

Université de Montréal

It's No Secret: The Overtness of External Support and Rebel-Civilian Interactions in Civil Wars

Par

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Résumé

Existe-t-il un lien entre le degré de publicité du soutien fourni par des États à des groupes rebelles et les relations entre les insurgés soutenus et les civils durant les guerres internes ? Les études sur les conflits examinent de plus en plus la manière dont un soutien étatique externe à des insurgés locaux façonne le comportement de ces derniers. Cependant, la littérature néglige l'influence de la décision des États-soutiens de nier ou reconnaître leur aide sur la conduite des rebelles.

Divisée en trois parties, ma thèse de doctorat utilise une méthodologie mixte alliant analyses quantitatives et études de cas qualitatives pour combler cette lacune dans la littérature.

L'*Article 1* présente de nouvelles données sur le degré de publicité du soutien étatique aux rebelles durant les guerres civiles entre 1989 et 2018. Il montre ensuite que cette variable est négativement corrélée à la propension des insurgés à user de la violence envers les non-combattants.

L'*Article 2* commence par présenter une théorie expliquant comment, pourquoi et dans quelles circonstances les États-soutiens tentent-ils de superviser les interactions avec les non-combattants des insurgés qu'ils appuient lors des guerres civiles. Il applique ensuite ce cadre théorique au soutien des États-Unis aux Unités de protection du peuple (YPG) et aux Forces démocratiques syriennes (FDS) dans le nord-est de la Syrie entre 2014 et 2020.

L'*Article 3* montre qu'en plus d'être corrélé négativement à la violence rebelle envers les civils, le degré de publicité du soutien étatique aux insurgés est corrélé positivement à la propension de ces derniers à fournir des services à la population. Il nuance ensuite les résultats statistiques en montrant que l'existence d'institutions formelles de fourniture de services n'équivaut pas nécessairement à une participation effective des civils à l'exercice du pouvoir en zones rebelles.

Ainsi, la thèse met en évidence le lien critique entre le degré de publicité du soutien étatique aux rebelles et les interactions entre insurgés soutenus et civils. Les résultats de recherche montrent dès lors que les expériences des non-combattants au cours de conflits qualifiés d'internes à un espace sont corrélés à des facteurs et intérêts liés à des acteurs externes à ce même territoire.

Mots-clés : guerres civiles, soutien étatique externe, groupes rebelles, clandestinité, publicité, violence envers les civils, gouvernance rebelle.

Abstract

What is the relationship between the overtness of state support to rebels and the nature of insurgent-civilian interactions during civil wars? Conflict studies increasingly examine how external support to local insurgents influences rebel behavior. However, the literature neglects the link between the state sponsors' decisions to acknowledge or deny their support and insurgent behavior.

My three-part doctoral dissertation uses a mixed-methods research design combining quantitative analyses and qualitative case studies to address this gap in the literature.

Article 1 introduces new data on the overtness of external support to rebels during civil wars between 1989 and 2018. The paper then shows that this variable negatively correlates with the propensity of the insurgents to target civilians.

Article 2 begins by outlining a theory of how, why, and when the state sponsors monitor the interactions with civilians of the insurgents they support. The paper then applies this theoretical framework to the United States' (US) support for the People's Defense Units (YPG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Northeast Syria between 2014 and 2020.

Article 3 shows that in addition to negatively correlating with civilian targeting, the overtness of external support to rebels positively correlates with the propensity of the insurgents to provide social services during civil wars. The paper then qualifies the statistical results by showing that the creation of formal social service institutions by the rebels does not necessarily lead to effective civilian participation in decision-making in insurgent areas.

The dissertation thus highlights the critical link between the overtness of state support to rebels and the insurgent-civilian interactions. In this way, I show that civilian experiences during conflicts we characterize as internal to a territory correlate with factors and interests linked to external actors.

Keywords: civil wars, external state support, rebel groups, covertness, overtness, violence against civilians, rebel governance.

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Abbreviations

AANES: Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria

ACLED: Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project

AFDL: Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo

AFP: Agence France-Presse

AIC: Akaike Information Criterion

BBC: British Broadcasting Corporation

BIC: Bayesian Information Criterion

CBS: Columbia Broadcasting System

CIA: Central Intelligence Agency

CNN: Cable News Network

COAR: Center for Operational Analysis and Research

COVID-19: Coronavirus Disease 2019

DIADATA: Diamond Dataset

DoD: Department of Defense

DR Congo: Democratic Republic of the Congo

DRUGDATA: Drug Cultivation Dataset

EU: European Union

FARC: Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia

FMLN: Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front

FORGE: Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence

FSA: Free Syrian Army

GED: Georeferenced Event Dataset

GEMDATA: Gemstone Location Dataset

GM: Group Members

HRW: Human Rights Watch

ICG: International Crisis Group

INT: Interview

IOs: International Organizations

IR: International Researchers

IS: Islamic State

ISIL: Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant

ISIS: Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

KCK: Kurdistan Communities Union

KNC: Kurdish National Council

KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government

LTTE: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

M23: Mouvement du 23 Mars

MLC: Mouvement de libération du Congo

MNLF: Moro National Liberation Front

MPLA: People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola

NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

NDA: National Democratic Alliance

NE Syria: Northeast Syria

NGOs: Non-Governmental Organizations

NPR: National Public Radio

NSA: Non-State Actors

NSC: National Security Council

NTC: National Transitional Council

NYT: New York Times

ODI: Overseas Development Institute

OHCHR: Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

PETRODATA: Petroleum Dataset

PGM: Pro-Government Militias

PKK: Kurdistan Workers' Party

POW: Prisoners of war

PRIO: Peace Research Institute Oslo

PYD: Democratic Union Party

R²: R Squared

RAND: Research and Development

RCC: Raqqa Civil Council

RCD: Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie

RMSE: Root-Mean-Square Error

RUSI: Royal United Services Institute

SDF: Syrian Democratic Forces

SIGINT: Signals intelligence

SJ: Syrian Journalists

SJAC: Syria Justice & Accountability Centre

SNA: Syrian National Army

SNC: Syrian National Council

SNHR: Syrian Network for Human Rights

SOF: Special Operations Forces

STJ: Syrians for Truth and Justice

TAC: Terrorism in Armed Conflict

TESEV: Turkish Economic and Social Studies Foundation

UCDP: Uppsala Conflict Data Program

UK: United Kingdom

UN: United Nations

UNHRC: United Nations Human Rights Council

UNITA: National Union for the Total Independence of Angola

US: United States

USO: United States Officials

USSOCOM: US Special Operations Command

Washington DC: Washington District of Columbia

YPG: People's Defense Units

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Introduction

“In peacetime they would have had neither the excuse nor the will to invite this intervention: but in time of war, when alliances were available to either party to the detriment of their opponents and thereby their own advantage, there were ready opportunities for revolutionaries to call in one side or the other.”

Thucydides (2009, 169–70), mentioned by *Kalyvas* (2006, 383)

Often associated with the Cold War, proxy wars have returned to the spotlight dramatically in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.¹ The attack on February 24 posed a stark dilemma to states of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO): if the Ukrainian government were to fall, would they support an irregular war against a pro-Kremlin regime (Cooper 2022; Wintour, Harding, and Walker 2022; Cohen 2022; London 2022)?² The conflict began when Russia provided aid to insurgents in eastern Ukraine in 2014 (Malyarenko and Wolff 2018). Would the situation be reversed this time with NATO support to pro-Ukrainian rebels? Surprisingly, while there were talks about the nature of possible assistance and its repercussions in terms of escalation between Russia and NATO (Harper 2022; S. Harris et al. 2022), there was little discussion about the form of support for potential rebels; notably the comparative advantages of covert versus overt assistance for both the sponsors and the would-be Ukrainian insurgents.³

State support for insurgent organizations marks the post-1989 era, with a transition from a phenomenon of rebel sponsorship mainly centered around the two world superpowers during the

¹ This introduction takes elements from an article I published in *Le Rubicon* (Arthur Stein 2022).

² The sources I present are a non-exhaustive sample of many media publications on material aid to a potential Ukrainian rebellion against a pro-Russian regime.

³ I do not base this assertion on a systematic analysis of media publications on the subject. Exceptions to the lack of debate on the form of assistance exist (Long 2022).

Cold War, to a more polymorph phenomenon in the subsequent period (Grauer and Tierney 2018; Meier et al. 2022). As a result, conflict studies intensely scrutinize the impact of transnational support to insurgents on conflict dynamics. However, while studies focus on the content of aid—what resources external states provide to rebels—few interrogate the form of support—whether the state sponsors publicly deny or acknowledge their material assistance. Thus, this dissertation focuses on the *overt*ness of external support to rebels and questions how it relates to the interactions between insurgents and civilians in civil wars.

This introduction proceeds as follows. The first section defines external state support to rebels and outlines the phenomenon’s broad historical trends. The second section presents the literature on the influence of external support to insurgents on civil war dynamics and wartime behavior. The third section poses the project’s research question and introduces the dissertation’s argument via an overview of the three articles constituting its core. The fourth and fifth sections discuss my methodological choices and reflect on epistemological considerations regarding the study of political violence. Finally, the introduction concludes with the outline of the dissertation.

External Support to Rebels in Civil Wars

Rebel sponsorship blurs the line between intrastate and interstate wars and, like cyber war, remains one of the most direct ways by which two states can confront each other without engaging their armies in conventional combat. This section introduces the concept of external state support to rebels and presents the major trends in this phenomenon in the contemporary period.

The Rationale Behind External Support to Rebels

States frequently assist rebels in the territory of other states. In the dissertation, I adopt the Uppsala Conflict Data Program’s (UCDP) definition of rebel or insurgent groups. This definition, accepted commonly in the literature on civil conflicts, considers that a rebel organization is a “non-governmental group of people having announced a name for their group and using armed force to influence the outcome of the stated incompatibility” (Pettersson 2022, 1).⁴ The UCDP “deals with

⁴ The incompatibility is the source of the conflict, as stated by the belligerents. In civil conflicts, the incompatibility may concern the government, being about a change in the “type of political system, the replacement of the central

formally organized opposition” and focuses “on armed conflict involving consciously conducted and planned political campaigns rather than spontaneous violence” (Pettersson 2022, 1).⁵

The content of material support to rebels varies widely.⁶ In some cases, the sponsors intervene in a civil war directly but provide material assistance to irregular forces to complement the war effort of their conventional troops. The US intervention alongside insurgents from the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan in 2001 is an example of this type of “blended strategy” (Ricks and Struck 2001; Salehyan 2010, 503). In most cases, however, external states assist insurgents indirectly without deploying their troops in the conflict zones. A common type of indirect support is when sponsors allow rebels to take refuge on their territory to avoid counterinsurgency measures from neighboring regimes (Byman 2013). An example is Thailand’s protection of *Khmer Rouge* militants inside its borders at the end of the 1980s (Reuters 1989). Beyond territorial sanctuaries, sponsors provide a wide range of other types of indirect material aid to rebels; lethal assets, such as weapons and ammunition, and non-lethal assistance, such as money, training, intelligence, and logistical resources (S. G. Jones 2016). An illustration is Pakistan’s weapons delivery to Kashmiri insurgents fighting against India in the 1990s (Staniland 2014).

The literature scrutinizes the rationale behind the association between sponsors and rebels extensively. From the perspective of insurgents engaged in local political struggles, the primary way to approach the phenomenon of rebel sponsorship is to focus on resources. Association with

government, or the change of its composition,” and/or concern the territory, being about a desire for “secession or autonomy” (Pettersson 2022, 2).

⁵ This definition excludes pro-government militias (PGM) that are fighting for, rather than against, the local government (Carey and Mitchell 2017) and non-strictly organized and identifiable opposition forces involved in instances of spontaneous violence. By focusing on external support to rebel groups rather than external support to all types of actors operating in civil wars, I aim to propose a middle-range theory attempting “to formulate well-specified conditional generalizations of more limited scope” (George and Bennett 2005, 266).

⁶ By material support, I mean any kind of assistance that researchers can observe and quantify and which goes beyond mere rhetorical statements of support not associated with any concrete actions of assistance from sponsors. For example, the UCDP database on which I relied in the quantitative analyses identifies the following types of support: troops, access to territory, access to military or intelligence infrastructure, weapons, materiel and logistics, training and expertise, funding, and intelligence material (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011).

external states can be a lucrative source of material assets for insurgents, next to domestic support from civilians (Jo 2015), the exploitation of natural resources, or criminal activities (Walsh et al. 2018). Voluntary association with sponsors is thus often a way to increase their capabilities for rebels and, consequently, their chances of military success in a conflict (Bapat 2012).

From the sponsors' point of view, there are two main ways of approaching the phenomenon of rebel sponsorship; either focusing on motives leading a state to materially assist rebels abroad or focusing on the political mechanisms through which states become involved in foreign conflicts. In terms of motives, the literature often distinguishes "proxy warfare" from "external support." Proxy warfare refers to the delegation of war to conduct "subversive operations" against a designated target (Mumford 2013, 40). In most cases, the target is a rival government. For instance, Rwanda relied on the *Rassemblement congolais pour la démocratie* (RCD) in 1998 to assist its troops when trying to overthrow the Congolese government of Laurent-Désiré Kabila (Tamm 2020). Less frequently, the target is another non-state actor. For instance, the United States (US) sponsored the People's Protection Units (YPG) in Northeast Syria in 2014 to fight the Islamic State (IS) (Aaron Stein 2022). In proxy warfare, the choice of the proxy depends "on the target" (Rauta 2018, 452). The insurgents' identity can be less important than the target's identity for the sponsors.

Whether used in conjunction with or in lieu of direct intervention, the literature shows that relying on rebels as proxies can be a cost-effective strategy for sponsors. Insurgents assume "the cost and risks of fighting" and, because they are local to the conflicts, "may be more resolute" in combat than non-locals (Bapat 2012, 2). When used as a substitute for direct military intervention, relying on rebels as proxies can also allow sponsors to avoid direct casualties, domestic war-related weariness and discontent, and international condemnation related to direct interference abroad (Salehyan 2010). Finally, relying exclusively on insurgents offers sponsors flexibility regarding future options. Sponsors may, to varying degrees, withdraw their support more quickly than if they are involved directly on the ground. Alternatively, states can increase their involvement through direct intervention after an initial strategy exclusively based on support to insurgents. For example, while the country intervened indirectly at the beginning of the conflict, the *Viet Cong's* advance pushed the US to engage directly in Vietnam in the middle of the 1960s (Brown 2016). Overall, through material aid to rebels, the sponsors' objective can be to achieve complete victory against a target or, more modestly, foster instability in the territory of a rival (Byman 2013).

Next to “proxy warfare,” the more generic “external support” includes all varieties of material assistance to rebels and does not require the sponsors to have objectives other than helping “friends.” Beyond converging strategic interests, states often support rebels due to kinship ties (San-Akca 2016). Religion is an example of a “highly sticky and visible” identity that can explain aid to insurgents abroad (Ives 2019b, 697). For example, a shared Muslim identity partly explains Malaysian support for the Filipino Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) in the 1990s (Abuza 2005). A shared ethnicity can also motivate a state to sponsor rebels (Ives 2019a). For example, a common ethnicity is part of the explanation for Russian support to separatist rebels in the Ukrainian Donbas in 2014 (Lanoszka 2016). Finally, states sometimes support rebels facing repressive and/or genocidal governments, justifying their support by the atrocities committed against civilians. For example, the US and other countries used human rights considerations in 2012 to justify their material aid to the Free Syrian Army (FSA) (Fordham 2012; Quinn and Bakr 2012).

If relevant conceptually, the distinction between “proxy warfare” and “external support” remains challenging to operationalize empirically. In most cases, establishing political motives and disentangling strategic considerations from identity dimensions is complex. For instance, Iranian material support for the Yemeni Houthis follows strategic considerations and identity dimensions, and there is a lack of consensus in the academic literature regarding how much each of these elements explains this support (Juneau 2016; Ostovar 2018).

An alternative approach to the phenomenon of rebel sponsorship is to focus on the political mechanisms leading states to become involved in civil wars via support to rebels. The mechanisms can relate to domestic or external factors. An example of the former is when states assist insurgents because their local constituency advocates for an intervention favoring oppressed kin abroad (Ives 2019b). An example of the latter is when states support rebels because they want to avoid contagion effects on their territory after the beginning of a civil war in a neighboring state (Kathman 2010).

Less interested in the sources of the phenomenon than in its consequences on wartime behavior, I adopt generic denominations like “external support to rebels” or “rebel sponsorship” to label any relationship involving material assistance from a state sponsor to a structured insurgent group. My conceptualization includes all the phenomena studied in the literature under terms such as “proxy warfare,” “external support,” “third-party intervention,” or “rebel sponsorship.”

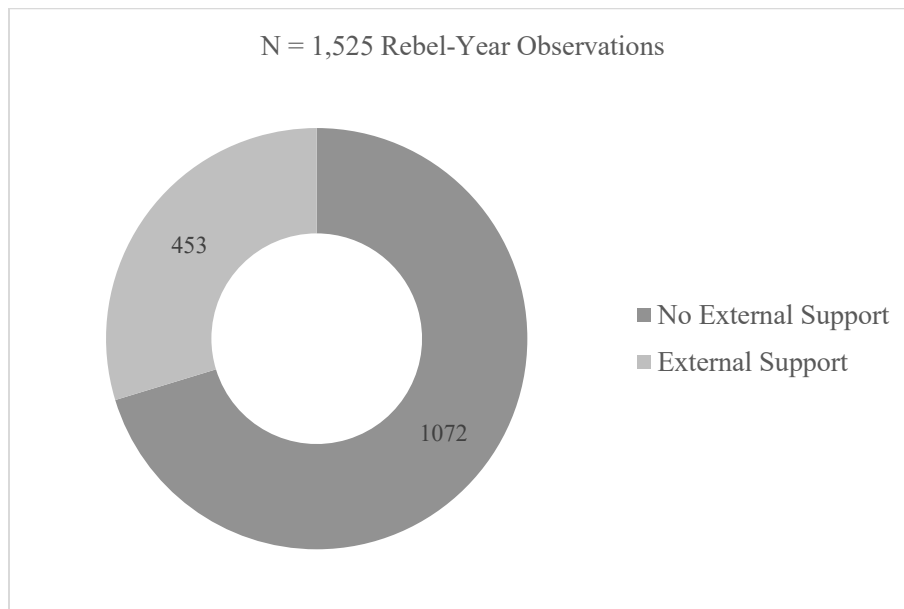
The Global Trends in External Support to Rebels

An overview of the phenomenon of external support to insurgents highlights its ubiquity in time and space (Hughes and Tripodi 2009). Phenomena comparable to state sponsorship occurred during the Peloponnesian War (Thucydides 2009; Walling 2013). The Romans empire relied on tribal militias to supplement its regular troops (Luttwak 1976; Murray and Mansoor 2012). Ottoman authorities sponsored pirates in the Mediterranean Sea (White 2018). More recently, external support to rebels was highly prevalent during the Cold War. For instance, the US supported the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA), which aimed to overthrow the Soviet-backed regime of the People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA) (Hoekstra 2018). In the same way, the Soviet Union supported the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) insurgency against the US-backed Salvadorian government (Alvarez 2010).

Far from being abandoned after the end of the Cold War, external support for rebels remains an important phenomenon in contemporary international relations (Grauer and Tierney 2018; Meier et al. 2022). Based on current knowledge, Figure 1 shows that, among the 1,525 rebel-year observations from 1989 to 2018, 453 are cases where the rebels receive material support from one or more states, while 1072 are cases where the insurgents receive no known support. (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Höglbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011; Pettersson, Höglbladh, and Öberg 2019).⁷

⁷ I code the post-2009 external support cases using data from Stein and Cantin's article (2021). Overall, the validity of the empirical analysis relies on the validity of the UCDP data on external support. While papers occasionally criticize the dataset due to its potential under-representation of certain forms of transnational ties (Twagiramungu et al. 2019), it remains one of the most widely used in research on the transnational dimensions of civil conflicts. UCDP published an update of its main dataset on external support shortly before I submitted this dissertation (Meier et al. 2022). I will be able to use this more up-to-date news in future analyses. I include a discussion of data availability, reliability, and comparability in the conclusion of the dissertation.

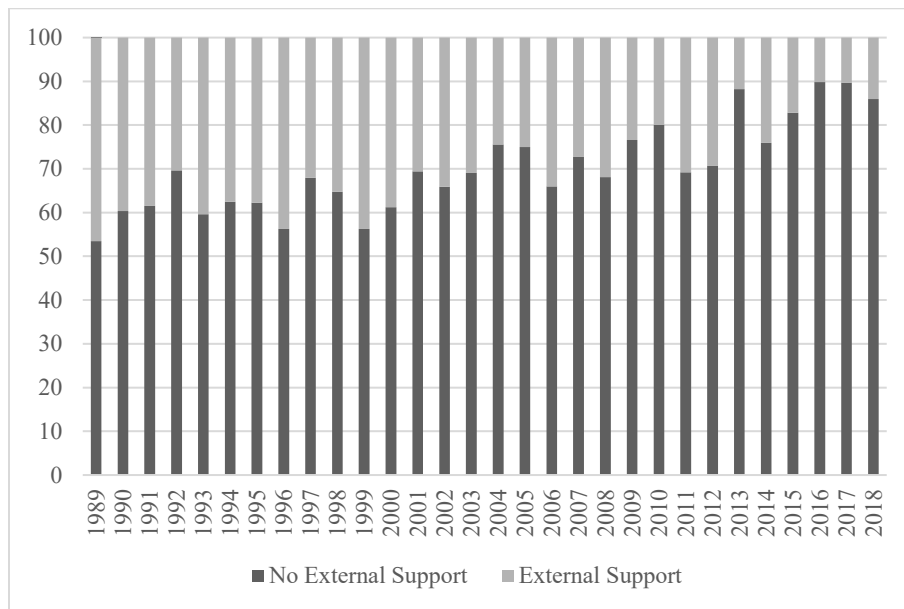
Figure 1. External Support to Rebels—Aggregated Data



A not-insignificant percentage of contemporary conflicts described as internal to a territory thus involve transnational dimensions, prompting some authors to question the relevance of the dichotomy between civil and interstate wars (D. E. Cunningham and Lemke 2013; Twagiramungu et al. 2019).⁸ Figure 2 depicts the percentage of cases of external support compared to the percentage of cases of absence of support for each year between 1989 and 2018. The aim is to assess potential temporal disparities in the prevalence of rebel sponsorship in international politics.

⁸ Salehyan (2010, 499–500), for instance, argues that failing to consider the transnational dimensions of civil wars can lead scholars to “dramatically understate the amount of conflict” and thus “inflate the amount of peace” in the international system, “leading to biased inferences and faulty conclusions about the declining prevalence of war.”

Figure 2. External Support to Rebels—Disaggregated Data



The figure highlights a certain regularity in the percentage of rebellions receiving support. This regularity is all the more plausible because, since some cases of recent covert support remain unknown, the data for the most recent years likely underestimate the share of groups receiving support. Future studies will have to confirm or, more probably, correct these numbers to provide a more accurate description of the prevalence of rebel sponsorship in contemporary conflicts.

The states’ temptation to rely on insurgents to intervene abroad thus remains important today. Notably, rebel sponsorship appears increasingly multilateral, with countries sharing common interests in a conflict’s outcome coalescing to empower the same insurgents (Mumford 2013; Meier et al. 2022). As the phenomenon is quintessential to “a highly interactive and interdependent, yet decentralized, [international] system of many kinds of actors, large and small, state and nonstate,” rebel sponsorship will likely continue to define the dynamics of civil wars in the future years (Brown 2016, 244; Mumford 2013; Bunker and Bunker 2016; A. Marshall 2016).

The Impact of External Support to Rebels on Civil War Processes and Wartime Behavior

Rebel sponsorship receives close scholarly attention in the wake of these global trends. The literature studies different impacts of the phenomenon on conflict dynamics. For instance, Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed (2015, 1176) argue that external support decreases the likelihood of a peaceful settlement between incumbent governments and rebels. The “uncertainty” regarding how

foreign assistance affects the “rebel war-making capacity” creates “bargaining problems” and leads governments to look for a decisive military victory instead of a negotiated agreement. Schulhofer-Wohl (2020) finds that external support can promote quagmires in civil conflicts by keeping the belligerents waging war despite the increasing costs of continuous fighting. Karlén (2017, 500) shows, for its part, that rebel sponsorship increases the likelihood of conflict recurrence by lowering the rebels’ “threshold for remobilization.”

Several studies focus specifically on the impact of external support on rebel behavior during wars. Mainly based on principal-agent frameworks, they study why, despite an initial alignment in strategic objectives between sponsors and insurgents, external support to rebels often leads to agency slack; insurgents conduct actions against their sponsors’ interests (Salehyan 2010; Popovic 2017). While we might expect that governments sponsor rebels when they can “effectively monitor” them and “sanction bad behavior” (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 714–15), empirical examples show that interests are rarely sufficiently close and command structures effective enough to ensure the loyalty of the rebels (Brown 2016). For instance, although they initially received support from India, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) turned against their sponsor militarily in the 1980s (Cronin-Furman and Arulthas 2021). Rebels often prioritize their agenda upon receiving support and depart from the priority objectives of their sponsors (Bapat 2012). For example, insurgents sometimes escalate the intensity of their conflict against the local government, even though their external supporters prefer to maintain a status quo (Kaplan 2019a). Rebel groups that are “decentralized” and “factionalized” appear particularly prone to defections (Popovic 2017, 923). External support also favors internal splits within rebellions (Tamm 2016).

A central limitation of past studies on the impact of sponsorship on insurgent behavior is that they often take rebel monitoring by sponsors for granted. Popovic (2017, 924) argues, for instance, that “Despite the *tight control* [Emphasis added], sponsors frequently encounter problems controlling rebels.” The assumption that the sponsors always try to control rebel conduct means that these studies perceive rebel defection against their supporters as a failure of such monitoring. These works do not, therefore, consider that state sponsors may not even attempt to control rebel behavior. A recent article by Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl (2021) further explores the supervision of rebels by sponsors. The authors distinguish between two types of sponsor-rebel relationships depending on the possibilities of control for foreign states; “delegation” corresponds to “hands-on”

control, while “orchestration” corresponds to “hands-off” control. Both relationships have respective advantages and limitations for sponsors. A remaining limit of this analysis is the assumption that sponsors will always “take advantage of the control opportunities posed by the respective support types” (2021, 136). The authors assume that the mere presence of sponsors’ operatives on the ground alongside the rebels leads to tight control of rebel behavior.

The Missing Link: The Form of External Support to Rebels

While past research focuses on support in general or specifically on the type of resources sponsors provide to insurgents, the form of support remains a missing link in current studies of state assistance to rebels during civil wars.

The Risks and Benefits of Overt Support to Rebels

The support states provide to rebels can be covert, sponsors’ political leaders deny or do not recognize it, or overt, sponsors’ political leaders claim it in official speeches.⁹ The refusal by Ugandan officials to admit their support for the *Front patriotique rwandais* in the early 1990s is an example of covert aid (AFP 1992). The US authorities’ public statement of their support for the Nicaraguan *Contras* in the early 1990s is an example of overt support (Preston 1989).

Several advantages may lead sponsors to opt for covertness when assisting insurgents materially. The main benefit of covert actions is plausible deniability (Poznansky 2020). Aiding rebels in another state’s territory is a highly hostile action. The target may respond with conventional or irregular military means against the sponsor (Salehyan 2008). Sponsors who do not publicly admit their support can therefore hope to avoid its detection by their rivals and limit

⁹ In the dissertation, I subscribe to Carson’s (2018, 6) definition that overt actions are those led “without restrictions on visibility and with behavioral and verbal expressions of official acknowledgment,” while covert actions are those led by an actor “in a way that conceals its role and does not feature official acknowledgment.” The intention of the actor conducting the action is the critical element of the distinction.

the risks of retaliation. In this way, covertness allows sponsors to manage information and maximize control over a potential escalation with the target actor.¹⁰

Denial is sometimes more critical than absolute secrecy. Even when it learns of support to rebels, it is not uncommon that the target keeps the information hidden from the public when the sponsors act clandestinely (Carson 2016). Reacting in the public sphere would require the target to retaliate militarily against the sponsor in order not to appear weak in the eyes of its domestic audience, especially opposition parties and public opinion. The risk of military escalation between the sponsor and the target would become significant, which is not necessarily in the target's interest (Carson 2018). A situation of this kind occurred during the Iraq war in the 2000s. The US knew Iran supported Shia groups fighting against the US forces. However, the American officials did not immediately reveal the information publicly to maintain complete control over the response to the Iranian affront (Gordon 2007; Carson 2018). In the same way, probably to maintain control over the response, US officials kept secret for several months suspicions that Russia offered Taliban-linked rebels money to target American soldiers in Afghanistan (Schwartz, Savage, and Schmitt 2020). Thus, even implausible deniability can be interesting for sponsors if they want to limit the risk of uncontrolled escalation with the target actor (Cormac and Aldrich 2018).

While there are benefits to covertness, different advantages can sometimes persuade states to publicize their assistance to insurgents. Sponsors who act openly have greater latitude for action than those who act covertly. Whereas covertness requires specific logistics to avoid the detection of assistance (Carson 2018), overtness exempts sponsors from these restrictive measures. As a result, a publicly-intervening sponsor can transfer more and better-quality resources to the rebels (Carson 2018). In return, the transfer of more resources, and more effective equipment, maximizes the rebels' chances of success (Carson 2018). Sponsors who act publicly are more likely to achieve their main objectives in a civil war. A link between the content and the form of support appears here: while covertness imposes constraints regarding what sponsors can transfer, overtness offers freedom of action. Thus, while covertness allows a state to maximize control over military

¹⁰ Carson (2018, 300) presents covert actions as a "via media," allowing actors intervening in a conflict to "have moderate (but not strong) influence on the local conflict and retain moderate (but not perfect) escalation control."

escalation after its support, overtness maximizes the assistance's effectiveness. Any state wishing to support rebels must either prioritize control or prioritize effectiveness.

Acting in the open also offers sponsors communicational advantages. For example, it can be beneficial for a state, especially in domestic politics, to publicly support a rebellion with which a part of its population shares ethnic or religious ties (Ives 2019b; 2019a). Iran's public support for *Hamas* is an example of this communicative process (Abou Jalal 2020). Moreover, aiding rebels engaged in a war against a repressive state can allow a sponsor to communicate its position vis-à-vis that regime, as mentioned above, regarding the US support for the FSA in Syria (Chivers and Schmitt 2013). Public action thus carries a political message from sponsors.

Finally, external support's clandestine or public nature is also crucial to the rebels. On the one hand, rebellions not willing to be perceived as "puppets of external states" or "out of touch with those inside the country" likely favor covert assistance (S. G. Jones 2016, 158). On the other hand, rebellions seeking international recognition may have a strong interest in receiving overt support as this can increase their diplomatic legitimacy (Jo 2015; Stanton 2017). The more overt the support, the more it signals a sponsor's normative commitment to the rebels' cause. An example is France's recognition of the Libyan National Transitional Council (NTC) as "the legitimate interlocutor of the Libyan people" in 2011 (Talmon 2011, 3). The symbolic resources stemming from overt support are especially crucial for secessionist insurgents, such as Kurdish groups in Iraq (Kaplan 2019a), which need external recognition to reach their state-building objectives. As such, overt support is not only material and carries critical symbolic dimensions for rebels.

While studies investigate the benefits and risks of covertness or overtness in specific cases, in the absence of cross-national data, no study systematically examines how this variable relates to insurgent behavior across time and space. This project wishes to address this gap in the literature.

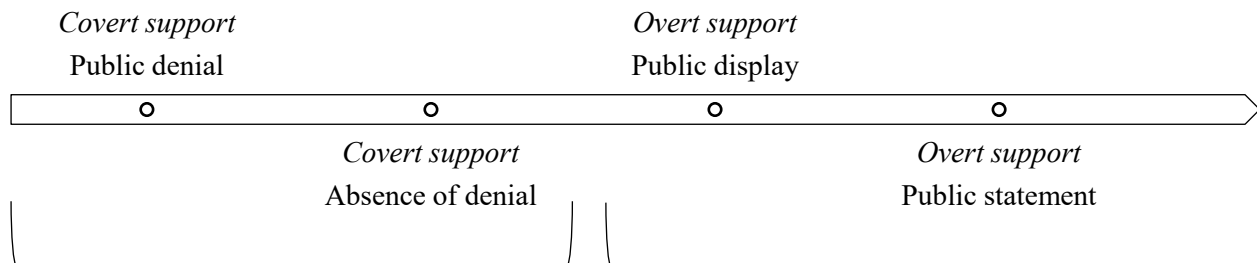
The Overtness of External Support to Rebels and Insurgents-Civilian Interactions

Through its three articles, this dissertation seeks to answer the following question:

What is the link between the overtness of external support to rebels and the interactions between the insurgents and civilians during civil wars?

Specifically, I question how variation in the overtness of state support for insurgents relates to rebel behavior in two related areas: violence against civilians and social service provision. To this end, I must first assess the prevalence of covertness versus overtness in contemporary international politics. As depicted in Figure 3 from *Article 1*, I conceptualize the overtness of external support as a continuum of four degrees of public recognition by external sponsors.

Figure 3. The Overtness of External Support to Rebels—Continuum



First, the two elements on the left side of the continuum correspond to covert support. Public denial is when a state publicly refutes any material assistance to rebels, and state authorities do not display obvious signs of material support.¹¹ An absence of denial is when a state does not publicly deny or acknowledge supporting rebels following repeated accusations, and state authorities do not display obvious signs of material aid. Second, the two elements on the right side of the continuum correspond to overt support. A public display is when a state does not publicly deny or admit supporting insurgents but displays apparent signs of assistance. Apart from not taking any positive actions to hide its ties with the rebels, the state voluntarily exhibits its relationship with the insurgents. Finally, a public statement is when a state publicly recognizes helping the insurgents. Sponsors can justify such overtness by strategic imperatives, moral concerns, or both.

In *Article 1*, I code the overtness of support for all insurgencies active in civil conflicts between 1989 and 2018 (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Pettersson, Högbladh, and

¹¹ I consider obvious signs of material support either the organization of voluntarily advertised public meetings with rebel leaders or the allowance of official rebel headquarters in the sponsors' main urban areas. However, I do not consider official meetings in the context of third-party mediation public displays of material support.

Öberg 2019) and receiving material support from at least one external state (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011; Stein and Cantin 2021). I mainly used newspaper articles to code the overtness of support. As I assessed the variable yearly for each group, I did a large part of the coding work using search engines to look for press articles for given dates. I also used reports from non-governmental organizations (NGOs), reports from international organizations (IOs), and academic articles. To keep a record, I compiled all of the sources used for the coding in a document.

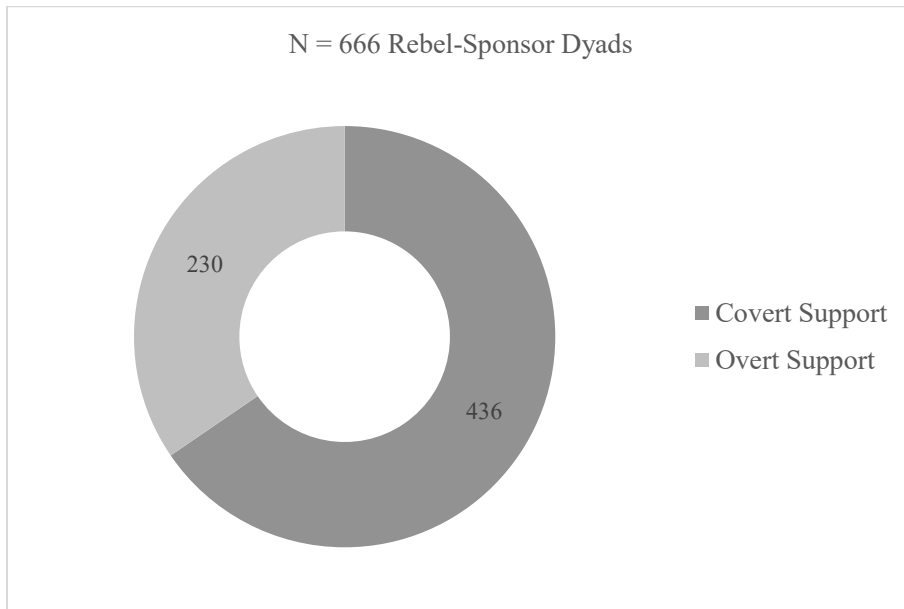
The least complicated part of the data collection was coding cases at the extreme left and right of the continuum introduced in Figure 3, a public denial, and a public statement. All that was required was to identify statements denying or acknowledging support from sponsors' high-level representatives. Conversely, the biggest challenge was coding the continuum's two intermediate situations, an absence of denial or a public display, as demonstrating the absence of a phenomenon is always challenging in social sciences. As a result, if I made coding errors, it was likely one of the following: I coded a public denial as an absence of denial or a public statement as a public display.¹² Overall, it is essential to mention that the coding figures rely on current knowledge regarding external state support for rebellions. As some support cases remain unknown due to extreme secrecy, the estimates are subject to change as historical studies reveal new cases of external support to insurgents.

Using the new data, Figure 4 displays the distribution of the 666 rebel-sponsor dyads from 1989 to 2018 according to whether they are cases of covert or overt support.¹³

¹² To limit the risks of biased conclusions caused by coding errors, the statistical analyses conducted in the dissertation's quantitative articles use two specifications of the overtness of support. The first is a binary specification aggregating both types of covert support, a public denial and an absence of denial, and overt support, a public display and a public statement. The second specification includes all the degrees of overtness of the support included in the continuum introduced in Figure 3.

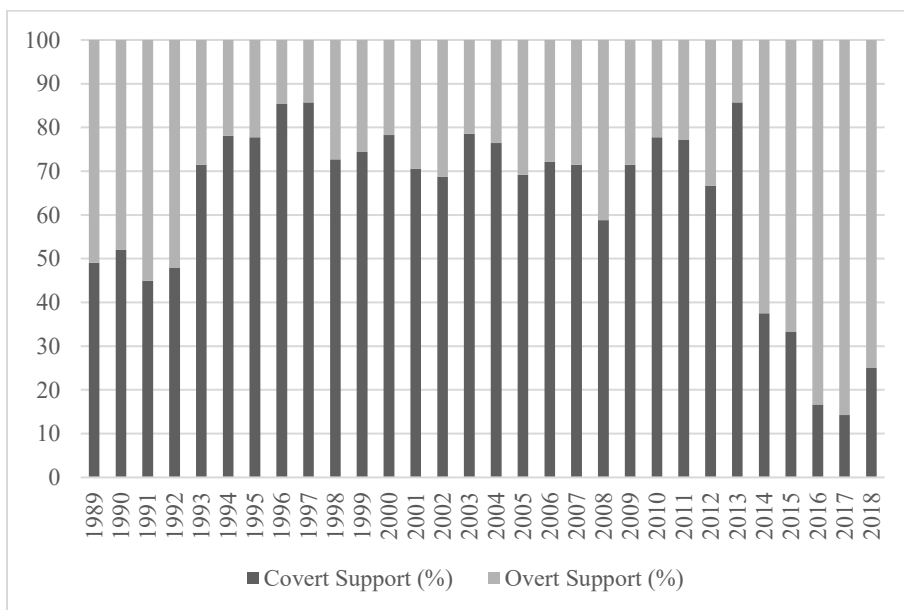
¹³ Some rebel groups are present in multiple dyads as they have multiple sponsors.

Figure 4. The Overtness of External Support to Rebels



Based on current knowledge, the first observation is that overt support remains an exception within international politics. Instead, sponsors provide most of their assistance covertly, all the more so given the difficulty of identifying covert assistance. Figure 5 disaggregates the data by year to highlight potential temporal shifts in the covertness or overtness of state support for rebels.

Figure 5. The Overtness of External Support to Rebels—Per Year



The pre-1992 period appears particularly prone to overt support. Half the observations are cases of overt support. In the context of the end of the Cold War, states from the two main blocs likely used overt support to signal the credibility of their political and technological systems. The 1993–2013 period appears much less prone to overt support. The share of observations that are cases of overt aid drops and oscillates between twenty and forty percent. This tendency likely reflects the emergence of an international system based on norms of non-intervention. Many states continue to support rebellions on the territory of other governments but seem less willing to admit their assistance publicly. Finally, with most cases being cases of overt support, the 2014–2018 period demonstrates a significant return of overt support at the core of states' *modus operandi*. This tendency potentially reflects a resumption of open strategic competition among great powers in conflicts such as Syria.¹⁴

Based on this new data, *Article 1* asks: How does the overt support of external support to rebels correlate with the propensity of the insurgents to target civilians in civil wars? A large body of research studies the determinants of insurgent violence toward noncombatants. A widely shared assumption is that the determinants of violence during wars differ from the factors causing the war (Kalyvas 2006). Notably, the literature strongly underlines the influence of insurgent access to material resources (Kalyvas 2006). Rebels face strong incentives to refrain from targeting civilians when noncombatants are a reliable source of assets for the insurrection (Weinstein 2006; Wood 2014). Conversely, rebels accessing alternative sources of assets can use coercion toward civilians to gain compliance (Berman and Matanock 2015; Stewart and Liou 2017).

Previous studies focus on the link between external support to rebels and insurgent violence toward civilians. These works, however, reach contrasting findings. On one side, Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood (2014) find that sponsorship provided by autocracies raises the probability of civilian abuse. On the other side, Fortna, Lotito, and Rubin (2018) do not find a significant association between sponsorship and the use of terrorism by rebels. Grant and Kaussler (2020) find that support to Syrian rebels did not impact the level of civilian targeting in the 2012–2016 battle of Aleppo.

¹⁴ A potential bias here arises from the fact that some recent cases of covert support are still unknown, leading to an overestimated share of cases of overt support in recent years. Future studies must confirm this inclination toward overt support in the post-2014 period.

These contrasting results strengthen the case for studying forms of support in a more disaggregated way to see which forms are associated with coercive relationships.

Article 1's hypothesis is that rebels who receive overt assistance are less likely to target civilians than rebels who receive covert support. I assume most sponsors do not want to face costs associated with known aid to violent rebels. I thus expect that sponsors primarily offer overt support to groups not engaged in widespread atrocities before receiving assistance. Further down the conflict timeline, I expect sponsors providing overt support to monitor rebels more strictly than those providing covert support. These expectations at the sponsor level define expectations at the rebel level. Insurgents receiving overt support face a restrictive structure of incentives promoting restraint. Engaging in civilian targeting would deprive the rebels of access to significant political and material resources. Conversely, rebels receiving covert support do not face the same disincentives regarding civilian targeting. They are less reliant on civilians due to access to foreign resources and, at the same time, are not constrained in their behavior by strict monitoring.

Statistical analyses using the data on the overtness of support introduced above and data on rebel violence from 1989 to 2018 (Sundberg and Melander 2013; Höglbladh 2019) confirm that the overtness of support to rebels negatively and significantly correlates with both the occurrence and the intensity of civilian targeting by insurgents.

Article 2 examines the same phenomenon through a qualitative lens. This article theorizes how, why, and when sponsors monitor the interactions with civilians of the rebels they support. I first outline different degrees of supervision that sponsors can implement during conflicts. I then present domestic and international material costs that states can face if they support rebels committing atrocities. I assume that, with few exceptions, most governments are sensitive to at least some of these costs. In line with this assumption, I finally theorize that the degree to which sponsors supervise insurgent-civilian interactions relates to a combination of their perception of the likelihood of their support becoming public and their perception of the costs they will face if their aid to violent rebels becomes public. The most likely and costly is the exposure of support in the eyes of the sponsors; the most intense is the monitoring. The two factors determine whether sponsors consider the material cost of actively monitoring insurgents worthwhile.

I assess the theory's robustness via a study of the US monitoring of the YPG and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Northeast Syria between 2014 and 2020. A small-N analysis allows me to observe the supervision led by the sponsor in detail, thus complementing quantitative studies on the links between external support to insurgents and rebel-civilian interactions. Through a review of written sources and 41 interviews with researchers, former senior US officials, YPG/SDF representatives, and Syrian journalists, I show that the potential costs incurred by the US due to the nature of its support motivated the sponsor to supervise the YPG/SDF behavior proactively. I highlight the supervision measures at the meso-level of the YPG/SDF relationships with other social groups and the micro-level of daily insurgents-civilian interactions. Additional evidence from the US support for the FSA corroborates the theory.

Finally, after showing in *Article 1* that the overtness of support correlates negatively with violence against civilians and examining this relationship qualitatively in *Article 2*, I examine, in *Article 3*, whether the overtness of support correlates with the rebels' provision of social services to civilians. By focusing on social service institutions, the article seeks to question the assumption that rebels "govern civilians where they are not victimizing them" (Huang and Sullivan 2021, 796).

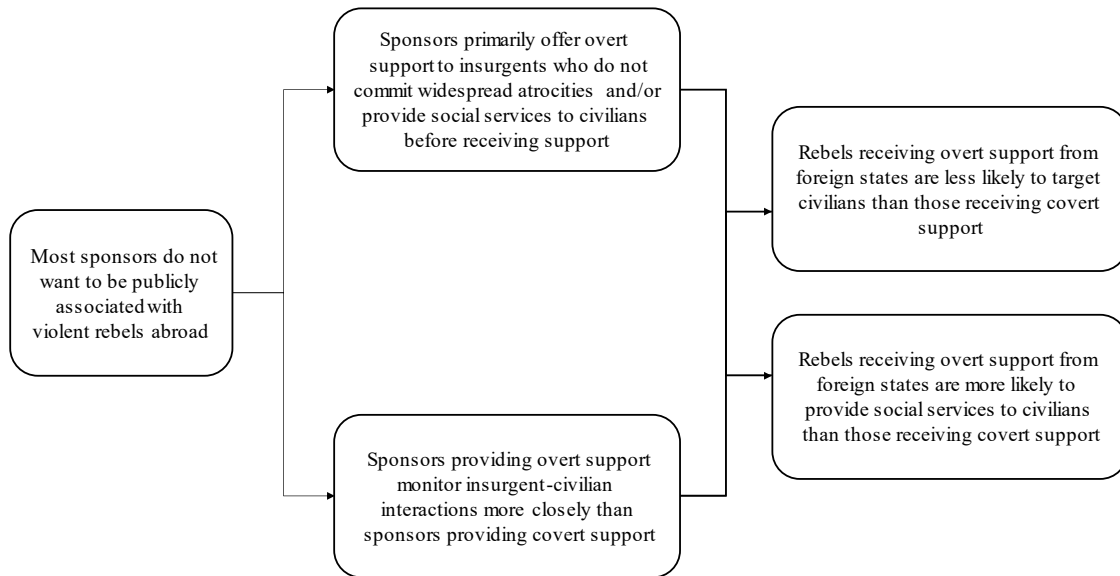
While Huang and Sullivan (2021) highlight that rebels receiving foreign support provide more social services than those not receiving external aid, in *Article 3*, I hypothesize that insurgents receiving overt support are more likely to invest in social service institutions than rebels receiving covert support. I argue that the motivations of the insurgents derive from those of the sponsors. The provision of covert or overt support does not denote an equal commitment to the cause of the rebels from the external states and thus does not commit them, in the same way, to participate in building institutions in the country at war. First, I consider that providing covert support does not commit the sponsors to contribute to the construction of rebel institutions. Due to the lack of public recognition of the support, domestic or external audiences do not develop expectations regarding the external states' investments in stabilization and reconstruction in these cases. Conversely, I contend that providing overt aid commits the states to contribute to the construction of rebel institutions because, in these cases, domestic and external audiences are likely to develop strong expectations regarding the participation of the sponsors in stabilization and reconstruction. The external states thus face strong incentives to support the development of social service institutions in order not to be seen as sole contributors to the destabilization of a territory.

As in *Article 1*, the argument is that these sponsor-level expectations lead to rebel-level ones. In contrast to insurgents receiving covert support, rebels receiving overt support have a strong interest in investing in social service institutions to retain access to foreign resources. Engaging in pro-civilian activities can allow the rebels to signal restraint effectively and present themselves as credible alternatives to the governments they are fighting (Jo et al. 2021). In addition, next to the sponsors' demands, the post-conflict-oriented nature of overt support means that rebels can be more confident in the sustainability of assistance and fully engage in institution-building when sponsors publicly recognize their sponsorship.

Statistical analyses using the data on the overtness of support for insurgents introduced in *Article 1* and data on rebel institutions from 1989 to 2012 (Albert 2022) confirm that the overtness of support to rebels positively and significantly correlates with the provision of social services by insurgents. I then leverage a study of how the YPG/SDF governed Raqqa between 2017 and 2020 to show that while overt support is often associated with investments in pro-civilian institutions by the rebels, a formal inclusion of civilians in new institutions does not necessarily lead to a genuine devolution of power to noncombatants. The YPG/SDF created formal social service institutions to meet the demands of its sponsor, but insurgent leaders retained strict control over decision-making power in these newly established structures.

Figure 6 illustrates the dissertation's central argument.

Figure 6. The Dissertation’s Central Argument



Methodological Reflections on the Study of Insurgent Violence

Particularly for a matter “as hard to get at as violence,” Collins (2009, 32) argues that “[methodological] purity is a big stumbling to understanding.” Thaler (2017, 69), for his part, states that quantitative analyses can be “more useful for capturing patterns in the variation of violence and conflict and understanding its distribution and correlates,” while qualitative approaches can be “more useful for understanding motivations, experiences of violence and their psychosocial effects, or capturing the processes of violent and conflictual situations.” Adhering fully to these premises, I adopted a mixed-method approach in the dissertation. Accordingly, I combined large-N statistical analyses and qualitative analyses based on written sources and interviews to study the link between the overtness of support to rebels and insurgent-civilian relations. The aim was to connect insights from the “rational choice and its constructivist/sociological competitors” (Checkel 2008, 14).¹⁵

¹⁵ Mixed-method approaches allying quantitative and qualitative analyses also correspond to what Roberts (1996, 155) calls “a marriage of colligation and correlation” (quoted in George and Bennett 2005, 230). The central objective is to explain “outcomes at the aggregate level via dynamics at a lower level” (Kertzer 2017, 83).

Hoover Green (2018, 131) argues that “we ought not to attempt to explain a pattern unless we are reasonably confident that that pattern is real.” I thus used the two large-N quantitative studies in *Article 1* and *Article 3* to highlight statistical correlations between the overtness of support and rebel-civilian interactions. These studies were not causal *per se*, as I recognized that the links between independent and dependent variables were likely to run in both directions. The propensity of rebels to use violence or provide social services to civilians certainly influences the propensity of sponsors to support them covertly or overtly in the first place.

After establishing broad correlations in cross-national studies, I qualitatively scrutinized the mechanisms linking the overtness of support to insurgent-civilian interactions in a case study. The case selection in *Article 2* was purposively “guided by a well-defined theoretical objective” (George and Bennett 2005, 70). The studied event, the US support for the YPG/SDF, was selected to illustrate the mechanisms that, in my view, often link the study’s two main variables of interest.¹⁶

The qualitative part of the investigation faced many obstacles in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. The core of the research began in the fall of 2020 when international travel and, thus, immersive face-to-face fieldwork were impossible. The solution to overcome this issue was to turn to online fieldwork. The use of remote communication tools is not new in social sciences, but the pandemic made it necessary for many analyses requiring access to human respondents (Howlett 2021). While the conduct of an online study raised practical and ethical questions that differed from those posed by physical fieldwork, this methodological approach did not have only disadvantages compared to “classical” fieldwork. Table 1 briefly presents the perceived limits and advantages of conducting online rather than physical fieldwork.

¹⁶ George and Bennett (2005, 141) posit that “[the] difference between a law and a mechanism is that between a static correlation (‘if X, then Y’) and a ‘process’ (‘X leads to Y through steps A, B, C’).”

Table 1. The Limits and Benefits of Online Fieldwork

Limits of Online Fieldwork	Benefits of Online Fieldwork
Impossibility to observe situational elements, or metadata, allowing a nuanced understanding of the context studied; ¹⁷	Ability to approach geographically dispersed audiences without being locked into immediate observations; ¹⁸
Impossibility to create a long-term trustworthy link with respondents allowing access to more confidential information than those obtained during a single meeting; ¹⁹	Ability to approach individuals who do not wish others to see them talking to a foreign researcher in conflict contexts;
Impossibility to access an audience with little or no knowledge of communication tools.	Ability to constantly iterate between written sources and interview data over a long period without being constrained by logistical imperatives related to physical fieldwork. ²⁰

I conducted 41 interviews over more than twenty months, allowing me to refine the analysis continually. Respondents were of four types—academic researchers or think-tank members working on the Syrian conflict, journalists, current and former US officials from the State

¹⁷ Fujii (2015, 527) interestingly theorizes the importance of elements drawn from the “mundane and quotidian of field life” in her study of “accidental ethnography.”

¹⁸ Massey (2003, 75) argues that there is “no such thing as total immersion.” Similarly, Howlett (2021, 397) states that “researchers have their own implicit biases and subjectively overlook things while in the field, even if unintentionally.” Jenner and Myers (2019, 166), for their part, argue that online interviews “suffer neither from reduced rapport nor from over-disclosure, as compared to in-person interviews” and “may be uniquely well-suited to overcoming challenges to conducting interview research with geographically distant or dispersed populations, as well as with ‘vulnerable’ populations or regarding sensitive or deeply personal topics.”

¹⁹ This idea refers to what anthropologists sometimes label “deep hanging out” (Geertz 1998).

²⁰ Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read (2015, 25) argue that fieldwork is “neither linear nor purely deductive.” Ragin (1987, 164), for its part, states that “most hypotheses and concepts are refined often reformulated, after the data have been collected and analyzed” (quoted in Kapiszewski, MacLean, and Read 2015, 23).

Department and the Department of Defense, and YPG/SDF militants—and were from three different continents. I mobilized substantial means to protect the data collected.

Overall, if this method prevented me from immersing in “a collective way of life” and gaining “firsthand knowledge about a major facet of it” (Shaffir and Stebbins 1991, 5), the process was more iterative and incremental than if I had conducted the interviews over a short field trip. Notably, conducting online fieldwork allowed me to avoid logistical constraints related to physical fieldwork, such as financial limits, visa restrictions, or the limits posed by the immediate political context of a place. My conclusion was that because both modes of fieldwork have benefits and limitations, it is ideal to combine them whenever possible. On the one hand, a detailed understanding of the context requires a prolonged physical presence in the field. On the other hand, the need not to lock oneself into the available data through immediate and constrained observations requires a distance from the object made possible by longer-term online research work.

To conclude this section, in Geddes’ (2003, 4) words, I tried, as best I could, to “steer a careful course between the Scylla of lovely but untested theory and Charybdis, the maelstrom of information unstructured by theory.” I believe that using a mixed-method approach interestingly allowed me to combine generalizations and an in-depth understanding of complex mechanisms.

Epistemological Reflections on the Study of Insurgent Violence

Finally, studying the causes of rebel violence in civil wars raised epistemological questions. As a logical extension of the study of “just war,” the literature on the ethics of international interactions interestingly starts to study the concept of “just rebellion” (Morkevicius 2013). A central question is whether scholars can or should assess the “justness” of insurgent motives when studying civil conflicts. A subsequent and interrelated question is whether researchers can or should assess whether sponsoring rebellions considered “just” is legitimate in itself; whether the legitimacy of a given political cause naturally extends to support for that cause (Pattison 2015).

In line with these ethical concerns stemmed a central question for my research: should I, as a researcher not physically and emotionally involved in the conflicts I study, question the inner justness of the insurgencies’ and the sponsors’ goals? Because I believe researchers cannot answer this question in general terms by applying a singular normative perspective to all cases of support to rebels across time and space, I responded negatively. In the articles that make up the dissertation,

I attempted, as best I could, to approach the concept of “rebellion” from a neutral standpoint. I did not associate the notion of “insurgency” with any specific normative considerations and referred to an insurgent group as a social organization engaged in an armed struggle against a constituted government. The latter could be legitimate or illegitimate in various audiences’ eyes.

Consequently, I deliberately adopted a perspective that was outcomes-oriented rather than motives-centered. Instead of assessing the insurgents’ and the sponsors’ intrinsic “rightness,” I adopted a standpoint centered on human security. Violence against civilians is a scourge that affects individuals in the short, medium, and long terms (Deglow 2016; Bara 2018; Costalli and Ruggeri 2019). By putting human security at the center of my approach, I thus aimed to “prioritize human needs” in the study of rebellions and use tools of social inquiry to promote “the normative goal of reducing the incidence of violence” (Mampilly 2011, 47; Thaler 2017, 59). Adopting such a perspective was not a panacea that resolved all epistemological questions stemming from the research, but it allowed me to avoid reifying political stability or given political institutions. Negative peace cannot be considered a desirable end at all times and places (Galtung 1985). Montesquieu (1734) eloquently said in his time that a state without conflict is, in parallel, without freedom.²¹ Fisher (2017, 262) argued, for its part, that “[democracy] is about struggles that are always in the process of becoming.”

Outline of the Dissertation

Following this introduction, the dissertation proceeds as follows:

Article 1 introduces a new dataset on the overtness of state support to rebels in civil wars between 1989 and 2018. It then assesses whether the overtness of support correlates with the propensity of insurgents to target civilians.

²¹ The original quote, which appeared in French in the ninth chapter of Montesquieu’s book *Considérations sur les causes de la grandeur des Romains et de leur décadence* (1734), is the following: “toutes les fois qu’on verra tout le monde tranquille dans un État qui se donne le nom de République, on peut être assuré que la liberté n’y est pas.”

Article 2 starts by exposing a theory on how, why, and when states monitor the interactions with civilians of the insurgents they support. It then applies the theoretical framework to the US support for the YPG/SDF between 2014 and 2020 in Northeast Syria.

Article 3 investigates whether, in addition to correlating with insurgent violence toward civilians, the overtness of support correlates with the rebels' propensity to provide social services in civil wars. It then studies the YPG/SDF governance in Raqqa to show that formal inclusion in social service institutions can sometimes have limits regarding effective civilian participation.

Finally, the conclusion presents an overview of the dissertation's contributions and limits and provides avenues for future research on the overtness of rebel sponsorship.

Chapter 1—Committed Sponsors: The Overtness of External Support to Rebels and Civilian Targeting in Civil Wars²²

Abstract:

How does the overtness of external support to rebels correlate with civilian targeting in civil wars? Conflict studies increasingly scrutinize how insurgent sponsorship shapes the behavior of rebels. However, the literature largely neglects the link between the sponsors' decisions to acknowledge or deny their support and rebel behavior. This article introduces a new dataset on the overtness of external support to rebels in civil wars between 1989 and 2018. It then assesses whether the overtness of support correlates with the propensity of insurgents to target civilians. I hypothesize that rebels receiving overt support are less likely to target civilians than rebels receiving covert support. This hypothesis stems from how supply-side factors—notably how state sponsors act after allocating their support—impact the insurgents' incentives regarding their relations with civilians. Statistical analyses strongly support the idea that variation in whether support is covert or overt relates to how rebels treat civilians in civil wars.

²² This chapter is a derivative of a scientific article I published in open access in the *European Journal of International Relations*, of which SAGE is the original publisher, in 2022. The publication reference is as follows:

Stein, Arthur. 2022. "Committed Sponsors: External Support Overtness and Civilian Targeting in Civil Wars." *European Journal of International Relations* 28 (2): 386-416. <https://doi.org/10.1177/13540661221084870>.

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The article is licensed under a [CC BY-NC 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) license. Compared to the original publication, I made minor to major adaptations in all sections, both empirical and theoretical.

Introduction

Rebel sponsorship is central to international interactions (Grauer and Tierney 2018). As state sovereignty has become a normative pillar of the international system (UN 1945), most states keep covert their support to rebels.²³ Designing plausibly deniable actions lower “potential security, economic, and reputational costs” for sponsors supporting rebels (O’Rourke 2020, 120; Poznansky 2019). Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez’s refusal to admit supporting the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) in the 2000s is an example of covert support (The Economist 2008).²⁴ However, states sometimes admit their material support to insurgents publicly. They even, at times, openly justify the provision of aid by appealing to the rightfulness of the rebels’ ethos. Syria’s acknowledged support for *Hezbollah* is an example of overt support (Oweis 2007).

While the literature increasingly scrutinizes the determinants of the overtness of support to rebels, it overlooks how this variable relates to civilian targeting in civil wars. Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood (2014) show that rebels receiving external support are more violent than insurgents receiving no support. However, recent studies nuance these findings. Some articles find no significant links between external support to rebels and coercive insurgent-civilian interactions (Fortna, Lotito, and Rubin 2018; Grant and Kaussler 2020). Another article finds that rebel sponsorship promotes constructive rebel-civilian relationships (Huang and Sullivan 2021). These findings thus call for further disaggregation of different forms of external support in civil conflicts.

This article hypothesizes that rebels receiving overt support are less likely to target civilians than rebels receiving covert support in civil wars. I contend that this is because supply-side factors determine the incentives of the insurgents regarding civilian targeting. My central assumption is that most sponsors do not want to face potential costs associated with known aid to brutal rebels. The first consequence is that sponsors primarily offer overt support to groups not engaged in

²³ I expose the predominance of covert support in a subsequent section introducing new data on the overtness of external support to rebels.

²⁴ The secrecy of external support is sometimes a collusive one. The external sponsors and the local targets are aware of such operations, but “keeping the public and other governments in the dark” allows them to control conflict escalation (Carson 2018, 3).

widespread atrocities before receiving foreign support. Further down the conflict timeline, for the same considerations, the second consequence is that sponsors who provide overt assistance will monitor insurgent-civilian interactions more closely than those who provide covert support.

From these expectations at the level of the sponsors emerge the expectation that rebels receiving overt support face a restrictive structure of incentives that promotes restraint toward civilians. Engaging in civilian targeting would deprive the insurgents of access to significant political and material resources. Conversely, rebels receiving mere covert support do not face the same disincentives regarding civilian targeting. In this situation, rebels are less reliant on civilians' voluntary cooperation due to access to external resources and, at the same time, are not severely constrained in their behavior by strict monitoring from sponsors.

To test my hypothesis, I introduce a new dataset on the overtness of external support to insurgents for each rebel group-year observation between 1989 and 2018. I first code the overtness of support using press articles, NGOs and IOs reports, and academic articles. Descriptive data show that overt support is an exception and that covert assistance remains the norm in the post–Cold War period. I then use the original data to establish that the overtness of state support to insurgents negatively and significantly correlates with the occurrence and intensity of civilian targeting by the rebels. Overall, the article contributes to the literature by identifying the overtness of support as a moderating factor in the statistical relationship between rebel sponsorship and violence toward civilians previously established in the literature (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014).

The first section reviews past works on the consequences of external support to rebels, the determinants of civilian targeting, and how the literature studies both variables conjointly. The second section introduces a new dataset on the overtness of support to rebels and offers descriptive statistics. The third section details my argument regarding how the overtness of support relates to civilian targeting. The third section presents the research design and the results of the statistical analyses. Finally, the concluding section reflects on the results' policy and research implications.

External Support to Rebels and Civilian Targeting in Civil Wars

External Support to Rebels in Civil Wars

In many modern civil wars, external states provide insurgencies with lethal resources, such as weapons and ammunition, and/or non-lethal resources, such as money, training, intelligence, or other logistical aid (S. G. Jones 2016). Another common form of non-lethal support is when states allow rebels to take shelter on their soils to avoid repression by rival governments (Salehyan 2007).

Several studies investigate the influence of rebel sponsorship on rebel behavior. Based on principal-agent frameworks, different works aim to explain why, despite material dependence, an initial convergence of interests often gives way to a situation where the rebels' aims are at odds with their sponsors' objectives (Salehyan 2010). Their conclusions show that interests are rarely sufficiently close and command-and-control structures effective enough to ensure the loyalty of insurgents (Brown 2016). Rebel sponsorship often favors opportunistic behaviors. The rebel groups that are "decentralized" and "factionalized" appear more prone to defect against their sponsors than "centralized organizations" (Popovic 2017, 923). External support also favors internal splits within rebellions (Tamm 2016). Despite providing insightful findings, past research mainly focuses on the influence of what sponsors transfer to rebels (Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed 2015) without fully considering the influence of the way states provide their assistance.

Civilian Targeting in Civil Wars

Another large body of research studies insurgent-civilian interactions in civil wars. Conflict studies strongly emphasize the role played by the material capabilities of the rebels (Kalyvas 2006). Various works show that when noncombatants are a reliable source of material assets, rebels face strong incentives to refrain from targeting them (Weinstein 2006; Wood 2014). In such cases, insurgents face incentives to provide social benefits to civilians, such as health, education, or justice (Mampilly 2011; Stewart 2019). Providing services to noncombatants can allow rebels to access "material contributions, political support, and recruits" from civilians (Arjona 2016, 50; Huang 2016b). Consistently, rebels who are less worried about popular consent due to access to lootable resources or external assets are more likely to target civilians to gain local collaboration (Berman

and Matanock 2015; Stewart and Liou 2017). The violence toward noncombatants is thus strategic rather than erratic, unintentional, or caused by rogue fighters (Valentino 2014).

External Support to Rebels and Civilian Targeting in Civil Wars

Some studies focus on both rebel sponsorship and insurgent-civilian interactions. These works reach contrasting conclusions regarding the effect of external support on insurgent-civilian relations. On one side, in line with the research outlined above, Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood (2014, 635) argue that rebel sponsorship decreases the rebels' need to "win the hearts and minds" of civilians and raises the probability of abuse. Their results show that support provided by autocracies is associated with higher degrees of civilian targeting. Other studies, however, propose more nuanced or opposite results. Fortna, Lotito, and Rubin (2018) find that insurgents receiving external support are not significantly more involved in acts of terrorism than others. Grant and Kaussler (2020, 19) find that support to Syrian insurgents "had almost no impact on the level of victimization of civilians" by the rebels during the 2012–2016 battle of Aleppo. Finally, Huang and Sullivan (2021) find that insurgents receiving external support are more likely to provide social services to noncombatants than rebels not receiving external assistance.

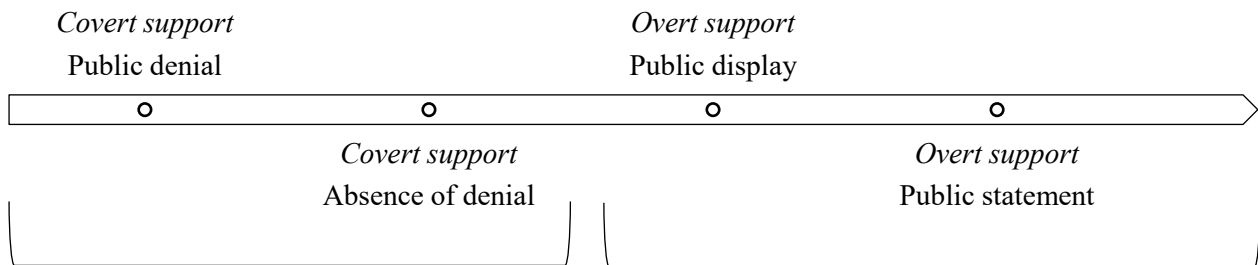
These contrasting findings call for more scrutiny of how the insurgents' transnational ties interact with their propensity to develop coercive or constructive interactions with civilians. While most studies compare rebels receiving support to insurgents not receiving assistance, an underexplored dimension concerns the disaggregation of different forms of support.

New Data on the Overtness of External Support to Rebels in Civil Wars

Defining the Overtness of External Support to Rebels

What distinguishes overt support from covert support? As depicted in Figure 7, I argue that the overtness of support to rebels can take different degrees.

Figure 7. The Overtness of External Support to Rebels—Continuum



On the left side of the continuum, we find two stages of covert support. First, public denial is when a state publicly refutes any material assistance to the rebels, and the state authorities do not display obvious signs of material support.²⁵ An example is Rwanda’s rejection of its support to the *Mouvement du 23 Mars* (M23) in 2012–2013, despite ample evidence provided by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) on the matter (AFP 2012b). An absence of denial is when a state does not publicly deny or acknowledge supporting the rebels following repeated accusations, and, again, the authorities do not display obvious signs of material assistance to the insurgents. An example is when Gaddafi’s Libya faced accusations of supporting rebellions throughout Africa in the 1990s. While Libyan authorities denied some allegations (Reuters 1990; BBC 1990), others remained without known public answers.

On the right side of the continuum, we find two stages of overt support. A public display is when a state does not publicly deny or acknowledge supporting the insurgents but displays obvious signs of assistance. Apart from not taking any positive actions to hide its aid, the state voluntarily exhibits its relationship with the insurgents. An example is when the Eritrean government hosted the Sudanese National Democratic Alliance (NDA) in Asmara during the 1990s (Sutton 1995). A public statement is when a sponsor publicly acknowledges providing material aid to rebels. States mostly justify such a degree of overtness by strategic imperatives, moral concerns often related to

²⁵ I consider obvious signs of material support the organization of voluntarily advertised public meetings with rebel leaders or the allowance of official rebel headquarters in the sponsors’ main urban areas. However, I do not consider that official meetings in the context of third-party mediation are public displays of material support.

human rights considerations, or both. An example is Uganda's public recognition of its support to the *Mouvement de libération du Congo* (MLC) in 1998 (Borzello 1998).

It is essential not to conflate the degree of acknowledgment of support with its visibility. Support can be denied or unacknowledged by sponsors but still be implausibly deniable (Cormac and Aldrich 2018). In addition, overt support does not equate to diplomatic support since sponsors can offer the latter without providing material assets to the insurgents. Finally, overt support does not equate to complete transparency regarding the amount or the type of material aid. In most cases of overt support, foreign states admit their support to a rebellion but remain vague regarding what they transfer. Sponsors appear especially reluctant to acknowledge the transfer of lethal resources such as weapons and/or ammunition and often prefer focusing their declarations on non-lethal aid.²⁶

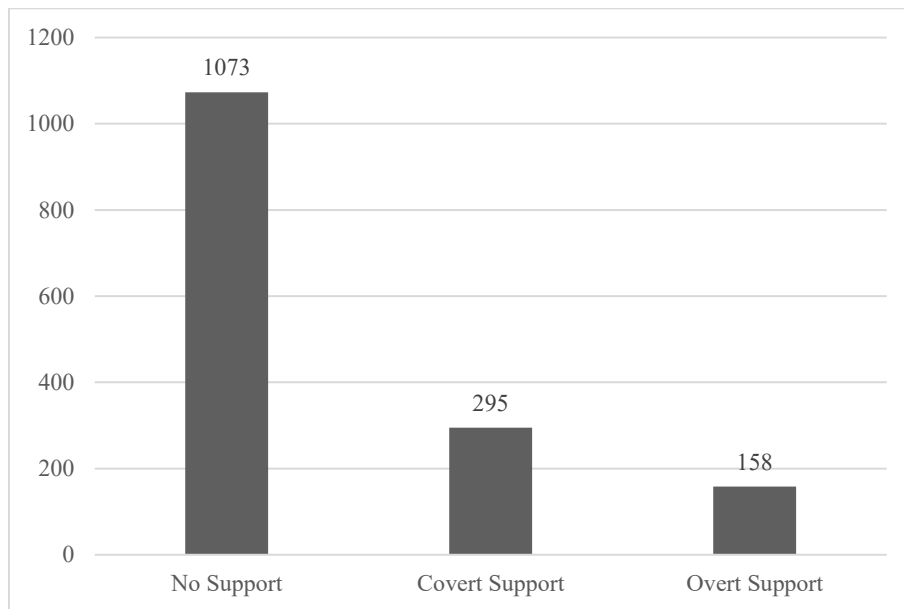
Trends in the Overtness of External Support to Rebels

I code the overtness of support for all insurgencies active in civil conflicts between 1989 and 2018 (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Pettersson, Högladh, and Öberg 2019) and receiving known material support from at least one external state (Högladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011; Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021).²⁷ Figure 8 shows that, among the 1,525 rebel-year observations in the dataset, 453 are observations where the rebels receive known material support from one or more external states. Moreover, among these 453 observations, 295 are observations where the rebels receive solely covert support, while 158 are observations where the insurgents receive overt support from at least one sponsor.

²⁶ One example is the US assistance to the Syrian rebels in 2012 (AFP 2012a).

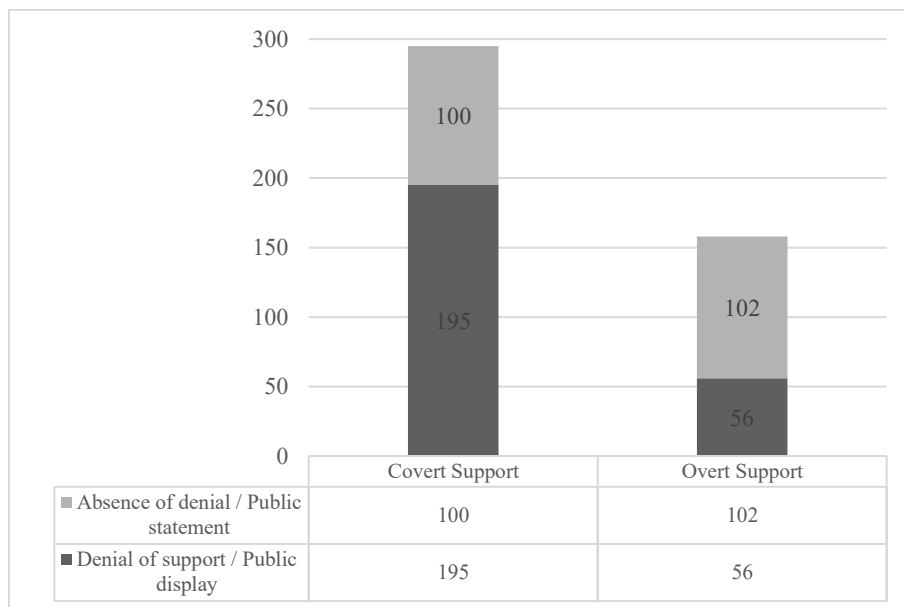
²⁷ The sources were press articles, NGOs and IOs reports, and academic articles. I evaluated the overtness of support yearly and compiled all sources in a coding manual. I do not code a state acknowledging support a posteriori as providing overt support at the time of provision.

Figure 8. The Overtness of External Support to Rebels—Aggregated Data



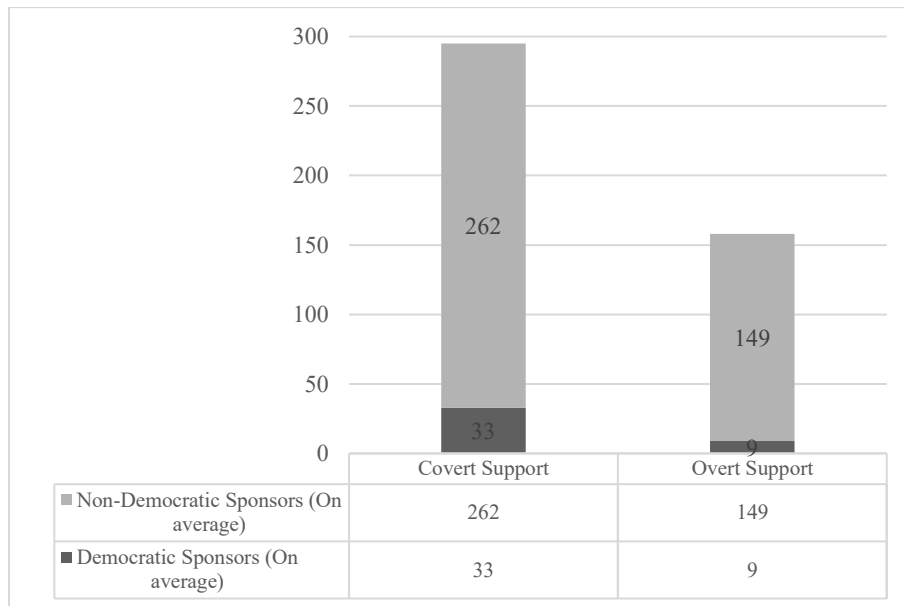
As depicted, overt support remains an exception in international politics. Instead, covert support is the norm in the period. Figure 9 disaggregates cases of covert and overt support along the continuum presented above to scrutinize further the prevalence of the overtness of support.

Figure 9. The Overtness of External Support to Rebels—Disaggregated Data



A potential question is whether the tendency to provide covert or overt support depends on the political regime of the sponsors. Figure 10 disaggregates observations depending on whether rebellions receive support from nondemocratic or democratic states.²⁸

Figure 10. The Overtness of External Support to Rebels—Political Regimes

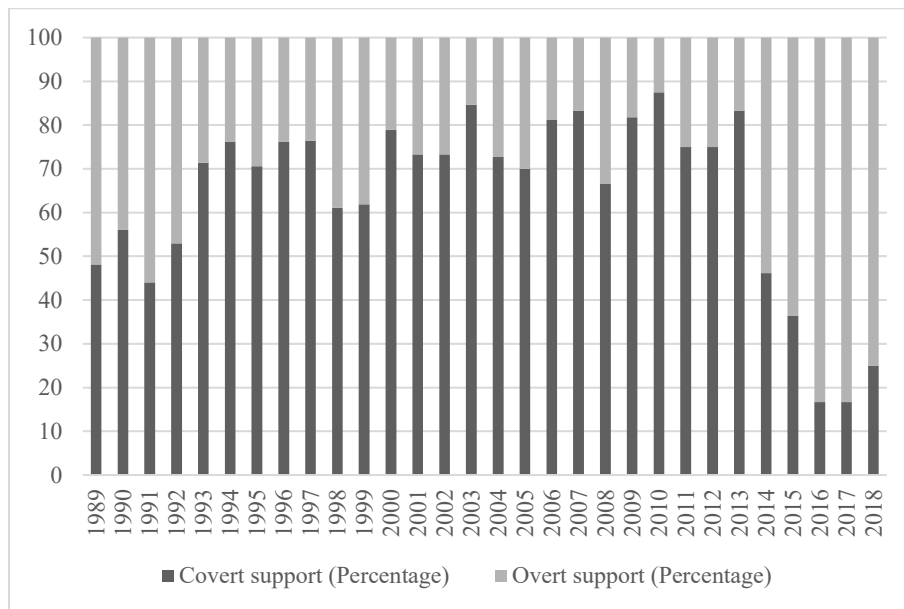


While most rebel groups receive support from non-democratic sponsors on average, the ratio between support from non-democratic supporters and support from democratic supporters does not differ enormously depending on the overtness of support.

Another question is whether variations in the configurations of the international system favor certain forms of support. Figure 11 depicts the percentage of cases of covert and cases of overt support each year to assess the existence of potential temporal disparities regarding the prevalence of overtness in international politics.

²⁸ I evaluate the sponsors' regime nature using their Polity Score (M. G. Marshall and Gurr 2020). A sponsor is democratic when its score equals or exceeds "6." I consider the means of sponsors' Polity scores when a rebel group has multiple sponsors.

Figure 11. The Overtness of External Support to Rebels—Per Year



The pre-1992 period appears particularly prone to overtness. Half the observations are cases of overt support. A potential explanation for this tendency could be that, in the context of the Cold War, states from the two main blocs instrumentally used overt support to rebellions to signal the credibility of their political and technological systems. An example could be the overt US support for rebels in Afghanistan in the early 1990s (Carson 2018). The 1993–2013 period appears less prone to overtness. The share of observations being cases of overt aid oscillates between 20 and 40 percent. This likely reflects the emergence of an international system based on non-intervention norms. Finally, with most cases being cases of overt support, the 2014–2018 period shows a return of overt support at the core of states’ *modus operandi*. This tendency may reflect a resumption of strategic competition among great powers in conflicts such as Syria.²⁹

²⁹ A potential bias here relates to the fact that some recent cases of covert support remain unknown, leading to an overestimated share of cases of overt support in recent years. Future studies must confirm or correct this inclination toward overtness in the post-2014 period.

The Costs and Advantages of Overt Support to Rebels

Acting overtly in a conflict entails both potential costs and advantages for sponsors. On the one hand, overtness exposes a sponsor to potential costs. First, overt support is a defying move that can trigger military retaliation from the target actor and/or its allies.

Then, overtness can lead to costs for the sponsor if rebels engage in harmful behavior. The repercussions can be reputational. For example, a state can be sensitive to costs caused by “naming and shaming” campaigns (DeMeritt 2012; McManus and Yarhi-Milo 2017). A sponsor can also be sensitive to reputational costs with its domestic constituency and the constituency of the territory affected by the conflict caused by overt support to rebels killing civilians with whom it claims religious or ethnic kinship. The Iranian leaders’ likely disinclination to support Palestinian groups coercing Palestinians exemplifies this idea (Malakoutikhah 2020).

Even a state insensitive to reputational costs can be sensitive to material costs if it supports violent rebels overtly. Notably, most states do not want to appear on lists of sponsors of terrorism due to the associated sanctions (DiBlasi 2020; Byman 2020). Being listed as a sponsor of terrorism prevented the Sudanese authorities from accessing “U.S.-dominated lending institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund,” for instance (Bearak and Mohieddin 2020). Moreover, a state relying strongly on foreign aid can be reluctant to support violent rebels openly because this could impact the amount of aid received from wealthy countries (Stanton 2017). A state must thus consider the potential reputational and/or material costs when evaluating the opportunity to provide overt support.

On the other hand, some advantages can sometimes motivate a sponsor to publicize its support. First, overt support can have a communicational advantage by serving as a signaling mechanism for various audiences. Domestically, a state can find benefits in publicizing its support to a group with which it shares kinship ties (Ives 2019b; 2019a). For example, the Palestinian cause’s strong “popular support at home” likely explains Qatar’s open support to *Hamas* (Levs 2014). Internationally, intervening overtly in a conflict can also allow a state to signal the credibility of its political and technological system. Second, overtness offers a sponsor operational benefits. A sponsor who intervenes overtly can transfer more resources and assets of higher quality to rebels than a state intervening covertly (O’Rourke 2018; Carson 2018). Overtness often entails

“robust amounts of aid, more advanced technologies, and optimally trained personnel” (Carson 2018, 36). This opportunity to transfer more and better resources increases the sponsor’s chances of attaining its objectives in a conflict. For example, Carson (2018) studies the US sponsorship of Afghan rebels in the 1980s. In 1986, the US accepted to adopt an overt posture in the conflict, which allowed the sponsors to provide American-made *Stinger* missiles to insurgents.

From the rebels’ point of view, not all groups searching for material aid value overtness over covertness. Some rebellions may not want to offer the perception that they are the “puppets of external states” or “out of touch with those inside the country” (S. G. Jones 2016, 158). Nevertheless, overtness can bring insurgents valuable advantages. By signaling a strong sponsors’ commitment to the rebels’ cause, overtness can offer “legitimacy-seeking” rebellions the necessary political resources they need (Jo 2015; Stanton 2017). An example is Armenian groups in Nagorno-Karabagh heavily relying on external recognition to reach their state-building objectives (Beacháin, Comai, and Tsursumia-Zurabashvili 2016). Then, even “legitimacy-indifferent” rebellions can find material benefits in overtness (Jo 2015). As mentioned, overt support often entails the transfer of more resources and assets of higher quality. These advantages can help rebels gain fighting capabilities. To return to the Carson (2018) example cited above, receiving *Stinger* missiles enabled Afghan rebels to defeat the Soviet-backed government. Based on the costs and advantages of overtness for both sponsors and rebels, the following section develops an argument stressing the link between this variable and the way rebels use violence toward civilians.

The Overtness of External Support to Rebels and Civilian Targeting in Civil Wars

This section starts by exposing my expectations regarding how a state’s choice of overt support will impact how it deals with rebel behavior. I then discuss how the sponsors’ actions, in return, define the structures of incentives of the rebels concerning civilian targeting.

The Sponsors' Incentives Depending on the Overtiness of External Support

Once deciding to intervene in a conflict through a local partner, a state must choose whether to do it covertly or overtly.³⁰ The potential reputational and material costs and the potential communicational and operational benefits of overt support present the sponsor with a choice. A state assists rebels overtly when it perceives that the potential benefits exceed the potential costs.³¹ However, a complicating factor is that the initial parameters that make a sponsor choose covert or overt support may change after the state begins to support the rebels.³² External support “may reduce the constraints on insurgent violence by diminishing rebels’ need to connect and contract with the local population” (Weinstein 2006; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014, 657). Rebels thus see their structure of incentives becoming more permissive to violence once they receive support.

Sponsors can implement various monitoring mechanisms to limit the risk that rebels start targeting civilians once receiving external aid (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014). A state can monitor rebels through the action of its operatives on the ground. The monitoring can also involve external threats to sanction atrocities-committing rebels by changing the conditions of support or halting it. I argue that the intensity of monitoring will increase in line with the degree of overtiness of support for the rebels. When providing covert support, a sponsor can hope that its assistance will not be exposed if rebels start to commit atrocities. The sponsor can tolerate a certain degree of violence to preserve its primary objectives in the conflict. If exposed, the sponsor who denies helping insurgents can still rely on plausible deniability to mitigate potential costs (Poznansky

³⁰ I follow Poznansky’s (2019) approach and take the sponsor’s decision to intervene in a conflict via support to a rebel group as a background condition.

³¹ I believe that low-level rebel violence prior to foreign support can sometimes be balanced by a state’s high interest in acting overtly. On the other hand, large-scale atrocities before support should tip the balance toward a complete lack of support. Cases where insurgent violence likely alienated potential benefactors are numerous. For example, while Russia was known to be sympathetic to Bosnian Serbs in the previous years, Russian authorities denounced the rebels in 1994 for their “unnecessary, unspeakable slaughter of civilians” (Graham 1994).

³² The question of a state’s leverage on military retaliation from the target government and/or its allies is outside the scope of this study.

2020). The sponsor does not face high incentives to monitor rebels strictly and has latitude regarding how it can respond to such a situation.³³

Conversely, a sponsor providing overt support gives up the possibility of plausibly denying its support. The state can be sure that rebel atrocities will lead to reputational and/or material costs. The sponsor thus faces strong incentives to monitor rebels strictly. I believe that “rhetorical commitment” can lead to “rhetorical entrapment” (Schimmelfennig 2001, 66). The sponsor’s choice for overt support caused by its initial perception that the benefits outweigh the potential costs creates incentives to control rebels strictly to maintain a favorable advantage-cost balance.

An example of monitoring in a case of overt support occurred during the Libyan civil war. In 2011, several states provided the National Transitional Council (NTC) with lethal and nonlethal assets (Nardulli 2015). The support was mainly overt. Different sponsors publicly justified aiding the rebels by appealing to the rightfulness of their cause (Black 2011; Hopkins 2011; Kerr 2011). In line with my theoretical expectations, the sponsors monitored the NTC-civilian interactions. Foreign advisers were, for instance, on the battlefield to advise the rebels on civilian protection (Traynor and Norton-Taylor 2011). Overall, the financial aid was conditional on the fact that it would help create a free and fair government structure in the rebel areas. The European Union (EU) was very active in this area. The EU announced that the aid “would be tied to progress in developing civil society” in May 2011 (John 2015, 156). The EU subsequently created a mission office in Benghazi, considered the rebel capital (Talbi 2011).

Another example is the case of the YPG during the war against the IS in Northeast Syria. Stressing that it would be “morally very difficult” not to support the group, the US started to overtly “furnish weapons, ammunition and medical aid” to the YPG following the IS attack on Kobane in September 2014 (Letzch 2014). From this time, the US monitored the YPG-civilian interactions. The sponsor notably advocated for the inclusion of non-Kurdish fighters into the group (Reuters 2017b). This advocacy led to the creation of the SDF in 2015, which, although YPG members still dominated it, included Arab, Syriac, or Turkmen fighters (A. A. Holmes 2019; Aaron Stein 2022).

³³ The argument is not that sponsors providing covert support are always insensitive to rebel abuses but that, contrarily to those providing overt support, they do not face an absolute need or urgency to act on such violence when it occurs.

Monitoring thus appears frequent when support is overt, particularly when provided by democratic states. Evidence regarding monitoring by non-democratic states in cases of overt aid is more difficult to find, likely, in part, due to transparency issues. Nevertheless, some evidence suggests that autocracies may also be sensitive, to some extent, to abuses by their rebel allies. For instance, when *Hamas* clashed with the *Fatah* in 2006 and 2007, Iran denounced the “regretful image of family clashes between men and women” and proposed to settle the dispute (BBC 2007).

The Rebels’ Incentives Depending on the Overtiness of External Support

I believe that the strictness of monitoring conducted by sponsors then defines the incentives of the insurgents regarding civilian targeting. The incentives of the rebels depend on whether they receive support or not (Weinstein 2006; Wood 2014; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014) and whether the support they receive is covert or overt for those receiving foreign support.³⁴

I identify three scenarios. In the first scenario, a rebel group receives no support from foreign states. In this case, the rebels face a mixed structure of incentives regarding civilian targeting. If the insurgents want and expect to receive support in the future, either covertly or overtly, demonstrating restraint can be a way to signal their willingness to abide by basic standards of civilian protection to convince potential sponsors (Jo et al. 2021).³⁵ If the rebels do not want and/or do not expect to receive support in the future, demonstrating restraint can be a way to win over the hearts and minds of civilians and foster their voluntary cooperation (Kalyvas 2006; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014). If the insurgents do not want and/or do not expect to receive support in the future but have access to lucrative natural resources or criminal networks, they can

³⁴ I follow Stanton’s (2017, 25) argument that rebels always “carefully weigh the costs and benefits of engaging in violence against civilians, making strategic calculations about whether to engage in violence as well as about which strategy of violence to adopt.” Next to strategic incentives, rebel ideologies may influence the nature of the insurgent–civilian interactions. However, whether rebel behavior is ideological or purely strategic is challenging to assess. Even if instrumentally adopted (Sanín and Wood 2014), restraint toward civilians can have performative dimensions over time. Rebels can gradually internalize these social norms (Green 2018).

³⁵ Groups willing to receive foreign assistance can have vital interests in being vocal about their restraint within the international forum. Engaging in “rebel diplomacy” campaigns can be an effective way to “signal political viability and moderation” (Huang 2016a; Jo et al. 2021, 930).

face a structure of incentives permitting civilian targeting (Weinstein 2006).³⁶ The incentives of the rebels depend on factors beyond the presence or absence of foreign support in this scenario.

In the second scenario, a rebel group receives covert support only from foreign states. In this case, the insurgents face a permissive structure of incentives regarding civilian targeting. Access to external resources makes the rebels less reliant on voluntary cooperation from civilians to maintain a constant flow of assets needed to fight. In addition, covert sponsors are not expected to monitor the rebel-civilian interactions strictly and have significant latitude when responding to potential post-support violence. Thus, if deemed beneficial to achieve their objectives, the insurgents can engage in extortionate behavior to produce forced cooperation from civilians.

Finally, in the third scenario, a rebel group receives overt support from foreign states. In this case, the rebels face a restrictive structure of incentives regarding civilian targeting. While the insurgents could become more violent due to a lower need to win civilians' hearts and minds, strict monitoring from sponsors can prevent the rebels from shifting their strategy. Starting to engage in extortionate behavior would make the rebels risk losing the benefits of overt support. Faced with the potential reputational and material costs mentioned above, a sponsor could follow two strategies in case of post-support abuses. First, the state could switch to covert support by pretending to cease its sponsorship. This strategy would, however, be both dangerous for the sponsor—public attention linked to the previous overtness would likely continue, increasing the risks of exposure and high costs—and detrimental for the rebels—legitimacy-seeking rebels would lose the symbolic benefits of overtness, and all groups would lose the material benefits of overtness. The sponsor could also decide to cease its support at the entire expense of the rebel capabilities.³⁷ In this case, the rebels thus have vital interests in complying with their backers' preferences for restraint toward civilians.

I believe the more overt the support, the more it restricts the rebels' incentives to target civilians. I anticipate strong path dependency at the extremities of the continuum presented in

³⁶ One example is the Islamic State (IS), which relied heavily on oil wealth in Northeast Syria (Le Billon 2021). This access compensated for the IS lack of (known) sponsors and likely influenced its propensity to target civilians heavily.

³⁷ The US ended its overt support of the UNITA in 1993 after repeated calls for the group to end human rights abuses (The New York Times 1992; S. A. Holmes 1993).

Figure 7 (Fioretos 2011).³⁸ If the sponsors publicly deny supporting the rebels, the insurgents will have few hopes that the support will become overt. Switching to overt support would be a strong turnaround for the sponsor, affecting its future credibility at the domestic and international levels. In these cases, violence toward civilians can become permitted from the rebels' perspective. If the sponsors publicly acknowledge helping insurgents, the insurgents can be confident enough regarding the support's durability to develop a long-term strategy to preserve such beneficial links. In intermediary situations, either an absence of denial or a mere public display, the insurgents likely face mixed incentives regarding civilian targeting.

To return to the examples mentioned above, in light of the sponsors' acute monitoring, the legitimacy-seeking NTC faced strong incentives to respect standards of civilian protection in 2011. For instance, the opportunity to continue benefiting from overt support likely led the group to pledge not to use landmines (HRW 2011). This opportunity also likely motivated the group to commit to norms regulating armed conflicts in August 2011 (NTC 2011). The consequences of monitoring were not solely symbolic. The commitment in favor of restraint translated into low rebel violence toward civilians on the battlefield. This restraint strikingly contrasted with the regime's behavior. In the same way, the YPG displayed a low propensity to target civilians after 2014, contrasting with the Kurdistan Workers' Party's (PKK) tendencies to use violence toward noncombatants (The Independent 1990).³⁹ *Ham*as also reduced its terrorist activities in 2006, when Iran started to finance the group more overtly following its access to power in Gaza (AFP 2006).⁴⁰

³⁸ I also assume path dependency regarding rebel violence. As Conrad and Moore (2010) demonstrated regarding states' use of torture, it may be difficult for a political actor to change its practices regarding the use of violence. A rebel group engaged in widespread abuse is unlikely to switch to a strategy aimed at receiving foreign backing since most potential backers are likely to be alienated already. Conversely, a group that demonstrates restraint initially keeps its possibilities open for the future.

³⁹ The PKK is the parent organization of the YPG.

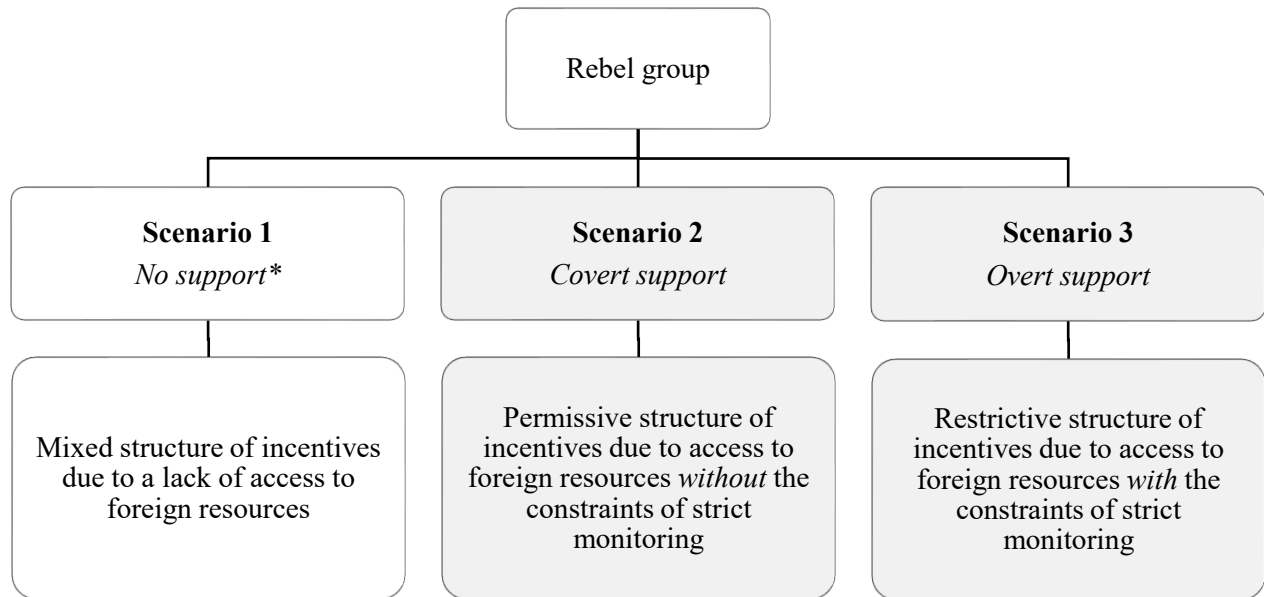
⁴⁰ Data from the UCDP, the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), or the Terrorism in Armed Conflict (TAC) dataset corroborate these rebel groups' inclination toward restraint in the context of overt support.

The rebels' pledge in favor of civilian protection did not prevent all abuse. Human rights organizations reported abuse by the NTC toward former (or alleged) regime fighters in liberated areas and foreign nationals, sometimes perceived as pro-Qaddafi mercenaries (Amnesty International 2011; UN Human Rights Council 2012). Reports of arbitrary

Observable Implications

Figure 12 summarizes my expectations regarding the insurgents' incentives depending on the presence and the overtness of support.

Figure 12. The Overtness of External Support and Civilian Targeting in Civil Wars



* As mentioned above, this situation corresponds either to groups wanting and expecting to receive foreign support in the future or groups not wanting and/or not expecting to receive foreign support in the future.

Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood (2014) demonstrate that, on average, the rebels not receiving support—those in *Scenario 1*—are less likely to target civilians than the insurgents receiving support—those in *Scenarios 2* and *3* lumped together. The present study aims at enriching these findings by disaggregating *Scenarios 2* and *3*. I expect rebels receiving covert support to face a permissive structure of incentives that allows civilian targeting for strategic or tactical reasons. The potential benefits of violence can often outweigh the costs for the rebels in this situation. Conversely, I expect rebels receiving overt support to face a restrictive structure of incentives

arrests and acts of torture notably led the NTC to issue “guidelines on how rebel fighters should treat prisoners of war” (John 2015, 83). In the same way, the YPG’s pledge in favor of civilian protection did not prevent all abuse. Amnesty International (2015) reported human rights violations in the war against the IS.

regarding civilian targeting. The potential costs of violence can often outweigh the advantages for the rebels in this situation. These expectations allow me to formulate a central hypothesis:

The rebels receiving overt support from foreign states are less involved in civilian targeting than the insurgents receiving covert support.

I will verify this hypothesis through statistical analyses. In terms of causality, following Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood's (2014) approach, this article suggests that the causal arrow between civilian targeting and the overtness of support goes both ways. The argument is that "foreign sponsors impose constraints on the behavior of the rebels they support, and that they work hard to select appropriate agents" (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014, 646). Endogeneity is central to the argument, and the objective is to expose a correlational relationship between the overtness of support and the rebels' propensity to target civilians. The idea is to show that, whatever their strategic objectives in a conflict, sponsors have a degree of leverage on the extent of civilian targeting by rebels via selection and monitoring mechanisms.

Statistical Analyses

Data Structure

The unit of analysis was the group-year. I used data from the UCDP Dyadic Dataset (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Pettersson, Högladh, and Öberg 2019) and UCDP data on external support (Högladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011) to identify all insurgencies which were active in intrastate conflicts and received material support from at least one state between 1989 and 2018.⁴¹

To increase the validity of the statistical results, I excluded "alleged" cases of external support from my observations. This exclusion was a limitation, as this could exclude cases of highly concealed sponsorships not sufficiently documented. This issue of false negatives could cause an overestimation of a negative correlation between the overtness of support and civilian

⁴¹ I coded external support for post-2009 cases using data from Stein and Cantin's article (2021). In addition, some of the datasets I used were published several years ago. I thus conducted manual research for all recent years to limit missing data and the biases that a large number of dropped observations could cause.

targeting. Unrevealed covert actions likely mainly occur in conflicts experiencing low violence because these events attract less attention from scholars, NGOs, IOs, or journalists than conflicts experiencing high victimization. To limit the risk of excluding false negatives, I presented a *Model A* with all cases of alleged support in the Appendix. I also presented *Models B* comparing all groups independently from whether they receive support or not in the Appendix.

Explanatory Variables

I matched each observation with two explanatory variables.⁴² First, *Overtness Dummy* was a binary variable set to “1” if a group received overt support from at least one state during the year and “0” if all the support received was covert. Again, as there is a risk that I excluded false negatives, I likely underestimated the number of “0” in the observations. Second, *Overtness Continuum* was a categorical variable set to “1” if a group’s sponsors all denied providing support; “2” if at least one of a group’s sponsors did not deny providing support and none of the sponsors publicly displayed or stated their support; “3” if at least one of a group’s sponsors publicly displayed its support and none of the sponsors publicly stated their support; and “4” if at least one of a group’s sponsors stated its support publicly.

Dependent Variables

I then matched the explanatory variables with two dependent variables coded using the UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) (Sundberg and Melander 2013; Högladh 2019).⁴³

⁴² I used two specifications to lower the risks of biases caused by errors when coding the overtness of support. If I made errors, it was likely inside the following two main categories: I coded a public denial as an absence of denial or a public statement as a public display.

⁴³ I used two specifications to address legitimate concerns in the literature about the appropriateness of comparing count data across time and space (Gohdes and Price 2013; Dawkins 2021; E. Miller et al. 2022).

To limit the risk of results biased by outliers, I excluded cases where rebels kill more than 5000 civilians in a year. This exclusion removed three cases from the analysis; the *Alliance des forces démocratiques pour la libération du Congo* (AFDL) in 1996 (30,110 victims), the AFDL in 1997 (5,016 victims), and the Serbian Republic of Bosnia-

First, to account for the occurrence of violence toward civilians, *Civilian Fatalities Dummy* was a binary variable set to “1” if a rebel group killed more than ten civilians in a year and “0” otherwise. I associated the threshold of 10 with rebel restraint.⁴⁴ Below this level of violence, it is doubtful that the sponsors would alter their strategies in a conflict. Second, to account for the intensity of civilian targeting, *Civilian Fatalities Count* was a count corresponding to the best estimate of the number of civilians killed by a rebel group in a year. Finally, to assess the robustness of the results, I presented a *Model C* in the Appendix using the number of deadly events of terrorism attributed to a rebel group in a year as a dependent variable (Fortna, Lotito, and Rubin 2020).

Control Variables

I included several control variables that may influence the link between the overtness of support and civilian targeting in civil wars. First, at the group level, I included a variable to specify whether a rebel group built itself around *Religious* identity (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020; Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021). As mentioned above, kinship ties can encourage a state to support rebels overtly, especially if such aid is popular with its domestic constituency (San-Akca 2016; Ives 2019b). At the same time, religious ideologies can influence the use of violence by the rebels (Isaacs 2016). I then accounted for a group’s *Territorial Control* (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013).⁴⁵ Holding large swaths of territories can allow a group to demonstrate its credibility and attract overt support from sponsors (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011). At the same time, numerous studies show the influence of the nature of the rebels’ territorial control on civilian targeting in civil wars (Kalyvas 2006; Stewart and Liou 2017).

At the rebel-sponsor dyad level, I considered the type of assistance provided to the rebels (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011; Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021). Providing *Troops* or *Sanctuary* is less likely to be done covertly than providing fungible resources such as money or

Herzegovina (8,360 victims) in 1995 (Sundberg and Melander 2013; Högbladh 2019). This removal explained why the number of observations was 450 instead of 453, as presented in the section above.

⁴⁴ Stanton (2017, 30) argues that restraint never represents “a complete absence of violence against civilians.”

⁴⁵ I completed some missing observations via manual coding.

weapons. In addition, having troops on the ground can enable a sponsor to monitor the insurgents more strictly than if they only provide material resources, influencing civilian targeting. Rebels accessing sanctuaries abroad are also known to be more violent toward civilians (Stewart and Liou 2017). I also included a variable to specify whether a group receives support from *Democratic Supporters* (M. G. Marshall and Gurr 2020). The sponsors' political regimes can influence the overtness of the support, as established democracies with robust institutional control over foreign policy need to be more transparent about their actions abroad than non-democracies (Norrevik and Sarwari 2021). In addition, liberal democracies will likely monitor rebel-civilian interactions more strictly than illiberal regimes (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014). I also included a variable considering the sponsors' *Reliance on Foreign Aid* (Edgell 2017).⁴⁶ States heavily relying on foreign aid are likely to be more sensitive to potential costs associated with support to violent rebels, influencing their propensity to opt for overt support in a conflict and to monitor the rebels.

At the conflict level, I added a variable for the *Number* of rebel groups operating in a conflict (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Pettersson, Högladh, and Öberg 2019). The presence of many groups can encourage a state to intervene by overtly supporting its favored one (Byman 2013). In parallel, the prevalence of civilian targeting increases in line with the number of rivals against which rebels compete (K. Cunningham, Bakke, and Seymour 2012; Wood and Kathman 2015). I also added a variable *Government Victimization*, considering the violence of the local government (Sundberg and Melander 2013; Högladh 2019). Intense repression can push a sponsor to endorse a rebel group publicly with the objective of defeating the government. However, the regime violence may also be “successful in deterring civilians from lending support to rebels,” causing the latter to increase their attacks against the population (Ottmann 2017, 38). Moreover, I added a variable considering the *Intensity* of conflicts (Pettersson, Högladh, and Öberg 2019). High-intensity civil wars certainly attract more attention from potential sponsors (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011). At the same time, the insurgents are more likely to extract resources from civilians brutally when conflicts escalate (Downes 2008).

⁴⁶ Edgell's dataset (2017) ended in 2012. Therefore, I coded post-2012 observations using the 2012 value. Since a country's reliance on aid does not fundamentally vary yearly, I do not expect this limitation to bias the results strongly.

Third, at the state level, I included a variable considering the presence of *Lootable Resources* in rebel areas; oil (Päivi Lujala, Ketil Rod, and Thieme 2007), gemstones (Gilmore et al. 2005; Paivi Lujala 2009), and drugs (Buhaug and Lujala 2005). While these resources can motivate a state to aid insurgents with whom it can collaborate (Findley and Marineau 2015), a significant strand of research links insurgents' access to those resources with violence toward civilians (Weinstein 2006; Staniland 2012).

The total number of observations in the sample was 450. Table 2 reports descriptive statistics for all variables.⁴⁷

⁴⁷ I included a *Model E* including a *Rebel Size* variable that takes into account the size of the groups in the Appendix.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics

	Min	Max	Mean	Median	SD
Overtness Dummy	0.00	1.00	0.35	0.00	0.48
Overtness Continuum	1.00	4.00	2.15	2.00	1.20
Civilian Fatalities Dummy	0.00	1.00	0.40	0.00	0.49
Civilian Fatalities Count	0.00	3577.00	80.10	0.00	265.50
Religious	0.00	1.00	0.40	0.00	0.49
Territorial Control	0.00	3.00	0.97	0.00	1.14
Troops	0.00	1.00	0.09	0.00	0.29
Sanctuary	0.00	1.00	0.54	1.00	0.50
Democratic Supporters	0.00	1.00	0.09	0.00	0.29
Reliance on Foreign Aid	1.00	4.00	2.51	3.00	1.12
Rebel Number	1.00	6.00	1.85	1.00	1.12
Government Victimization Dummy	0.00	1.00	0.41	0.00	0.49
Intensity	1.00	3.00	1.30	1.00	0.50
Lootable Resources	0.00	3.00	1.21	1.00	0.89

Unit of analysis = rebel-group-year; N = 450 Rebel groups receiving support from external states.

Results

I ran four statistical models to test my argument linking the overtness of support to civilian targeting. Model 1 used *Overtness Dummy* as the explanatory variable and *Civilian Fatalities Dummy* as the dependent variable. Model 2 used *Overtness Dummy* as the explanatory variable and *Civilian Fatalities Count* as the dependent variable. Model 3 used *Overtness Continuum* as the explanatory variable and *Civilian Fatalities Dummy* as the dependent variable. Finally, Model 4 used *Overtness Continuum* as the explanatory variable and *Civilian Fatalities Count* as the

dependent variable. I used logistic regressions for the binary dependent variable and negative binomial regressions for the count dependent variable.⁴⁸ Table 3 outlines the statistical results.

⁴⁸ The distribution of *Civilian Fatalities Count* was likely characterized by over-dispersion. I presented a *Model D* using a zero-inflated negative binomial regression in the Appendix.

Table 3. The Overtness of External Support and Civilian Targeting

	Model 1 DV: Civilian Fatalities Dummy	Model 2 DV: Civilian Fatalities Count	Model 3 DV: Civilian Fatalities Dummy	Model 4 DV: Civilian Fatalities Count
Overtness Dummy	-1.663***	-1.783***		
	(0.373)	(0.401)		
Overtness Continuum 2			-0.549	-0.091
			(0.376)	(0.382)
Overtness Continuum 3			-1.554**	-1.860***
			(0.552)	(0.464)
Overtness Continuum 4			-2.163***	-1.795***
			(0.602)	(0.478)
Religious	0.098	-0.483	0.049	-0.487
	(0.461)	(0.466)	(0.469)	(0.458)
Territorial Control	-0.379	-0.435*	-0.384	-0.432*
	(0.223)	(0.203)	(0.226)	(0.202)
Troops	1.238	2.095**	1.383	2.078*
	(0.938)	(0.766)	(1.084)	(0.816)
Sanctuary	0.957**	0.734*	0.871*	0.720*
	(0.369)	(0.340)	(0.361)	(0.339)
Democratic Supporters	1.069**	0.262	1.043**	0.238
	(0.401)	(0.363)	(0.391)	(0.361)
Reliance on Foreign Aid	-0.093	-0.138	-0.109	-0.131
	(0.176)	(0.167)	(0.174)	(0.165)
Rebel Number	0.203	0.259	0.237	0.262
	(0.194)	(0.151)	(0.196)	(0.150)
Government Victimization Dummy	0.462	1.079***	0.391	1.096***
	(0.292)	(0.268)	(0.317)	(0.291)
Intensity	1.526***	1.719***	1.525***	1.695***
	(0.402)	(0.282)	(0.397)	(0.273)
Lootable Resources	0.236	-0.053	0.220	-0.056
	(0.231)	(0.167)	(0.230)	(0.166)
Num.Obs.	450	450	450	450
AIC	514.8	3185.0	513.4	3189.0
BIC	564.1	3238.4	570.9	3250.6
Log.Lik.	-245.407	-1579.513	-242.689	-1579.480
Unit of analysis = rebel-group-year; Standard errors clustered by rebel group in parentheses.				
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001				

The results indicate negative and statistically significant correlations between the overtness of external state support to rebels and civilian targeting by the insurgents in civil wars from 1989 to 2018. The overtness of support appears to be a good predictor of the occurrence of violence against civilians and its intensity. Figures 13 and 14 use estimates from Models 1 and 3 to present the predicted values for *Civilian Fatalities Dummy* based on changes in the variables *Overtness Dummy* and *Overtness Continuum*. I hold all control variables at their median value and show confidence intervals at the 0.95 level.

Figure 13. Predicted Values—Civilian Fatalities Dummy—Overtness Dummy

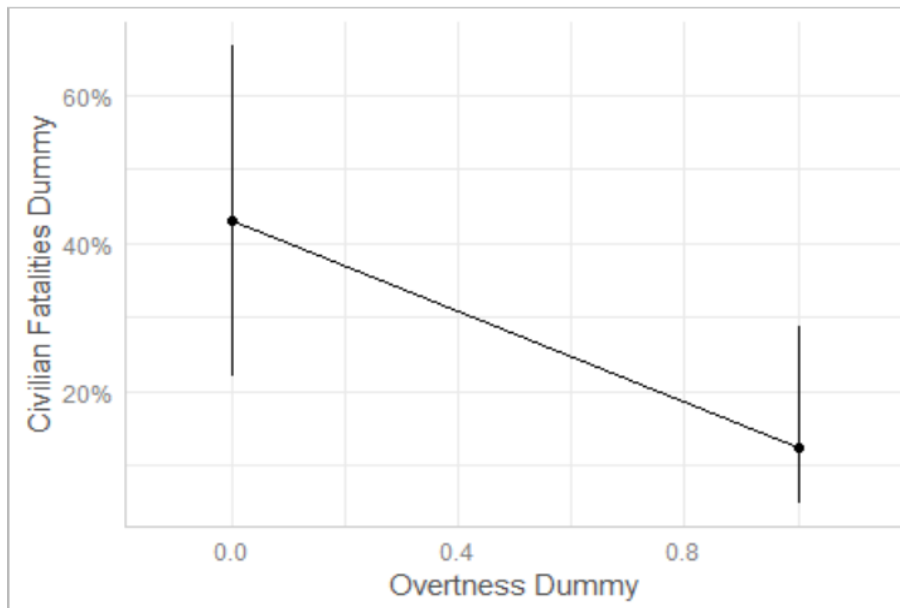
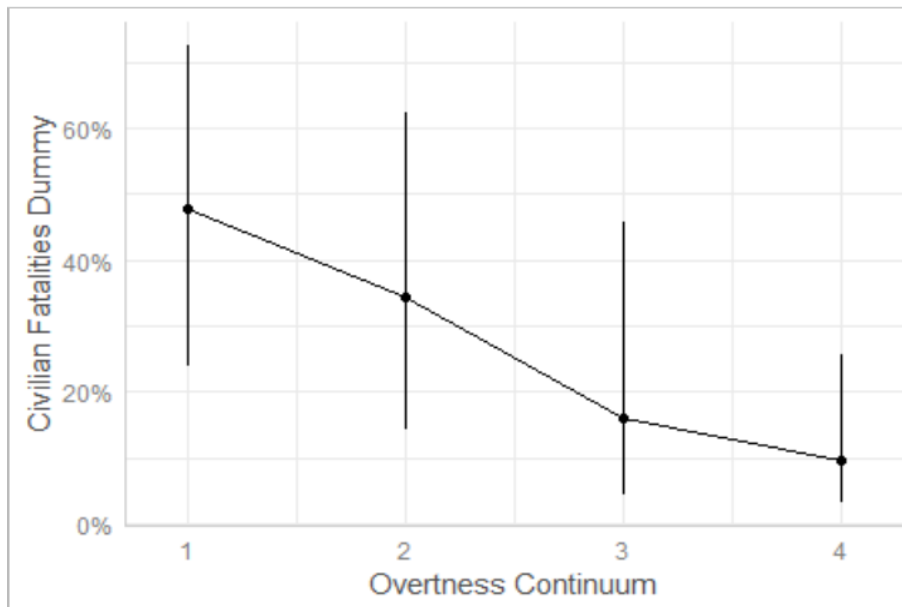


Figure 14. Predicted Values—Civilian Fatalities Dummy—Overtness Continuum



Figures 14 and 15 indicate that the likelihood that rebels use violence toward civilians correlates negatively with the overtness of the support they receive from abroad. The more overt the support, the less it appears likely that rebels will target civilians.

Discussion

The results contribute to the literature on the link between external support for rebels and civilian targeting. The findings indicate that the overtness of support is central to understanding violence toward noncombatants, as it can be a moderating factor in the previously established relationship between external support and civilian targeting (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014).

The implications stemming from these results are critical at a time when states can perceive support to rebels as a substitute to direct military interventions abroad (Mumford 2013). First, while research using principal-agent approaches assumes moral hazard in the sponsor-rebel relationship (Salehyan 2010; Popovic 2017), the findings suggest that sponsors can have some leverage on insurgent violence. First, sponsors can select nonviolent rebels when intervening in a conflict. Then, by publicly recognizing the provision of support, states appear to gain leverage on insurgent conduct. As long as support is overt, the rebels likely face incentives to abide by their sponsors' will and refrain from using violence. As such, external support does not ineluctably promote civilian targeting, and sponsors should be held accountable for the behavior of their rebel allies.

Second, qualifying previous arguments (Weinstein 2006; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014), the findings suggest that rebel access to significant external resources does not necessarily translate into significant violence. Although overtness is likely associated with more and higher quality resources transferred to rebels than covertness (Carson 2018), it is associated with less violence toward noncombatants. These results corroborate recent ones from Huang and Sullivan (2021), associating external support to rebels with constructive insurgent-civilian relationships.

Finally, the findings indicate that restraint can be a particularly fruitful strategy for the rebels. Restraints will likely offer the insurgents more overt support from outside, with all the symbolic and material advantages that overtness provides. These findings resonate with Stanton's (2020) results, which show that the rebels who refrain from targeting civilians are more likely to secure favorable outcomes in civil wars due to increased access to foreign resources.

Conclusion

This article reassessed the link between external support to insurgents and rebel behavior in civil wars by examining whether the overtness of support correlates with insurgent violence. I expected that rebels receiving overt support were less likely to target civilians than rebels receiving covert support. This expectation mainly arose from how supply-side factors—notably how states act after allocating their support—determine the incentives of the rebels regarding civilian targeting. Statistical analysis using new data on the overtness of support to rebels supported this rationale. Thus, rebel behavior is not only linked to the type of resources provided by sponsors (Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed 2015) and also correlates with the form that the support takes.

From a policy point of view, the major implication concerns the responsibility held by sponsors regarding the conduct of the rebels in civil wars. Landau-Wells (2018) previously argued that publicly endorsing rebels is a robust normative commitment with concrete implications in conflict zones. As violence in civil wars affects the civilians' livelihoods for several decades following a conflict (Rivera 2016; Deglow 2016), sponsors should use all the leverage they can gain through overtness to ensure that the rebels abide by minimal standards of civilian protection.

For future research, microlevel studies could help reach a more in-depth understanding of the link between the overtness of support and insurgent behavior. Tracing the processes altering the incentives of the insurgents amidst the fog of civil wars will be necessary to move from

aggregated correlations to a more fine-grained understanding of the phenomenon. For example, interviews with rebel leaders could help us map their strategic calculations during wars. In addition, it would be interesting to study how the overtness of support influences the sociopsychological dispositions of rank-and-file combatants. For example, an overt endorsement from foreign sponsors may influence the group members' self-representations and, in return, affect their behavior.

Finally, the findings raise questions that resonate with the debates around “post-truth politics” (Crilly 2018; Adler and Drieschova 2021). As the states' “control over both information collection and the disclosure decision” is likely to decrease in the coming years (Lin-Greenberg and Milonopoulos 2021, 1071), it appears crucial to study whether and how the truthfulness of discourses in international politics may have concrete implications on the battlefields in civil wars.

Chapter 2—Keeping Costs Down: External Support to Rebels and the Monitoring of Insurgent-Civilian Interactions in Civil Wars

Abstract:

How do foreign sponsors manage rebel violence in civil wars? This article builds theory on how, why, and when external states monitor the interactions with civilians of the insurgents they support. As actors who are sensitive, to various degrees, to costs at domestic and international levels, states can undertake various measures to limit the risks of being publicly associated with atrocities-committing rebel groups abroad. I argue that the degree to which a sponsor supervises insurgents depends on a combination of his perception of the likelihood of its support becoming public and its perception of the costs it will face if its support for violent rebels becomes public. These factors determine whether the sponsor considers the monitoring costs worthwhile. I assess the theory's robustness via a study of the United States' (US) monitoring of the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) between 2014 and 2020. Through a review of written sources and interviews with researchers, former US officials, YPG/SDF militants, and Syrian journalists, I show that the nature of US support and the potential costs associated led the US to monitor the YPG/SDF proactively in Northeast Syria. Additional evidence from the US support for the Free Syrian Army (FSA) corroborates the theory.

Introduction

In many civil wars, external states assist local insurgents via human support, such as troops, military or civil advisers, or diplomats on the ground, and/or material support, such as weapons, funding, or other logistical resources (S. G. Jones 2016; Meier et al. 2022). Supporting the rebels often allows states to punish or harass a state or non-state rival (Byman 2013). Support for insurgents also frequently stems from the states' desire to help insurgents with whom they share social identities (San-Akca 2016). Conflict studies extensively study the determinants (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011) and consequences (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014; Karlén 2017; Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021) of external support to rebels. However, few studies investigate the sponsors' monitoring of rebels, or lack thereof, after the provision of support. Several studies assume moral hazard in the sponsor-insurgent relationship (Salehyan 2010; Popovic 2017), but we know little about how states seek to mitigate potential blowback caused by their support to rebels on the territory of other states.

In this article, I theorize how, why, and when sponsors monitor the interactions with civilians of the rebels they support. Monitoring refers to positive actions undertaken by the sponsors to prevent or end the perpetration of abuse toward noncombatants. I focus on physical violence: lethal violence, such as selective or indiscriminate killings, or heavy-handed governance practices, such as arbitrary arrests or torture. Monitoring does not, in this paper, include the preconditions for support potentially set by a sponsor.⁴⁹

I first outline various monitoring measures states can take to supervise the interactions between the insurgents they support and civilians in conflict areas. I then present material costs at domestic and international levels that states can face if they support rebels committing atrocities. I assume that, with few exceptions, most governments are sensitive to at least some of these costs. In line with this assumption, I finally theorize that the degree to which sponsors supervise insurgents relates to a combination of their perception of the likelihood of their support becoming public and their perception of the costs they will face if their aid to violent rebels becomes public.

⁴⁹ My objective, via this exclusion, is to define the scope conditions of the argument clearly.

The most likely and costly is the disclosure of support; the most intense will be the monitoring. The two factors determine whether states consider the costs of monitoring insurgents worthwhile.

I assess the theory's robustness by studying how the US monitored the YPG and the SDF in Northeast Syria. A small-N analysis allows me to observe in detail the supervision led by the sponsor, thus complementing quantitative studies on the links between external support to rebels and insurgent-civilian interactions (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014; Fortna, Lotito, and Rubin 2018; Huang and Sullivan 2021). Through a review of written sources and interviews with researchers, former senior US officials, YPG/SDF militants, and Syrian journalists, I show that the nature of the US support and the potential costs associated motivated the sponsor to supervise the YPG/SDF proactively between 2014 and 2020. I highlight these measures at the meso-level of the YPG/SDF relationships with other social groups and the micro-level of the daily insurgents-civilian interactions. Further evidence from the US support for the FSA corroborates the theory's logic.

The theory adds to the burgeoning literature on external support to rebels and, more specifically, how the phenomenon impacts the livelihoods of civilians in conflict-riven areas (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014; Huang and Sullivan 2021). The findings suggest that the sponsors can have some influence on rebel-noncombatant interactions if they desire.

The first section reviews the literature on rebel monitoring by external states. The second section expounds on the logic linking the sponsors' perceptions of the likelihood of their support becoming public and the costs they will face if their assistance to violent rebels becomes public to their motivations regarding the intensity of monitoring. The third and fourth sections assess the theory's validity using the US support for the YPG/SDF and additional examples. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the findings' implications for future research on external support to rebels.

Monitoring Rebels in Civil Wars

Several studies focus on the impact of external support on insurgent behavior during civil wars. Mainly based on principal-agent frameworks, these works question why an initial convergence of interests between the sponsors and the rebels often gives way to moral hazard, situations where the rebels' verbal or physical acts are at odds with their sponsors' goals (Salehyan 2010). While we could expect that states sponsor insurgents "when they can effectively monitor

agent activities and sanction bad behavior” (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 714–15), historical examples show that interests are rarely sufficiently close and command structures effective enough to ensure the loyalty of the rebels (Brown 2016). Insurgents often prioritize their interests once they receive external resources (Bapat 2012). Rebellions that are “decentralized” and “factionalized” appear particularly likely to defect against their sponsors (Popovic 2017, 923).

One limitation of the mainly quantitative studies is that they often take rebel monitoring by the sponsors for granted. As an example, Popovic (2017, 924) argues that “Despite the *tight control* [Emphasis added], sponsors frequently encounter problems controlling rebels.” The assumption that the sponsors will always at least try to control the rebel conduct means that these studies consider defection an inherent failure of such monitoring. Not considered is that the sponsors may not even attempt to control the behavior of the rebels.

A recent article by Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl (2021) further explores the supervision of the rebels by their sponsors. They distinguish between two types of sponsor-rebel relationships depending on the possibilities of control for foreign states. On one side, “delegation” corresponds to “hands-on” control. On the other side, “orchestration” corresponds to “hands-off” management. The authors argue that both relationships have advantages and caveats. One remaining limitation of this quantitative analysis is the assumption that the sponsors will always “take advantage of the control opportunities posed by the respective support types” (2021, 136). For instance, the article assumes that the mere presence of sponsors’ operatives alongside the rebels on the ground results in tight control of the rebel behavior.

To sum up, few qualitative studies investigate the sponsors’ strategies to lower the risks of defections by the rebels. Moreover, while most studies focus on the dangers of defections regarding the sponsors’ strategic objectives, few, to my knowledge, examine the issue of insurgent violence toward civilians. How, why, and when sponsors actively try to protect themselves against potential blowback in parallel to pursuing their strategic aims in a conflict remains under-theorized.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Oversight regarding the rebels’ military strategy has a positive dimension: the sponsors aim to ensure that the rebels do what they want them to do. Conversely, monitoring in terms of rebel violence has a negative dimension: the sponsors aim to ensure that the insurgents abstain from doing what they do not want to be associated with.

Monitoring Rebel-Civilian Interactions in Civil Wars

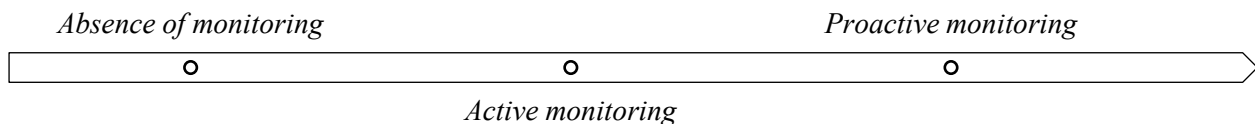
This section presents a continuum including different intensities of supervision of the rebel-civilian interactions. I then argue that while monitoring entails costs for external states, an absence of monitoring can also be costly for the sponsors if the insurgents become violent toward civilians. The sponsors must therefore make a choice considering the measurable costs of monitoring and the perceived costs they will face if their support for violent rebels becomes public.

The Intensity of the Monitoring

This article focuses on the determinants of monitoring by the sponsors rather than on the success of monitoring. The latter corresponds to the responsiveness of the rebels to supervision and depends on an extensive range of factors beyond mere monitoring attempts by a single sponsor.

Figure 15 presents different levels of monitoring intensity:⁵¹

Figure 15. The Intensity of the Monitoring–Continuum



An absence of monitoring reflects the sponsor’s complete indifference to rebel-civilian interactions. In rare cases, this can correspond to situations in which sponsors actively promote rebel abuse to destabilize rival states. As a result, insurgents can commit atrocities without eliciting reactions from their supporters. Active monitoring is when sponsors communicate expectations in

⁵¹ For clarity, I assume that states are unitary actors in this paper. However, several segments of the same government often have differing priorities in monitoring, mainly because they interact with different audiences. Additionally, monitoring can sometimes have an individual dimension: an operative fearing prosecution or dismissal if rebels commit abuse may have a strong interest in monitoring insurgents.

I focus on external support to rebel groups; opposition organizations as defined by the UCDP (Pettersson 2022). Insofar as these cases involve, in my view, different dynamics in terms of relationships between sponsors and armed groups, I do not include in the discussion cases of state support to PGM (Mitchell, Carey, and Butler 2014; Koren 2017).

terms of restraint and minimally try to verify compliance by the rebels on the battlefield through various direct and/or indirect means.⁵²

Finally, proactive monitoring corresponds to cases where the sponsor engages itself, under its name, in positive confidence-building measures to favor peaceful rebel-civilian relationships. Sponsors can operate proactive monitoring at two different levels. First, at the meso-level, proactive monitoring aims to promote peaceful interactions between the rebel organization and other social entities favored by the sponsor. At this level, proactive monitoring can take various forms, such as the organization of talks between rebels and competing armed groups or political parties operating in the same areas. Second, at the micro-level, proactive monitoring aims at maintaining the peacefulness of quotidian interactions between individual insurgents and civilians. At this level, proactive monitoring can take various forms as well, such as supervising mediations between the insurgents and individuals when tensions occur or facilitating the liberation of civilians arrested by the rebels. At both the meso-level and micro-level, proactive monitoring aims to reduce actual or potential rebel violence by substituting voluntary cooperation from civilians for coerced collaboration. This idea assumes that “the quantity and quality of collaboration” influence the intensity of violence against civilians (Kalyvas 2006; Arjona 2017, 755).⁵³ The risk of insurgent violence decreases when civilians voluntarily abide by the rules of the rebels.

Overall, I designed the continuum’s categories to be gradual, as a state engaging in proactive supervision has likely engaged in active supervision beforehand.

⁵² I refer to expectations transmitted verbally and privately to the insurgents. In cases of covert support, public statements would amount to voluntary disclosure of support by the sponsors. In cases of overt support, public statements without prior private statements seem lowly plausible.

⁵³ The idea assumes a contradiction between power and violence. Arendt (1970, 53) argues that “To substitute violence for power can bring victory, but the price is very high; for it is not only paid by the vanquished, it is also paid by the victor in terms of his own power.” Similarly, Padgett and Ansell (1993, 1260) state that “overt domination of locked-in interactions is a sure sign of control’s absence, not of its presence.”

The Cost of Monitoring Insurgent-Civilian Interactions

Actively or proactively monitoring rebel-civilian interactions can be costly for sponsors. The more strictly a state wishes to supervise the insurgents, the more human and material resources it must commit to ensuring that the rebels abide by its expectations. First, the sponsor must assign diplomats, intelligence officers, civil advisers, or military trainers operating alongside the rebels in the field or abroad to monitor their allies. For instance, the United Kingdom (UK) sent military advisers with the publicly professed aim of helping the Libyan rebels to “better protect the civilian population” in 2011 (Coghlan 2011). Second, the state must endow the monitoring agents with specific material means to supervise the insurgents. A sponsor wishing to monitor the rebels must thus redirect resources that it might otherwise use to achieve its strategic aims in a conflict.

At times, the cumbersome nature of monitoring can even impede a sponsor’s strategic goals. For instance, heavy monitoring allegedly hindered the US support for the FSA (Entous and Malas 2013). According to some rebel leaders, “by the time many requests were approved, the proposed operation was no longer feasible” (Entous 2015). Some critics argued that “the US was more worried about the risks and unintended consequences [of its support] than it was about whether the FSA succeeded” (Gaston 2021a, 36). The costs associated with monitoring thus create a theoretical puzzle: why do some states commit significant resources to oversee the conduct of their insurgent allies instead of focusing on their primary strategic objectives in a conflict?

The Perceived Costs of Exposure by External Sponsors

Monitoring can be costly, but not supervising the rebels can also entail costs for the sponsors if their support to insurgents committing abuses becomes public. Because human rights have become an integral part of the norms and discourses regulating the international system (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Hafner-Burton, Tsutsui, and Meyer 2008), a public association

with violent groups will damage the sponsors' reputations.⁵⁴ Beyond the reputational aspect, which researchers can hardly observe, this association can have tangible effects on the sponsors.

Material costs at two different levels explain why most states may fear public disclosure of their support for violent rebels.⁵⁵ First, the sponsors can face costs at the domestic level. Government officials can face sanctions, such as legal proceedings before judicial institutions, congressional hearings, or public protests. For instance, the US support for the abuse-committing Nicaraguan *Contras* in the 1980s exposed the government to large domestic demonstrations and congressional opposition, including multiple hearings of officials involved in the program (Søndergaard 2020). Government officials can also face a loss of domestic political opportunities. In elective systems, voters can punish leaders supporting violent rebels abroad at the ballot box. Some leaders can notably face electoral sanctions if they support rebels targeting civilians with whom at least a part of the population claims kinship. For example, the Turkish support for groups targeting Kurds in Northern Syria likely impacts the Kurdish support for the party of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in elections (Bozarslan 2021; Zaman 2021a).

Second, the sponsors can face costs at the international level if their support for violent rebels becomes public. States can face economic sanctions (Byman 2020). For example, Libya's presence on the US list of sponsors of terrorism until 2007 constrained its economic opportunities (Wald 2006). States that depend on foreign aid can also experience a reduction in the assistance they receive (Stanton 2017). For instance, Sudan's support to groups using terrorism prevented it from accessing valuable foreign aid until 2020 (Dahir 2020). The sponsors may also lose opportunities on the international stage if caught supporting abusive rebels. Governments can notably alienate current and/or potential allies (Szekely 2020). For instance, the US support for the YPG, which Turkey considers entirely tied to the PKK, is a disruptive element in the US-Turkey

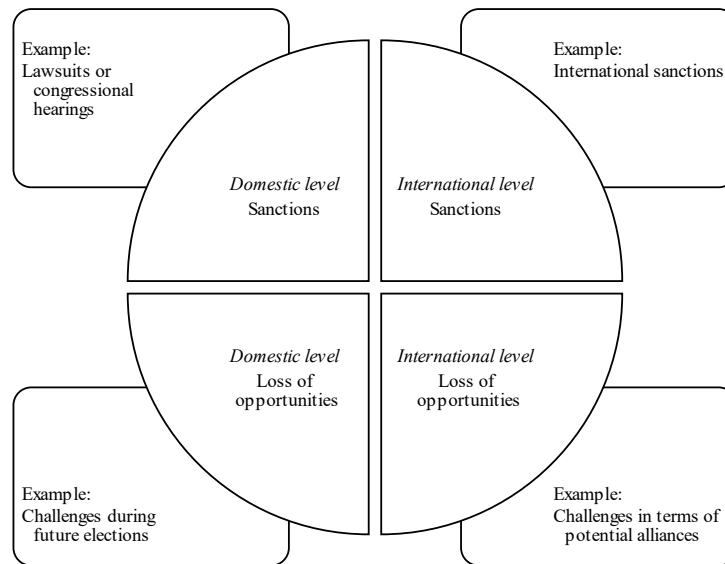
⁵⁴ Even governments heavily denounced for their human rights practices instrumentally use human rights discourses to criticize policies of other states deemed contrary to their strategic interests. For example, Russia frequently uses the accusation of "genocide" against Ukraine to justify its involvement in the Ukrainian Donbas (Fisher 2022).

⁵⁵ As mentioned above, the article assumes that governments are unitary actors. As a result, it does not consider possible moral considerations that might also guide the willingness of specific individual agents to monitor the rebels.

relationship (E. Cunningham 2015). The US sanctions on the Turkish-backed *Ahrar al-Sharqiyah* due to human rights abuses also risk affecting the US-Turkey relationship (Zaman 2021b).

Figure 16 synthesizes the costs governments can face, alternatively or cumulatively, if their support to rebels targeting civilians becomes public.

Figure 16. The Potential Costs for Sponsors Supporting Violent Rebels



While the costs at the domestic level concern democratic regimes predominantly, the costs at the international level can affect all states regardless of their political institutions. Importantly, I believe that very few states are entirely impermeable to costs at both internal and external levels over the long term. A sponsor wholly impervious to these costs would be one; whose opportunities depend very little on domestic factors because of a highly authoritarian regime; that can withstand severe international sanctions over a long period; that has ample autonomy of action on the international scene so that it does not fear a loss of opportunity in terms of alliances if its reputation is damaged. Russia and China are, in my view, the only states coming close to these characteristics in the post-Cold War period. Their characteristics make that few domestic and/or international mechanisms can prevent them from openly associating themselves with violent rebels if desired.

The potential costs at domestic and international levels allow me to identify, in Table 4, gradual levels of cost perception by governments, depending on their intrinsic characteristics.

Table 4. The Perceived Costs of Exposure by External Sponsors

		←	
		Domestic level <i>High costs perceived</i>	Domestic level <i>Low costs perceived</i>
↑	International level <i>High costs perceived</i>	HIGH COSTS	MEDIUM COSTS
	International level <i>Low costs perceived</i>	MEDIUM COSTS	LOW COSTS

The Perceived Likelihood of Exposure by External Sponsors

Sponsors supporting violent rebels will face the costs I outlined above if their support to rebels becomes public. In my view, the likelihood of support becoming public depends on the nature of the assistance. The nature of support mainly stems from the sponsors’ strategic objectives and combines the overtness of the assistance and the type of resources provided to rebels.⁵⁶ In some cases, sponsors publicly acknowledge their assistance to the insurgents.⁵⁷ In these cases, states give

⁵⁶ I believe that the sponsors’ strategic aims in a conflict primarily determine the nature of support. Sponsors consider the advantages that specific ways of providing support can give them. The main advantage of covert support is plausible deniability (Poznansky 2020). States opting for covertness can hope to avoid the disclosure of their support and thus limit the risks of retaliation and/or military escalation (Carson 2018). Conversely, a sponsor providing overt support can transfer more assets and better-quality resources (Carson 2018). Transferring more resources and more effective assets maximizes the rebels’ chances of military success. Sponsors who act publicly are thus more likely to achieve their objectives in a conflict (Carson 2018). Next to the sponsors’ strategic aims, rebel violence before the support can also influence, to some extent, the nature of the assistance. I address this issue at the end of this section.

⁵⁷ Overt and covert support are not mutually exclusive. In some cases, sponsors provide both overt and covert support to the same rebels. However, for the argument, and because this is a more substantial commitment from sponsors to insurgent cause, overt support trumps covert support when both occur concomitantly.

up the ability to plausibly deny their support, thereby exposing themselves to costs if the rebels commit abuses (Poznansky 2020). The sponsors will, by association, be held responsible for rebel violence. The likelihood of exposure is thus absolute when support is overt.

Conversely, states providing covert support may expect to avoid the detection of their aid by external observers.⁵⁸ In cases of covertness, the likelihood of exposure depends primarily on whether the sponsors provide human or material support.⁵⁹ Due to important visibility, human support entails a relatively high likelihood of detection. The visibility of support is remarkably high when sponsors send troops to fight alongside the rebels, as the sponsors' operatives expose themselves to the opponent's view on the battlefield. The lower visibility of hardware support entails, on the contrary, a low likelihood of detection. Even if caught helping insurgents, sponsors can rely on the benefits of plausible deniability when providing material aid only.⁶⁰

The form and type of support allow me to identify, in Table 5, different gradual degrees of perception of the likelihood of the exposure of support by governments.

⁵⁸ Rival governments, rival armed groups, IOs, NGOs, or media outlets can reveal the sponsors' covert support to rebels. If detected by a rival government, a sponsor can sometimes rely on mutual collusion (Carson 2018).

⁵⁹ Human and material support are not mutually exclusive either. States providing human support often provide material aid as well. However, for the argument, and because this is a more substantial commitment from sponsors to the rebel cause, human support trumps material support when both occur.

⁶⁰ The intensity of the conflicts also likely influences the likelihood of exposure. Protracted multi-party civil wars attract more attention from scholars, NGOs, IOs, or journalists than localized conflicts that do not present risks of spillovers. This idea introduces a paradox for sponsors. The greater the quantity and quality of resources provided to rebels, the more likely the conflict will escalate. In return, a high-intensity conflict will attract widespread attention, increasing the likelihood of exposure. This is particularly true since the means of detection currently develop outside the state's control (Lin-Greenberg and Milonopoulos 2021). Future research could investigate this paradox.

Table 5. The Perceived Likelihood of Exposure by External Sponsors

		←	
		Form of support <i>Overt support</i>	Form of support <i>Covert support</i>
↑	Type of support <i>Human support</i>	ABSOLUTE LIKELIHOOD	HIGH/MEDIUM LIKELIHOOD
	Type of support <i>Material support</i>	ABSOLUTE LIKELIHOOD	LOW LIKELIHOOD

The Expected Level of Monitoring Intensity

Considered together, the perceived costs of exposure and the perceived likelihood of exposure ultimately determine, in my view, the intensity of monitoring set up by the sponsors. Table 6 presents my expectations regarding the intensity of monitoring for different combinations of these two variables.

Table 6. The Expected Level of Monitoring Intensity

			<i>Perceived likelihood of exposure</i>		
			←		
			ABSOLUTE LIKELIHOOD	HIGH/MEDIUM LIKELIHOOD	LOW LIKELIHOOD
<i>Perceived costs of exposure</i>	HIGH COSTS	<i>Scenario 1</i> Proactive monitoring expected	<i>Scenario 3</i> Active monitoring expected	<i>Scenario 6</i> Monitoring considered unlikely	
	MEDIUM COSTS	<i>Scenario 2</i> Active monitoring expected	<i>Scenario 5</i> Mixed expectations regarding monitoring	<i>Scenario 8</i> Monitoring considered unlikely	
	LOW COSTS	<i>Scenario 4</i> Monitoring considered unlikely	<i>Scenario 7</i> Monitoring considered unlikely	<i>Scenario 9</i> Monitor. considered highly unlikely	

These are minimum expectations. Sponsors may engage in more stringent supervision than the theory would suggest. From *Scenario 1* to *Scenario 3*, the sponsors face high incentives to monitor the rebels strictly. Conversely, from *Scenario 4* to *Scenario 9*,⁶¹ the states do not face high incentives to monitor rebel-civilian interactions closely. It is possible to analyze some scenarios in more detail. In *Scenario 1*, a democratic state publicly acknowledges its human support to the rebels. Because it incurs high costs at the domestic and international levels if the insurgents commit abuses, the sponsor will likely attempt to monitor the rebels proactively to limit potential violence. In *Scenario 6*, a democratic state provides material support to the rebels but denies its assistance publicly. The sponsor faces a dilemma here. A revelation of support for violent insurgents would

⁶¹ I have mixed expectations in *Scenario 5*.

expose the state to high costs at the domestic and international levels. However, the likelihood of exposure is low. In addition, conducting strict monitoring may be risky for the sponsor. Increasing the number of interactions with the rebels can automatically increase the likelihood of exposure. Therefore, the sponsor will probably not attempt to monitor the insurgents strictly.

In *Scenario 4*, a powerful and authoritarian state publicly recognizes its provision of human support to rebels. Since it perceives no high costs at the domestic and international levels can affect him, the sponsor is unlikely to commit resources to supervise the insurgents. In *Scenario 5*, an authoritarian state of low power on the international scene covertly provides human support to the rebels. The sponsor may face costs at the international level if it supports violent rebels, such as economic sanctions, but does not fear high costs at the domestic level due to the nature of its regime. I have mixed theoretical expectations in this case. The state leaders will need to determine whether they consider it necessary to engage in costly monitoring, as the risks of exposure are high, or whether they accept the potential consequences of public association with violent insurgents, as they consider the associated costs to be bearable. Finally, in *Scenario 9*, a powerful and authoritarian state provides material support to the rebels and denies this assistance in the public sphere. In this case, it is highly unlikely that the sponsor will try to supervise the insurgents.

Before moving on to the case study, it is worth mentioning that rebel violence prior to the beginning of support can influence the form of assistance in some cases and to some extent. I, however, expect path dependency in the sponsor-rebel relationship. As I argued in *Article 1*, a sponsor must weigh the costs it may incur due to rebel violence prior to support against the benefits of overt support when designing its support. A state opts for overt support when it considers that the benefits of overtness exceed the costs. However, rebels can become violent after receiving support because access to external resources makes them less dependent on civilian support (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014). Following this logic, even if a sponsor chooses to provide overt support, primarily or secondarily, based on past low rebel violence, the initial sponsor's decision to act overtly constrains its future motivations. The sponsor will need to strictly monitor insurgents to protect itself against a drastic shift in rebel behavior if it fears high domestic and/or international costs. As a "rhetorical commitment," recognition of support may thus amount to a form of "rhetorical entrapment" for sponsors (Schimmelfennig 2001, 66).

Furthermore, while a sponsor can, in principle, change the form of its support throughout a conflict, again, I expect path dependency in the sponsor-rebel relationship.⁶² The need to match their actions with their discourses makes it difficult for sponsors to renege on a support made public. Sponsors have to act in a way that they do not appear “inconsistent” and lose “credibility” domestically and internationally (Petrova 2016, 388). Switching from overt support to covert support would, in any case, be dangerous for sponsors because public attention linked to the previous overtness would likely continue. The risk of support exposure would therefore be high.

I now assess the robustness of the theoretical framework through the study of one central sponsor-insurgent cooperation observed in Syria.

The US Support to the YPG/SDF in Northeast Syria

This section examines the US support for the YPG/SDF in Northeast Syria between 2014 and 2020. As presented, the nature of the US support exposed the US policymakers to potential costs at the domestic and international levels, pushing them to monitor the YPG/SDF proactively.

Methodology and Data

The supervision of rebels often involves mechanisms that are not or are little publicized, making it necessary to have access to the testimonies of those involved in order to understand their characteristics and scope. The consequence is that tracking these mechanisms for several cases across time and space is difficult. In this article, I thus use a single case study to approach the phenomenon of monitoring during civil wars and deliberately focus on a paradigmatic case of external support; the US-YPG/SDF relationship. The objective is to show that even a government with *a priori* significant freedom of action in foreign policy because of its power within the international system may be constrained in its actions by the need to avoid domestic and international costs. An in-depth case study, corroborated by qualitative evidence from other cases, will allow me to reflect on lessons learned and produce questions for future research on monitoring.

⁶² Shifts from material to human support or covert to overt support are more likely than the other way around.

In terms of data, I extensively reviewed written sources on the US-YPG/SDF relationship; press articles, academic papers, and reports from NGOs, think tanks, and IOs. I also conducted forty-one interviews with researchers,⁶³ former US officials,⁶⁴ YPG/SDF officials, and journalists from Northeast Syria.⁶⁵ The aim was to triangulate data obtained from experts on the conflict, the sponsor, the insurgents, and observers not directly related to the conflict parties.

Background Information on the YPG/SDF and the US Support

The YPG is a Kurdish armed group that became active in the wake of the Syrian revolution of 2011.⁶⁶ The YPG is the military branch of the Democratic Union Party (PYD). The PYD is the Syrian affiliate of the PKK, which fights against Turkey and is on the US and EU lists of terrorist organizations (INT-IR-04).⁶⁷ By 2013, the YPG had “established itself as the dominant military force in nearly every Kurdish-populated area” of Northeast Syria (ICG 2014, 1). In addition, the group was overseeing “security through its military and police forces,” running “tribunals and prisons,” and delivering “humanitarian aid” (ICG 2014, 1).

In a context of low “public appetite for a full-scale US ground invasion” (J. Votel and Dent 2019), the US began considering using the YPG as auxiliaries to fight the IS in Northeast Syria in 2014 (INT-USO-08).⁶⁸ The turning point triggering the US support was the battle of Kobane in September 2014. The US started to “furnish weapons, ammunition and medical aid” to the YPG

⁶³ The researchers were university researchers or think tank members studying the Syrian revolution and the civil war.

⁶⁴ The respondents were senior members within the US State Department or the US Department of Defense.

⁶⁵ A table in the Appendix offers more details on the sample.

⁶⁶ Labeling the YPG as a rebellion is debatable (more on this in *Note I* in the Appendix).

⁶⁷ The division of tasks between the YPG and the PYD is a source of debate. The entities interacted with different audiences during the studied period, and it seemed to be more about who dealt with whom rather than who controlled whom. Therefore, this article alternatively refers to the two branches of the organization. The depth of the ties between the PKK and the YPG/PYD is a source of even greater debates (more on this in *Note II* in the Appendix).

⁶⁸ A former US diplomat said that the US wanted to intervene “on the cheap,” calling Syria the “graveyard of American foreign policy since 2011” (INT-USO-08).

(INT-USO-07) (Letzch 2014). Assistance from the US and a new Global Coalition against IS proved decisive for the YPG victory in Kobane in January 2015 (Aaron Stein 2022).

Despite being labeled as “mission-based” (Haenni and Quesnay 2020, 3),⁶⁹ US support grew throughout the military campaign against the IS. In October 2015, the US redirected “Train and Equip” funds toward the newly formed SDF: an umbrella group including the YPG and Arab factions from Northeast Syria (Reuters 2015).⁷⁰ If seemingly plural, YPG leaders retained all decision-making power in the SDF (INT-USO-07). The SDF rapidly became the US leading Syrian partner, with more significant material engagements than the previous US initiatives (Gaston 2021a). After publicly admitting the supply of weapons only to SDF Arab factions, the US recognized furnishing lethal assets to the YPG as well (The Guardian 2017).

From 2014 to 2020, the US assistance for the YPG/SDF included weapons and ammunition, vehicles, money, intelligence, and other logistical and humanitarian assets (Gaston 2021a). The US also deployed trainers and advisers, Special Operations Forces (SOF), and air support through the Global Coalition against IS (Mulroy and Oehlerich 2020).⁷¹ In addition, the sponsor stationed US diplomats in Northeast Syria, and US Congress members frequently met with YPG/SDF political and military leaders (The New York Times 2019; Roebuck 2021).

The gradual defeat of the IS enabled the YPG/SDF to extend its territorial control beyond traditional Kurdish areas of Northeast Syria. After victories in Manbij in 2016 and Raqqa and Deir-Ezzor in 2017, the YPG/SDF captured the last territory of the jihadist group in Baghuz in 2019. In

⁶⁹ The US administration frequently presented the US intervention in Northeast Syria as provisional (more on this in *Note III* in the Appendix).

⁷⁰ The US “Train and Equip” program aimed at training factions of the Syrian opposition to fight the IS. The process was, however, a failure (INT-IR-05) (Black 2015; Shear, Cooper, and Schmitt 2015).

⁷¹ The US adopted a “by-with-and-through” approach against the IS in Syria and Iraq (Mulroy and Oehlerich 2020). This way of conducting military activities aimed to defeat the jihadist group without deploying many US troops on the ground. The US never publicized the exact number of American troops in Syria. Diplomats even admitted to hiding the real numbers from US President Donald Trump (Williams 2020). While France, the UK, and many countries involved in the Global Coalition against IS also supported the YPG/SDF, the US reportedly played the most prominent role in Northeast Syria (INT-IR-05; INT-USO-03; INT-USO-07).

2020, the YPG/SDF political and military structures allegedly included over two hundred thousand people (ICG 2020).⁷² Despite two aborted US withdrawals in December 2018 and October 2019, the US maintained a significant human presence alongside the YPG/SDF in 2020. In addition, it continued to provide the group with various material assets. The persistence of cells of the IS in Northeast Syria and the leverage this support offered the sponsor in a potential future settlement of the Syrian war likely explained the US continuous support (Mulroy and Oehlerich 2020).⁷³

The Nature of the US Support and the Potential Costs for the US

I believe that the nature of the US support—overt human support associated with extensive material aid—was driven by the US strategic objectives rather than considerations related to pre-support YPG violence. From the start, US President Obama publicly framed the IS as a future threat to “the homeland” if “left unchecked” (INT-USO-08) (Obama 2014). Moreover, polls in the US showed that “widespread fears of the extremist group” overwhelmed “the public’s strong aversion to military conflicts” stemming from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (Clement 2014).⁷⁴

The goal to rapidly defeat the IS seemingly led the US to act openly through the Department of Defense rather than covertly (INT-USO-08). The US publicly justified its early support for the YPG using humanitarian imperatives. US officials stressed that it would be “morally very difficult” not to help the group in the battle of Kobane (Letzch 2014). A former US official stated, “what we were seeing was a humanitarian disaster,” and “our motivation to do this [was] largely a humanitarian one to begin with” (INT-USO-07). Public concerns regarding the IS thus “prompted American overt military action and underpinned the authorities used to legally sanction military action” (Aaron Stein 2022, 2). As reported by a former US diplomat, the fight against the IS was “an overt mission beginning in August of 2014” (INT-USO-08). Then, the first overt US “boots on the ground in Syria was in December 2015” as “the urgency to hasten the war” grew in the wake

⁷² The accuracy of such numbers is difficult to verify.

⁷³ A strong continuity marked the US involvement in Northeast Syria, beginning with the presidency of Barack Obama all the way through that of Donald Trump (INT-USO-03).

⁷⁴ A former US official insisted that decisions regarding the form of interventions are made at the “American president level” via the US National Security Council (NSC) (INT-USO-07).

of the IS attacks in Paris in November 2015 (Aaron Stein 2022, 107). Overall, the US operation “remained largely in the hands of the American military” between 2014 and 2020 (INT-USO-08), with a predominant use of US airpower and SOF (Aaron Stein 2022).

Although defined in terms of the US strategic goals in Northeast Syria, the nature of support provided to the YPG and then the SDF created specific incentives for the US regarding monitoring YPG/SDF-civilian relationships. The US could have concerns about the YPG interactions with civilians at the beginning of the support. The YPG included many former PKK cadres, especially at the leader level (INT-SJ-03). If not prone to mass killings, the PKK had a history of using “collective targeting” and terrorism against civilians in Turkey in the 1990s (The Independent 1990; Çandar 2012; Masullo and O’Connor 2020). The PKK was also accused of “kidnappings, murder and narcotics trafficking” (Bradley and Parkinson 2015). Moreover, human rights organizations exposed instances of abuse by the YPG itself before the US support in 2014 (HRW 2014; Taylor 2015). A famous example was the killing of six civilians in June 2013 (SJAC 2020).

YPG abuse could expose the US to potential costs at both domestic and international levels. In principle, the US cannot support groups “accused of gross human rights violations” (Aaron Stein 2022, 93). Accordingly, at the domestic level, abuse could lead to reports from human rights groups, prompt public protest, undermine the electoral performance of the political leaders behind the support, and/or expose US officials to legal and political repercussions. For instance, some US officials were reportedly “afraid of jeopardizing their careers by being seen to cooperate with anyone linked to the PKK” in 2014 (Zaman 2014).

At the international level, rebel violence could be detrimental to the US-Turkey alliance.⁷⁵ From the start, Turkey denounced the US-YPG partnership (INT-USO-07; INT-USO-08). Turkish

⁷⁵ The US did not publicly downplay Turkish concerns. A former US diplomat stated that the US “understood at an intellectual level why the Turks would be worried about the PKK” (INT-USO-08). Notably, US officials considered Turkey a strategic partner whose cooperation was worth accommodations. A former US diplomat said Turkey was “a very important NATO state. The NATO radar that [was] the core of the entire anti-ballistic missile system defending against Iran [was] in Turkey. We [had] tremendous military assets there. We really [couldn’t] ‘do’ the Middle East, the Caucuses or the Black Sea without Turkey. And Turkey [was] a natural opponent of Russia and Iran” (Szuba 2020).

officials labeled the YPG a terrorist group and publicly criticized US support.⁷⁶ Turkish officials argued that PKK members operating within the YPG maintained strong ties with their former group and wanted to use Northeast Syria as a rear base, an alleged “terror corridor,” for attacks in Turkey (ICG 2020; Reuters 2016).⁷⁷ YPG/SDF actions in Arab villages were also “a long-stated concern by Turkey,” according to a former US official (INT-USO-07). Thus, Turkey could have used demonstrated YPG/SDF abuse to criticize the US actions in Northeast Syria further.⁷⁸

Figure 17 synthesizes the potential costs the US leaders could face if the YPG/SDF had engaged in widespread violence toward civilians.⁷⁹

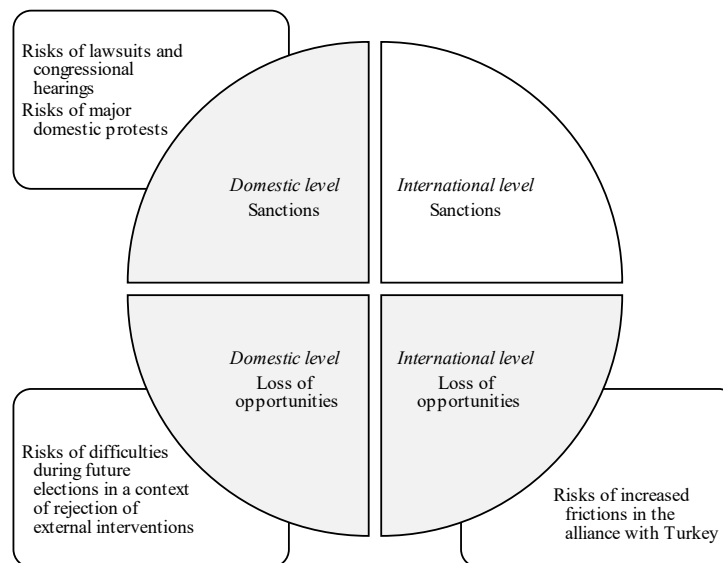
⁷⁶ The US justified its support by pointing to the YPG significant operational capabilities while acknowledging the risks posed by potential links to the PKK. However, this way of presenting the situation was somewhat paradoxical, as the YPG capabilities were derived primarily from the group’s links to the PKK (ICG 2014). Some observers denounced this as “US hypocrisy” (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020b).

⁷⁷ A former official from the US Department of Defense stated that the US officials “didn’t look at the YPG the same way they looked at the PKK. And [they] didn’t look at it the way Turkey did. Turkey equated all of these Kurds as members of PKK” (INT-USO-07). As a result, the US support fully angered the Turkish authorities (E. Cunningham 2015), prompting the US to take specific actions to try to limit the tensions (more on this in *Note IV* in the Appendix).

⁷⁸ If it could hinder the US cooperation with Turkey, the US power and role on the international stage meant that international sanctions against the US were unlikely in the event of YPG/SDF abuse.

⁷⁹ A Western official tellingly said, “You’ve got to pick your poison. It’s either [the IS] or the PKK” (Zaman 2014).

Figure 17. The Potential Costs for the US



The US Monitoring in Northeast Syria

The US support for the YPG corresponds, in my view, to *Scenario 1* outlined in Table 6. Therefore, my expectation is that the sponsor faced incentives to monitor the YPG/SDF-civilian interactions strictly. Consistent with my theory, there is considerable evidence that the US proactively monitored the insurgent-civilian relations at both the meso- and micro-levels.⁸⁰

Proactive Monitoring at the Meso-Level: The US proactive monitoring first took place at the meso-level. This type of supervision aims to allow the serenity of interactions between the rebels and other social entities within a territory. A significant instance of meso-level monitoring occurred in 2015. After the YPG early success, the US feared that the extension of the group’s military activities into Arab-dominated areas could spark tensions (INT-USO-07). US officials “didn’t want to create a solely Kurdish partner force that would be fighting primarily [...] in Arab

⁸⁰ I focus on monitoring in the governance area rather than on military supervision. I scrutinize how the US monitored the YPG/SDF-civilian interactions in post-combat situations rather than how the US monitored the way the YPG/SDF conducted their military operations against the IS.

areas” (INT-USO-02). As stated by the head of the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), the YPG had “to work on their own branding. If they [continued] to keep linkage to their past product—the PKK linkage, specifically—the relationship [was] fraught with challenges” (Reuters 2017b). YPG officials needed to change their “brand” if they “wanted meaningful American support” (Mogelson 2017).⁸¹ The US thus proactively “encouraged” the YPG “to reorganize” (INT-USO-01) and build a “joint Arab and Kurdish force” (INT-USO-02).

The initiative proved successful. As recounted, “With about a day’s notice, they declared that they were the Syrian Democratic Forces” (Mogelson 2017). This reorganization proved crucial “when the fights moved out of strictly Kurdish areas and became fights also in Arab areas,” as the YPG/SDF “needed Arab soldiers to fight with them” (INT-USO-01). As stated by a former US official, “we were keen to bring them together under one moniker. [...] [We] did believe that characterizing them [...] as the Syrian Democratic Forces did help us in [...] our communication problem with the Turks” (INT-USO-07). In the same idea, another US official presented the rebranding as mainly “an effort to deal with the Turks” (INT-USO-08). Soon after the SDF creation, the US airdropped large amounts of weapons to the Arab factions of the group and deployed SOF to train them (Mogelson 2017).⁸²

Another significant example of meso-level monitoring started in 2014. The US encouraged the YPG/PYD to engage in political talks with other Kurdish political parties from Northeast Syria

⁸¹ Establishing the extent to which the US exerted actual pressure on the YPG is challenging (more on this in *Note V* in the Appendix).

⁸² A US official mentioned that the YPG leaders “understood the information environment very well. And so, I think they understood what we were trying to do with kind of that branding and the messaging of the organization in that way. And they recognized that [...] if they were going to have a long-term relationship with the United States and the Coalition [...] [there] was going to be more and more need to have an Arab component to deal with [...] the increasing Arab population in the areas in which they were beginning to operate” (INT-USO-07).

The official documents of the SDF did not refer to “any ideological affiliation with the PKK” (Rashid 2018, 3). The SDF was more diverse than the YPG in rank-and-file members (A. A. Holmes 2019), but the group maintained traditional YPG members at its top (INT-IR-02; INT-USO-07). The SDF leader Mazloum Abdi was a prominent former commander in the YPG, and most SDF high-level leaders were from the YPG/PYD (Mogelson 2017).

gathered in the Kurdish National Council (KNC).⁸³ The KNC, which was part of the United Nations-led (UN) Syrian peace process in Geneva and had close ties with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq and Turkish authorities, often criticized the PYD repression of KNC members and PYD authoritarian practices of governance in the region (Gunes and Lowe 2015; Rudaw 2017; Koontz 2019).⁸⁴ To lower tensions and potential violence between parties, the US proactively encouraged intra-Kurdish talks (INT-USO-07).⁸⁵ Officials from the US State Department threw “their prestige behind efforts to smooth things over” between parties and hosted rounds of negotiations on US bases in Northeast Syria (INT-IR-07; INT-IR-08) (Stocker-Kelly 2020; The New Arab 2021).⁸⁶ US representatives were, according to US officials, “in the room for many of the meetings to encourage them” and make sure each side felt that “they were getting a fair hearing” (INT-USO-01). They “helped make the agendas” (INT-USO-01) and, at times, publicly praised signs of progress in the negotiations (Dri 2020a).

The issue of PYD-PKK linkages was central during intra-Kurdish talks. The KNC strictly conditioned an agreement to PYD severing relations with the PKK (Abdulssattar 2020b), and, for this reason, the PKK was, at times, accused of vetoing a potential deal (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020b; Netjes and van Veen 2021). The US seemingly perceived the talks as a way to defuse local tensions and “dilute the PKK presence” in Northeast Syria (INT-USO-08; INT-USO-07). US officials allegedly told their insurgent allies their expectations regarding this issue (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020b).⁸⁷ A former US diplomat reported that US officials nudged the YPG/SDF to

⁸³ The negotiations between the PYD and the KNC started in 2012. The US involvement in the negotiations is reported from October 2014, at the beginning of the US-YPG partnership (Stocker-Kelly 2020; al-Ghazi 2021).

⁸⁴ The PYD frequently used the KNC close ties with Turkey, and the KRG, from where it mainly operated, to criticize the party (more on this in *Note VI* in the Appendix).

⁸⁵ Again, establishing the extent to which the US exerted actual pressure on the PYD is challenging (more on this in *Note VII* in the Appendix).

⁸⁶ Facilitating the talks served various interrelated purposes for the US (more on this in *Note VIII* in the Appendix).

⁸⁷ Next to direct demands, the US also likely used arrest warrants for PKK leaders to push the YPG/SDF to distance themselves from the group (Rudaw 2018).

dissociate from the PKK “as confidence-building measures” in the negotiations (INT-USO-01). Another former operative stated that US officials were “mindful of the risks” posed by the potential use of the US support by the PKK and “wanted to take steps to mitigate that risk” (INT-USO-03). Another remembered saying to the YPG/SDF leaders, “listen, what just happened in location X is a big problem for you. It’s a big problem for us. It’s a big problem for the campaign against Daesh. That behavior needs to stop. So, you need to use your influence with the PKK [...]. To put a stop to that kind of activity” (INT-USO-06).⁸⁸ The US thus made repeated requests to the YPG/SDF to distance itself from the PKK in private interactions, with explicit references to potential costs for both the sponsor and the insurgents.

Other instances of proactive monitoring occurred at the meso-level after 2014. For example, the US operated top-level shuttle diplomacy between the YPG/SDF and Turkish authorities or the Syrian opposition in Turkey to prevent an escalation of tensions between these parties (INT-USO-06; INT-USO-08). As told by a former US official, “you have to have groups that are not fighting. [...] So, for sure, we would have pushed all groups. Not just the Kurdish groups. All groups. To get along and [...] participate in these overall stabilization efforts” (INT-USO-02).

Proactive Monitoring at the Micro-Level: Although probably less intense than at the meso-level, the US also proactively monitored YPG/SDF quotidian interactions with civilians. This type of supervision became particularly possible when security conditions allowed the deployment of US diplomats in liberated areas (INT-IR-05; INT-USO-07). An example of micro-level monitoring was the US involvement in conflicts between the YPG/SDF and tribal leaders. The fight against the IS led the YPG/SDF to extend its authority beyond traditional Kurdish areas of Syria. To promote local stability, the US tried to get local tribal authorities to “cooperate” with the YPG/SDF (INT-SJ-08; INT-USO-01). With this objective, the US notably encouraged the YPG/SDF to co-

⁸⁸ The US official did not disclose the specific event in question, but this testimony reveals the pervasiveness of discussions about the YPG/SDF-PKK ties in the US-YPG/SDF relationship. The SDF leadership announced the withdrawal of non-Syrian PKK members from Northeast Syria in 2020 (more on this in *Note IX* in the Appendix).

opt tribal representatives into the new political and military institutions created in liberated areas (INT-SJ-09; INT-USO-07) (Hassan 2021; Dukhan, Ammar, and Shaar 2021).⁸⁹

This co-optation was, however, only partially successful. On various occasions, tribal leaders denounced the absence of security in YPG/SDF regions (INT-SJ-02) (Nassar and Al Maleh 2018; Hassan 2021), the corruption and low representativeness of the YPG/SDF structures (al-Kanj 2020; Roebuck 2021), or heavy-handed counterterrorism (Roebuck 2021). To lower tensions that could escalate into violence, the US thus became “a mediator in the disputes” between local figures and the YPG/SDF and “monitored the strains” when they occurred (INT-USO-02; INT-USO-08). In addition, US officials frequently met with tribal leaders to hear general complaints and receive specific demands (INT-IR-07; INT-SJ-13; INT-USO-08) (Enab Baladi 2019; Roebuck 2021).⁹⁰ Moreover, the US tried to maintain tribe leaders’ support for the YPG/SDF through service projects promised to the population (INT-SJ-06) (Malas 2020).

Other instances of proactive monitoring occurred at the micro-level. For example, the US authorities intervened to mitigate tensions related to YPG/SDF conscription of civilians into their military ranks. As stated by a former US official, “we made it very clear to the SDF leadership [...] [that] this was not in our interest. We were not going to support them subjugating other parts of the population” (INT-USO-07). US officials also allegedly occasionally intervened when the YPG/SDF arrested civilians in Arab-majority areas (INT-IR-06; INT-SJ-17; INT-SJ-19) (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020a) or when governance issues fostered tensions (INT-SJ-08) (A. Darwish 2021).⁹¹ Moreover, the US reportedly investigated people arrested as sympathizers of the IS to allow possible reintegration into their communities (INT-USO-01).

Finally, beyond interventions in cases of existing tensions, constant interactions between the US and YPG/SDF officials likely enabled organic monitoring of the group. As told by a former

⁸⁹ The Syrian regime and the IS led a similar strategy of co-optation in Northeast Syria (Dukhan 2019).

⁹⁰ A former official within the US State Department stated that US officials “met regularly with tribal Arabs, tribal leaders, in Deir-Ezzor, in Raqqa” (INT-USO-01) (more on this in *Note X* in the Appendix).

⁹¹ More anecdotally, US officials intervened when SDF fighters displayed flags of the PKK and pictures of the PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan in the streets of Raqqa at the city’s liberation (Reuters 2017d).

US official, “At the top level [...] [US officials] met with General Mazloum maybe four, five times a week. We had visitors coming from Washington [...] who would visit every couple of months. And then at local levels, we had lower-level people meeting with local officials” (INT-USO-01). US officials mentioned near-constant discussions with the YPG/SDF leaders “to encourage them, to guide them, to help them to improve the way they dealt with the Arab population” (INT-USO-01; INT-USO-02; INT-USO-07). The sponsor reportedly “encouraged [the YPG/SDF] to try to fix a mistake that they had made. Or to de-escalate a situation with local people that was getting [...] hot” (INT-USO-01). The US notably “worked with [the group] on the security side to improve the way they provided security. To get more Arab local policemen on the street. And to get the Kurdish security elements out of the urban areas” (INT-USO-01). Frequent meetings with the YPG/SDF aimed at creating “a sense that the US had a presence there diplomatically” (Morell 2021). Overall, the US actions appeared to try to build confidence between insurgents and civilians.

Discussion

The nature of US support thus led the sponsor to proactively monitor the YPG/SDF-civilian interactions in Northeast Syria between 2014 and 2020. For this purpose, the US especially deployed diplomats whose tasks did not directly relate to the immediate imperatives of warfare (INT-USO-01; INT-USO-07; INT-USO-08). Significant abuse would have exposed US policymakers to domestic and international costs. In particular, Turkey would have likely used violations to criticize the US assistance more strongly, further damaging the US-Turkey relationship in the period. As stated by a former US official, “we had to do all kinds of things” to show that Turkish allegations regarding YPG/SDF abuses were, in US views, unfounded (INT-USO-07).⁹² Consistently, US officials mentioned a rupture of the partnership if the YPG/SDF had engaged in widespread violations following the beginning of the cooperation.⁹³

⁹² Concerning Turkey’s position, the US official added, “in many regards, there was just not enough we could do. We would never overcome their political messaging on this” (INT-USO-07).

⁹³ Officials from the US Department of Defense and the US State Department seemed to share the idea that YPG/SDF abuses would have ended the partnership (more on this in *Note XI* in the Appendix).

To conclude, the US presented the cooperation with the YPG/SDF as “beneficial for both sides” (Morell 2021). US officials lauded the relationship as particularly close and built on “mutual trust, constant communication, and clear expectations” (INT-USO-02; INT-USO-07) (J. Votel and Dent 2019).⁹⁴ As a result, the US operatives and insurgents developed solid bonds. The US officials particularly praised the YPG/SDF “strong command-and-control structure” in contrast with other non-state armed groups in Syria (INT-USO-02). This solid command structure reportedly meant that the sponsor could transmit its expectations and concerns directly to insurgent leaders in an iterative way (INT-IR-05). A US official mentioned that the leadership “was working very hard to satisfy US government’s wishes” (INT-USO-01).⁹⁵ Another official said that the YPG/SDF leaders “were pretty amenable to everything [the US] asked them to do” (INT-USO-02).⁹⁶ Ultimately, this compliance with the US expectations seemingly allowed the sponsor to rely mostly on “informal recommendations” rather than on pressures or absolute conditionality when they dealt with the insurgents (INT-IR-02; INT-IR-05) (Gaston 2021a, 42).⁹⁷

Further Evidence

Another example of US support to rebels corroborates the influence of the nature of support on the intensity of monitoring. Prior to support for the YPG/SDF, different US programs supported the opposition in Syria. The US authorities faced a mixed environment when they first envisaged

⁹⁴ Various US officials praised the YPG/SDF leaders (more on this in *Note XII* in the Appendix).

⁹⁵ The YPG/SDF reportedly internalized and never crossed the US red lines (more on this in *Note XIII* in the Appendix).

⁹⁶ The US tried to distance the YPG/SDF from the PKK but never conditioned support to a total dissociation. As told by a former US official, “If we really thought we were asking for something that involved intense pressure, like asking them to do things [...] that had to do with Ocalanist ideology and stuff, we probably just wouldn’t bother asking. Because we [knew] it would be difficult to demand it from them” (INT-USO-01). Another US official stated that “The YPG [...] still often times wore their YPG patches [...] And while we tried to discourage that. And try to get them to rely [...] [mostly] on SDF [...] badging and everything, they never really gave up their YPG identity” (INT-USO-07).

⁹⁷ The article focuses on governance and examines monitoring aiming to lower tensions between the YPG/SDF and noncombatants. However, US officials also mentioned general adherence to international standards for the conduct of war (more on this in *Note XIV* in the Appendix).

aid for Syrian rebels in 2012. While they operated in a context of low domestic appetite for direct military intervention abroad (Pew Research Center 2012), they also faced growing pressure to act on the Assad regime’s atrocities (Peel, Dyer, and Blitz 2012).⁹⁸ In this context, the US agreed to provide selected groups from the FSA with non-lethal aid in 2012 (Fordham 2012). Then, another program led by the CIA—allegedly one of the most extensive programs in the agency’s history (Aaron Stein 2022)—provided lethal resources to selected FSA groups in 2013 (Entous 2015).

The US support for the FSA was mainly overt—the US leaders justified the aid as a response to the regime’s atrocities in their public speeches—and material—the US had no significant human presence in the Syrian territory where the FSA operated.⁹⁹ From the start, US operatives appeared conscious of potential costs stemming from their support for Syrian rebels.¹⁰⁰ A central US concern was that the resources provided could fall into Islamist hands (DeYoung 2013b). For instance, US officials repeatedly told the FSA to distance itself “as far as possible from the Nusra front” (Aaron Stein 2022, 129). Another concern was potential rebel abuse (Chivers and Schmitt 2013). For instance, US officials “raised the concern that the limits imposed in Syria [could] do little to shield the [CIA] from criticism if something [went] wrong” (G. Miller 2013). A former US official said, “What happens when some of the people we trained torture a prisoner?” (G. Miller 2013). The same official argued that the persons in charge of the program could “face congressional hearings” if the rebels receiving support committed massive abuses in Syria (G. Miller 2013). In the same idea, an official from the US State Department declared, “If anything went wrong—if something negative got out on the media, there was no way to undo or explain it.

⁹⁸ US officials said that the US became involved “in part because there was a sense that other states would arm the rebels anyhow” (Chivers and Schmitt 2013).

⁹⁹ The CIA program was covert, but its implementation in parallel with more overt assistance exposed the US government to the same potential costs as entirely overt support. As I argued in the theoretical framework, overt support trumps covert support when sponsors concomitantly provide both forms of support.

¹⁰⁰ Paradoxically, US operatives appeared aware of the limits of external support without a human presence alongside rebels. As argued, “aid to insurgencies had generally failed in instances when no Americans worked on the ground with the foreign forces in the conflict zones” (Mazzetti 2014).

Those managing the programmes knew that in such a scenario it would be their jobs or their careers sacrificed, or worst case going to jail” (Gaston 2021a, 28).

Consistently, the US implemented several monitoring measures in Syria. The supervision procedures ranged “from State Department officers in DC and Turkey regularly making calls to grantees and community members, to third-party monitoring, to CIA demands for after-action reporting and in-person debriefs at intelligence hubs in Jordan and Turkey” (Gaston 2021b). FSA members reported that “they were frequently questioned about allegations of misconduct or war crimes by their affiliates or other groups” (Gaston 2021b). Some abuses led to cases of termination of support (Chulov 2016).¹⁰¹

Conclusion

This article scrutinized how, why and when external sponsors monitor the interactions with civilians of their rebel allies in civil wars. First, I argued that the degree to which sponsors supervise

¹⁰¹ Despite the US willingness to monitor the FSA actively, the effectiveness of these measures appeared limited. A “lack of access to territory and the overall chaotic environment” made verifying allegations of “abuse, crossing redlines on affiliation, or misuse or transfer of weapons or equipment” difficult (Gaston 2021a, 35). At one point in the Syrian conflict, jihadist groups could allegedly “draw most of the US vetted groups into their own political and military orbits” (Aaron Stein 2022, 84).

The US support to the FSA demonstrates that irrespective of the sponsors’ motives, the type of support provided is a factor that influences the sponsors’ ability to carry out effective monitoring. States sending few or none of their operatives alongside the insurgents face constraints in supervising the rebels. Sponsors can find ways to alleviate this issue. For instance, some sponsors can rely on signals intelligence (SIGINT) or satellite observations. However, while these tools can track large-scale abuse easily attributable to a given actor—an example is the Chinese repression in Xinjiang (South China Morning Post 2020)—their imprecision likely limits the sponsors’ possibilities in terms of detection and attribution of violence during civil wars.

The challenge of monitoring the FSA was reminiscent of previous cases of US support to rebels where the sponsor struggled to monitor the insurgents effectively. For instance, overt and mere material support prevented the US from successfully supervising the Afghan insurgents in the 1980s and 1990s (The New York Times 1989). Similarly, despite apparent concerns regarding abuse from the rebels, the US failed to prevent the UNITA from targeting civilians at the beginning of the 1990s (The New York Times 1992).

rebels relates to the sponsors' perception of the likelihood of their support becoming public and their perception of the costs they will face if their support for violent rebels becomes public. I then tested this argument with a study of how the US monitored the YPG/SDF in Northeast Syria between 2014 and 2020 and further evidence from the Syrian civil war.¹⁰²

These findings raise future research questions related to rebel monitoring. While this article focused on monitoring attempts, future studies must focus on the determinants of the insurgents' responsiveness to monitoring. Unlike the PKK in Turkey, the YPG/SDF did not use collective targeting and terrorism to achieve its goals. The SDF was "better behaved in terms of human rights than almost any other armed actor in Syria" (Gaston 2021a, 43). However, civilians denounced YPG/SDF authoritarian practices and the group's refusal to include non-group members in their institutions in Northeast Syria. Accordingly, civilians frequently accused the US authorities of not doing enough to prevent these violations (INT-SJ-07; INT-SJ-09; INT-SJ-10; INT-SJ-13; INT-SJ-17; INT-SJ-19) (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020a).¹⁰³ They notably rued a lack of direct communication channels with the US authorities to report abuse from the YPG/SDF (INT-IR-07).¹⁰⁴ Future studies will need to look more directly at the factors promoting responsiveness to monitoring to understand how sponsors can effectively favor the restraint of the rebels in civil wars.

Next to a general examination of the responsiveness of the insurgents to monitoring, future research should examine temporal variations in rebel compliance with the demands of sponsors.

¹⁰² While the article focused on actual monitoring cases to test the proposed theory's validity, future studies will also need to study cases where the sponsors did not supervise insurgents. However, two methodological barriers can make this type of study difficult. First, proving an absence of monitoring in a foolproof way in an area as secretive and multidimensional as external support to rebels will likely be complicated. Then, the fact that support is covert in *Scenarios 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, and 9* will likely make access to reliable information challenging. It will be difficult, in most cases, to find officials willing to talk about insurgent oversight, as this would be an admission of support.

¹⁰³ US officials acknowledged that monitoring was a "mixed success" (INT-USO-01). A former US official stated, "It was never clean" (INT-USO-07). Civilians called for stricter supervision by the US authorities (more on this in *Note XV* in the Appendix).

¹⁰⁴ Civilians denounced the permanent presence of YPG/SDF members in meetings between civilians and US officials, preventing the free transmission of complaints about the group's practices (INT-IR-07; INT-SJ-06; INT-SJ-07).

Studying whether vulnerability promotes higher responsiveness to demands from external states seems particularly necessary. The YPG/SDF showed significant “flexibility” in its behavior in the Syrian conflict (Rashid and Cengiz 2020, 13). As an organization searching for political support, the YPG/SDF proved way more adaptive to contextual imperatives than the PKK (INT-IR-05; INT-IR-07; INT-USO-08). Some empirical evidence suggests that the insurgents were more willing to abide by their sponsor’s expectations when highly vulnerable on the battlefield.¹⁰⁵ The literature will need to study further the link between vulnerability and acceptance of external demands to see whether the latter is a frequent adjustment variable in periods of threats for rebels. If confirmed, this would reveal a paradox in the sponsor-rebel relationship. Sponsors would have greater leverage on insurgent-civilian interactions when rebels are weak on the ground. More help would mean stronger rebels but fewer sponsors’ control over rebel-civilian interactions. This situation would ultimately give strong incentives for states who provide overt support to monitor insurgents strictly, as overt support is often associated with more substantial assistance (Carson 2018).

The idea of the insurgents’ responsiveness to supervision finally leads to questions related to the metrics that sponsors monitor. As mentioned above, the YPG/SDF did not engage in collective targeting but maintained less observable authoritarian practices in Northeast Syria. The US seemingly cared about the most severe abuses,¹⁰⁶ which could lead to high costs, but generally had little involvement in the more routinized aspects of governance (INT-SJ-02; INT-SJ-10).¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Some empirical elements suggest a relative moderation in the 2014–2015 and 2018–2019 periods (more on this in *Note XVI* in the Appendix).

¹⁰⁶ A US official mentioned, in a very telling way, that the US feared “sustained oppression” going “beyond two or three people” (INT-USO-08).

¹⁰⁷ A researcher argued that the “relation between the Coalition and the YPG [was] one of very [...] hands-off mild interference when it [came] to governance. [...] So, if they put up an Ocalan photo in Raqqa, [they were] going to tell them to take it off. If they [had] major issues with the tribes, [they were] going to tell them [...] you should sort it out” (INT-IR-07).

A US official similarly argued that the US never saw the involvement in Syria “as a focus on the civilian population the way [the US] did in Afghanistan and Iraq. Where it was often the driving force as it should be in an insurgency” (INT-USO-08). Instead, the US saw its involvement in governance “in terms of supporting a military campaign” (INT-

The sponsor and the rebels seemingly found a *modus vivendi* according to which the YPG/SDF leaders knew what lines not to cross in exchange for ample latitude in terms of governance. Security and stabilization were always the US priority.¹⁰⁸ A former US diplomat mentioned that supervising the YPG/SDF-civilian interactions was mainly a “supporting line of effort” to “an overall military campaign to destroy the ISIS state” (INT-USO-08). The US “monitored it closely, but it wasn’t [the sponsor’s] top priority” (INT-USO-08). This idea, which corroborates the US instrumental use of monitoring to avoid costs rather than for moral reasons, strengthens the case for assessing more directly the specific metrics that sponsors consider when supervising the rebels; is it the insurgent violence that sponsors monitor or its most visible forms for outside observers?

USO-08). YPG/SDF officials confirmed this US involvement at the margin in terms of daily governance insofar as the sponsor focused primarily on counterterrorism operations (INT-GM-03; INT-GM-05).

¹⁰⁸ A former US Department of Defense official argued that “in order to have good security, one of the things you need is good local governance” (INT-USO-03). Another official from the US State Department said that the US “didn’t want to push [the YPG/SDF] to do things that would make the security situation worse. Or create civil unrest of any kind” (INT-USO-01).

Chapter 3—Building the Future: The Overtness of External Support to Rebels and the Provision of Social Services in Civil Wars

Abstract:

How does the overtness of external support to rebels correlate with the provision of social services by the insurgents in civil wars? Studies show that rebels receiving overt support from foreign sponsors tend to be less violent toward civilians than those receiving covert support. This paper focuses on whether, in addition to correlating with the level of violence toward noncombatants, the overtness of external support correlates with the insurgents' propensity to provide social services. I argue that, unlike covert assistance, overt support is post-conflict oriented and leads sponsors to encourage the rebels to invest strongly in social service institutions. This sponsor-level assumption leads to the hypothesis that insurgents receiving overt assistance engage in social service provision more frequently than those receiving covert support. Statistical analyses using data from 1989 to 2012 support my hypothesis. Then, a case study of the way the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) governed Raqqa between 2017 and 2020 allows me to show that while overt support is often associated with rebel investments in social service institutions, formal civilian inclusion does not necessarily equate to a genuine devolution of power to noncombatants.

Introduction

The literature increasingly studies the link between the overtness of external support to insurgents and rebel behavior in civil wars. Because of the benefits of plausible deniability (Cormac and Aldrich 2018; Poznansky 2020), I show in *Article 1* that most sponsors opt for covertness when helping rebels on the territory of another state. Nevertheless, operational and/or communicational benefits sometimes explain the decisions of sponsors to provide overt support to insurgencies (Carson 2018). France’s recognition of its assistance to the Libyan NTC in 2011 is an example of overt support (Jolly and Fahim 2011).

I show in *Article 1* that the overtness of assistance is a moderating factor in the link between external support to rebels and civilian targeting in civil wars, highlighted by Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood (2014). For their part, Huang and Sullivan (2021) show that the rebels receiving external funding, weapons, or training provide more social services to civilians than those not receiving external aid. In this article, I seek to further investigate the link between external support and rebel-civilian interactions by evaluating whether, in addition to correlating with the level of rebel violence, the overtness of support correlates with the propensity of the insurgents to provide social services. In this way, I aim to question the assumption that, on average, insurgents “govern civilians where they are not victimizing them” (Huang and Sullivan 2021, 796).¹⁰⁹

This article hypothesizes that insurgents receiving overt support are more likely to provide social services than rebels receiving covert support. I argue that the motivations of the rebels derive from those of their sponsors. The provision of covert or overt support does not denote an equal commitment to the cause of the rebels from the external states and, consequently, does not commit them, in the same way, to participate in institution-building. First, I contend that providing covert support does not commit the sponsors to contribute to the construction of insurgent institutions. Due to the lack of public recognition of the support, domestic or external audiences do not develop expectations regarding the external states’ investments in stabilization and reconstruction in these cases. Conversely, I argue that providing overt assistance commits the sponsors to participate in

¹⁰⁹ The IS or the Taleban are examples of groups both providing services to the population under their jurisdiction and extensively targeting civilians (Weiss and Hassan 2016; Jackson 2021).

the construction of institutions because, in these cases, domestic and external audiences are likely to develop strong expectations regarding their participation in stabilization and reconstruction. The states face incentives to encourage the development of social service institutions in order not to be seen as solely promoting the destabilization of the country at war.

These theoretical expectations at the level of the sponsors allow me to define theoretical expectations at the level of the rebels. Contrary to insurgents receiving covert support, rebels receiving overt aid have a strong interest in investing in social service institutions to retain access to external resources. Engaging in pro-civilian activities can allow rebels to signal restraint and present themselves as credible alternatives to the governments they are fighting (Jo et al. 2021). In addition, beyond the sponsors' preferences, the post-conflict-oriented nature of overt support means that rebels can be more confident in the sustainability of support and fully engage in institution-building when the sponsors publicly recognize their aid.

First, I test my hypothesis quantitatively using data on the overtness of external support to rebels (*Article 1*) and on rebel institutions (Albert 2022) between 1989 and 2012. I establish that the overtness of support positively and significantly correlates with the provision of social services by the rebels. Second, I investigate how the YPG, via the broader SDF, governed Raqqa between 2017 and 2020. This case study shows that while overt support is often associated with rebel investments in social service institutions, a formal inclusion of civilians in insurgent bodies does not necessarily equate to a genuine devolution of power to noncombatants. The YPG/SDF established seemingly inclusive institutions in Raqqa to comply with US demands, but insurgent leaders maintained strict control over decision-making in the newly created institutions.

The article underlines the link between the overtness of external support to rebels and the provision of social services by the insurgents. First, the quantitative results corroborate but qualify recent findings associating external support with constructive insurgent-civilian relationships (Huang and Sullivan 2021). The results also corroborate findings from *Article 1*, indicating that rebel access to a significant quantity of external resources does not necessarily lead to coercive insurgent-civilian interactions (Weinstein 2006; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014). Overt support allows the transfer of more and better resources than covert support (Carson 2018), but it is associated with more constructive insurgent-civilian relations than clandestine aid. Second, the qualitative findings demonstrate the importance of going beyond the mere observation of formal

institutions in conflict zones, as apparent pro-civilian institutions can hide the reproduction of highly vertical decision-making structures.

The first section reviews past works on the overtness of external support to rebels and on insurgent institutions. The second section underlines my argument regarding how the overtness of support relates to the provision of social services by the rebels. The third and fourth sections present the statistical analyses and the case study on the YPG/SDF governance in Raqqa. Finally, the conclusion briefly reflects on the paper's research and policy implications.

External Support to Rebels and the Provision of Social Services in Civil Wars

External Support to Rebels in Civil Wars

Foreign states assist local rebels in many contemporary civil wars (Grauer and Tierney 2018). Sometimes, the sponsors directly intervene in conflicts but rely on rebels to complement their forces. Turkish intervention alongside the Syrian National Army (SNA) in Northern Syria exemplifies this type of “blended strategy” (McKernan 2019; Salehyan 2010, 503). In most cases, however, the sponsors support the insurgents without directly intervening in the conflicts. One common support type is when states allow rebels to take shelter on their territory to avoid repression by neighboring states (Salehyan 2007). The sanctuary the Syrian authorities offered the PKK under the rule of Hafez Al-Assad is an example (Tejel 2009). Sponsors also often offer rebels lethal resources, such as weapons and ammunition, and/or non-lethal assets, such as money or other logistical resources (S. G. Jones 2016).

Next to the content of assistance for rebels, the literature increasingly focuses on the form of support. The aid can be covert, the sponsors deny or, at least, do not acknowledge it, or overt, the sponsors claim it in public speeches. The main advantage of covertness is plausible deniability (Poznansky 2020; Heinkelmann-Wild and Mehrl 2021). States opting for covertness can hope to avoid the detection of their support by their rivals and limit the risks of retaliation (Carson 2018; Salehyan 2008). This way, covertness allows foreign states to maximize control over a potential military escalation. The sponsors' denial can sometimes be more critical than absolute secrecy. Even if it learns of support to rebels, the target state can keep the information hidden from the public when sponsors act covertly to avoid uncontrolled escalation (Carson 2016; 2018). Even

“implausible” deniability can thus allow the sponsors to limit the risk of escalation with the target state (Cormac and Aldrich 2018). Covert support can also be helpful for sponsors when it is difficult to maintain close control over the insurgents after transferring resources. As exposed in *Article 2*, public association with violent groups can damage a state’s reputation and expose it to domestic and/or international costs. Providing covert support thus allows a state to avoid potential costs if the insurgents commit abuses.

Despite the benefits of clandestine actions, some advantages can sometimes persuade states to recognize their assistance to insurgencies. First, operating in the open means acting more freely from an operational standpoint. Providing overt support allows sponsors to transfer more and better-quality resources as they can operate without the logistical constraints that covertness mandates to avoid exposure (Carson 2018). These operational advantages maximize the rebels’ chances of success and, thus, the sponsors’ chances to achieve their aims in a conflict (Carson 2018). Second, providing overt support offers sponsors communicational advantages. For example, it can be beneficial for a state to publicize its support to rebels with whom a part of its population shares ethnic or religious ties (Ives 2019a; 2019b). Helping rebels fighting an atrocity-committing regime can also allow a sponsor to convey its position vis-à-vis that government. Thus, while covert support allows the sponsors to maximize control over their support’s harmful effects, overt assistance increases the support’s impact and can serve as a signaling mechanism.¹¹⁰

From the insurgents’ point of view, covert support may be of interest if the rebels do not wish to offer the perception that they strategically depend on foreign actors (S. G. Jones 2016). Nevertheless, overt support can offer “legitimacy-seeking” rebels valuable legitimacy among local and external audiences (Jo 2015; Stanton 2017). Then, the fact that overt support allows the sponsors to provide more and better resources can convince both “legitimacy-seeking” and “legitimacy-indifferent” insurgents to prefer such a form of aid (Jo 2015). The material benefits of overt aid can help the rebels improve their fighting capabilities, increasing their chances of achieving their objectives in a conflict (Carson 2018).

¹¹⁰ Providing overt support also maximizes the sponsors’ ability to take credit for the rebels’ success.

The Provision of Social Services in Civil Wars

The provision of social services by the rebels is also a central phenomenon in contemporary civil wars, as around two-thirds of rebellions between 1945 and 2012 established at least one governing institution (Albert 2022). The literature shows that the provision of social services offers essential benefits to rebels in their struggle against the state. Building institutions can allow the insurgents to “create legitimacy for themselves” among civilians (Stewart 2019, 18). In return, these investments can allow the rebels to access “material contributions, political support, and recruits” (Arjona 2016, 50; Huang 2016b). In addition, the literature shows that the rebels’ time horizon influences how they envisage the construction of institutions where they operate (Arjona 2016). Studies also show that the way rebels govern during war impacts post-conflict democratization and the nature of post-conflict governance (Huang 2016b; Liu 2021).

External Support to Rebels and the Provision of Social Services in Civil Wars

Huang and Sullivan (2021) specifically look at the influence of external support on the provision of social services by the rebels. The authors find that insurgents receiving funding, weapons, or training are more likely to provide social services to civilians than others (Huang and Sullivan 2021). For their part, Carnegie, Howe, Lichtenheld, and Mukhopadhyay (2022) find that non-military aid to rebels can, in uncontested areas, bolster the insurgents’ public support due to an increased ability to provide services to the population. The following section builds on these studies and shifts the focus from the content of support to its form; is the support covert or overt?

The Overtiness of Ext. Supp. to Rebels and the Provision of Social Services in Civil Wars

In this section, I argue that overt support for rebels exposes the sponsors to specific expectations from domestic and external audiences regarding their contribution to institution-building. I then link these sponsor-level expectations to the motivations of the rebels regarding the provision of social services in civil wars.

The Sponsors' Incentives Depending on the Overtiness of External Support

The advantages and risks of overt support expose the sponsors to a choice when they design their assistance to insurgents. I believe external states opt for overt support when the circumstances lead them to perceive that the advantages of overt actions outweigh the potential costs they may face. The provision of covert or overt support, however, does not denote an equal commitment to the insurgents' cause on the part of the sponsors and, therefore, does not commit them, in the same way, to participate in building institutions in the country at war.

First, I consider covert support to denote that states have short time horizons. In these cases, the lack of recognition of support means that domestic or external audiences do not develop expectations regarding the sponsors' investments in stabilizing and reconstructing the conflict-affected territory.¹¹¹ Even if third parties disclose the support, the sponsors can rely on plausible deniability. As a result, covert support does not commit the sponsors to institution-building during and after conflicts. The lack of expectations on the sponsors means they face no incentives to encourage the rebels to provide social services. The external states can confine themselves to using their aid for immediate purposes without engaging in costly long-term considerations.¹¹²

Conversely, I consider that overt support is post-conflict oriented for the external states. In these cases, domestic and external audiences are likely to develop high expectations regarding the sponsors' investments in stabilization and reconstruction. Thus, while providing overt support to rebels allows sponsors to fulfill their immediate objectives in a conflict, it engages them in a broader institution-building process. To avoid domestic and/or external costs highlighted in *Article 2*, sponsors need to demonstrate that they are not only a source of instability and that they are also involved in defining a viable alternative political order to that proposed by the target state (O'Rourke 2018). The sponsors who provide overt support face high incentives to encourage and

¹¹¹ Domestic audiences are, for example, the civilian population within the state sponsor. External audiences are, for example, other governments or the civilian population within the state where the conflict occurs.

¹¹² I do not argue that covert support is necessarily short-lived—many examples of covert support span long time frames—but that the lack of formal recognition offers sponsors great flexibility in retracting aid to the rebels at any time if they deem that such assistance is no longer in their interests.

directly contribute to the development of rebel institutions.¹¹³ As a “rhetorical commitment,” the recognition of support for rebels can lead to a “rhetorical entrapment” (Schimmelfennig 2001, 66). The sponsors offering overt support have to act in a way as not to appear “inconsistent” and lose “credibility” to domestic and external audiences (Petrova 2016, 388). I expect credibility in terms of contribution to effective governance to be as crucial as credibility in military terms for the states.

The involvement of the sponsors in rebel institution-building may occur at an embryonic stage of the insurgent institutions. Western countries’ support for the FSA fighting the Al-Assad regime is an example. In 2012, the US and countries such as France or the UK agreed to provide selected groups from the FSA with non-lethal aid (Fordham 2012; Quinn and Bakr 2012).¹¹⁴ Non-lethal support for the rebels was overt. Sponsors’ leaders publicly presented their aid as a response to the atrocities of the regime. Accordingly, seemingly anxious not to be perceived as promoting instability without proposing a credible alternative to the regime (Klapper 2012a; DeYoung 2013b; Chivers and Schmitt 2013), the FSA backers promoted rebel institution-building actively (Mac and Farquhar 2012). They notably channeled “aid to rebel-held parts of Syria” for insurgents to “administer themselves” (Quinn and Bakr 2012). The sponsors were, from the start, strongly involved in the governance of the rebellion, both in terms of the composition of its leadership (Klapper 2012b; Karam and Laub 2012; Mroué and Hubbard 2012) and the activities conducted (Spetalnick 2013; Narbone, Favier, and Collombier 2016).

On several occasions, the sponsors publicly conditioned an increase of their support on conditions linked to the form of future institutions (DeYoung 2013a). For example, any authority that would replace Al-Assad’s regime needed to “be inclusive,” “protect the rights of [the] Alawite minority and other sects,” and “abide by the rule of law” (Landler and Gordon 2013). Consistently, the rebels aligned with the FSA heavily engaged in service provision in controlled areas, providing different social services to civilians (Laub 2012; Carnegie et al. 2022; Roula Khalaf 2013). The insurgents also reportedly held elections in some areas (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2018).

¹¹³ The alternative political order may take the form of different institutions within the same state, or new institutions within a new state in the case of separatist insurgents.

¹¹⁴ Other programs focused on lethal assistance followed the provision of non-lethal assistance to the FSA (Entous, Gorman, and Malas 2013; Entous 2014).

Overall, the provision of services became “a key medium” through which the rebels expressed “the aspiration for an alternative political order” in Syria (Martínez and Eng 2018, 239).

The involvement of the sponsors in the development of rebel institutions does not necessarily occur at the institution-building stage and may, further down the conflict timeline, intervene as a catalyst for existing bodies. For instance, Qatar has been an overt supporter of *Hamas* in the Gaza Strip for several years, hosting the organization’s political office beginning in 2012 (Rudoren and Worth 2012; Gidda 2014). A central explanation for such open support is that the Palestinian cause “draws popular support” in Qatar (Levs 2014). Qatari aid did not participate in creating *Hamas* institutions, which predated known Qatari support, but it has been a catalyst for their development, especially in times of financial difficulty for the organization (Barzak 2012; Gordon, Kirkpatrick, and Kershner 2014). Through state-controlled charities (Qatar Charity 2019), Qatar has provided *Hamas* with ample funds to address, among other things, needs in health, education, and other forms of welfare in Gaza (Amer 2018; Reuters 2019). Qatar’s funds have notably paid the salaries of some civil servants in the territory (BBC 2014; Al-Jazeera 2021).

In the context of overt support, Qatar has had a vested interest in *Hamas* engaging in pro-civilian activities to show that it is not fostering instability and, thus, to avoid potential reputational and/or material costs at different levels.¹¹⁵ In particular, it has been in Qatar’s interest that, next to its domestic audience, the international audience, and the local audience in Gaza, perceive the provision of services by *Hamas* as a result of its support. On the international level, support for *Hamas* has strained the US-Qatar relationship (Schanzer 2013; Reinl 2017; Hsu 2020). Qatari officials have therefore tried to justify their aid by saying that Qatar has been “using the money in Gaza to help the Palestinian people, not Hamas” but that to help Gaza, the group has been their “best contact” (E. Harris 2015). In Qatari officials’ words, the funds have served to stabilize the territory and prevent “the next war” (Reuters 2018). Moreover, at the local level, Qatar’s aid has appeared to be “instrumental in reducing street pressure on *Hamas* in Gaza and defusing anger against its iron-fisted rule” (The Arab Weekly 2021). In this way, the insurgent institutions have served the interests of both the sponsor and the sponsored group in the context of overt support.

¹¹⁵ The country has, at times, attempted to encourage reconciliation between *Hamas* and *Fatah* (Droubi 2013).

My argument is thus that the overtness of support defines the motivations of the sponsors in terms of support for the development of social service institutions. A sponsor that provides overt support forgoes plausible deniability and ties its reputation to that of the rebels. It must therefore take active steps to avoid domestic and/or international costs resulting from its support. I do not claim that states providing covert assistance are necessarily insensitive to the nature of rebel institutions but that, contrarily to those providing overt support, they do not face strong incentives to act on such matters.

In addition, pushing the rebels to invest in social service institutions reflecting their ideologies can allow the external states to foster the development of political bodies with whom they can cooperate after the conflict. For example, some observers have argued that Qatar's support to *Hamas* offered "under the pretext of humanitarian aid" has aimed at offering the group "legitimacy" and preparing it to be "a future partner" in Gaza (Barzak 2012; Murphy 2012; Amer 2018). In another example, overt support for local rebels has allowed Turkey to help construct institutions in line with its ideological priorities in Northern Syria (BBC 2019; Tastekin 2021). In any case, for the sponsors to hope for normalizing relations with the target state is illusory after providing overt support. For example, a diplomatic normalization between France and Gaddafi's regime after the former recognized the NTC rebels as "the legitimate interlocutor of the Libyan people" in 2011 was unlikely (Talmon 2011, 3). The sponsors providing overt support thus have a substantial interest in favoring the insurgents' victory and, in parallel, promoting investment in pro-civilian institutions that can take over after the conflict.

The Rebels' Incentives Depending on the Overtness of External Support

In my view, the incentives of the sponsors have repercussions on the motivations of the insurgents regarding institution-building. Rebels receiving covert support do not face significant incentives to create or maintain pro-civilian institutions. As argued above, sponsors are unlikely to encourage them to invest in those bodies actively. Beyond the incentives stemming from the sponsors' preferences, the mere existence of covert support defines specific incentives for rebels. Insurgents have few guarantees regarding the sustainability of support when the sponsors do not acknowledge supplying it. The uncertainty caused by the fact that states can cut off assistance abruptly does not encourage the rebels to engage in institution-building. Instead, they may

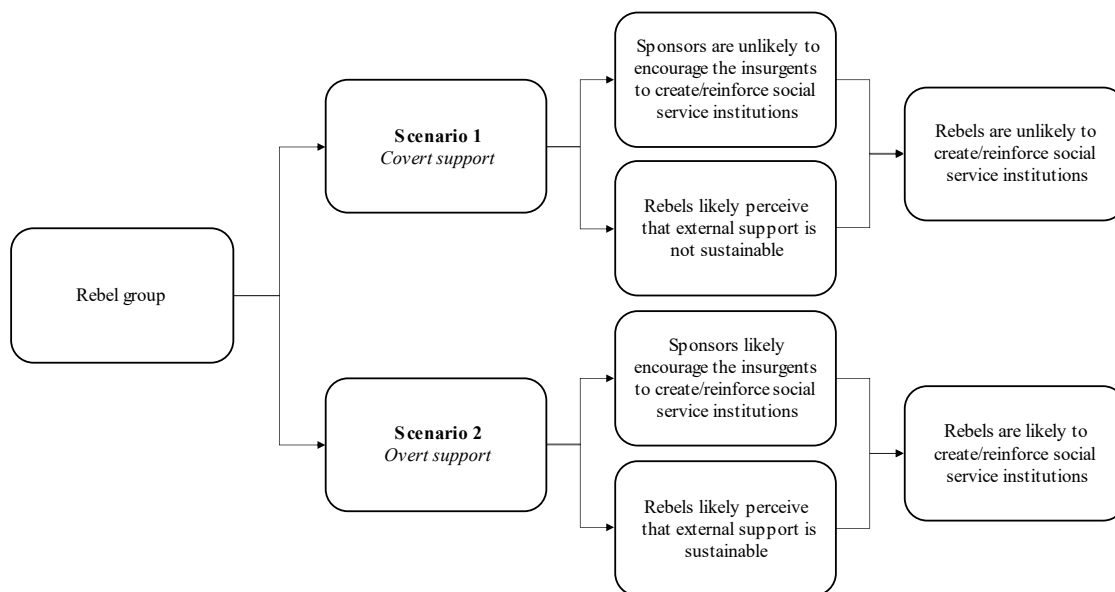
prioritize the armed conflict and consider providing social services to be a later focus if they are successful militarily (Mampilly 2011). Consistently, in these situations that ally a low reliance of the rebels on resources from civilians due to access to foreign ones and an expected absence of strict monitoring from the sponsors, *Article 1*'s findings show that rebels often engage in harmful behavior toward noncombatants.

Conversely, in cases where the rebels receive overt support, they face significant incentives to create or, if existing, reinforce social service institutions. In these cases, the sponsors likely encourage the insurgents to invest in institution-building. The rebels have significant interests in complying with their backers' preferences to continue accessing the significant amount of material resources allowed by the overtness of support. Beyond the sponsors' preferences, the mere existence of overt support defines specific incentives for the rebels. Insurgents receiving overt support can be confident enough regarding the durability of aid to invest robustly in institutions.

Observable Implications

Figure 18 summarizes my theoretical expectations regarding the provision of social services by the rebels depending on the overtness of external support.

Figure 18. The Overtness of External Support and the Pr. of Social Serv. in Civil Wars



The more overt the support, the more it increases, in my view, the insurgents' propensity to create or reinforce social service institutions. The hypothesis which I will evaluate is thus:

The rebels receiving overt support from foreign states are more likely to invest in social service institutions than those receiving covert support.

Two theoretical clarifications are necessary before moving on to the statistical analyses. First, as Cunningham, Huang, and Sawyer (2021, 87), I make “no assumptions” about the sincerity of the commitment of the rebels to the welfare of civilians. As the case study below shows, creating social service institutions can maximize the sponsors' and the rebels' political and material benefits without demonstrating a genuine sensitivity to democratic ideals or the fate of civilians.

Second, following Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood's (2014) and *Article I's* approaches, the article suggests that the causal arrow between the overtness of support and the existence of social service institutions goes both ways. Rebel institutions can predate support and, in some cases and to some extent, influences its overtness. However, as argued above, even if a state defines its support, at least partially, based on the existence of social service institutions, the sponsor's initial decisions constrain its future motivations. Once it provides overt support, the state fully links its reputation to the rebels' actions and exposes itself to costs if the insurgents engage in harmful behavior. As a result, the sponsor should take active steps to ensure that the rebels maintain or extend social service institutions. I thus assume that the sponsors both “work hard to select appropriate agents” and then “impose constraints on the behavior of the rebels they support” to protect themselves against potential costs (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014, 646). I aim to show that, whatever their objectives in a conflict, states can promote a civilian-friendly environment by carefully selecting their allies and supervising the rebels they support.

Statistical Analyses

Data Structure

The unit of analysis was the group-year. I used the UCDP Dyadic Dataset (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Pettersson, Högladh, and Öberg 2019) to identify all insurgencies active in civil wars between 1989 and 2012 and retained only cases where rebels

received proven material support from at least one sponsor, based on UCDP data on external support to rebels (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011) and Stein and Cantin’s article (2021) for post-2009 cases.¹¹⁶

Explanatory Variables

I matched each observation with two explanatory variables. First, *Overtness Dummy* was a binary variable set to 1 if the insurgents received overt support from at least one state during the year and 0 if the insurgents received covert support only. Second, *Overtness Continuum* was set to 1 if the insurgents’ sponsors all denied providing support; 2 if at least one sponsor did not deny providing support and none of the sponsors publicly displayed or stated their support; 3 if at least one sponsor publicly displayed its support and none of the sponsors stated their support; 4 if at least one sponsor stated its support publicly.

Dependent Variables

I then matched each observation with the variable *Pro-Civilian Services*, assessing whether the insurgents invested in social service institutions during the year based on the Rebel Quasi-State Institutions (QSI) Dataset (Albert 2022). I set the variable to 1 if rebels provided health, education, welfare/aid, or organized elections during the year and 0 if they provided none of these services.

This choice of services stemmed from my desire to focus on forms of governance that are truly civilian friendly rather than designed to maintain short-term political stability only. For instance, “education and healthcare are broadly desirable and beneficial to all persons” (Stewart 2019, 20). Similarly, rebel elections can often “bolster popular support for the rebel group while serving as a signal of the group’s organizational strength, *pro-citizen bent* [emphasis added], and commitment to pursue a break from the incumbent state’s governance” (K. G. Cunningham, Huang, and Sawyer 2021, 82). I deliberately excluded police and justice from the variable *Pro-*

¹¹⁶ I excluded alleged cases of external support from the sample to increase the validity of the results (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011). This decision probably excluded cases of highly concealed support not sufficiently documented by third parties. To limit the risk of biases introduced by this exclusion, I presented a *Model F* in the Appendix, including all cases of external support, even those not sufficiently documented.

Civilian Services, as the insurgents can deliver these services in a host of ways that are not necessarily benevolent. Rebel justice, for instance, can help the insurgents “coerce compliance through the direct punishment of detractors” (Loyle 2021, 109), as the harsh provision of justice by jihadist rebels in Libya, Syria, and Yemen illustrates (Cook, Haid, and Trauthig 2020).

Control Variables

I included several control variables that could influence the link between the overtness of support and the provision of social services by the rebels. At the group level, I included a variable specifying whether the insurgents had *Secessionist* aims (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020).¹¹⁷ Separatists have significant opportunities to attract overt support from foreign states (Huang, Silverman, and Acosta 2022). At the same time, separatists face high incentives to build institutions to prove the viability of their national project over the long term (Florea 2020). I also included a variable considering whether a rebellion built itself around *Religious* identity (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020; Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021). A religious affinity with the rebels may motivate a state to provide overt support since such aid is likely to be popular with its population (Ives 2019b). In parallel, religious identities influence how rebels govern (Revkin 2020; Bamber and Svensson 2022). I also included a variable considering the insurgents’ *Territorial Control* (D. E. Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013).¹¹⁸ Holding territories can allow the rebels to prove their credibility and convince states to help them overtly (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011). At the same time, if controlling territory is not an absolute condition for providing services (Uribe 2017; Jackson 2018), studies show the influence of the nature of the rebels’ territorial control on insurgent governance (Stewart 2019).

At the rebel-sponsor dyad level, I included a variable considering the type of support provided to the rebels (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011; Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021). Due to higher visibility, providing *Troops* or offering *Sanctuary* is less likely to be done covertly than providing money or weapons. In addition, having troops alongside the insurgents or harboring

¹¹⁷ I completed some missing observations via manual coding.

¹¹⁸ I completed some missing observations via manual coding.

rebels on their territory can enable the sponsors to supervise the rebels more strictly than if they provide fungible assets. A tighter control may, in return, affect whether the insurgents provide social services depending on the preferences of the sponsors. I also added a variable considering whether the rebels receive support from *Democratic Supporters* (M. G. Marshall and Gurr 2020). Democracies with robust institutional control over foreign policy need to be more transparent about their actions abroad than autocracies, likely influencing the overtness of support.¹¹⁹ At the same time, democracies are more likely to promote pro-civilian behavior, particularly elective institutions in rebel territories (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014). I also considered the sponsors' *Reliance on Foreign Aid* (Edgell 2017). States relying on foreign aid are likely to care strongly about their image on the international stage. In return, this sensitivity can influence both the overtness of support and the fact that the sponsors will more or less encourage their rebel allies to provide social services.

At the conflict level, I included a variable considering the *Number* of rebel groups in the conflict (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Pettersson, Högladh, and Öberg 2019). The presence of many groups can push a state to help its favorite one exert influence over the conflict outcomes (Byman 2013). On the other hand, the number of groups can affect how each perceives the possibility of governing, leading to competitive governance or co-governance (Berti 2020). I also added a variable *Government Victimization*, considering the violence from the local regime (Sundberg and Melander 2013; Högladh 2019). Intense repression can help the rebels to convince external states to support them overtly (B. T. Jones and Mattiacci 2019; Kydd 2022).¹²⁰ At the same time, the incumbent's atrocities can motivate the insurgents to provide social services to present themselves at odds with the government's practices (Wickham-Crowley 2015). In addition, I added a variable considering the *Intensity* of wars (Pettersson, Högladh, and Öberg 2019). High-intensity wars attract more attention from external states than low-intensity disputes (Salehyan, Gleditsch,

¹¹⁹ For example, the US Congress plays an important role in the conduct of foreign policy in the US (Howell and Pevehouse 2007; Søndergaard 2020).

¹²⁰ However, Olson Lounsbury and Pearson (2019) find no significant correlation between government violence and external military interventions.

and Cunningham 2011). In parallel, the intensity of conflicts likely affects the rebels' prioritization of combat or governance when attributing limited material resources (Mampilly 2011).

Finally, I added a variable considering the presence of *Lootable Resources* in rebel territories; oil (Päivi Lujala, Ketil Rod, and Thieme 2007), gemstones (Gilmore et al. 2005; Paivi Lujala 2009), and drugs (Buhaug and Lujala 2005). While these resources can influence the nature of the sponsor-rebel relationships (Findley and Marineau 2015), the literature links the access to those assets with the nature of the rebel-civilian interactions (Staniland 2012; Florea 2020). The total number of observations was 318.¹²¹ Table 7 reports descriptive statistics for all variables.¹²²

¹²¹ Missing observations were due to missing data for the dependent variable *Pro-Civilian Services*.

¹²² I included a *Model G* including a *Rebel Size* variable that takes into account the size of the groups in the Appendix.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics

	Min	Max	Mean	Median	SD
Overtness Dummy	0.00	1.00	0.34	0.00	0.47
Overtness Continuum	1.00	4.00	2.11	2.00	1.15
Pro-Civilian Services	0.00	1.00	0.33	0.00	0.47
Secessionist	0.00	1.00	0.40	0.00	0.49
Religious	0.00	1.00	0.41	0.00	0.49
Territorial Control	0.00	3.00	0.83	0.00	1.04
Troops	0.00	1.00	0.05	0.00	0.23
Sanctuary	0.00	1.00	0.59	1.00	0.49
Democratic Supporters	0.00	1.00	0.12	0.00	0.33
Reliance on Foreign Aid	1.00	4.00	2.54	3.00	1.08
Rebel Number	1.00	6.00	1.78	1.00	1.06
Government Victimization Dummy	0.00	1.00	0.40	0.00	0.49
Intensity	1.00	3.00	1.29	1.00	0.49
Lootable Resources	0.00	3.00	1.26	1.00	0.88

Unit of analysis = rebel-group-year; N = 318 Rebel groups receiving support from external states.

Results

I ran two logistic regressions to assess the link between the overtness of external support to insurgents and the provision of social services in civil wars. Model 5 used *Overtness Dummy* as the explanatory variable, while Model 6 used *Overtness Continuum*. Table 8 outlines the results.

Table 8. The Overtness of External Support and the Provision of Social Services

	Model 5 DV: Pro-Civilian Services	Model 6 DV: Pro-Civilian Services
Overtness Dummy	2.108** (0.673)	
Overtness Continuum 2		1.223* (0.495)
Overtness Continuum 3		1.811* (0.708)
Overtness Continuum 4		3.410*** (0.834)
Secessionist	0.667 (0.824)	0.694 (0.856)
Religious	-1.360 (0.779)	-1.177 (0.734)
Territorial Control	0.327 (0.275)	0.430 (0.275)
Troops	-2.086 (1.106)	-2.603* (1.211)
Sanctuary	0.646 (0.726)	0.947 (0.680)
Democratic Supporters	0.878 (0.614)	0.963 (0.653)
Reliance on Foreign Aid	-0.179 (0.232)	-0.181 (0.230)
Rebel Number	-0.362 (0.478)	-0.475 (0.556)
Government Victimization Dummy	0.459 (0.344)	0.757* (0.351)
Intensity	0.952* (0.400)	1.073* (0.470)
Lootable Resources	0.353 (0.326)	0.461 (0.359)
Num.Obs.	318	318
AIC	340.4	325.7
BIC	389.3	382.1
Log.Lik.	-157.206	-147.831
Unit of analysis = rebel-group-year; Standard errors clustered by rebel group in parentheses.		
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001		

The results indicate positive and statistically significant correlations between the overtness of external support to rebels and the insurgents' propensity to furnish social services to civilians between 1989 and 2012. Insurgents receiving overt support from foreign states are more likely to invest in social service institutions than rebels receiving covert support. Figure 19 uses estimates from Model 5, and Figure 20 uses estimates from Model 6 to present the predicted values for *Pro-Civilian Services* based on changes in *Overtness Dummy* and *Overtness Continuum*, respectively. I hold all control variables at their median value and show confidence intervals at the 0.95 level.

Figure 19. Predicted Values—Pro-Civilian Services—Overtness Dummy

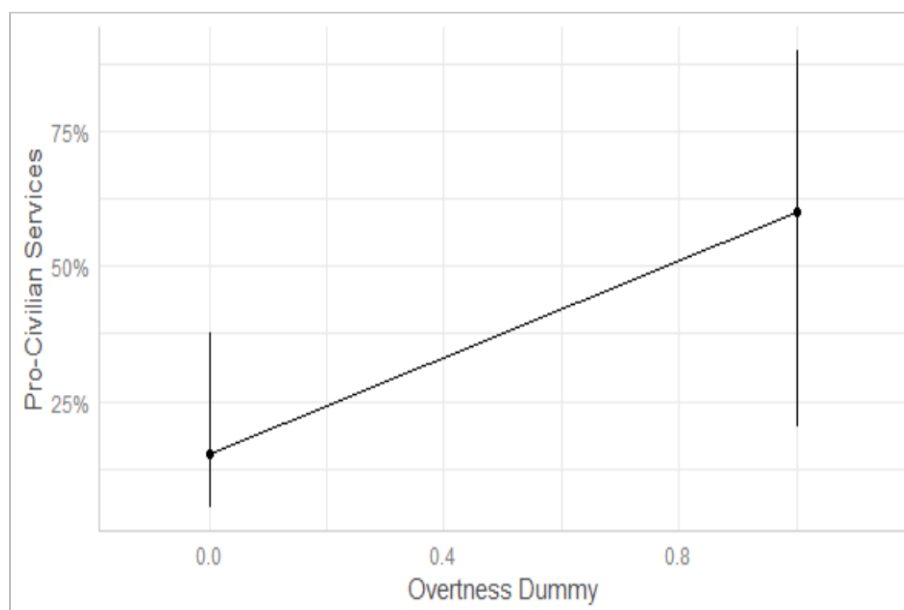


Figure 20. Predicted Values—Pro-Civilian Services—Overtnes Continuum

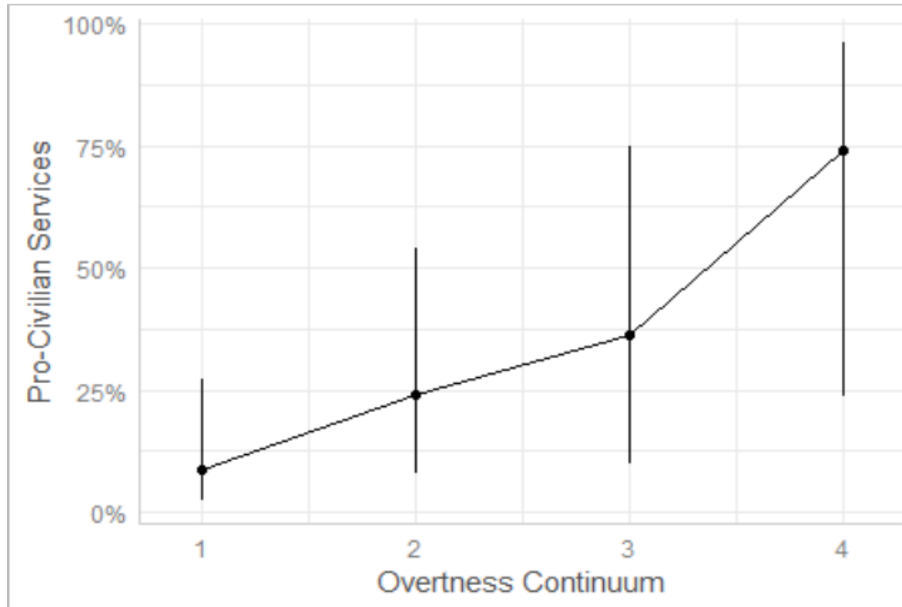


Figure 20 and Figure 21 indicate that the more overt the support, the more likely the rebels are to provide social services to civilians.

Discussion

The statistical results contribute to the literature on external support to rebels and rebel institutions, indicating that the overtnes of assistance is an important predictor of the propensity of the insurgents to provide social services to the population during civil wars. In this way, the findings confirm but specify previous results that show the influence of external support on the provision of social services by the rebels (Huang and Sullivan 2021).

As *Article 1*, the findings also qualify the link between rebel access to external resources and the coercive nature of the insurgent-civilian interactions during civil wars (Weinstein 2006; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014). While overt support is likely associated with more and better assistance from sponsors to rebels than covert support (Carson 2018), it is associated with more constructive insurgent-civilian relations than clandestine aid.

Finally, the findings further credit the idea that civilian targeting and social service provision represent “two sides of the same coin” for insurgents (Huang and Sullivan 2021, 796).

In addition to being less violent toward civilians (*Article 1*), on average, rebels receiving overt support invest more in social service institutions than insurgents receiving covert assistance.

Beyond Formal Pro-Civilian Institutions

So far, I have stressed the quantitative relationship between the overtness of support and the presence of formal institutions. However, whether the existence of formal bodies equates to genuine civilian participation in decision-making needs to be questioned qualitatively. The following section investigates a potential disjunction between formal institutions and the reality of power devolution via the study of the YPG/SDF governance in Raqqa from 2017 to 2020.

Qualitative Data

In terms of data, I first used written sources; academic and press articles, or reports from NGOs, think tanks, or IOs. I also used forty-one interviews with university or think tank researchers, senior officials from the US State Department and the US Department of Defense, YPG/SDF high-level representatives, and journalists from Northeast Syria.¹²³ A triangulation via data from diverse respondents aimed at maximizing the case study's internal validity.

Background Information on the YPG/SDF and the US Support

The YPG is a Kurdish-majority armed group that became active after 2011. The YPG is the military branch of the PYD, created as a Syrian affiliate of the PKK in 2003 (INT-IR-04). Building on human and material resources inherited from the PKK, the YPG/PYD rapidly asserted its authority in Kurdish areas of Northeast Syria in 2012 (D. al-Darwish 2016; Tezcür and Yıldız 2021). As a result, when the IS emerged in 2013, the YPG was “the dominant military force in nearly every Kurdish-populated area” (ICG 2014, 1).

The YPG trajectory changed drastically from the Kobane battle in 2014 when the US and a Global Coalition against IS started to sponsor the group overtly (INT-USO-07). In 2015, the US redirected “Train and Equip” funds toward the newly established SDF. This umbrella organization,

¹²³ A table in the Appendix offers more details on the sample.

which included the YPG and Arab factions, became the central fighting force against the IS in Northeast Syria (Reuters 2015).¹²⁴ The fight against the IS allowed the YPG/SDF to take over cities previously under the control of the jihadist group beyond Kurdish areas. After victories in Manbij in 2016 and Raqqa and Deir-Ezzor in 2017, the YPG/SDF ended the IS territorial aspect in Baghuz in 2019. In 2020, the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) ruled by the YPG/SDF included seven administrative entities: Jazira, Euphrates, Afrin, Manbij, Raqqa, Tabqa, and Deir Ez-Zor (INT-GM-02).

The Creation of Formal Pro-Civilian Institutions in Raqqa

The question of post-IS governance arose before the Raqqa battle in 2017 for the YPG/SDF (Enab Baladi 2016). The Kurdish-led group had almost no local relays in Raqqa, whose population was overwhelmingly Arab (Dukhan, Ammar, and Shaar 2021). In this context, the US, the YPG/SDF main sponsor, encouraged their insurgent allies to put “civilians in control” by creating inclusive governing bodies in a post-combat stabilization perspective (INT-USO-07; INT-IR-07; INT-SJ-08; INT-USO-01) (US Department of Defense 2017). The US officials believed that “turning to locals” was “critical to winning hearts and minds among Sunni Arabs who dominate the area” (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020a).

Accordingly, from the outset of the 2017 battle, the YPG/SDF argued their will to gather all the components of Raqqa’s society into future institutions. YPG/SDF officials announced meetings “with the people and important tribal figures” to find “out their opinions on how to govern” the area (Reuters 2017a). Following these meetings, the insurgents formally designed the Raqqa Civil Council (RCC), which became the highest administrative body in the governorate in April 2017 (INT-SJ-08). The seemingly pro-civilian institution aimed to “stabilize these areas, channel services, and security” and mirrored other “local governing councils” set up “as emergency institutions” in Manbij or Deir Ez-Zor (INT-IR-07; INT-GM-02; INT-GM-03; INT-GM-05). Between 2017 and 2020, the RCC included various committees along sectorial lines, such as a committee dedicated to education or another dedicated to health (INT-SJ-17) (SDF Press Center 2017; SDF Press Center 2018).

¹²⁴ The YPG retained all the decision-making power within the SDF (INT-IR-01).

The US officials explicitly promoted the creation of “demographically appropriate local government structures” (Joint Force Quarterly 2018, 37). While the YPG/SDF had created local councils in other areas, they formally made an effort to create institutions “in line with local demographics” in Raqqa (INT-IR-07; INT-GM-03) (Favier 2018, 10).¹²⁵ Notably, in line with the US desire to create representative institutions (INT-USO-01), the YPG/SDF showed a central interest in co-opting tribal figures into their structures (INT-IR-02; INT-IR-03; INT-SJ-02; INT-GM-04; INT-GM-05) (ICG 2019).¹²⁶ The YPG/SDF offered tribal leaders positions on the council with all the associated financial and practical privileges (INT-SJ-08).¹²⁷ The first co-chair of the RCC was an Arab tribal leader operating alongside a Kurdish civil engineer, and the RCC included several tribal representatives (Dukhan 2019).¹²⁸ Frequent meetings then occurred to include tribal leaders in the new governing structures (INT-GM-04) (Nassar and Al Maleh 2018). Overall, the YPG/SDF officials systematically underlined the fact that Arabs represented “the majority of the RCC” and that most members were people from the Raqqa governorate from 2017 to 2020 (INT-GM-02; INT-GM-04; INT-GM-05) (Iso 2017; Favier 2018, 11).

¹²⁵ Being under much “international attention” in the former capital of the IS, the YPG/SDF reportedly tried to be “more lenient” and “more careful” in Raqqa compared to other cities of Northeast Syria (INT-IR-07).

¹²⁶ Tribal loyalties in Northeast Syria are reportedly fluid and often determined “by who pays better, who provides security, and who provides some role in governance” (Yacoubian 2017, 9). The tribe is “not necessarily a cohesive entity,” but tribal affiliation “informs the social composition of many communities,” and tribal leaders “often perform important governance functions” such as “dispute mediation, distribution of economic welfare and patronage, and security provision” (COAR 2019, 2). Because the tribal figures are “influential political brokers,” co-opting them into new institutions can be “the best means of gauging the political orientation of the tribe as a whole” for an actor willing to govern in Northeast Syria (COAR 2019, 2).

The policy of tribal co-optation took place in a context of fierce competition for tribal loyalties (more on this in *Note XVII* in the Appendix).

¹²⁷ Paradoxically, co-opting tribal leaders contradicted the reformist ideology the YPG/SDF professed, as the group often associated these actors with a feudal social organization that needs to be overcome (INT-IR-04; INT-IR-08).

¹²⁸ The instrumental co-optation led by the YPG/SDF seemingly led to equally instrumental cooperation from local elites (more on this in *Note XVIII* in the Appendix).

The Illusion of Inclusive Local Governance in Raqqa

However, the formal representation of Arab figures in seemingly pro-civilian institutions did not equate to a genuine devolution of decision-making power to civilians in Raqqa. First, the YPG/SDF apparent concern for representativeness did not lead to implementing an elective model in the area. Instead, insurgent leaders stressed the urgency of designing new institutions to justify nominations to the RCC rather than elections (INT-GM-03).

Beyond the mere absence of an elective system, the RCC faced criticisms for opaque nomination procedures.¹²⁹ Although the YPG/SDF officials argued that the group promoted the appointment of the right person in the right place based on qualifications (INT-GM-02; INT-GM-03; INT-GM-04), local critics deplored that most RCC members were “simply selected based on loyalty” (INT-SJ-09). Pledged allegiance to insurgents trumped competence (INT-SJ-17). An observer argued that “why” the YPG/SDF appointed specific individuals in the RCC or “what” they were responsible for was not clear to the population (INT-SJ-03). The YPG/SDF decision to focus their co-optation on tribal authorities at the expense of liberal professions and civil servants “who would be less amenable to transactional politics” appeared to follow “a purposeful policy intended to empower more pliable and largely non-ideological” individuals (Tsurkov and Al-Hassan 2019; Favier 2018).¹³⁰ The RCC subsequently suffered from a lack of specialists (INT-SJ-10). Locals denounced some appointees’ lack of technical knowledge or, because the RCC also included officials not from Raqqa, a lack of knowledge regarding the local context (INT-SJ-03).

In addition to non-transparent nomination procedures, the design of an inclusive-looking governance structure seemed to hide a parallel structure of power controlled by the YPG in Raqqa (INT-IR-04; INT-SJ-10; INT-SJ-12; INT-SJ-13; INT-SJ-17; INT-USO-08). YPG leaders, called *cadros*, and officially appointed as “technical advisers” to the RCC (Mehchy, Haid, and Khatib 2020, 26), with “supervision” or “advisory” roles (INT-IR-07), remained responsible for the major decisions regarding the provision of services (INT-SJ-17). For most of them, the *cadros* operating

¹²⁹ While elections were supposed to take place in a second phase (INT-GM-03; INT-GM-04), none took place during the 2017–2020 period (INT-SJ-03; INT-SJ-07).

¹³⁰ A local observer argued that the “heads of the tribes [were] not political people” (INT-SJ-08).

in the “shadows” had backgrounds in the PKK (INT-SJ-03; INT-SJ-06; INT-SJ-08).¹³¹ The *cadros* reportedly controlled everything in RCC committees: “Money, humans, services” (INT-SJ-07). Local observers reported that the RCC members could not “do anything” without approval from these unofficial leaders (INT-SJ-06).¹³² The person formally appointed at the RCC, including the chairs, had “no rights to take any decision” going against the *cadros*’ will (INT-SJ-03) (Mehchy, Haid, and Khatib 2020). The *cadros* held “ultimate decision-making authority behind and beyond local governing entities” (ICG 2020). An observer argued that civilians knew of the existence of the *cadros* but often did not know who was effectively responsible for which services, leading to an unclear decision-making structure (INT-SJ-17).¹³³

The formal bodies were thus overshadowed by “a parallel structure” of informal governance (INT-IR-07). The YPG/SDF took public “pride in its focus on building a bottom-up participatory decision-making process,” but in reality, “those formal channels [were] largely inactive” (Mehchy, Haid, and Khatib 2020, 30). The formal institutions functioned as “channels to convey complaints and petitions rather than as platforms for effective participation” (ICG 2017, 4). Despite holding “impressive titles,” the co-opted Arabs held “no real authority” (ICG 2017, 4), as the YPG/SDF “outsourced” some aspects of “day-to-day governance” but did not “[relinquish] control” (INT-IR-07). For many, the RCC remained a “façade for the YPG” as “the ultimate decision-making authority” stayed in the hands of the *cadros* “[calling] the shots on strategic and important issues”

¹³¹ Many *cadros* had received training in the Qandil mountains, which was the PKK stronghold in Iraq (more on this in *Note XIX* in the Appendix).

¹³² One example given by a journalist concerned authorizations needed to rebuild houses after 2017. The journalist argued that even “if you [were] from Raqqa and you already [owned] your house, you [needed] a permission from [the] SDF municipality to rebuild your own house. [...] And you [had] to pay for it” (INT-SJ-03).

¹³³ The YPG/SDF could not durably hide the role played by the *cadros* (more on this in *Note XX* in the Appendix).

(INT-IR-07; INT-SJ-09). Over time, some tribe members complained that “the purpose of their inclusion was merely a cosmetic measure to justify SDF rule” (Nassar and Al Maleh 2018).¹³⁴

The Sidelining of Local Political Figures in Raqqa

Moreover, if the group co-opted figures amenable to transactional politics, the YPG/SDF seemingly sidelined autonomous actors that could threaten their position in Raqqa (INT-IR-02). This first concerned people associated with the FSA. The most prominent example concerns *Liwa Thuwar Raqqa*, a faction initially affiliated with the FSA. After cooperation with the YPG, and even integration into the SDF (Zeid, Hamou, and Kieke 2015) (INT-IR-02), *Liwa Thuwar Raqqa* deplored the sidelining of Arab fighters during the battle for Raqqa and then publicly rejected the authority of the RCC (The Syrian Observer 2017; Farhat 2017). The tensions culminated when the YPG/SDF arrested members of the group, including leaders, in the months following Raqqa’s takeover (INT-SJ-07; INT-SJ-17). In general, as the FSA allegedly still held strong popularity among Raqqa residents in the studied period (INT-SJ-05; INT-SJ-17), local and external observers pointed out that the YPG/SDF perceived open support for the Syrian revolution as defiance toward their authority and repressed it (INT-SJ-17) (UNHRC 2018; UNHRC 2018).¹³⁵

The YPG/SDF also sidelined figures conducting non-profit activities in Raqqa (INT-SJ-07). The group was “very suspicious of civil society work,” something said to be “very alien” to its political culture (INT-IR-07). The RCC and local non-profit organizations often operated in the same fields and competed over the same pool of workers (INT-SJ-19). In addition, the civil society organizations were a space where “technocrats, activists, and skilled workers” sidelined by formal governance could “form the nucleus of a postwar civil society” (Al-Saidawi 2018). Many workers operating in non-profit organizations were “well-known and respected individuals rooted in their localities” and “traditional tribal structures” (Al-Saidawi 2018).

¹³⁴ Critics of the YPG/SDF institutions argued that the co-opted figures were not “good for anything except issuing statements” (Nassar and Al Maleh 2018). Speaking about the RCC, a journalist stated that it was “not for Raqqa,” it was “not civilian,” and it was “not [a] council” (INT-SJ-03).

¹³⁵ The actual level of public support for the Syrian opposition was difficult to assess without reliable survey data (more on this in *Note XXI* in the Appendix).

In this context, the YPG/SDF allegedly saw such activists “as threats” and tried to “control the civil society” (INT-SJ-06; INT-SJ-09; INT-SJ-12; INT-SJ-13).¹³⁶ The YPG/SDF notably arrested prominent local non-profit employees, leaders, and lower-level workers, after creating the RCC (INT-SJ-07; INT-SJ-09; INT-SJ-12; INT-SJ-13; INT-SJ-19) (Syria Direct 2019; STJ 2020). Observers highlighted the popularity held by these figures, said to be “famous activists” among civilians, and foreign donors, as one of the most credible explanations for the arrests (INT-SJ-06; INT-SJ-10).¹³⁷ The RCC was reportedly “upset about the US partnership with the NGOs, and that the NGOs [took over] some of the roles of state institutions” (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020a). The YPG/SDF was “uncomfortable with the perceived power and reach accrued by the activists” and sought “to subject them to their own authority through intimidation tactics” (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020a). The insurgents often accused civil society actors of being linked with the IS, the FSA, or Turkey (INT-SJ-06; INT-SJ-07; INT-SJ-09; INT-SJ-10; INT-SJ-12; INT-SJ-13; INT-SJ-19).¹³⁸

Discussion

Thus, while the insurgents designed the RCC as a formal embodiment of “democratic decentralization,” the council mainly served to bring Raqqa “under the direct authority of the YPG” (Heydemann 2018, 11). The YPG/SDF operated a dual strategy of co-opting individuals deemed loyal enough into their social service institutions and sidelining figures deemed too popular or oppositional. Overall, the “lip-service to inclusive representation” seemingly served, in a central way, to satisfy demands from the YPG/SDF sponsors for the inclusion of civilians in local decision-making (INT-GM-04) (Gaston 2021a, 44). A former US official argued that the YPG/SDF leaders “understood the information environment very well” and knew that if they wanted “a long-term

¹³⁶ The YPG/SDF faced accusations of using formal authorizations to control the civil society’s activities in Northeast Syria (INT-SJ-08; INT-SJ-12; INT-SJ-13). Observers also denounced tight control of the reconstruction funds provided by foreign donors (INT-SJ-03; INT-SJ-10; INT-SJ-19).

¹³⁷ The YPG/SDF justification for the arrests was that they acted on intelligence from the Coalition against IS (more on this in *Note XXII* in the Appendix).

¹³⁸ A common complaint from civilians in Raqqa was that to the YPG/SDF, “every Arab [was] IS” (El-Gamal and Megally 2021, 22).

relationship with the United States,” they needed “to have an Arab component to deal with [...] the increasing Arab population” in the controlled areas (INT-USO-07). Designing ostensibly inclusive governance allowed the insurgents to demonstrate sensitivity to the plight of civilians and thus continue access critical resources from external states.¹³⁹ The US officials were apparently aware of the YPG/SDF shortcomings regarding the proper inclusion of locals in the new structures (INT-USO-08) but, as *Article 2* shows, intervened only at the margins to prevent serious abuses.¹⁴⁰

The YPG/SDF governance in Raqqa shows that, when faced with explicit demands from their sponsors to create social service institutions, rebellions can resist by creating formally inclusive bodies without delegating real power to local civilians. Locals increasingly criticized the YPG/SDF authority over time in Raqqa. For critics, the inclusiveness promoted by the YPG/SDF was “merely a fig leaf” for external audiences (INT-SJ-10; INT-SJ-12; INT-SJ-13) (Dukhan, Ammar, and Shaar 2021). A local journalist argued that the RCC was “only a façade for the West,” created by the YPG/SDF to show that they were “an alternative for [the] Assad regime and ISIS and all other groups” and thus continue to “receive funds or military aid” (INT-SJ-09).¹⁴¹ Despite criticisms, no credible political alternatives threatened the sustainability of the YPG/SDF governance in Raqqa from 2017 to 2020 (INT-IR-07; INT-SJ-20).¹⁴² Many observers pointed to a local acceptance by default, guided by the idea that, in the context of the Syrian conflict, the YPG/SDF represented “the best of the worst” (INT-SJ-10) (al-Omar 2021).¹⁴³

¹³⁹ The YPG/SDF monitored foreign journalists closely in the AANES (INT-SJ-04; INT-SJ-07; INT-SJ-13). More generally, the group placed a central focus on the image projected on the international stage. Insurgents skillfully promoted the allegedly inclusive nature of their institutions through communications in international media and insurgent diplomacy, including representation in Western capitals (INT-SJ-02; INT-SJ-04; INT-SJ-07; INT-SJ-13; INT-SJ-17). In addition, the YPG recently employed a lobbying firm in the US to defend its interests (Pecquet 2021).

¹⁴⁰ The US officials knew about the prominent role played by the *cadros* (more on this in *Note XXIII* in the Appendix).

¹⁴¹ A journalist argued that the SDF was “a big lie. There [was] no SDF. [It was] PYD and PKK” (INT-SJ-06).

¹⁴² Again, the actual extent of local discontent is challenging to estimate in Raqqa without accurate survey data.

¹⁴³ This idea of the YPG/SDF being “the best of the worst” frequently appeared in local testimonies (more on this in *Note XXIV* in the Appendix).

Conclusion

This article aimed to enrich our understanding of the link between the rebels' access to external resources and their propensity to develop constructive relations with civilians during civil wars. The paper investigated the link between the overtness of state support to insurgents and the inclination of the rebels to provide social services. I hypothesized that insurgents receiving overt support are more likely to invest in social services than rebels receiving covert support. This hypothesis stemmed from my assumption that sponsors providing overt support will more strongly encourage rebels to invest in the provision of social services than those providing covert support.

First, statistical analyses using data on the overtness of external support (*Article 1*) and rebel institutions (Albert 2022) between 1989 and 2012 supported this hypothesis. The overtness of support positively and significantly correlates with the provision of social services by the rebels. Second, I was keen to qualify the link between the existence of formal rebel institutions and the inclusion of civilians in the exercise of power in insurgent areas. A case study of the YPG/SDF governance in Raqqa from 2017 to 2020 allowed me to highlight that, in the face of explicit demands from their sponsors, rebels can sometimes instrumentally create façade institutions that include, in effect, little integration of demands from civilians.

The findings are descriptive rather than causal and thus do not allow me to define absolute policy recommendations for sponsors. At first glance, it may seem more rational for states to keep their support covert at all times, as this allows them to maintain a broader range of future options than overt support. Nevertheless, the advantages of overtness may sometimes convince external states to link their reputations to those of the rebels voluntarily. In these cases, the only recommendation I can make for states wishing to limit potential costs at the domestic and international levels is to actively encourage rebels to invest in providing social services to civilians.

In terms of research avenues, future qualitative studies will need to analyze, in other cases, the potential disjuncture between the existence of formal institutions and the reality of civilian inclusion in these entities. Studying the extent to which the insurgents' creation of formal bodies reflects a genuine sensitivity to the plight of civilians during wars is critical is essential to developing better conflict resolution strategies.

Conclusion

“Kto Kovo?” (Who [is using] whom?)

Lenin, quoted by Kalyvas (2006, 377)

State support for rebellions remains a structuring element of the current international relations, motivating the study of the consequences of this phenomenon on human security during civil conflicts. Accordingly, the dissertation’s three core articles investigated, through a mixed-method approach, the link between the overtness of external state support to rebel organizations and the interactions between the insurgents and civilians in civil wars.

First, I introduced new quantitative data on the overtness of state support for rebels. Next, I showed that the overtness of support correlates with the insurgent violence toward civilians and the rebels’ propensity to provide social services in conflict zones. Both correlations, negative for the former and positive for the latter, highlighted a statistical association between the form of support to insurgents and the coercive or constructive nature of the rebel-civilian interactions.

Then, I theorized and illustrated via a case study focused on the US support for the YPG/SDF in Northeast Syria the link between the nature of external support to the rebels and the sponsors’ motivations for monitoring the rebel-civilian interactions during civil wars. The objective was to investigate, more specifically, the mechanisms linking the overtness of support for insurgents and the nature of insurgent-civilian relations.

Finally, a case study focused on the YPG/SDF governance in Raqqa nuanced the overall impact of the overtness of state support to rebels on the insurgent-civilian interactions in civil wars, demonstrating that the mere existence of formal insurgent institutions does not necessarily equate to the effective devolution of power to civilians in armed conflicts.

The dissertation’s conclusion proceeds as follows. The first section exposes the project’s main empirical and theoretical contributions to the literature on civil wars as well as potential policy recommendations. The second section outlines the research’s methodological limits. Finally,

the third and last section highlights avenues for future research on the link between the overtness of state support for rebels and insurgent-civilian interactions.

Contributions to the Literature

The dissertation makes different empirical and theoretical contributions to the literature on civil conflicts, from which I can draw policy recommendations.

Empirical Contributions

The dissertation relied on extensive data collection and thus made different empirical contributions. First, despite the limitations acknowledged below, the quantitative data collected on the overtness of state support to rebels was an important contribution to the literature on civil conflicts. The new data can, for instance, be used as independent variables to examine the link between the overtness of support to rebels and variables such as the duration of civil conflicts, their intensity, the nature of relations between different rebel groups operating in the same territory, or the relationships between the external sponsors and the targeted state or non-state actors. The new data can also be used as dependent variables to investigate which groups are more likely to receive covert or overt support. Finally, the data can serve as control variables in studies investigating different phenomena related to contemporary civil conflicts.

Second, the interview data collected on the US support for the YPG/SDF from 2014 to 2020 was also an empirical contribution to the literature. Interviewing high-ranking individuals within the US administration and the YPG/SDF allowed me to access new empirical elements that can inform future quantitative and qualitative studies on the transnational dimensions of civil conflict or on the Syrian conflict more specifically.

Theoretical Contributions

Next to its empirical contributions, the dissertation made different theoretical contributions to the literature on contemporary civil wars. From a general point of view, the research project's primary contributions were the exposure of the statistical link between the overtness of state support for rebels and the nature of insurgent-civilian relations and the theorization of what are, in my view, the mechanisms linking both variables. The logic I wished to convey through the

quantitative and qualitative analyses was that the sponsors' initial decisions to provide overt support, taken within a relatively unconstrained setting and stemming from the operational and/or communicational advantages of overtness, then tends to lock the sponsors into a specific course of action that they must maintain to avoid high costs at the domestic and/or international levels.¹⁴⁴

More precisely, in my conceptualization, the period when the sponsors define the terms of their support corresponds to a critical juncture during which they have significant freedom regarding the degree of overtness of their aid.¹⁴⁵ However, providing overt support will trap the states into path dependency. The initial freedom of action disappears once the states provide overt aid, and the sponsors can become trapped in a relationship with the rebels whose potential repercussions they only partially control.¹⁴⁶ Consequently, the states must act so that the potential costs associated with overt support remain minimal, and this leads them, in my argument, to supervise the rebels strictly to prevent them from turning violent. This monitoring will subsequently define specific incentives for rebels regarding their relations with noncombatants.

In this way, pursuing an established literature on the subject, the dissertation aimed to show the link between external interests and civilian experiences during internal conflicts. Overall, and as argued below, the mechanisms linking the overtness of support to the nature of insurgent-civilian relations will need to be confirmed and refined via future case studies. Increasing the number of observations will be essential to show that the statistical association between the dissertation's two variables of interest is not only explained by the fact that sponsors select nonviolent rebels when

¹⁴⁴ As stated in *Article 2*, I believe that very few states are impermeable to costs at both internal and external levels over the long term.

¹⁴⁵ Mahoney (2002, 7) refers to critical junctures as “moments of relative structural indeterminism when willful actors shape outcomes in a more voluntaristic fashion than normal circumstances permit” (quoted in Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 347).

¹⁴⁶ Capoccia and Kelemen (2007, 344) argue that “choices made during critical moments unleash long-term sequences of institutional development.” In the same idea, Mahoney (2000, 513) posits that “once a particular option is selected [in a critical juncture] it becomes progressively more difficult to return to the initial point when multiple alternatives were still available” (quoted in Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, 347).

providing overt support but that monitoring after the beginning of assistance also plays an important role in explaining the statistical link.

In addition to the central contributions of the dissertation, the research results made more specific theoretical contributions that corroborate or qualify recent findings in the study of civil conflicts. First, at the sponsor level, while a strand of research using principal-agent theories assumes moral hazard or agency slack in the sponsor-rebel relationship (Salehyan 2010; Popovic 2017), findings from the dissertation suggested that the sponsors have some leverage on insurgent violence through both selection and monitoring. First, the states intervening in a conflict may select rebels not engaged in acts of violence. The sponsors can then implement various monitoring measures to ensure that the rebels do not target civilians once they receive support. As such, external support does not, in my view, ineluctably promote civilian targeting in civil wars.

Second, at the rebel level, the findings suggested that restraint can be a profitable strategy for the rebels. Not targeting civilians may allow the insurgents to stand at odds with the behavior of the regimes they are fighting against and convince states to support them openly. In return, receiving overt support can allow the rebels to receive more resources and better assets from foreign states (Carson 2018). In this way, engaging in constructive relations with civilians can increase the insurgents' chances of achieving their aims in a conflict. These findings resonated with Stanton's (2020) results, which show that the rebels who refrain from targeting civilians are more likely to secure favorable outcomes in civil wars due to increased access to foreign resources. This "political bonus" from a lack of violence is positive from a human security perspective.

Third, qualifying previous arguments in the literature (Weinstein 2006; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014), the findings suggested that rebel access to significant external resources does not necessarily translate into significant insurgent violence. Providing overt support likely allows the sponsors to transfer more resources and resources of higher quality to the rebels than covert support due to lower logistical constraints (Carson 2018). However, overt support is associated with less violence toward noncombatants and the provision of more social services than clandestine assistance. The results corroborated findings from Huang and Sullivan (2021) that link external support to rebels to constructive insurgent-civilian relationships. The results also resonate with previous ones showing that "[material] resources alone do not determine the success or failure of insurgent groups" during civil wars (Staniland 2014, 4).

Finally, by showing the link between the overtness of support and both civilian targeting and the provision of social services, the findings suggested that, as hinted by previous studies, these variables are “two sides of the same coin”; rebels invest in social service institutions where they do not widely target noncombatants (Huang and Sullivan 2021, 796).

I believe these theoretical implications are critical as external support to rebels continues to be a determining element in international politics, blurring the demarcation between civil wars and interstate conflicts (Grauer and Tierney 2018; Twagiramungu et al. 2019; Meier et al. 2022).

Policy Recommendations

In general, being descriptive rather than causal, the research findings do not allow the definition of absolute policy recommendations for the sponsors. At first sight, it may seem more rational for states to maintain covert assistance at all times as it allows them to maintain greater flexibility in future policy options than overt support. Nevertheless, the tactical and communicational advantages of overtness mentioned throughout the dissertation may sometimes convince states to voluntarily ensnare themselves in a rhetorical trap when circumstances make this option compelling. In these cases, the only policy recommendation that I can make for states wishing to limit domestic and/or international costs is significant involvement in monitoring the rebel-civilian interactions.

While the findings do not allow for absolute policy recommendations for states, the fact that the sponsors tend to act differently depending on the overtness of their support defines incentives for actors interested in maximizing human security during conflicts. The sponsors’ apparent leverage on rebel behavior means that third actors must hold them accountable for rebel violence when it occurs. NGOs, IOs, and the media should actively investigate, publicly reveal, and potentially denounce the sponsors’ activities in civil wars to make it too costly to support insurgents committing atrocities. Naming-and-shaming activities long studied by the literature on political violence should serve to alter the incentives faced by the sponsors and, in return, those faced by the rebels abusing noncombatants (DeMeritt 2012; Krain 2012; Ilgit and Prakash 2019; DiBlasi 2020). NGOs, IOs, and the media can, therefore, partially compensate for limits in terms of direct actions in conflict zones through massive investments in the informational sphere.

In addition to working with state sponsors to make support for violent groups unsustainable, third-party actors interested in promoting human security in war, such as NGOs or IOs, can also work with rebel groups directly, notably via programs of accountability for non-state actors. For example, NGOs such as the Geneva Call work with armed groups on issues related to the plight of civilians in conflict zones (Bongard and Heffes 2019).

Methodological Limits of the Research

Next to the dissertation's contributions, it is essential to recognize some methodological limitations affecting both the quantitative and qualitative analyses. First, as with all quantitative studies of armed conflicts, limitations in terms of data availability, validity, and comparability potentially biased *Article 1* and *Article 3*'s statistical results. Concerning the independent variable, as mentioned in the introduction, existing datasets on state support for rebels likely underestimate specific forms of support, particularly the most covert forms (Twagiramungu et al. 2019). An underestimation of covert support cases may consequently affect the direction of the statistical results. In addition, my coding of the overtness of support was not free of potential coding errors related to limitations in terms of data availability, validity, and comparability across cases.

Concerning the dependent variables, existing data on violence against civilians and rebel institutions also suffer from limitations in terms of availability, reliability, and comparability. Studies criticize cross-country comparisons because quantitative data collection and coding are not uniform across cases (Spagat et al. 2009; Gohdes and Price 2013; Dawkins 2021; Gargiulo 2022). Both “technical biases, which arise from counting methods, and political biases, which arise when people’s agendas shape what they report,” affect these processes during conflicts (Dawkins 2021, 1099; Aronson 2013). Power dynamics mean that some conflicts, or actors and events within conflicts, attract more attention than others from the press, NGOs, or IOs, which remain the central producers of the quantitative data used in the literature on conflicts (Blacksin 2022). In return, this inequality in attention may introduce biases when comparing cases across time and space.

While I tried to limit the risks of biases by carefully selecting the variables I included in the models and including different robustness checks in the statistical analyses,¹⁴⁷ there is no magic bullet that can absolutely protect us from the risk of biased results due to limitations in data availability, validity, and comparability. *Article 1* and *Article 3*'s results will likely evolve as historical studies increase the depth of our knowledge of support for rebels, violence against civilians, rebel institutions, and the control variables I used. Modesty should always guide interpretations of analyses of phenomena as complex as political violence in civil wars, particularly when drawing theoretical conclusions and policy implications from quantitative findings (Ward, Greenhill, and Bakke 2010; E. Miller et al. 2022).

Another limitation mentioned in the introduction stemmed from the fact that I conducted the dissertation's qualitative analysis during the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, if instructive, the online fieldwork was necessarily incomplete and suffered from restricted access to numerous and diverse sources. The impossibility of conducting in-person field research is an acknowledged limitation to the depth and finesse of the qualitative analysis I hope to mitigate via future fieldwork.

Moreover, another limitation traditionally associated with qualitative studies using interviews was related to the actors' tendency to distort distant events over time and operate a form of "moral rationalization" when recounting their contributions to historical events (Tsang 2002; Fujii 2010). Nevertheless, the choice of a recent case of support to insurgents and my desire to speak to various actors in different positions of power minimized this limitation, in my opinion.

Finally, one limitation of the qualitative analysis of the mechanisms linking the overtness of support to the nature of insurgent-civilian relations was linked to the difficulty of investigating many active or proactive monitoring cases. The supervision of rebels is a secretive enterprise by its very nature. The public manifestations revealed in the press, or other public channels, are often a tiny part of the reality of the phenomenon that the states accept to publicize. Consequently, only in-depth studies relying on eyewitnesses, such as the one I conducted on the US support for the YPG/SDF, can accurately reveal the contours of monitoring. For this reason, the dissertation presents few concrete examples of active or proactive supervision. Further studies will thus need

¹⁴⁷ For instance, in *Article 1*, I used both absolute and standardized binary values for the count of civilian victims. These latter are less sensitive to inconsistencies in data collection and coding.

to complement the current analysis to maximize the external validity of my theorization of the mechanisms linking the dissertation's two main variables of interest.

Research Avenues

First, as mentioned above, future studies focusing on historical cases other than those mentioned in the dissertation will be needed to increase the proposed theorization's external validity. In addition, several elements that remain under-theorized in the dissertation will deserve further investigation in future studies on the links between the overtness of external support to rebels and insurgent-civilian interactions during civil wars.

First, future research will need to study further the influence of the political regime of the sponsors on how they supervise rebel-civilian interactions. The quantitative results in *Article 1* and *Article 3* are robust to the inclusion of a variable considering the democratic nature of the sponsors in the models. However, as mentioned in *Article 2*, I believe the political regime of the sponsors must have at least a qualitative impact on day-to-day sponsor-rebel interactions. Democracies subject to strong internal and external constraints likely do not approach the rebel-civilian interactions in the same way as autocracies that are much freer in the conduct of their foreign policy and, by definition, less sensitive to human rights issues from a normative perspective.

An interesting case for investigating how the political regime of the sponsors can influence how they supervise the rebels would be Rwanda's support for the RCD between 1998 and 2001. Despite overt support and an apparent willingness to firmly control the insurgents' military strategy (Tamm 2020), the Rwandan authorities tolerated high civilian targeting by the RCD (Sundberg and Melander 2013; Höglbladh 2019). Studying why Rwanda did not combine overt support with strict monitoring or why, potentially, its supervision did not work would increase our understanding of the influence of the political regime of the sponsors on rebel-civilian relationships.¹⁴⁸

A methodological difficulty here stems from the fact that it is more difficult to study relationships between autocratic sponsors and insurgents than between democratic states and

¹⁴⁸ Intuitively, this case would fall under *Scenario 2* defined in *Article 2*. Rwanda risked few potential costs at the domestic level due to its authoritarian nature during the period (M. G. Marshall and Gurr 2020) but risked high costs at the international level. Future studies should examine this case in more detail.

rebels. Representatives from illiberal governments are probably less willing to talk to researchers focused on human rights issues than officials from democracies, and the quantity of open sources is often minimal for these cases. However, these methodological difficulties should not lead to a lack of focus on autocratic states. The risk is that greater access to information about support from democracies could lead to overestimating the prevalence of monitoring in civil conflicts.

Second, future studies will need to examine further the nuanced nature of the overtness of support in many cases. In order to measure the importance of this variable in quantitative analyses, I primarily conceptualized overtness in a binary manner in the dissertation. However, the transparency of the sponsors regarding their assistance to rebels is always partial. The sponsors never fully admit to the totality of the activities conducted in support of the insurgents or the full content of the assistance provided to the rebels. Even the states acknowledging assistance often remain unclear about the most critical facets of it. Therefore, conceptualizing more precisely what leads states to admit some aspects of their support while keeping others covert is an essential avenue of research. In addition, while I assumed that providing support covertly often serves to control conflict escalation for the sponsors, it would also be interesting to study how, in some cases, overtness can serve the same purpose. For example, some sponsors may consider that a certain amount of transparency regarding what they provide to the insurgents, and thus also what they do not provide, may allow them to define limits within which the conflict will take place and maintain control over the risks of escalation with the target actor.

Third, future studies will need to explore further the interconnection between the material content of support to rebels and its overtness. For example, to what extent does covertness constrain the sponsors' ability to provide material resources to the rebels that can decisively contribute to their success on the battlefield? Conversely, to what extent does overtness allow the sponsors to maximize the quantity and quality of resources provided to the rebels and, consequently, maximize their chances of success in civil wars? While previous research initiated the investigation of this matter in specific cases (Carson 2018), the literature needs a more systematic assessment of the interaction between the content and the form of support in the specific context of civil wars.

Fourth, as briefly discussed in *Article 3's* case study, future studies will need to question more directly how the sponsors' expectations in terms of restraint can lead the rebels, in some cases, to adapt their visible practices without altering the reality of how they interact with civilians.

Creating façade institutions can mask authoritarian practices that are less visible to outside observers. This discrepancy between formal practices and actual conduct, which necessarily eludes quantitative studies, must be examined in other cases. Notably, this disjunction shows, in my view, the contribution of mixed method approaches for studying complex phenomena such as civil conflicts. These approaches allow for combining statistical studies focused on quantifiable practices with qualitative studies that are more likely to highlight the limits of formal practices.

Fifth, a promising, though methodologically complex, avenue of research relates to the psychological effects of different degrees of overtness of external support to rebels. To what extent does overt support affect the morale of the rebels, whether leaders or rank-and-file fighters? To what extent can overt support from sponsors with whom the rebels share a religious or ethnic identity lead to a morale boost for the insurgents and influence their wartime behaviors? Intuitively, one might expect that overt support would lend weight to the insurgents' ethos and validate its rightfulness. On the contrary, one might expect covert support to appear strategic, insincere, and/or not sustainable in the eyes of the rebels and negatively affect the insurgents' self-perceptions. These considerations, at this stage entirely hypothetical, could be the subject of future qualitative studies interested in specific examples of external support for rebellions.

Sixth, future studies will need to question further the temporality of the sponsors' sensitivity to human rights issues. The dissertation focused primarily on the post-Cold War period, during which a human rights regime developed and gradually became entrenched (Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005; Hafner-Burton, Tsutsui, and Meyer 2008). However, for several years, an "autocratic resurgence" seems to be taking place on the international stage (Frantz and Kendall-Taylor 2017; Norris 2021; Welsh 2021). Studying how the evolution of dominant norms in the international system impacts the sponsor-rebel relationships and, consequently, the insurgent-civilian interactions is essential to understanding to what extent the current analysis is historically situated.

All these theoretical elements will thus deserve better attention to enrich our understanding of the link between the overtness of support and the nature of insurgent-civilian relations. Finally, while the dissertation explicitly focused on state support to rebels, future studies may attempt to apply the theoretical framework introduced in *Article 2* to other types of relationships, in particular, state support to other states and pro-government militias (PGM). Determining whether or not the

identified mechanisms apply in these cases is essential to clearly delineate the dissertation's theoretical contribution to the literature on political violence.

In conclusion, external state support for rebel groups will probably remain a structuring element of international interactions in the years to come. Therefore, a thorough study of its causes and its consequences for civilians remains imperative for researchers wishing, at their level, to contribute to limiting the dramatic impact of contemporary armed conflicts.

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Appendix—Article 1

Description of the Variables

Table 9 describes the variables included in *Article 1*'s main text and Appendix.

Table 9. Summary and Description of the Variables Included in Article 1

Name	Definition	Sources
Identifiers		
Location	The variable corresponds to the name of the country whose government the group is fighting against.	UCDP Dyadic Dataset version 19.1 (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Pettersson, Högbladh, and Öberg 2019)
Group	The variable identifies the rebel group. ¹⁴⁹	UCDP Dyadic Dataset version 19.1 (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Pettersson, Högbladh, and Öberg 2019)
Year	The variable corresponds to the year of the observation.	UCDP Dyadic Dataset version 19.1 (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Pettersson, Högbladh, and Öberg 2019)
Explanatory Variables		
Overtness Dummy (All—Appendix)	The variable is set to 1 if the rebel group receives overt support from at least one external state in a year and 0 otherwise.	UCDP External Support—Primary Warring Party Dataset v.1.0-2011 (Högbladh,

¹⁴⁹ I removed the “Serbian irregulars” and “Croatian irregulars” from the sample because they were too similar to other observations. This exclusion removed 6 observations.

		Pettersson, and Themnér 2011) / (Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021) / Manual Coding
Overt Continuum	The variable is set to 1 if the rebel group's sponsors all deny providing support in a year; 2 if at least one of the sponsors does not deny providing its support and no sponsors display or state their support; 3 if at least one of the sponsors publicly displays its support and none of the sponsors publicly declare their support; and 4 if at least one of the sponsors states its support publicly.	UCDP External Support— Primary Warring Party Dataset v.1.0-2011 (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011) / (Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021) / Manual Coding
Overt Dummy (Appendix)	The variable is set to 1 if the rebel group receives overt support in a year and 0 if it receives no support.	UCDP External Support— Primary Warring Party Dataset v.1.0-2011 (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011) / (Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021) / Manual Coding
Covert Dummy (Appendix)	The variable is set to 1 if the rebel group receives covert support in a year and 0 if it receives no support.	UCDP External Support— Primary Warring Party Dataset v.1.0-2011 (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011) / (Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021) / Manual Coding
Dependent Variables		
Civilian Fatalities Dummy	The variable is set to 1 if the rebel group kills more than ten civilians during the year and 0 otherwise.	UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global version 19.1 (Sundberg and Melander 2013; Högbladh 2019)
Civilian Fatalities Count	The variable corresponds to the best estimate of the total number of civilians killed by the rebel group during the year.	UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global version 19.1 (Sundberg and Melander 2013; Högbladh 2019)

Terrorism Events (Appendix)	The variable corresponds to the total number of events of terrorism having caused fatalities attributed to the rebel group in a year.	Terrorism in Armed Conflict (TAC) Dataset (Fortna, Lotito, and Rubin 2020)
Control Variables		
Religious	The variable is set to 1 if the rebel group built itself around religious identity and 0 otherwise.	Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) Dataset (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020) / (Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021)
Territorial Control	The variable is set to 0 if the rebel group does not control territory; 1 if the group's territorial control is low; 2 if the group's territorial control is moderate; and 3 if the group's territorial control is high.	Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict (NSA) Dataset (D. E. Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013) / Manual Coding
Troops (All—Appendix)	The variable is set to 1 if at least one of the rebel group's sponsors provides external troops in a year and 0 otherwise.	UCDP External Support—Primary Warring Party Dataset v.1.0-2011 (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011) / (Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021)
Sanctuary (All—Appendix)	The variable is set to 1 if at least one of the rebel group's sponsors provides access to its territory in a year and 0 otherwise.	UCDP External Support—Primary Warring Party Dataset v.1.0-2011 (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011) / (Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021)
Democratic Supporters (All—Appendix)	The variable is set to 1 if the rebel group receives support from a democratic sponsor, or democratic sponsors on average, and 0 if it receives support from a non-democratic sponsor or non-democratic sponsors on average in a year. A democracy is a country whose Polity Score is 6 or more.	Polity5 Dataset (M. G. Marshall and Gurr 2020)

	<p>The variable indicates what percentage of a sponsor's GDP the foreign aid commitments it receives in a year correspond to.</p> <p>I consider the means of sponsors' reliance on foreign aid when insurgents have multiple foreign sponsors.</p>	
Reliance on Foreign Aid (All—Appendix)	<p>I divide the set of observed values into four categories of equal size according to the following limits:</p> <p>1 = 0;0,5229583; 2 = 0,5229584;2,060298; 3 = 2,060299;5,796882; 4 = 5,796883; 48.17251.</p> <p>Edgell's dataset ends in 2012. Therefore, I code post-2012 cases using the same value as in 2012.</p>	(Edgell 2017)
Rebel Number	<p>The variable indicates the number of active rebel groups in a conflict in a year.</p> <p>Active groups are involved in opposition against the government, resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths.</p>	UCDP Dyadic Dataset version 19.1 (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Pettersson, Högbladh, and Öberg 2019)
Government Victimization	<p>The variable is set to 1 if the incumbent government kills more than ten civilians in a year and 0 otherwise.</p>	UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global version 19.1 (Sundberg and Melander 2013; Högbladh 2019)
Intensity	<p>The variable is set to 1 if the best estimate of the number of battle-related fatalities in the conflict opposing the rebel group to the government ranges from 25 to 999; 2 if the number ranges from 1000 to 9,999; and 3 if the number is equal or higher than 10,000.</p>	UCDP Battle-related Deaths Dataset version 19.1 (Pettersson, Högbladh, and Öberg 2019)
Lootable Resources	<p>The variable indicates the number of lootable resources (oil, gems, or drugs)</p>	Petroleum Dataset (PETRODATA) (Päivi Lujala,

<p>available and produced where the rebel group operates.</p> <p>While these datasets do not cover the entire 1989–2018 period, I expect the presence of these resources to be stable over time.</p> <p>I compare the data in the various databases with the UCDP data (https://ucdp.uu.se/) regarding the geographic presence of rebel groups to see if it is geographically plausible that insurgents have access to these resources.</p>	<p>Ketil Rod, and Thieme 2007) / Diamond Dataset (DIADATA) (Gilmore et al. 2005) / Gemstone Location Dataset (GEMDATA) (Paivi Lujala 2009) / Drug Cultivation Dataset (DRUGDATA) (Buhaug and Lujala 2005) / Manual Coding</p>
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<p>Rebel Size (Appendix)</p>	<p>The variable corresponds to the best estimate of the rebel group’s number of militants in a year.</p> <p>Counts are log-transformed.</p>	<p>Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict (NSA) Dataset (D. E. Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013) / Manual Coding</p>
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Robustness Checks

Model A

Because independent sources do not sufficiently document these cases, *Article 1*’s analyses do not include observations for which external support to rebels is only alleged according to UCDP data on external support (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011). As I argued in the main text, this exclusion can, however, cause an overestimation of a negative correlation between the overtness of support and civilian targeting. Below, I rerun Model 1 (logistic regression) but include cases of alleged support in the observations. The sample size increases from 450 groups to 495.

Table 10. The Overtness of External Support and Civilian Targeting (Model A)

	Model A DV: Civilian Fatalities Dummy
Overtness Dummy (Alleged)	-1.644*** (0.361)
Religious	0.124 (0.448)
Territorial Control	-0.273 (0.229)
Troops (Alleged)	0.931 (0.887)
Sanctuary (Alleged)	0.658 (0.378)
Democratic Supporters (Alleged)	0.461 (0.444)
Reliance on Foreign Aid (Alleged)	-0.013 (0.157)
Rebel Number	0.155 (0.193)
Government Victimization Dummy	0.185 (0.302)
Intensity	1.403*** (0.388)
Lootable Resources	0.119 (0.223)
Num.Obs.	495
AIC	593.7
BIC	644.2
Log.Lik.	-284.851
Unit of analysis = rebel-group-year; Standard errors clustered by rebel group in parentheses.	
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001	

The correlation between the overtness of support to rebels and civilian targeting is robust to the inclusion of the alleged cases of external support to insurgents.

Models B

According to *Article 1*'s theoretical framework, the rebels receiving no support face a mixed structure of incentives regarding civilian targeting; the rebels receiving overt support face a restrictive structure of incentives; and the rebels receiving covert support face a permissive structure of incentives. However, because including these cases would prevent the inclusion of control variables related to the type of support or the nature of supporters, the models I present in the main text do not include cases where the insurgents do not receive support from sponsors.

Model B1 (logistic regression) compares cases where rebels receive overt support to cases where the rebels do not receive support at all. *Overt Dummy* is set to 1 if the rebel group receives overt support in a year and 0 if the rebel group receives no support. I do not include cases of covert support in the sample. In the same way, Model B2 (logistic regression) compares cases where the rebels receive covert support to cases where the rebels do not receive support at all. *Covert Dummy* is set to 1 if the rebel group receives covert support in a year and 0 if the rebel group receives no support. Again, I do not include cases of overt support in the sample.¹⁵⁰

¹⁵⁰ Some cases coded as an absence of external support can be cases of highly concealed support.

Table 11. The Overtness of External Support and Civilian Targeting (Models B)

	Model B1 DV: Civilian Fatalities Dummy	Model B2 DV: Civilian Fatalities Dummy
Overt Dummy	-0.923*	
	(0.376)	
Covert Dummy		0.662*
		(0.293)
Religious	0.410	0.316
	(0.332)	(0.310)
Territorial Control	-0.297*	-0.326*
	(0.150)	(0.145)
Rebel Number	-0.199	-0.292*
	(0.151)	(0.121)
Government Victimization Dummy	0.191	0.041
	(0.221)	(0.207)
Intensity	2.223***	1.946***
	(0.335)	(0.330)
Lootable Resources	0.079	0.193
	(0.145)	(0.149)
Num.Obs.	1167	1301
AIC	1288.1	1507.9
BIC	1328.6	1549.3
Log.Lik.	-636.055	-745.970
Unit of analysis = rebel-group-year; Standard errors clustered by rebel group in parentheses.		
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001		

As anticipated, rebel groups without external support appear to face mixed structures of incentives. These groups are significantly more likely to target civilians than rebels receiving overt support but significantly less likely to target civilians than insurgents receiving covert support. These results corroborate the idea that the absence/presence of support and the various forms the support can take define various structures of incentives for insurgents regarding civilian targeting.

Model C

To assess the statistical results' robustness, I reproduce Model 1 presented in the main text, using the number of events of terrorism having caused fatalities attributed to a rebel group in a year as a dependent variable (Fortna, Lotito, and Rubin 2020). The analysis covers 1989–2013, and I use a negative binomial regression.

Table 12. The Overtness of External Support and Civilian Targeting (Model C)

	Model C DV: Terrorism Events
Overtness Dummy	-0.918** (0.292)
Religious	0.780** (0.260)
Territorial Control	-0.222 (0.153)
Troops	-35.979*** (0.496)
Sanctuary	1.363*** (0.299)
Democratic Supporters	-0.086 (0.257)
Reliance on Foreign Aid	-0.474*** (0.120)
Rebel Number	-0.147 (0.207)
Government Victimization Dummy	-0.543 (0.304)
Intensity	1.058*** (0.229)
Lootable Resources	0.275 (0.144)
Num.Obs.	385
AIC	1291.8
BIC	1343.1
Log.Lik.	-632.877
Unit of analysis = rebel-group-year; Standard errors clustered by rebel group in parentheses.	
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001	

The results are robust to the use of this alternative dependent variable. The overtness of support is a good predictor of the number of deadly terrorist events conducted by the rebels.

Model D

Considering the excess of zeros in the dependent variable *Civilian Fatalities Count*, the following model uses a zero-inflated negative binomial regression (ZINB) instead of a negative binomial regression for Model 2 included in the main text.

Table 13. The Overtness of External Support and Civilian Targeting (Model D)

	Model D DV: Civilian Fatalities Count
Count Overtness Dummy	-0.058*** (0.015)
Count Religious	-0.433*** (0.015)
Count Territorial Control	-0.086*** (0.006)
Count Troops	1.079*** (0.020)
Count Sanctuary	-0.210*** (0.013)
Count Democratic Supporters	-0.497*** (0.022)
Count Reliance on Foreign Aid	0.024*** (0.006)
Count Rebel Number	-0.140*** (0.006)
Count Government Victimization Dummy	0.357*** (0.013)
Count Intensity	0.481*** (0.010)
Count Lootable Resources	-0.110*** (0.007)
Zero Overtness Dummy	1.145*** (0.262)
Zero Religious	-0.320 (0.269)
Zero Territorial Control	0.314* (0.127)
Zero Troops	-0.832 (0.507)
Zero Sanctuary	-1.157*** (0.238)
Zero Democratic Supporters	-0.937* (0.392)
Zero Reliance on Foreign Aid	0.167 (0.114)
Zero Rebel Number	-0.136 (0.107)
Zero Government Victimization Dummy	-0.581* (0.244)
Zero Intensity	-1.213*** (0.250)
Zero Lootable Resources	-0.291* (0.135)
Num.Obs.	450
R2	0.999
R2 Adj.	0.999
AIC	50633.5
BIC	50732.1
RMSE	254.50
Unit of analysis = rebel-group-year; Standard errors in parentheses.	
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001	

The results show that rebels receiving overt support are less likely to target civilians. Moreover, the overtness of support also appears to be a good predictor of total civilian casualties when rebels target noncombatants.

Model E

As the size of a rebellion likely varies depending on the overtness of support—more support means easier recruitment—and available data do not enable me to disaggregate rebel size for each conflict year, the models in the main text do not include this variable. However, the size of a rebellion can be a proxy for its credibility and thus influences the overtness of support it receives. Moreover, the size of a rebel group can probably influence the degree of insurgent violence. Therefore, below, I reproduce Model 1 (logistic regression) but include a *Rebel Size* variable.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ The exclusion of some observations is because, despite intensive research, I could not find any data concerning the size of these rebel groups.

Table 14. The Overtness of External Support and Civilian Targeting (Model E)

	Model E DV: Civilian Fatalities Dummy
Overtness Dummy	-1.660*** (0.374)
Religious	0.092 (0.478)
Territorial Control	-0.392 (0.237)
Troops	1.393 (0.947)
Sanctuary	1.041** (0.376)
Democratic Supporters	1.060** (0.403)
Reliance on Foreign Aid	-0.111 (0.176)
Rebel Number	0.197 (0.197)
Government Victimization Dummy	0.487 (0.299)
Intensity	1.553*** (0.397)
Lootable Resources	0.246 (0.246)
Rebel Size	0.004 (0.142)
Num.Obs.	447
AIC	510.4
BIC	563.7
Log.Lik.	-242.191
Unit of analysis = rebel-group-year; Standard errors clustered by rebel group in parentheses.	
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001	

The statistical results are robust to the inclusion of the size of the rebel groups.

Appendix—Article 2

Description of the Sample

Table 15 presents the sample of individuals interviewed for *Article 2* (and *Article 3*). I conducted the interviews online from January 2021 to April 2022. I adhered to a strict ethics protocol approved by the University of Montreal. The interviews were conducted in English, French, and Arabic (with the help of an interpreter). I report data anonymously and will never publish or communicate any information allowing the identification of participants.

Table 15. Sample Description

Interview Code	Position of the Respondent	Location	Month-Year
International Researchers			
INT-IR-01	International researcher—International journalist	Online	January 2021
INT-IR-02	International researcher—Academic researcher	Online	January 2021
INT-IR-03	International researcher—Academic researcher	Online	January 2021
INT-IR-04	International researcher—Academic researcher	Online	February 2021
INT-IR-05	International researcher—Think tank	Online	April 2021
INT-IR-06	International researcher—Think tank	Online	April 2021
INT-IR-07	International researcher—Think tank	Online	June 2021
INT-IR-08	International researcher—Think tank	Online	June 2021
Journalists from Northeast Syria			
INT-SJ-01	Syrian journalist	Online	March 2021

INT-SJ-02	Syrian journalist	Online	March 2021
INT-SJ-03	Syrian journalist	Online	April 2021
INT-SJ-04	Syrian journalist	Online	April 2021
INT-SJ-05	Syrian journalist	Online	April 2021
INT-SJ-06	Syrian journalist	Online	May 2021
INT-SJ-07	Syrian journalist	Online	May 2021
INT-SJ-08	Syrian journalist	Online	May 2021
INT-SJ-09	Syrian journalist	Online	May 2021
INT-SJ-10	Syrian journalist	Online	May 2021
INT-SJ-11	Syrian journalist	Online	June 2021
INT-SJ-12	Syrian journalist	Online	June 2021
INT-SJ-13	Syrian journalist	Online	June 2021
INT-SJ-14	Syrian journalist	Online	June 2021
INT-SJ-15	Syrian journalist	Online	June 2021
INT-SJ-16	Syrian journalist	Online	July 2021
INT-SJ-17	Syrian journalist	Online	July 2021
INT-SJ-18	Syrian journalist	Online	July 2021
INT-SJ-19	Syrian journalist	Online	July 2021
INT-SJ-20	Syrian journalist	Online	Nov. 2021
US Officials			

INT-USO-01	Former senior official—US State Department	Online	June 2021
INT-USO-02	Former senior official—US Dep. of Defense	Online	July 2021
INT-USO-03	Former senior official—US Dep. of Defense	Online	July 2021
INT-USO-04	Former senior official—US Dep. of Defense	Online	July 2021
INT-USO-05	Former senior official—US State Department	Online	Sept. 2021
INT-USO-06	Former senior official—US State Department	Online	October 2021
INT-USO-07	Former senior official—US Dep. of Defense	Online	January 2022
INT-USO-08	Former senior official—US State Department	Online	April 2022
YPG/SDF Officials			
INT-GM-01	Political representative—Autonomous Admin. of North and East Syria (AANES)	Online	October 2021
INT-GM-02	Political representative—Autonomous Admin. of North and East Syria (AANES)	Online	October 2021
INT-GM-03	Political representative—Autonomous Admin. of North and East Syria (AANES)	Online	February 2022
INT-GM-04	Military representative—Autonomous Admin. of North and East Syria (AANES)	Online	March 2022
INT-GM-05	Political representative—Autonomous Admin. of North and East Syria (AANES)	Online	April 2022

Factual Information

Table 16 presents information that supports the factual elements I mobilize in the case study on the US support for the YPG/SDF.

Table 16. Factual Information

Note Number	Factual Information
I.	<p>Labeling the YPG as a rebellion is debatable. On the one hand, the group made a “strategic decision” not to fight the Syrian regime at the outbreak of the Syrian revolution (ICG 2014, 7). Relationships between the Syrian authorities and the PKK date back to Hafez Al-Assad, when the regime allowed the PKK to operate in Syria and Lebanon (INT-IR-04). Assad’s aim was, among other things, to pressure Turkey regarding Syria’s share of water from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020b). The support was “conditioned on the PKK staying out of Syria’s domestic politics” (Netjes and van Veen 2021, 13).</p> <p>After decades of oppression, the government made “conciliatory moves” toward its Kurdish population and withdrew from regions of Northeast Syria in 2012 (Sary 2016, 8). Building on human, organizational, and ideological resources inherited from its ties with the PKK, the YPG/PYD rapidly asserted its authority in the Kurdish-populated areas of the region (D. al-Darwish 2016; Tezcür and Yıldız 2021). The YPG and the regime kept commercial and military relations throughout the conflict (INT-SJ-11) (Schievels and Colley 2020). For instance, the regime remained in the center and airport of Qamishli and parts of Hassakah (ICG 2020). In addition, the government remained in charge of the salaries of administrative employees operating in the YPG-controlled areas (ICG 2014).</p> <p>On the other hand, YPG officials always rejected accusations of collusion with the regime (ICG 2014). Instead, they presented themselves as a third force, “an alternative to an authoritarian regime and an Islamist opposition” hostile to other ethnoreligious groups (Rana Khalaf 2016, 22). Occasional armed clashes occurred between the YPG and the regime forces during the war (Andresen 2016).</p> <p>The YPG/PYD can be qualified as a “quasi-rebel group,” constantly oscillating between passive coexistence and active confrontation with the regime (Netjes and</p>

van Veen 2021, 32). The group began to adopt a more confrontational stance in 2014 when it received support from the US and many states of the Global Coalition against IS. The “boost” that external support offered the YPG likely transformed the organization into a more traditional rebel group in the period studied in this article (Netjes and van Veen 2021, 32).

The division of tasks between the YPG and the PYD is a source of debate. The entities interacted with different audiences during the studied period, and it seemed to be more about who dealt with whom rather than who controlled whom. Therefore, this article alternatively refers to the two branches of the organization.

The depth of the ties between the PKK and the YPG/PYD is a source of even greater debates (Stein and Foley 2016; Kaya and Lowe 2017). Some observers argue that both groups were intertwined in “their ideology, leadership and combat forces to the point that [...] the YPG/PYD [could not] make autonomous decisions on strategic issues” during the studied period (Netjes and van Veen 2021, 8). Other observers propose a more nuanced point of view. They highlight organizational and ideological ties but recognize that the YPG/PYD has partial strategic autonomy (Gurcan 2019).

II.

Taking a definitive stance is complex. Political actors instrumentally used both narratives to justify their actions. On one side, Turkish officials viewed “the YPG and SDF as largely PKK fronts, lending the prospect of a robust PKK safe haven or semi-autonomous Kurdish zone under PYD control developing in Syria as an existential threat to their country” (Holland-McCowan 2018, 17). On the other side, the YPG/PYD likely tried to distance themselves from the PKK to appeal to external audiences (ICG 2014; ICG 2020). For instance, the group removed allusions to the PKK from its program in 2012 (Cengiz 2020).

Without taking a side in the debate, highlighting factual information is possible. The YPG/SDF leader, Mazloum Abdi, fought in the PKK ranks and was allegedly

close to Abdullah Ocalan before the Syrian war (ICG 2014; Wright 2019; Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020b). Likewise, many YPG/PYD mid-level and high-level members operating in Northeast Syria, called *cadros*, were PKK members who fought in neighboring countries before 2011 (INT-IR-02; INT-IR-07; INT-SJ-03) (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020b). In addition, the PKK and the PYD were both members of the Kurdistan Communities Union (KCK), an entity guided by the Ocalan’s project of democratic confederalism.

However, the PKK and the YPG/PYD faced different historical contexts and local constraints in their respective paths.

The US administration frequently presented the US intervention in Northeast Syria as provisional. US officials labeled the support as “temporary, transactional and tactical” (Loyd 2017) (INT-IR-02; INT-IR-06; INT-SJ-05).

III. Moreover, US officials argued that their involvement was not “nation building” (Reeves and Wittes 2017) and that they did not plan “post-conflict activities” of reconstruction (Chotiner 2019). Accordingly, the international involvement in Northeast Syria focused on “stabilization efforts” (El-Gamal and Megally 2021, 24). YPG/SDF members deplored this lack of political recognition of the AANES (INT-GM-02) (al-Masri 2020).

IV. A former official from the US Department of Defense stated that the US officials “didn’t look at the YPG the same way they looked at the PKK. And [they] didn’t look at it the way Turkey did. Turkey equated all of these Kurds as members of PKK” (INT-USO-07). As a result, the US support fully angered the Turkish authorities (E. Cunningham 2015), prompting the US to take specific actions to try to limit the tensions.

The US imposed restrictions on material support to the SDF (INT-USO-01). The US refused to provide heavy weaponry, such as anti-aircraft weapons. The sponsor also established inventories of the resources provided and communicated

some of them to Turkey (Aaron Stein 2022). In addition, the US vetted some SDF members receiving US training (INT-IR-05). The training seemingly included tactical elements and lessons on international humanitarian law. Gaston's insightful report focuses on these mechanisms (2021a).

Overall, US officials cited the YPG/SDF use of US support to attack Turkey as a critical red line in their relationship with the insurgents (INT-USO-01; INT-USO-02). A former US official stated, "Obviously, if the YPG had anything to do with attacks in Turkey, that would have been a redline. To my knowledge, they did not" (INT-USO-02).

Despite these accommodations, the "level of intra-nation distrust" between the US and Turkey became palpable over time, "largely over the [...] dissatisfaction in Washington over Turkish acquiescence to jihadist groups, and in Ankara, America's growing support for the YPG" (Aaron Stein 2022, 82).

Another redline in the US-YPG/SDF relationship was using US resources to attack the Syrian regime (INT-IR-05). A former official reported that the "US military efforts did not have authority to be an anti-regime force" (INT-USO-02), and the YPG/SDF could only use the support provided against the IS. In addition, the YPG/SDF could not use the support to secede from Syria (Wright 2019).

V. Establishing the extent to which the US exerted actual pressure on the YPG is challenging. Reports mentioned that "The US Department of Defense (DoD) [...] put pressure on [the YPG] to merge into a new group called the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in order to avoid potential legal issues due to the designation of PKK as a terrorist organization by the US" (INT-IR-06) (Rashid 2018, 3).

However, some observers argued that it was a discussion rather than pressure from the US (INT-IR-02). YPG/SDF members said it was a local initiative later approved by the US (INT-GM-01; INT-GM-02) (Wright 2019). Either way, the US likely hinted at more aid if the YPG changed its structures (INT-IR-02).

VI. The PYD frequently used the KNC close ties with Turkey, and the KRG, from where it mainly operated, to criticize the party. For example, the PYD accused the KNC of being out of touch with the concerns of civilians in Northeast Syria (INT-SJ-04; INT-SJ-11) (ICG 2014) when not accusing it of working for foreign interests (INT-SJ-11). The PYD also often railed against KNC unreasonable demands in the negotiations despite being in a weak military position on the ground (INT-SJ-11) (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020b; Dri 2020c).

Next to accusing the PYD of being the Syrian branch of the PKK, the KNC accused the party of cooperating with the Syrian regime (INT-SJ-04).

VII. Again, establishing the extent to which the US exerted actual pressure on the PYD is challenging. Some observers spoke of pressures (INT-SJ-04; INT-SJ-05; INT-SJ-14) (The New Arab 2021). Others preferred talking of supervision (Hassib 2020) or sponsorship (INT-SJ-15; INT-USO-01) of the negotiations by the US. A KNC member declared that “Washington [would] likely reconsider its support for the [YPG/SDF] administration in northeastern Syria, if it [was] not able to be inclusive of all components of the region” (Sheikho 2021).

VIII. Facilitating the talks served various interrelated purposes for the US (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020b; al-Ghazi 2021). First, by ending the one-party governance in Northeast Syria, an agreement could increase the local administration’s legitimacy among the population and favor stability (INT-IR-05). Second, a deal could alleviate the Turkish concerns about an administration entirely dominated by the YPG/SDF at its border (INT-IR-05; INT-IR-06; INT-IR-07; INT-IR-08; INT-SJ-05). Third, by pushing the YPG/SDF toward the Syrian opposition, an agreement could allow the PYD to enter the UN-led peace process in Geneva (INT-IR-05; INT-IR-08). Fourth, the stability offered by a deal could provide the SDF, and thus the US, a strong position in hypothetical future negotiations with the Syrian regime (INT-IR-06; INT-USO-01).

The SDF leadership announced the withdrawal of non-Syrian PKK members from Northeast Syria in 2020, in what some observers perceived as an attempt to “Syrianize” the organization (ICG 2020; Abdulssattar 2020b; al-Masri 2020; Cengiz 2020, 4). However, this withdrawal's reality and potential progress were difficult to assess.

IX. Rumors mentioned internal tensions within the YPG regarding the strategy to adopt vis-à-vis external sponsors and other Kurdish parties (INT-IR-02; INT-IR-03; INT-IR-04; INT-IR-05; INT-IR-06; INT-SJ-06). On the one hand, members closer to the traditional PKK base allegedly rejected intra-Kurdish talks and refused to withdraw non-Syrian PKK members from Northeast Syria (Zaman 2020). On the other hand, members closer to Mazloum Abdi were allegedly more prone to abide by the US demands, especially regarding the presence of PKK operatives (Abdulssattar 2020a; 2020b; al-Ghazi 2021). It is difficult to determine whether the tensions were real or feigned to demonstrate a form of responsiveness to US demands. Rumors mentioned the expulsion of senior PKK members from Northeast Syria in 2020 (The Syrian Observer 2020; Zaman 2020).

X. A former official within the US State Department stated that US officials “met regularly with tribal Arabs, tribal leaders, in Deir-Ezzor, in Raqqa.” He added that “they did have some complaints about the SDF. [...] They wanted the SDF to spend more money locally on assistance. They felt like they weren’t getting their fair share of the money that the SDF had to run local administrations. They felt like some people were arrested in [...] an arbitrary manner. And that the arrests were not justified. They complained that some of the counterterrorism operations from the SDF used too much force. And that civilians were injured. So, those were the types of complaints. And sometimes, they had specific names of people. [...] And they would ask for help to get these people released. Those were the types of complaints. We were trying to help them” (INT-USO-01).

Officials from the US Department of Defense and the US State Department seemed to share the idea that YPG/SDF abuses would have ended the partnership (INT-IR-05). A former US Department of Defense official stated, “In like all of our efforts, we have requirements. [...] To ensure that all our partner forces abide by [...] the law of armed conflicts in the treatment of civilians, including POWs, etc.” He continued: “If, for whatever reason, they did not agree to abide by international laws of armed conflicts and norms, then we would not have been able to partner them. It’s just required. So, it was a condition. It was a condition that [...] from my memories, it was [...] not a debate. They agreed immediately.” He added that “there is always redlines that are tied to human rights abuses. With any partner force. We, as Americans, have absolute obligation not to allow our partner forces to commit human rights violations. If they do, we have to report it. [...] And then we have to cease involvement if it’s egregious” (INT-USO-02).

XI.

An official from the US State Department stated, “if they had mistreated civilians in a very brutal way. If they had killed civilians or done things like this. If they had maintained prison facilities [...] that were brutal and terrible. That probably would have also created a rupture with the US. But they didn’t” (INT-USO-01).

Even if not the central question here, it is difficult to assess whether the US could withdraw its support once provided. The sponsor had few alternative options in Northeast Syria (INT-IR-05; INT-USO-08).

XII.

Various US officials praised the YPG/SDF leaders. Brett McGurk, the former lead coordinator of the campaign against the IS, lauded the SDF as “the best unconventional partner force [the US] ever had, anywhere” (Wright 2019). A US general presented the SDF leader Mazloun Abdi as “not only an impressive and thoughtful man, but a fighter who was clearly thinking about the strategic aspects of the campaign against ISIS and aware of the challenges of fighting a formidable enemy” (J. Votel and Dent 2019). Another US official stated, “General Mazloun

and a couple of people around him, their leadership, they were pretty sophisticated” (INT-USO-01).

Overall, members of the US armed forces, particularly those embedded with the YPG/SDF, became strong proponents of the group throughout the studied period (INT-IR-02). A former US diplomat argued that “the military loved this campaign because they finally had local partners to by-with-and-through who were really good. [...] [The] US military was totally wedded to the SDF” (INT-USO-08).

XIII.

The YPG/SDF reportedly internalized and never crossed the US red lines (INT-IR-08; INT-USO-01; INT-USO-02). A former US official stated that the YPG/SDF did not get “close to any redlines.” He added that the group “wanted and needed Coalition support to continue their counter-ISIS fight,” so “they were very responsive to the concerns that [the US] would bring to their attention” (INT-USO-03). The YPG/SDF seemingly respected the main redline, an absence of attacks against Turkey (A. A. Holmes 2021). A researcher noted that the YPG/SDF followed “what the Americans [asked] them to do, thinking that potentially, this [was] going to save them from another war that [they were] going to lose with Turkey” (INT-IR-07).

XIV.

The article focuses on governance and examines monitoring aiming to lower tensions between the YPG/SDF and noncombatants. However, US officials also mentioned general adherence to international standards for the conduct of war (Wright 2019). A US official stated that “when it [came] to actual combat operations, [...] [the SDF] were pretty professional. Complying with the various rules of [...] the law of armed conflicts or international humanitarian law.” He added that they were committed to complying “with the basic rules that govern modern warfare.” He said, “With partners, you establish expectations and monitor to make sure that people follow your expectations. And in the case of the SDF, I think we [...] were pretty comfortable that the SDF was living up to the expectations that we set” (INT-USO-03).

The US praised the “by-with-and-trough” approach as a model allowing strategic success while alleviating operational issues linked with traditional military interventions abroad (Kaplan 2019b). This debatable transfer of risks to US allies resulted in low US casualties compared to YPG/SDF casualties (Morell 2021).

However, if US officials lauded the YPG/SDF respect for international norms on the conduct of war, civilians and human rights organizations accused the Coalition against IS of disproportionate use of force during the liberation of Northeast Syria, especially Raqqa (INT-SJ-07; INT-SJ-09) (Enab Baladi 2017; Harp 2018; Sherlock, Al-Arian, and Sadoun 2018). The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights declared that the civilians were “paying an unacceptable price” (Reuters 2017c). In addition, civilians accused the YPG/SDF of providing incorrect or inaccurate geolocation data to the Coalition, leading to significant casualties during aerial bombardments (INT-IR-01; INT-SJ-06; INT-SJ-09) (Mogelson 2017). The disproportionate use of force did not relate to a lack of, or a failure of, the US monitoring. The Coalition deliberately chose to rely primarily on air bombing to liberate Northeast Syria (McNerney et al. 2022).

XV. US officials acknowledged that monitoring was a “mixed success” (INT-USO-01). A former US official stated, “It was never clean” (INT-USO-07). Civilians called for stricter supervision by the US authorities. Local civilians specifically criticized an illusory representation of non-Kurdish communities in the YPG/SDF institutions. Despite the insurgents’ promotion of a political model centered on the decentralization of power, decision-making remained “heavily centralized” in Northeast Syria (Rana Khalaf 2016, 10). Arabs who joined administrations were “given impressive titles, but little authority” (Yacoubian 2017, 8). Overall, the efforts made by the YPG/SDF “to achieve Arab buy-in to its project” did not amount to “a meaningful share in governance” (ICG 2017, 4; Nassar and Al Maleh 2018; Enab Baladi 2021).

Local civilians also denounced authoritarian practices on the part of the YPG/SDF (Enab Baladi 2018b). Contested methods of policing included house confiscations (Hammoud 2020), arbitrary detentions (INT-IR-07; INT-SJ-06; INT-SJ-07; INT-SJ-09; INT-SJ-13; INT-SJ-19) (STJ 2019; Syria Direct 2019; STJ 2020; Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020a), and torture (Hammoud 2021). Another central issue was the military conscription established by the YPG/SDF (INT-SJ-03) (Enab Baladi 2018a; Fox 2021; Rantisi and Darwish 2021; SNHR 2021; Al Omar 2021).

The UN Commission of Inquiry confirmed human rights abuses, including harassment, arbitrary arrests, and torture (US Department of State 2020). The YPG/SDF abuses raised concerns in the US administration, which feared losing the support of the population in Northeast Syria (O'Donnell, Linick, and Barr 2020; Hammoud 2021). A central concern of the US was that the civilians' resentment toward the YPG/SDF would fuel a revival of the IS (Williams 2021).

Some empirical elements suggest a relative moderation in the 2014–2015 and 2018–2019 periods. In 2014–2015, the existential threats posed by the IS apparently sparked the first wave of moderation. For instance, the YPG crackdowns on the media “became less severe in both quality and quantity” in Northeast Syria (D. al-Darwish 2016, 19).

XVI.

Then, from 2018 to 2019, the looming and then actual Turkish attacks against the YPG/SDF seemingly sparked the second wave of moderation (Rashid and Cengiz 2020). The group took new commitments regarding child soldiers (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020b), apologized for the 2013 killing of protesters in Amuda (SJAC 2020), and restarted the process of reconciliation with the KNC (INT-IR-06; INT-SJ-04; INT-SJ-15; INT-USO-01) (al-Masri 2020; Ibrahim 2020; Dri 2020b; al-Ghazi 2021; Cengiz 2021; Enab Baladi 2021). As stated by a former senior US official, at this time, “General Mazloum looked at the situation and thought: I need to try to strengthen my position. Strengthen the position of the SDF politically in the areas that we control” (INT-USO-01). Arrests of local activists also apparently

decreased (INT-IR-07). In this second period, the end of the IS territorial control made it difficult for the YPG/SDF to justify human rights abuse by the imperatives of high-intensity conflict against the jihadist group.

Authoritarian practices, however, reportedly increased in 2018–2019 in areas where the US reduced its human presence, such as in Raqqa (INT-SJ-03; INT-SJ-04; INT-SJ-08; INT-SJ-09; INT-SJ-13; INT-SJ-17). This preliminary observation, which future studies need to corroborate, gives credit to the idea that the type of support influences the opportunities for monitoring, as mentioned in *Footnote 101*.

Appendix—Article 3

Description of the Variables

Table 17 describes the variables included in *Article 3*'s main text and Appendix.

Table 17. Summary and Description of the Variables Included in Article 3

Name	Definition	Sources
Identifiers		
Location	The variable corresponds to the name of the country whose government the group is fighting against.	UCDP Dyadic Dataset version 19.1 (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Pettersson, Högladh, and Öberg 2019)
Group	The variable identifies the rebel group. ¹⁵²	UCDP Dyadic Dataset version 19.1 (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Pettersson, Högladh, and Öberg 2019)
Year	The variable corresponds to the year of observation.	UCDP Dyadic Dataset version 19.1 (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Pettersson, Högladh, and Öberg 2019)
Explanatory Variables		

¹⁵² I removed the “Serbian irregulars” and “Croatian irregulars” from the sample because they were too similar to other observations. This exclusion removed 6 observations.

Overtness Dummy (All—Appendix)	The variable is set to 1 if the rebel group receives overt support from at least one external state in a year and 0 otherwise.	UCDP External Support— Primary Warring Party Dataset v.1.0-2011 (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011) / (Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021) / Manual Coding
Overtness Continuum	The variable is set to 1 if the rebel group’s sponsors all deny providing support in a year; 2 if at least one of the sponsors does not deny providing its support and no sponsors display or state their support; 3 if at least one of the sponsors publicly displays its support and none of the sponsors publicly declare their support; and 4 if at least one of the sponsors states its support publicly.	UCDP External Support— Primary Warring Party Dataset v.1.0-2011 (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011) / (Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021) / Manual Coding
Dependent Variable		
Pro-civilian Services	The variable is set to 1 if the rebel group provides health, education, welfare/aid, or organizes elections during the year and 0 otherwise.	Rebel Quasi-State Institutions (QSI) Dataset (Albert 2022)
Control Variables		
Secessionist	The variable is set to 1 if the rebel group has secessionist aims and 0 otherwise.	Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) Dataset (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020) / Manuel Coding
Religious	The variable is set to 1 if the rebel group built itself around religious identity and 0 otherwise.	Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) Dataset (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020) / (Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021)
Territorial Control	The variable is set to 0 if the rebel group does not control territory; 1 if the group’s territorial control is low; 2 if the group’s territorial control is moderate; and 3 if the group’s territorial control is high.	Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict (NSA) Dataset (D. E. Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013) / Manual Coding

Troops (All—Appendix)	The variable is set to 1 if at least one of the rebel group’s sponsors provides external troops in a year and 0 otherwise.	UCDP External Support— Primary Warring Party Dataset v.1.0-2011 (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011) / (Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021)
Sanctuary (All—Appendix)	The variable is set to 1 if at least one of the rebel group’s sponsors provides access to its territory in a year and 0 otherwise.	UCDP External Support— Primary Warring Party Dataset v.1.0-2011 (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011) / (Arthur Stein and Cantin 2021)
Democratic Supporters (All—Appendix)	The variable is set to 1 if the rebel group receives support from a democratic sponsor, or democratic sponsors on average, and 0 if it receives support from a non-democratic sponsor or non-democratic sponsors on average in a year. A democracy is a country whose Polity Score is 6 or more.	Polity5 Dataset (M. G. Marshall and Gurr 2020)
Reliance on Foreign Aid (All—Appendix)	The variable indicates what percentage of a sponsor’s GDP the foreign aid commitments it receives in a year correspond to. I consider the means of sponsors’ reliance on foreign aid when insurgents have multiple foreign sponsors. I divide the set of observed values into four categories of equal size according to the following limits: ¹⁵³ 1 = 0;0,5229583; 2 = 0,5229584;2,060298; 3 = 2,060299;5,796882; 4 = 5,796883; 48.17251.	(Edgell 2017)

¹⁵³ I take into account the values observed during the period 1989–2018 to define the different categories.

Rebel Number	<p>The variable indicates the number of active rebel groups in a conflict in a year.</p> <p>Active groups are involved in opposition against the government, resulting in at least 25 battle-related deaths.</p>	<p>UCDP Dyadic Dataset version 19.1 (Harbom, Melander, and Wallensteen 2008; Pettersson, Högbladh, and Öberg 2019)</p>
Government Victimization	<p>The variable is set to 1 if the incumbent government kills more than ten civilians in a year and 0 otherwise.</p>	<p>UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset (GED) Global version 19.1 (Sundberg and Melander 2013; Högbladh 2019)</p>
Intensity	<p>The variable is set to 1 if the best estimate of the number of battle-related fatalities in the conflict opposing the rebel group to the government ranges from 25 to 999; 2 if the number ranges from 1000 to 9,999; and 3 if the number is equal or higher than 10,000.</p>	<p>UCDP Battle-related Deaths Dataset version 19.1 (Pettersson, Högbladh, and Öberg 2019)</p>
Lootable Resources	<p>The variable indicates the number of lootable resources (oil, gems, or drugs) available and produced where the rebel group operates.</p> <p>While these datasets do not cover the entire 1989–2018 period, I expect the presence of these resources to be stable over time.</p> <p>I compare the data in the various databases with the UCDP data (https://ucdp.uu.se/) regarding the geographic presence of rebel groups to see if it is geographically plausible that insurgents have access to these resources.</p>	<p>Petroleum Dataset (PETRODATA) (Päivi Lujala, Ketil Rod, and Thieme 2007) / Diamond Dataset (DIADATA) (Gilmore et al. 2005) / Gemstone Location Dataset (GEMDATA) (Paivi Lujala 2009) / Drug Cultivation Dataset (DRUGDATA) (Buhaug and Lujala 2005) / Manual Coding</p>
Rebel Size (Appendix)	<p>The variable corresponds to the best estimate of the rebel group’s number of militants in a year.</p> <p>Counts are log-transformed.</p>	<p>Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict (NSA) Dataset (D. E. Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013) / Manual Coding</p>

Robustness Checks

Model F

Because independent sources do not sufficiently document these cases, *Article 3*'s analyses do not include observations for which external support to rebels is only alleged according to UCDP data on external support (Högbladh, Pettersson, and Themnér 2011). This exclusion can, however, lead to biases in the results. Below, I rerun Model 5 (logistic regression) but include cases of alleged support in the observations. The sample size increases from 318 groups to 358.

Table 18. The Overtness of External Support and the Pr. of Social Services (Model F)

	Model F DV: Pro-civilian Services
Overtness Dummy (Alleged)	1.942** (0.716)
Secessionist	0.301 (0.757)
Religious	-1.092 (0.753)
Territorial Control	0.301 (0.273)
Troops (Alleged)	-1.526 (1.104)
Sanctuary (Alleged)	0.888 (0.643)
Democratic Supporters (Alleged)	0.628 (0.511)
Reliance on Foreign Aid (Alleged)	-0.262 (0.220)
Rebel Number	-0.271 (0.443)
Government Victimization Dummy	0.379 (0.314)
Intensity	0.987** (0.373)
Lootable Resources	0.323 (0.308)
Num.Obs.	358
AIC	380.5
BIC	430.9
Log.Lik.	-177.250
Unit of analysis = rebel-group-year; Standard errors clustered by rebel group in parentheses.	
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001	

The correlation between the overtness of support to insurgents and the provision of social services is robust to the inclusion of the alleged cases of external support to rebels.

Model G

As the size of a rebellion likely varies depending on the overtness of support—more support means easier recruitment—and available data do not enable me to disaggregate rebel size for each conflict year, the models included in the main text do not include this variable. However, the size of a rebellion can be a proxy for its credibility and thus influences the overtness of support it receives. Moreover, the size of a rebel group can probably influence its ability and/or willingness to invest in the provision of social services. Therefore, below, I reproduce Model 5 (logistic regression) but include a *Rebel Size* variable.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ The exclusion of some observations is because, despite intensive research, I could not find any data concerning the size of these rebel groups.

Table 19. The Overtness of External Support and the Pr. of Social Services (Model G)

	Model G DV: Pro-civilian Services
Overtness Dummy	2.134*** (0.641)
Secessionist	0.269 (0.808)
Religious	-1.683* (0.701)
Territorial Control	0.403 (0.275)
Troops	-1.853 (1.027)
Sanctuary	0.542 (0.707)
Democratic Supporters	0.904 (0.601)
Reliance on Foreign Aid	-0.182 (0.231)
Rebel Number	-0.530 (0.487)
Government Victimization Dummy	0.432 (0.354)
Intensity	1.285*** (0.378)
Lootable Resources	0.528 (0.322)
Rebel Size	-0.414 (0.267)
Num.Obs.	316
AIC	334.8
BIC	387.4
Log.Lik.	-153.386
Unit of analysis = rebel-group-year; Standard errors clustered by rebel group in parentheses.	
* p < 0.05, ** p < 0.01, *** p < 0.001	

The statistical results are robust to the inclusion of the size of the rebel groups.

Description of the Sample

Table 20 presents the sample of individuals interviewed for *Article 3* (and *Article 2*). I conducted the interviews online from January 2021 to April 2022. I adhered to a strict ethics protocol approved by the University of Montreal. The interviews were conducted in English, French, and Arabic (with the help of an interpreter). I report data anonymously and will never publish or communicate any information allowing the identification of participants.

Table 20. Sample Description

Interview Code	Position of the Respondent	Location	Month-Year
International Researchers			
INT-IR-01	International researcher—International journalist	Online	January 2021
INT-IR-02	International researcher—Academic researcher	Online	January 2021
INT-IR-03	International researcher—Academic researcher	Online	January 2021
INT-IR-04	International researcher—Academic researcher	Online	February 2021
INT-IR-05	International researcher—Think tank	Online	April 2021
INT-IR-06	International researcher—Think tank	Online	April 2021
INT-IR-07	International researcher—Think tank	Online	June 2021
INT-IR-08	International researcher—Think tank	Online	June 2021
Journalists from Northeast Syria			
INT-SJ-01	Syrian journalist	Online	March 2021
INT-SJ-02	Syrian journalist	Online	March 2021

INT-SJ-03	Syrian journalist	Online	April 2021
INT-SJ-04	Syrian journalist	Online	April 2021
INT-SJ-05	Syrian journalist	Online	April 2021
INT-SJ-06	Syrian journalist	Online	May 2021
INT-SJ-07	Syrian journalist	Online	May 2021
INT-SJ-08	Syrian journalist	Online	May 2021
INT-SJ-09	Syrian journalist	Online	May 2021
INT-SJ-10	Syrian journalist	Online	May 2021
INT-SJ-11	Syrian journalist	Online	June 2021
INT-SJ-12	Syrian journalist	Online	June 2021
INT-SJ-13	Syrian journalist	Online	June 2021
INT-SJ-14	Syrian journalist	Online	June 2021
INT-SJ-15	Syrian journalist	Online	June 2021
INT-SJ-16	Syrian journalist	Online	July 2021
INT-SJ-17	Syrian journalist	Online	July 2021
INT-SJ-18	Syrian journalist	Online	July 2021
INT-SJ-19	Syrian journalist	Online	July 2021
INT-SJ-20	Syrian journalist	Online	Nov. 2021
US Officials			
INT-USO-01	Former senior official—US State Department	Online	June 2021

INT-USO-02	Former senior official—US Dep. of Defense	Online	July 2021
INT-USO-03	Former senior official—US Dep. of Defense	Online	July 2021
INT-USO-04	Former senior official—US Dep. of Defense	Online	July 2021
INT-USO-05	Former senior official—US State Department	Online	Sept. 2021
INT-USO-06	Former senior official—US State Department	Online	October 2021
INT-USO-07	Former senior official—US Dep. of Defense	Online	January 2022
INT-USO-08	Former senior official—US State Department	Online	April 2022
YPG/SDF Officials			
INT-GM-01	Political representative—Autonomous Admin. of North and East Syria (AANES)	Online	October 2021
INT-GM-02	Political representative—Autonomous Admin. of North and East Syria (AANES)	Online	October 2021
INT-GM-03	Political representative—Autonomous Admin. of North and East Syria (AANES)	Online	February 2022
INT-GM-04	Military representative—Autonomous Admin. of North and East Syria (AANES)	Online	March 2022
INT-GM-05	Political representative—Autonomous Admin. of North and East Syria (AANES)	Online	April 2022

Factual Information

Table 21 presents information that supports the factual elements I mobilize in the case study on the YPG/SDF governance in Raqqa.

Table 21. Factual Information

Note Number	Factual Information
XVII.	<p>The policy of tribal co-optation took place in a context of fierce competition for tribal loyalties. Tribes and clans are “not unitary actors,” and tribal structures are reportedly highly adaptable to “changing political circumstances” in Northeast Syria (Yacoubian 2017, 8; Khaddour and Mazur 2017, 19). Studies highlight that tribal leaders often “lend support to those who guarantee benefits to themselves and their tribesmen” (Dukhan, Ammar, and Shaar 2021).</p> <p>As such, the tribal loyalties shifted depending on who controlled the region throughout the conflict, be it the Syrian regime, the Syrian opposition, the IS, or the YPG/SDF (Favier 2018). As a result, members of “the same tribe or clan [swore] contradictory and very volatile allegiances, submitting themselves to the ‘law of the strongest’” (Favier 2018, 11).</p>
XVIII.	<p>The instrumental co-optation led by the YPG/SDF seemingly led to equally instrumental cooperation from local elites. Studies suggest several reasons for this cooperation with an armed actor from outside the region; “out of genuine loyalty to the SDF,” due to the “perceived financial incentives,” or, also “in pragmatic recognition” of the fact that the YPG/SDF was “the primary governance actor” in the area (COAR 2019, 1).</p> <p>In addition, alignment with the YPG/SDF could also relate to the fear of a return of the Syrian regime in Raqqa. Several tribes “aligned with the armed opposition in the early stages of the conflict, and consequently [feared] that a return of the Government of Syria [would] lead to evacuations, detentions, or revenge killings” (COAR 2019, 6). Accepting co-optation thus appeared to be a favorable situation for some leaders, at least “until another type of agreement to manage the area” was found (A. Darwish 2020).</p>

Many *cadros* had received training in the Qandil mountains, which was the PKK stronghold in Iraq (INT-IR-07). The geographical origin of the *cadros* was contentious for locals (INT-IR-07; INT-SJ-07; INT-SJ-13; INT-SJ-20). Some were Syrian Kurds “who fought under the PKK before returning to Syria after 2011” (ICG 2020). However, many *cadros* were foreign not only to Raqqa but also to Syria. Many were Turkish, Iranian, or Iraqi Kurds, and some did not speak Arabic (INT-SJ-06; INT-SJ-07; INT-SJ-08).

XIX.

Variations in individual personality likely influenced the interactions between the *cadros* and civilians. A researcher argued that some *cadros* were “more controlling than others. Some of them [were] [...] nicer to the population. Some of them [were] more popular with the locals. Also, some of them [were] Syrians and some [were not]” (INT-IR-07). The Syrian members of the YPG were reportedly more careful about local acceptance than non-Syrians (INT-IR-08).

Overall, the weakness of the formal rules within the YPG/SDF institutions left ample room for informal regulation through the contacts made by the population with the *cadros* (Haenni and Quesnay 2020).

XX.

The YPG/SDF could not durably hide the role played by the *cadros*. If there was “a great deal of secrecy” around their presence in the first years of the war against the IS (ICG 2020), over time, “locals came to realise that these individuals tended to call the shots” (ICG 2020). Hiding the role of these *cadros* was particularly difficult since many of them were not from the area (INT-IR-07). Their “accent, their dress code and the way they [conducted] themselves” betrayed their identity (ICG 2020).

The awareness of the role played by these leaders forced the group to adjust. The YPG/SDF announced their decision “to dismiss many PKK personnel, thereby reducing Qandil’s influence” in the region in 2020 (Abdulssattar 2020b).

The actual level of public support for the Syrian opposition was difficult to assess without reliable survey data. In any case, the repression of public support for the FSA seemingly reflected a desire to avoid the rise of competing actors with high local legitimacy because of strong connections with the population.

- XXI. The YPG/SDF officials often argued that the group achieved what the Syrian opposition did not in terms of governance (INT-GM-02). A study reported that many civilians in Raqqa complained about “how the Arab fighters of the region [were] portrayed in the media as incompetent, disorganized, and untrustworthy, or somehow always one step away from joining an extremist organization” (El-Gamal and Megally 2021, 22).

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- XXII. The YPG/SDF justification for the arrests was that they acted on intelligence from the Coalition against IS (INT-IR-07). A press article on the matter brought the hypothesis that the YPG/SDF and the Coalition were potentially “being fed flawed intelligence [...] to settle personal and professional scores” (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020a). Explanations centered on the activists’ popularity and those centered on flawed intelligence were not mutually exclusive. The local activists’ “attempt to operate independently from the formal SDF structures” potentially made “the administration uncomfortable and more conducive to acting on misguided reports” (Zaman and Wilkofsky 2020a).

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- XXIII. The US officials knew about the prominent role played by the *cadros*. A report to the US Congress mentioned that YPG officials “[maintained] control over leadership and decision-making positions [...] demonstrating an ‘unwillingness to share power with Arabs, even in the Arab-majority regions of the northeast where Arab fighters probably [represented] a majority of the SDF’s front line forces’” (O’Donnell, Linick, and Barr 2020, 6). The report stated that “Arab representatives [were] allowed to participate as deputies but ‘[wielded] little influence in SDF command decisions’” (O’Donnell, Linick, and Barr 2020, 56).
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In the same idea, a former US official stated that the YPG/SDF members were “heavy-handed” and had an “ideology of centralized decision-making that influenced how they worked in these different communities. They tended to have a Kurdish adviser in every little locality who had tremendous authority. And you had a lot of Arabs that maybe were not as empowered as they should have been” (INT-USO-01). The same official argued that the US worked with the YPG/SDF “to get the Kurdish security elements out of the urban areas” (INT-USO-01).

Next to the presence of a shadow decision-making structure, US officials were aware of authoritarian practices in Raqqa (US Department of State 2020). A former US official said he “met regularly with tribal Arabs, tribal leaders, in Deir-Ezzor, in Raqqa. And they did have some complaints about the SDF. They felt, like, they weren’t getting their fair share of the money that the SDF had to run local administrations. They felt like some people were arrested in [...] an arbitrary manner. And that the arrests were not justified. They complained that some of the counterterrorism operations from the SDF used too much force. And that civilians were injured” (INT-USO-01).

This idea of the YPG/SDF being “the best of the worst” frequently appeared in local testimonies. Many residents feared a return of the Syrian regime to Raqqa (al-Omar 2021) (INT-SJ-13), especially since the region was at the forefront of the Syrian revolution (INT-SJ-20).

XXIV. A journalist from the governorate argued that local civilians had “suffered ten years of ISIS, Al-Nusra, and before them, they [had] suffered forty years of oppression from the Syrian government. And they [believed] that people who [would] not kill [them were] the best people. Yes, [the YPG/SDF] [was] the best option available” (INT-SJ-08). Another journalist said, “We [had] a bad and very bad. We [chose] the bad part” (INT-SJ-06). Local observers underlined the population’s high fatigue (INT-SJ-06; INT-SJ-07; INT-SJ-10). A journalist argued that local civilians did not “have the ability to be involved in more

conflicts” (INT-SJ-03). Another argued, “The one who has the gun is the one who has the world” (INT-SJ-09).

Another factor to consider is the progressive routinization of institutions. Even an imperfect institution “tends to become reified and institutionalized, losing its connection with the human agents that constructed it or gave it meaning” over time (Orlikowski 1992, 406). The longer an institution exists, the more entrenched it becomes within shared understandings (Barley and Tolbert 1997).

The fact that the economic opportunities were reportedly better in the YPG/SDF-controlled territory than in the Syrian regime-held areas likely favored this routinization of the YPG/SDF institutions (INT-IR-02; INT-SJ-17). Being “the most significant employer in the region,” the YPG/SDF administration successfully co-opted many civilians in its structures independently from ideological affinities (Hatahet 2019, 7). Overall, some civilians likely accepted the YPG/SDF authority as it came “with the American protection” and “the American stabilization money” in the period studied (INT-IR-07).

YPG/SDF officials argued that there was more security and better living conditions in the YPG/SDF-controlled territory than in other Syrian regions (INT-GM-02).
