹²

Finally, informal cessation involves restraint which is signaled by *continued non-violence* while actors *retain the capacity* for further fighting. This differentiates cases of informal cessation from instances of actor collapse, splintering, or organizational incapacity. Informal cessation occurs not because actors are incapable of fighting, but because they deliberately refrain from doing so. Governments may judge that pursuing weakened rebels is too costly, as in Turkey’s tolerance of PKK fighters retreating into northern Iraq in the late 1990s.¹³ This choice of restraint is mutual. Tolerating localized autonomy in exchange for reduced violence, both the government of Mali and Tuareg insurgents repeatedly de-escalated informally during the 1990s. And returning to the Iraq example, Peshmerga forces consistently limited themselves to defensive engagements, signaling willingness to de-escalate despite maintaining coercive capacity. Such restraint is rarely codified or publicly declared, but can be inferred from sustained inaction despite capability. Because both actors remain armed and capable of renewed fighting, informal cessation reflects a strategic choice to halt hostilities; often resembling a political compromise without codified terms, an agreement in not further pursuing the other side even if one has the organizational capacity to do so.

Applying these criteria enables a systematic distinction between informal cessations and other forms of conflict termination previously grouped under the residual category of fading out. Specifically, 80.2% of fade-outs satisfy the criteria for informal cessation, indicating that most informal endings represent strategic outcomes rather than incidental declines

¹²This perspective also connects to the literature on civil war peace negotiations. Belligerents often engage in talks long before formal settlements are reached, or stop without ever reaching a signed deal. Many instances coded as failed negotiations may in fact reflect deliberate choices to avoid codified agreements. Negotiations can serve purposes other than producing a treaty: clarifying demands, signaling restraint, or testing credibility. Ultimately, some “failed” peace talks may have provided the necessary communication channels that resulted in informal cessation of hostilities.

¹³A decline in fighting capacity of one actor should provide the other with incentives to eliminate the opponent. If cessation results from retreat and exhaustion of capacity by one actor, the lack of pursuit by the other signals restraint. In my dataset, I capture whether cessation involves retreat by the rebels. These cases offer an interesting avenue for future research into the conditions under which states decide to pursue already weakened rebels or refrain from doing so.

in violence. This distinction represents a major empirical contribution, providing data that allows us to parse out a large class of conflict termination outcomes that were previously excluded from systematic theoretical and empirical analysis.

3 Commitment Problems in Formal Settlements

Understanding when and why actors choose informal cessation requires first understanding why formal settlements are so difficult to achieve. Bargaining and civil war literature identify the lack of credible commitment as the central obstacle to peace (Fearon, 1995b; Meng and Paine, 2022; Powell, 2006; Walter, 1997). Even when both sides prefer peace, formal agreements may remain non-credible because actors cannot guarantee compliance once the balance of power shifts. Reaching and sustaining peace is difficult when regimes cannot credibly commit to implementing provisions or respecting a revised post-war status quo (Lake, 2025; Matanock, 2020; Walter, 2002). Traditionally, conflict resolution literature equates settlement with assumptions of formality. As a result, sustaining *formal* peace depends on solving the underlying commitment and enforcement problem (Fortna, 2004; Lee, 2022; Matanock, 2020). Where such enforcement mechanisms are unavailable or unreliable, formal agreements may be unattractive.

At the core of the state’s commitment problems are the risks associated with rebel demobilization. When formal settlements require rebels to demobilize, it removes rebels’ ability to defend themselves and creates incentives for the state to renege after challengers relinquish their enforcement capacity (Fearon, 1995b; Mattes and Savun, 2009; Walter, 1997, 2002). Data from the Peace Agreement Dataset (PA-X) shows that between 1990 and 2024, 27% of all peace agreements, and 40% of those involving powersharing, included provisions for demilitarization, disarmament, or demobilization (Christine Bell and Badanjak, 2019). These provisions may be necessary for state consolidation but render rebels vulnerable and dependent on institutional or external enforcement. In the absence of external enforcement,

civil wars become zero-sum contests making formal settlement unlikely (Fearon and Laitin, 2003).¹⁴

These enforcement problems are especially severe in weak and autocratic institutional environments (Powell, 2024). Weak states are frequently forced to share power, via civil war settlements or political powersharing, but generally have lower credibility when they do so (Paine, 2024). Although governments may attempt to bolster credibility through institutional reforms or external enforcement (Doyle and Sambanis, 2006; Hartzell and Hoddie, 2003; Matanock, 2020; Meng, 2019; Walter, 1997), these mechanisms are costly and often unavailable. As a result, formal settlements frequently remain non-credible, as regimes may lack the will or institutional capacity to follow through (Meng, Paine, and Powell, 2023; Svolik, 2012).

The dominant solution to commitment problems is third-party enforcement (Fortna, 2004; Hartzell, 1999; Howard, 2008; Lee, 2022; Matanock, 2020). External actors can make formal agreements credible by altering incentives for defection, rewarding compliance, and punishing violations (Walter, 1997, 2002). Peacekeeping missions, external security guarantees, and internationally backed power-sharing arrangements can therefore improve the durability of settlements by substituting for weak domestic enforcement (Fortna, 2004, 2018; Hartzell and Hoddie, 2003; Hoddie and Hartzell, 2005; Matanock, 2020). However, such enforcement is costly. Third parties must possess both the capability and willingness to intervene and bear the cost of enforcement, conditions that are frequently absent in civil wars, particularly in authoritarian or geopolitically peripheral contexts (Lee, 2022; Svolik, 2012). As a result, many otherwise mutually beneficial bargains remain non-credible because they lack reliable external enforcement.

¹⁴The demobilization assumption merits clarification. Not all formal peace agreements require complete disarmament, but formal settlements systematically reduce rebel enforcement capacity relative to the pre-settlement baseline. More fundamentally, existing scholarship suggests that states face a categorical commitment problem with armed challengers: sovereign authority is structurally incompatible with tolerated armed competition, making credible commitment to armed rebels nearly impossible (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Walter, 1997). Formal settlements address this through disarmament or integration; informal cessation, as this paper argues, manages it through a different logic.

Reputational concerns further undermine the viability of formal settlements. Where governments fear that formal agreements signal weakness, the broader strategic implications of conceding can make formal resolution prohibitively costly. In multi-party civil wars, governments may seek to avoid public, institutionalized concessions for fear of future of emboldening others to demand similar terms or launch renewed campaigns (Reiter, 2010; Walter, 2006, 2009). These risks are especially salient in secessionist conflicts, where autonomy for one group may encourage others to demand the same (Bormann and Savun, 2018; Walter, 2006). Authoritarian regimes, in particular, often resist institutionalizing permanent concessions for fear of precedent-setting (Paine, 2024).

Time inconsistency problems can further exacerbate the aversion to formal settlements. Optimistic expectations about the utility of fighting in the future may render today's deals non-credible and make governments especially unlikely to make permanent institutional reforms. External enforcement may in fact exacerbate mistrust and decrease the durability of formal settlements in the short-term, if warring parties adhere to formal provisions only under enforcement (Beardsley, 2008). As a result, belligerents may avoid formal agreements altogether, preferring arrangements that offer direct enforcement and flexibility.

These obstacles do not eliminate the possibility of mutually acceptable bargains but make codifying them difficult. Actors may recognize opportunities to halt violence while remaining unwilling to formalize concessions that expose them to future vulnerability, reputational costs, or irreversible institutional commitments. The question, then, is not whether a bargain exists but whether it can be structured in ways that remain credible without relying on demobilization, formal concessions, or external enforcement.

4 The Benefits of Informality

Commitment problems may prevent actors from codifying agreements, but they do not eliminate the existence of mutually beneficial bargains. As conflict unfolds, fighting

reveals information until belligerents converge on acceptable deals (Reiter, 2003; Slantchev, 2003; Wagner, 2000). Even when formal agreements are unattractive or non-credible, actors continue to identify opportunities to stabilize their relationship. For example, during the 1960s, Kurdish Peshmerga exchanged communiqués with Baghdad signaling willingness to accept limited autonomy, while expressing doubts about the regime’s credibility and capacity to implement reforms (DOS 1963). Such exchanges illustrate that belligerents may recognize mutually preferable arrangements even when they reject formalization, and view formal settlements as “off the table.”

If formal deals are unattractive, informality offers an alternative path. Informal cessation becomes attractive when continued fighting is costly, and formal agreements are non-credible or politically costly. Ambiguous, informal arrangements may not be symptoms of failed peace but rather deliberately chosen, allowing actors to avoid formal subordination if they cannot achieve full victory (Petersen, 2024, p. 17). Informal deals offer strategic advantages that make them preferable to formal settlement for both governments and rebels: preserving flexibility, minimizing political costs, and retaining direct enforcement capacity.

4.1 Government Benefits

Informal arrangements in international relations can preserve flexibility and minimize risk under uncertainty. They allow actors to cooperate despite mistrust, avoid rigid institutional commitments, and preserve deniability. This logic extends to post-conflict settings: when commitment problems, enforcement deficits, or reputational concerns make formal settlements risky or unstable, actors may prefer informal bargains that are flexible, opaque, and reversible (Lipson, 1991). The same logic applies to post-conflict settings, where governments and rebels may prefer informal bargains when formal settlements are costly, non-credible, or politically dangerous.

First, informality preserves flexibility under uncertainty. Binding agreements may lock actors into terms that quickly become costly, while “soft” law permits adjustment and

exit with lower penalties (Abbott and Snidal, 2000; Koremenos, 2005). In civil wars, when warring parties remain unsure about future capabilities or intentions, informal cessations offer a flexible pathway to halt hostilities without locking in terms likely to require revision. Governments thus retain the ability to revise or withdraw concessions if conditions shift.

Second, informality creates strategic ambiguity that reduces enforcement pressures and escalation risks. States sometimes prefer informal alliances to avoid rigid obligations (Leeds, 2003; Snyder, 1984). Governments in civil wars may resist codifying ceasefires or powersharing for fear that formal violation will force retaliation. Unwritten deals allow leaders to de-escalate quietly, preserving room to maneuver if conditions shift. Ambiguity in terms allows actors to refrain from re-initiating the conflict when retaliation would otherwise be required. This allows both sides to maintain restraint without incurring reputational penalties. Ambiguity then offers plausible deniability as no official terms are violated and reduces the risk that isolated incidents reignite full-scale conflict.

Third, informality lowers domestic political costs. While codified concessions can embolden other challengers, signal weakness, or provoke elite backlash (Paine, 2024; Walter, 1997, 2006, 2009), informal concessions provide rulers political cover: they can manage rebels without acknowledging them as legitimate or setting precedents that bind future responses. This obscurity allows governments to reduce violence without publicly recognizing challengers or codifying concessions.

4.2 Rebel Benefits

For rebels, the primary advantage of informality is that it avoids the vulnerabilities of demobilization. Informal cessation allows armed groups to retain coercive capacity to defend their territorial or political spoils and in turn reduces the commitment problem that prevents settlement. Informal cessation relies on the credible threat of retaliation rather than external guarantors.

This logic parallels research on authoritarian powersharing under weak institutions.

In weak and autocratic institutional environments, powersharing is notoriously difficult to sustain because promises to share authority are easily reversed and cannot be credibly enforced (Paine, 2024; Powell, 2024). Under weak or authoritarian institutions, elites are typically more likely to resist permanent institutional reforms (Paine, 2024), and lack willing or capable external guarantors (Svolik, 2012). Where formal enforcement is unreliable, power-sharing arrangements are most stable when challengers retain independent coercive capacity to defend their position (Meng, Paine, and Powell, 2023; Paine, 2024; Powell, 2024; Roessler and Ohls, 2018). Non-demobilization allows opposition actors to enforce agreements directly, reducing incentives for state defection. Informal coexistence thus resolves commitment problems internally by preserving mutual deterrence.

Informality also underpins other strategies of violence management such as co-optation. When elimination of armed challengers is costly and difficult, states can provide rebels with rents in exchange for subordination to state authority and restraint (Driscoll, 2015; Lee, 2022; Migdal, 1988; North et al., 2009; Reno, 1998). Co-optation of rebels involves extending payments or informal benefits, for example, access to jobs or resources or selective enforcement of laws, to neutralize threats (De Mesquita et al., 2005; Geddes et al., 2018). Co-optation produces self-enforcing arrangements that are sustained as rebels prefer receiving benefits (Lee, 2022).¹⁵

Informality becomes a rational response to limited enforcement capacity and acute commitment problems. Informal cessation provides governments with an opportunity to avoid binding and public, precedent-setting concessions, while rebels secure survival and local authority without surrendering enforcement capacity. Rebels' capacity for punishment renders informal cessation self-enforcing.

¹⁵Many cases of de facto territorial control in Myanmar exemplify such dynamics where even in the context of military skirmishes, full-scale civil war is avoided while actors resist formal ceasefire or peace agreements.

5 The Toleration Dilemma

While informality is often strategically beneficial, it remains inherently risky. Rebels may exploit informal cessation as cover for regrouping or rearming (Min, 2020, 2025), or grow dissatisfied with their spoils over time, providing the possibility that today’s co-opted rebels become tomorrow’s challengers. Governments must weigh the benefits of immediate stability against the risk that informal deals are temporary pauses rather than durable solutions.¹⁶ Informal cessation thus resolves *only* the state’s credibility problem but does not eliminate the credibility problem on the rebel side. In turn, informal cessation is not universally attractive.

Informal cessation is therefore not a costless solution but a strategic trade-off, and one that governments will only accept under particular conditions. Informal cessation is most likely when states can minimize the resulting dilemma posed by tolerated challengers. Specifically, I propose two conditions under which informal cessation emerges. First, rebels must view informal concessions as sufficient to justify restraint. Second, governments must be willing to tolerate challengers who remain armed and retain the capacity to pose future threats. Informal cessation thus reflects an equilibrium in which both actors accept continued coexistence as preferable to the costs and risks of continued fighting or formal settlement.

These conditions are most likely to be met when two factors align: *relative strength* and the *nature of rebel demands*. First, informal bargains are feasible when rebels are relatively weak. Weak rebels are more willing to abandon resistance in exchange for limited concessions and pose less threat to central state authority, reducing the risks and costs associated with toleration. By contrast, stronger rebels demand greater concessions and remain more dangerous if tolerated, making informal accommodation both more costly and less attractive to governments. Second, informal bargains are most attractive in territorial conflicts,

¹⁶This dilemma may suggest strong reasons for states not to allow rebels to remain armed. One might arrive at the conclusion that therefore states should never tolerate challengers. Empirical patterns suggest that states are more willing to allow rebels to exist and remain armed within their territories than this reading suggests. This interpretation draws on conversations with David A. Lake.

where rebels have more limited ambitions, governments can concede de facto authority, and both actors can safely retreat. Together, rebel weakness and bounded territorial demands create the "Goldilocks" conditions under which informal cessation becomes preferable to both continued fighting and formal settlement.

5.1 Rebel Weakness

Rebel military capabilities are an important confounding variable in many conflict processes, shaping conflict onset, intensity, duration, affecting the scope of demands, and determine the feasibility of achieving favorable settlements (Clayton, 2013; Fearon, 1995b; Pechenkina and Thomas, 2022). The size of a rebel group's demands is a function of their capabilities. Stronger rebels can credibly insist on formal concessions such as powersharing or autonomy, while weaker groups recognize that such deals are unattainable and adjust their goals downward. Unable to expect large or formal settlements, weaker rebels are in turn more easily satisfied with modest concessions.

For governments, this dynamic makes containing violence by weaker groups less costly. Because weaker rebels accept smaller concessions, regimes can achieve de-escalation while giving up relatively little. This makes informal concessions a more favorable tradeoff for leaders who want to concede as little as possible in return for maximum reduction in violence. In turn, weaker rebels are more likely to be satisfied with informal concessions.

Weaker rebels are also easier for states to tolerate once fighting stops. Weaker rebels not only pursue more limited demands and thus require fewer concessions to stand down, their persistence poses relatively little risk to central state authority. Highly capable challengers invite suppression: governments devote disproportionate resources to eliminating threats that endanger their hold on power (Balcells and Kalyvas, 2025). Governments can reduce violence through limited informal accommodation of less threatening rebels and conserve coercive resources for more serious threats elsewhere (Wucherpfennig, 2021). This makes informal coexistence a manageable rather than existential concern.

This raises an obvious question: if rebels are weak, why does the government concede anything at all rather than simply eliminating them? The answer lies in the asymmetry between what it costs a weak rebel group to defend limited spoils and what it costs a government to take them back. Groups embedded in peripheral regions, protected by terrain, or rooted in local ethnic constituencies can impose disproportionate costs on a government that chooses elimination over accommodation, even when they pose no credible threat to central authority. Despite a lack in military capabilities, small rebel groups can often survive and even thrive if they have popular support (Staniland, 2018). Even the pursuit of weak rebels is rarely free, and under resource constraints, the expected cost of elimination may exceed the expected cost of tolerating a contained, manageable challenger. At the same time, informal concessions are uncodified and less public, making informal accommodation the path of least resistance when dealing with weaker rebels.

These dynamics create the equilibrium at the heart of the argument. Weaker rebels are more willing to settle for limited informal concessions; governments are more willing to offer them and tolerate their persistence. Informal cessation is thus most likely when rebels are too weak to demand formal settlement but their elimination would nonetheless be costly. Therefore, I expect:

Hypothesis 1: Informal cessation is more likely in civil wars involving relatively weaker rebel groups.

5.2 Territorial Demands

A similar dynamic unfolds when we consider the nature of the underlying conflict. Bounded territorial demands create conditions under which informal cessation is especially feasible. Rebels whose ambitions are primarily territorial, for example, focused on control of a particular enclave, region, or periphery, are more easily tolerated than those demanding regime change or institutional reform. Regime change goals require overthrowing the government to be achieved. Inclusion, representation, or rights-based demands require in-

stitutional reforms. Unlike efforts to capture the capital or alter the regime’s structure, territorial demands can be granted in a *de facto* manner. Governments may simply refrain from contesting peripheral zones, while tacit toleration satisfies rebels’ demands for local authority without requiring codified recognition. This makes territorial conflicts especially conducive to informal cessation.

Rebels are not inherently committed to formality as such, but to the achievement of their underlying goals (Acosta, 2019). For groups pursuing autonomy or independence, *de facto* territorial control may constitute full or near-full goal achievement even in the absence of formal recognition.¹⁷ A rebel group that controls its ethnic homeland, administers local governance, and faces no active government challenge has achieved the substance of its aims regardless of whether those gains are codified. Even rebels pursuing independence may frequently be satisfied with less than full secession, especially when they are too weak to realistically hope for formal concessions. As local authority can amount to a “non-codified victory” bounded demands reduce incentives for continued escalation (Cederman et al., 2015).¹⁸

Territorial goals, whether secession or local autonomy, tend to concern a particular geographic region, ethnic enclave, or historic homeland. Cases in which the territorial demand of a rebel group concerns the entire geography of the state equate to regime change goals rather than demands for territorial control. In this way, territorial groups pursue clearly defined and bounded objectives. This is particularly true if rebel control at the periphery does not threaten central state authority.

While limited aims may sometimes signal weakness (Thomas et al., 2016), they are also easier for states to accommodate. When challengers’ demands are bounded, concessions

¹⁷This insight is derived from conversations with Philip Roeder about the nature of territorial demands and the goals of secessionist movements.

¹⁸This argument challenges earlier research on secessionist conflict, which emphasized that territorial disputes involve indivisible stakes and are more difficult to resolve through settlement (Toft, 2009, 2010b; Walter, 2003). Rather than interpreting the absence of formal settlement as evidence of intractability, I argue that conflicts over bounded territorial demands are often resolved informally. Informal arrangements allow rebels to retain arms and enforce concessions directly, while enabling governments to reduce violence without formally conceding authority.

can be made without threatening core state authority (Powell, 1991). It is uncertainty about the true scope of rebel ambitions that often prevents accommodation. When demands are clearly limited, however, concessions become more feasible as demands are unlikely to change even following power shifts (Powell, 1996; Schultz and Goemans, 2019). Bounded demands thus make rebel restraint more credible. Primarily territorial demands are more likely to be of this limited or bounded nature compared to broader demands for regime change or political reform.

Territory can also have divergent value for both actors. An ethnic homeland is of high value to the armed group that desires to control it. Yet, the same territory might be rugged, hard to govern, and low in natural resources, making it harder for the government to control and easier to relinquish. Authoritarian regimes in particular may find it strategically efficient to allow rebels to control remote or marginal areas rather than overextend coercive force (Loyle et al., 2023). In turn, governments may be more willing to relinquish informal control over these hard to govern and low-resource areas.

The role of decentralization in civil war resolution is often framed as a temporary or second-best solution (Lake and Rothchild, 2005; Sambanis and Schulhofer-Wohl, 2009; Walter, 2006). But it may be more feasible to informally sustain territorial than political powersharing arrangements that requires elite inclusion and institutional change. For governments, conceding *de facto* local authority is less costly than institutionalized powersharing. Formal peace would make such territorial reform more permanent and inflexible should contextual conditions change. Especially if rebels demand independence or autonomy, formal settlements would imply codifying a new status quo that is very difficult to reverse.

Finally, territorial decentralization allows for defensible separation. Post-violence geographic concentration allows rebels to withdraw into defensible areas, reducing direct clashes and enabling *de facto* local governance without requiring formal recognition that would trigger reputational consequences. This defensible separation offers a possible solution to severe ethnic conflict, through the creation of defensible enclaves (Kaufmann, 2015).

Territorial separation provides greatest stability when warring parties can be *fully* separated (Johnson, 2008; Lacina, 2015). This means that peace is more likely and more stable when ethnic groups are concentrated in different regions rather than living in close proximity. Many cases of informal cessation take precisely this form, where rebels demand territorial control over majority ethnic enclaves, making both restraint and defensible separation more credible.

Bounded territorial demands create conditions where both sides can accept informal bargains: Rebels achieve local control without risking disarmament; governments tolerate autonomy in ways that pose little threat or cost to central authority. In turn, I expect:

Hypothesis 2: Informal cessation is more likely in civil wars involving bounded territorial demands, especially concerning ethnic, peripheral or low-resource territory.

6 Research Design

I examine the argument by analyzing data from the UCDP/PRIO Conflict Termination dataset (Kreutz, 2010, 2025). My dataset contains information on all armed conflicts with at least 25 battle-related fatalities per year between a government and a nonstate armed actor between 1960 and 2020. The data covers 2,158 dyad-year observations and 609 conflict terminations.¹⁹ This dataset serves as the basis for estimating the probability of informal cessation, and is utilized in a number of bivariate, logistic, and multinomial logistic analyses.

Informal cessation is characterized by (a) the cessation of violence (b) without formal agreement (c) as both actors remain armed and autonomous, and (d) choose restraint. I apply this definition to all cases of “fading out” in the UCDP/PRIO Conflict Termination dataset (Kreutz, 2021). This results in a total of 278 cases across 609 conflict terminations. I conduct qualitative research on how each of these conflict episodes terminated. I code

¹⁹While recent literature highlights some of the limitations of dyadic research designs in international studies (e.g. i.i.d assumption, misspecification), others suggest that the choice should ultimately be theoretically informed (Cranmer and Desmarais, 2016; Diehl and Wright, 2016). As this theory is at its core concerned with a two actor interaction, the dyadic setup is a useful simplifying modeling choice.

binary variables reflecting whether a rebel actor retreated, went into exile, collapsed, merged, splintered, or remained active and armed. Using these qualitatively informed variables, I identify a total of 223 cases of informal cessation, accounting for 80.2% of cases.

6.1 Territorial Variables

To capture whether a conflict is primarily fought over territory or political control, I draw on the *Incompatibility* variable from the UCDP/PRIO Conflict Termination dataset (Kreutz, 2010, 2025), which distinguishes conflicts with territorial objectives from those seeking regime change. The variable takes two levels: “territory,” denoting conflicts fought solely over territorial demands, and “other,” denoting conflicts fought over regime change goals or a combination of regime change and territorial goals.

Alternatively, I also measure *rebel demands*. I utilize The Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) Dataset (Braithwaite and K. G. Cunningham, 2020), which codes rebel group goals as 6 distinct types of goals: autonomy, independence, regime change, representation, rights, democratization. I collapse the categories into three analytically meaningful types: (1) *territorial* demands for independence or autonomy, (2) *rights* demands, and (3) *regime change*. This distinction allows me to assess whether conflicts over bounded, spatially defined objectives are systematically more likely to fade out informally.

I then combine data on armed groups with information from the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset on the properties of rebels’ ethnic constituencies or ethnic homeland. Using the ACD2EPR link (Wucherpfennig, Metternich, et al., 2012), I match armed groups to their primary ethnic constituencies. This enables measurement of territorial characteristics associated with groups’ core support base:

I measure several *features of ethnic homelands* using the EPR-Geo dataset (Vogt et al., 2015; Wucherpfennig, Weidmann, et al., 2011). First, *ethnic concentration* is coded as a binary indicator for whether the group is classified as geographically concentrated, distinguishing groups with compact territories from those that are dispersed. Second, *group area*

captures the logged size (in km^2) of the group’s ethnic territory, which provides a measure of the spatial extent of the claim. Third, *distance to capital* records the minimum geodesic distance (in km) from the ethnic polygon to the national capital, indicating the degree of peripherality of the group’s homeland. Fourth, I include a variable from the ACD2EPR dataset which captures whether rebels claim to represent their ethnic constituency, and I code this variable as binary if direct evidence of a claim is present. Finally, *border proximity* is measured as the minimum distance from the ethnic polygon to an international border, supplemented by a binary indicator for whether the group’s territory directly abuts a border. To capture the resource value of a territory to the state, I measure the number of oil fields intersecting with the ethnic population polygon.

Together, these measures capture whether rebel demands are rooted in bounded, peripheral, ethnically homogeneous, or relatively low-resource territories as the conditions theorized to make informal coexistence more viable.

Figure 2 shows the frequency of each conflict outcome, including established formal and decisive outcomes, for both territorial and regime change conflicts. It shows that informal outcomes are the single most common type of conflict termination (36.6%), but that a share of ambiguous outcomes also remains (18.7%).²⁰ Overall, the majority of territorial conflicts end in informal cessation. At the same time, territorial conflicts account for almost 80% of all informal cessations.

6.2 Rebel Strength Variables

To capture variation in rebel strength, I rely primarily on the Nonstate Actor Dataset (D. Cunningham et al., 2013), which provides a five-point categorical measure of relative strength ranging from *much weaker* to *much stronger* than the government. This categorical scale serves as the main operationalization in the analysis, as it allows for nonlinear effects

²⁰This classification tries as best as possible to capture all cases in which cessation appears strategic. Cases of cessation not captured by informal cessation may be of interest for further study, including cases where violence ends as a result of coding artifacts such as rebel group splintering or merging. The data identifies but does not explain these cases.

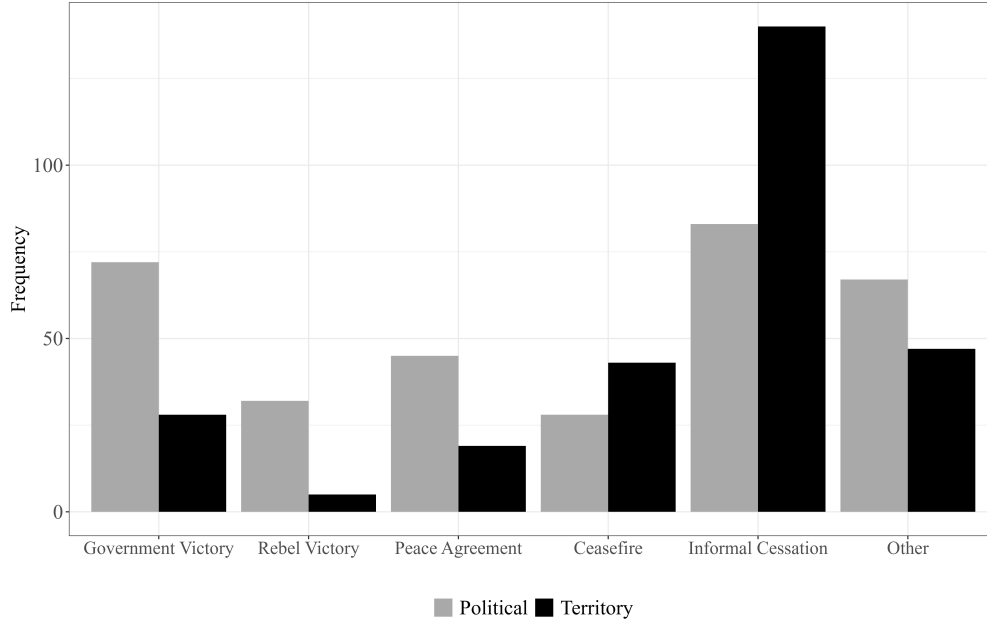


Figure 2: Frequency of civil conflicts by termination and incompatibility type.

Table 2: Distribution of Conflict Outcomes by Relative Rebel Capacity

	Rebel Victory	Government Victory	Formal Agreement	Informal Cessation
Rebels Stronger	43.4%	17.0%	35.8%	3.8%
Rebels Weaker	2.0%	37.4%	22.7%	37.9%

Notes: Entries are row percentages. Row sums equal 100%.

across different relative levels of strength. Additionally, for robustness, I employ several alternative specifications: a continuous scale ranging from -2 (much weaker) to $+2$ (much stronger), a binary indicator for whether rebels are weaker than the state, and the logged estimate of rebel troop size. Table 2 shows how conflict outcome types are distributed across weak and strong rebel groups. Strong rebels are generally relatively rare, and rarely experience informal cessation.

As a further alternative, I use a binary indicator of whether rebels enjoyed *large popular support* from their ethnic constituency, defined as mobilizing over 50 percent of the group's population (Vogt et al., 2015; Wucherpfennig, Weidmann, et al., 2011). This variable provides leverage on the capacity for broad mobilization independent of battlefield

strength. Finally, I draw on the Rebel Armament Dataset to measure capabilities in terms of armaments. This includes indicators of whether a group possessed major conventional weapons, small arms, or explosives. These measures allow me to capture rebel strength not only as relative capacity vis-à-vis the state but also in terms of material capabilities, providing a complementary perspective on the robustness of the results.

6.3 Control Variables

Alongside the main explanatory variables, I include standard controls identified in the civil conflict literature. First, I control for conflict characteristics. *Battle deaths*, drawn from the UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset (Davies et al., 2025), capture conflict intensity, as higher lethality may increase the likelihood of decisive outcomes while reducing negotiated or informal settlements. I also include *conflict duration*, measured as the number of years since episode onset using the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Termination data. As conflicts become more protracted, opportunities for negotiated or informal resolution may decline. This measure is also used to plot predicted probabilities of informal cessation over the conflict life cycle.

Second, I include institutional, economic, and demographic controls from the *peace-sciencer* package (Miller, 2022). *Regime type*, measured using V-Dem polyarchy scores (Coppedge, Gerring, Glynn, et al., 2020; Coppedge, Gerring, Knutsen, et al., 2019), accounts for differences in political constraints and conflict management strategies. *Logged GDP per capita* captures state resources and administrative capacity, which influence both suppression and settlement prospects (San-Akca, 2014). *Logged population size* reflects structural capacity and the difficulty of eliminating challengers in larger societies. I also control for *ethnic fractionalization*, which captures societal divisions that may affect both conflict dynamics and settlement prospects (Fearon and Laitin, 2003).

Finally, I include a *Post-Cold War indicator* to account for changes in the international environment after 1989, including reduced proxy competition and shifting external

support patterns, which may influence both conflict duration and termination outcomes.

6.4 Estimation Strategy

The empirical analysis proceeds in four steps. First, I use descriptive cross-tabulations and chi-square tests of independence to identify broad patterns in the association between conflict type, rebel demands, and conflict outcomes. To further probe differences in territorial characteristics, I conduct two-sample mean comparisons (t-tests) of continuous variables such as homeland area, distance to the capital, and oil field endowments, contrasting conflicts that faded out with those that terminated in other ways. These initial tests provide a baseline assessment of whether informal cessations are systematically associated with the territorial and capability conditions theorized above.

Second, I estimate a series of logistic regression models that directly assess the probability of informal cessation relative to all other termination types. To do so, I aggregate the dyad-year data into a cross-sectional dyad-level dataset by coding ongoing years as missing and comparing outcomes only at the point of termination.²¹ The baseline model takes the form:

$$\Pr(\text{InformalCessation}_i = 1) = \text{logit}^{-1}\left(\beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Territorial}_i + \sum_{k=1}^{K-1} \gamma_k \text{RebelStrength}_{ik}\right) \quad (1)$$

Third, I turn to multinomial logistic regression models that leverage the panel structure of the data. Here, the dependent variable Y_{it} captures the outcome of conflict dyad i in year t . All ongoing conflict years are coded as the baseline category (*Ongoing*), while the termination year is coded as one of four outcomes: government victory, rebel victory, formal agreement, or informal cessation. The multinomial model can be expressed as:

$$\log\left(\frac{\Pr(Y_{it} = \text{Informal Cessation})}{\Pr(Y_{it} = \text{Ongoing})}\right) = \alpha_{\text{IC}} + \beta_1 \text{Territorial}_{it} + \sum_{k=1}^{K-1} \gamma_k \text{RebelStrength}_{itk} + \mathbf{X}_{it} \boldsymbol{\delta} \quad (2)$$

²¹In the panel data setup, years of ongoing conflict are coded as NA in the binary outcome variable.

Finally, I present predicted probabilities and marginal effects plots to illustrate the substantive implications of the estimates. These visualizations show how the likelihood of different outcomes shifts across levels of rebel strength and territorial conflict, providing a more intuitive sense of the magnitude and conditionality of the effects.

7 Empirical Results & Discussion

The subsequent results strongly support the theory. Descriptive cross-tabulations provide an initial check. Rebels who are relatively weak compared to the government are significantly more likely to experience informal cessation ($\chi^2 = 25.7$, $p < 0.001$). Conflicts coded as territorial are significantly more likely to end in informal cessation than those fought over regime change ($\chi^2 = 23.6$, $p < 0.001$). Looking at demands instead of conflict type, groups seeking autonomy or independence are also more likely to end conflicts informally than groups pressing for regime change or rights-based reforms ($\chi^2 = 27.8$, $p < 0.001$). Turning to territorial features, informal cessation more frequently occurs with groups that are on average located in less valuable and more peripheral areas. Their territories contain fewer oil fields (3.04 vs. 6.08, $p < .05$), lie farther from the capital (432 km vs. 299 km, $p < .01$), and are smaller in size (152,574 km² vs. 184,045 km², logged, $p < .001$).

Table 3 presents the results of a set of logistic regressions. The models strongly support the hypotheses. Comparing the likelihood of informal cessation to all other outcomes, rebel weakness is consistently associated with higher probabilities of informal cessation. Model 1 shows that weaker rebels are approximately seven times more likely to end in informal cessation compared to stronger groups. The weakest rebels have the highest predicted probabilities of informal cessation, while the probability declines monotonically as strength increases. Put differently, an increase in rebels' relative capacity from much weaker to weaker decreases the likelihood of informal cessation by about 74% (Model 4). This supports the theoretical expectation that informal cessation is a weak rebel equilibrium.

Table 3: Logistic Regression Coefficients for Informal Cessation (Dyad-Clustered SE)

	<i>Informal Cessation (Binary)</i>					
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Rebels weaker (binary)	1.96*** (0.48)					
Rebel strength (log estimate)		-0.17** (0.07)				
Rebel strength (continuous)			-1.20*** (0.17)			
Relative strength: weaker				-1.31*** (0.21)	-1.39*** (0.22)	-1.68*** (0.29)
Relative strength: parity				-2.70*** (0.62)	-2.79*** (0.63)	-2.74*** (0.78)
Relative strength: stronger				-1.94** (0.79)	-1.62** (0.80)	-15.58 (832.40)
Relative strength: m. stronger				-15.77 (650.87)	-15.62 (650.87)	-15.45 (835.22)
Territorial conflict	0.71*** (0.19)	0.75*** (0.21)	0.40** (0.20)	0.39* (0.20)		
Rebel demands: rights					1.06** (0.46)	0.55 (0.65)
Rebel demands: territorial					0.65*** (0.21)	0.85*** (0.33)
Distance to capital km						0.0000 (0.0003)
Border area (binary)						-0.41 (0.35)
Group area (log)						0.14* (0.09)
Constant	-2.45*** (0.48)	0.79 (0.56)	-2.23*** (0.28)	0.21 (0.18)	0.05 (0.19)	-1.18 (1.07)
Observations	507	382	507	507	480	318
Log Likelihood	-323.06	-254.58	-304.17	-302.25	-281.50	-183.48
Akaike Inf. Crit.	652.12	515.17	614.34	616.49	577.00	386.96

Notes: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Across models, territorial conflicts are also about twice as likely to end informally compared to regime change conflicts. Models 5 and 6 assess the effect of rebel demands instead of conflict type, and again the pattern holds: territorial demands are associated with a 2.0 to 2.3 times greater likelihood of informal cessation. These results reinforce the

claim that weaker rebels with bounded territorial objectives are more likely to reach informal cessation than any other outcome.

Table 4 and 5 present multinomial logistic regression models that compare the probability of each outcome to the reference category “ongoing conflict.” Across multinomial logit models, rebel weakness is positively associated with informal cessation relative to continued conflict, even after controlling for territorial characteristics. As rebel capabilities increase, the odds of informal cessation decline, while stronger rebels are significantly more likely to achieve rebel victories or reach formal peace settlements. This aligns with findings in the broader literature on rebel strength and formal conflict outcomes (Clayton, 2013; Gent, 2011; Nilsson, 2010). The results also indicate that some capacity aids in the acquisition of formal concessions, while very strong rebels do not settle but select to continue fighting until a more decisive victory. These results lend further support to the theoretical expectation that the state tolerates a low-level threat, and weak rebels settle for survival and limited concessions.²²

In the analysis of territorial conflicts, the pattern is slightly more nuanced. Considering the probability of informal cessation versus continued conflict, territorial conflicts are not by themselves significantly more likely to end in informal cessation, however, they are significantly less likely to end in a decisive victory (Table 4). Considering additional territorial measures, the evidence supports the mechanism (Table 5). While territorial conflict by itself did not show a significant effect on the probability of ending in informal cessation over continued conflict, the characteristics of the disputed territory did point into the direction of the theory. These results offer some explanation for existing findings about the difficulty in settling territorial conflicts (Walter, 2003, 2006), but highlight that this difficulty results from a central expectation that settlement is formal.

The results further reinforce the interpretation that informal bargains are most durable where claims are bounded, far from the capital, and low in resources. Table 5 incorporates

²²Additional models in the Appendix also suggest that informal cessations are more likely when rebels represent a distinct ethnic group and can mobilize a supportive constituency.

Table 4: Multinomial Coefficients for Civil War Outcome (Dyad-Clustered SE)

	<i>Conflict Outcome (Baseline: Ongoing)</i>			
	Government Victory (1)	Rebel Victory (2)	Formal Agreement (3)	Informal Cessation (4)
Relative strength: weaker	−0.24 (0.17)	1.01 (0.81)	0.48** (0.22)	−1.29*** (0.20)
Relative strength: parity	−0.58 (0.45)	3.53*** (0.82)	1.64*** (0.33)	−1.76** (0.73)
Relative strength: stronger	1.34* (0.78)	6.24*** (0.95)	−12.89*** (0.00)	−17.72*** (0.00)
Relative strength: much stronger	−10.83 (492.50)	6.65*** (1.35)	2.85** (1.43)	−10.69 (481.83)
Territorial conflict	−0.84*** (0.17)	−0.98* (0.60)	−0.01 (0.20)	0.07 (0.17)
Constant	−1.56*** (0.15)	−5.26*** (0.76)	−2.84*** (0.21)	−1.66*** (0.15)
Observations	1,931			
Akaike Inf. Crit.	3,286.59			

Notes: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

the characteristics of the contested territories. The results demonstrate that it is not simply territorial demands per se, but territorial demands over peripheral, bounded territories that are most likely to end in informal coexistence. The level of concentration of a rebel group's ethnic constituency, a region's level of oil deposits, and distance to the capital all retain their expected signs. The geographic concentration of a rebel group's ethnic population shows a positive but insignificant association to informal cessation versus continuing violence, while greater natural resource endowments predict lower probabilities. This may indicate that extensive resource wealth makes a region more valuable and harder to relinquish for the central government.

The results reveal important patterns in the interaction between territorial demands and distance to the capital. When rebels pursue territorial demands, the probability of informal cessation increases as the distance of the contested territory from the capital increases. Greater distance also raises the likelihood of a peace settlement relative to continued conflict. In contrast, distance in regime change conflicts has the opposite effect, reducing the

Table 5: Multinomial Coefficients for Civil War Outcome (Dyad-Clustered SE)

	<i>Conflict Outcome (Baseline: Ongoing)</i>			
	Government Victory (1)	Rebel Victory (2)	Formal Agreement (3)	Informal Cessation (4)
Relative strength: weaker	-0.06 (0.22)	1.75 (1.17)	0.72*** (0.25)	-1.35*** (0.23)
Relative strength: parity	0.06 (0.56)	4.41*** (1.19)	1.48*** (0.46)	-1.01 (0.75)
Relative strength: stronger	-12.54*** (0.00)	8.76*** (1.97)	-12.66*** (0.00)	-12.78*** (0.00)
Relative strength: much stronger	-12.29*** (0.00)	8.31*** (1.86)	-11.93*** (0.00)	-11.90*** (0.00)
Rebel demands: rights	0.21 (0.60)	1.33 (1.23)	-0.47 (0.71)	-15.89*** (0.00)
Rebel demands: territorial	-0.97*** (0.28)	-4.07 (3.34)	-0.64** (0.31)	-0.03 (0.32)
Distance to capital (log km)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.10* (0.05)	0.00 (0.03)	-0.07** (0.03)
Rights $\times$ Distance (log km)	0.13 (0.12)	-0.03 (0.22)	-0.04 (0.14)	0.04*** (0.00)
Territorial $\times$ Distance (log km)	0.03 (0.04)	0.67 (0.54)	0.04 (0.05)	0.11** (0.04)
Group geo. concentrated	0.00 (0.40)	2.06 (1.43)	0.42 (0.57)	-0.39 (0.59)
Oil occurrence (in ethnic area)	0.01 (0.01)	-0.00 (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)
Territory size (log)	-0.05 (0.09)	0.33 (0.28)	-0.37*** (0.09)	-0.01 (0.07)
Constant	-1.27 (1.05)	-11.73*** (4.35)	0.98 (1.05)	-1.11 (0.93)
Observations	1,269			
Akaike Inf. Crit.	2359.82			

Notes: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

probability of informal outcomes and making continued fighting more likely. If rebels have goals that demand regime change or overthrow of the government, distance is insignificant to the level of threat they pose.

I provide an additional test of how territorial characteristics condition the likelihood of informal cessation. Figure 3 presents results from three models, each interacting rebel territorial demands with a distinct territorial characteristic. First, examining the interaction between territorial demands and the minimum distance between the contested territory and the capital, I find that territorial demands near the capital do not significantly affect the likelihood of informal cessation. Similarly, distance from the capital has no effect on informal cessation for non-territorial rebels. By contrast, the probability of informal cessation increases with each one-unit increase in the log distance to the capital, indicating that territorial conflicts located farther from the center of state authority are more likely to end informally. Substantively, a group whose territory of interest lies 200 km from the capital has a 9% higher probability of informal cessation compared to a group located 100 km away.²³

The distance-to-capital finding speaks to a debate about how states relate to their periphery. Some argue that even weak states resist ceding territorial control, as border changes are rare and sovereignty is not easily subdivided (Florea and Huang, 2025; Luna and Soifer, 2017). Others suggest states may tolerate or even benefit from rebel governance in remote areas they lack the capacity or incentive to govern directly (Florea and Malejacq, 2024; Idler, 2019; Moriarty, 2010). The results here support the latter: the further a contested territory lies from the capital, the more likely conflict is to end informally, reflecting strategic willingness rather than administrative failure alone.

Second, I find that the geographic concentration of a rebel group's ethnic constituency conditions this relationship. Territorial demands by groups with geographically dispersed ethnic constituencies are extremely unlikely to reach informal cessation. It suggests that

²³The marginal increase in probability associated with an additional 100 km declines as baseline distance increases. At 500 km, an additional 100 km increases the probability by approximately 2%, and at 1,000 km by approximately 0.8%.

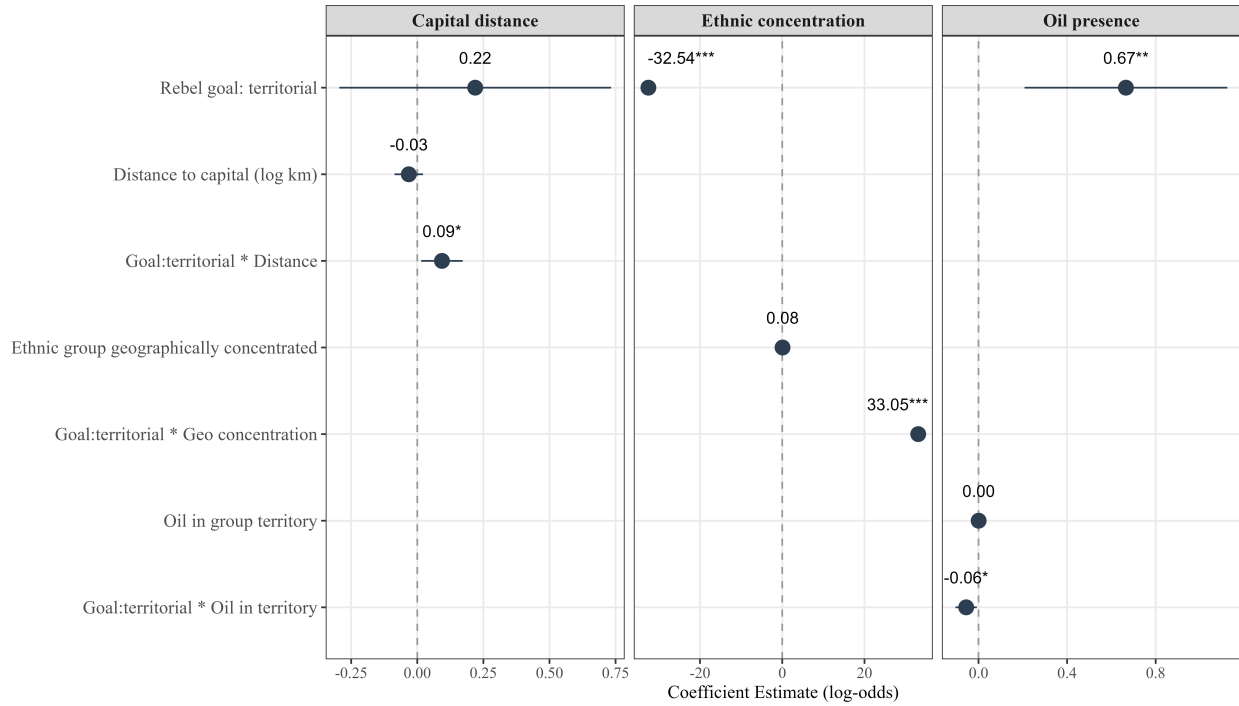


Figure 3: Marginal effects for interaction models, each box corresponds to one multinational model, presenting only the results for the outcome Informal Cessation. Full models in Tables 23-25 in Appendix.

territorial claims are infeasible when populations are not spatially concentrated. In contrast, geographic concentration dramatically increases the likelihood that territorial groups achieve informal coexistence.²⁴ This strongly supports the core theoretical mechanism that informal coexistence is most likely when territorial demands bounded and concentrated. This finding speaks in particular to the literature on ethnic separation (Cederman et al., 2015; Lacina, 2015) and suggests that complete separation of ethnic constituencies contributes to violence decline.

Finally, I assess how natural resources shape the probability of informal cessation. As part of the logic about bounded demands and the value of territory, I expect that states should be less willing to tolerate rebel control over resource rich regions. Indeed, I find that oil presence has no effect on informal cessation for non-territorial groups. Territorial groups,

²⁴The large coefficient reflects complete separation rather than a meaningful marginal effect. All territorial conflicts involving highly concentrated ethnic constituencies ended in informal cessation.

however, are more likely to achieve informal cessation when their territory is resource poor. The greater the oil presence in a group's claimed territory, the less likely does informal cessation become. An increase in oil fields in rebel claimed territory reduces the odds of informal cessation by roughly 5% relative to non-territorial rebels, as resource wealth makes states less willing to tolerate rebel control.

7.1 Alternative Explanations & Robustness Checks

To further strengthen these results, I test several alternative explanations. I first consider whether the results are driven merely by frequent short-term lulls in fighting, or repeated need for recovery periods within longer wars, rather than genuine terminations. I then examine the effect of state weakness specifically, to show that informal cessations are not driven by government incapacity. The following analyses address each of these possibilities in turn. All models are included in the Online Appendix.

A key alternative explanation is that informal cessations reflect temporary lulls rather than genuine conflict termination. To assess this possibility, I examine relapse patterns and the durability of informal cessation outcomes. While some cases collapse quickly, a substantial share endure for many years. Most informal cessations remain ongoing at the end of the dataset in 2020 (69.3%), and even when conflict recurs, many cases experience a decade or more of stability. These patterns suggest that informal cessation often reflects sustained coexistence rather than transient interruptions. I further test whether the main results are driven by short-lived cessations by re-estimating the models on increasingly restrictive subsets requiring informal cessation to last at least one, five, and ten years. To ensure comparability, I apply these thresholds across all outcome categories. The results remain consistent: rebel strength is negatively associated with informal cessation, while territorial conflict increases its likelihood.²⁵

²⁵In fact, in my data, about 28% of formal settlements break down in less than five years, compared to only 16.1% of decisive victories. For the full set of models, see Online Appendix. In a separate project, I examine the determinants of the durability of informal coexistence and its long-term trajectories.

A second concern is that informal cessations involving weaker rebels reflect temporary pauses within longer conflicts rather than distinct termination outcomes. Because rebel–state dyads can re-enter the dataset when fighting resumes, the relationship between rebel weakness, territorial conflict, and informal cessation might disappear when considering only terminal episodes. To assess this possibility, I re-estimate the models on a restricted sample that includes only terminal dyad-episodes without subsequent relapse. The results remain unchanged.²⁶

A third concern is that informal cessation reflects state incapacity rather than strategic restraint. If informal cessations occur because weak states are unable to defeat rebels, state capacity should predict their occurrence. To assess this possibility, I re-estimate the models while controlling for state capacity using the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) from the Correlates of War project (Singer, 1988; Singer et al., 2012). State capacity does not predict informal cessation. Across specifications, the effect of CINC is either null or positive, indicating that stronger states are no less likely to experience informal cessation than weaker ones.²⁷

I conduct several additional robustness checks, with full results reported in the Online Appendix. First, I replicate the analyses using alternative measures of rebel strength, including continuous, categorical, and troop-based indicators. Across all specifications, weaker rebels remain significantly more likely to experience informal cessation, confirming that the results are not driven by a particular operationalization of relative strength.

Second, I examine whether conflict outcomes are better explained by rebel capability type rather than relative strength, using data on rebel arsenals from the Rebels’ Armament Dataset (Mehlretter, Pamp, et al., 2023; Mehlretter, Thurner, et al., 2023). These measures capture the technologies of conflict rather than relative power. While the effects of specific weapon types are mixed, the results do not overturn the core finding that relative rebel weakness is associated with informal cessation.

²⁶Full results are reported in Online Appendix.

²⁷Full results are reported in the Online Appendix.

Finally, I restrict the sample by region and historical period. The results remain consistent across geographic subsets and pre- and post-Cold War periods, indicating that the findings are not driven by region-specific dynamics or temporal trends. The temporal consistency of the findings also suggests that the probability of informal cessation is not fundamentally affected by normative changes in the international community, as recent work suggests in context of norms over war-fighting or intervention (Howard, 2008; Howard and Stark, 2017; Piccolino, 2023).

Overall, informal cessations are systematically associated with rebels being weaker and pursuing bounded territorial claims, and this relationship holds across alternative measures, model specifications, and subsets of the data.

8 Conclusion

The majority of civil conflict episodes end not through decisive victories or codified peace settlements, but through informal cessation. These outcomes occur when both governments and rebels tacitly agree to halt violence without written agreements or institutionalized reforms, while both sides persist with arms and coercive capacity. Our previous emphasis on canonical and formal outcomes, while productive, leaves a large share of civil war terminations untheorized. When violence fades without a treaty or a clear winner, existing frameworks tend to treat informality as a byproduct of exhaustion, organizational collapse, or state incapacity and as inherently transitory. These interpretations are not unreasonable, but they are incomplete. They do not account for a large and systematic class of cases in which governments and rebels choose restraint deliberately. By conceptualizing informal cessation as a distinct outcome of civil war, I expand the framework of conflict termination to capture what existing categories have thus far obscured: strategic decisions to cease fighting informally.

The theory highlights the strategic logic behind these informal bargains. First, actors

prefer informality in contexts of weak enforcement, low trust, and enduring commitment problems. Formal settlements require governments to codify concessions and implement institutional reforms they may have no intention or ability to uphold. Rebels, in turn, often fear that disarmament or demobilization will leave them vulnerable to repression. Informal bargains resolve the state's credibility problem by allowing rebels to remain armed and organized, sustaining a self-enforcing threat of renewed conflict that formal agreements cannot guarantee. For governments, informal cessation avoids binding, precedent-setting concessions and preserves flexibility in managing challengers. For rebels, it secures survival, recognition, and often *de facto* local authority without the vulnerabilities of disarmament. Informality provides each side with what it most needs while sidestepping the credibility, enforcement, and reputational costs that often make formal settlements unattractive. Yet, these advantages only align under particular conditions.

The statistical evidence consistently shows that the weaker the rebels, the more likely conflicts are to fade into informal coexistence, while increasing rebel strength shifts outcomes toward victory and formal settlements. The role of territorial demands is more nuanced, but ultimately consistent with the theory. Informal cessation is most feasible where rebels' aims are spatially bounded, especially in peripheral regions that pose little threat to central sovereignty. Tacit recognition of local control in such contexts can satisfy rebels' ambitions while allowing governments to avoid codifying permanent concessions. Consistent with this logic, the analysis shows that territorial conflicts, and especially those involving peripheral, low-resource regions, are more likely to end informally than other types of disputes. These patterns are robust across model specifications and durability thresholds, establishing informal cessation as a systematic outcome that is central to our framework of conflict termination.

Together, these findings carry implications that extend well beyond the measurement of conflict outcomes. For the study of civil conflict, these findings invite a reconsideration of what it means for war to end. Nearly half of all civil conflicts since 1960 have previously

been coded as “fading out”, a category that implies incidental decline rather than strategic choice. This paper shows that the majority of those cases satisfy the criteria for deliberate informal cessation. But bringing informal cessation into view opens new empirical terrain: why do some informal arrangements endure for decades while others collapse within years? How do the terms of tacit coexistence emerge and stabilize without codification? And how does informal cessation relate to established findings on conflict duration, recurrence, or intensity? These are questions that existing frameworks were simply not designed to ask, and that a more complete typology of conflict endings makes possible.

For theories of enforcement and credibility, the findings extend self-enforcing arrangements to civil conflict resolution. Scholarship on civil war settlement has established that external enforcement can make formal agreements credible where domestic institutions cannot. This paper complements that insight by showing that conflict can also end in the absence of such mechanisms, when the internal structure of the informal arrangement itself provides the necessary enforcement. This is particularly relevant as the conditions that made third-party guarantees viable in the 1990s and 2000s become less readily available today as major powers disengage from liberal tools of conflict resolution. The field’s focus on external enforcement has, perhaps inadvertently, privileged formal settlements backed by third-party guarantors as the primary pathway to durable peace. This paper points toward an alternative that derives credibility from direct enforcement.

For the study of secessionist and territorial conflict, the findings challenge a long-standing pessimism. Territorial and secessionist disputes have long been understood as among the hardest to resolve formally: indivisible stakes, reputation externalities, and the precedent-setting costs of conceding territory all raise the bar for codified agreement. This paper suggests that the relative rarity of formal settlements in these conflicts need not be read as evidence of intractability. It may instead reflect that resolution frequently takes a different form: a non-codified recognition of *de facto* authority that allows both sides to disengage without formal capitulation. The literature on territorial conflict has illuminated

why these disputes are difficult to resolve through agreement; this paper points toward why they so often involve informal cessation.

Civil wars do end. But they often end quietly. Understanding these outcomes is essential to grasping how political order is constructed and maintained under conditions of chronic weakness and mistrust. It is equally essential to understanding why so many armed groups remain politically relevant long after open fighting ends, and why so many states manage rather than eliminate the challengers in their midst.

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