

Friends in the Profession:

Rebel Leaders, International Social Networks, and External Support for Rebellion

What drives foreign state support for rebel organizations? While scholars have explored the geopolitical and organizational factors that foster external support for rebellion, there has been little attention to the role of rebel *leaders* in securing it. In this paper, we argue that rebel leaders' personal backgrounds affect their ability to obtain foreign support during armed conflict. In particular, we contend that rebel leaders with *international experiences* – including study abroad, work abroad, military training abroad, and exile – are better able to secure foreign support for their organizations. These experiences provide opportunities for would-be rebel leaders to interact with a multitude of foreign individuals who may later enter politics or otherwise achieve prominence in their respective societies, allowing them to build interpersonal social networks across borders. Such international networks provide key points of contact when rebel leaders later seek foreign backing. We test this theory using data from the new Resistance Organization Leaders (ROLE) database, and find robust support for our argument as well as the broader role of leader attributes in explaining state support of rebellion. We also illustrate our theory's causal process with a case study of the Nepalese Civil War. Overall, our results underscore the value of incorporating individual rebel leaders and their social networks more squarely into the study of armed conflict.

In this paper, we contend that rebel leaders often exploit their transnational social networks deriving from earlier life experiences to pursue an important wartime goal: securing foreign state support for their rebellion. Existing studies on third-party support for rebel groups tend to focus on states' geopolitical calculations and rebels' organizational characteristics (e.g., Byman 2005; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011; Findley, Piazza and Young 2012; San-Akca 2016). In contrast, scholars have largely neglected the role of social networks running through the world of violent politics, privileging wars' military, organizational, and violent factors at the expense of their social and relational facets. We show that rebel leaders, like leaders of any industry, seek to capitalize on their personal and professional connections to pursue their goals. Geopolitics may help determine state sponsorship of rebellion, but such sponsorship, we argue, often has micro-foundations shaped by elite-level interpersonal relations established prior to conflict onset.

Although individuals can establish transnational social networks in a number of ways, we demonstrate that would-be rebel leaders' international experiences are particularly conducive to the development of interpersonal social networks that they can later utilize for wartime purposes. As we show below, many rebel leaders spent substantial time studying, working, or living abroad before beginning their "careers" in violent politics, including in world capitals – from Paris to Cairo – that are hubs of ideological ferment and agitation. These situations provide a wealth of opportunities for them to forge new friendships and acquaintances while also allowing these new social groups to engage in political discussion, debate, and association. In such contexts, future rebel leaders can interact with a multitude of individuals who later go on to political careers themselves, whether in national governments or in rebel organizations. Consequently, the social

networks established during one's time abroad often emerge as valuable contacts when, once in a position of rebel leadership, leaders begin seeking external state support.

A study of the transnational elite social networks underpinning state-rebel alliances offers fresh implications for conflict scholars. First, it helps establish states and rebel groups as socially interconnected, and hence urges analysis of the role of socialization, influence, and the exchange of know-how, ideas, tactics, and ideologies across conflicts. This conceptualization of contemporary violent conflicts as comprised of a “complex system of interdependencies” between political units (Dorussen 2016, 285) contrasts sharply with prevailing approaches, much of which take the conflict or the rebel group as the unit of analysis and treat them as proverbial organizational silos whose behavior is determined independently of that of other actors. Yet, such an approach precludes questions about social linkages between different units. We aim to show that many rebel leaders operate with a transcontinental network of “friends in the profession.” In the age of new technologies and social media, such networks are only likely to become more consequential as the sharing of knowledge, tactics, and ideologies with transnational counterparts becomes easier and more routine. Understanding rebel elites' social networks helps scholars better appreciate rebel groups' formal and informal interactions with external actors and embed individual organizations within global politics.

Second, if rebel organizations' ability to secure outside support – and plausibly their ability to fight, survive, and win – is partly dependent on their leaders' transnational social networks, an implication is that their organizations' overall strength is determined not by their military and mobilizational capabilities alone, but also by their social capital. Studies that attempt to measure and assess various dimensions of rebel groups' capacity may thus need to broaden their scope to

include measures of rebel “leadership capital” (Bob 2005), including capital deriving from leaders’ transnational social ties.

Third, if outcomes scholars typically attribute to geopolitics, state structures, or conflict characteristics are often buttressed by political elites’ personal connections, this suggests that in the work of rebellion “who one knows” matters for what one achieves. The extraordinary politics that is violent rebellion, then, often has origins in ordinary relationships. This understanding of violent politics is consistent with recent studies suggesting that the nature of rebel organizations’ local and domestic social networks shape their wartime behavior in important ways (Parkinson 2013, Staniland 2014, Shesterinina 2016). Here, we demonstrate that rebel leaders’ *transnational* social ties likewise help explain their wartime trajectories.

The paper proceeds as follows. We first make the case for studying rebel leaders and their transnational social networks. We then present our theory linking rebel leaders’ past international experiences and their ability to secure wartime foreign state support. In the third section we use the Resistance Organization Leaders (ROLE) Database – a new dataset of rebel leader biographies – to offer a descriptive analysis of rebel leaders’ backgrounds. We then outline our research design and present our empirical results. We further illustrate our theory’s causal mechanism with a case study of interpersonal networks between state and rebel leaders that proved pivotal to the Maoists in the Nepalese Civil War. We conclude by discussing the implications of our findings.

Rebel Leaders and International Social Networks

A rich literature emphasizes the reliance of nonstate armed groups on foreign state sponsorship. In explaining variation in external state support for rebel groups in civil wars, studies

generally focus on conflict characteristics, states' structures and political objectives, and rebels' organizational features and conflict goals (Findley and Teo 2006; Aydin 2010; Gent 2007; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, Maoz and San-Akca 2012). Despite the major advances this research has yielded for our understanding of external sponsorship of nonstate armed groups, it has largely neglected two dimensions of violent conflict which can shed new light on external support as well as on conflict dynamics more broadly.

First, in the large literature examining rebel group behavior, few scholars analyze the role of rebel leader characteristics.¹ The omission is stark, given numerous studies of heads of state in international relations and other areas of political science, as well as a large body of literature in psychology and organizational management, suggest that individual leaders' personal attributes – their experiences, education, skills, family backgrounds, ascriptive traits, beliefs, and personalities – have considerable effects on their decision-making as leaders in office (e.g. Jervis 1976; Stoessinger 2005; Saunders 2011, Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015, Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009, Kertzer and Rathbun 2015, Conger and Kanungo 1987, Peterson et al. 2003, Gift and Krcmaric 2015; Hudson and Day 2020, Krcmaric, Nelson, and Roberts 2020).² Within civil wars and campaigns of armed resistance, the prominent place held by leaders like Yoweri Museveni, Abimael Guzman, John Garang, Massoud Barzani, Joseph Kony, and Usama bin Laden in scholarly accounts suggests that these individuals powerfully shaped the course of the wars in which their groups fought. Given that little in the theories linking *state* leaders' attributes to their decisions in office pertains exclusively to heads of state – rather, they are general theories of leader attributes and outcomes – we have reasons to believe *rebel* leaders' decisions in civil war

¹ Though few studies examine the attributes of individual rebel leaders, conflict research is increasingly turning to the study of rebel *leadership* more broadly (i.e., its ideology, selection process, turnover, and incentive structure). See Straus (2015), Tiernay (2015), Prorok (2016), and Cunningham and Sawyer (2019).

² On “first-image” analysis in international relations, see Waltz (1959).

are as much informed by their personal attributes and experiences as are state leaders' decisions in interstate war and international politics more broadly.

Second, tending to focus on overt manifestations of power – military capacity, troop size, territorial control, and the like – existing work has paid comparatively less attention to the *social* underpinnings of rebel organizations. Noting this lacuna, recent studies examine how the local social milieus in which rebel groups are embedded affect organizational cohesion, mobilizational capacity, information channels, and governance choices (Daly 2012, Parkinson 2013, Staniland 2014, Lawrence 2016, Arjona 2016). Yet, rebel groups' social networks typically span well beyond their local and domestic milieus. As we argue below, many rebel leaders in contemporary conflicts have transnational interpersonal ties forged through their prior life experiences abroad. Just as rebel groups exploit local or quotidian social networks for domestic mobilizational purposes, so, too, do their leaders often tap into their overseas social connections to pursue their wartime international objectives.

Bringing these insights together, this study proposes that individual rebel leaders' personal experiences abroad serve as opportunities for transnational social networking, and further, that these networks become valuable contacts when leaders seek external support for their armed movements.³ Existing studies understate the extent to which elite social ties between rebel and state leaders buttress rebel movements' external relations. They examine civil wars with states, conflicts, or rebel groups as units of analysis, but rarely do they lend systematic attention to state and rebel *leaders* as valuable units of analysis in their own right. Thus, we lack an understanding of cross-border elite networks as well as the ways in which such networks affect conflict.

³ As prewar domestic experiences greatly affect individual decisions to engage in violent endeavors (Kalyvas 2006), so, too, do prewar international experiences.

Analyses of social networks aim “to identify patterns of relationships...and to link those relations with outcomes of interest” (Hafner-Burton et al. 2009, 561). As with other studies of social networks in international relations, we use the common definition of networks as “sets of relations that form structures” (Hafner-Burton et al. 2009, 560). We specifically examine rebel leaders’ *social* networks – ties fostered through personal and professional social interactions. Thus, the components of a social network in this study are individual rebel leaders, their physical location at specific points in time, and their relationships with other relevant figures. These social networks are distinct from alliances or other forms of cooperation between political entities, which are *organizational* and not social ties (though the former can certainly be forged out of the latter). In addition, we focus on *transnational* social networks – those that cross state borders – in order to probe the interconnectedness between units that are often studied independently. Note that in this analysis we limit our focus to social ties that are exogenous to the war – that is, those that emerge from circumstances outside the war setting. Certainly, rebel leaders can intentionally develop politically relevant interpersonal relationships during the course of their campaigns, as when the leaders of national liberation movements from Africa, Asia and Latin America gathered at the Tricontinental Conference in Havana in 1966 to hash out a common vision and strategy for overcoming “imperialism” (Barcia 2009). Yet, here we are concerned with examining how leaders’ *pre-leadership experiences* shape their wartime pursuits. Rather than treating rebel leaders as if they emerge from a vacuum, we thus recognize that their existing social connections shape the course of their armed campaigns. More broadly, our research applies the “personal biography approach,” now a mature research agenda in the study of state elites (Krcmaric, Nelson, and Roberts 2020), to rebel leaders in what we believe is among the first efforts of its kind.

International Experiences and Wartime External Support

Successfully launching a violent rebellion against the state is difficult, not least because states generally have significantly greater resources and military strength than do their nonstate opponents (Scott 1985; Cunningham et al. 2013). It is intuitive, then, that rebel leaders would seek to capitalize on whatever resources they have at their disposal, including extant social networks from family ties, intellectual, religious, or ideological communities, educational and professional experiences, time served in prison or exile, and other social loci.

Among these possibilities, one source of networks stands out as being particularly salient for would-be rebel leaders in developing transnational connections: their time abroad. Individuals may spend extended periods of time abroad for a variety of reasons, from studying or working to living in exile or receiving military training. Whatever the reason for living abroad, the experience offers them numerous opportunities to make new foreign connections. These connections, in turn, can prove useful once they have become rebel leaders and seek foreign support.

Consider study abroad. As education research shows, studying abroad is typically an experience marked by active and heightened social networking with individuals of diverse origins, as students form new friendships with peers from their own country, other countries, and the host country (Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune 2011; Gu and Schweisfurth 2015). As they develop new foreign contacts, they also often gain new ideas and even identities (Gu and Schweisfurth 2015, 947). Examples among the ranks of future rebel leaders abound. Kamal Jumblatt, leader of the Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) during the Lebanese Civil War, studied at the Sorbonne in Paris and there became influenced by the activism of French communist youth, as he acknowledged in a 1966 speech (Reich 1990, 284). Amilcar Cabral, Agostinho Neto, and Eduardo Mondlane, who would later lead Guinea-Bissau, Angola, and Mozambique to independence, respectively,

were fellow students in Lisbon in the 1940s and 1950s. There, they developed a new socialist ideological path that they viewed as better suited to the struggle of African anti-colonialism (Rebeka 2014, 208-209). And a number of African insurgencies in the 1970s emerged out of vibrant intellectual circles at universities in Asmara, Addis Ababa, Dar es Salaam, and other key capitals (Reno 2011, 132-133).

Similarly, research on migration and exile shows that the experience of living in exile is usually marked by significant intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic social networking (Hauff and Vaglum 1997, Williams 2006, Engebrigtsen 2007). While some exiled ethnic communities become more well integrated into their host societies than others, exiles and refugees are often active agents in building new social networks (Fuglerud and Engebrigtsen 2006, Williams 2006). Consider Paul Kagame's experience growing up as a Rwandan refugee in Uganda. Having fled Rwanda for Uganda with his family at a very young age, Kagame became involved in Yoweri Museveni's rebel movement, the National Resistance Army (NRA), during his youth. Kagame served as an intelligence officer for six years in the NRA until its victory over Uganda in 1986. Thereafter, Kagame continued to be "mentored" by rebel-turned-president Museveni as Kagame turned his focus to the government in Kigali (Waugh 2004, 24-26). Once the Rwandan Civil War was underway with Kagame as head of the rebel Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), Museveni supplied arms to the rebel group (Prunier 1995, 118-119). Kagame has since credited Museveni's support as important in his successful bid to overthrow the Rwandan government.⁴

Like the experiences of study abroad and exile, the pursuit of professional opportunities abroad, as well as military training abroad, also allow individuals the opportunity to acquire new social networks marked by internationalism. Notable examples abound here, too. Hasan di Tiro,

⁴ "Kagame, Museveni Recall the RPF Struggle," *The New Times*, July 5, 2009, <https://www.newtimes.co.rw/section/read/79049>.

head of the Free Aceh Movement, ran a business that took him to the US, Europe, and the Middle East prior to his involvement in the secessionist fight against Indonesia (Aspinall 2009). He later launched his secessionist movement by exploiting preexisting contacts abroad, tapping into his contacts from his time as a student in the US and his international business engagements in search of external sponsors for his fight against Indonesia.⁵ In a similar vein, Foday Sankoh, eventual leader of the RUF of Sierra Leone, received military training in a camp run by Muammar Gaddafi in Libya in the mid-1980s. Gaddafi famously invited numerous revolutionaries to train in his camps around this time. One individual Sankoh befriended in Libya was Charles Taylor, who would return to his home country of Liberia to lead the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) in the First Liberian Civil War (Farah 2003). The two continued their close working relationship during their respective rebellions in West Africa and ultimately proved to be crucial allies, even after Taylor became Liberian president.⁶

Whether originating from study abroad, work abroad, military training abroad, or time in exile, we argue that these transnational networks facilitate rebel groups' ability to secure foreign sponsorship once war is imminent or underway. Simply put, rebel leaders often initiate the search for state sponsors by personally mobilizing their preexisting foreign contacts. These micro-foundations of foreign state sponsorship are typically absent from dominant narratives focused on the international rivalries surrounding armed conflicts or on the organizational characteristics of rebel groups. Yet, we argue that they are vital to understanding variation in foreign sponsorship of rebellion.

⁵ While his contacts from his student days did not yield sponsors, di Tiro eventually obtained Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi's agreement to train Acehnese fighters through an acquaintance from his business days who had gone on to become Libya's ambassador to Sweden (Aspinall 2009; Schulze 2006, 237).

⁶ Indeed, having become acquainted with one another during military training in Libya, Foday Sankoh proceeded to aid Charles Taylor and his rebel group's campaign against the Liberian government in the 1990s. In return, Taylor contributed troops to the RUF incursion into Sierra Leone and continued to fuel the RUF's violent campaign after becoming Liberia's president in 1997 (Keen 2005).

The overall argument is well illustrated in the story of American support for South Sudanese independence. For Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) leader John Garang, US support for his secessionist campaign against Sudan – which continued through four successive administrations – all began with his time at Iowa State University. While there pursuing a PhD in economics in the late 1970s, Garang befriended a fellow doctoral student named Brian D'Silva. Thanks to Garang's influence, D'Silva became deeply interested in the cause of South Sudanese independence and even briefly taught with Garang at a university in Khartoum after completing his studies. Not long afterwards, D'Silva went on to create a small Washington-based clique of pro-Garang individuals with ties to the American government who would together launch an intensive lobbying campaign aimed at mobilizing US lawmakers for South Sudan's independence through the 1980s and 90s (Hamilton 2012). For example, it was thanks to the efforts of D'Silva and his informal group that in 1989, Garang secured his first visit to Washington as leader of the SPLA to meet with US officials (Hamilton 2012; Perlez 1989).

It is also worth noting that interpersonal ties are valuable not only to rebel leaders seeking foreign support, but to states seeking foreign proxies as well. Indeed, previous work highlights the “principal-agent problem” facing states as the key barrier to backing rebels: states must delegate authority to rebels, but know it can be abused for the rebels' own ends (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011). In the words of one leading study, “states will be more likely to delegate to rebels when they are reasonably confident that the rebel force shares similar preferences; *when they can select good, competent agents*; and when they can effectively monitor agent activities and sanction bad behavior” (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 714, emphasis added). Yet prior personal ties can help mitigate this trust problem. State leaders are more likely to see a rebel organization as a “good, competent agent” if they are personally acquainted with its leaders

from past experience, especially when dealing with less established rebel groups. For instance, one early state to back the Palestinian cause was Algeria, which operated as “both mentor and model for Fatah” (Amos 1980, 160). According to Yaari (1970, 37): “Algeria’s preference for Fatah most likely lies in the fact that some Algerian leaders had known [Palestinian leader Yasser] Arafat in Cairo when they were living there in exile, and when Arafat was chairman of the Palestinian student organization. The story runs that during that period, Arafat had helped them with various services behind the Egyptian government’s back.” This shows how the transnational ties we highlight can not only help rebel leaders locate external support, but also help external states select proxy organizations. In this sense, our argument builds on existing research that approaches the problem from a state-centric perspective as well.

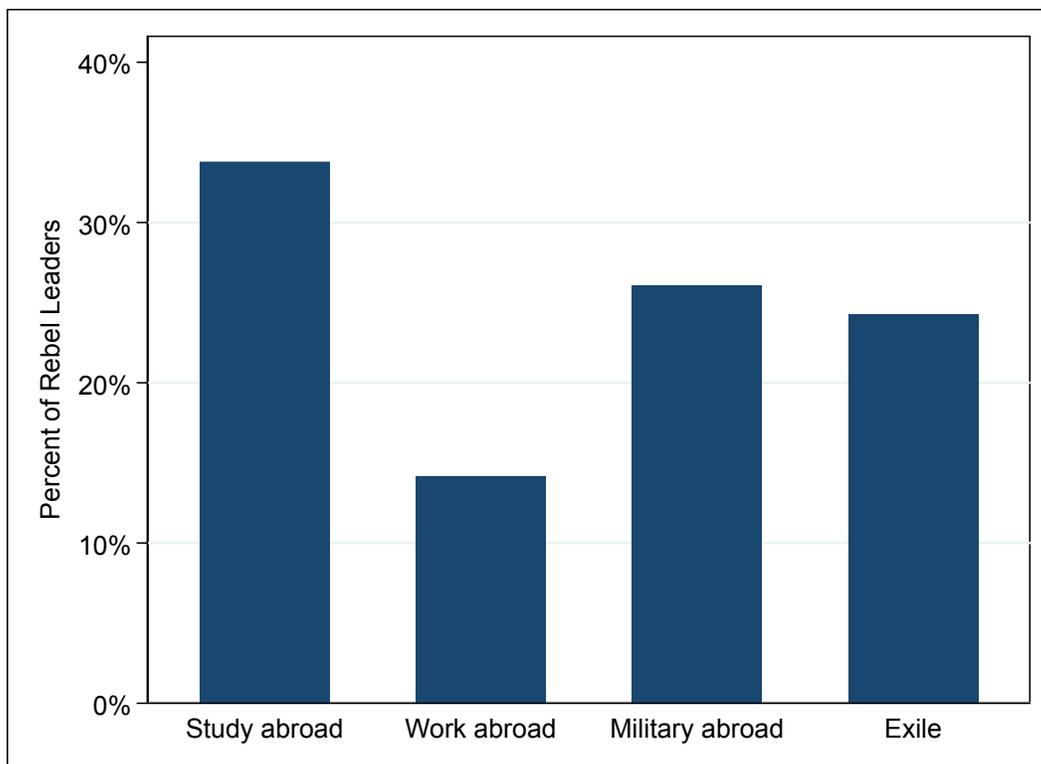
In sum, we hypothesize that individuals who spent time abroad prior to rebel leadership are better equipped to obtain foreign state support during violent conflict thanks to their existing transnational social networks compared to leaders who lack such experience. Experiences living abroad open up opportunities for would-be rebel leaders to network with other political and economic elites and activists, unlocking possibilities for future external support once violent rebellion begins. These arguments are consistent with recent studies showing that external state support for rebel organizations is driven not merely by the strategic interests of the external patron, but also by rebel groups’ own external outreach efforts (Coggins 2015, Huang 2016, Malejacq 2017). Contacts deriving from a rebel leader’s international experience can facilitate the conduct of rebel diplomacy and help cement rebel-sponsor partnerships.

New Data on Rebel Leaders’ Experiences Abroad

As we move toward empirically assessing our argument, we first present descriptive data on rebel leaders' international experiences before testing their impact. In order to do so, we draw on the Resistance Organization Leaders (ROLE) database (Authors), which provides novel and detailed biographical information on 490 rebel, insurgent, and terrorist leaders who led organizations involved in civil wars that were active between the years of 1980 and 2011. The list of rebel leaders in ROLE is based on work by Prorok (2016), who identified the top leaders of all rebel groups in Uppsala Conflict Data Project's (UCDP) Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict Dataset (NSA) (Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan 2013). Built to be both thorough (in terms of the range of information collected on each leader) as well as transparent (in terms of the documentation of all sources and coding rules used to collect it), ROLE yields a rich source of information on the characteristics, backgrounds, and experiences of contemporary rebel leaders.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of rebel leaders in ROLE who had each of the four aforementioned international experiences – study abroad, work abroad, military training abroad, and time in exile – before assuming leadership. Clearly, international life experiences are relatively common among the ranks of rebel leaders; prior to their leadership tenure, 34% of rebel leaders active between 1980-2011 had studied abroad; 26% had received military training abroad; 24% had lived in exile; and 14% had worked abroad. Overall, 57% of rebel leaders had one of these four international life experiences before their leadership tenure. These data provide some preliminary support to our argument that many rebel leaders launch violent rebellions already endowed with international contacts deriving from their experiences abroad.

Figure 1: Rebel Leaders' Pre-Leadership International Life Experiences



Note: data are from the ROLE Database, which covers rebel groups in civil wars active between the years of 1980 and 2011, per the UCDP's Non-State Actors in Armed Conflict (NSA) dataset.

Empirical Analysis

We now move to quantitative tests of our theory of rebel leaders' international life experiences and wartime external state support for rebellion. In order to do so, we combine data on rebel leaders from ROLE with organization-, conflict- and state-level data to test the effects of individual leaders' attributes among other key drivers of state support.

Dependent Variable: State Sponsorship

Our dependent variable in the study is foreign state sponsorship of rebel organizations. In our main analyses, we use data from San-Akca's (2016) *Dangerous Companions: Cooperation between States and Nonstate Armed Groups* (NAGs) dataset.⁷ This dataset – which has become one of the leading measures of state sponsorship of rebellion in the literature – includes information on nine types of foreign state support for rebel organizations, including safe haven, allowing rebels to open offices in the sponsor's territory, training camps, training, weapons and logistical support, financial support, the transport of arms and equipment, and troop support for each year that a rebel organization was active (San-Akca 2016). Our theory, centered on rebel leaders' transnational social networks, suggests that those with international experiences should be able to secure more sponsors; it is agnostic about the type of support an organization receives. We therefore use a continuous measure that documents the number of STATE SPONSORS per year for each rebel organization. This measure ranges from zero to nine, with a mean of 1.15 and a standard deviation of 1.39.⁸

Individual-Level Explanatory Variables

As outlined above, we contend that rebel leaders' international life experiences facilitate their development of transnational social networks that prove useful later in wartime. Our main explanatory variables thus measure whether the rebel leader spent time studying abroad, working abroad, training militarily abroad, or in exile prior to their leadership tenure. Since all four of these binary measures tap into the overarching construct of experience abroad, and we are agnos-

⁷ NAGs is available at nonstatearmedgroups.ku.edu.tr.

⁸ For robustness, we also use a binary version of the variable and another measure of state sponsorship, with similar findings. These tests are discussed in the robustness checks section below.

tic about which one(s) matter most, we combine them into a five-point additive index capturing the *INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE* of rebel leaders.

One methodological challenge in testing our hypothesis is that presumably, individuals go abroad for reasons that are common across positive cases – that is, international experience is not randomly assigned among would-be rebel leaders. For example, it is possible that individuals from elite families are more likely to go abroad since they have the means to do so, or that those who are more educated pursue such experiences. We therefore control for other rebel leader attributes in order to better isolate the effect of international experience from other individual-level factors. In our base models, we include *LEADER AGE*, as older leaders may have more experience abroad and be seen as more reliable by potential foreign backers; the leader's *EDUCATION* level, since it is possible that more educated individuals choose to go abroad and also are more appealing partners for would-be foreign patrons; and whether the individual has *MILITARY EXPERIENCE* as well as *COMBAT EXPERIENCE*, both of which might conceivably lead to less collaboration with state sponsors due to a leader's desire to maintain military decision-making authority (though, on the other hand, these attributes may increase foreign sponsorship if foreign sponsors look more favorably upon rebel leaders with military or combat backgrounds). Later, we control for a number of other leader characteristics in robustness tests (including elite family background).

Organization- and Conflict-Level Control Variables and Alternative Explanatory Variables

In order to build on existing literature, we use the same explanatory variable as a leading study of state sponsorship of rebellion (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011), and add the leader attributes described above. Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011) use six variables capturing characteristics of the rebel organization. The first two measure rebel strength: *REBELS*

MUCH WEAKER and *REBELS STRONG*. This follows their argument that there may be a “goldilocks” relationship between rebel strength and state sponsors. In particular, rebels far weaker than the state are unlikely to receive external support, while those as strong or stronger than the state are unlikely to accept it. A third variable from their study is an indicator for whether the group has a *CENTRALIZED COMMAND*. This is expected to increase external state sponsorship, as rebels with a clear chain of command and centralized decision-making authority are likely to be seen as more reliable by potential supporters. Fourth is an indicator for external *GOVERNMENT SUPPORT*. This, too, is expected to increase sponsorship for the rebels, as it is likely to invite more intervention on their behalf through counter-balancing dynamics. Fifth, we include a dummy for whether the rebels have a *TRANSNATIONAL CONSTITUENCY*. Transnational audiences that share some ties with the rebels – such as the Kurds with the PKK – are likely to boost foreign sponsorship by boosting international advocacy and pressure on their behalf from abroad. The sixth and finally variable is an indicator for whether the group has *TERRITORIAL CONTROL*. Groups that control territory may be more able to fund their campaigns domestically and thus resist foreign state support and the attendant agency costs that often come with it.

On top of these organizational factors, we follow Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011) and include five variables at the conflict or country level. First, we add a dummy variable for *MULTIPLE GROUPS* fighting against the state. Countries with multiple rebellions may be more likely to see state sponsorship due to the greater pressure on those groups to find external backers and out-compete their rivals (and the range of options those potential backers have to support). Second, we include the key variable of whether the government is in an *INTERNATIONAL RIVALRY*. States in international rivalries may face more external sponsorship of their rebel adversaries, as their rivals see this as a low-cost way to undermine and challenge them while limiting the risk of

escalation (see, e.g., Belgin San-Akca and Maoz 2012). Lastly, we include the *GDP PER CAPITA*, *POLITY SCORE*, and *CINC SCORE* (Composite Index of National Capabilities score) of each country to capture its other attributes that may encourage or discourage proxy warfare against it. Richer and stronger nations are expected to face less external sponsorship of their rebel adversaries due to deterrence, while more democratic states are expected to see less external sponsorship against them due to the legitimacy costs associated with doing so.

Empirical Results

Table 1 shows the results from our base models, which use ordinary least squares (OLS) with data at the organization-year level. The *INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE* index is the primary explanatory variable of interest. Model 1 shows the effect of leader-level factors only, Model 2 organization-level factors, Model 3 state-level factors, and Model 4 all three combined. As can be seen, the models provide clear support for our central argument. In particular, rebel leaders' pre-leadership international experiences strongly boost the number of foreign states that support their organizations. This effect is quite significant in substantive terms, with each level of the five-point international experience index yielding about 0.6 more sponsors for the rebel organization (0.63-0.66, depending on the model). As elaborated below in our analysis of standardized effect sizes, this effect rivals or surpasses the other most influential variables in the model.

The models also collectively suggest that in accounting for state sponsorship of rebellion, leader-level factors matter as much as if not more than the organization- and state-level factors emphasized in existing literature (e.g., Salehyan, Cunningham, and Gleditsch 2011, Maoz and San-Akca 2012). A comparison of R^2 values across the models helps drive this point home. In particular, the five leader-level factors included in the model account for 18% of the variation in

the number of sponsors, while the seven organization-level factors and four state-level factors employed by Salehyan, Cunningham, and Gleditsch (2011) account for 6% and 19% of the total variation, respectively. Overall, this suggests that the attributes of individual rebel leaders are an important part of the state sponsorship phenomenon, and should be incorporated into our models alongside state- and organization-level variables.

Table 1: Predicting State Sponsorship of Rebel Organizations

	(M1) State Sponsors	(M2) State Sponsors	(M3) State Sponsors	(M4) State Sponsors
<i>Leader Level</i>				
Leader age	-0.00 (0.00)			-0.00 (0.00)
Education	0.31*** (0.04)			0.28*** (0.04)
Military experience	-0.32** (0.10)			0.40*** (0.10)
Combat experience	0.54*** (0.09)			0.43*** (0.09)
International experience	0.63*** (0.04)			0.66*** (0.04)
<i>Organization Level</i>				
Rebels much weaker		0.11 (0.06)		0.13 (0.09)
Rebels strong		-0.57 (0.31)		1.35*** (0.35)
Centralized command		0.15 (0.18)		-0.42 (0.28)
Government support		0.20*** (0.03)		0.02 (0.04)
Transnational audience		0.33*** (0.04)		0.18*** (0.05)
Territorial control		-0.12* (0.06)		0.07 (0.08)
Multiple groups		-0.10 (0.08)		0.40*** (0.10)
<i>State Level</i>				
International rivalry			0.53*** (0.06)	0.55*** (0.08)
GDP per capita			0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)
Polity score			-0.00 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
CINC score			-0.28*** (0.04)	-0.20*** (0.05)
Constant	1.87*** (0.15)	0.65*** (0.20)	0.68*** (0.05)	1.70*** (0.35)

Observations	1,471	2,055	1,814	1,153
R ²	0.18	0.06	0.19	0.41

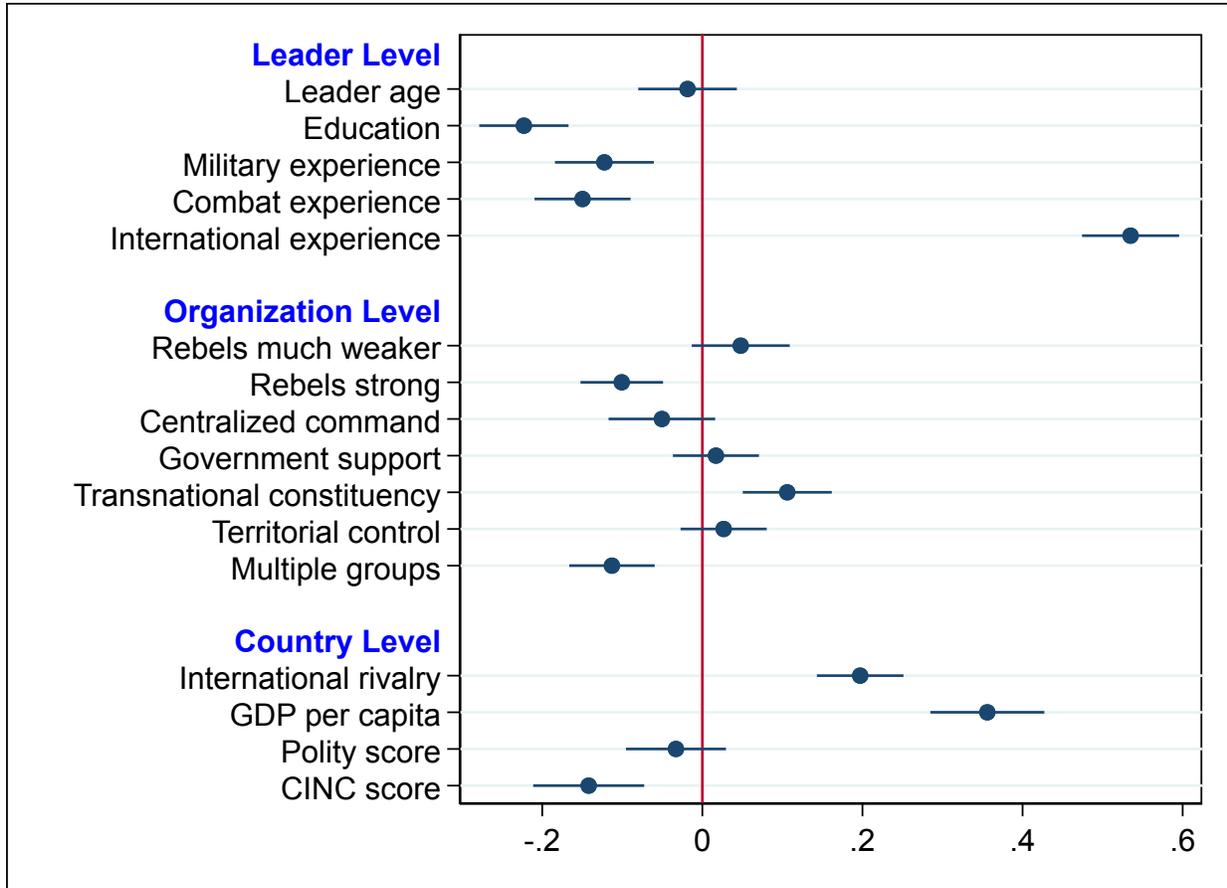
*Note: DV is number of sponsors per organization-year. Results from OLS models. Standard errors in parentheses
*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$*

Other findings are notable as well. At the leader level, education and combat experience both increase sponsors, potentially suggesting these are traits foreign sponsors value – or, in the case of education, that widen the networks and perspectives of rebel leaders. At the organization level, transnational constituencies lead to more foreign sponsors, as found in Salehyan, Cunningham, and Gleditsch (2011). And at the state level, involvement in an interstate rivalry increases the number of sponsors, replicating a key result in the literature – as backing rebellions against a rival is often seen as a cheap substitute for open war (Maoz and San-Akca 2012). Moreover, we find that higher GDP per capita boosts state sponsorship of rebellion, while higher CINC scores diminish it. The CINC score result suggests a deterrence dynamic, while the GDP per capita result may indicate opportunistic behavior by potential interveners. Overall, the results align relatively well with some of the core findings in the literature, lending credence to our models while also showing that there are important variables at every level of analysis.

To examine the substantive impact of our variables, Figure 1 shows the Beta coefficients from the preferred model (Model 4). These coefficients represent the effect of a one standard deviation change in each variable on the number of sponsors, allowing us to compare their relative effect sizes (rather than looking at a one unit change on different scales). The standardized variables clearly demonstrate that international experience has the strongest effect of any variable on the number of foreign state sponsors, significantly surpassing the influence of GDP per capita – the next strongest factor – and more than doubling the effect of all other significant predictors in the model. This reinforces the picture gleaned above, showing that while other important factors such as geopolitics (i.e., international rivalry and CINC score) and the strength and reach of rebel

movements (i.e., strong rebels and transnational audience) exert significant effects on state sponsorship, the international experience of rebel leaders is one of – if not the most – potent factors in facilitating such arrangements.

Figure 1: Plot of Beta Coefficients from Full Model



Note: DV is number of sponsors per organization-year. Results from OLS models.

Table 2: Disaggregating the Different Types of International Experience

	(M1)	(M2)	(M3)	(M4)	(M5)
	State Sponsors				
<i>Leader Level</i>					
Leader age	0.01 (0.00)	0.01 (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)	0.00 (0.00)	-0.00 (0.00)
Education	-0.20*** (0.04)	-0.20*** (0.03)	-0.10** (0.04)	-0.08* (0.04)	-0.28*** (0.04)
Military experience	-0.25* (0.11)	-0.42*** (0.10)	-0.59*** (0.11)	-0.33** (0.11)	-0.40*** (0.11)
Combat experience	-0.36*** (0.09)	-0.23** (0.09)	-0.24* (0.09)	-0.31*** (0.09)	-0.39*** (0.09)
Study abroad	0.75*** (0.09)				0.40*** (0.09)
Work abroad		1.86*** (0.12)			1.53*** (0.12)
Military training abroad			0.80*** (0.10)		0.39*** (0.10)
Exile				0.82*** (0.09)	0.61*** (0.08)
<i>Organization Level</i>					
Rebels much weaker	-0.07 (0.09)	0.07 (0.09)	0.10 (0.09)	-0.04 (0.09)	0.15 (0.09)
Rebels strong	-0.52 (0.35)	-0.74* (0.36)	-0.62 (0.35)	-0.60 (0.34)	-1.06** (0.35)
Centralized command	0.51* (0.23)	-0.26 (0.28)	0.48* (0.22)	0.51* (0.22)	-0.41 (0.28)
Government support	-0.02 (0.04)	0.12** (0.04)	-0.04 (0.04)	0.04 (0.04)	0.09* (0.04)
Transnational audience	0.13* (0.05)	0.21*** (0.05)	0.12* (0.05)	0.05 (0.05)	0.21*** (0.05)
Territorial control	-0.03 (0.08)	0.01 (0.08)	-0.05 (0.08)	0.01 (0.08)	0.09 (0.07)
Multiple groups	-0.16 (0.10)	-0.23* (0.10)	-0.31** (0.10)	-0.21* (0.10)	-0.35*** (0.10)
<i>State Level</i>					
International rivalry	0.62*** (0.08)	0.67*** (0.08)	0.62*** (0.08)	0.59*** (0.08)	0.58*** (0.08)
GDP per capita	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)
Polity score	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.02* (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
CINC score	-0.16** (0.05)	-0.20*** (0.05)	-0.38*** (0.06)	-0.18*** (0.05)	-0.17** (0.05)
Constant	0.48 (0.32)	1.06*** (0.35)	0.19 (0.31)	0.34 (0.31)	1.51*** (0.35)
Observations	1,203	1,178	1,187	1,198	1,153
R ²	0.29	0.39	0.29	0.30	0.44

Note: DV is number of sponsors per organization-year. Results from OLS models. Standard errors in parentheses
 *** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

To explore our results more deeply, we also analyze the impact of each component of the international experience index – study abroad, work abroad, military training abroad, and exile. In particular, Table 2 displays the effects of each of the components separately (Models 1-4) and together in one model (Model 5). The results indicate that each of the four types of international experience has a positive and significant effect on the number of foreign sponsors, and that these effects hold even when all four are included together (Model 5). Thus, regardless of whether it is from studying, working, training militarily, or living in exile, international life experience boosts rebel leaders’ ability to secure foreign state sponsors in war. The consistency of this result across different experiences strengthens our argument, suggesting that it has less to do with the specific institutional context – be it a university, a military camp, or a business – in which the experience takes place, and more to do with the general international networking advantages that come with immersion in another country prior to leading a rebel organization.

Robustness Checks

We conduct a number of robustness checks to boost confidence in our findings. Perhaps the main concern a skeptical reader might hold is that the leaders who go abroad – or the organizations they lead – have other underlying advantages that help them secure more state sponsors. We address this in two primary ways. First, we add a number of covariates that help account for these possible advantages, including: (1) whether the leader comes from an *ELITE FAMILY*,⁹ (2) whether the leader is a *POLYGLOT*,¹⁰ (3) whether the organization contains a *POLITICAL WING*,¹¹

⁹ Coming from an elite family may facilitate experience abroad and offer other wartime advantages to rebel leaders. This variable comes from ROLE, and requires clear evidence that the leader comes from a politically well-connected or influential family background.

¹⁰ Possessing linguistic ability might incline leaders toward travel abroad and help them court foreign powers. ROLE codes a leader as a polyglot if s/he speaks four or more languages.

¹¹ Having a formal political wing may imply greater strategic flexibility and political pragmatism by group members (e.g., Acosta 2019). This measure comes from the NSA dataset.

and (4) whether the organization is financed by *NATURAL RESOURCES*.¹² These additions yield no substantive change in our core results (see Appendix, Table A1). Second, another way of addressing this issue is controlling for how the leader came to power, as this helps mitigate concerns that organizations *choose* leaders with certain traits strategically to attract foreign support. In particular, we control for whether the leader was (1) *ELECTED* or (2) *APPOINTED* – as opposed to taking power by force or founding the group – as the first two imply more group control over the leader selection process and thus more room for strategic choice.¹³ The inclusion of these variables produces no meaningful change in our results (see Appendix, Table A2). This helps assuage concerns about leaders’ experience abroad proxying for other underlying advantages.

We also replicate the results with alternate measures of the dependent variable in order to ameliorate any concerns about the specific measure we use. To begin with, we replace the NAGs measure of state sponsorship with a measure from the Revolutionary and Militant Organization Dataset (REVMOD) (Acosta 2019). REVMOD operationalizes state sponsorship in several ways including financial backing, overt diplomatic support, passing of intelligence, and troop support. San-Akca’s operationalization of state sponsors is similar but more lenient, since it also includes safe havens and tactical diplomatic support. Moreover, we also dichotomize the NAGs measure to ensure we are not overly reliant on cases with many sponsors and replicate the analysis using this binary NAGs-based measure of the dependent variable. We use OLS on the REVMOD measure since it is continuous, and logistic regression on the binary NAGs measure since it is dichotomous. These tests show that our key findings are consistent across multiple operationalizations of sponsorship (see Appendix, Table A3), enhancing confidence in their validity.

¹² Use of natural resources might invite support from countries that wish to gain access to the resources themselves. This measure comes from Rustad and Binningsbo (2012).

¹³ These variables are from ROLE.

Finally, we conduct an additional robustness check concerning data availability in *ROLE*. In particular, we replicate the main findings with the addition of a measure of leader prominence. This helps check the possibility that the historical record simply better documents rebel leaders with international experience (and their ability to find foreign support) due to their greater presence and prominence outside of their own country. To test this, we constructed a measure of rebel leader prominence based on the number of search results on the leader on *GOOGLE SCHOLAR*. The results of this test (see Appendix, Table A4) show that our core findings are not sensitive to the inclusion of this variable. In sum, the persistence of our findings across these robustness tests helps substantially boost confidence in our quantitative results.

From Study Abroad to Indian Support in the Nepalese Civil War

To further illuminate the links between a rebel leader's international experience and state support for rebellion, we provide a brief case study of India's involvement in the Nepalese Civil War (1996-2006). This helps more clearly elucidate the causal mechanisms at work in our theory via process-tracing methods (Van Evera 1997, 80), complementing our broader statistical results. In a nutshell, the case shows that a rebel leader's personal connections originating from his study abroad experience in India were integral to his ability to marshal Indian support during civil war, and thus reinforces our major findings. The case is also in many ways archetypal in our universe of cases: a young man from an otherwise unremarkable background wins a study abroad scholarship, lands in a politically vibrant city abroad, meets individuals from both the host country and his home country, becomes drawn to politics for the first time, immerses himself in political activism, takes on the cause of rebellion once back home, and uses personal connections from his international life experience to foster external support for his rebel movement. The case further

shows that alternative explanations centered on the rebel group's military strength and ideology, as well as India's geopolitical considerations, fail to account for the outcome.

We first provide a brief sketch of the course of the conflict. In 1996, the Maoists took up arms against the government of Nepal. They called for a communist revolution and vied to abolish the Nepalese monarchy and create more equal regional, caste, gender, and ethnic representation at the power center in Kathmandu. Within a few years, the king began to display increasingly dictatorial tendencies as he sought to quell the insurgency, culminating in his dismissal of the entire government and his assumption of full executive powers in the February 2005 royal coup. With the war at a stalemate by this time, this move compelled the incumbent parliamentary parties and the Maoists, erstwhile war opponents, to form an alliance (the Seven Party Alliance, or SPA) later that year *against* the monarchy. In this parliament-rebel pact, the Maoists indicated their willingness to participate in multiparty politics while the incumbent parties caved in to key Maoists demands, namely the abolishment of the monarchy and the creation of a republic and a constituent assembly that would draft a new constitution. With massive popular demonstrations in the capital and other towns in April 2006, the king finally capitulated and agreed to the SPA-Maoist demands. When a new interim SPA government was created the following month, one of its first moves was to abolish the 240-year-old monarchy and declare a republic. The government and the Maoists signed a comprehensive peace accord in November that year, bringing the civil war to an end and paving the way to a multiparty democratic system.¹⁴

Missing from this conventional account of the war is the considerable degree of informal diplomacy conducted by the Maoist rebels even as their forces fought against the Royal Nepalese Army. Throughout the course of the conflict, the Maoist leadership used its preexisting personal connections in Delhi to quietly sustain dialogue not only with the Indian political elite, but also

¹⁴ For a detailed account of the civil war, see Adhikari (2014).

with members of the Nepali government itself. The termination of the Nepalese war indeed could not be sufficiently explained without understanding the role of the Maoists' diplomacy with the governments of India and Nepal, diplomacy that was enabled by a leader's use of personal connections originating from his pre-rebel days.

Much of this backdoor diplomacy was conducted by the Maoists' second-in-command, Baburam Bhattarai. Bhattarai was born in 1954 in Gorkha District in western Nepal to a peasant family. Excelling through secondary school, he obtained a scholarship to study in India under the Colombo Plan, an intergovernmental initiative aimed at promoting cooperation among Asian countries.¹⁵ He earned a bachelor's degree in architecture at Chandigarh College of Architecture in 1977 and a master's degree at the Delhi School of Planning and Architecture in 1979 (where he would meet his future wife, Hsila Yami, who herself was to become a leading member of the Nepalese Maoists during the war). Bhattarai then went on to obtain a doctorate in Regional Development at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi in 1986 (Jha 2014, 13, Shrestha and Bhattarai 2017, 77). It was during his student days in India that Bhattarai became interested in Marxism. He created the All India Nepalese Students' Association, his "first foray into political activism" (Jha 2014, 13), and when he completed his doctoral studies, he "returned to Nepal a Marxist" (Jha 2014, 15). He joined a faction of the Left that called for armed revolt against the government, and launched the Maoist rebellion 10 years later.

Significantly, a number of Bhattarai's friends and acquaintances from his days at JNU went on to enter careers in Indian politics, civil service, and academia. Not only so, he remained in regular contact with them throughout the decades and into the civil war years (Bhushan 2016, 179, Adhikari 2014, 159). Having launched an insurgent war as a top rebel leader, Bhattarai first

¹⁵ "JNU Scholar Baburam Bhattarai Becomes Nepal's New Prime Minister," NDTV, August 28, 2011, <http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/jnu-scholar-baburam-bhattarai-becomes-nepals-new-prime-minister-465804>.

tapped into his Indian network in 2002, when he managed to contact the Indian Prime Minister's Office through S.D. Muni, an old acquaintance from JNU who had been an Indian diplomat and was a prominent scholar of Asian politics (Whitfield 2012, 167). Using this channel, Bhattarai managed to relay to the Indian government that the Maoists were firmly committed to good relations with India (Adhikari 2014, 15). Incrementally gaining the trust of Indian political elites, by 2003 Bhattarai was meeting with senior officials of India's external intelligence agency, the Research and Analysis Wing (RAW), as well as with members of the internal Intelligence Bureau (Muni 2012, 321, Jha 2014, 67, Adhikari 2014, 159). This was no small feat, given that many in the Indian security and intelligence establishments saw the Nepalese Maoists as actual or potential collaborators with India's own communist insurgents.¹⁶ The Maoists, after all, had been branded a terrorist organization by India and its major allies, including the United States and the United Kingdom, while Interpol had issued arrest warrants for top Maoist leaders, including Bhattarai.¹⁷ For India to be seen to be communicating with the Nepalese Maoists would have been politically explosive both domestically and internationally.

By 2005, Bhattarai was meeting with an influential leader of the Marxist Communist Party of India (CPI-M), Prakash Karat, solidifying further links with the Indian government.¹⁸ As S.D. Muni explains, the meeting of Bhattarai and Karat was arranged by Muni himself, as "Karat, Bhattarai, and I knew each other from our time at JNU. Prakash Karat was a student in my center, and Bhattarai used to visit me frequently when he was pursuing research work for his Ph.D." (Muni 2012, 327). Thereafter, Bhattarai was in regular contact with other leading Indian

¹⁶ Confidential cable, "Indian pundits press for new direction in Nepal policy," US Embassy - New Delhi, June 2, 2005, <http://wikileaks.wikimee.org/cable/2005/06/05NEWDELHI4131.html>.

¹⁷ Navin Singh Khadka, "Interpol Goes After Nepal Rebels," BBC News, November 28, 2003, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/3246066.stm.

¹⁸ Ranjit Devraj, "Maoist Overture to Enter Nepal's Mainstream Politics?" Inter Press Service, May 30, 2005, <http://www.ipsnews.net/2005/05/south-asia-maoist-overture-to-enter-nepals-mainstream-politics/>.

politicians, notable among them Sita Ram Yechury of the CPI-M, who would emerge as the primary link between the Maoists and the Indian government during peace negotiations (Adhikari 2014, 179, Muni 2012, 327). Supporters of this rebel diplomacy, such as Muni, reasoned that “no solution to Nepal’s problems is possible without taking the Maoists on board.”¹⁹ With the Nepalese monarchy’s increasing intransigence and autocratic maneuvers during the civil war, Delhi began to see the Maoists as part of a potential solution to Nepal’s political crisis and insurgency. As a Nepalese analyst reported at the time, “it is clear that after Bhattarai’s [2005] Delhi tour the Maoists have received unprecedented political recognition from the Indian government.”²⁰

While Bhattarai made his rounds in Delhi seeking to win favor with the Indian political establishment, he was also using his personal connections to meet with high-ranking members of the Nepalese government, representatives of the very adversary against which the Maoists were waging war. How common it is for rebel leaders to be in dialogue with representatives of the incumbent government in the midst of a civil war is an open empirical question. What is clear is that this dialogue, too, was critical to bringing about the Maoist-SPA agreement in 2005.

This wartime dialogue with the Nepalese government also had roots in Bhattarai’s study abroad experience. While in Delhi as a student, Bhattari had often visited B.P. Koirala, who had been Prime Minister of Nepal from 1959-1960 and a longtime leader of the Nepali Congress party and who regularly spent time in Delhi in the 1970s. Through him, Bhattarai had also become acquainted with Shekhar Koirala, B.P.’s nephew. Decades later, in the final phases of the civil war, Shekhar Koirala (by then a high-ranking member of Nepali Congress) would emerge as a top government negotiator with the Maoists, meeting personally with Bhattarai and the Maoists’ top leader, known as Prachanda, in June 2006. Bhattarai and Prachanda were also meeting with

¹⁹ Devraj, “Maoist Overture to Enter Nepal’s Mainstream Politics?”

²⁰ Sudheer Sharma, “Comrades in Delhi,” *Nepali Times*, Issue #251, June 10-16, 2005, <http://nepalitimes.com/news.php?id=420#.WJ49kJp04B>.

G.P. Koirala (brother of B.P and by 2006 a four-time Prime Minister of Nepal) in the lead up to the termination of the war. At their “historic” summer 2005 meeting, Prachanda is said to have assured Koirala that the Maoists were prepared to participate in a multiparty democratic system. In response, Koirala urged that the incumbent parties continue their dialogue with the Maoists toward a final settlement to the conflict, thus helping to mainstream the idea of incorporating the Maoists into a postwar government (International Crisis Group 2006, Jha 2014, 13, 51, 99, Adhikari 2014, 180).

Thus, through quiet yet active diplomacy, the Maoist leadership succeeded in convincing both the Indian political establishment and top officials of the Nepali government of the seriousness of their commitment to republicanism, participation in multiparty politics, and the formation of a constituent assembly. That India has historically played a dominant role in Nepali politics is a given (Jha 2012, 333). It was therefore crucial that the Maoists secured constructive relations with India even as it fought against the incumbent Nepalese government. It was with India’s blessing that in November 2005 the Seven Party Alliance and the Maoists signed a 12-point agreement – a draft of which had been seen by Indian officials prior to its formal adoption – indicating a joining of forces between the political parties and the Maoist rebels in opposing the king and restoring democracy in Nepal (Adhikari 2014, 180; Jha 2014, 102). Likewise, it was through extensive dialogue between government officials and the Maoists, especially throughout 2005, that erstwhile adversaries were able to gradually overcome mutual mistrust and identify common interests toward a resolution of the conflict. As shown, Bhattarai directly capitalized on personal connections from his university days in Delhi to win the trust of Indian and Nepali political elites. Building on these interpersonal ties, he enabled the Maoists to transform from a small rural insurgency into a mainstream political party, and their leaders from little known

armed activists to heads of state. It is perhaps no surprise that Bhattarai, as Nepal's prime minister in 2011, stated: "I am what I am because of JNU."²¹

Prominent alternative arguments for foreign support to rebels posit that external states are more likely to back the rebels if they are militarily strong and if they share ideological affinities (Siverson and Emmons 1991; Maoz 2012). Neither of these arguments finds support in this case. When Bhattarai began fostering backdoor diplomatic ties with India in the early 2000s, the Maoists were not a very strong military force. Having begun as a fringe communist group with only a few dozen fighters, they did succeed in recruiting in the countryside and growing in numbers. Nonetheless, they had neither external patrons providing material support nor lucrative access to natural resources, and rebel taxes on civilians could only bring in limited funds and resources when their popular base consisted of the rural poor. Neither were the Indian government and the Nepalese Maoists ideologically aligned. To the contrary, publicly the Maoists denounced "expansionist" India as among their foremost enemies, on par with the Nepalese monarchy and the parliamentary parties (Adhikari 2014, 159, 163-166). Even while Bhattarai was building secret diplomatic links with India using his JNU connections, the Indian police were arresting other top leaders of the Maoist rebels when they traveled in India (Adhikari 2014, 162). Fighting against their own domestic Maoist elements and seeking to maintain strong relations with the United States, India would have seen the Nepalese Maoists as a political and ideological inconvenience.

In sum, the Maoists were keenly aware of their need for India's political support in their drive to join mainstream politics in Nepal. To achieve this, a rebel leader successfully exploited his personal connections from his pre-rebel days as a student in India. Had it not been for these personal contacts between Bhattarai and Indian elites, it would have been extremely difficult for

²¹ Prashant Jha, "Alma Mater Triggers a Flood of Memories for Bhattarai," *The Hindu*, updated August 3, 2016, <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/alma-mater-triggers-a-flood-of-memories-for-bhattarai/article2568142.ece>.

India to back a group that it formally labeled a foreign terrorist organization, especially while its ally, the United States, was sending arms to the Nepalese military to fight against the insurgents. The evidence from this case is thus consistent with the findings in the quantitative analysis, helping elucidate its causal mechanisms and lending greater confidence to our theory. While this particular case focuses on a key “number two” figure in a rebel organization as opposed to the top leader per se, our theory is about rebel leaders and their transnational social networks and should therefore apply to a group’s top *leaders*, beyond the single individual at the helm.²² In this sense, we believe that it adds to the weight of evidence already presented and helps further substantiate and illustrate the study’s central claims.

Conclusion

The study of leader characteristics is well established in security studies and international relations, among other subfields, but is just beginning to receive serious treatment in scholarship on violent nonstate actors. In this paper, we argue that rebel leaders’ pre-leadership international experiences become a key resource that endows them with transnational networking advantages, paying dividends when they seek external support for their movements. Using data from the new ROLE database on rebel leader attributes and biographies (Authors), we found significant empirical support for these claims: rebel leaders’ international experiences, including studying abroad, working abroad, military training abroad, and exile, boost the number of foreign state sponsors that back their campaigns, even when accounting for key characteristics of their broader organizations and their state opponents.

²² Indeed, nothing in the theoretical argument limits its applicability solely to the top leader of a rebel organization, although we might expect the personal experiences and networks of the top leader to have the biggest effects given that he or she wields the most influence in most cases. In this sense, the fact that a second-in-command figure’s transnational ties had such key impacts in the Nepali case may be even *stronger* evidence for our argument.

These results offer important theoretical implications. First, we found that individual rebel leader attributes explain foreign state sponsorship of rebellion as much as the organization- and state-level factors often believed to dominate such decisions. This points toward the wider influence of rebel leaders in conflict, leading us to ask: what other processes and outcomes are shaped by the individual experiences and endowments of rebel leaders in war? And what other advantages do their preexisting international social networks confer on these leaders as they enter violent politics? Future studies on nonstate actors involved in contentious politics may be able to expand the explanatory power of their models by accounting for leader-level attributes like these, thus bringing the role of rebel leaders *as individuals* into the mainstream of contemporary conflict studies. Additionally, the study points to the importance of studying the international *social* context in which rebel organizations operate. Just as recent research has illuminated how local social networks shape violent rebellion (e.g., Parkinson 2013), so do individual leaders' transnational connections impact the strategies and capabilities of their organizations once war is underway. Understanding the elite networks and relations running through the world of violent politics is thus a valuable, if challenging, research frontier.

The results also point toward some critical policy implications. From a conflict resolution perspective, they suggest that rebel leaders' preexisting social networks from earlier life experiences are a potentially valuable and under-utilized peace-making asset. If such connections can be leveraged to secure military advantage and support in war, can they not also be exploited for diplomatic pressure and support aiming at peace? Indeed, the Nepali case hints at this potential, given that the primary means of Indian support was *de facto* diplomatic recognition and pressure on both parties to negotiate toward a peaceful political arrangement. Meanwhile, from the perspective of US foreign policy specifically, the findings also offer a cautionary note. Given the

strong effects of international life experiences and transnational social networks on the part of rebel leaders in securing external backing for their organizations, they suggest that countries like the US may be vulnerable to supporting rebel organizations abroad due to personal lobbying or influence, even when it may not be in their national interest or the wider interest of the international community. This suggests that policy-makers should exercise caution in dealing with rebel organizations whose leaders have deep personal ties to those close to power and critically evaluate the costs and benefits of arming or otherwise backing their campaigns.²³

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²³ One prominent rebel leader today who may fit this narrative is Khalifa Haftar, the former general under Muammar Qadhafi who leads the rebel Libyan National Army vying for control of post-Qadhafi Libya. Haftar's widely reputed ties to power in Washington – dating to his two decades living outside DC after his wartime capture and exile in the 1980s – may be helping him secure US support. See, e.g., Russ Baker, “Is General Khalifa Haftar the CIA's Man in Libya?” *Business Insider*, April 22, 2011. <https://www.businessinsider.com/the-cias-man-in-libya-2011-4>

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