

State Breakdown and Army-Splinter Rebellions

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Abstract. In Afghanistan, Libya, Liberia and beyond, armed rebellions have begun when armies fell apart. When does this occur? This paper conducts a large-N analysis of these army-splinter rebellions, distinct from both non-military rebellions from below and from coups, using new data. It finds that they follow a logic of state breakdown focusing on regime characteristics (personalist regimes and the loss of superpower support at the end of the Cold War) rather than drivers of mass mobilization from below. In contrast, these regime-level factors matter much less for the non-military rebellions from below that dominate theorizing about civil war origins. This paper also shows that one option for military rebels lies in not attempting a coup but instead heading straight into a rebellion. This paper thus distinguishes highly different paths to armed conflict, validates the state breakdown approach to why armies fall apart, and extends the well-known tradeoff between coups and civil wars.

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In 1976, soldiers across Lebanon under the command of a lieutenant split to launch the Lebanese Arab Army. As the Cold War ended, some Communist regimes and American client dictators, such as in Afghanistan and Liberia, could not hold together their ruling coalitions, and their armies fell apart to bloody infighting. In Libya and Syria in 2011, civilian uprisings turned to civil wars when military defectors joined mass movements. More recently, in November 2020, a civil war in Ethiopia broke out pitting the federal army against constitutionally-approved regional security forces in Tigray.

Table 1. Comparing army-splinter and non-military rebellions

	Army-splinter rebellions	Non-military rebellions
Number (armed groups, excluding splinters and alliances from existing armed groups), 1946-2013	43	289
Mean duration of conflict spells (years), 1946-2013	3.36	5.93
Mean battle deaths per year (best estimate), 1989-2013	1034*	642
Median battle deaths per year (best estimate), 1989-2013	254.5*	116
Mean number of concurrent conflict dyads, 1946-2013	2.15	1.74

Data from the Uppsala Conflict Data Project, version 17.1 (Pettersson and Eck 2018), including UCDP Battle Deaths Dataset, for which data are only available 1989-2013. All differences statistically significant, $p < .01$. *Excludes “Syrian insurgents,” a major outlier; the gap in mean and median deaths is much wider when this is included.

Each of these cases is an episode of *army-splinter rebellions* (ASRs): civil conflicts in which the rebel group consists to a large extent of government security personnel when the fighting begins, and which are not accompanied by a coup attempt. This paper is the first to conduct a large-N transnational analysis of the origins of these conflicts. According to the new data I present in this paper, from 1946 to 2013, army-splinter rebels constituted about one of every nine armed groups (11.2%), in addition to violent coup attempts (13.5%) and the rebellions from below—which I call “non-military rebellions”—that attract most attention and constitute some 75% of armed groups. Following the observation that the ways rebels emerge shape conflict dynamics (Maves Braithwaite and Gallagher Cunningham 2020; Shesterinina 2022), it is noteworthy that army-splinter rebellions have distinct characteristics (see Table 1): they are shorter, bloodier and more complex than

rebellions from below. The short duration of ASRs is consistent with wars at the centre over control of government, rather than rural, peripheral insurgencies which tend to provoke long wars (Fearon 2004; Mukherjee 2014); their battle deaths represent, perhaps, the fact that they begin with fighting power from the state armed forces (Balcells and Kalyvas 2014); and the multiplicity of factions suggest that they occur in circumstances of state breakdown (Jacobsen 2017).

Indeed, I argue that army-splinter rebellions have quite distinct origins from non-military rebellions, which drive most theorizing on conflict origins. In contrast to simply recruiting civilians to take up arms, army-splinter rebellions represent existing armies breaking apart. They are also distinct from coups in that the soldiers involved do not try to take over the security apparatus, but fight it from the outset, entering the conflict as a warring party against the state.

To explain when this occurs, I examine a *state breakdown* hypothesis arguing that armies are more likely to collapse when there are unregulated factional conflicts within the state. Past scholarship has argued that this is especially common in personalist regimes, which typically have weak institutions for regulating intra-elite conflicts, and at moments of significant external shocks to the ability of regimes to hold together, notably the end of the Cold War. Do these factors indeed lead to armies falling apart?

My findings confirm that personalism and the end of the Cold War are especially important correlates of ASRs. In contrast, these are less relevant conditions for non-military rebellions. On the other hand, sociopolitical characteristics like ethnic exclusion, which help explain the latter, do less work in explaining ASRs. These are, in short, distinctive paths to civil conflict. Army-splinter rebellions are thus different from the rebellions from below that have been most frequently theorized, and that are admittedly much more frequent than army-splinter wars (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Blattman and Miguel 2010; Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013; Lewis 2017; Larson and Lewis 2018; Lewis 2020). The reason for focusing on army-splinter rebellions is that this represents chunks of the state apparatus turning against itself. The key question

here, as distinct from non-military rebellions, is not so much whether an opposition group can convince civilians to take up arms as whether a portion of the armed agents of the state rebels against it. Distinguishing among civil conflicts by their military and non-military origins is therefore an important way of improving explanation and prediction. Scholars should take care to clarify what kind of rebellion they are attempting to explain. Hence, the paper's first contribution is to understanding the onset of civil conflicts.

Explaining the origins of these rebellions is a similar, though much less extensive, project to that of Maves Braithwaite and Gallagher Cunningham's (2020) new Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) dataset, which tracks rebel group origins in terms of their "parent organizations". Alongside several other parents, this includes the armed forces, and so FORGE overlaps in important ways with my work. However, among armed groups it codes as having military parents, FORGE does not distinguish between coup plotters and those that enter into rebellion directly. They also do not code the armed forces as a parent organization for several cases where, according to my data, a significant portion of a rebel army's initial fighting force comes from military defectors. A fuller summary of my differences with FORGE's coding is in the appendix.

ASRs also represent a path, distinct from coups, by which soldiers can challenge sitting regimes. As Thyne (2017) argues, coups and civil conflicts should be carefully separated; those civil conflicts that correspond to coup attempts, in which such an attempt turns violent and produces enough battle deaths to get over a certain threshold, simply involve a different technology of rebellion. I show, however, that soldiers can still rebel in ways that produce civil conflicts without coups. If there is likely to be resistance among other military personnel to a coup attempt, as with the coup-proofing techniques frequently found in personalist regimes, a coup may be impossible, or in any case it may be safer to embark on a rebellion directly. In other words, coup-proofing can channel opposition to a regime into other types of threats. Recent scholarship, drawing together different issue areas in civil-military relations (Brooks 2019) has developed a tradeoff between coups and civil

wars (Powell 2014; 2019; Houle 2016; Roessler 2016; Sudduth 2016) based on the pivotal position of the armed forces. I confirm this logic and show that army-splinter wars are an important and under-explored form by which rebellions can occur, when a faction of soldiers has the motivation to rebel but not the opportunity to launch a coup.

Hence the paper contributes to a second field, the study of military politics, by demonstrating that rebellious military personnel have more options than is often thought. My findings show that regimes that protect themselves well against coups are far from invulnerable to military disintegration. Instead, their armies can fall apart in a different way: when soldiers directly launch civil wars.

In the next section, I develop these distinct paths to civil conflict and theorize the origins of army-splinter rebellions in state breakdown. I next conduct the paper's empirical analysis, which indicates, as expected, a particular role for personalism and the end of the Cold War, and a comparatively limited role for ethnic exclusion. I conclude with next steps for research and reflections on the disaggregation of conflict types and the changing mix of conflicts over time.

The Concept of Army-Splinter Rebellion

Rebellions from above and below

Rebellions “from below” or non-military rebellions, originating outside of the armed forces, are considerably more theorized than army-splinter rebellions, and have been the focus of much of the literature on civil conflict origins (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Humphreys and Weinstein 2008; Blattman and Miguel 2010; Denny and Walter 2014; Lewis 2017; Larson and Lewis 2018; Lewis 2020). Many of the key problems for organizing these rebellions come from the issue of recruitment. A civilian population provides a potentially large fighting force. But to harness this force, the issue becomes how to recruit civilians to fight, and how to survive when the state begins with specialists in violence and rebels do not. Hence the factors that scholars identify as

facilitating rebellions deal with characteristics of civilian society. Motivations to join up can come, for example, from the political exclusion of large swathes of the population, providing a large recruitment pool (Cederman, Gleditsch, and Buhaug 2013), or from an endogenous process of violence and ethnic mobilization (Larson and Lewis 2018). Groups of activists with deep local social ties can help organizing and connecting potential recruits into an armed group structure (Staniland 2014). And the survival of an incipient rebel group can require physical space away from the reach of the state or the shelter provided by amenable civilian networks (Fearon and Laitin 2003; Larson and Lewis 2018).

The process is different with ASRs. With rebels armed to a great extent by the state itself and led (before they defect) by state elites, these rebellions are likelier to emerge from characteristics of the state apparatus itself. The motivations for rebellion may have much more to do with problems within the regime or the armed forces; the key networks are likely to be found within the armed forces itself; and the survival of the military faction long enough to launch a rebellion depends on the environment within the armed forces, with surveillance and possible purges. In short, the process producing these rebellions is likely to differ considerably from non-military rebellions—justifying the distinction and a separate analysis of these conflicts’ origins.

Army-splinter wars vs. coups

A second key distinction is between ASRs and coup attempts. ASRs are not just coup attempts resisted violently that descend into civil conflict (De Bruin 2018; 2020a); indeed, I exclude from my list any case of civil conflict that also appears on the Powell and Thyne coup list.

In some cases, military rebels do not seek a change in government, a key criterion for coup attempts. This includes seven ASRs in my dataset (conflicts over the status of Bangladesh in Pakistan, Croatia and Slovenia in Yugoslavia, Western Bosnia in Bosnia-Herzegovina, South Yemen

in Yemen, and [twice] Azawad in Mali). In these cases, according to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, rebels were fighting over territory. (Unsurprisingly, there is no case of a UCDP conflict taking the form of a violent coup attempt that seeks territorial goals.) In the remaining 36 ASRs, however, the goals of the military rebels do not distinguish these conflicts from coup attempts: they are fights over the central government.

What *does* distinguish ASRs from violent coups, though, is the method of rebellion. Coups are thought of as sudden events. They are at least intended to be. Typical coup strategy involves presenting one's fellow officers with a *fait accompli* in the belief that they will capitulate (Singh 2014, 7–8). But soldiers can rebel and *not* attempt these tactics.

Instead, they prepare for war, much as other rebellions do, rather than trying to organize a sudden seizure of power within the military apparatus. This is the key difference between army-splinter wars and coup attempts. In some cases, deserting soldiers are organized into a fighting force outside of the army, such as the Liberian exiles who formed the initial core of Charles Taylor's National Patriotic Front of Liberia (Kandeh 2004, 41; UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia 2019c) or the Hawiye deserters from the Somali military who played a similar role in the United Somali Congress (Bakonyi 2009, 442; Compagnon 1998, 80). In other cases, such as Laurent Nkunda's National Congress for the Defence of the People in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the faction consists of soldiers previously integrated—at least formally—into the armed forces of the regime during a previous peace process (Stearns 2008, 257). In still other cases, a civilian uprising from below prompts soldiers to defect, and this provides the fighting power that turns the uprising into an armed conflict; Libya and Syria in 2011 are clear instances of this.

To see the distinguishing importance of sudden seizures of power, consider two edge cases that resemble military coups in some respects—they were led and organized by officers, and dedicated to regime overthrow. In 1976, Muslim members of the Lebanese armed forces entered into rebellion as the Lebanese Arab Army led by Lt Ahmed Khatib; they declared that their intention was

to overthrow the regime, and holed up in the Bekaa Valley to begin a rebellion, rather than trying to seize control of the capital rapidly to produce a *fait accompli* (Deeb 1980, 7; Haley, Snider, and Bannerman 1979, 39). In a more ambiguous case, in February 1993, Surat Husseinov, the commander of Azerbaijan's 709th Brigade, withdrew his troops from the capital. The President accused him of plotting a coup attempt and sent remaining forces to attack. Husseinov gained the upper hand quickly in a short armed conflict, and took the capital in June of that year (UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia 2019a; 2019b). The UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia calls this a coup; however, like Khatib's, it began without a rapid, sudden attempt to seize power. Neither case appears on Powell and Thyne's (2011) list of coup attempts. What disqualifies these cases from the set of coups is just that the rebels' intention to overthrow the regime did not imply an attempt to do so immediately and suddenly.¹ The rebels instead prepared for war.

These ASRs raise a puzzle. Why would a rebellious military faction not attempt a coup, which offers the prospect of rapid victory? Coup-proofing measures provide an explanation. If coup plotters encounter effective resistance, it is much harder to achieve the rapid, *fait accompli* effects of seizing centres of power rapidly, and the plot can backfire just as fast, at immense risk to officers that have suddenly revealed themselves (Singh 2014). In contrast, an ASR can build up gradually. ASRs often establish bases in safer terrain away from the capital (Sumatra and Sulawesi for two Indonesian ASRs in 1958) or indeed across international borders (Jordan and Turkey for Syrian rebels, or Libya for Chadian rebels), recruit new followers, and join with existing civilian opposition movements. This is a very different method from coups, and is worth exploring as an alternative means for rebellious soldiers to resist the state. This strategy takes much more time than a coup and essentially guarantees resistance. But it has the insurgent's advantage of focusing on short-run survival until it is possible to

¹ Powell and Thyne (2011) do not include a criterion of suddenness in their definition of coups, but the cases they identify as overlapping—as coup attempts miscoded as civil conflicts—are all of short duration. The longest is 23 days; most are three or fewer.

win militarily. It may be safer and a more viable route to victory if it appears especially likely that a coup attempt will be resisted.

Army-splinter rebellions and defection to uprisings from below

One final, partial distinction deserves mention. Some cases of ASR involve soldiers who defect to an existing civilian uprising; Libya and Syria in 2011 are the best-known cases. There are eight such instances in my dataset. Here, the defectors were a significant force in giving the uprising the military power to launch an armed conflict; they were a crucial reason why each war happened in the first place. Hence, in order to constitute an army-splinter rebellion, a significant share of the fighting power of the rebellion must come from military defectors *before* the war begins, for example to a civilian, initially non-violent uprising, because this indicates that it would have been difficult for an armed conflict to take place without this defection. If an armed conflict begins with an armed insurgency from below and only *then* do defectors join the rebellion in significant numbers (say, in the Cuban Revolution of 1959), it would not constitute an army-splinter rebellion. There are different issues at stake with defection during wartime, because factors endogenous to the war, such as the progress of battle and the strains that it places on military units, can induce defections in these cases (Albrecht and Koehler 2018; Lehmann and Zhukov 2019; Lyall 2020; McLauchlin 2020).

Defection during uprisings from below has received significant scholarly attention (McLauchlin 2010; Chenoweth and Stephan 2011; Nepstad 2013; Makara 2013; Lee 2015; Dahl 2016; Lutscher 2016; Barany 2016; Dworschak 2020), and I draw on some of that scholarship to theorize ASR origins. It is natural to ask what is different about the concept of army-splinter rebellions. First, the majority of ASRs are cases in which the rebellious soldiers do not join with a prior civilian uprising but launch an armed conflict on their own (such as the Lebanese Arab Army and Husseinov cases cited above). These are not covered by existing research on defection induced by uprisings from below. It is sensible to group this phenomenon together with cases of defection that produce civil conflicts under the heading of army-splinter rebellions, as I do here, because they share the

common characteristic of an armed conflict starting because government soldiers leave and start fighting. Indeed, ASRs have the particular characteristic that they all involve armed conflicts, which many cascades of military defection that are prominent in existing scholarship do not entail, such as in most of Eastern Europe in 1989 (clashes in Romania are an exception, coded as an army-splinter rebellion in my dataset). Finally, in some cases (such as the Cuban Revolution, as noted above), defection mainly occurred once armed conflict was already in progress; it would not constitute an ASR, even if it is counted as an instance of mass military defection. In the end, then, the objects of analysis are overlapping.

Explaining army-splinter rebellions: the state breakdown approach

The foregoing discussion suggests that ASRs should be associated with characteristics of a regime and how those characteristics affect its armed forces. Past work on state breakdown suggests which aspects of a regime matter most. Some civil wars fought by fragments of government armies have become emblematic of a problem of state breakdown. This includes extreme cases like Afghanistan after Soviet withdrawal (Rubin 1995; Giustozzi 2009), post-Communist conflicts such as in the former Yugoslavia (Posen 1993; Woodward 1995), and several conflicts in Africa including in Liberia, Chad and Somalia (Reno 1998; Debo 2016). In each of these settings, scholars and commentators argued, states that were chronically weak to begin with lost the last of their props with the withdrawal of superpower support, and could no longer exert control over their central state institutions, above all their armed forces (Rubin 1995; Reno 1998; Kalyvas and Balcells 2010).

In other words, this literature has identified two central characteristics that may favor army-splinter rebellions: weak central institutions and the removal of the external support that can make up for such problems.

Weak central institutions are essentially those without clear rules for the central political process. In well-established democracies and some autocracies, leaders tend to govern with reference to a fairly clear set of rules: either the rules of the democratic game, or an elite institution such as a

single party. These institutions set formal and informal rules for leadership selection and constraints on executive power. These rules serve to regulate what Milan Svolik (2012, 2) calls the problem of authoritarian power-sharing—the possibility of fallings-out between the dictator and his supposed allies. They can constrain and regulate conflicts. But in more personalist regimes, autocrats rule without constraints from such institutions (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014; 2018). In these cases, the autocrat is at the center, governing with unclear and shifting coalitions of elite support. While autocrats in these cases can be highly unconstrained (such as Stalin or Mao) and rule for very long periods of time (such as Mobutu), we can also anticipate that ever-shifting coalitions produce disgruntled elites—including military elites—who are willing, if possible, to mount rebellions.

Losing access to political power and patronage as coalitions shift, and without the protection and predictability provided by strong institutions, out-of-favour elites may have considerable incentives to consider rebelling (Reno 1998). These rebellions will be particularly likely to involve soldiers. Officers themselves are often the elites contesting for better access to wealth and power; civilian elites with control over patronage may seek to recruit followings in the armed forces to improve their chances, through identity appeals or funding; and armed forces riddled with clientelistic relationships are unlikely to build cohesion or trust, creating pools of soldiers willing to defect from their regimes. These soldiers can switch sides to uprisings—indeed, Dahl (2016), Lutscher (2016) and Dworschak (2020) note an important relationship between personalist regimes and defection, which, as noted, sometimes results in an army-splinter rebellion. I extend this insight to note that disgruntled military personnel can also launch their own rebellions without waiting for an uprising, a point that existing defection scholarship does not consider. Either way, if they leave the armed forces and initiate an armed conflict, it constitutes an army-splinter rebellion by my definition.

How does a willingness to rebel translate into a civil conflict? To answer Fearon's (1995) specific requirement of how a mutually acceptable compromise is foreclosed, under personalism the lack of clarity about political coalitions and loyalties may produce information failures, as the

willingness to rebel is kept private so as not to betray plots. Shifts in political power may produce commitment problems, as elites decide to rebel before they lose their positions of power, and hence their future ability to extract concessions from a leader. Without well-regulating central institutions, as Svobik (2012) argues, it is difficult for regime members to work out their differences through negotiation.

In line with this, Fjelde (2010) finds that civil conflicts are generally more likely in military and multi-party authoritarian regimes than in single-party regimes, a difference that maps to an important degree onto the distinction between personalist and more institutionalized single-party regimes (Geddes, Wright and Frantz 2014). I extend Fjelde's argument to suggest that personalist regimes are particularly prone to one path of civil conflict: by way of army-splinter rebellion.

Further, personalism helps answer a second criterion for an explanation of army-splinter wars, i.e. why the personnel in question do not just try to launch a coup. Personalist regimes with multiple uncoordinated factions make coordination within the armed forces, and hence the bloodless resolution of a coup attempt, more difficult to achieve. Personalist regimes often attempt to reserve senior command posts to loyalists in order to forestall coup attempts (Brooks 1998; Quinlivan 1999; Talmadge 2015). They frequently employ counterbalancing coup-proofing techniques (Escribà-Folch, Böhmelt, and Pilster 2019), pitting army units against gendarmeries, Presidential Guards, and the like. The result—and indeed the intention of these techniques—is that coup attempts are likelier to be resisted (De Bruin 2018). Additionally, multiple independent chains of command among counterbalanced military services may mean that even senior officers cannot take advantage of their institutional position to coordinate among officers for a coup, which is, according to Singh's (2014) findings, a primary mechanism for coup success. It is not as easy to seize power quickly if there is no clear chain of command at the top of which to place oneself. With a bloodless victory in a coup especially unlikely, insurgent officers will be more likely to launch an open rebellion instead, or to join an existing uprising from below and risk armed conflict with their former comrades.

This confirms and extends a tradeoff that recent scholarship has found: coup-proofing may work in the sense that it decreases the likelihood of coups, but also increases the likelihood of rebellions. Roessler (2016) argues that one form of coup-proofing, purges along ethnic lines, makes coups less likely (see also Harkness 2016), but also increases the risk of rebellion. It removes regime opponents from the centre but leaves them to rebel. Houle (2016) extends this past ethnic purges, contending that other forms of coup-proofing, like counterbalancing, facilitate rebellion by weakening the armed forces, reducing their deterrent effect. Powell (2014) mentions both mechanisms. These two causal logics both focus on aspects of rebellions from below: their ability to recruit, and how deterred they are by the armed forces. I add a further mechanism here: entering into civil conflict directly with the regime.

In contrast to personalist regimes, more institutionalized autocracies and democracies should have relatively clear rules about leadership selection and constraints on the leader, other pathways to have grievances felt (Frantz et al. 2020). The incentives to rebel, rather than work within the system, should be much more limited:

H1. Personalist dictatorships should be more likely to experience army-splinter rebellions than non-personalist dictatorships or democratic regimes.

There are important reasons why personalist regimes may *also* be prone to non-military rebellions from below. Political elites that fall out of favor may try to launch rebellions on other organizational bases than the army, including with international support. Factionalized political systems may struggle to deal with insurgencies (Fearon and Laitin 2003). Armies weakened by coup-proofing may be little able to deal with rebellions from below on the battlefield, encouraging them to rebel, particularly at moments of high coup risk when leaders have incentives to hold elite coup-proofing forces back in the capital (Powell 2019). However, I expect the relationship between personalism and ASRs to be stronger than with non-military rebellions. The latter include peripheral insurgencies that may be mounted against internally secure, institutionalized states (Buhaug 2006;

Mukherjee 2014). But without prior institutional divisions within the armed forces, an army-splinter rebellion is unlikely.

H2. The relationship between personalism and army-splinter rebellions should be stronger than the relationship between personalist regimes and non-military rebellions.

A further argument in the state breakdown thesis is that since the Second World War, weak states came to depend on external support to hold together. Outside support in states like Zaire or Liberia provided the financing needed to pay off powerful military and political leaders to keep a ruling regime in office (Jackson 1990; Herbst 2000). External assistance can give state leaders the freedom to rule in an exclusive fashion, focusing on cultivating loyalists rather than building capable, institutionally coherent, and united armed forces (Byman 2006; Elias 2018; Boutton 2019). Continued external support can hold such states and their armies together for a time, but once it is removed, according to this thesis, the system crumbles.

This type of argument refers above all to the end of the Cold War. At this point, the external support on which many states relied was removed, and ruling coalitions broke apart to vicious infighting (Rubin 1995; Reno 1998). One piece of evidence suggesting state breakdown at the end of the Cold War is that post-Cold War civil wars have been more often fought conventionally, with clashes of armies armed with heavy weapons rather than guerrillas engaging in hit-and-run attacks against a well-armed state. The reason, according to Kalyvas and Balcells (2010), is that state armies broke up after the removal of superpower support, permitting well-armed rebellions. However, theirs is an indirect test of the hypothesis that the withdrawal of foreign support from states that depend on it is a path to state breakdown and civil war. In contrast, examining army-splinter rebellions provides a more direct test.

H3. Army-splinter rebellions should be more likely at the end of the Cold War than during or after the Cold War.

In contrast, I do not expect as strong a relationship between the end of the Cold War and non-military rebellions. To be sure, incumbent regime weakness at the end of superpower support might have given a special impetus to rebellions from below; many regimes had a very difficult time maintaining control over their territory. However, as Kalyvas and Balcells (2010) argue, the superpowers also sponsored insurrections among rebel groups against strong states during the Cold War, meaning that the difference between the two periods should be less dramatic for these non-military rebellions from below.

H4. The relationship between the end of the Cold War and army-splinter rebellions should be stronger than the relationship between the end of the Cold War and non-military rebellions.

Coding army-splinter rebellions

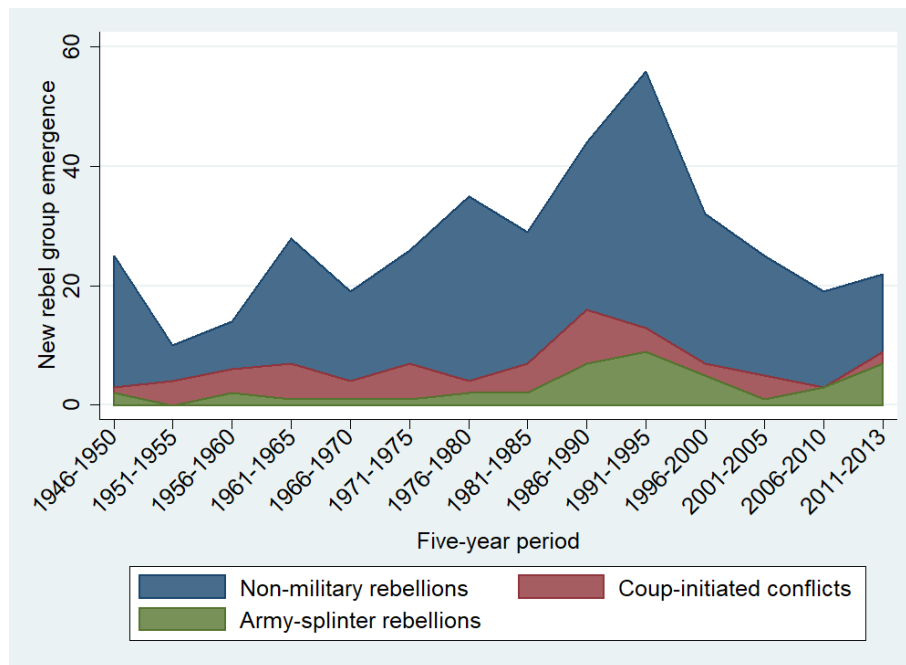
Army-splinter rebellions are defined by characteristics of the rebel group involved in them—specifically, their provenance from the government security services. Building on the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Database version 17.1 (Pettersson and Eck 2018), this project coded each non-state actor involved in at least one armed conflict dyad against the state over the period 1946-2013. There were, however, certain exclusions. My research assistants and I did not code any armed groups that formed as a result of a split from an existing armed group, or an alliance of existing armed groups. Their creation does not tell us about organizations obtaining the capacity and willingness to militarily resist the state, but about the reconfiguration of groups that already have that capacity and willingness. Hence they do not tell us about whether the *initial* acquisition of that capacity comes from outside the state or inside. In total, we coded 384 armed groups defined this way.

We coded the armed groups based on their characteristics at the outbreak of their first involvement in an armed conflict against the state. My research assistants and I based our codings on the UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia and the existing secondary literature about each case. We coded a rebel group as an army-splinter rebellion if, at the outset of the armed conflict, a substantial proportion—at least 25%, where numbers could be obtained—of its fighting capacity came from

uniformed government security personnel. We only coded a 1 if we could judge with high confidence that this was the case.

This coding scheme decision focuses attention on *where the rebels get the ability to fight an armed conflict against the state*. This is the central theoretical concern of the project—to differentiate rebellions that get the ability to fight from arming civilians from cases where rebels get the ability to fight from government soldiers who switch sides. Note that the coding rule does not consider defectors from the government security services who join a rebellion after its armed conflict with government forces has begun, as noted above. However, it does count as army-splinter rebellions cases where government security personnel defect to an otherwise *non-violent* opposition and engage in fighting against other government security personnel, such as Libya in 2011. We count the latter but not the former as ASRs, because in the latter cases we would possibly not have observed the armed conflict had there not been defection; in the former we already do.

Figure 1. Time trend in emergence of new rebel groups in UCDP armed conflicts



Coded in such a way, in the 1946-2013 period, army-splinter rebellions constituted 43 of 384 (11.20%) new UCDP-PRIO non-state armed groups (“new” here just means excluding those that emerge from alliances or splits of existing non-state armed groups). In addition to these 43, 52 armed groups are coded as coup plotters whose coups turn into civil conflicts. This is based on the list of overlapping cases prepared by Powell and Thyne (2011) with some of my own modifications.² Following Thyne (2017), it is important to carefully separate out these coups because the causal process is likely dissimilar yet again. I call the remaining 289 armed groups “non-military rebellions” since they do not emerge from the uniformed armed forces. Figure 1 indicates the over-time trend in rebel group emergence, measured over the course of five-year periods. It immediately suggests the importance of the end of the Cold War for ASRs, though they also emerge in every era and there is a more recent increase; there was also a very clear increase in non-military rebellions at the same time.

Analyses

Data

The hypotheses outlined above deal with the emergence of different kinds of government-rebel dyads in conflict. The unit of analysis here is the country-year. The dependent variable is coded 1 if a new rebel-government conflict dyad of the appropriate kind began in the country-year, and 0 otherwise.

² Powell and Thyne (2011, appendix) maintained two lists of conflicts for the 1946-2010 period: one of coup attempts that are coterminous with UCDP civil conflicts, and one of UCDP civil conflicts *sparked* by coup attempts, including for example, the entire Afghanistan civil war since 1978. I coded all of the former as coups; for the latter, I coded a coup-conflict if I could find a link between a *specific* armed group and a coup, such as Jerry Rawlings’ faction in Ghana or the MPCCI in Côte d’Ivoire. I also extended the list to 2011-2013 and to updated lists of UCDP conflict actors by matching dates of coup attempts in the Powell/Thyne database to outbreaks of civil conflict.

For army-splinter rebellions, the DV=1 if a new rebel-government dyad emerged in a country-year, provided at least 25% of the rebel group's recruits come from the uniformed armed forces in that year *and* the rebellion is *not* also a coup attempt; 0 otherwise. To examine whether ASRs are a distinct category of civil conflict, I analyze one model in which the dependent variable is defined as 1 if a *non-military* rebellion, i.e. one that was not either a coup attempt or an ASR, emerged in a country-year, 0 otherwise. Following Thyne (2017), I exclude coups from consideration in both of these models. However, I estimate a separate model with civil conflicts initiated by coup attempts as the dependent variable in order to examine whether army-splinter wars have a distinct causal process from violent coups, as my approach expects.

I use the measure of personalism developed by Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018), a continuous measure using item-response theory and drawing on multiple specific practices (making high office dependent on a connection to the leader; the leader setting up a new political party once in power; whether the regime leader controls appointments to the party executive; whether the party executive committee is absent or a rubber stamp for the leader; whether the leader controls the security apparatus personally; whether the leader promotes officers based on loyalty or identity-group membership; whether the leader creates a paramilitary or other security force loyal to him; and whether the leader conducts military purges). In comparison to categorical coding schemes as in their previous work (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014), it is based more on explicit and observable criteria and less on judgment calls about the relative importance of central institutions like political parties. Hence it is able to distinguish in a fine-grained way among authoritarian regimes, and to compare across authoritarian regime types (e.g. single-party, military, monarchy, civilian) on a single dimension of personalism. This measure ranges from zero to one. The mean personalism score among army-splinter rebellion onset years (dictatorships only) is .676; for non-military rebellions it is .421; for coup-initiated conflicts, .454.

It is important for Hypotheses 1 and 2 to be able to compare personalist regimes to democracies and so to look outside authoritarian regimes; including these regimes in models is also helpful for properly estimating other covariates, such as the end of the Cold War and ethnic exclusion. I therefore included regimes coded by Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018) as not authoritarian (i.e. democratic or warlord-dominated, foreign-occupied, or otherwise confused), and included dummy variables for democratic and “other”. The personalism index in these cases is coded as zero.³

I measure periods of time for the end of the Cold War as follows: 1951-88 is coded as the Cold War; 1989-95, the end of the Cold War (to capture its immediate aftermath); and 1996-, after the Cold War. The first period is the baseline.

I also include the measure of the share of the population excluded from political power on the basis of ethnicity according to the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset. Ethnic exclusion can be a key coup-proofing strategy among personalist dictators, and may generate army-splinter rebellions among disgruntled out-group soldiers who cannot realistically displace the dominant group through a coup; this would reflect the theoretical mechanism under exploration here. However, exclusion may also generate more broad-based grievances and motivations to rebel that have relatively little to do with intra-military conditions (Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010), and that carry ethnic out-group soldiers along. It is important to note that the EPR measure of ethnic exclusion is exclusion from executive power, which may *or may not* comprise ethnic stacking policies in the armed forces; hence, this measure plausibly captures these broader ethnic grievances. (Data on ethnic exclusion in the armed forces exist but are limited to Africa and the Middle East [Johnson and Thurber 2017; Harkness 2021]). In other words, ethnic exclusion might be a posttreatment

³ This is an unusual move but it works out mathematically. The coefficient on the personalism index is estimated holding all other covariates, including the democracy and “other” dummies, at zero. So the personalism index is *only* relevant to the dictatorships it was measured for; the dummies on democracy and “other” soak up the relationship between these regime types and the dependent variable. It is as though there were an interaction effect, dictatorship * personalism, but since dictatorship always equals 1 if the personalism index is not equal to zero, it is redundant to include the “main effect” of dictatorship.

mechanism through which personalism has an effect on army-splinter rebellions, but it may also be a pretreatment variable relatively independent of the theory on offer here. For the moment I cannot separate these two possibilities with the EPR data. To ensure, conservatively, that any relationship between personalism and army-splinter rebellions is not simply due to a confounding relationship between ethnic exclusion and these rebellions, I include ethnic exclusion as a control variable.⁴

I also include log GDP per capita, since personalist regimes may be associated with worse economic performance, which would in turn generate grievances (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012; Hegre and Sambanis 2006). Finally, each model includes log of population as a particularly important general predictor of civil conflict (Hegre and Sambanis 2006), with data from Gleditsch (2002). However, I have no strong theoretical reason to expect a relationship between population and ASRs; I include this control anyway for comparability with the models explaining non-military rebellion, in order to examine to what degree these types of civil conflict have distinct origins.

All the models use a count of years since the last outbreak of the corresponding type of rebellion, as well as the square and cube of this measure (Carter and Signorino 2010). Data are available on all variables for 163 countries in the period 1951-2010 because GDP data begin reliably in 1950 (and are lagged) and the Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018) data stop in 2010. Some cases are, additionally, excluded by the population thresholds for inclusion in Geddes, Wright and Frantz (2018).⁵ Descriptive statistics are given in Table 2.

⁴ In the appendix, I estimate a model dropping the ethnic exclusion variable, and little changes.

⁵ I “rescued” some of these missing cases by coding as democracies any country coded by Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland (2010) as democratic for the entire period. I also imputed subsequent-year values of key covariates for states newly entering the dataset. For Yugoslavia in 1991, for which Geddes, Wright and Frantz do not code a regime type, I used the *previous* year’s regime type since Geddes, Wright and Frantz normally code at January 1 of a given year.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics

Regime type ⁶	No new armed group	New non-military rebellion	New army-splinter rebellion	New violent coup	Total
Dictatorship	4,274	132	22	35	4,463
Democracy	3,268	67	6	10	3,354
Warlord/foreign-occupied/other	147	10	3	0	160
Total	7,689	209	31	45	7,974

Time period	
1950-1988	4,572 57.34%
1989-1995	1,052 13.19
1996-2010	2,350 29.47
Total	7,974

Covariate	N	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Personalism index	7,974	.236	.294	0	1
Share of population ethnically excluded (EPR)	7,974	.175	.244	0	.98
Ln GDP per cap., 2005 US\$ (Gleditsch 2002)	7,974	8.24	1.19	4.89	13.36
Ln population (Gleditsch 2002)	7,974	9.06	1.54	4.96	14.09

⁶ (Geddes, Wright & Frantz 2014, with additional democracies coded from Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland 2010)

Results

Results from the BTSCS analyses are given in Table 3. I estimate separate models with different types of rebellion as the dependent variable.⁷ It quickly becomes apparent that these different types of conflict have different correlates: personalism is a much greater influence on army-splinter rebellions than on non-military rebellions, and vice versa for ethnic exclusion. Figure 2 provides a visualization of these differences. Moreover, the results suggest that coups coded in UCDP as civil conflicts are a distinct phenomenon, much as Thyne (2017) argues; for my purposes, it is noteworthy that army-splinter rebellions emerge as a strategy that occurs in very different circumstances to coups.

Turning to the specific hypotheses from the state-breakdown model, Model 2 shows that, among dictatorships, greater personalism is associated closely with army-splinter rebellions. This confirms Hypothesis 1. That regime type is of substantive importance is confirmed in Table 4, giving predicted probabilities: it shows that the model-derived risk of army-splinter war is over six times higher in maximally personalist dictatorships than in democracies, on average, and sixteen times higher than in non-personalist dictatorships. Moreover, in Tables 3 and 4 there is no apparent evidence of a relationship between personalism and non-military rebellions, i.e. rebellions from below. This is in line with, and in fact goes past, expectations in Hypothesis 2.

⁷ Multinomial logit would be inappropriate here because in some countries in some years, different types of rebellions break out; one cannot therefore treat these as mutually exclusive categories.

Table 3. BTSCS Logit Estimates: Paths to Rebellion

VARIABLES	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Non-Military Rebellion	Army-Splinter Rebellion	Coups with UCDP armed conflicts
Personalism index (in dictatorships only)	-0.130 [0.291]	2.787** [1.175]	0.383 [0.470]
Democracy	0.042 [0.219]	1.080 [0.895]	-0.014 [0.493]
Warlord/foreign occupied/other	0.832** [0.332]	2.662*** [0.908]	
1989-1995	0.914*** [0.222]	1.811*** [0.485]	0.395 [0.415]
1996-2010	0.181 [0.211]	0.966** [0.443]	-0.595 [0.526]
Share of population ethnically excluded	1.011*** [0.303]	1.023* [0.549]	-0.462 [0.636]
Log GDP per capita	-0.337*** [0.104]	-0.365** [0.175]	-0.645*** [0.190]
Log population	0.333*** [0.057]	0.123 [0.106]	-0.056 [0.083]
Time since last rebellion of the given type	-0.143*** [0.033]	-0.156* [0.089]	-0.127* [0.075]
Time ²	0.005** [0.002]	0.008* [0.004]	0.007* [0.004]
Time ³	-0.000* [0.000]	-0.000* [0.000]	-0.000** [0.000]
Constant	-3.624*** [0.854]	-5.606*** [1.755]	0.958 [1.670]
Observations	7,974	7,974	7,814
Number of countries	163	163	162

Robust standard errors in brackets

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Figure 2. Marginal effects of covariates on predicted probability of different types of rebel emergence

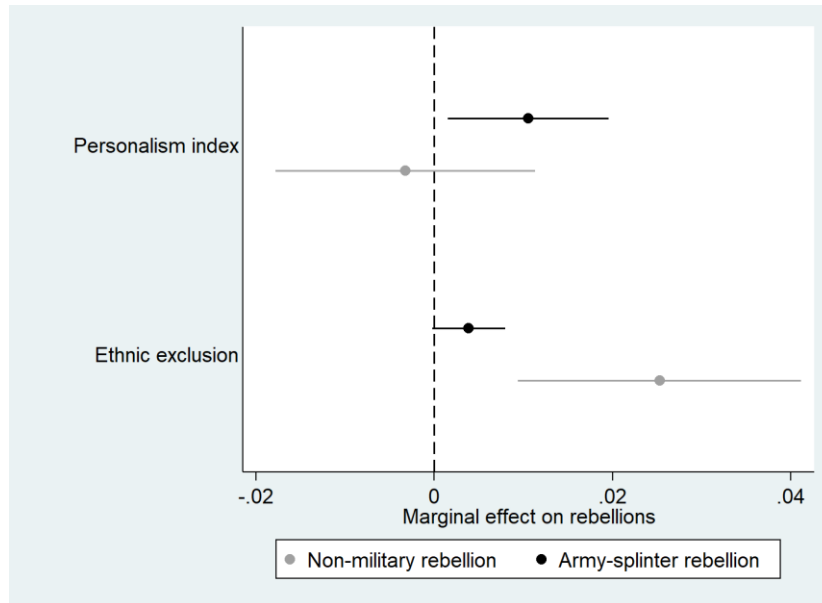


Table 4. Predicted probabilities of rebellions, by regime type

Regime type	Predicted probability of non-military rebellion		Predicted probability of army-splinter rebellion	
	[95% CI]		[95% CI]	
Dictatorship, personalism = 0	2.7%		0.08%	
Dictatorship, personalism = 1	[2.0%	3.5%]	[0.00%	0.2%]
Democracy	[1.5%	3.3%]	[0.1%	2.5%]
	[1.9%	3.7%]	[0.03%	0.5%]

In Table 5, I dig into the links between personalism and army-splinter rebellion more deeply, reanalyzing Model 2 with new controls (and removing population since there is no theoretical reason to expect a relationship between it and ASRs, and it had been included in Table 1 simply to compare across rebellion types). Here, two moves are important. The first addresses an endogeneity concern. The personalism index is based (among other criteria) on military purges. There is the concern that the coding is based on observations of purges that *follow* conflict onset. To address this concern, I control for Geddes, Wright and Frantz's (2018) *military purges without trial* variable. This is likely an overcompensation, given that many purges would have occurred prior to the onset of an army-splinter war, and would also be a plausible mechanism linking personalism to ASRs by intimidating coup-plotters and suggesting that they follow a different strategy; they are part and parcel of classic coup-proofing techniques. In Model 4 here, the relationship between personalism and ASR remains clear and strong. Second, I test the mechanism by using two specific measures of coup-proofing from Geddes and colleagues, the creation of a special security force linked to the leader (model 5), and promotion within the armed forces based on loyalty to the leader (model 6). These are measured only for authoritarian regimes, and so, as with the personalism index, I code each as zero for non-authoritarian regimes. I expect that each would be positively associated to ASRs, and it is plausible that each would weaken the apparent relationship between personalism and these conflicts, because they would be ways of *accounting* for that relationship.⁸ Table 5 shows that this holds for the creation of a leader-linked security force, but not for promotion based on loyalty to the leader, which surprisingly seems to have no link to army-splinter rebellions. Hence, counterbalancing appears to link personalism to army-splinter wars, and purges prior to conflict may do so as well. These are critical coup-proofing techniques.

⁸ I do not include a standard measure of coup-proofing, the number of independent land-force branches (Escribà-Folch, Böhmelt, and Pilster 2019), for two reasons: there is a loss of over 1400 cases due to missing data, and these different branches often indicate military specialization rather than coup-proofing (Dworschak 2020; De Bruin 2020b). De Bruin's (2020b) State Security Forces dataset is, at present, available for a random sample of countries and thus would also entail a large loss of cases; with only 43 ASRs, this is a risk.

Table 5. Purges and coup-proofing

VARIABLES	(4) Army-splinter rebellions	(5) Army-splinter rebellions	(6) Army-splinter rebellions
Personalism index (in dictatorships only)	2.676** [1.251]	1.660 [1.482]	2.715** [1.140]
Democracy	1.967* [1.045]	2.186** [1.083]	1.962* [1.065]
Warlord/foreign occupied/other	3.433*** [1.135]	3.721*** [1.144]	3.430*** [1.139]
Military purges without trial	0.991** [0.453]	1.071** [0.445]	1.004** [0.436]
Leader creates special security force		1.248 [0.916]	
Promotion based on loyalty to leader			-0.060 [0.488]
1989-95	1.585*** [0.511]	1.548*** [0.524]	1.584*** [0.515]
1996-2010	0.828* [0.435]	0.734* [0.438]	0.827* [0.437]
Share of population ethnically excluded	1.083* [0.571]	0.915 [0.669]	1.092* [0.574]
Log GDP per capita	-0.472*** [0.178]	-0.444** [0.179]	-0.470*** [0.174]
Time since last army-splinter rebellion	-0.117 [0.084]	-0.109 [0.085]	-0.118 [0.085]
Time ²	0.006 [0.004]	0.006 [0.004]	0.006 [0.004]
Time ³	-0.000 [0.000]	-0.000 [0.000]	-0.000 [0.000]
Constant	-4.590** [1.980]	-5.044*** [1.883]	-4.599** [1.934]
Observations	7,924	7,924	7,924
Number of countries	163	163	163

Robust standard errors in brackets

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 6. Predicted probabilities of rebellions, by time period

Time period	Predicted probability of non-military rebellion		Predicted probability of army-splinter rebellion	
	[95% CI]		[95% CI]	
1951-1988	2.4%		0.2%	
	[1.8%	3.0%]	[0.1%	0.3%]
1989-1995	5.1%		1.3%	
	[3.7%	6.6%]	[0.6%	2.0%]
1996-2010	2.3%		0.4%	
	[1.8%	2.9%]	[0.2%	0.6%]

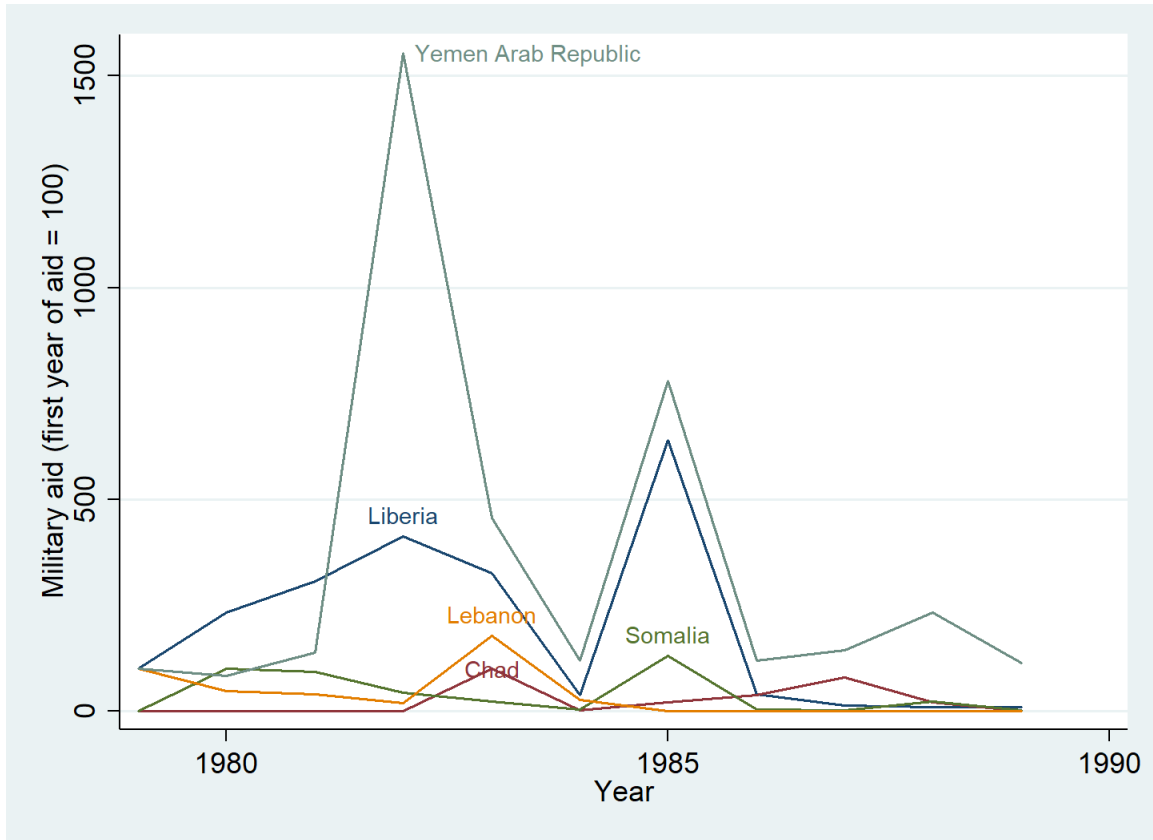
The results also confirm that the spike in army-splinter rebellions and especially army-splinter wars at the end of the Cold War seen in Figure 1 is statistically significant (Hypothesis 3), and the effect size is indicated in Table 6. Army-splinter rebellions were over six times likelier at the end of the Cold War than before and three times likelier than since 1996. It is worth pointing out, however, that ASRs were still likelier after 1996 than during the Cold War; the wave has not receded entirely. Additionally, several recent cases (Libya, Syria, South Sudan, Central African Republic) are excluded from the analysis because covariates stop in 2010; Figure 1 suggests a more substantial increase recently.

In contrast, non-military rebellions were around twice as likely in the 1989-95 period as in the other two. The effect size is in absolute terms *larger* for non-military rebellions, but is proportionately smaller. This offers some confirmation for Hypothesis 4, suggesting that the processes setting ASRs in motion were especially dependent on geopolitical conditions.

Moreover, the cases of ASRs at the end of the Cold War appear to be in line with the proposed mechanisms; this is unsurprising, as key cases like Afghanistan and Liberia motivated the state-breakdown hypothesis in the first place (Rubin 1995; Reno 1998). Sixteen ASRs emerged in this period, in twelve countries. Seven of these countries were USSR successor states, ex-Communist or former Soviet clients (Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Ethiopia, Georgia, Romania, Yugoslavia), although in several, the link with the USSR was strained if not absent. The other five were recipients of US economic and military aid during the first half of the 1980s (Chad, Lebanon, Liberia, Somalia, and Yemen), according to USAID (2018). USAID figures also show that these countries experienced large declines in US military assistance beginning in the late 1980s (see figure 3). To be sure, other countries around the world experienced aid withdrawal without army-splinter wars, so a statistical analysis would in principle be helpful; at this point, though, the number of countries experiencing ASRs is small and statistical analysis only gets one so far. The destabilization

at the end of the Cold War thus appears to have been an important factor in the violent breakdown of regimes in the form of army-splinter wars. However, this still leaves unexplained the ongoing risk of ASRs, relative to the Cold War – a legacy that is not apparently consistent with a single shock around 1990. In some cases, such as Chad or DR Congo, the destabilization wrought with the withdrawal of superpower assistance may have initiated profound long-term instability, with further ASRs over time. However, in other cases, ASRs do not have a clear connection to the end of the Cold War itself (Central African Republic, South Sudan). The ongoing character of these conflicts merits further investigation.

Figure 3. US military aid in countries experiencing army-splinter rebellions at the end of the Cold War (excluding ex-Communist states)



Finally, it is noteworthy that ethnic exclusion from the executive has less to do with army-splinter rebellions than with non-military rebellions. There is still a positive and statistically significant relationship, but, as noted above, it is not clear to what degree this comes from exclusion conditions within the armed forces and to what extent it comes from general mobilization of ethnic out-groups. Hence, for ASRs, a more important dimension than ethnic exclusion as measured by EPR may be ethnic politics specific to the armed forces (McLauchlin 2010; Makara 2013; Harkness 2016; Johnson and Thurber 2017; Morency-Laflamme and McLauchlin 2020).

In the web appendix to this article I replicate the analysis using rare-events logit, and results are similar. I also re-run the models with the traditional dependent variable of new civil *conflict* onsets rather than the emergence of new rebel groups. The results are similar but not statistically significant for personalism; however, I consider the emergence of new rebel groups to be the proper dependent variable, because the key issue is to isolate the circumstances in which a faction of the armed forces launches a new rebellion, not the circumstances in which such a rebellion starts a civil conflict where there had not been one already.

Conclusion

The analysis in this paper confirms that army-splinter rebellions are a distinct phenomenon, with distinctive origins from non-military rebellions from below. It shows that elite politics is a lot more important for ASRs than it is for non-military rebels. Specifically, personalism matters for the former but not for the latter, and while the end of the Cold War was correlated with both, it had a stronger relative relationship with army-splinter rebellions. Conversely, ethnic exclusion is less important for ASRs. This paper adds to a burgeoning literature on varieties of authoritarian rule. Personalist rulers are not only likelier to lose power violently when they lose power (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014, 321), to engage in international conflict (Weeks 2012), and to have ineffective

armed forces (Talmadge 2015). They are, additionally, especially prone to the direct resort to rebellion through army-splinter rebellions.

Attention to ASRs as a distinct phenomenon for analysis takes a fuller account of the array of options that disgruntled officers have available to them. My analysis indicates that there are limits to the well-known desire on the part of officers to avoid dividing the army at all costs. Some are willing not just to *risk* such a division, but to deliberately execute it.

The next step for analysis of types of military uprising is to examine the strategic choice of coup attempt vs. direct entry into rebellion in more detail. I argue in this paper that the link between personalist regimes and ASRs exists because the latter tend to occur where coup attempts are likelier to be resisted and unsuccessful. Further confirmation would come with more fine-grained analysis, especially with a more detailed analysis of coup-proofing tactics and techniques, including bloodless coup attempts as a potential outcome. One may essentially ask the question: when a faction of the armed forces seeks to rebel, which technology of rebellion does it employ?

Further, given the distinctive origins of ASRs, it is important to examine how they are fought. The end-of-the-Cold War finding is broadly consistent with Kalyvas and Balcells' (2010) account of the rise of conventional civil wars in the post-Cold War period, in which the withdrawal of superpower support led to the crumbling of states. One could expect that army-splinter rebellions would be disproportionately likely to be conventionally fought, because defectors would have access to the equipment and knowledge to wage conventional war from the outset. I count 32 of 188 new armed groups since 1989 that were ASRs, or 17%. In contrast, Kalyvas and Balcells find that 47% of civil conflicts after the Cold War were conventional conflicts. Hence ASRs cannot seem to fully account for them. If conventional civil conflicts have to do with the loss of superpower support to states, this might go through stolen and abandoned equipment, defection to rebel groups already fighting, or rebellions by previously ousted regimes—none of which is under investigation here. This merits a deeper exploration of the link between ASRs and technologies of warfare.

A final question is whether ASRs are a risk into the future. The wave of army-splinter rebellions at the end of the Cold War has receded somewhat since the mid-1990s, though not entirely. There is still a relatively elevated probability of ASRs that is as yet unexplained by existing geopolitical explanations. In addition, longer-run trends may indicate that army-splinter rebellions are likely to stay with us. Notably, personalist authoritarian regimes are increasingly common, more institutionalized authoritarian regimes less so (Geddes, Wright, and Frantz 2014, 318). If this trend continues, we can expect state breakdown and army-splinter rebellions to continue as well.

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