

Credible Discipline or Competitive Impunity? Multi-State Support for Insurgencies and Civilian Violence

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Abstract

A large body of research examines how external state support influences rebel behavior in civil conflicts. This literature has primarily conceptualized state sponsorship of rebellion as a dyadic relationship between rebels and their sponsors, focusing on how individual supporters enable or constrain rebel behavior through direct leverage. While this approach has yielded important insights, it overlooks a fundamental reality that many rebel groups often operate in multi-sponsor environments where support flows from several states simultaneously. In such contexts, rebels are exposed to a more complex set of relationships than a single patron-client tie. This study moves beyond bilateral ties to argue that the structure and dynamics of support networks shape rebels' strategic use of violence against civilians by altering the balance between external discipline and rebel autonomy. Drawing on a global dataset of multi-sponsored rebel groups active in intrastate conflicts between 1989 and 2017, we test three sets of mechanisms linking network properties to rebel violence, namely the composition of sponsor networks, interactions among supporters, and the characteristics and substitutability of support. The findings suggest that these mechanisms are systematically conditioned by network-level properties, particularly the concentration of military power among sponsors and the functional redundancy of support provisions. Alongside these conditional effects, the normative composition of sponsor networks, such as the degree of political alignment and regime type, has an independent, direct effect on rebels' incentives for civilian victimization.

Keywords: civil conflicts, external support networks, civilian violence