Sponsors of Death? A Quantitative Analysis of Nonstate External Support and Rebel Group One-Sided Violence

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A Quantitative Analysis of Nonstate External Support and Rebel Group One-Sided Violence

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1. INTRODUCTION

Why do rebels deliberately kill civilians?

It has been 75 years since the Geneva Convention, the first international treaty dedicated to minimising the killing of non-combatants, was signed (Hultmann, 2014, p. 289). Unfortunately, despite all the hopes and efforts put into the realisation of the convention, deliberate atrocities against civilians by rebel groups continue to be a seemingly inherent feature of civil wars and have even been growing in numbers over the past decades. Still, the scale of such violence ranges considerably – across rebels, conflicts and time (Wenger & Mason, 2008, p. 844). That raises questions: What purpose does the intentional killing of civilians in civil wars serve? And why do some rebel groups victimise civilians more than others?

In the quest for answers, several papers analysed the effect of state external support on rebel group civilian killing (Meier et al., 2022; Salehyan et al., 2014; Fortna et al., 2018; Huang & Sullivan, 2020; Stein, 2022). However, those accounts failed to recognise that not only governments provide external support. Increasingly, also armed nonstate actors, such as Al-Qaida, engage as external supporters in civil wars (Meier et al., 2022, p. 549). Motivated to understand how this phenomenon alters the dynamics of violence, this paper aims to analyse in what way the reception of external support from nonstate actors affects the level of rebel group one-sided violence. Thereby, it extends on the principal-agent theory developed by Salehyan et al. (2014) to argue that rebels who receive nonstate external support are more likely to perpetrate more civilian killings.

To test the hypothesis, the paper conducts a large-N study with panel data from 1989 to 2017, using pioneering data from UCDP on sources of external support and rebel group one-sided violence. The analysis delivers strong empirical support for the supposed positive

relationship, raising implications that can prove to be relevant for the future protection of civilians in civil wars.

The paper is structured as follows: In the first chapter, I introduce major conceptual issues and debates surrounding civil war violence against civilians and define the concept of interest, before turning towards the various explanations that scholars have proposed. Thereby, I argue that while previous literature offers theoretically convincing approaches to the effect of external support on the targeting of civilians, it has not accounted yet for the increasing influence of non-state actors as providers of support. Subsequently, I move on to the theoretical framework and present the employed research design. Following that, I present the analysis of the statistical findings on rebel group one-sided violence. Finally, a discussion of my findings, policy suggestions and an outlook for future research complete the paper.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Conceptual (Un)clarity

2.1.1 Review of Conceptual Debates

As Kalyvas (2006) pointedly notes, the study of violence against civilians (VAC) treads on a "conceptual minefield" (p. 19). Terms such as civilian victimisation, civilian abuse or one-sided violence are often used interchangeably. However, albeit those labels describe closely related phenomena of VAC, their definitions are inconsistently applied across studies (Hultmann, 2014, p. 290). On top, some studies suffer from a mismatch between conceptualisation and operationalisation: They infer conclusions for all kinds of violence, though the analysed data are on a specific type of violence only (Gutiérrez-Sanín, & Wood, E. J., 2017, p. 21). Resulting from this chaos, the comparability of findings often proves difficult (Balcells & Stanton, 2021, p. 47).

Scholarly definitions of VAC mostly differ depending on the types of violence they cover (Hultmann, 2014, p. 290). One strand solely focuses on lethal forms of VAC, including targeted killings, mass killings and genocides (Gutiérrez-Sanín, & Wood, 2017, p. 21). A second strand also incorporates non-lethal forms of violence. An example of such research is Weinstein (2006, p.. 199 - 200), who understands VAC as also involving forms of civilian coercion, ranging from (sexual) abuses to torture, forced re-location and forced labour.

Other researchers, meanwhile, conceptualise VAC based on the targeting dimension (Balcells & Stanton, 2021, p. 48). Kalyvas (2006), for instance, proposes to distinguish between selective violence targeted at specific individuals and indiscriminate violence targeted at whole social groups. Building on that approach, Balcells (2010, p. 297) introduces the concept of direct violence. Direct violence, accordingly, requires face-to-face interaction between the perpetrator and the civilian victim and is perpetrated in the form of targeted executions. By either

helping the victim to escape or denouncing it to the military actor, fellow civilians play a key role in the facilitation of direct violence. This type of violence is contrasted to indirect violence such as aerial bombings, where civilian agency plays little to no role. Some scholars, lastly, criticise the widely practised analytical exclusion of unintentional civilian victimisation (Downes, 2008, pp. 13 - 18). However, most of the approaches presented here reject this idea and agree that a defining feature of VAC is its intentionality.

2.1.2 Definition: Rebel Group One-Sided Violence

The overview above has shown the great diversity of conceptions in the field of VAC but has also pointed towards the prevalent risk of conceptual stretching. To avoid such a pitfall, I restrict this paper's focus to one-sided violence, which describes intentional and lethal incidents of VAC perpetrated by organised armed rebel groups (Fjelde et al., 2016, p. 42). This excludes collaterals and indirect casualties as well as civilian killings by criminal organisations (Eck & Hultmann, 2007, p. 235). Moreover, it narrows down my analytical scope on violence committed by rebel groups, which excludes government actors as perpetrators. With this, I aim to ensure better comparability to related studies (Salehyan et al., 2014; Stein, 2022).

With the definition of the phenomenon of interest now being clarified, the following section will review scholarly explanations for rebel group one-sided violence. Here, the previous section has shown that differences between the various conceptions of VAC are not always clear-cut. That means that many studies may still be highly relevant for understanding one-sided violence, even though they do not use the term or the exactly identical concept explicitly. In such cases, I still include them in the review.

2.2 Explanations - Why do rebels deliberately kill civilians?

As Valentino (2014) observes, early studies on violence in civil wars tended to conceive the killing of civilians as expressing "ancient, tribal hatred" and "senseless acts of individual madness" (p. 92). In the 1990s, the inadequacy of this understanding, which saw VAC as incidents of tragic irrationality, became increasingly evident. Amongst the first to acknowledge the instrumental logic of VAC was Gagnon (1994) who argued that ethnic cleavages would not suffice to explain the atrocities of the Yugoslavian war. Rather, the killings would be the result of intentional actions and strategies by political players (p. 164). Soon, this argument found its way into the mainstream of political science and formed a new agreement according to which armed groups would engage in civilian killings when perceived as a necessary and effective means to advance specific strategic goals (Valentino, 2000; Valentino et al., 2004, Valentino, 2005). Under this premise, several strands of research developed over the past two decades.

2.2.1 Strategic Logic

In his influential book *The Logic of Violence in Civil Wars*, Kalyvas (2006) puts forward a coercive logic of VAC, according to which groups kill non-combatants to exercise control and deter from collaborating with the opponent (Kalyvas, 2006, p. 150). Thereby, while selective violence is more effective, actors often opt for indiscriminate attacks due to the relatively high costs of selective violence in terms of information and surveillance (pp. 146 – 209): Selective violence is the joint outcome of collaboration between the perpetrators of VAC and civilian denouncers and therefore only occurs when both the armed actor and the civil population have an incentive to engage in such. Kalyvas (2006) argues that this is largely a function of territorial contestation between the competing conflict parties.

Various works have drawn upon this argument. Adding to the idea of control as a goal of VAC, Wood (2010) finds that insurgents with lower organisational capabilities are not able to credibly reward civilian support with selective incentives, and, thus, tend to commit more civilian killings to prevent the population from collaborating with the government. In another work, Wood and Kathman (2015) extend Kalyvas' (2006) idea of contestation, arguing that more intense periods of inter-rebel fighting are associated with more civilian killings. Also concerned with competition between groups, Schneider et al. (2012) claim that insurgents may commit VAC in response to civilian killings by the opposing belligerent.

2.2.2 Hobbesian Logic

Differing from Kalyvas' (2006) view of VAC as a strategic response to structural incentives, Weinstein (2006) proposes a more Hobbesian logic, which understands armed group violence as "the unintended byproduct of the organizational profile of armed groups" (Kalyvas, 2012, p. 664). Weinstein (2006) argues that VAC occurs in civil wars as human nature is naturally prone to such, and that the varying degrees of organisational capacity to constrain this individual behaviour explain patterns of VAC. This capacity, in turn, is determined by their economic endowments: Rebels with poor resource endowment recruit members based on a shared ideology and depend on civilian support to fund their activities. Such groups therefore perpetrate less VAC and invest in close ties with the civilian populations. Resource-wealthy rebel groups, in contrast, recruit less ideologically committed combatants and depend to a lesser degree on civilian support. Such groups, accordingly, are more likely to perpetrate indiscriminate attacks against civilians (Weinstein, 2006, pp. 204-205).

Contradicting Weinstein's (2006) claim, Valentino (2004, pp. 71 – 72) holds that group ideology can be a key enabler of VAC. As the scholar argues, the radicality by which groups would

commit to their ideology would favour the perpetration of large-scale civilian killings. Likewise, Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood (2014) put forward that no VAC could be explained without reference to ideology as an instrumental and normative mobiliser. In this view, group ideology affects the strategic goals of armed actors and alters what actions they deem appropriate to achieve those (pp. 216 – 217).

2.2.3 International Factors

All the differences put aside, neither of the above-presented approaches considers the influence of international factors. However, since the Cold War, intra-state wars have increasingly been internationalised. External support, describing the provision of military support to an armed group by an actor outside of the ongoing war, has become a feature of most contemporary civil wars and is growing in number and scale (Meier et al., 2022, p. 549). The question remains how this development impacts civil wars. Various scholars have been concerned with this issue, analysing the impact of third-party involvement on civil war duration (Sawyer et al., 2017) and inter-rebel fighting intensity (Stein & Cantin, 2021). In this context, some scholars have also examined the influence of external support on civilian killings. Supposedly, external support correlates with VAC for two reasons: First, following Weinstein's (2006) logic, rebels receiving external support rely to a lesser degree on the support of the local population and consequently have fewer constraints to commit VAC (Stein, 2022, p. 22). Second, external support is said to incentivise VAC as it is a tool for rebel groups to send signals of commitment to their supporters (Weinstein, 2006, p. 209).

Testings of these theoretical propositions have produced ambiguous findings. Fortna et al. (2018, p. 782), for instance, do not find a statistically significant influence of the reception of foreign sponsorship on the perpetration of terrorist attacks, while Huang and Sullivan (2020, p.

794) even associate external support with better provisions of public goods for civilians. Contrarily, Wood (2010, p. 612) finds that rebel groups supported by external patrons are more likely to target civilians. The quantitative study of Salehyan et al. (2014) undergirds this finding, arguing that the reception of external support causes higher levels of one-sided violence. Thereby, it is shown how this effect changes when disaggregating types of support and accounting for the characteristics of the external supporter.

2.3 Research Question

While Salehyan et al. (2014) offer an insightful actor-centric perspective, they fail to overcome the most severe limitation of previous studies on foreign assistance: They merely account for external support from states. However, as external support is not solely provided by foreign governments, this focus results in an incomplete analysis of its effects on rebel group one-sided violence. In the past decades, instances of nonstate actors engaging as external supporters of rebel groups in civil wars have been increasing. The most prominent examples of this inter-rebel collaboration are the transnational terror organisation Al-Qaida, the Somali-based Islamist insurgent group Al-Shabaab or the Hezbollah militias, which have been supporting civil war belligerents in numerous conflicts (Meier et al., 2022, p. 549). Also due to limited data availability, previous research has not yet examined how this trend may alter the relationship of rebel groups towards civilians. In attempting to address this gap, this paper aims to analyse in what way the reception of external support from non-state actors affects how much rebel groups perpetrate intentional civilian killings.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Theory of Salehyan et al. (2014)

To examine the relationship between the reception of nonstate external support and the perpetration of one-sided violence, this paper extends the theoretical framework put forward by Salehyan et al. (2014). Their theory relies on Weinstein's (2006) idea of resource mobilisation, holding that external support is just like the extraction of natural resources one source for rebels to fund their activities without having to rely on civilian support (Salehyan et al., 2014, p. 636). As "a strategy of ideological persuasion and service provision is costly", rebels receiving external support have fewer incentives to uphold collaborative ties with civilians and may become unconcerned with maintaining their safety and livelihoods (p. 637). Hence, they are expected to have fewer organisational structures in place that discipline their combatants and put strict constraints on the use of VAC. Simultaneously, their resource wealth tends to attract more opportunistic fighters prone to violence (p. 637).

Adding to this, Salehyan et al. (2014) describe the relationship between external supporters and rebel groups as a principal-agent model, where external supporters pursue their self-interest and aim to benefit from their efforts in return. In exchange for military assistance, external supporters obtain some control over the rebel groups they are funding and can influence their actions accordingly. The funded rebel groups, on the other side, give up some degree of autonomy in return for the augmentation of their military capabilities (pp. 638-639). The permanent risk of moral hazard characterises this asymmetric relationship: As external supporters cannot fully control the funded rebels, they may misuse the provided resources for activities that are not advancing the sponsors' interests or are even detrimental to them (p. 639). In this context, rebel groups may be incentivised to perpetrate civilian killings to "demonstrate their commitment to the sponsor and maintain their resource flows" (p. 639). Accordingly, civilian killings fulfil a communicative purpose in that they showcase the rebel groups' activeness towards the

sponsor. In other cases, one-sided violence may also correspond to the supporters' strategic guidelines.

Overall, external support increases levels of one-sided violence for two reasons: First, it generates organisational structures that constrain the use of violence against civilians to a lesser extent. Second, the relationship with the external sponsors creates direct and indirect incentives to deliberately target civilians (p. 639). With this framework, Salehyan et al. (2014) bring together the Hobbesian logic of Weinstein (2006) with the instrumental-strategic function of VAC as advocated by Kalyvas (2006). The major contribution they make, however, is their argument that the principal's institutional characteristics moderate this supposed effect of external support: Salehyan et al. (2014, pp. 641-644) find that democracies providing foreign assistance are more likely than autocracies to closely monitor the rebels they fund and issue sanctions in the case of civilian killings. That is because democracies have, on average, strong domestic human rights lobbies and are "at the very least" rhetorically committed to protecting non-combatants and human rights norms (p. 642). As a result, democratic sponsors are exposed to popular domestic and international pressure when associated with rebel groups violating those standards. Therefore, democratic sponsors are expected to undertake more efforts in constraining their agents' perpetration of civilian killings, which diminishes the effect of external support on one-sided violence.

3.2 Theory Extension and Hypothesis

Salehyan et al. (2014) claim that the characteristics of the external supporter influence the level of one-sided violence a supported rebel group perpetrates. This paper extends this logic to instances of external support by non-state actors, arguing that in those cases, the positive effect on one-sided violence is even stronger. The hypothesis of this paper is based on the

assumption that non-state sponsors of rebel groups differ from state sponsors in that they operate outside of the normative, legal and political constraints that states are subjected to.

States can be held politically accountable for human rights violations of the rebels they fund. Democratic governments and also, to a lesser extent, autocratic states, risk domestic public pressure when they support rebel groups perpetrating one-sided violence. Nonstate external supporters such as Al Qaida or Al-Shabaab, however, are often transnational actors, building their organisation on a network of associated groups across various countries (Krause & Milliken, 2009, p. 205). Thus, as, unlike states, they are not bound to a specific territory, they do not need to respond to political pressure from a civilian support base as much as states do.

Moreover, nonstate external supporters can also more easily evade international accountability mechanisms. For instance, state external supporters may want supported conflict parties to refrain from civilian killings to avoid severe image damage in the international arena. This is because the media, NGOs and other governments can direct the public attention to state sponsors of violent rebels to deploy name-and-shame tactics. The case of Rwanda illustrates what Keohane (2006, p. 84) once labelled "reputational accountability": The continuous Rwandan support for the M23 rebels in the DRC, responsible for mass killings and other war crimes, has recently led Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and even the US government and France to condemn Rwanda, demanding the immediate cease of collaboration (Amnesty International, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2023; Tampa, 2024). This tactic proved already effective in 2012, when the UK and the US decided to freeze their military funding and political support of Rwanda, which in turn weakened their support for M23, leading to their temporary defeat and the trial of one of the leaders at the ICC (Tampa, 2024). There is no comparable case in which such large-scale international pressure was exerted on a nonstate external supporter. It is also hardly believable that – even if attempted – the naming and shaming would have had any significant effect on the targeted nonstate group.

Admittedly, although nonstate actors might be, compared to states, largely immune towards domestic or international political pressure, they could technically still be hurt by international financial sanctions. However, while there are examples in which the UN Security Council issued sanctions against the rebels engaging in civilian killings, one cannot find any instance in which sanctions were also imposed on their nonstate external supporters (DW, 2024). Likewise, there is no precedence in which nonstate sponsors had to fear legal prosecution for being complicit in human rights violations of funded conflict parties. Contrarily, as Nicaragua's attempt to sue Germany for supporting Israel shows, state sponsors risk such legal accountability.

Therefore, one can assume that non-state external supporters have to fear fewer costs than state sponsors when supported rebel groups engage in civilian killings. Hence, they may have fewer incentives to prevent the rebels they support from the perpetration of one-sided violence. On the contrary, non-state external supporters may even be more likely to encourage the targeting of civilians: Amongst the most active external supporters are Al Qaida, Al-Shabaab, PKK or the Hezbollah (Meier et al., 2022, p. 550). All those groups deploy terrorist tactics themselves, which by definition explicitly involve intentional attacks against civilians (Sinai, 2008, p. 9). It is therefore reasonable to assume that such actors may demand from the rebels they fund to also engage in one-sided violence. This results in the following hypothesis:

H1: Rebel groups who receive external support by a non-state actor are more likely to engage in higher levels of one-sided violence.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1 Data Structure and Statistical Method

To test the hypothesis, this paper conducts a large-N panel study of rebel group one-sided violence. The unit of analysis is the actor-dyad year, with one observation for each group per year and conflict-dyad. I retrieved the data for the dependent variable and various controls from the dataset by Stein (2022), which aggregates all incidents of one-sided violence by rebel groups as listed in the UCDP Georeferenced Dataset Version 19.1 to the annual level. I then merged those data with the actor version of the UCDP External Support Dataset (UCDP ESD). In its most recent version, the dataset covers events of external support from 1975 to 2017 and is the first to include non-state actors as both providers and recipients (Meier et al., 2022, p. 549).

UCDP data are collected using an open-source coding approach. That involves human coders screening media, NGO reports, archives and case studies (Sundberg & Melander, 2023, p. 525). As said, for the independent variable, UCDP is the only available data source. For the dependent variable, contrarily, it would have been possible to rely on ACLED data instead. However, I opted for the UCDP data on civilian killings to ease the merging process. Furthermore, Keck (2012) has shown that UCDP provides in terms of measurement reliability and overall robustness superior data compared to ACLED.

As I am interested in rebel group one-sided violence during civil wars, the analysis excludes all instances of inter-state wars. Moreover, I constrain the focus to one-sided violence perpetrated during active conflicts, which dismisses observations of inactive conflict years. That follows the theoretical stance of Kalyvas (2006, p. 22), holding that wartime violence is fundamentally different from violence during periods of peace and should thus be analysed separately. A conflict is coded as active when the battle-related casualties cumulate to at least 25 deaths per year (Meier, 2022, p. 15). Resulting from those data adjustments, the merged dataset

contains roughly 1400 observations, covering a period from 1989 to 2017. As a statistical method, I deploy a negative binomial regression (NB). This is the appropriate choice for the discrete nature of the dependent variable and additionally accounts, in contrast to the Poisson model often used for count data, for overdispersion (Long, 1997).

4.2 Operationalisation and Statistical Model

4.2.1 Dependent Variable: Rebel Group One-Sided Violence

The dependent variable is *rebel group one-sided violence*, which is defined as "the use of armed force (…) by a formally organized group against civilians" (Högbladh, 2019, p. 30). Thereby, armed force captures any form of intentional lethal violence conducted with manufactured weapons, sticks, stones, fire or water. Civilians, meanwhile, are all non-combatants who are not members of state-related forces, the political opposition or other armed militias (Högbladh, 2019, p. 30). The variable is measured as a discrete count of civilian deaths per rebel group and dyad-year. In instances where no rebel group civilian killings were reported, an absence of one-sided violence is noted, setting the variable to zero.

4.2.2 Focal Independent Variable: Non-State External Support

The focal independent variable is *non-state external support*. Following the UCDP ESD, I conceptualise it as "the provision of militarily relevant assistance by an outside [non-state actor] to a primary warring [rebel group] in a state-based armed conflict with the intent to assist that party in that conflict" (Meier, 2022, p. 6). This definition presumes that assistance is provided with the consent of the supported rebel group, distinguishing the concept from related terms such as third-party intervention (Meier et al., 2022, p. 546). Outside non-state actors must be organised non-governmental armed groups that are not part of the conflict in question during

the year of the observation. This excludes support provided by private patrons (Meier, 2022, p. 6).

The UCDP ESD codes ten different types of external support: In its most direct way, external support contains the provision of troops and the conduct of joint operations. Moreover, external supporters may provide material, weapons and other logistic help. Support can also involve knowledge sharing, such as training or intelligence services. Finally, the dataset includes instances of financial funding, access to territory and other unknown types of militarily relevant assistance (Meier et al., 2022, p. 547).

Non-state external support is measured as a binary indicator. It identifies all observations in which, in a given conflict year, a warring rebel group has received at least one of the described types of external support by at least one non-state actor.

4.2.3 Control Variables

To isolate the effect of non-state external support, I include various controls that one can group into subnational and organisational factors. Their selection is inspired by Stein (2022), who gathered most of the literature-relevant explanations for rebel group one-sided violence in a new dataset.

First and foremost, the analysis controls for Kalyvas' (2006) proposition that patterns of *territorial control* influence the targeting of civilians. An accurate measurement of territorial contestation would ideally account for variations within every country and year. Such a nuanced approach, however, is beyond the scope of this study, as data on the dependent variable are aggregated to the yearly conflict level. To still include it in the study, this paper uses a proxy developed by Stein (2022), which measures whether and how much a rebel group controlled

territory in a given year. The variable is categorical and ranges from zero to four, whereby a higher value indicates that a rebel group controls more territory.

Besides, the model controls for *governmental civilian killings*. With this, I account for findings according to which rebels may engage in civilian killings in response to indiscriminate counterinsurgency efforts by the government (Wood, 2010). It is coded as a binary variable, showing whether the incumbent government is responsible for at least ten civilian killings in the respective year.

As a last subnational control, I include *conflict intensity* in the model, as research has shown that periods of more intense battles between rival groups are associated with higher levels of rebel group one-sided violence (Wood & Kathman, 2015). *Conflict intensity* is measured as a categorical account of battle-related deaths in a given conflict per year. The variable ranges on a scale from one to three: One indicates that the total number of battle-related fatalities in the dyad-conflict-year lies between 25 to 999; two represents a range from 1000 to 9,999; and three informs that the number of fatalities exceeds 10,000.

Weinstein (2006) argues that resource-wealthy rebels are more likely to engage in higher levels of one-sided violence. Therefore, the model tests for *lootable resources*, measuring the number of resources, constrained to oil, gems and drugs, available for extraction in the area of a rebel group. The variable is categorical and ranges from zero to three, whereby a higher score corresponds to a higher resource endowment.

As shown in the literature review, some consider group ideology a facilitator of VAC (Valentino, 2004; Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood, 2014). That leaves room for the possibility that groups founded on the grounds of religious identity are more likely to engage in higher levels of civilian killings. Thus, I also control for the influence of *religiosity*, which is a binary indicator identifying whether a rebel group pursues an explicit religious agenda. Finally, the model

incorporates the findings of Salehyan et al. (2014) and includes *state external support*. The variable is a binary measure of all instances where a rebel group received external support from at least one foreign government. The table below summarises the variables' respective measurement and data source.

Table 1*: Overview of Variables*

Variable Name	**Measurement**	**Data Source**
Rebel Group One-Sided Violence	Discrete count of civilian killings per rebel group and conflict-year.	Sundberg & Melander (2013)
Nonstate External Support	Binary indicator. 1 = Rebel group received external support by a nonstate actor in a given year.	Meier et al. (2022)
Territorial Control	Categorical. 0 = rebel group does not control territory, 1 = territorial control low, 2 = territorial control moderate; 3 = 3 territorial control is high.	Cunningham et al. (2013); Stein (2022)
Conflict Intensity	Categorical. 1 = number of battle-related fatalities ranges from 25 to 999 in a year; 2 = number of fatalities ranges from 1000 to 9,999; 3 = number of fatalities is higher than 10,000.	Sundberg & Melander (2013); Stein (2022)
Governmental Civilian Killings	Binary. 1= Government killed at least 10 civilians.	Sundberg & Melander (2013)
Lootable Resources	Categorical (from 1 to 3). Indicates number of lootable resources where the rebel group operates.	Stein (2022)
Religious	Binary. 1 = rebel group is explicitly founded around religious identity.	Braithwaite & Cunningham (2020); Stein & Cantin (2021)
State External Support	Binary. 1 = Rebel group received external support by a state actor in a given year.	Meier et al. (2022)

5. ANALYSIS

5.1 Results of NB

The following analysis estimates two negative binomial models. Model 1 includes the focal independent variable *nonstate external support* and all six control variables as described in the methodology section. On top, it is examined to what extent the inclusion of *nonstate external support* is a meaningful addition to previous explanations of rebel group one-sided violence. For this purpose, a second model is added, which only includes the control variables. The results of both models are displayed in the table on the following page.

The omnibus test statistics show that model 1 represents a statistically significant improvement in fit relative to an Intercept-only model (X^2 (7) = 250,680, p < 0.001). The same is true for model 2 (X^2 (6) = 241,265, p < 0.001). However, McFadden's Pseudo R - Square indicates that model 1 improves the goodness of fit relative to a null-model by 6.04 %, while model 2 only leads to a proportionate improvement in fit by 5.52 %. This suggests that the first model may possess more explanatory power than model 2. To directly compare their relative statistical significance, a likelihood ratio chi-square test is performed. As LR = 49.57 $> t_{critical}$ ($df = 1,\ p = 0.05$), one can conclude that the inclusion of nonstate external support represents a statistically significant improvement in fit compared to model 2, thus adding meaningful information to the model. Besides, the lower AIC and BIC scores of model 1 vis-à-vis model 2 suggest that it balances parsimony and complexity more appropriately (AIC = 8957.790 and BIC = 9004.760 (BIC) for model 1, whereas AIC = 9042.412 and BIC = 9094.769 for model 2). Overall, the higher relative quality and better fit make model 1 the preferred model, thus already indicating a relevant influence of nonstate external support on rebel-group one-sided violence.

Table 2*: Results of Standard Negative Binomial Regression*

DV: Rebel Group One-Sided Violence	**Model 1**	**Model 2**
Nonstate External Support	0.593**	NA
	(0.193)	
State External Support	0.663***	0.561**
	(0.190)	(0.190)
Religious	0.393*	0.255
	(0.193)	(0.189)
Conflict Intensity	2.564***	2.597***
	(0.235)	(0.237)
Governmental Civilian Killings	0.814***	0.749***
	(0.194)	(0.189)
Lootable Resources	0.034	- 0.013
	(0.094)	(0.093)
Territorial Control	- 0.239*	- 0.255*
	(0.098)	(0.099)
(Intercept)	0.109	0.419
	(0.320)	(0.309)
Number of Observations	1388	1401
Alpha	8.830 (0.400)	8.996 (0.404)
Log. Lik.	- 4512.709	- 4537.491
McFadden's Pseudo R - square	0.0604	0.0552
AIC	9043.549	9090.93
BIC	9004.760	9132.942
Prob $> X^2$	X^2 (7) = 250,680, p < 0.001	X^2 (6) = 241,265, p < 0.001

Unit of analysis = rebel-group-conflict-year; Standard errors clustered by rebel groups in parentheses.

*p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

The results of model 1 reveal that all control variables except *lootable resources* have a statistically significant effect on rebel group one-sided violence.

The reception of *nonstate external support* increases the log count of rebel group one-sided violence by 0.593, holding the other variables constant. This effect is statistically significant, ($p < 0.01$). Precisely, the incidence rate ratio (IRR) of $e^{0.593} = 1.8410$ indicates that rebel groups who received nonstate external support committed roughly 1.8 times as many civilian killings than those without a nonstate external supporter. *State External Support* is associated with a 0.663 increase in the log count of the dependent variable ($p < 0.001$). The incidence rate ratio (IRR) of $e^{0.663} = 1.940$ informs that rebel groups with a state supporter committed roughly twice as many civilian killings. Likewise, the variable *religious* has a statistically significant positive effect ($B = 0.393$, $p < 0.05$). As IRR = $e^{0.393} = 1.482$, the level of one-sided violence a rebel group perpetrates increases by approximately 50 % when it is explicitly founded on a religious identity.

Territorial Control, contrary to the other variables, shows a negative effect on civilian killings. It can be noted that a one-unit decrease in the degree to which a rebel group exerts territorial control increases the log count of perpetrated one-sided violence by 0.239 ($p < 0.05$).

Regarding the conflict-level controls, both *conflict intensity* and *governmental civilian killings* have a statistically significant positive effect on the dependent variable. When the respective incumbent government is responsible for at least 10 yearly civilian killings, the log count of rebel group one-sided violence is predicted to be 0.255 points greater ($p < 0.001$). With an IRR of $e^{0.749} = 2.115$, one can conclude that the presence of *governmental civilian killings* doubles the level of rebel group one-sided violence. A one-unit increase in *Conflict Intensity*, meanwhile, is expected to increase the log-count of the dependent variable by 2.597 ($p < 0.001$).

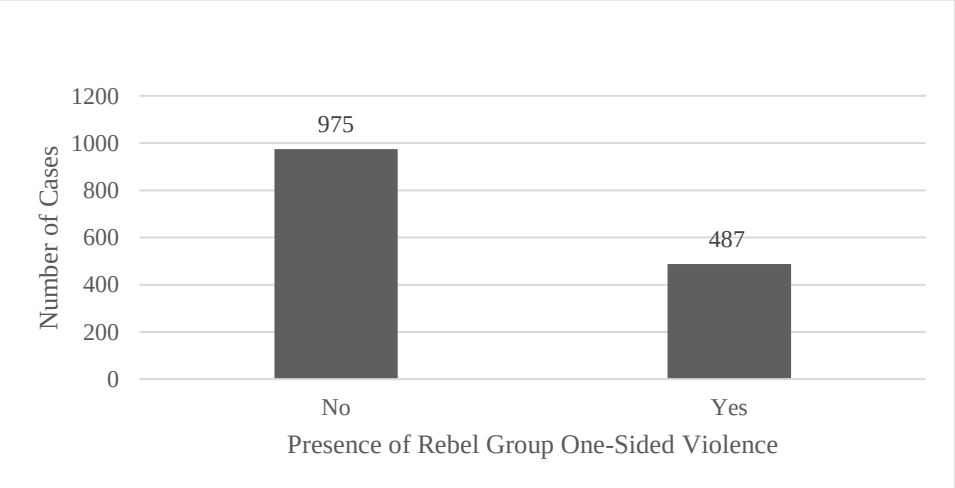
When conflict intensity increases by one-unit, the level of rebel group civilian killings increases thirteenfold, as IRR = $e^{2.597}$ =13.423.

The statistical significance and coefficients of the control variables remain largely similar in model 2. Only the variable *religious*, significant at the conventional 95 % level in model 1, loses statistical significance (B = 0.255; p = 0.176). Moreover, *state external support*, previously significant with $p < 0.001$, is now only significant at the 99 % level (B = 561, $p < 0.01$).

5.2 Results of ZINB

Overall, results suggest that the reception of nonstate external support increases the level of one-sided violence a rebel group perpetrates. However, caution is required regarding the interpretation of the results. While the standard NB successfully solves the violation of fixed overdispersion, the data of rebel group one-sided violence might suffer from an excess of zeros. As the bar chart below illustrates, nearly 1000 out of 1400 cases are in fact null observations.

Table 3*: Bar Chart of Null Observations of Rebel Group One-Sided Violence*



In view of this, it is likely that the data contain more zeros than what would be accounted for with a standard NB, as this regression model assumes that the likelihood of zero occurrence

is equal to the chance that one observes any other count. This could potentially lead to incorrect estimations of coefficients and standard errors (Long, 1997). Therefore, a zero-inflated negative binomial regression (ZINB) is conducted to test the robustness of the results towards the excess zeros in the dataset.

The zero-inflation allows one to circumvent the issue of excess zeros by assuming that those are predicted by a model other than the standard model (source). Hence, the ZINB estimates two models: One logit model predicting the likelihood that one-sided violence does not occur in the first place (putting the DV to zero); and another negative binomial model estimating counts of the DV amongst those where it did occur. For the latter, the same set of the predictors used in the standard NB is included. For the logit model, I only include the variables *conflict intensity* and *governmental civilian* killings. With that, I assume that overall low levels of violence during many conflicts included in the dataset may explain the disproportionate occurrence of zeros in the DV. The results for model 1 are displayed in the table on the following page.

Table 4: *Results of ZINB Regression (Model 1)*

Model 1	DV : Count of Rebel Group One-Sided Violence (Corrected for Zero-Inflation)	DV : Non-Violence (Logit)
Nonstate External Support	0.388**	NA
	(0.145)	
State External Support	0.490**	NA
	(0.150)	
Religious	0.188	NA
	(0.150)	
Conflict Intensity	1.931***	- 1.414***
	(0.160)	(0.206)
Governmental Civilian Killings	1.060***	0.649***
	(0.158)	(0.145)
Lootable Resources	- 0.082	NA
	(0.072)	
Territorial Control	- 0.145	NA
	(0.077)	
(Intercept)	1.706***	1.270***
	(0.253)	(0.239)
Number of Observations	1388	
Log Lik.	-4448.70088	
AIC	8921.40177	

Unit of analysis = rebel-group-conflict-year; Standard errors clustered by rebel groups in parentheses.

*p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001

Unfortunately, no assessment of overall model fit can be provided using SPSS for the zero-inflated negative binomial regression. However, the AIC score of the zero-inflated model is smaller than the AIC for the standard model. Therefore, one can note that the zero-inflation improves the overall quality of the model, therethrough increasing the robustness of the results.

A look at the two models produced by the ZINB supports that, as supposed, *conflict intensity* and *governmental civilian killings* have a dual effect: They both statistically significantly affect the likelihood of observing zeros and the level of rebel group one-sided violence. Putting it more precisely, *conflict intensity* has a statistically significant negative effect on the probability of observing an absence of rebel group one-sided violence: A decrease in *conflict intensity* increases the log odds of zero occurrence by 1.414 ($p < 0.001$). Simultaneously, for a one-unit increase in intensity, the log count of the dependent variable increases by 1.931 ($p < 0.001$).

Meanwhile, the presence of *Governmental Civilian Killings* is a positive statistically significant predictor of excess zeros, as it increases the log odds of no rebel group one-sided violence by 0.649 ($p < 0.001$). At the same time, the observation of *Governmental Civilian Killings* is associated with a 1.060 increase in the log count of rebel civilian killings ($p < 0.001$).

Regarding the other control variables for the count model, *lootable resources* is still statistically insignificant ($p = 0.253$). Moreover, the effects of the variable *religious* ($p = 0.209$) and *territorial control* ($p = 0.060$) lose their statistical significance compared to the standard model results. Contrary, the reception of *state external support* continues to have a statistically significant effect on rebel group one-sided violence. Groups receiving support by a foreign state have a log count of civilian killings that is 0.490 points greater than those who did not have a state external supporter ($p < 0.01$).

Finally, the count model confirms that nonstate external support is a positive statistically significant predictor of rebel group one-sided violence: The log count of one-sided violence is

predicted to be 0.388 points greater for rebel groups receiving nonstate external support than for those who did not ($p < 0.01$). However, the correction for excess zeros diminishes the effect size compared to the results of the standard negative binomial model: With an IRR of $e^{0.388}$ = 1.474, the zero-inflated model predicts rebel group civilian killings to increase by merely 50 %, as opposed to 80 % when running the standard model.

5.3 Discussion of Results

As the table shows, the findings are largely in line with previous accounts in the literature and match the outlined theoretical expectations.

Table 5: *Comparison of Expected and Observed Effect of Predictors. Relationship Direction only reported when $p < 0.05$ in at least one of the regressions.*

Variable	**Expected Relationship**	**Observed Relationship Matches Expectation**
Conflict Intensity	Positive	Yes, $p < 0.05$ in all models
Governmental Civilian Killings	Positive	Yes, $p < 0.05$ in all models
Territorial Control	Negative	Yes, $p < 0.05$ in 2/3 models
Religious	Positive	Yes, $p < 0.05$ in 1/3 models
Lootable Resources	Positive	NA; $p > 0.05$ in all models
State External Support	Positive	Yes, $p < 0.05$ in all models
Nonstate External Support	Positive	Yes, $p < 0.05$ in all models

First of all, the intensity of a conflict has a positive effect on rebel group one-sided violence across all deployed models. Likewise, rebels kill more civilians when also the incumbent state

power engages in civilian killings. That strengthens the argument of Wood (2010), Wood & Kathman (2015) and other scholars according to whom overall higher levels of (battle-field)-violence correlate with more rebel group one-sided violence. Furthermore, the robust positive effect of state external support substantiates the findings of Salehyan et al. (2014).

Instead, the negative effect of territorial control aligns only partially with the theoretical expectations: It neither contradicts nor confirms Kalyvas' (2006) claim that civilian targetings are more likely in situations of either high or low levels of territorial control. Unfortunately, the research design of this paper did not allow us to accurately test for this. Moreover, the detected effect is only statistically significant when deploying a standard negative binomial model. Nonetheless, by suggesting that rebels kill more civilians, the less territorial control they exert, the findings partially reaffirm the widely held assumption that civilian killings tend to be a weapon of the weak (Stanton & Balcells, 2021).

By accounting for the religiosity of the rebel groups, the analysis also tested the proposition that ideology facilitates group civilian killings (Valentino, 2004; Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood, 2014). As the variable only has a statistically significant positive effect in the standard NB of model 1, the paper reveals mixed evidence on that matter. Besides, the presence of lootable resources is, contrary to the expectations derived from Weinstein (2006), not statistically significantly associated with the level of rebel civilian killings.

Most importantly, however, the analysis provides strong empirical support for the central argument and hypothesis of this paper: Rebel groups who receive external support from a non-state actor are more likely to engage in higher levels of one-sided violence.

6. CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary

This paper has shown that scholars have developed numerous explanations for why rebels deliberately kill civilians. Amongst many others, one set of explanations has emphasised the role of external support for rebel-civilian relations (Salehyan et al., 2014; Fortna et al., 2018; Huang & Sullivan, 2020; Stein, 2022). However, in solely focusing on external support by states, those contributions did not account for the increasing empirical importance of nonstate actors engaging as external supporters of fellow rebel groups.

In aiming to close this gap, this thesis has examined in what way the reception of nonstate external support affects the amount of civilian killing perpetrated by rebels. Thereby, I have proposed that rebels who receive nonstate external support are more likely to engage in higher levels of one-sided violence. Two causal mechanisms underscore this argument: Firstly, I have theorised that nonstate external support reduces the degree to which rebels need to rely on civil support, thus removing the incentive to put organisational constraints on the use of violence against civilians. Secondly and simultaneously, I have assumed that nonstate external support exposes rebels to the influence of their sponsor and increases incentives to actively target civilians either because civilian killings are explicitly demanded and rewarded by the nonstate supporter or perceived as a signal of commitment. To test the hypothesis, I conducted a large-N panel study with data from 1989 to 2017 on rebel group one-sided violence and external support. While the analysis has substantiated various explanations held in previous literature, it has also delivered strong empirical support for the supposed positive relationship between nonstate external support and rebel group one-sided violence.

6.2 Implications

In addressing a blind spot of previous research, the finding sheds light on the influence of transnational inter-rebel relations on conflict dynamics. In more precise terms, the result suggests that nonstate external support alters the incentive structures of rebel groups in a way that affects their relationship vis-à-vis civilians. With that, the analysis conducted in this paper appears to add to and strengthen Weinstein's (2006) argument that sources of resource endowment are a relevant predictor of rebel group behaviour and patterns of violence against civilians.

Three important policy lessons can be drawn from this observation. The following section will briefly elaborate on each of them.

Implication 1: Improve the legal accountability of nonstate external supporters

First, the findings have implications for the development of international law. As Mastorodimos (2017, pp. 1 – 2) points out, existing frameworks in international law tend to overly focus on states and individuals. Unfortunately, this focus risks disregarding the legal accountability of armed nonstate actors associated with atrocities against civilians. Admittedly, nonstate actors are formally bound by international humanitarian law through Article 3 of the Geneva Convention. Still, however, there is practically no tool available to enforce said legal accountability, except for the trial of individual group leaders as regulated by international criminal law. An adequate framework concerned with the group accountability of nonstate actors beyond the individual level is missing (Mastorodimos, 2017, pp. 1 – 2). In view of this paper's findings, it is critical to increase the efforts to change this and hold nonstate actors more legally accountable. Available accountability mechanisms against state external supporters could serve as an orientation. The (failed) initiative of Nicaragua to sue Germany at the ICJ, for instance, has illustrated that states who assist conflict parties responsible for large-scale civilian victimisation

risk legal prosecution. International lawmakers should explore how one could extend that logic in a way that equally applies to armed nonstate actors supporting violent rebel groups.

Implication 2: Monitor inter-rebel relations more closely

Second, international organisations and civil society actors should monitor and report inter-rebel funding more closely to understand how they affect the dynamics of violence in armed conflicts. NGOs such as Human Rights Watch or Amnesty International already pay close attention to how state external supporters contribute to rebel group violence (see Human Rights Watch, 2023; Amnesty International, 2023). Broadening this perspective to include instances of nonstate external support will help improve problem awareness amongst policymakers.

Implication 3: Prevent the cross-border exchange of military goods between nonstate actors

Third, and finally, states committed to the protection of civilians in armed conflicts should concentrate their efforts on limiting the violence-fuelling activities of transnational nonstate actors. The joint deployment of their intelligence and security apparatus could prove critical to be able to restrict the cross-border exchange of military goods between rebels. Besides, financial sanctions of known group leaders could be a suitable tool to exert more pressure on nonstate external supporters.

Overall, those three propositions could help increase the costs of support, thereby either discouraging nonstate sponsors from providing said assistance in the first place or incentivising them to constrain the funded rebels' use of VAC.

6.3 Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

Despite the insights this research has revealed, the conclusiveness of the findings is limited in several aspects that have to be taken into account. First and foremost, the quantitative design

has enabled the paper to detect whether nonstate external support correlates with higher levels of rebel group one-sided violence. However, it has not examined the supposed underlying causal mechanisms. Hence, one should be cautious about overinterpreting the results: They do not allow to draw inferences about the theoretical argument connecting nonstate external support with rebel group one-sided violence.

Furthermore, as is explained in the methodology section, UCDP deploys an open-source approach to gather information on rebel group civilian killings and nonstate external support. While, at present, there is no other adequate alternative, this approach is likely to undermine measurement reliability (Meier et al., 2022, p. 547). As the inclusion of three different estimates of one-sided violence (low, best and high) illustrates, open-source coding conducted by humans is, despite all employed methods to ensure consistency, subject to data uncertainty. Weidmann (2016, p. 206), for instance, finds that areas with higher smartphone coverage tend to report more events of violence. Killings committed in areas with little to no smartphone infrastructure, meanwhile, often go unreported. Therefore, with the screening of media, one might not always be able to conclusively trace how many civilians were victimised during a violent event. Likewise, it may not always be possible to clearly attribute killings to a specific actor. In view of this, one should note that the UCDP numbers are, at best, a rough approximation of reality, likely to sometimes miss and sometimes overstate counts of civilian casualties.

Similar issues apply to the coding of nonstate external support. By definition, armed nonstate actors operate in clandestine grey areas, often off the public's attention. Thus, nonstate external support in civil wars may be an underreported phenomenon: It is a plausible assumption that the dataset tends to mainly capture instances of overt support and might miss an unknown number of cases in which nonstate actors manage to assist a conflict party covertly.

Future research should aim to address those data issues and expand on the existing data projects. For instance, the binary nature of the available data on external support risks oversimplifying the relationship between foreign assistance and civilian killings. Here, a quantification of the relative importance of external support for the total financial and military resources of each rebel group could be fruitful. Such data would allow researchers to account for differences in terms of scope of support across cases. Besides, possible interaction effects of nonstate external support with other factors impacting one-sided violence could also be examined.

Lastly, to complement this paper's findings, process-tracing case studies could be a promising avenue for future research. It is yet to be uncovered through what exact causal steps nonstate external support influences rebel groups in a way that they perpetrate more one-sided violence. Unfolding how transnational inter-rebel relations can exacerbate the severe humanitarian ramifications of conflicts will be critical to advancing a comprehensive understanding of civil war violence.

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