

Sponsors of War:

State Support for Rebel Groups in Civil Conflicts

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Abstract

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Many civil wars are illustrative of wider international tensions and connections that transcend state borders. States often intervene to influence the trajectory and outcome of civil conflicts by providing external support to warring parties. This assistance ranges from direct military intervention to the provision of weapons, training, funds, safe havens, intelligence, logistics and other critical resources. This dissertation contains four individual essays that each seeks to advance our knowledge of state support to rebel movements. The first essays (I and II) add to our understanding of how external state support influences conflict dynamics while the latter (III and IV) begin to unpack the political decision-making process behind decisions that alter the original support commitment. Essay I evaluates whether state support to rebels increases the probability of civil war negotiations being initiated. The findings question a widespread belief among policymakers that support can foster negotiations. Essay II explores if external support influences the risk of conflict recurrence. It finds that state support to rebels can increase the risk of conflict recurrence in the short-term while there is no equivalent effect of support provided to governments. Essay III is the first global analysis of support termination and it thereby opens up an entirely new research field. The results suggest that the causes related to the initiation of support and its termination are largely distinct while the transition from the Cold War and the absence of ethnic kinship ties offer some insights into when states are more likely to terminate support. Essay IV unpacks the political decision-making process of the United States' support to the armed opposition in Nicaragua in the 1980s and in Syria in the 2010s. The results indicate that adverse feedback functions as a trigger for increasing previous commitments as long as policy failure can be attributed to external actors, while reduced support is often a result of attributing failure to the state sponsor's own actions. Taken together, the essays make significant contributions to advance our understanding of biased third-party interventions, conflict recurrence, civil war negotiations, foreign policy decision-making and state sponsorship of terrorism.

Keywords: external support, intervention, civil war, state sponsorship, conflict delegation, proxy war, internationalized conflict, negotiations, conflict recurrence, US foreign policy, Nicaragua, Syria

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To Pappa and Adam

List of Essays

This thesis is based on the following essays, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals.

- I “Escalate to De-Escalate? External State Support and Governments’ Willingness to Negotiate”. Unpublished manuscript. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the CIDCM/IR Workshop at the University of Maryland, College Park 12 December 2016 and at the Transnational Conflict Data Workshop at London School of Economics, London 19 May 2017.
- II “The Legacy of Foreign Patrons: External State Support and Conflict Recurrence”. 2017. *Journal of Peace Research*, 54(4): 499–512.
- III “Turning Off the Taps: The Termination of State Sponsorship”. 2017. *Terrorism and Political Violence*, forthcoming.
- IV “Changing Commitments: US Support to Rebels in Syria and Nicaragua”. Unpublished manuscript. An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Research Seminar at Uppsala University, Uppsala 27 April 2017, at the War Studies Seminar at the Swedish Defence University, Stockholm 9 June 2017 and at the Conflict Research Society’s Annual Conference at the University of Oxford, 19 September 2017.

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Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.

– Zora Neale Hurston

The Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University is truly an amazing place. Not only is it a highly stimulating research and teaching environment, it also comes with a collegial atmosphere that few workplaces are able to match. For the past six years, I have been lucky to call this my home, and to learn a great deal from friends and colleagues from around the globe, who share my curiosity in trying to make sense of the world. All of you have in some way helped me to advance, improve and refine this dissertation and made going to the office a pleasure. While I cannot mention each and every person by name, I wish to acknowledge the vast amount of ideas, advice and feedback that I have received just through small talk in the hallways or over short coffee breaks.

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Niklas Karlén

Uppsala, 18 October 2017

Introduction

Civil wars are rarely just a matter of internal affairs. Many intrastate armed conflicts are illustrative of wider international tensions and connections that transcend state borders. While states today seldom fight each other directly, there is a considerable amount of indirect conflict being channeled through proxies (Melander, Pettersson & Themnér, 2016). States frequently intervene to influence the trajectory and outcome of civil conflicts by providing external support to warring parties. This assistance ranges from direct military intervention to the provision of weapons, training, funds, safe havens, intelligence, logistics and other critical resources. In fact, almost two-thirds of all rebel groups active since World War II have relied on state sponsors to mobilize fighters and to sustain their activities (San-Akca, 2016). Similarly, many governments engaged in civil conflicts have relied on other states for the supply of military materiel and for assistance with counterinsurgency operations (Karlén, 2016). Scholars, policymakers and practitioners must all take these wider transnational and international relationships into account in order to deal with the complex civil wars of today.

Existing research on external support in civil wars has primarily focused on reasons for why states initiate assistance to belligerents and how this affects certain conflict dynamics, in particular conflict duration and outcome (Regan, 2002; Findley & Teo, 2006; Byman, 2007; San-Akca, 2009; Cunningham, 2010; Salehyan, 2010; Salehyan, Gleditsch & Cunningham, 2011; Aydin, 2012; Aydin & Regan, 2012; Maoz & San-Akca, 2012; Sawyer, Cunningham & Reed, 2017; Tamm, 2016a; Jones, 2017). However, our understanding of the effects of external support on armed conflict is partial at best. Many potential consequences remain understudied and much of previous research has restricted its analysis to large-scale military interventions. For instance, we know little about the effects of support on negotiations or its potential implications for post-conflict stability. The dominant strand in existing research has overlooked many of the potential ways in which states have the ability to influence civil conflicts short of committing troops. Moreover, as most studies do not move beyond the initial decision to provide assistance, we have little insight into why states would change or terminate their support commitment at a later point in time. Our understanding of the political decision-making process of state sponsors is therefore limited. The four essays in this dissertation seek to address these significant research gaps by stressing the dynamic nature of external support provision.

The dissertation furthers our general understanding of external support in civil wars, focusing specifically on state support to rebel movements. In particular, it expands our knowledge regarding the effects of support and enhances our knowledge about the political decision-making process of state sponsors. This research topic is important, given that previous research indicates that the presence of external support adversely affects the dynamics and prospective resolution of armed conflicts. External support generally makes conflicts longer, deadlier and less likely to end in a negotiated settlement (Balch-Lindsay & Enterline, 2000; Heger & Salehyan, 2007; Cunningham, 2010). State sponsors influence both the willingness and ability of rebel groups to instigate political violence (Regan & Meachum, 2014) and can foster cohesion as well as fragmentation within the armed opposition (Lounsbury, 2016; Tamm, 2016b). Rebels with access to external state sponsors are more likely to fight each other, more prone to target civilians, engage more frequently in sexual violence, and are less likely to embrace democracy if they become the new executive once the war is over (Wood, 2010; Fjelde & Nilsson, 2012; Colaresi, 2014; Johansson & Sarwari, 2017). State support to rebels also increases the risk of interstate conflicts (Schultz, 2010). These findings make it imperative to explore questions related to the political decision-making behind state support to belligerents and how these decisions in turn influence conflict processes.

The first essays (I and II) expand our knowledge on the effects of external state support while the latter (III and IV) deepen our understanding of the political decision-making process of state sponsors. Essay I evaluates systematically whether state support to rebels increases the probability of civil war negotiations being initiated. The findings question a widespread belief among policymakers that external support to the rebel side can increase the government's perception of a hurting stalemate and thus encourage negotiations. Essay II explores why some conflicts that have ended experience renewed fighting while others do not. It finds that state support to rebels can increase the risk of conflict recurrence in the short-term while there is no equivalent effect of support provided to governments. These results indicate that there are negative effects of support provision that extend beyond the cessation of political violence. Essay III is the first global analysis of support termination and it thereby opens up an entirely new research field. The essay shows that most factors associated with the initial decision to provide support to rebels cannot account for why states stop providing support but that the transition from the Cold War and the absence of ethnic kinship ties offer some insights into when states are more likely to terminate their support commitments. Essay IV unpacks the political decision-making process of the United States' support to the armed opposition in Nicaragua in the 1980s and in Syria in the 2010s. The essay demonstrates that decision-makers tend to become caught up in an escalatory spiral in which adverse feedback functions as a trigger for increasing previous commitments as long as failure can

be attributed to external actors, while reduced support is often a result of attributing failure to the state sponsor's own actions.

The dissertation makes three broader contributions. First and foremost, it questions the static nature of external support implicit in previous research. The individual essays emphasize the need to look beyond structural, time-invariant factors and stress the dynamic nature of external support provision. Support commitments fluctuate over time and assistance is sometimes terminated before the end of hostilities. The essays in this dissertation pay attention to shifts and temporal dynamics and explore the impact of support related to various time frames. Recognizing this temporal dimension contributes to the current intervention literature with new insights and opens up novel and promising avenues for future research.

The dynamic approach also requires an emphasis on the agency and decision-making of state sponsors. Studies of external support gain leverage by paying more attention to the actors who are making the decisions rather than restricting their analytical focus to general characteristics of the conflict situation (Findley & Teo, 2006). Although support decisions are clearly influenced by a network of interdependent relationships between states and non-state actors I argue that it is most often state sponsors who ultimately decide whether or not to provide, change or terminate assistance. There is thus much to be gained by analytically treating them as central.

Second, the dissertation moves beyond the limited conceptualization of civil war interventions as large-scale military operations. In order to capture much of the impact that external support can have on conflict dynamics, it is useful to define intervention broadly. The covert provision of resources such as weapons and funds often occurs in parallel to (or independent of) large-scale military interventions. Although these activities are fundamentally more difficult to study empirically because of their clandestine nature, it is necessary to incorporate them in our analyses in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the repertoire used by state sponsors to influence civil conflicts. External states do not just contribute with military personnel; support is often channeled indirectly as well.

Third, the dissertation sheds new light on commonly held beliefs in policy circles and academia. Essay I casts considerable doubts upon a claim frequently made by policymakers that military assistance to rebels can be used as a foreign policy tool to force governments to the negotiation table. Essay II problematizes the intent of third parties and explores how states can actually contribute to the recurrence of conflict. Essay III calls into question the effectiveness of threats or sanctions in inducing states to end their sponsorship of rebel movements. The results indicate that most measures available to other states to influence sponsor-rebel relationships have little impact.

The outline of this introductory chapter is as follows. In the next section, I define the key concept of this dissertation: external support in civil wars. Next, I provide an empirical overview of this phenomenon that serves to

highlight its importance and continued relevance. In the subsequent section, I review previous research on external support and identify the various research gaps that this dissertation addresses. The succeeding section briefly clarifies my meta-theoretical assumptions and motivates the overall research methodology. I then go on to present the four individual essays in greater detail. The final section concludes by emphasizing the larger implications of the dissertation and by providing suggestions for future research.

Defining External Support

There are currently a myriad of different concepts available that describes the involvement of outside states in domestic conflicts: intervention, third-party intervention, external support, state sponsorship, state support, partisan interventions, biased interventions, proxy war, indirect interstate conflict, conflict delegation, internationalized conflict, secondary support, outside support and foreign intervention. Many scholars use these concepts synonymously while others see them as distinct concepts with different connotations. Hence, it is essential to be clear about how the central phenomenon under study in this dissertation is defined as this helps to clarify both the scope and significance of its findings.

I define *external support* as a unilateral intervention by a foreign state in an intrastate armed conflict in favor of either the government or the opposition movement. In the individual essays, the main emphasis is placed on state support for rebels. External support includes both the direct participation with troops (military intervention) and more indirect forms of aid such as the provision of weapons, funds, logistics, military training and access to intelligence and sanctuaries. *Intrastate armed conflict* is defined as a contested incompatibility that concerns government and/or territory where the use of force between two parties, of which one is the government of a state, results in at least 25 battle-related deaths in one calendar year.¹ The terms ‘civil conflict’ and ‘civil war’ are used synonymously to intrastate armed conflict and do not necessarily reflect a conflict of higher intensity. An *internationalized conflict* is an intrastate armed conflict in which at least one external state actively supports one side by contributing to the fighting with troops.

The definition of external support is inclusive in the range of activities it encompasses at the same time as it is limited in that the supporter needs to be a state that seeks to deliberately aid one of the actors engaged in warfare. Although diaspora communities, individuals and other non-state groups may also provide assistance, the scale and range of this support cannot compete

¹ This is the definition of intrastate armed conflict used by the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP).

with the vast and often critical resources being provided by state sponsors (Byman et al., 2001).

The definition used is basically in line with the definition of intervention originally proposed by Rosenau (1968; 1969) and later adopted by Regan (2000; 2002). Rosenau claimed that interventions are at their core: (i) convention breaking and (ii) authority-targeted. External support to belligerents in a civil conflict is clearly convention breaking, even more so if the recipient is a non-state actor. The United Nations General Assembly has adopted a resolution which states that:

“No State may use or encourage the use of economic, political or any other type of measures to coerce another State in order to obtain from it the subordination of the exercise of its sovereign rights or to secure from it advantages of any kind. Also, no State shall organize, assist, foment, finance, incite or tolerate subversive, terrorist or armed activities directed towards the violent overthrow of the regime of another State, or interfere in civil strife in another State” (UNGA A/RES/2031).

External support is also authority-targeted in that the intervention is specifically directed at either changing or preserving the structure of political authority in the target state (Rosenau, 1968: 167). However, I prefer to use ‘support’ or ‘sponsorship’ to refer to the phenomena under study rather than intervention. The reason for this is that it more precisely denotes that the state has the intention to aid one of the warring parties rather than being impartial. With regard to state support to non-state actors, this is essentially what Byman (2007) refers to as ‘active support’ and San-Akca (2016) as ‘intentional support’. The definition used excludes third-party interventions that aim to reduce violence or that seek only to assist the warring parties in finding a political solution. Such ‘impartial’ involvement includes mediation efforts and multilateral peacekeeping missions with an international legal mandate. These kinds of third-party interventions are beyond the scope of the current study.

Patterns of Support

States have interfered in each other’s affairs as far back as when nation-states first emerged. In fact, many scholars have considered intervention one of the core issues of international relations (Rosenau, 1964; Little, 1975; Bull, 1986; Heraclides, 1990; Regan, 2000; Aydin, 2012). The principle of state sovereignty has long been regarded as ‘organized hypocrisy’ – a long-standing international norm that is frequently violated (Krasner, 1999). External support in civil wars is nothing new and contrary to common belief it is not limited to the Cold War rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. Ongoing interventions in civil conflicts in Syria, Ukraine, Yem-

en, Afghanistan, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Somalia, South Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo corroborate this. All of these conflicts involve a significant number of external states that actively provide support to the belligerents. Byman (2013) estimates that at least ten outside states have been involved in the civil war in Syria.

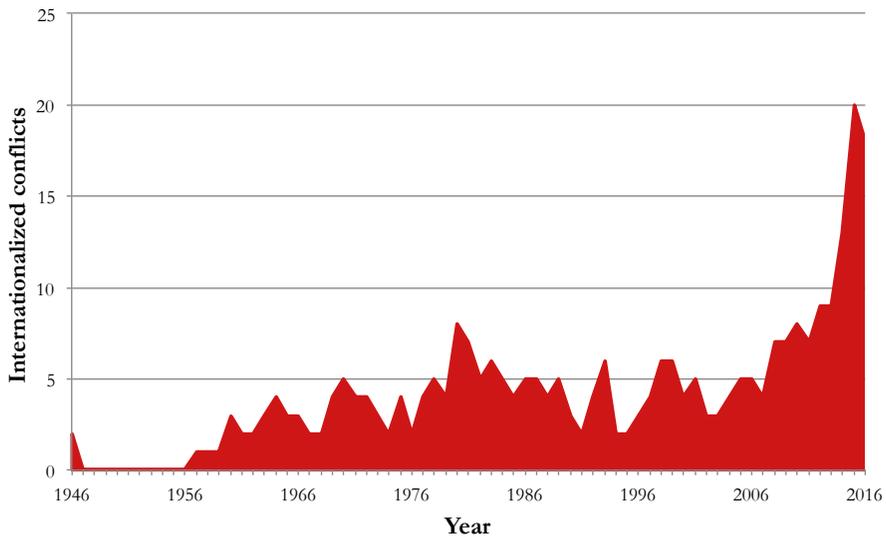


Figure 1. Number of internationalized conflicts 1946-2016

Source: UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset v.17.1-2017, 1946 – 2016

Figure 1 presents a global overview, which illustrates that the number of internationalized civil conflicts has increased since the end of World War II. This upward trend has accelerated in recent years, implying that external states are increasingly willing to intervene in other states' civil conflicts by actively providing troops on the ground.² This underscores the continued and increasing relevance of this research topic. I will now turn to review what we know about external support in civil wars from existing research.

² This is likely to be a low estimate of the full range of external support as the data only includes troop support. The trend is not just attributable to an increase in the number of conflicts in recent years as the proportion of conflicts that has become internationalized displays the same general pattern. Ten years ago, external states fought alongside one of the warring parties in approximately 10% of the world's civil wars, today that figure is nearly 40%.

Existing Research

This dissertation is situated at the intersection between international and domestic politics. It builds on earlier studies on the linkages between civil and international conflict; particularly research on biased third-party interventions, transnational dimensions of civil war, and state sponsorship of terrorist groups. This section reviews previous research on external support in civil wars and highlights the knowledge gaps which this dissertation aim to fill. Previous research has primarily focused on two broader questions: why states intervene and how external support affects conflict dynamics. I will now elaborate on both of these strands of research.

Why States Provide Support

Previous research has identified a number of factors that are important when states decide to initiate support. In essence, a state must have both the opportunity and willingness in order to intervene in another state's civil conflict (Siverson & Starr, 1991). Opportunity is often related to geographical proximity and to whether the state possesses sufficient capabilities. This means that external support is most often provided by great powers or neighboring states. Great powers have a wide-ranging foreign policy agenda in combination with the required resources while proximity to the conflict zone often makes it easier for neighboring states to offer support across the border.

States also need incentives to intervene. Humanitarian reasons can be important, but there are often strategic motivations behind the decision to provide support. External support can serve as a low-cost foreign policy tool to weaken an adversary. In essence, external support can work as a form of conflict delegation (Salehyan, 2010). Interstate rivalry has become the single most important determinant in explaining support provision and it has become so established in the literature that some studies even limit their empirical investigations to such cases (Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski, 2005; Maoz & San-Akca, 2012; Colaresi, 2014). Interstate rivals are pairs of states that have a long history of enmity between them. Two types of rivalries exist. The first is a direct rivalry in which one or both states are also engaged in intrastate armed conflict at home. Examples of this type of rivalry include the relationship between India-Pakistan and Sudan-Chad. The second type of rivalry is indirect in that two outside rival states seek to influence a third state's civil conflict. A prominent example of this is the rivalry between the

United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War, which affected a number of civil conflicts around the world. A more contemporary example is Saudi Arabia and Iran, which are backing opposing sides in Yemen's civil war.

Besides targeting rivals, states may have a number of reasons for initiating support. States might want to offer support to a kin group, increase their regional influence, promote a certain ideology or limit conflict diffusion (Saideman, 2002; Byman, 2007; Kathman, 2011). Neighbors usually have a strong interest in the conflict as they are more likely to be directly affected by its outcome and potential spillover effects (Kathman, 2011). Some recent studies show that economic interests, trade ties and access to strategic resources are central for many interveners (Aydin, 2012; Stojek & Chacha, 2015; Bove, Gleditsch & Sekeris, 2016). States are generally more likely to become involved when economic interests are at stake. The probability of military intervention increases when the state affected by civil war has large oil reserves and the external state has a high demand for oil (Bove, Gleditsch & Sekeris, 2016). Furthermore, if an opposition movement has access to extractable resources, such as diamonds, it is far more likely to attract external state sponsors (Findley & Marineau, 2015).

Transnational ties between supporters and receivers are equally central. There is a large literature which points to the importance of ethnic ties in encouraging state support for ethnic groups (Carment, 1993; Davis & Moore, 1997; Saideman, 1997; 2002; Jenne, 2007; Huibregtse, 2010; Mylonas, 2013; Nome, 2013). Members of ethnic groups care about the welfare of other group members and this loyalty transcends state borders. Studies focusing on external support to rebel movements have uncovered a similar effect when considering a larger set of transnational relationships underpinned by either ethnicity, religion or ideology (Salehyan, Gleditsch & Cunningham, 2011; San-Akca, 2016). Relatedly, many former colonial powers maintain a strong interest in the affairs of their former colonies (Stojek & Chacha, 2015). Some former colonial powers still maintain foreign military bases abroad, which can facilitate the provision of support and reduce transaction costs. France's numerous interventions in francophone African states provides a compelling example (Gregory, 2000).

In sum, existing research offers ample explanations as to why states initiate support and has been able to identify a range of meaningful correlations. Nevertheless we still lack a more detailed understanding of the political decision-making process of state sponsors. Current research suffers from two major shortcomings. First, studies have almost exclusively focused on explaining the initial decision to provide support. After this decision has been taken, we know little about what transpires. Does external support fluctuate and if so, why do state sponsors alter their prior commitments? Essay IV seeks to address this gap. The essay focuses on the political decision-making process of the United States in regard to the armed opposition in Nicaragua

in the 1980s and in Syria in 2010s. In essence, it demonstrates that decision-makers tend to become caught up in an escalatory spiral in which adverse feedback functions as a trigger for increasing previous commitments as long as failure can be attributed to external actors, while reduced support is often a result of attributing failure to the state sponsor's own actions. Essay III also investigates what happens after the initial decision to provide support has been taken. It focuses on the termination of state support to rebels and opens up a new avenue of research by being the first global analysis of this phenomenon. In particular, it sheds light on whether some of the main theories used to explain the initiation of rebel support are able to offer insights into its persistence or termination. The findings suggest that most factors associated with the initial decision to provide support cannot account for why states stop providing support. The implication is that the causes of support onset and termination are largely distinct.

How Support Affects Civil Conflicts

External support affects conflict processes in various ways. Existing research has mainly focused on the impact of external support on conflict duration and outcome. In addition, scholars have explored whether support affects conflict onset, conflict intensity, interstate conflict, rebel group dynamics, and post-conflict democratization. However, several studies restrict their analysis to large-scale military interventions. Most of the findings indicate that external support adversely affects conflict dynamics and that it reduces the prospects for successful conflict resolution.

Armed conflicts with external support tend to last longer, at least when both sides receive outside support (Regan, 2002; Aydin & Regan, 2012). This creates a 'balance of power' in which neither party is capable of successfully bringing the conflict to an end. As resources are plentiful, the parties can regularly rearm and thus they never reach a mutually hurting stalemate. However, some research indicates that external support to just one of the conflict actors increases the likelihood of victory for that particular actor and this may shorten the duration of conflict. External support to the rebel side generally increases the likelihood of insurgent victory (Balch-Lindsay, Enterline & Joyce, 2008; Gent, 2008; Lyall & Wilson, 2009; Akcinaroglu, 2012) while it appears that support to the government side is only effective when the fighting capacity of the rebel forces either matches or exceeds that of the government (Sullivan & Karreth, 2015). A recent study by Jones (2017) suggests that we need to differentiate between various intervention strategies and their timing. He finds that there is a critical window early on in which external support to the rebel side is likely to increase the probability of insurgent victory, while direct military intervention on behalf of the government is only likely to succeed once a civil conflict has become protracted.

Armed conflicts with many external state sponsors are less likely to end in a negotiated settlement (Cunningham, 2010; 2011). External states may enter a conflict with partly different agendas from the warring parties and thus expand the number of disagreements that need to be settled. The challenges associated with achieving a negotiated solution tend to grow in complexity as the number of actors who have the power to block or stall the process increases. The more actors that are involved, the more complicated the bargaining environment becomes, as each actor has a stake in the negotiations. In addition, some types of support may serve to increase uncertainty about the parties' capabilities and thus complicate the bargaining process even further. Sawyer et al. (2017) found that conflicts are less likely to end if opposition movements receive highly fungible external support such as money or guns. This leads to greater insecurity that can hinder agreement on a settlement.

Some research suggests that external support can contribute to the initial outbreak of intrastate conflict (Brown, 1996; Sambanis, 2004; Regan & Meachum, 2014). Case studies have long suggested this but it has been hard to determine whether a general relationship exists, as most global datasets do not include the years prior to the onset of conflict. A recent study by Regan and Meachum (2014), utilizing new data on countries with political instability confirms that external support does indeed increase the risk of conflict onset. States can provide resources to the parties that are crucial in the beginning of an armed struggle. Resources such as military training, weapons and safe havens can significantly facilitate mobilization and increase both the capacity and the resolve of the receiver.

Armed conflicts with external support are often more deadly (Rasler, 1983; Lacina, 2006; Heger & Salehyan, 2007). Battle-related deaths increase as additional resources are made available to the warring parties. External states can make advanced weaponry accessible to the belligerents that they would otherwise not have access to. This enables the warring parties to inflict far greater damage. Furthermore, armed conflicts in which the opposition receives external support are commonly more disposed to civilian targeting (Wood, 2010). Resources provided by external state sponsors can make rebel movements less dependent on their local constituency (Weinstein, 2007). Access to external resources from state sponsors may reduce the incentives to win hearts and minds of civilians since the rebels are likely to be less dependent on the local population for resources that could help sustain the fighting. Thus, the presence of external support to the rebel side has the potential to increase the likelihood of civilian targeting and casualties (Wood, Kathman & Gent, 2012; Salehyan, Siroky & Wood, 2014).

Furthermore, armed conflicts with external support to rebels are more likely to trigger international conflicts and disputes (Schultz, 2010; Maoz & San-Akca, 2012). When a state becomes involved in a civil war on the rebel side, this may heighten tensions between the state supporter and the govern-

ment of the state affected by civil war, particularly if the supporting state is also a neighboring state. In such situations, the state affected by civil war may seek to retaliate against a neighboring state for supporting opposition movements and/or conducting cross-border counterinsurgency operations within the conflict-affected state's territory. Civil wars can create new sources of interstate tension, and external support to rebel organizations can both act as a substitute and a trigger for the direct use of force between states (Schultz, 2010).

In addition, there is evidence which suggests that external support increases the likelihood of fighting between rebel groups (Fjelde & Nilsson, 2012). Groups that have received support from a foreign state have a higher likelihood of engaging in inter-rebel violence. An outside state might consciously offer resources to certain rebel groups in order to outmaneuver other groups that are deemed threatening to that state's overall political aims. In order to understand violence between different groups it might thus be necessary to look at the strategic interests of state supporters. Other studies have shown that state sponsors can affect the organizational capacity of rebel movements by fostering either cohesion or fragmentation within groups (Lounsbury, 2016; Tamm, 2016b).

Lastly, post-war countries in which the new government received external support during the war tend to have less stable democratization trajectories (Colaresi, 2014). Groups that come to control the government after the war are vulnerable to political attacks on their patriotism and judgment if they assume office with the help of a former interstate enemy. Democratic transitions will normally only be successfully initiated when the side in power after the conflict has a high probability of winning the subsequent election. Rebel groups or governments that allied with external states face the possibility of a post-conflict crisis of legitimacy in the eyes of the public, since they may be viewed as being little more than a puppet government controlled by the external supporter. The process of democratization—which often involves increased transparency, a free press and free and fair elections—is likely to contribute to such tactical alliances becoming publically known. This may make democracy a less attractive option for groups that have allied with external states as they have incentives to hinder a transition to democracy in order to stay in power.

To summarize, we know that external support influences the onset, dynamics and outcome of armed conflicts. However, our understanding of the effects of external support is still incomplete since many potential consequences remain understudied and much of previous research has restricted its analysis to large-scale military interventions. For instance, we know little about the effects of support on civil war negotiations or its implications for post-conflict stability. Essay I and Essay II address these gaps by expanding our knowledge on the effects on external support with regard to these issues. Essay I explores whether state support to rebels might facilitate civil war

negotiations. It evaluates a widely held belief in policy circles that support could be used to encourage negotiations. This claim has never been systematically assessed. The findings suggest that states are generally unable to foster negotiations by providing support to the armed opposition. Essay II finds that state support to rebels can increase the risk of conflict recurrence in the short-term while there is no equivalent effect of support provided to governments. These results indicate that there are negative effects of support provision that extend beyond the cessation of political violence.

Methodology

This dissertation makes use of multiple methodological approaches in order to increase our understanding of external support in civil wars. In this section I briefly clarify the dissertation's meta-theoretical assumptions, motivate the overall research design and elaborate on the source material used.

As social scientists, we are not always transparent in regard to the meta-theoretical assumptions that underpin our work. However, just as important as being transparent in regard to our research methodology is recognizing the fundamental assumptions we make about knowledge production. This dissertation is based on a positivist ontology in that it adheres to four implicit assumptions about the world: (1) naturalism, (2) objectivism, (3) a belief in regularities, and (4) empiricism (Smith, Booth & Zalewski, 1996).³

All essays in this dissertation concern external support in civil wars. However, they each look at different dependent variables: the onset of negotiations, conflict recurrence, termination of support and changes in support commitments. The selection of the most appropriate methodology reflects the research questions of each individual essay. Both quantitative and qualitative research designs are employed, as the former are better at establishing patterns and accounting for alternative explanatory factors while the latter produce more nuanced explanations in regard to sequencing and causal mechanisms. Essay I, Essay II and Essay III all use statistical estimation techniques (duration analysis or binary time-series cross-section logit models) while Essay IV uses process tracing to make within-case analyses of two individual cases. Most essays are concerned not only if something happens, but also when it happens. By thinking in terms of embedded longitudinal implications, a potentially richer understanding of the social processes underlying the problem can be achieved (Box-Steffensmeier & Jones, 2004).

Studying what are often covert actions poses several methodological challenges in terms of data availability. Official government documentation is often classified and access to key decision-makers is often restricted. This means that for research on a global scale it becomes necessary to rely on secondary sources. Essays I-III all make use of systematically collected data about external support in armed conflicts 1975–2009 from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (Högbladh, Pettersson & Themnér, 2011). The UCDP External Support Data is one of the most comprehensive global datasets

³ See Smith et al. (1996) for an elaborate discussion of these assumptions.

available and its sources consist mainly of media and NGO reports along with UN documentation and scholarly publications. The dataset includes both covert and overt forms of support, but is restricted to support that is intentionally given to aid a party in an active armed conflict. This is ideal since the focus of this dissertation is specifically on deliberate assistance.

The UCDP External Support Data offers several advantages compared to similar datasets such as the Non-State Actor Data by Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan (2013), the intervention data by Regan (2002) and the NAGs dataset by San-Akca (2016). The main benefits are that it (1) covers a broad range of external support, (2) offers detailed information about state supporters, (3) includes data on support to both sides, and (4) provides time-varying data on an annual basis. Since the focus of this dissertation is on state support I utilize a subset of this data that only covers support provided by states. All empirical models are based on confirmed instances of external support, which is likely to be a conservative estimate. Two conceivable biases – operating in opposite directions – are inherent in this type of data. First, knowledge about external support is likely to increase over time as issues become less sensitive and previously classified documents become public. This suggests that the older the case, the more accurate it is likely to be. Yet, there is also an opposing trend related to media coverage. In today’s connected world, covert operations are no longer as secret as they used to be. Today, we can see videos of Russian armored vehicles in Ukraine or Iranian military advisers in Syria on social media within a day and policy decisions taken behind closed doors leak promptly to the media. This suggests that the newer the case, the more accurate it is likely to be.

Essay IV tackles the data challenge through an in-depth analysis of two individual cases. Process tracing requires large amounts of data, which ideally come from a wide range of sources (George & Bennett, 2005; Beach & Pedersen, 2013; Bennett & Checkel, 2014). To this end, I engaged in an extensive data collection effort. The analysis rests on primary sources such as policy documents, meeting notes, personal memoirs, elite interviews, and public statements as well as secondary source material comprised of media reports, academic publications and reports from policy institutes. During a period of five months, I studied thousands of declassified documents hosted by the National Security Archive in Washington D.C.⁴ This material included policy documents, cables, meeting notes and letters between agencies and decision-makers. Furthermore, I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with US policymakers with insights into the policy process. The wide range of material allowed for triangulation between different sources, which to

⁴ The main emphasis was placed on the collections: (1) The Iran-Contra Affair: The Making of a Scandal, (2) Nicaragua: The Making of U.S. Policy 1978-1990, (3) Presidential Directives on National Security, part I & II, (4) CIA Covert Operations from Carter to Obama 1977-2010, (5) El Salvador: The Making of U.S. Policy 1977-1984, and (6) El Salvador: War, Peace and Human Rights, 1980-1994.

some extent helped mitigate selection bias (Tansey, 2007). Since we lack systematic data on changes in support commitments, this constitutes a significant empirical contribution.

Another methodological concern is the selection processes associated with the global samples – particularly in regard to Essay III since the termination of support can only be observed if support has been provided in the first place. As such, it would make sense to first look at the selection of which conflicts receive external support since these later become the observations under study. However, given the current state of research on support termination, it is not possible to correctly specify such models since we have yet to properly identify which factors that can account for the provision of support and which might say something about its termination. Selection models require that we can identify at least one specific factor that would explain the provision of support that we know for certain is unrelated (exogenous) to its termination. That is, we need a variable that affects selection but not outcome (Heckman, 1976; Achen, 1986; Sartori, 2003). Since this study constitutes the first global analysis on support termination, we lack the required theoretical priors to make this necessary distinction, so I leave it for future research to refine these models once we have generated a critical mass of research on the topic.

Having elaborated on my overall research design and certain methodological challenges, I now turn to present each of the four individual essays in greater detail.

Presentation of the Essays

The dissertation contains four essays that each seek to advance our understanding of biased third-party interventions, in particular state support for rebel movements. The first essays (I-II) add to our understanding of how external state support influences conflict dynamics while the other two essays (III-IV) question the static nature of assistance and begin to unpack the political decision-making process behind decisions that alter the previous support commitment. Essay I evaluates the claim that external state support to rebel groups can put pressure on the government to engage in civil war negotiations. In Essay II, I argue that past instances of external state support is likely to lead to conflict recurrence, especially if the rebel side is the recipient. Essay III looks broadly at what factors might explain the termination of state support to rebels while the civil war is still ongoing. Lastly, Essay IV takes a closer look at the decision-making process behind US support to rebels in two cases and explores why support commitments vary over time.

Essay I: Escalate to De-Escalate? External State Support and Governments' Willingness to Negotiate

The first essay evaluates the commonly held belief among policymakers that state support to rebels can be used as a foreign policy tool to pressure governments into negotiations. Many seem to believe that providing material assistance to the rebel side can induce a 'ripe moment' that favor the onset of negotiations. However, this widespread belief has never been systematically assessed. Can external state support to rebels increase the likelihood of civil war negotiations?

Essay I connects this reasoning to ripeness theory (Zartman, 1989; 1993; 1995; 2000) and suggests that great powers, sustained pressure over time or direct military intervention might be even more effective in coercing the target government. The hypotheses are evaluated using binary time-series cross section (BTSCS) logit models that make use of global data on the onset of negotiations in all intrastate armed conflicts between 1975 and 2009.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the findings demonstrate that external state support to rebels hinders rather than facilitates the onset of negotiations between the warring parties. The statistical results show a negative correlation between external support and the onset of negotiations. This may be

because state supporters have other underlying motives or because pressure increases the resolve of the target government or emboldens the rebels. The negative effect is even greater if the state sponsor is a great power. Furthermore, the essay finds that sustained pressure over time is also likely to decrease the probability of negotiations but this finding is not robust to alternative model specifications. Direct military intervention has no discernable impact. The essay contributes both to our understanding of biased third-party interventions and to the literature on civil war negotiations.

Essay II: The Legacy of Foreign Patrons: External State Support and Conflict Recurrence

The second essay was published in the *Journal of Peace Research* 54(4) in 2017. It explores why some conflicts that have ended experience renewed fighting while others do not. Previous research on conflict recurrence has approached this question by looking at domestic factors such as how the war was fought, how it ended or factors associated with its aftermath. Except for the literature on third-party security guarantees, scholars have overlooked the influence of outside actors on conflict recurrence. In contrast to previous explanations of recurrence, Essay II emphasizes the need to expand our focus to incorporate how outside states might influence the probability of renewed warfare. The central argument is that previous instances of biased third-party interventions create an external support structure that influences the risk of conflict recurrence in the future. The essay posits two theoretical mechanisms as to how this would work: facilitation and anticipation. The first mechanism holds that outside states can directly facilitate remobilization by providing strategic advantages to the challenger. The second mechanism emphasizes that the mere anticipation of renewed support can be enough to alter the calculations of the challenger. Both of these lead to the same observable implication: that armed conflicts with external support would experience a greater likelihood to recur compared to those that did not receive support.

This argument is evaluated using Cox proportional hazards models on global data on intrastate armed conflicts 1975-2009. The findings demonstrate that state support to rebels increases the risk of conflict recurrence in the short term as groups anticipate or come to receive renewed assistance from state sponsors. The results further indicate that it is more important for rebel groups to have had enduring support over the years in the previous conflict episode rather than access to multiple state sponsors. State support to governments on the other hand is not associated with conflict recurrence. The essay emphasizes the long-term implications of support provision and adds yet another dimension to a growing body of literature that demonstrates how external support provision adversely affects conflict processes.

Essay III: Turning Off the Taps: The Termination of State Sponsorship

The third essay is forthcoming in *Terrorism and Political Violence* and was published online in 2017. The essay asks why some states terminate their sponsorship of rebel movements while others are persistent in their provision of support. Most research to date has focused on why states decide to initiate support to rebels and how this affects conflict duration. However, we know little about why states stop providing assistance while the armed conflict is still ongoing. This is surprising given that support has been shown to make armed conflicts more intractable and that other states and international organizations frequently condemn and sanction states with the explicit aim of ending rebel patronage. The essay moves beyond the initial decision to provide support to explore when and why states terminate their support at a later point in time.

The essay constitutes the first large-N study to examine which factors are linked to the termination of external state support to rebel movements – a hitherto neglected but highly policy-relevant question. It uses Cox proportional hazards models to uncover global patterns in state support to rebel movements between 1975 and 2009. The results demonstrate that few factors used to explain support provision can offer insights into its termination. This implies that the provision and termination of support have partly distinct causes. However, the essay does find that support is most likely to be terminated when no ethnic kinship ties exist between the rebel movement and the supporting state and that many decisions to withdraw support coincide with the end of the Cold War. Surprisingly, most external pressures that other states can apply – such as threats and sanctions – do not appear to have any significant impact.

Essay IV: Changing Commitments: US Support to Rebels in Syria and Nicaragua

The fourth essay starts to unpack the political decision-making process behind policy choices that fundamentally alter the support commitment of the state sponsor. The calculus of state supporters varies over time, which means that the level and type of assistance provided to the armed opposition fluctuates. What drives these strategic decisions by states to intensify or scale back their support to rebel movements?

Essay IV offers a theoretical argument that is able to account for these policy adjustments over time. Drawing on the literature of foreign policy change, it suggests that leaders change their support commitment when there is adverse feedback and that support increases as long as the causes of policy failure can be attributed to external actors while cutbacks occur when failure is attributed to the state sponsor's own actions. The latter prompts domestic

audiences to act in order to force leaders to back down. Adverse feedback and the process of attributing policy failure is thus key to understanding when and why states alter their support commitment.

Process tracing is used to explore the value of the theoretical framework. I conduct within-case analyses of United States' support commitments to insurgent groups in Nicaragua during the 1980s and in Syria during the 2010s. The empirical evidence comes from a wide range of sources such as policy documents, elite interviews, meeting notes, public statements, personal memoirs, media reports, academic publications and reports from policy institutes.

I find that the theory is able to account for the within-case variation in both cases notwithstanding differences in time period, presidential administrations, and civil wars. This suggests that the theoretical framework has traction across different contexts. The findings indicate that central decision-makers tend to become caught up in an escalatory spiral in which negative feedback functions as a trigger for increasing previous commitments as long as the cause of policy failure could be attributed to external actors. This is consistent with evidence from psychological research in regard to escalation commitments: individuals often allocate additional resources despite information suggesting that the policy is not likely to produce its intended outcome. De-escalation is largely driven by restrictions imposed by domestic audiences following a process of internal attribution. Leaders' perceptions and the domestic politics of the state sponsor are thus key to understanding variation in external support.

Conclusion

This dissertation focuses on state support for rebel groups. All four essays address gaps in previous research and make individual contributions that further our understanding of this phenomenon. The dissertation: (a) demonstrates that state support to rebels decreases rather than increases the probability of negotiations, (b) provides evidence that support can contribute to conflict recurrence under certain conditions, (c) provides the first global analysis of support termination, and (d) offers a nuanced understanding of why state sponsors change their support commitments. In doing so, it contributes with new knowledge to the subfields of third-party interventions, conflict recurrence, civil war negotiations, foreign policy decision-making and state sponsorship of terrorism.

The main contribution of the dissertation is its emphasis on the dynamic nature of external support. Support commitments are not inherently static and state sponsors adjust and terminate their support over time. Recognizing this is central both to expanding our knowledge of the effects of support on conflict dynamics and for further unpacking the political decision-making processes of state sponsors. The individual essays recognize this by leveraging time-varying data, incorporating temporal dynamics, and by expanding the analysis to include the period after the initial decision to offer support has been taken. In sum, the dissertation both expands our knowledge of the effects of external state support and deepens our understanding of the political decision-making process of state sponsors.

The findings add to a burgeoning literature which demonstrates how the provision of state support to rebels negatively influences conflict dynamics (Cunningham, 2006; Heger & Salehyan, 2007; Salehyan, 2009; Cunningham, 2010; Schultz, 2010; Colaresi, 2014; Salehyan, Siroky & Wood, 2014; Sawyer, Cunningham & Reed, 2017). Essay I challenges the widespread belief in policy circles that support to rebels can be used to foster negotiations. On the contrary, it finds that support is correlated with a decreased likelihood of negotiation onset. Essay II demonstrates that state support to rebels increases the risk of conflict recurrence in the short term as groups anticipate or come to receive renewed assistance from state sponsors. The results further indicate that it is more important for rebel groups to have had enduring support in the previous conflict episode rather than access to multiple state sponsors. Essay III demonstrates that few of the factors used to explain support provision can offer insights into its termination. This implies

that the provision and termination of support have partly distinct causes. However, the essay does find that support is most likely to be terminated when no ethnic kinship ties exist between the rebel movement and the supporting state and that many decisions to withdraw support coincide with the end of the Cold War. Essay IV demonstrates that decision-makers tend to become caught up in an escalatory spiral in which adverse feedback functions as a trigger for increasing previous commitments as long as failure can be attributed to external actors, while reduced support is often a result of attributing failure to the state sponsor's own actions.

Implications for Future Research

Future research should further relax the distinction between domestic and international politics and pay more attention to processes and relationships that transcend state borders. Five avenues look especially promising in furthering our understanding of external support in civil wars in light of the findings presented here.

First, we should devote more attention to the fluctuations and termination of external support instead of the almost exclusive focus on its initial provision. Support provision is a dynamic process and we need to further disentangle what influences the level of commitment of state sponsors at various points in time. The essays in this dissertation provide the first steps in this larger endeavor. In relation to this, we need to collect global and time-varying data on levels of support to supplement what we already know about the various forms of assistance.

Second, we need to continue to unpack the political decision-making process of state sponsors. To this end it might be useful to differentiate between various types of supporters and delve deeper into their domestic politics. As a first step we should think of meaningful categorizations of supporters. The motives as well as the means employed by, for example, great powers, neighbors and rogue states might be quite distinct when it comes to the provision of external support and its subsequent effects. As a second step we should relax the unitary actor assumption and start to engage seriously with the domestic politics within state supporters. This is needed in order to see how various actors and structures interact to shape decisions related to support provision.

Third, while the literature on external support to rebels is now burgeoning, this should be accompanied by an increased focus on security assistance provided to governments. State support to governments can have equally detrimental effects, but have rarely been the focus of research outside the realms of interstate alliances, arms trade and human rights. In this context, it might prove useful to explore the agency and motives of recipient governments, similar to what has been done in recent years in research on state support to rebel groups.

Fourth, the increase in United Nations peacekeeping operations with enforcement mandates such as those in Libya (2011) or Mali (2013) begin to blur the distinction between impartial third-party interventions and those that provide active support to the belligerents. This suggests that we might need to revisit the common analytical distinction made in the literature between ‘neutral’ and ‘biased’ interventions. Greater attention should also be paid to the interplay between unilateral biased interventions and these larger multi-lateral efforts. In particular, we need to examine the various interactions between outside states in much more detail and not assume that decisions are always taken unilaterally. For instance, it might prove useful to focus on the role of ‘brokers’ as major powers may channel their support intended to non-state actors through third-party states. Current datasets are not able to capture this kind of delegation and we have yet to discover its actual implications.

Fifth, it might be beneficial to further distinguish between various forms of external support and to theorize more about how the political decision-making as well as potential effects could differ. For instance, different forms of support vary in costs and some may be more susceptible to termination than others. Recent studies have just started to unpack these differences (Sawyer, Cunningham & Reed, 2017) and how the decision-making in regard to covert operations might differ from overt actions taken by states (Poznansky, 2015; Carson, 2016). These are promising avenues worth exploring further.

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