# Informal Cessation: Rethinking How Civil Wars End

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September 24, 2025

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**Abstract**

When do opponents end civil conflict without formal settlement? Existing research emphasizes decisive victories and institutionalized peace agreements as prerequisites for durable peace. Yet, most civil conflicts conclude without either. This paper explains the logic behind informal cessation as an outcome of civil conflict in which armed actors remain intact and no agreement is signed. I argue that informal cessation emerges when continued fighting is costly but formal settlements suffer from severe commitment problems, or otherwise lack credible enforcement. In these contexts, both states and rebels may accept non-codified, self-enforcing bargains that do not require rebels to disarm. This gives challengers direct enforcement capacity, reducing the state's credibility problem. But it confronts the state with a new strategic dilemma: allowing rebels to remain armed leaves open the risk of future rebellion. Managing this trade-off, informal cessation becomes more likely when rebels are relatively weak and make bounded, territorial demands. For governments, such groups pose limited risk to central authority and can be appeased with minimal concessions; for rebels with lower capabilities or bounded demands, informal deals offer acceptable partial gains. 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 in conflicts involving relatively weaker rebels and territorial demands, especially over peripheral or low-resource regions. This paper reframes informal outcomes not as failed resolutions, but as deliberate, enforceable alternatives to continued conflict.

***Keywords:*** Civil War Termination, Commitment Problems, Informality, Secession
Words: 10,664

*University of California San Diego, Contact: wwagner@ucsd.edu. 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, Jesus E. Rojas Venzor, Alex R. Zhao, Yujia Wan, the participants of the International Relations Workshop at UC San Diego, panel participants and discussants at APSA 2024 and PSSI 2024. The full Online Appendix is available here.

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 (Toft, 2010a) or formal settlements that institutionalize power-sharing and disarmament under external guarantees (Fortna, 2018; C. Hartzell & Hoddie, 2003; Walter, 2002). These frameworks implicitly treat other outcomes as failures of conflict resolution, or inherently transitory rather than deliberate, strategic arrangements. 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.

Informal cessation is a strategic choice. I conceptualize informal cessation as a distinct outcome 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 is informal. Considering variation in conflict outcomes along two dimensions, formality and actor persistence, I locate informal cessation within existing frameworks of civil war termination. I show informal cessations are the single most common mode of conflict termination.

I argue that informality becomes attractive precisely where formal settlements are diffi-

[1]Correspondence 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.

cult to achieve, non-credible, and otherwise dependent on external enforcement that is often unavailable. Informal bargains forgo disarmament explicitly, letting rebels remain armed and able to deter defection by the government. Through informal cessation, governments can grant de facto concessions that induce rebels to lay down some arms without locking themselves into binding or precedent-setting institutional reforms. Typically, formal settlements require rebels to disarm, leaving them vulnerable to betrayal (Fearon, 1995a; Walter, 1997). In turn, informal cessation decreases the state's commitment problem through direct enforcement of powersharing concessions by the challenger (Meng & Paine, 2022; Paine, 2024; Powell, 2006). Informal bargains are not failed settlements but deliberate strategies in the context of severe commitment and enforcement problems, made credible precisely because rebels remain armed.

But this solution generates what I call the "toleration dilemma." The very coercive capacity that rebels can use to defend their rights also preserves the possibility of future challenge. 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 make smaller demands and are more easily persuaded to stand down, while also posing less of a long-term threat if they persist. Rebels with bounded territorial goals can be satisfied through tacit recognition of local control, which approximates their core goals without requiring 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.

To evaluate when and why civil wars end informally, I construct a dataset of over 2,158 conflict dyad-year observations from 1960 to 2020. The data includes a total of 609 conflict terminations and 223 informal cessations. I estimate logistic and multinomial regression models to compare the probability of informal cessation with other outcomes, including government victory, rebel victory, and formal peace settlements. These models incorporate covariate measures of rebel strength (both relative and absolute) and territorial demands and

the characteristics of the territory under dispute. I plot predicted probabilities of informal cessation and other conflict outcomes for relative rebel weakness and territorial conflict over conflict duration to capture how the likelihood of different outcomes evolves across the life cycle of a conflict.

The results support the theoretical argument. Informal cessation is most likely when rebels are relatively weak and make only bounded demands for peripheral, low-resource, or ethnically concentrated territory. Informal cessation remains more likely than other outcomes even as war drags on, though its probability declines over the course of a conflict. I also find that stronger rebels are more likely to achieve negotiated settlements or battlefield success, while weaker rebels are more likely to be defeated as conflicts mature. By contrast, regime change conflicts, which pose existential threats to the state, tend to persist until government victory and are less likely to end in negotiated formal or informal resolution. The findings suggest that informal cessation is a mutually tolerable resolution when rebels lack the capacity or desire to demand more, and governments prefer to avoid permanent concessions while keeping threats from persisting rebels low.

The contributions of this paper are threefold. Conceptually, it defines and elevates *informal cessation* as a distinct and widespread mode of conflict termination. Theoretically, it shows how informality creates a self-enforcing alternative to formal peace agreements that lack credible enforcement. Empirically, it recodes the universe of "fading out" cases and demonstrates systematic patterns in its occurrence.

This study also has several broader implications. First, it redefines how we think about civil war outcomes. My findings show that informal cessation is the modal outcome of civil wars, suggesting we should rethink it as more than a residual category. Second, it expands theories of enforcement and credibility by showing that bargains can be sustained not only through institutions or external guarantors, but through rebels' retained coercive capacity in the shadow of violence. In fact, external enforcement is often not available to many actors in civil war. The findings here point towards alternative paths for conflict management, if

not formal resolution. Third, it offers a new interpretation of so-called "difficult" conflicts, particularly territorial and secessionist wars: while rarely resolved through formal agreement, they often stabilize through tacit tolerance and informal autonomy. Findings in the literature of the resistance of secessionist conflict to formal settlements (Walter, 2003) may instead point to the preference for informal, self-enforcing deals. Fourth, the study links civil war termination to informal governance and authoritarian powersharing, emphasizing that informality is not failure but a deliberate strategy under weak institutions (Lee, 2022; Meng & Paine, 2022; Meng, Paine, & Powell, 2023), where challengers' continued coercive capacity renders such deals enforceable (Paine, 2024; Powell, 2024).

## The Informal Dimension of Civil War Outcomes

"Civil wars do end; the killing does stop." With this observation, Licklider (1998) reflected on what he called the first wave of empirical research on civil war termination. That early literature focused on explaining war onsets rather than their endings. When it did turn to termination, it revolved around two possibilities: decisive military victory or negotiated agreement, often brokered with external involvement (Licklider, 1993, 1998; Mason, Weingarten Jr, & Fett, 1999). Victories, particularly those by rebel forces, are believed to promote peace by eliminating the defeated actor or allowing the winner to impose a new political order (Meng & Paine, 2022; Toft, 2010a). Formal settlements, in turn, are often conceived as "second-best" outcomes born out of "draw" or stalemate (Mason et al., 1999; Zartman, 2000). Mutual exhaustion or military impasse in which neither actor can achieve victory creates conditions ripe for settlement.

Later work expands on this view, examining centrally the mechanisms of negotiated agreements that institutionalize post-war arrangements, often with outside help (Fortna, 2004; C. Hartzell & Hoddie, 2003; Joshi & Mason, 2011; Toft, 2009, 2010a; Walter, 2002). But these categories capture only a minority of actual civil war terminations. In the early

2000s, studies of civil war shifted focus to the surprising absence of settlements in civil wars that are Pareto inefficient. Focusing on the conditions enabling settlement and the obstacles created by commitment problems, the solution was overwhelmingly sought in the institutional design and external enforcement of negotiated settlements (Collier & Sambanis, 2002).

This focus yielded a rich body of research. Scholars examined variation in the form of settlements (Werner, 1998), the stability of agreements (C. A. Hartzell, 1999; Sawyer, Cunningham, & Reed, 2017; Walter, 2002), and the conditions under which conflict recurs (Walter, 1997). Others linked the outcomes to broader determinants such as civil war duration (De Rouen Jr & Sobek, 2004), conflict severity (Balcells & Kalyvas, 2014), and rebel characteristics (Akcinaroglu, 2012). More recent work draws on new data to explore the role of leadership traits in shaping outcomes (Acosta, Huang, & Silverman, 2023; Prorok, 2016; Silverman, Acosta, & Huang, 2024; W. Wagner & Tappe Ortiz, 2025). With decisive victory or formal peace settlements remaining quite rare, many of our insights into how civil conflicts end are based on a specific subset of cases.

Despite recent advances, the underlying conception of what it means for civil wars to terminate has remained surprisingly rigid. Still, for much of the literature today, conflict "ends" either through decisive victory or through a formal settlement. The most important recent expansion of this framework is research on ceasefires (Clayton, Nathan, & Wiehler, 2021; Clayton, Nygård, Rustad, & Strand, 2023a, 2023b; Clayton & Sticher, 2021). Clayton et al. (2023a) argue that ceasefires should be integrated into the broader study of how "conflict parties commit to stop fighting." They highlight that previous work on ceasefires was largely limited to case studies and policy analysis, and that new data now allow systematic cross-national research. Ceasefires occur in nearly half of all ongoing civil wars (Clayton et al., 2023a) and serve varied functions from creating humanitarian access, managing violence, to paving the way toward negotiations (Clayton et al., 2021; Clayton & Sticher, 2021; Zart-

man, 2000).[2] Even with ceasefires included, a large share of civil war terminations remain unaccounted for.

The UCDP/PRIO Conflict Termination Dataset, for example, codes six outcome categories: government victory, rebel victory, formal ceasefire, formal peace settlement, actor ceases to exist, and "fading out" (Kreutz, 2021). Figure 1 illustrates the growing share of fade-outs over time, underscoring how much of civil war termination remains unexplained by existing frameworks. In total, 55.6% of terminated conflict episodes do not fit neatly into the more clear-cut conceptual categories of victory or settlement. And nearly half (45.6%) of all conflicts since 1960 are coded as having "faded out."[3]

Existing frameworks do not adequately capture these outcomes. Most civil war typologies either overlook informal cessations or subsume them under residual categories such as stalemates, rebel inactivity, or temporary pauses (Balcells & Kalyvas, 2014; Kreutz, 2015; Licklider, 1993; Lyall & Wilson III, 2009). Battlefield stalemates are rarely the focus of large-N studies (Pechenkina & Thomas, 2022; Preston, 2004), or are considered as vehicles towards negotiated settlements (Zartman, 2000). Where draws are discussed (Greig, Mason, & Hamner, 2018; Mason et al., 1999), they are typically treated as equivalent to negotiated settlements rather than as distinct outcomes. The result is that the most common type of conflict ending is conceptually underappreciated, although it represents a patterned way in which wars stop.

Informal cessation is not uniformly unstable or transitory. Conflicts in which violence

[2]Novel data on ceasefires allows the empirical study of patterns, answering questions about when ceasefires are likely, when they last, or when they collapse. In a similar fashion, data and conceptualization of informal cessation can aid us in opening new avenues of inquiry into its heterogeneity, causes, and consequences.

[3]The codebook describes these cases 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." In turn, I investigate the group-specific circumstances leading to the cessation of fighting that the UCDP/PRIO data leaves unspecified.

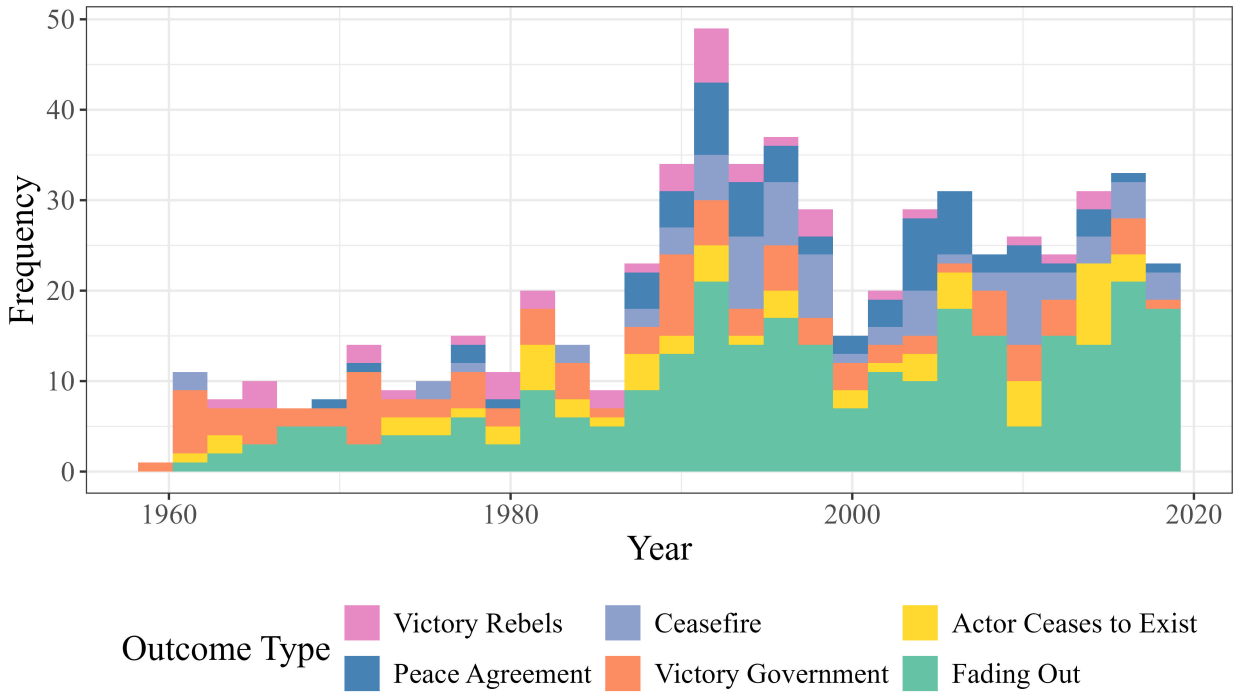


Figure 1: Frequency of Outcome Types for All Terminated Conflict Episodes in the UCDP/PRIO Conflict Termination Dataset (1960-2020).

fades or trickles out are considered neither over nor resolved. Implicitly, existing frameworks attribute fading out to temporary pauses for recuperation, strategic re-grouping, or even seasonal lulls. This creates an expectation that, without formal solution, fighting will inevitably resume. This view does not match the reality of conflict recurrence across cases of informal conflict outcomes. In fact, fewer than half of these terminations return to civil war (47.8%), and even those that eventually relapse often experience a decade or more of relative stability.[4] Far from being unresolved wars doomed to relapse (Lake & Rothchild, 2005), these cases reveal important variation in how states and challengers manage conflict outside of institutionalized settlement processes. If violence can end without a formal agreement and remain dormant, it becomes essential to understand the conditions under which such outcomes arise.

I expand the framework of civil war outcomes to include cases where violence ends through

[4]See Appendix A.

tacit agreements between belligerents: *informal cessation*. Thereby, I re-conceptualize cases that are currently subsumed under imprecise empirical labels such as "fading out." I conceptualize civil war outcomes along two dimensions: (1) whether one actor prevails or both persist in the post-conflict order, and (2) whether this order is codified through formal agreement. This allows us to more systematically explore their distinct dynamics.

Formal outcomes can be situated on this two-dimensional spectrum. Traditionally, we can think of conflict outcomes on a uni-dimensional spectrum from imposed to negotiated post-war order. Decisive victory implies that one side eliminates or subjugates its opponent and unilaterally imposes a post-war 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, too, are uncommon (12% of episodes) but are often viewed as the sine qua non of durable peace.

This dimension helps create a rank ordering of outcomes from most to least preferred, but it assumes that there always is a clear-cut outcome to observe. Introducing *formality* as the second dimension makes it possible to locate informal cessation within this broader typology. Like negotiated settlements, informal cessations involve the persistence of both actors. Yet they differ fundamentally in that the post-war order is not formally negotiated or codified. Instead, actors continue to exist, choose not to fight, and often shape local orders without institutionalizing their relationship.

Table 1 illustrates this conceptualization of civil war outcomes across the two dimensions: actor prevalence/nature of post-war order (y-axis), and formality (x-axis). Existing frameworks privilege only one dimension of this space (from victory to formal settlement) while leaving the informal dimension largely unexamined. Yet, it is precisely in this quadrant that the majority of real-world cases fall. Introducing informal cessation as a distinct outcome captures these overlooked cases and places them on equal analytical footing with canonical

| | **Formal** | **Informal** |
|---|---|---|
| **One Actor Persists** (Imposed) | Decisive Victory | Other |
| **Both Actors Persist** (Negotiated) | Negotiated Settlement | Informal Cessation |

Table 1: Typology of Formal and Informal Conflict Outcomes

outcomes.

## Defining Informal Cessation

Informal cessation occurs when violence subsides without a signed agreement or decisive military outcome, and both actors remain armed and intact. These outcomes share four defining features: (1) the observable 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).[5] 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

[5]Battle-death cut-offs are an imperfect measure of conflict activity and violence levels. We often base battle-death estimates on news reports and event data which shows systematic patterns of missingness (Shaver et al., 2023). While not ideal, it is the current standard for determining whether a conflict is ongoing or not. Intensive qualitative research, and frequently country-expert interviews, are necessary to improve measurement.

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 below this threshold.[6]

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.[7] 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, violence is unexplained by *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

[6]While 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.

[7]This 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.

leaders repeatedly signaled willingness to accept limited autonomy, yet rejected formal accords on the grounds that regime promises were not credible (U.S. Department of State, 08/19/1963). 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 to quantify, and less visible than formal settlements, but also more adaptable to contexts of political uncertainty, mistrust, or weak enforcement capacity.[8]

Finally, informal cessation involves, at least temporary, *restraint*. 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.[9] In other cases, 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.

I apply these criteria to all cases previously labeled as "fading out" in the UCDP/PRIO Conflict Termination Dataset. A total 80.2% of terminations previously not clearly classified

[8]This 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.

[9]A 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.

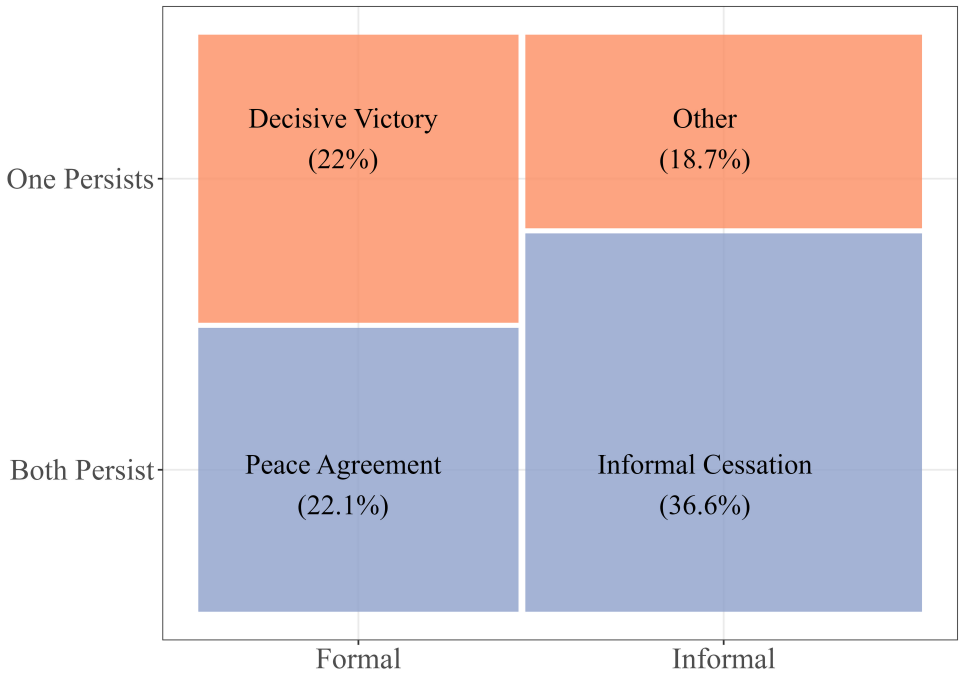


Figure 2: Frequency of Civil War Terminations by Category.

fit into the category of informal cessation. Figure 2 displays the distribution of outcomes once this typology is applied, situating informal cessation alongside decisive victory, negotiated settlement, and ceasefire. Unlike victory or collapse, both sides persist. Unlike settlements or ceasefires, there are no codified terms. And unlike simple inactivity, restraint is strategic, not incidental. Informal cessation therefore captures a wide range of cases of how civil conflicts end that have been theoretically neglected. These arrangements offer states and rebels an alternative to protracted war or risky formal agreements. Yet the absence of formal settlement raises a critical question: When are actors likely to allow violence to cease without formal agreement?

## Commitment Problems in Formal Civil War Settlements

A natural first step in explaining informal cessation is to ask why parties so often cannot (or will not) formalize peace. The settlement literature points to a cluster of obstacles that

make formal agreements difficult to reach. The central challenge is a lack of credibility. Both parties doubt that their opponent will honor formal terms, or external enforcement is otherwise unavailable. Under these conditions, belligerents might find benefits in halting violence informally, rather than engaging in risky or non-credible deals.

While much of the civil war resolution literature emphasizes the benefits of formal settlements, even mutually agreeable deals are often undermined by deep-rooted commitment problems (Fearon, 1995a, 1995b; Meng & Paine, 2022; Paine, 2022, 2024; Powell, 2006, 2019, 2024; R. H. Wagner, 2000; Walter, 1997). Reaching and sustaining peace is difficult when regimes cannot credibly commit to implementing provisions or respecting a revised post-war status quo (Fearon, 2017; Lake, 2025; Matanock, 2020). These commitment problems make successful settlement contingent on solving the underlying enforcement problem (Lee, 2022).

This need for enforcement is even bigger in contexts of weak and autocratic institutions (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). Dictators and wartime governments may attempt to bolster credibility through institutional reforms (Matanock, 2020; Meng, 2019) or by soliciting external enforcement (Doyle & Sambanis, 2006; C. Hartzell & Hoddie, 2003; Walter, 1997). But such signals are costly, and authoritarian regimes often lack the institutional capacity or incentives to follow through on reform, making formal commitments less believable (Meng et al., 2023; Svolik, 2012).

At the core of the state's commitment problems are the risks associated with rebel demobilization. It provides the regime with overwhelming capabilities to double-cross rebels and renege on promises of powersharing and inclusion (Mattes & 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 (Bell & Badanjak, 2019). These provisions may be necessary for state consolidation but render rebels vulnerable and dependent on institutional or external enforcement. And rebels are acutely aware of the risks associ-

ated with demobilization (Walter, 1997). Once disarmed, rebels lack the ability to defend themselves or their spoils (Walter, 2002). In the absence of external enforcement, civil wars become zero-sum contests making formal negotiation unlikely (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Often an implicit or explicit requirement of formal peace settlements, rebel disarmament itself creates the state's incentives to renege on a deal and double cross rebels once they are weakened.

In turn, external enforcement is seen as necessary for overcoming the state's commitment problem and credible settlement (Walter, 1997). Third party enforcers are required to alter the incentives for reneging on formal settlement by rewarding compliance or punishing defection (Walter, 2002). In this context, UN missions and peacekeeping, or externally backed powersharing provisions can under certain conditions improve the durability of formal settlements (Fortna, 2004, 2018; C. Hartzell & Hoddie, 2003; Hoddie & Hartzell, 2005; Howard, 2008; Matanock, 2020). However, for these mechanisms to function, third-party enforcers must not only be capable but also willing to bear the cost of enforcement (Lee, 2022). Such credible enforcers are frequently absent from many civil wars and authoritarian regimes (Svolik, 2012), rendering a larger set of possible deals non-credible.

Beyond enforcement, additional strategic barriers inhibit formal settlement. For example, expectations about the future distribution of power and cost can prevent settlement. Optimistic expectations about the utility of fighting in the future may render today's deals non-credible. Some scholars find that third-party involvement through mediation or enforcement can, in fact, exacerbate time inconsistency problems and decrease the durability of settlements in the short-term (Beardsley, 2008). Where warring parties adhere to formal provisions only under enforcement, they may have little trust that co-operation is possible in the absence of external punishment. In such cases, even externally enforced settlements may be difficult to reach as actors avoid being locked into unfavorable deals or removing flexibility for future revisions.

Reputational concerns further undermine the viability of formal settlements, especially

where regimes face multiple challengers (K. G. Cunningham, 2011; Reiter, 2010; Walter, 2006). Granting public concessions to one rebel group can set a precedent, emboldening others to demand similar terms or launch renewed campaigns (Driscoll, 2015; Walter, 2009). Leaders then avoid codification because it triggers audience costs, invites spoilers, or exposes them to cascading demands (Mattes & Savun, 2009; Walter, 1997). These risks are especially salient in secessionist conflicts, where autonomy for one group may encourage others to demand the same (Bormann & Savun, 2018; Walter, 2006). Authoritarian regimes, in particular, often resist institutionalizing concessions for fear of precedent-setting (Paine, 2024). Where governments fear that formal agreements signal weakness or worry about reputational consequences, the broader strategic implications of conceding can make formal resolution prohibitively costly.

These obstacles show that formal settlements often demand precisely what belligerents cannot credibly provide: trust, institutional reform, or reliable third-party enforcement. When rulers seek to retain autonomy and flexibility, informal arrangements are often preferable to formal institutionalized concessions (Lee, 2022; Meng et al., 2023; Paine, 2024). In turn, when rebels fear disarmament or betrayal, informal arrangements become attractive if they enable them to defend concessions in the future. Thus, informal cessation represents a strategy for managing violence under conditions of weak institutions, reputational concerns, and lacking credible enforcement.

# Theory: Informality and Enforcement

Considering that formal settlements are often non-credible and fragile, when do actors choose to stop fighting informally?

Civil conflict begins when governments and rebels cannot resolve their incompatibilities without fighting. Whether over territory, autonomy, or control of the state, these disputes reflect divergent interests that bargaining alone failed to reconcile (R. H. Wagner, 2000).

Although formal settlement is often portrayed as an alternative to fighting until decisive victory, opponents continuously face three options as the conflict unfolds: continuing to fight, formal settlement, or informal cessation.

As the conflict unfolds and fighting reveals information about actors' capabilities and resolve, they eventually reach a point at which settlement becomes mutually preferable (R. H. Wagner, 2000). Continuing to fight is thus not an alternative but part of the bargaining process itself. As Rosen (1972) memorably illustrated, two opponents in a dark room will stop fighting once the light is turned on and they can see the distribution of capabilities clearly. This analogy conveniently illustrates how actors would arrive at a war-ending bargain under complete information. In civil wars, actors continue to fight until one side achieves decisive victory or enough information is revealed to make a negotiated deal preferable (Reiter, 2003; Slantchev, 2003). War ends when the expected value of settlement exceeds the expected value of continued conflict (Wittman, 1979). The bargaining model perspective does not inherently require the resulting settlements to be formal, only that they be credible.

Actors' inability to commit, not the absence of mutually preferable bargains, prevents settlements (Fearon, 1995b; Powell, 2006). Fearon (1995b, p. 401) considers an unfortunate combination of preference and opportunity that makes deals unenforceable by providing actors (one or both) incentives to renege. States' inability to write enforceable contracts makes mutually agreeable bargains less attainable (Fearon, 1995b, p. 385). Once fighting has revealed information about the relative resolve and decisive victory appears unlikely, both sides should seek compromise. Despite these challenges, belligerents often negotiate, exchange demands, and signal restraint even when formal agreements are non-credible. For example, during the 1960s, Kurdish Peshmerga repeatedly exchanged communiqués with Baghdad, signaling willingness to accept limited autonomy while also expressing doubts in the regime's sincerity and its ability to implement reforms (U.S. Department of State, 08/19/1963). Actors can clearly recognize the existence of mutually preferable bargains, even if they reject codification and view formal agreements as untrustworthy.

If formal deals are unattractive, informality offers an alternative path. Informality enables governments to reduce violence without enshrining costly reforms, while rebels preserve coercive capacity by avoiding disarmament. Assessing the political order in post-2003 Iraq, Petersen (2024, p. 17) argues that weak or ambiguous arrangements may not be symptoms of failed peace but rather be deliberately chosen. Especially when actors are unable to achieve dominance or victory (the ultimate tool for ensuring one's survival), but want to avoid subordination, they can tolerate informal cessation rather than attempt to codify permanent peace. Informal cessation can be a mutually preferable outcome, when continued fighting is costly, decisive victory improbable, and formal settlement non-credible. It provides governments with non-permanent, non-codified powersharing, and it provides rebels with survival and enforcement through retained arms.

## Government Benefits of Informality: Flexibility

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 (Abbott & Snidal, 2000; Koremenos, 2005; 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 allows cooperation when future preferences or power balances are uncertain. Binding agreements may lock actors into terms that quickly become costly, while "soft" law permits adjustment and exit with lower penalties (Abbott & 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.

Second, informality creates strategic ambiguity. Just as 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. Similarly, ambiguity in terms allows actors to refrain from reacting when retaliation would otherwise be required. For example, when rebels violate a formal ceasefire, a state might feel forced to react for fear of appearing weak and non-credible. Ambiguity then offers plausible deniability as no official terms are violated.

Third, informality lowers domestic political costs. Codified concessions can embolden other challengers, signal weakness, or provoke elite backlash (Paine, 2024; Walter, 1997, 2006, 2009). By contrast, informal concessions provide rulers political cover: they can manage rebels without acknowledging them as legitimate or setting precedents that bind future responses.

Unlike formal peace accords, which lock in visible and permanent concessions, informal deals are flexible, opaque, and reversible. For governments, informal cessation avoids visible, precedent-setting concessions and preserves flexibility. Leaders can reduce violence and manage threats without institutionalizing concessions that embolden other groups or constrain future options. Thus, informality enables rulers to manage violence without staking formal reputation. These bargains allow states to halt violence without institutional lock-in.

## Rebel Benefits of Informality: Enforcement

For rebels, informality avoids the vulnerabilities of demobilization while securing survival, recognition, and territorial control short of secession. Unlike formal peace agreements, which typically require rebels to demobilize and thus surrender their enforcement leverage, informal arrangements allow armed groups to retain coercive capacity. In formal settlements, disarmament deepens the commitment problem by stripping rebels of their deterrent capacity, making state defection more likely (Walter, 1997). By contrast, in informal bargains, rebels

remain armed, allowing them to enforce directly. The ability to defend their territorial or political spoils in turn reduces the commitment problem that prevents settlement and offers an internal solution to the enforcement problem. Informality alleviates the state's commitment problem by making agreements self-enforcing through the credible threat of retaliation rather than reliance on external guarantors.

This logic parallels findings on authoritarian powersharing. 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). Paine (2024) introduces several conditions other than external enforcement that may enable authoritarian leaders to share power more successfully. One of these strategies includes non-demobilization, providing the opposition with the ability to defend their spoils. Self-enforcing powersharing emerges when both regime and challenger can threaten to recapture state power should they be excluded (Roessler & Ohls, 2018). Coercive means to defend one's spoils are necessary to make powersharing self-enforcing under weak institutions (Meng et al., 2023). This parallels the logic of self-enforcing authoritarian powersharing under weak institutions, as informal arrangements persist precisely because challengers retain the means to defend themselves and punish betrayal (Meng & Paine, 2022; Paine, 2022; Powell, 2024).

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, Wallis, & Weingast, 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, Smith, Siverson, & Morrow, 2005; Geddes, Wright, & Frantz, 2018). As Lee (2022) argues, co-optation produces self-enforcing

arrangements that are sustained as rebels prefer receiving benefits, while governments retain the flexibility to revise or withdraw concessions if conditions shift.[10]

Informality thus becomes a rational response to limited enforcement capacity and the state's commitment problem. Without disarmament, bargains are directly enforced by the challenger and the shadow of violence sustains compliance. This allows the challenger to credibly threaten to punish defection from the informal powersharing deal, reducing reliance on strong institutions or third party enforcers. By retaining arms, groups can directly enforce their position, deter betrayal, and secure de facto autonomy or material benefits. This arrangement allows them to govern, extract resources, or remain politically relevant without risky disarmament.

## The Toleration Dilemma

Informal cessation provides each side with what it needs most. On the one hand, governments avoid binding and precedent-setting concessions and maintain flexibility. On the other hand, rebels secure survival and local authority without disarmament. Yet, these advantages alone do not guarantee that conflicts end informally.

Even if informality is preferable, it remains inherently risky. As conflicts halt informally, challengers retain arms and autonomy, enabling them to credibly threaten defection or renewed violence if the state violates tacit arrangements. This mutual deterrence makes informal bargains self-enforcing in the absence of institutional guarantees. But it creates a strategic dilemma for the state: States trade short-term calm for long-term risk from tolerated rebels.

Rebels who remain armed retain the capacity not just to enforce informal bargains, but also to renege and escalate. Rebels may exploit informal cessation as cover for regrouping or rearming (Min, 2020, 2025), or grow dissatisfied with their spoils over time, providing the

[10]Many 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.

possibility that today's co-opted rebels become tomorrow's challengers. Informal cessation resolves *only* the state's credibility problem but does not eliminate the credibility problem on the rebel side. Governments must weigh the benefits of immediate stability against the risk that informal deals are temporary pauses rather than durable solutions.[11] Informal cessation is then most likely when informality offers strategic benefits and states can minimize the resulting toleration dilemma.

I propose two conditions under which governments are likely to extend informal offers to rebels they believe can be more easily tolerated, and rebels accept informal concessions in exchange for restraint. Rebels must receive concessions sufficient to convince them to stop fighting. And the state must be willing to tolerate a challenger who remains armed and retains the capacity to pose a future threat. Only when both sides accept this tradeoff does informal cessation become a viable alternative to continued conflict 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 weak, willing to lay down their resistance in exchange for mere toleration or relatively small concessions, and posing little threat to central state authority. Second, informal bargains are most attractive in territorial conflicts, especially when demands involve ethnic, peripheral, or low-resource regions. In such contexts, governments can concede local authority, both actors can safely retreat, and rebels meet their ambitions. Together, rebel weakness and bounded territorial demands create the "Goldilocks" conditions under which informal cessation becomes preferable to both continued fighting and formal settlement.

[11]This dilemma of tolerating rebel persistence may in fact suggest strong reasons for states not to let rebels 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 about Fearon (1995a).

### Rebel Weakness and Informal Cessation

Rebel military capabilities are an important confounding variable in many conflict processes, shaping conflict onset, intensity, duration, and outcomes. Rebel capabilities influence bargaining position (Fearon, 1995b), affect the scope of demands, and determine the feasibility of achieving favorable settlements (Clayton, 2013; Pechenkina & 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. Informal cessation therefore provides a credible pathway for weak groups to secure survival and relevance without the high bar of codified agreements or the risks of demobilization. Weaker rebels, who cannot realistically hope for victory or formal concessions, are more likely to accept informal offers.

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.

At the same time, weaker rebels are less threatening even if they persist. States are more likely to tolerate groups that pose little threat to central state authority. Rebels may be capable but do not desire central authority. Or rebels may lack the capacity to pose significant threat. High-capability groups invite suppression, as governments devote disproportionate effort to eliminate challengers who endanger regime survival (Balcells & Kalyvas, 2025). By contrast, tolerating weak rebels is both cheaper and less risky. Governments avoid high resources required for elimination of even weak rebels, minimize some domestic violence, and can do so at relatively few concessions. This enables governments to focus coercive resources on stronger threats (Wucherpfennig, 2021).

In this way, relative weakness creates an equilibrium in which informal cessation is accept-

able to both sides. Weaker rebels are more willing to settle for limited, informal concessions, and governments are more willing to tolerate their persistence. Informal cessation is thus most likely when rebels are too weak to demand formal settlements 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.

### Territorial Demands and Informal Cessation

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. Unlike efforts to capture the capital or alter the regime's structure, territorial demands reflect bounded aims that can be accommodated informally. Governments may simply refrain from contesting peripheral zones, while rebels consolidate local authority without requiring codified recognition. This makes territorial conflicts especially conducive to informal cessation.

Decentralization is often framed as a temporary or second-best solution (Lake & Rothchild, 2005; Sambanis & Schulhofer-Wohl, 2009). But it may be more feasible to informally sustain territorial than political powersharing, which requires elite inclusion and institutional change. For governments, conceding de facto local authority is less costly than institutionalized powersharing. Formal peace settlements risk precedent-setting, and make 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.

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 easier for a government to relinquish control. Authoritarian regimes in particular may find it strategically efficient to allow rebels to control remote or marginal areas rather than overextend coercive force (Loyle, Cunningham, Huang, & Jung, 2023). In turn, governments may be more willing to relinquish informal control over these hard to govern and low-resource areas.

While limited aims may sometimes signal weakness (Thomas, Reed, & Wolford, 2016), they are also easier for states to accommodate. Powell (1996) argues actors would prefer to appease if they had certainty over the true limited nature of the challengers' demands, but are prevented by uncertainty over their war aims. Schultz and Goemans (2019) expand on this idea by introducing heterogeneity in the size of challengers' war aims into formal models of bargaining. They find that the size of territorial claims remained unaffected by power shifts if an actor had a well-bounded claim, and smaller claims increased the likelihood the challenger will receive concessions. The limited or bounded nature of certain territorial demands makes them more easily accommodated as gains become separable, reducing the risk of future aggression (Powell, 1991). If rebel demands are primarily territorial, their demands are more likely to be limited or bounded compared to broader demands for regime change or political reform. Regime change goals require overthrowing the government to be achieved. Inclusion, representation, or rights-based demands require institutional reforms. But territorial demands may be sufficiently satisfied, removing the need for future fighting, through tacit toleration of local control.

Bounded demands also make appeasement more credible. For rebels, local authority can amount to a "non-codified victory." Because securing tacit recognition of control over a defined territory achieves their primary goals, bounded demands reduce incentives for continued escalation (Cederman, Hug, Schädel, & Wucherpfennig, 2015). For groups seeking autonomy or independence in an ethnic enclave or peripheral homeland, informal toleration of their territorial control may be tantamount to achieving their aims, especially when they are too weak to realistically hope for formal concessions. In such contexts, toleration may

remove the need for further resistance, while the rebels' control poses little threat to the central state.[12]

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 creates space for violence to decline without formal settlement, offering a possible solution to severe ethnic conflict, through the creation of defensible enclaves where warring parties can be geographically separated (Kaufmann, 2015). Others find that territorial separation provides greater 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 state officials even need to request permission to enter rebel-controlled zones. This defensible separation stabilizes coexistence and makes restraint 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.

[12]This argument is in many ways diametrically opposed to a lot of the research on secessionist conflict in the early 2000s. Many scholars then stressed that territorial conflicts in particular involve indivisible stakes and are therefore more resistant to settlement (Duffy Toft, 2002; Toft, 2010b; **?**). Instead, I propose a rethinking of those earlier findings. Rather than viewing a lower likelihood of formal settlement as a signal of intractability, secessionist conflicts involving bounded territorial demands may be more likely settled informally. This, in turn, allows rebels to retain arms for defense, circumventing disarmament provisions in peace settlements. And it enables governments to avoid "dividing" formal authority.

# 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. This dataset serves as the basis for coding the occurrence of informal cessation, and is utilized in a number of bivariate, logistic, and multinomial logistic analyses.

## Measuring Informal Cessation

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 not to continue fighting. My focus lies explicitly on outcomes in which the rebel actor in the dyad continues to exist post-conflict, and retains some capacity. I differentiate between informal cessation and outcomes where there may not have been a decisive victory but one actor, usually the armed group, disappeared or demobilized for other reasons.[13]

I first consider all cases in which the conflict outcome in the UCDP/PRIO Conflict Termination dataset currently labeled as "fading out." This results in a total of 278 cases across 609 conflict terminations. I then conduct qualitative research on how the conflict terminated. I code binary variables reflecting whether a rebel actor retreated, went into exile, collapsed, merged, splintered, or remained active and armed. This approach allows me to more precisely capture 80.2% of all conflict terminations that remained previously unspecified. Using these qualitatively informed variables, I identify a total of 223 cases of

[13]For example, such reasons include withdrawal into exile or group collapse. For this particular analysis, I note and explicitly exclude such ambiguous outcomes. Without further qualitative investigation, it is not immediately obvious how these remaining cases fit into the framework of conflict outcomes. It is not clear whether these constitute de facto government victories, or whether rebels splinter, merge, or re-organize to continue rebellion. These alternative outcomes are difficult to conceptualize and capture, yet they offer interesting avenues for future research on the conditions under which conflicts "end" in the elimination or disappearance of one actor, its consequences for the conflict overall, as well as whether states strategically aim for a reshuffling of rebel actors.

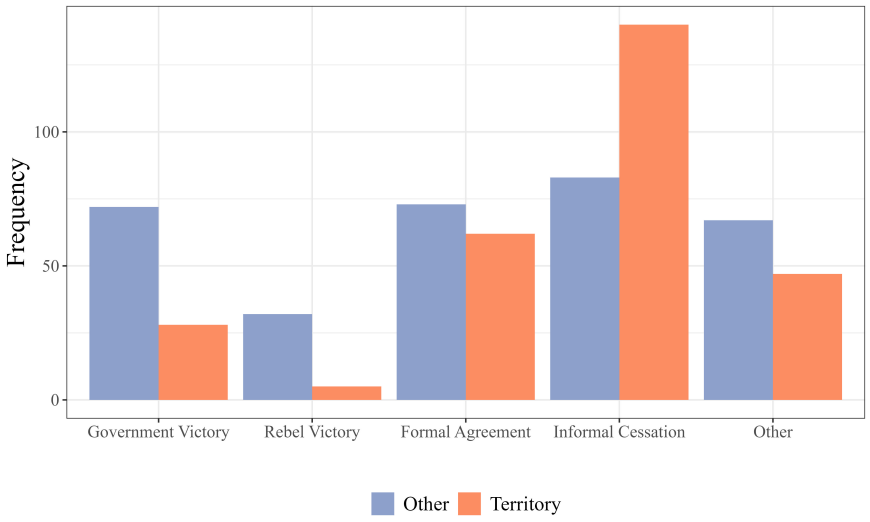


Figure 3: Frequency of Civil Conflicts by Outcome Type.

informal cessation.

Figure 3 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%). In turn, this means that many of our findings about civil war termination are based on the analysis of only about half of cases.

## 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: First "territory" denotes conflicts solely fought over territorial demands, the second category denoted as "other" includes conflicts fought over regime change goals or a combination of regime change and territorial goals.

Alternatively, I also measure *rebel demands* rather than conflict type. I utilize the FORGE dataset (Braithwaite & 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, Cederman, & Gleditsch, 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, Girardin, Cederman, & Wimmer, 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, and relatively low-resource territories as the conditions theorized to make informal coexistence more viable.

## Rebel Strength and Alternative Explanatory Variables

To capture variation in rebel strength, I rely primarily on the Nonstate Actor Dataset (D. E. Cunningham, Gleditsch, & Salehyan, 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 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. Across specifications, results remain consistent, lending confidence that the findings are not an artifact of a single measurement choice. Table 2 shows how conflict outcome types are distributed across weak and strong rebel groups. Strong rebels are relatively rare, and rarely experience informal cessation.

As a further alternative, I incorporate measures from the Ethnic Power Relations dataset (Vogt et al., 2015; Wucherpfennig et al., 2011). In particular, 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. 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

Table 2: Distribution by Conflict Outcomes for Stronger/Weaker Groups

| | 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%.

state but also in terms of material capabilities, providing a complementary perspective on the robustness of the results.

## Control Variables

Alongside the main explanatory variables, I also include a set of standard controls to account for confounding factors identified in the civil conflict literature. With respect to conflict characteristics, I include *battle deaths*, drawn from the UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset (Davies, Pettersson, Sollenberg, & Öberg, 2025), to capture the intensity of fighting. Higher lethality may increase the probability of decisive outcomes while reducing the likelihood of negotiated or informal settlements. Additionally, I include *conflict duration*, which I create from the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Termination data as the number of years since the onset of the conflict episode. As conflicts mature, they become increasingly protracted, limiting opportunities for peaceful resolution. Including duration ensures that the results are not confounded by the life cycle of conflicts themselves. I utilize this measure of conflict duration especially to plot the predicted probabilities of civil war ending in informal cessation over the course of a conflict.

Furthermore, I draw on the *peacesciencer* R package (Miller, 2022) for a number of additional control variables. First, I control for *regime type* using the V-Dem measure of polyarchy (Coppedge et al., 2020, 2019). More democratic regimes are theorized to be both more constrained in their use of violence and more likely to settle conflicts formally, while autocracies may rely on repression or tolerate low-level coexistence. Second, I include economic and demographic capacity measures. *Logged GDP per capita* captures state resources and administrative capacity, which may influence both the ability to suppress challengers and the costs of prolonged conflict. Generally, the literature expects governments with higher levels of economic development to succeed over rebel challengers (San-Akca, 2014). *Logged population* size accounts for the structural capacity of states to mobilize coercion and the difficulty of fully eliminating armed challengers in large, heterogeneous societies. Third, I control for

*ethnic fractionalization*, which measures the extent of societal division along ethnic lines. More fractionalized societies may experience both greater challenges to state authority and a wider array of potential settlements, making conflict outcomes less predictable and making continued fighting more likely, especially when rebels' ethnic constituency is seizable (Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Finally, I include a *Post Cold War indicator*, coded as one for years after 1989, to account for the broader international environment. The Cold War period is characterized by higher rates of proxy interventions and great power competition, which may affect both conflict duration and outcome type.

## 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.[14] The baseline model takes the form:

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

Third, I turn to multinomial logistic regression models that leverage the panel structure

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

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:

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

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.

# Empirical Results & Discussion

The theory argues that informal cessation emerges when rebels are weak enough to accept limited concessions yet resilient enough to persist, and when their demands are bounded, territorial, and peripheral. Weak groups cannot credibly demand large or codified concessions, but they can be induced to stop fighting through limited toleration. Likewise, territorial claims pose less threat to central authority and can be accommodated informally especially in peripheral or low-resource regions. If these expectations hold, we should observe weaker rebels and groups with bounded territorial aims disproportionately represented among cases of informal cessation. The empirical analysis below tests these predictions, and the 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 fade out 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 reform or rights-based changes ($\chi^2$ = 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 km$^2$ vs. 184,045 km$^2$, 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 steadily 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 affirms the theoretical expectation that weaker rebels are more easily tolerated. Territorial conflicts are also about twice as likely to end informally compared to regime change conflicts. Models 5 and 6 shift from conflict type to rebel demands, and again the pattern holds: territorial demands are associated with a 2.0 to 2.3 times greater likelihood of informal cessation compared to other outcomes. 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 two multinomial logistic regressions 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

Table 3: Logistic Regression Coefficients for Informal Cessation

| | *Informal Cessation (Binary)* | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | (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*** | −1.39*** | −1.68*** |
| | | | | (0.21) | (0.22) | (0.29) |
| Relative strength: parity | | | | −2.70*** | −2.79*** | −2.74*** |
| | | | | (0.62) | (0.63) | (0.78) |
| Relative strength: stronger | | | | −1.94** | −1.62** | −15.58 |
| | | | | (0.79) | (0.80) | (832.40) |
| Relative strength: m. stronger | | | | −15.77 | −15.62 | −15.45 |
| | | | | (650.87) | (650.87) | (835.22) |
| Territorial conflict | 0.71*** | 0.75*** | 0.40** | 0.39* | | |
| | (0.19) | (0.21) | (0.20) | (0.20) | | |
| Rebel demands: rights | | | | | 1.06** | 0.55 |
| | | | | | (0.46) | (0.65) |
| Rebel demands: territorial | | | | | 0.65*** | 0.85*** |
| | | | | | (0.21) | (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*** | 0.79 | −2.23*** | 0.21 | 0.05 | −1.18 |
| | (0.48) | (0.56) | (0.28) | (0.18) | (0.19) | (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: $^{*}p < 0.1$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{***}p < 0.01$.

on rebel strength and formal conflict outcomes (Clayton, 2013; Gent, 2011; Nilsson, 2010), underscoring that weakness encourages informal bargains while strength facilitates decisive or negotiated resolutions. These results lend support to the theoretical expectation that weaker

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

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

Notes: $^{*}p < 0.1$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{***}p < 0.01$.

rebels are more tolerable to governments and more willing to accept informal arrangements.[15] In such contexts, informal bargains are sustainable because both sides recognize their limits. The results are consistent with the idea that the state tolerates a low-level threat, and rebels settle for survival and limited concessions.

In the analysis of territorial conflicts, the pattern is slightly more nuanced. Territorial conflicts are not by themselves significantly more likely to end in informal cessation relative to ongoing conflict. However, they are significantly less likely to end in a decisive government or rebel victory.

Table 5 expands the analysis by incorporating measures that capture 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,

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

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

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

Notes: $^{*}p < 0.1$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{***}p < 0.01$.

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, 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 reinforce the interpretation that informal bargains are most durable where claims are bounded, far from the capital, and low in resources.

The results reveal important patterns in the interaction between territorial demands and distance to the capital. Distance to the capital plays a central role, either as rebels who desire control over peripheral regions pose lower threat to central state authority, or because their demands can be met while the state persist. 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 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.

On the territorial measures, the evidence supports the mechanism. While territorial conflict by itself did not show a significant effect on the probability of ending in informal cessation over continued conflict, taking into account characteristics of the disputed territory did point into the direction of the theory. Logistic regressions show that territorial conflicts and territorial demands are significantly more likely to end in informal cessation than any other outcome type. Yet, informal cessation is most likely when conflict is territorial, but territorial claims are bounded in scope, peripheral in location, and low in value to the state. These conditions increase the likelihood that the state offers tacit bargains that rebels are likely to accept and which endure through territorial separation.

Figure 4 presents the predicted probability for government victory, rebel victory, informal

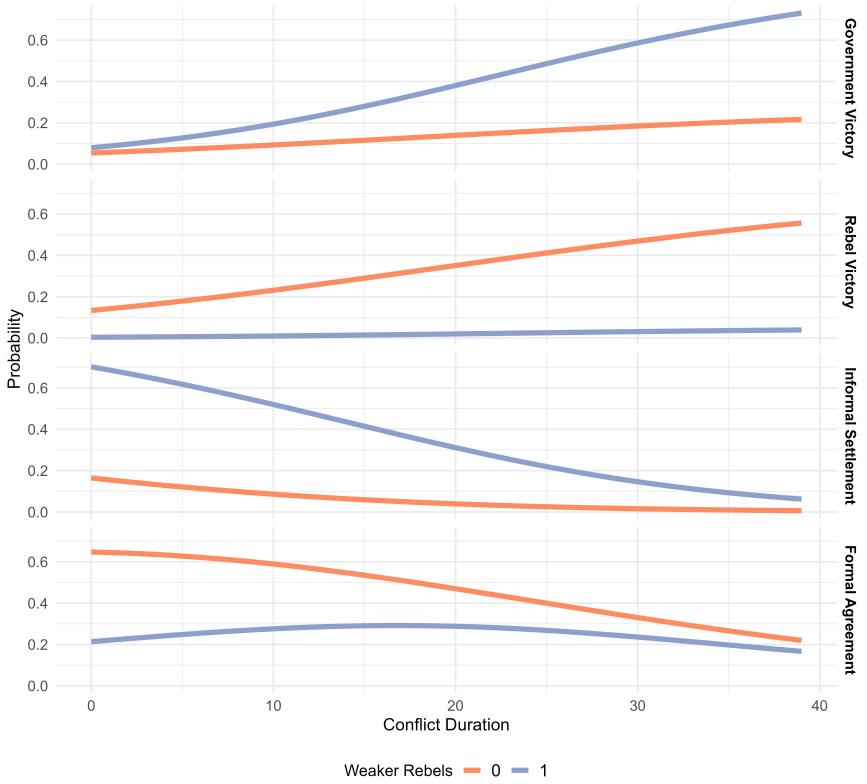


Figure 4: Predicted Probabilities for Rebel Weakness on Conflict Outcomes.

cessation, and peace settlement over the course of a conflict comparing relatively weaker versus stronger rebel groups. As the multinomial models compare each outcome to the baseline of continuing conflict, I use the conflict duration as the x-axis. The predicted probabilities thus reflect the likelihood of a conflict ending in outcome $i$ at time $t$. The top panel shows probabilities for government victory, the second panel reflects probabilities of rebel victory, then panel three shows probabilities for informal cessation, and the bottom panel reflects probabilities for formal agreements. Visually, the figure provides strong support for the strength mechanism. Panel 3 clearly illustrates a striking relationship between rebel strength and informal cessation, especially early during conflicts. The probability of informal cessation at the beginning of a conflict is about 70% and declines as conflict matures. The probability of informal cessation declines reaching a similar probability than formal settlement for highly protracted conflicts.

On other outcomes, the panels show predicted probabilities consistent with conflict res-

olution literature. Weaker rebels rarely achieve rebel victory, instead rebel victory becomes more likely as conflict continues on for stronger rebels. Conversely, as conflict matures, government victory over weaker rebels becomes more likely. Aligned with literature on the probability of peace agreements, stronger rebels are more likely to achieve formal peace settlements, and that the probability declines slightly over time.[16]

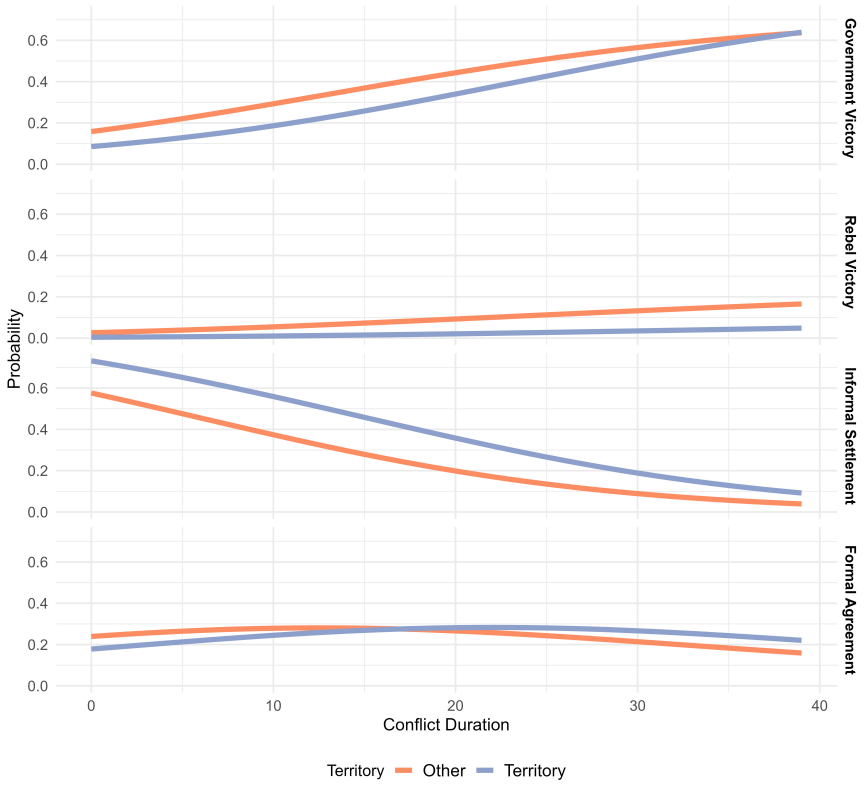


Figure 5: Predicted Probabilities for Territorial Type Conflict on Conflict Outcomes.

Figure 5 plots the predicted probability of each outcome for conflicts fought over territory compared to those fought over government control. The patterns and tendencies are consistent with my theoretical expectations, as well as existing literature on other outcome types.[17] Territorial conflicts are more likely to reach informal cessation while regime change conflicts are more likely to terminate in any other outcome. Informal cessation is, in fact, the only outcome type for which the predicted probability is consistently higher for territorial

[16]Predicted probabilities are based on Table 18 in Appendix D.
[17]Predicted probabilities are based on Table 17 in Appendix D.

conflicts compared to regime change conflicts. The probability of formal settlement seems to not be contingent on conflict type. In contrast, regime change conflicts have a slightly higher likelihood to end in a decisive victory for one actor over the other. But consistent with the results in Tables 4 and 5, the predicted probabilities of informal cessation for territorial and regime change conflicts fall close together. This reflects the insignificant association between territorial conflict (uninteracted) and informal settlement if we are not accounting for the characteristics of the territory or territorial demands.

## Robustness & Alternative Specifications

My findings are robust across alternative measures and model specifications. All additional results are reported in the Online Appendix.

First, I employ a series of alternative measures of rebel strength (see Appendix C Tables 9-12). In addition to the binary weaker/stronger classification used in the main models, I replicate the multinomial models with binary, continuous, and categorical measures of relative strength, as well as logged continuous measures of rebel troop size relative to the state. Across all specifications, the pattern remains consistent that weak rebels are most likely to achieve informal cessation, while rebel strength decreases the likelihood of informal cessation.

Second, I test whether the results are robust to an alternative way of thinking about rebel capabilities. Instead of relative strength, I examine the composition of rebel arsenals using the Rebels' Armament Dataset (RAD), which codes rebel arsenals of different weapon types including small arms, explosives, and major conventional weapons (Mehltretter, Pamp, Thurner, & Binder, 2023; Mehltretter, Thurner, Pamp, & Binder, 2023). Unlike strength measures, which capture how rebels compare to their state adversary or in absolute terms, these indicators reflect *how* conflicts are fought. Conventional weapons signal a more state-like type of warfare and small arms and explosives signal insurgency or guerrilla tactics. Yet,

capability type is not a direct proxy for strength.[18] Overall, I find inconsistent results for the effect of different capability types on conflict outcomes.[19] As this rebel armament data became available only recently, more work is needed to further understand the divergent patterns when contrasting rebel strength and rebel capabilities.[20]

Third, one might worry that informal cessations are not genuine outcomes but merely short-lived pauses in fighting. To address this concern, I examine relapse patterns. While some informal cessations do collapse quickly, a substantial share endure for many years, suggesting that they reflect more than temporary lulls. The majority of informal cessation outcomes is censored at the end of the dataset in 2020 (69.3%). Yet, even when conflict does eventually recur, many informal cessations experience a decade or more of stability. These descriptive durability patterns underscore that informal coexistence often represents a meaningful equilibrium, even in the absence of formal agreements.[21]

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.

[18]For instance, small arms and improvised explosives do not make groups more powerful in relative terms, but they characterize guerrilla-style insurgencies that can be highly resilient. Conversely, access to tanks, artillery, or aircraft reflects conventional arsenals, but may often be tied to state sponsorship or the opportunistic capture of state stockpiles, which may not translate into sustainable military advantage.

[19]Table 16 in Appendix C suggests that a high reliance on small arms makes informal cessation less likely while a high reliance on major conventional weapons increases the probability.

[20]Generally, Mehltretter, Pamp, et al. (2023) find that having a greater arsenal of conventional weapons is positively associated with an increase in rebel strength, while a greater arsenal of explosives signals rebel weakness. Conversely, the arsenal of small or light weapons shows no significant associated with measures of relative rebel strength or fighting capacity. In the least, the mixed results I identify suggest that the link between arsenal and strength is not yet clearly established.

[21]In a separate project in my dissertation, I examine the durability of informal coexistence and its long-term trajectories.

# Conclusion

This paper has argued that a large share of civil wars 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. By conceptualizing informal cessation as a distinct outcome of civil war, I expand the framework of conflict termination to capture what existing categories have obscured. These outcomes are not simply failed resolutions; they represent an alternative mode of conflict management in which violence recedes not due to formal agreements or external enforcement but because both sides recognize the feasibility of coexistence, settle without formal commitments, and retain the ability to enforce directly.

The theory highlights the strategic logic behind these informal bargains. I argued, first, that actors often 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 make formal settlements unattractive. Yet, these advantages only align under particular conditions.

Thus, I argued that conflicts end informally when both rebels and the state perceive an informal bargain as beneficial and feasible. For rebels, willingness to lay down some arms stems from weakness: groups that cannot credibly press for regime change or expansive con-

cessions are more likely to accept limited autonomy and survival in place of continued war. For governments, the same weakness makes these groups more easily tolerable. Permitting rebels to persist, control territory, and remain armed, reduces the state's commitment problem. This feature of informal outcomes also creates a toleration dilemma for the state, which will only tolerate rebels who pose relatively low risk to central state authority. Weaker rebels are then more easily tolerated as they pose less threat to regime survival. 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 government or rebel victory and formal peace settlements.

The findings also underscore the role of territorial demands. 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.

Most importantly, my conceptualization of informal cessation opens new avenues to expand our understanding of what it means for conflicts to end. Questions about the variation in informal arrangements and the conditions for the durability of informal peace remain as of yet unanswered. Even though many of these informal cessations are not mere flukes, they differ widely in their stability, governance structures, and long-term trajectories. Some persist for decades as tacitly accepted political orders, while others quickly unravel into renewed violence. Future research should therefore ask not only why wars end informally, but also why some informal bargains endure while others collapse, and how these pathways shape broader processes of state formation, authoritarian survival, and post-conflict governance.

Civil wars, as Licklider (1998) noted, do end. But they often end not with treaties or total victory, but in the quieter, less visible form of informal cessation. Understanding

these outcomes is essential to grasping how states and armed groups manage violence, share space, and navigate the gray zone between war and peace. Ultimately, the findings offer some insight into why governments, fairly often, choose to manage rather than eliminate challengers, why rebels remain politically relevant long after open fighting ends, and why violence so often fades without a definitive conclusion.

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