

**Friends in the Profession:  
Rebel Leaders, International Social Networks, and External Support for Rebellion**

Reyko Huang  
Texas A&M University

Daniel Silverman  
Carnegie Mellon University

Benjamin Acosta  
Arcturus Intelligence

**Abstract:** What drives foreign state support for rebel organizations? While scholars have examined the geopolitical and organizational factors that fuel foreign support, the role of rebel leaders in this process remains under-studied. In this article, we propose that rebel leaders' personal backgrounds shape their ability to obtain foreign support during conflict. In particular, we argue that rebel leaders with significant prior *international experiences* – including study abroad, work abroad, military training abroad, and exile – are at an advantage in securing wartime external 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 gain prominence in their respective societies, allowing them to build interpersonal social networks across borders. Such networks offer key points of contact when rebel leaders later seek foreign backing. We test this theory using data from the new Rebel Organization Leaders (ROLE) database, finding robust support for our argument as well as the broader role of rebel leader attributes in explaining external support. Our results underscore the value of incorporating individual leaders and their social networks more squarely into the study of modern war.

**Author's Note:** We are grateful to our outstanding team of research assistants who helped build the ROLE database, making this study possible: Samira Abunemeh, Sarah Ascol, Daniel Bolich, Jure Erlic, Denzel Johnson, Joseph Karle, Sarah Knight, Casey Knott, Raaga Kalva, Eli Mitrani, Amanda Rafael, Ihsan Saleh, Elly Shein, Elizabeth Smith, Devin Vanstone, Andrea Winn, Nathan Seder, and especially Joel Jaffe. For valuable discussions and comments, we thank Clifford Bob, Mike Desch, Morgan Kaplan, Zachariah Mampilly, Juan Masullo, Nathalie Mendez, Madison Schramm, and Jun Sudduth, as well as participants at the Rebel Diplomacy II Workshop at UC Santa Barbara and its convener, Bridget Coggins; the International Security Center seminar at the University of Notre Dame; the Leiden University Workshop in Political Science; the Glasscock Center for Humanities Research seminar and the History Department's War, Violence, and Society Working Group at Texas A&M University; the Politics and Strategy Research Workshop at Carnegie Mellon University, and a panel at the 2020 American Political Science Association meeting.

**Data Statement:** The data underlying this article are available on the ISQ Dataverse, at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/isq>

**Funding Sources:** The Scowcroft Institute of International Affairs at Texas A&M University and The Ohio State University Political Science Department supported data collection for this project.

In this article, 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; Aydin 2010; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunninghamman 2011; San-Akca 2016). In contrast, scholars have largely neglected the role of elite 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 drive state sponsorship of rebellion, but such sponsorship 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 their "careers" in violent politics, including in world capitals – from Paris to Cairo – that are hubs of ideological ferment and agitation. These experiences 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 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, they begin seeking external state support.

A study of the transnational elite social networks underpinning state-rebel alliances offers several fresh implications for conflict scholarship. First, it helps establish states and rebel organizations 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 et al. 2016, 285) contrasts with prevailing approaches, many of which examine rebel groups’ *organizational* ties but do not probe their *social* interconnectedness at the elite level. We aim to show that many rebel leaders operate within 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 organizations’ capacity may thus need to broaden their scope to include measures of rebel “leadership capital” (Nepstad and Bob 2006), including capital deriving from leaders’ transnational social ties.

Third, if outcomes that 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 aligns with recent studies suggesting that the nature of rebel organizations' local and domestic social networks shape their wartime behavior in important ways (Daly 2012, Parkinson 2013, Staniland 2014, Shesterinina 2016). Here, we demonstrate that rebel leaders' *transnational* social ties likewise help explain their wartime trajectories.

The article 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 Rebel 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 conclude by discussing the implications of our findings.

## **Rebel Leaders and International Social Networks**

A rich literature emphasizes the reliance of armed nonstate actors on foreign state sponsorship. In explaining variation in external state support for rebel groups in civil wars, studies largely 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 work has yielded, it has largely neglected two dimensions of violent conflict which can shed new light on external support and on conflict dynamics more broadly.

First, in the large literature examining rebel organizational behavior, few scholars analyze the role of rebel leader characteristics.<sup>1</sup> The omission is stark, given numerous studies of heads of

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<sup>1</sup> While few studies examine the attributes of *individual* rebel leaders – though see Doctor (2020) for a key exception – conflict research is increasingly turning to the study of rebel *leadership* more broadly (i.e., its ideology, selection

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 while in office (e.g., Jervis 1976; Conger and Kanungo 1987; Peterson et al. 2003; Stoessinger 2005; Hudson 2005; Goemans, Gleditsch, and Chiozza 2009; Saunders 2011; McDermott 2014; Horowitz, Stam, and Ellis 2015, Kertzer and Rathbun 2015; Gift and Krcmaric 2017; Furhmann 2020).<sup>2</sup> Within civil wars and campaigns of armed resistance, the prominent place held by leaders such as Yoweri Museveni, Abimael Guzman, John Garang, Massoud Barzani, Joseph Kony, and Usama bin Laden in scholarly accounts suggests that these individuals strongly shaped the course of the wars in which their organizations 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 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 pays 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, Arjona 2016). Yet, rebel social networks typically span well beyond their local and domestic

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process, turnover, removal, and incentive structure). See Straus (2015), Tiernay (2015), Prorok (2016, 2018), Hoover Green (2016), Jordan (2019), and Cunningham and Sawyer (2019).

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

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 social networks for domestic mobilizational purposes, so, too, do their leaders often tap into their international social connections to pursue their wartime international objectives.

Bringing these insights together, this study proposes that individual rebel leaders' personal experiences abroad serve as key opportunities for transnational social networking, and further, that these networks provide valuable contacts when leaders seek external support for their armed movements. 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.

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). Using 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. 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 emerge from 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 1966 Tricontinental Conference in Havana 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). Research on insurgency and rebellion shows that obtaining external state support is one of the most important ways in which rebel organizations can “level the playing field” and boost their chances of prevailing or at least avoiding an immediate defeat (e.g., Byman 2005, Salehyan 2007). It is intuitive, then, that rebel leaders would seek to capitalize on whatever resources they have at their disposal to obtain foreign state backing, including existing 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 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, the experience offers them numerous opportunities to make new foreign interpersonal connections. We argue that these connections often become the roots of wartime external support for rebellion.

Consider study abroad. As shown in education research, studying abroad is an experience marked by active and heightened social networking with individuals of diverse origins, as students develop new friendships with peers from their own country, other countries, and the host country (Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune 2011; Gu and Schweisfurth 2015). This is perhaps especially clear in certain cities – from New York to Paris and Lisbon to Dar-es Salaam – which have historically played host to numerous foreign students in specific periods of time. These key urban nodes were concentrated sites of networking for foreign students, allowing them many occasions to network with others who would, like them, later enter the world of (mainstream or revolutionary) politics. Examples of these dynamics influencing future rebel leaders abound. Kamal Jumblatt, the 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). Likewise, 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 they viewed as better suited to the struggle of African anti-colonialism (Rebaka 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 major African capitals (Reno 2011, 132-133).

Similarly, scholarship on migration and exile shows that the experience of living in exile is often marked by significant intra- and inter-ethnic social networking (Hauff and Vaglum 1997,

Williams 2006, Engebrigtsen 2007). While some exiled communities become more integrated into their host societies than others, exiles and refugees are frequently active agents in building new social networks (Fuglerud and Engebrigtsen 2006, Williams 2006). Like foreign students, exiles have often concentrated in certain urban centers in specific time periods. For example, a panoply of political exiles came to call Algiers their home during the decolonization era, quickly turning the city into a “Mecca of Revolution” (Byrne 2016); Maputo in newly independent Mozambique became a base for exiles from other Lusophone countries such as Angola and East Timor (Ramos-Horta 1987, 104); and Cairo continues to be a major hub for Sudanese and Libyan exiled communities (Fabos 2008, 33; Baldinetti 2010). Having fled home on account of their political affiliations, individuals in these multinational host cities often readily co-mingled with other political exiles (Harpviken and Lischer 2013). Examples of individuals who were exiled prior to leading a rebellion include Jalal Talabani, head of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), who, along with many other Kurds, fled Iraq for Syria;<sup>3</sup> and Abdul Fattah Ismail, leader of the Yemeni Socialist Party, who was exiled in Moscow prior to the 1986 civil war in South Yemen (Lackner 2017, 686). Both leaders would later attempt to mobilize foreign support from the countries in which they had lived.

Working abroad is another experience that allows individuals the opportunity to acquire new international social networks. Most individuals assume leadership of armed movements after gaining some work experience, whether in academia, business, government, or other sectors (Acosta, Huang, and Silverman 2018). These experiences often involve spending extended periods of time abroad. For instance, prior to taking up leadership of the Congolese Rally for Democracy (RCD) in the Second Congo War, Ernest Wamba dia Wamba spent many years as a history professor at the University of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, having previously taught at Brandeis

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<sup>3</sup> “Iraq’s Talabani Visits Assad Seeking Closer Ties,” Reuters, January 21, 2007, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-syria-talabani/iraqs-talabani-visits-assad-seeking-closer-ties-idUSL1456599420070114>.

University, Harvard University, and Boston College in the U.S. (Vazquez and Wamba dia Wamba 2000). He was well-networked within academic circles, serving as president of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA), a pan-African research organization, until a few years prior to his transition to insurgent leadership in 1998.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, many would-be rebel leaders receive military training abroad, whether in formal military academies or in more informal training camps run by states or by nonstate organizations. Here again, certain locales and institutions have served as centers of militant and revolutionary learning in specific eras, serving as key meeting points for future state and rebel elites.<sup>5</sup> In the 1940s and 50s, for example, a range of leftist leaders from diverse countries joined study tours in Mao's China, including Abimael Guzman, later head of Peru's Sendero Luminoso, and cadres of PAIGC, the organization that led the independence movement for Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde (Rothwell 2012, Weigert 2011, 15). Others trained in Western military institutions, like Paul Kagame, leader of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF), who trained at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in Fort Leavenworth, Kansas prior to taking up armed rebellion against Rwanda (Soudan 2015, 42-43). Beyond formal military academies, Libya under Muammar Qaddafi and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) are known for having hosted numerous foreign activists, militants, and revolutionaries for military training, some of whom formed lasting connections that endured well into their wartime years (Hoffman 1998; Bloom 2005; Reno 2011).

Whether stemming from foreign study, work, exile, or military training, we thus argue that transnational social networks facilitate rebel groups' ability to secure foreign support once war is imminent or underway. Simply put, rebel leaders often search for state sponsors by personally

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<sup>4</sup> See the CODESRIA website at <https://www.codesria.org/spip.php?article3068>.

<sup>5</sup> On how U.S. military training of foreign officers leads to "long-lasting friendships" between American and foreign military personnel, see Martinez Machain (2021, 318).

mobilizing their prior foreign contacts. As the vignettes below illustrate, this “tapping” of foreign contacts can occur in various ways. Some rebel leaders are already acquainted with an external state’s top decision-makers and directly appeal to them for support; others have contacts among external states’ high-level officials or diplomats and seek to work their way up to the top leadership through them; and still others are networked in business or other professional circles with some connection to external state power and thus take more indirect approaches to soliciting support. This argument is consistent with 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).

Our argument also builds neatly on existing work that approaches the problem from a state-centric perspective. Indeed, prior work on state sponsorship of rebellion highlights the “principal-agent problem” facing states as the key barrier to backing rebels: states must delegate authority to rebel organizations, but know it can be abused for the rebels’ own ends (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011). In the words of one key 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). Personal ties can help ease these issues. State leaders are more likely to see a rebel group as a “good, competent agent” if they are personally acquainted with its leadership from past experience or are otherwise connected with rebel leaders through a few minor degrees of separation. For instance, one early state to back the Palestinian cause was Algeria, which functioned 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." In this sense, transnational personal ties can not only help rebels find external support, but also help states pick reliable proxies.

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 transnational social networks compared to leaders who lack such experience. Experiences living abroad open 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 micro-foundations of foreign sponsorship are typically absent from dominant theories focused on international geopolitical rivalries or on the organizational characteristics of rebel groups. Yet, reflecting how seemingly small events can result in large outcomes (Pierson 2000), they are often crucial for gaining a fuller understanding of more macro-level political developments.

Some caveats about our theory are in order before proceeding. First, we do not argue that rebel leaders' international experiences and contacts are the only factors shaping foreign support for rebellion. On the contrary, we recognize that such foreign support decisions are often shaped by geopolitical imperatives, ideological linkages, rebel organizational dynamics, the domestic politics of the potential sponsor, and many other factors. Indeed, we find evidence in our quantitative analysis that geopolitical and state-level factors such as interstate rivalry, international power, and democracy all matter in addition to leader attributes, and our findings should be situated alongside these other levels of analysis. Second, we do not argue that pre-leadership international experiences always translate into future state support. Rather, in light of the many other forces that shape whether states back rebellions, we argue that, all else equal, such experiences boost the likelihood

of obtaining foreign support (and of obtaining more and greater support than would otherwise be the case without them). We expect that there are cases in which leaders have a personal history with a potential patron but either do not want its support or are unable to obtain it due to overriding geopolitical, ideological, organizational, or other considerations.

### **Illustrative Cases: Pathways to Foreign Support**

The ways in which rebel leaders' foreign contacts from their time abroad become sources of external support during violent conflict are as varied as their respective biographies. Nevertheless, we document a clear pattern: that experiences from foreign study, work, exile, and military training can all lead to the development of transnational social networks, facilitating leaders' later search for external state support for rebellion. Central to this causal process are the interpersonal relations future rebel leaders build while abroad – relations which may seem to them unremarkable at the time, and yet later yield political benefits. Here, we provide brief cases that illustrate the link between rebel leaders' earlier international experiences and wartime external state support for each of the four foreign experiences described in our theory. As elaborated in the empirical analysis section, and in keeping with existing studies, we consider external support to include the provision of material resources such as funding, weapons, training, and logistical support, as well as intelligence and diplomatic support (see San Akca 2016; Acosta 2019).

*Study abroad:* For Sudan People's Liberation Army (SPLA) leader John Garang, staunch American support for his secessionist campaign against Sudan – which persisted through four successive U.S. administrations – all began with his time abroad as a student at Iowa State University. While there pursuing a Ph.D. in economics in the late 1970s, Garang befriended a fellow doctoral student by the name of 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 U.S. lawmakers for South Sudan's independence through the 1980s and 90s (Hamilton 2012). Calling themselves "the Council," D'Silva and the others in this group "all exerted extensive influence in Washington. They smoothed the path of visiting south Sudanese [and] help[ed] to shape U.S. legislation" (Moorcraft 2015, 132-133). For example, it was due to the efforts of "the Council" that in 1989 Garang secured his first visit to Washington as leader of the SPLA to meet with U.S. officials (Hamilton 2012; Perlez 1989). Garang's personal engagement with American officials took off from there: he went on to make many visits to Washington and was soon "on a first-name basis with presidents, secretaries of state and members of Congress" (Lacey 2005).

*Exile:* As leader of the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) in the Rwandan Civil War, Paul Kagame and his fighters received weapons and logistical support from neighboring Uganda. Historical accounts attribute this support to the close relationship Kagame had established with Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni during the former's years in exile in Uganda. Like thousands of other Tutsis in the period following Rwandan independence, Kagame fled Rwanda with his family at a young age and settled in Uganda as a refugee. In his youth he became involved in the National Resistance Army (NRA), a Ugandan rebel group led by Museveni, serving as an intelligence officer in the organization for six years until its successful overthrow of the incumbent government in 1986. This experience brought Kagame personally close to Museveni; he became "one of Museveni's close *protégés*" (Kinzer 2008, 45) and continued to be "mentored" by him following Museveni's transition from rebel leader to Ugandan president (Waugh 2004, 24-26). Kagame later

recalled: “At the time there was a lot to admire [Museveni] for and good reason to be associated with him.... I learned a lot from him” (quoted in Soudan 2015, 33, 35). When the Rwandan Civil War began in 1990 with Kagame as head of the RPF, Museveni allowed RPF forces to operate in Ugandan bases and supplied weapons to them (Kinzer 2008, 80, 102). This support was never public, as Museveni was courting international aid at this time and found the RPF invasion of Rwanda personally “embarrassing,” having already been accused of allowing too much Rwandan influence in his army (Kinzer 2008, 56, 101-102). He “tried to maintain at least a pretense of neutrality” as “the risk would have been too great for Kampala if RPF soldiers had been caught on its territory” (Prunier 1998, 131). Notwithstanding such political risks, Museveni and his officials chose to quietly back RPF fighters since many of them enjoyed “close personal ties to RPF commanders.... This unofficial tie to Uganda was a great asset to the rebel force” (Kinzer 2008, 102; see also Prunier 2009, 13-14). Years later, as Rwandan president, Kagame publicly thanked Museveni for allowing Rwandan exiles a role in the NRA war and later helping the RPF to victory in the Rwandan Civil War (*The New Times*, July 5, 2009).

*Work abroad:* Foreign state sponsorship of Hasan di Tiro’s Free Aceh Movement (GAM) rebellion against Indonesia in the mid-1970s also has origins in his earlier international experiences. In particular, prior to launching GAM, di Tiro ran an international business venture that took him to various parts of the world. If his own account is to be believed, he developed extensive international connections in the process (Aspinall 2006, 44):

*I had entrée to the highest business and governmental circles in many countries: the United States, Europe, Middle East, Africa and not least Southeast Asia...I have close business relationships with top 50 US corporations in fields of petrochemicals, shipping, construction, aviation, manufacturing and food processing industries.*

Hyperbole or not, what is clear is that di Tiro launched his secessionist movement by exploiting his wealth of personal contacts abroad. He traveled across the United States and Europe in the early days of GAM, tapping into acquaintances from his time as a student in New York and Texas and moving on to contacts from his international business engagements in search of external sponsors for his secessionist movement. These efforts bore fruit: through an acquaintance of his from his business days who had since become Libya's ambassador to Sweden, di Tiro obtained Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi's agreement to train Acehnese fighters (Aspinall 2006, 105-106; Schulze 2006, 237).<sup>6</sup> According to Aspinall (2006, 106-107), the training in Libya ultimately "had a great impact" on GAM's operations.

*Military training abroad:* If GAM recruits trained in Libya thanks to di Tiro's international business ties, for others such as Foday Sankoh, eventual leader of the RUF of Sierra Leone, guerrilla training in Qaddafi's Libya itself became a site of valuable networking. In the 1980s Qaddafi famously invited numerous revolutionaries to train in his camps, which the historian Stephen Ellis (2001, 71-72) characterized as "the Harvard and Yale of a whole generation of African revolutionaries." One individual Sankoh befriended there was Charles Taylor, who was soon to lead the National Patriotic Front for Liberia (NPFL). Sources, including prosecutors at Taylor's war crimes trial in The Hague, consistently point to the meeting of Taylor and Sankoh in Libya as the origin of a partnership in armed politics that would come to define the course of West African politics for the next decade (Sesay 2011; Keen 2005, 37; Reno 2011, 182; Gberie 2005, 52-53; Ellis 2001, 93).<sup>7</sup> Sankoh's RUF, still nascent, unorganized and unclear in its aims, soon became acquainted

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<sup>6</sup> This account is consistent with a separate study noting that "[w]hat is known about Libyan connections with revolutionary organizations...suggests that they always operate through a contact person, through whom they channel funds and issue directives about 'revolutionary assignments'" (Abdullah 1998, 215).

<sup>7</sup> While multiple sources mention that Taylor and Sankoh met during training in Libya (e.g. Keen 2005, 37 and Ellis 2001, 93), Abdullah (1998, 220) suggests that Sankoh may have first come into contact with an NPFL official in Freetown, who then introduced him to Taylor, while Gberie (2005, 52) states that the two first met in Ghana in 1987 and then again in Libya in 1988. Regardless, all sources mention the Libya training as a key (re)connection.

with other NPFL officials, and in 1989, one year after Sankoh and Taylor's Libya meeting, the two organizations made a deal on mutual support (Abdullah 1998, 218-220; Ellis 2001, 71). Having secured Qaddafi's backing and Sankoh's aid, Taylor returned to Liberia to lead the NPFL in the First Liberian Civil War. Two years later, it was Taylor's turn to contribute NPFL troops to Sankoh's RUF as the latter launched its own war against the Sierra Leonean government. Liberian military backing of the RUF continued once Taylor was elected Liberian president in 1997; in return, Taylor obtained huge shares of the RUF's diamond profits (Keen 2005). Taylor himself acknowledged in a 1998 BBC interview: "It is known by everyone that I have been friendly with Foday Sankoh for many years before the revolution" [i.e. the civil war in Sierra Leone] (International Justice Monitor 2010). Referring to Taylor, Sankoh, and two other militant leaders who formed "an 'axis' connected to Gaddafi," an observer noted in 2001 that the "alliances formed then [in Libya] still shape the politics and wars of West Africa, and there are growing indications that...Libya is in the thick of regional tensions fomented by the alumni of its training camps" (Farah 2001).

These cases illustrate how rebel leaders use interpersonal connections forged in earlier life experiences abroad to mobilize external material and political support for armed rebellion. While such experiences are far from the only driver of foreign state support, the vignettes strongly suggest that they can facilitate that support and demonstrate the plausibility of the argument on a range of modern cases.

### **New Data on Rebel Leaders' Experiences Abroad**

Before empirically testing our argument, we first present descriptive data on rebel leaders' pre-leadership international experiences. In order to do so, we use the Rebel Organization Leaders

(ROLE) database (Acosta, Huang, and Silverman 2018), which provides novel and detailed biographical information on 488 top leaders of rebel organizations in civil wars that were active between 1980 and 2011. The list of rebel leaders in ROLE is based on a study by Prorok (2016), which identifies 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 offers a rich source of information on the characteristics, backgrounds, and experiences of contemporary rebel leaders.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of rebel leaders in the database who had each of the four key international experiences – study abroad, work abroad, military training abroad, and exile – before assuming leadership.<sup>8</sup> Clearly, international life experiences are relatively common among the ranks of rebel leaders; prior to their leadership tenure, 38% of rebel leaders active between 1980-2011 had studied abroad; 27% had received military training abroad; 25% had lived in exile; and 15% had worked abroad. Overall, 60% of rebel leaders had one of these four international experiences before their leadership tenure. These data suggest that the international experiences of the leaders in the vignettes presented above were not unusual, and support our argument that many rebel leaders launch violent rebellion already endowed with international contacts deriving from their experiences abroad.

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<sup>8</sup> ROLE codes a 1 for *study abroad* if the individual received formal schooling at any education level outside of their home country before rebel leadership. Where ambiguous – as the term “abroad” may be unclear for leaders who were born in one country but grew up elsewhere – we code a 1 if they attended any level of schooling for any length of time in two or more countries. Thus, if a leader was born in Country 1, moved to Country 2 at the age of 2 (prior to the start of any schooling), and eventually attended university in Country 2, the leader will *not* have studied abroad. Similarly, ROLE codes *work abroad* as 1 for any extended professional experience outside of the individual's home country (i.e. country of birth of country of long-term residence) before leading rebellion. *Exile* is coded 1 if the individual fled their home country for an extended period of time. *Military training abroad* is coded 1 for having received military training from a foreign state army or nonstate organization.

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

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

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

### **Empirical Analysis**

We now move to build on the qualitative and descriptive evidence presented above and quantitatively test our theory of rebel leaders' international experiences and wartime external state support for rebellion. In order to do so, we combine the abovementioned data on rebel leaders from ROLE with organization-, conflict- and state-level data to gauge the effects of individual leaders' attributes alongside other key drivers of external state support.

#### *Dependent Variable: State Sponsorship*

The outcome variable in this 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. 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 ties, suggests that those with international experiences should be able to secure more foreign state sponsorship. In the primary results section below, 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 standard deviation of 1.39.

To ensure robustness, we also replicate the analysis on additional operationalizations of the outcome later in the paper, including a dichotomous measure of foreign support, a categorical measure of strength of support, support from host countries (those the leader actually visited) separately from non-host countries, and measures from another prominent dataset on external support for rebellion in addition to the *Dangerous Companions* data. All of these operationalizations yield substantively similar core results.

### *Individual-Level Explanatory Variables*

Our primary explanatory variables measure whether the rebel leader spent time studying abroad, working abroad, training militarily abroad, or living in exile before their leadership tenure. All four of these binary measures tap into the same overarching construct of experience abroad, which enables international social networking prior to rebel leadership. Since we are agnostic about which one(s) matter the most, in our main results we combine them into a five-point additive index capturing the *INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE* of rebel leaders.<sup>910</sup>

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 are more likely to pursue such experiences. Further, the factors that drive leaders

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<sup>9</sup> The four measures are later separated and tested individually.

<sup>10</sup> There is wide variation on this measure, including a number of leaders in the sample with no major *pre-leadership* international experiences. Examples include Walid Jumblatt, the Lebanese Druze leader, Muqtada Al-Sadr, the Iraqi Shi'a militia leader, and Johnny and Luther Htoo, leaders of the God's Army organization in Myanmar.

to seek international experiences, such as educational attainment, might also affect external states' decision to support the rebel group. We therefore control for other rebel leader attributes in order to better isolate the effect of international life experience from other individual-level factors. In our base models, we include *LEADER AGE*, as older leaders may have more experience abroad and be viewed as more reliable; the leader's *EDUCATION* level, since it is possible that more educated individuals choose to go abroad and are also more appealing partners; and whether the individual has had *MILITARY EXPERIENCE* as well as *COMBAT EXPERIENCE*, both of which might plausibly be linked to a greater likelihood of international experiences (particularly military training abroad) as well as external state support. Later, we control for a number of additional leader characteristics in the robustness checks section (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 variables 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 features 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 sponsorship. In particular, rebels far weaker than the state are unlikely to receive any 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 variable for whether the rebels have a *TRANSNATIONAL CONSTITUENCY*. Transnational groups sharing ties with the rebels – like the Kurds with the PKK – are likely to boost foreign sponsorship by amplifying international advocacy and pressure on their behalf from abroad. The sixth and final variable is an indicator for whether the organization has any *TERRITORIAL CONTROL*. Groups that control territory may be more able to fund their campaigns domestically and thus resist foreign support and the attendant agency costs that often accompany 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. Any individual rebel movement in a conflict with multiple groups may find it more difficult to obtain external support, as a would-be foreign patron has more options and may choose to sponsor one of several groups to fight against the government. Second, we include the key variable of whether the government is in an *INTERNATIONAL RIVALRY*. States in international rivalries may face more external state 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 (e.g., Maoz and San-Akca 2012). Lastly, we include the real *GDP PER CAPITA*, *POLITY SCORE*, and *CINC SCORE* (Composite Index of National Capabilities score) of each country in order to capture other attributes that may encourage or discourage proxy warfare against it. Richer and stronger states are expected to face less sponsorship of their rebel opponents due to international deterrence, while more democratic states are expected to see less 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) regressions with data at the organization-year level and robust standard errors. The *INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE* index is the primary explanatory variable of interest. Model 1 shows only the leader-level factors, Model 2 only the organization-level factors, Model 3 only the state-level factors, and Model 4 all three levels combined. The models provide clear support for our central argument. Rebel leaders' pre-leadership experiences abroad are strongly associated with the number of foreign states that back their organizations. This effect is quite significant in substantive terms, with each level of the five-point international experience scale yielding about 0.6 more foreign sponsors for the rebel organization (specifically, 0.56-0.63, depending on the model). As elaborated below in our analysis of standardized effect sizes, its impact rivals or surpasses the other most influential variables in the model.

**Table 1: Predicting State Sponsorship of Rebel Organizations**

	(M1) State Sponsors	(M2) State Sponsors	(M3) State Sponsors	(M4) State Sponsors
<b><u>Leader Level</u></b>				
Leader age	0.01*** (0.00)			0.01*** (0.00)
Education	-0.27*** (0.04)			-0.32*** (0.04)
Military experience	-0.19 (0.10)			-0.39*** (0.10)
Combat experience	-0.46*** (0.09)			-0.45*** (0.09)
International experience	0.56*** (0.06)			0.63*** (0.05)
<b><u>Organization Level</u></b>				
Rebels much weaker		0.08 (0.08)		0.06 (0.09)
Rebels strong		-0.59** (0.22)		-0.92* (0.38)
Centralized command		0.10 (0.12)		-0.34* (0.15)
Government support		0.18*** (0.04)		0.03 (0.05)
Transnational constituency		0.29*** (0.05)		0.21*** (0.05)
Territorial control		-0.08 (0.06)		0.10 (0.08)
Multiple groups		-0.17* (0.08)		-0.61*** (0.11)
<b><u>State Level</u></b>				
International rivalry			0.57*** (0.06)	0.62*** (0.08)
GDP per capita			0.00*** (0.00)	0.00*** (0.00)
Polity score			-0.01 (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
CINC score			-0.27*** (0.03)	-0.19*** (0.05)
Constant	0.96*** (0.20)	0.77*** (0.16)	0.54*** (0.06)	1.02*** (0.29)
Observations	1,271	1,735	1,483	977
R-squared	0.15	0.05	0.15	0.39

*Note: DV is number of sponsors per organization-year. Results from OLS regressions with robust standard errors. \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$*

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 often emphasized in the existing literature (e.g., Salehyan, Cunningham, and Gleditsch 2011, Maoz

and San-Akca 2012). A comparison of  $R^2$  values across these models helps drive this point home. The five leader-level factors included in the model account for 15% of the variation in the number of sponsors, while the seven organization-level factors and four state-level factors used by Salehyan, Cunningham, and Gleditsch (2011) account for 5% and 15% of the total variation, respectively. This suggests that the experiences and attributes of individual rebel leaders are an essential part of the state sponsorship phenomenon, and that they should be incorporated into our models alongside more traditional state- and organization-level variables.

Other findings are notable as well. At the leader level, education, military experience, and combat experience are all associated with less foreign sponsorship, while age is linked with more. These findings not only reinforce the relevance of leader-level factors more broadly, but also cast doubt on alternative interpretations of our central result. Indeed, one might worry that our primary explanatory variable – international experience – proxies for other positive attributes that leaders may hold. For example, perhaps more ambitious or capable would-be rebel leaders are more likely to go abroad. Yet, as seen above, other indicators of leader achievement (like education) are linked negatively to foreign sponsorship, suggesting that foreign sponsors value agents that are reliable and trustworthy over those with talent or ambition. The negative effects of education and military experience are particularly notable, given that study *abroad* and military training *abroad* are both positively associated with external support (as shown in Table 2 below). This suggests that the positive effects of international experiences have little to do with their substantive components, and far more to do with their having been on foreign soil.

Meanwhile, at the organizational level, rebel strength and centralization are both associated with less support, which may again reflect the costs of embracing foreign influence, as stronger and more centralized groups appear to eschew it. We also find that movements with transnational

constituencies gain more sponsors, as found in Salehyan, Cunningham, and Gleditsch (2011). And at the state level, interstate rivalries lead to more sponsors, replicating a key result in the literature – as backing a rebellion against a rival power is often seen as a cheaper substitute for open war (Maoz and San-Akca 2012). In contrast, higher CINC scores reduce foreign sponsorship, suggesting that there are also international deterrence dynamics at work. Overall, the results align relatively well with some of the key findings in the literature, lending credence to our models while also showing that there are important variables at every level of analysis.

### **Figure 2: Plot of Beta Coefficients from Full Model of State Sponsorship**

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

*Note: DV is number of sponsors per organization-year. Results from OLS regressions with robust standard errors.*

To examine the substantive impact of our variables, Figure 2 shows the Beta coefficients from the preferred model (M4). These coefficients represent the effect of a one-standard-deviation increase 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 vastly different scales). The Beta coefficients show that experience abroad has the strongest effect of any variable on the number of state sponsors, surpassing the impact of all other predictors in the model. This reinforces the picture gleaned above, showing that while other factors such as global geopolitics (i.e., international rivalries and CINC scores) and the strength and reach of rebel organizations (i.e., strong rebels and transnational audiences) exert significant effects on state sponsorship, the international life experience of rebel leaders is one of the – if not the – most potent factors in facilitating such arrangements.

## Additional Observable Implications

**Table 2: Disaggregating the Different Types of International Experience**

	State Sponsors				
<b><u>Leader Level</u></b>					
Leader age	0.02*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.02*** (0.00)	0.01** (0.00)
Education	-0.25*** (0.04)	-0.22*** (0.04)	-0.14*** (0.04)	-0.14*** (0.03)	-0.32*** (0.04)
Military experience	-0.28** (0.11)	-0.40*** (0.10)	-0.64*** (0.12)	-0.29** (0.10)	-0.34** (0.11)
Combat experience	-0.35*** (0.10)	-0.22** (0.08)	-0.20* (0.10)	-0.32*** (0.09)	-0.44*** (0.08)
Study abroad	0.70*** (0.11)				0.48*** (0.10)
Work abroad		1.45*** (0.19)			1.09*** (0.19)
Military training abroad			0.75*** (0.13)		0.43*** (0.11)
Exile				0.71*** (0.10)	0.67*** (0.10)
<b><u>Organization Level</u></b>					
Rebels much weaker	-0.04 (0.10)	-0.02 (0.09)	0.12 (0.10)	-0.13 (0.10)	0.03 (0.09)
Rebels strong	-0.34 (0.45)	-0.40 (0.33)	-0.41 (0.47)	-0.38 (0.41)	-0.82* (0.32)
Centralized command	0.69** (0.22)	-0.15 (0.14)	0.65*** (0.18)	0.67*** (0.14)	-0.31* (0.15)
Government support	0.00 (0.05)	0.10* (0.04)	-0.00 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)	0.06 (0.05)
Transnational constituency	0.15** (0.05)	0.22*** (0.05)	0.19*** (0.05)	0.11* (0.05)	0.22*** (0.05)
Territorial control	-0.06 (0.09)	-0.09 (0.08)	-0.09 (0.09)	-0.06 (0.09)	0.08 (0.08)
Multiple groups	-0.37*** (0.10)	-0.41*** (0.11)	-0.54*** (0.11)	-0.39*** (0.10)	-0.54*** (0.12)
<b><u>State Level</u></b>					
International rivalry	0.65*** (0.08)	0.76*** (0.08)	0.65*** (0.08)	0.67*** (0.08)	0.65*** (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	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.03** (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)	-0.01 (0.01)
CINC score	-0.16** (0.06)	-0.20*** (0.05)	-0.36*** (0.05)	-0.18** (0.06)	-0.17** (0.05)
Constant	-0.17 (0.34)	0.59* (0.30)	-0.52 (0.31)	-0.31 (0.27)	1.04*** (0.31)
Observations	1,017	998	1,004	1,012	977
R-squared	0.28	0.33	0.28	0.29	0.39

Note: DV is number of sponsors per organization-year. Results from OLS regressions with robust standard errors.  
 \*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$

Our theory also contains several other observable implications – that is, patterns in the data that we should see if it is correct. First, if our argument is right, we should see meaningful effects across different types of international experiences. Indeed, each of the four types of experiences outlined in the article – study abroad, work abroad, exile, and military training abroad – provides opportunities to form valuable international networks. We should thus expect to see more support associated with each experience. If, instead, only some experiences are associated with more support, this might suggest that the specific dynamics of those types of experiences are driving our results. Table 2 shows the effects of each of the four types separately and together in one model. The results indicate that *each* of the four types of experience abroad has a positive and significant association with the number of sponsors, and that these effects hold even when all four are included together. The consistency of this result across types of experiences strengthens our argument, suggesting it has less to do with the specific context – be it a university, military camp, or business – in which the experience takes place, and more to do with the general social networking advantages that come with immersion in another country prior to leading a rebellion.

Second, if our networks-based argument is valid, we should see that experience abroad has the strongest link with support from the “host country” – the country in which the experience took place – rather than support from any country. This is because the specific country in which the rebel leader studied, worked, trained, or lived in exile is likely to be where he or she formed the strongest networks, and thus has the best odds of obtaining support. As noted in our theory section, sustained time living abroad – especially in revolutionary hub cities such as New York, Paris, and Cairo – can pay dividends in terms of sponsorship from third countries that are neither the leader’s country of birth nor the host country (as in the case of someone like Hasan di Tiro, who obtained Libyan support through personal business contacts without actually living there). Nevertheless, a

networks logic would lead us to expect that rebel leaders' time abroad will pay the greatest dividends where they actually spent it.

### **Figure 3: Effect of Study Abroad on Odds of Support from Host and Non-Host Countries**

INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

*Note: Results from logistic regressions with robust standard errors. Specification same as M4 in Table 1.*

To investigate, we coded the host countries for all study abroad experiences in the dataset<sup>11</sup> and matched them with foreign sponsors from *Dangerous Companions*. We are then able to assess the extent to which an experience abroad boosts the odds of support from the host country as opposed to from other countries. Figure 3 shows the effects of our international experience scale on both host country support and non-host country support, based on separate logistic regressions on each one (the specification used is otherwise identical to the full model in Table 1). The results confirm our expectations: while leaders who studied abroad are significantly more likely than those who did not to receive support from non-host countries, they are *especially* likely to receive support from the states in which they actually had their foreign experience. In particular, having studied abroad gives a rebel leader over twice the odds of obtaining support from a non-host country, and over three times the odds of obtaining support from the host country. The difference between these two effects is statistically significant ( $p=0.02$  from a  $\chi^2$  test).

Third, our argument should not be limited to one country (or type of country) in its effects. Rather, it predicts that we will see effects across different types of countries when we look at them in a disaggregated fashion, since personal ties can shape policy-making in a wide range of states.

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<sup>11</sup> This was a relatively labor-intensive task, so we chose to focus on the host countries for study abroad experiences (rather than all four types of international experiences) as a useful test of our expectation.

We test this expectation by examining sponsorship by each of the top three destination countries for study abroad in our sample.<sup>12</sup> Table A1 in the Appendix presents the results of logit regressions on support from the U.S. (M1), France (M2), and Egypt (M3), with dummy variables for whether the leader studied in each of those countries. Once again, the specifications are otherwise the same as the full model (M4 in Table 1). The results confirm that individuals who studied abroad in each of the three countries are more likely to receive support from that specific country than those who did not do so. This is consistent with our argument and suggests that its effects are apparent across different types of sponsor countries in our dataset.<sup>13</sup>

### **Robustness Checks**

We also conduct several additional robustness checks to bolster confidence in our results. One concern is that leaders who go abroad – or the organizations they lead – have other underlying advantages that help them earn more support. We address this in two ways. First, we add a number of additional covariates that help account for these possible advantages, including: (1) whether the leader is from an *ELITE FAMILY* background,<sup>14</sup> (2) whether he or she is a *POLYGLOT*,<sup>15</sup> (3) whether the organization has a *POLITICAL WING*<sup>16</sup> and (4) whether it is financed by *NATURAL RESOURCES*.<sup>17</sup> The addition of these variables yields no substantive change in our core results (see Appendix,

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<sup>12</sup> We thank an anonymous reviewer for this suggestion.

<sup>13</sup> Future analyses may wish to examine the timing of rebel leaders' international experiences as an additional way to investigate these dynamics, as more recent experiences may be more likely to yield active social networks that can be exploited for wartime needs.

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> Linguistic skill 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.

<sup>16</sup> A formal political wing may imply greater strategic flexibility and political pragmatism by group members (Acosta 2019). This measure comes from the NSA dataset.

<sup>17</sup> 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).

Table A2). Second, another way of addressing this issue is controlling for how the leader rose to power, as this helps mitigate concerns that organizations *choose* leaders with certain traits to attract outside support. In particular, we control for whether the rebel leader was (1) *ELECTED* and (2) *APPOINTED* – as opposed to taking power by force or founding the group – as the first two imply greater choice by group members (or a subset of them) in terms of who leads the organization.<sup>18</sup> Again, the addition of these variables yields no meaningful change in our core results (Appendix, Table A3). These tests help assuage concerns about leaders’ experience abroad proxying for other underlying individual or organizational advantages.

In addition, we conduct a robustness check specifically to address concerns about the availability of data on different leaders in *ROLE*. In particular, we replicate the main findings with the addition of a measure of leader visibility or prominence in the historical record. This helps test for the possibility that the historical record simply better documents rebel leaders with foreign experience (and their foreign support) due to their greater presence and prominence outside of their own country. To test for this, we constructed a unique measure of rebel leader prominence based on the number of search results obtained for each leader’s name on *GOOGLE SCHOLAR*. The results of this test (Appendix, Table A4) show that our core findings are not sensitive to the inclusion of this measure of information availability on individual leaders.

Another concern is that the dynamics we investigate may have changed after the end of the Cold War. Indeed, the intense geopolitical competition between the two global superpowers during the Cold War created more potential support for rebel organizations, and this may have altered the relative importance of elite social ties as opposed to geopolitical variables in driving that support. We address this in two ways. First, we add a dummy variable for *COLD WAR* (vs. post-Cold War)

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<sup>18</sup> These variables are from *ROLE*.

cases to our main model to ensure this is not confounding our results. Second, we split our sample into Cold War and post-Cold War cases and replicate the model on each one to ensure our results are not specific to one time period – an unusually strict test. Table A5 in the Appendix shows that our core findings are substantively unchanged across these tests. This suggests that our result about the impact of rebel leaders’ international experiences on foreign support for rebellion are not driven by, or specific to, the Cold War or post-Cold War periods.

Another possible concern is that ideological factors are behind some of our results, as these can loom large in decisions by states to back rebel organizations. To address this, we add controls for rebel organization ideology (*LEFT-WING*, *RIGHT-WING*, and *THEOCRATIC*) to the model. We also add these controls to the country-specific tests conducted earlier on support by top study abroad destinations, since they may have clearer effects on individual patrons than in an aggregate sample with an ideological mix of sponsors.<sup>19</sup> Across all of these tests (Appendix, Table A6), our central findings are unchanged.

A final potential confounder we consider is state disruption: future rebel leaders might be more likely to go abroad to escape efforts by their governments to target them, which could in turn be proxying for the underlying threat they pose. In other words, individuals who represent a greater future revolutionary threat to the state might be more likely to go abroad to escape state repression; these same individuals might also be more likely to attract foreign sponsorship if they do launch a rebel movement or campaign. In order to address this possibility, we add a measure of whether the individual faced a pre-leadership assassination attempt by the state (*ASSASSIN*) to our main model. The results of this test (Appendix, Table A7) show that controlling for pre-leadership attempts by

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<sup>19</sup> We show results for the U.S. and France but not Egypt, as Egyptian support (only 60 cases) is completely determined by the predictors once the ideology measures are included, meaning the model is oversaturated.

the state to target the individual does not substantively impact our findings, helping ease concerns about strategic repression efforts driving our findings.

Finally, we conduct some additional tests to ensure that our results are robust to coding and modeling decisions. First, we replicate the results with clustered standard errors – clustering on (1) the organization and (2) the country – to ensure we are accounting for potential error dependence in our data. Second, we replicate the main results using both (1) negative binomial and (2) Poisson regressions instead of OLS regressions to account for the positive and right-skewed distribution of the DV and make sure that our results are robust to model selection. Third, we replicate the results with alternative operationalizations of the DV from the *Dangerous Companions* dataset, including a dichotomized measure (support or not) and an ordinal measure of strength of support (military vs. non-military vs. none). Fourth, we replicate the analysis with an alternative dataset of support for rebellion, the UCDP External Support Dataset (Hogbladh, Pettersson, and Themner 2011). We use dichotomous (support or not) as well as ordinal (military vs. non-military vs. none) measures of support from this dataset too. The results in all four of these cases are substantively unchanged (Appendix, Table A8-A11), with international experience retaining its strong positive relationship with foreign support. In sum, this thorough set of robustness tests helps bolster confidence that our core findings are robust to efforts to account for a wide array of alternative explanations, modeling choices, and operationalization of our dependent variable.

## **Conclusion**

The study of leader characteristics is well established in international relations and security studies, among other subfields, but is just beginning to receive serious treatment in scholarship on violent nonstate actors. In this paper, we contend 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 ROLE database on rebel leader attributes and biographies (Acosta, Huang, and Silverman 2018), we found significant empirical support for these claims: rebel leaders' international experiences, including studying abroad, working abroad, military training abroad, and exile, boost the amount of foreign state support for their campaigns, even when accounting for key characteristics of their broader organizations and their state opponents. We argue that the transnational social connections established during their time abroad are at the core of the causal process linking pre-leadership international experiences and wartime foreign state support.

These results offer important theoretical implications. First, we find that individual rebel leader attributes explain 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 international social networks confer on these leaders as they enter violent politics? Future studies on rebellion may be able to enhance 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 work illuminates 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 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' prior 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 conflict, can they not also be exploited for diplomatic pressure and support aiming at peace? From the perspective of foreign policy-making, the findings also offer a cautionary note. Given the strong effects of international experiences and transnational networks on the part of rebel leaders in securing external backing for their organizations, they suggest that powerful countries 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 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 scrutinize carefully the merits of arming or otherwise backing their campaigns.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> One contemporary rebel leader who may fit this narrative is Khalifa Haftar, the ex-general under Muammar Qaddafi who led the Libyan National Army's bid for control of post-Qaddafi Libya. Haftar's widely reputed ties to power in Washington – dating to his two decades living outside Washington, DC after his wartime capture and exile in the 1980s – may have helped him secure American support. See Baker (2011).

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