Article

International Political Science Review
1–16

DOI: 10.1177/0192512116678098
journals.sagepub.com/home/ips

An umbrella of legitimacy: Rebel faction size and external military intervention

Levente Szentkirályi
University of Colorado at Boulder, USA

Michael Burch
Eckerd College, USA

Abstract
How may the legitimacy of rebel groups shape the decisions of third-party states to support insurgencies militarily? In aiming to better understand how the (group-level) attributes of insurgencies motivate interventions on their behalf, we argue that the size of rebel forces serves as a proxy for a revolution's perceived legitimacy within the international community. Specifically, we maintain that the larger the insurgency, the greater the insurgency's perceived legitimacy and, thus, the more likely intervention on its behalf becomes. This analysis challenges previous studies that have confined the causal salience of faction size to relative capabilities or strength, and it also underscores the controversial policy implications of this finding.

Keywords
Rebel group, faction size, legitimacy, military intervention, responsibility to protect

Introduction

Mass protests and armed conflict have shaken North Africa and the Middle East since the start of the Arab Spring in early 2011. The revolutionary violence that still persists in Yemen, Bahrain, Egypt, and Syria threatens to incite disorder and hostility in neighboring countries like Iran, Israel, and Pakistan, whose existing and developing nuclear weapons capabilities in this volatile environment present a threat to global security. With the United Nations (UN) Security Council continuing to strive to determine how best to facilitate an end to the hostilities against dissidents, it is unclear whether external military intervention, as occurred in Libya in 2011, will be forthcoming. This

Corresponding author:
Levente Szentkirályi, Department of Political Science, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO 80309-0333, USA.
Email: szentkiralyi@colorado.edu

uncertainty should compel us to re-examine why third-party states sometimes intervene in rebellions within other countries, and why the plights of oppressed insurgents sometimes go unheeded.

Despite the burgeoning literature on why and how third-party states intervene in support of insurgencies, most extant research programs have aimed to understand the effects of intervention on the outcomes of these disputes, and their analyses have focused on state-level determinants. This paper takes a different approach: it explores how certain attributes of insurgencies themselves motivate interventions on their behalf, and it contends that the size of the rebel group, as a matter of the insurgency's perceived legitimacy in the international community, is an important determinant of external intervention.

While diverse forms of intervention exist, we are particularly interested in the decision of third-party states to intervene militarily – for example, to deploy ground forces or to fire weapons in the country in which the domestic conflict occurs (Meernik, 1996: 394; Pearson et al., 1994: 209). This narrow construal demarcates the clearest instances of intervention, since the supply of arms and equipment and the movement of military personnel are not easily concealed. With broader notions of 'support'or 'aid,' it is easier for states to covertly grant assistance to rebels, to engage in clandestine interventions, and to deny having provided aid if their involvement were revealed (Andreas, 2004: 34–35, 49). Since employing a broader conception introduces bias into the analysis by obscuring when interventions actually occur, non-military forms of support – including, for example, providing economic aid, imposing sanctions, or fostering diplomacy and mediation – are not considered here. Also, as detailed below, we narrow our focus to multilateral military interventions involving at least two states.

Accordingly, we argue that the probability of 'rebel-biased' multilateral military interventions (those in support of insurgents) increases with larger rebel forces: for faction size signals to potential interveners that the insurgency is legitimate. It is the same umbrella of legitimacy that vindicates challenges to state authority by larger rebel groups that also provides third-party states the justification to intervene against the established government: a justification that is generally absent with smaller rebellions. This conclusion challenges existing scholarship on the causal salience of rebel group size, which has treated size as a rough measure of the insurgency's relative strength or capabilities.

Alternative explanations of the influence of rebel group size

Beyond having the capacity to intervene, potential interveners must also have strong incentives to risk the costs of intervention (Gent, 2008: 719; Gleditsch and Beardsley, 2004: 400). For instance, if another third-party state would likely retaliate against the intervening country, the probability of intervention decreases (Newell, 1980: 252). Similarly, protracted conflicts and longer durations that a potential intervener would be involved in a dispute also reduce the likelihood of intervention (Regan, 2000; Regan and Aydin, 2006). And if an intervention would exacerbate the repression of rebels, third-party states would be reluctant to intervene to avoid greater violence against those they seek to aid (Betts, 1994).

Nevertheless, there are occasions when third-party states are drawn into foreign intrastate disputes, since domestic conflicts invariably produce negative externalities (like refugee flows across borders) and are, thus, rarely confined by geopolitical boundaries (Gleditsch and Beardsley, 2004; Salehyan and Gleditsch, 2006). This is confirmed by scholars who claim that external intervention becomes more likely as geographical proximity to an intrastate conflict increases, or when intrastate conflicts escalate to 'regional security dilemmas' (Gent, 2008; Regan, 2000). In any event, once a state provides some form of external support, diminishing marginal returns of further

investments notwithstanding, it is likely that the state will eventually intervene militarily (Fulbright, 1967: 232–237).

While these factors complicate decisions of third-party states, Gent insists that governments intervene 'to influence the outcome of a conflict' (Gent, 2008: 715) – and since intervention is costly, states aim to mitigate the risks of intervention and are more likely to intervene when an insurgency is stronger relative to the government it defies (Gent, 2008: 728, 730). Governments can typically suppress resistance movements of weaker revolutionary factions, since states enjoy a considerable disparity in power and resources, whereas stronger rebel groups are less easily defeated in the absence of external support. Consequently, 'intervention on behalf of the government can have a greater [marginal] effect on shifting the outcome of the civil conflict toward government victory when there is a stronger rebel group' (Gent, 2008: 714, 721). Conversely, since the potential success of smaller and weaker insurgencies remains tenuous *even when* they receive external support, intervention 'will be more efficiently used when there is a strong rebel group that is more effective at fighting the government' (Gent, 2008: 720).

It is suggested by Salehyan et al. (2011) that beyond the *supply* of third-party support, we must understand what shapes the *demand* for this aid. The authors claim that if a rebel group has no desire to receive assistance, it is immaterial whether third-party states aim to provide it (and vice versa). Salehyan et al. assert that 'moderately' strong insurgencies – which are 'neither stronger nor much weaker than the government' (Salehyan et al., 2011: 730) – are most likely to be offered and to accept external support (Salehyan et al., 2011: 711, 726, 734). Intuitively, the weakest (and smallest) insurgencies, whose success depends on the assistance of third-parties, entail too great a risk to potential interveners (Salehyan et al., 2011: 716). While the demand for intervention may be high in such cases, the supply or willingness is sparse. Conversely, the strongest (and largest) rebel groups, which have greater capacities to wage successful insurgencies without external support, are unlikely to partner with willing third-party states. Accepting foreign assistance often entails costly concessions to intervening states and, thus, demands that rebel groups forfeit autonomy in deciding how to fight their campaigns and govern their support bases (Salehyan et al., 2011: 711, 716–719, 718 fn. 35). Stronger insurgencies will be unwilling to make such compromises. Consequently, it is only when a rebel group is strong enough to attract the investment of potential interveners albeit weak enough to accept the costs of these partnerships and to cede autonomy that intervention is likely.

Unexplained causal influence of rebel group size

Our concern with extant studies is that they only consider faction size as a rough proxy for the relative military strength or material capabilities of rebel groups (Gent, 2008: 717, 721, 723; Salehyan et al., 2011: 723) – that is, as advantages in the capacity to win a conflict. Yet, why assume that size is what primarily establishes such advantage? The ability of an insurgency to defeat a national military also depends on how well its members are trained, armed, funded, organized, committed to the cause, etc. Libya's insurgency against Qaddafi's regime in 2011 illustrates that the influence of rebel group size is not sufficiently explained by relative strength or capabilities. The Libyan resistance was well-armed and considerable in size (US Department of State, 2012),[1] but it 'suffered from internal dissension and lack of training' (New York Times, 2011), such that it was the protracted North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) bombings that 'put the momentum back on the side of the rebels' and led to the overthrow of Qaddafi (New York Times, 2011). This casts doubt on whether Libyan rebels enjoyed the strength or advantage that would explain NATO's intervention on conventional accounts.

This is not to say that relative strength or capabilities are unimportant in shaping external military interventions, but rather that the causal salience of faction size is not explained by these variables. While controlling for various capabilities measures, we demonstrate empirically that there is more to the size of rebel forces than existing research suggests. We attribute this unaccounted-for causal influence to rebel group legitimacy – which we understand as having a reasonable grievance against the established government that justifies collective armed violence to alter the status quo, as representing the interests of a broader civilian population, and as conducting an insurgency in accordance with international laws of war.

It should be qualified from the outset that this claim is not corroborated by an empirical test of rebel group legitimacy: the data necessary to develop a viable direct measure of legitimacy are lacking and plausible alternatives prove problematic. For instance, a greater diversity of actors involved in armed resistance may be a measure of legitimacy, with greater heterogeneity suggesting increased public support of the collective insurgency and heightened public support marking the campaign's legitimacy. Yet, greater heterogeneity could mean that an insurgency is fractured, creating the potential for radical factions to splinter from the mainstream rebel group and to obscure the broader insurgency's legitimacy (as occurred with the Syrian opposition). Other possibilities raise similar worries. Public statements by political leaders who endorse or condemn rebels are commonly biased and made for politically strategic reasons. Rebel groups living and fighting among civilian populations might be a sign of their popular support or could antithetically be a sign of their dominating and exploiting those populations. Legitimacy might be found in the aims of insurgencies, but these self-proclaimed motivations are commonly purported to be righteous. Responding to state-perpetrated violence as opposed to initiating violence against the state might imply efforts to resolve grievances diplomatically, but it is often difficult to corroborate which side of a conflict fires first. In short, alternative measures present a host of conceptual challenges and coding problems.

Consequently, our aim is more exploratory than explanatory: upon demonstrating empirically that there is something statistically significant yet unexplained about rebel group size, we offer a robust theoretical explanation for attributing this residual causal influence to perceived legitimacy, and we gesture toward future research programs by exploring possible measures of rebel group legitimacy.

Data and methodology

All of the rebel group attributes measured in this analysis come from the Non-State Actor Dataset developed by Cunningham et al. (2009). The independent variable of interest, *faction size*, approximates the actual number of insurgents who fight in a given conflict, with the smallest insurgent group numbering 40 participants and the largest comprising more than one million. Rebel group size is not normally distributed, so a logged value of the variable is used in the statistical models. Like the original coding, which consists in a one-time estimate, our design does not account for changes in faction size over time: each conflict episode between an insurgent group and the state is tested only once. This is a regrettable limitation in the available data, since changes in size over time and, thus, changes in perceived legitimacy could be expected to alter the probability of multilateral military interventions.

As for the dependent variable, while concentrating on forms of military support may help to curtail the previously-mentioned bias that broader notions of intervention may introduce, certain types of military support may also be granted covertly, go undocumented, and thus deflate the number of actual interventions in our universe of cases. Accordingly, military *intervention* – where a state commits its own military forces to fight in support of a rebel group – is distinguished from

types of indirect military *aid* (supplying weapons, combat and transportation vehicles, etc., or providing teams of military advisors to train, organize, and counsel rebel forces, etc.). Since the starkest instance of intervention involves the movement of troops or the firing of weapons in support of an insurgent group by some third-party state, circumscribing the dependent variable in this way should yield the most reliable conclusions about the relationship between faction size and intervention.

Further, only those cases in which *two or more* third-party states commit their military forces to help fight an insurgency are coded as interventions. This is because a single intervening state may be motivated by strategic calculations – where an intervention aims to undermine the established government to improve the intervening state's relative position – or by a rivalry with the embattled government. In either case, these motivations obscure the causal influence of group legitimacy by hindering our ability to distinguish between sincere appeals to legitimacy and appeals that merely mask a state's true motives for becoming involved in an intrastate dispute (Brands, 1988: 614, 623). Our more stringent coding scheme should avoid this concern, since multilateral interventions imply a broader recognition of the rebel group's legitimacy by the international community.

Within our sample of 400 rebel groups, there are 20 rebel-biased interventions; and because of the rare occurrence of multilateral military intervention (constituting roughly five percent of these cases), the influence of faction size is analyzed using a rare events logit model (King and Zeng, 2001). This approach is necessary to correct for the bias that a normal logistic regression model would entail.

While we claim that faction size is the clearest signal to the international community of a rebel group's legitimacy, if an insurgency has a political wing that may facilitate redressing its grievances diplomatically, this may testify to the group's legitimacy since the existence of a political wing may imply a willingness to work *within* the oppressive system to resolve the dispute – especially if the political wing is recognized by the state as a legal organization, which should cement opportunities for diplomacy. Conversely, an insurgency may strive to establish a political wing to better adhere to international law as a further way to signal its legitimacy (Jo, 2015). These possibilities are controlled for, with both *political wing* and *legal wing* coded dichotomously. Also, to further mitigate the aforementioned effect of strategic motivations, several other control variables are included in our models. For instance, *central strength* and *mobilization capacity*, which measure the abilities of rebel groups, relative to the state, to constrain constituent groups and mobilize their personnel, account for the relative strength that some say drives the benefit–cost calculations of intervening states. Following the original coding scheme, both variables are coded categorically from low to high. Whether or not the rebel group governs territory is also incorporated as a further control for relative capabilities – as is *per capita gross domestic product (GDP)*, which is commonly thought to measure state capacity relative to an insurgency (Fearon and Laitin, 2003) and accounts for the possibility that what shapes rebel-biased interventions is weak state capacity to mount a counterinsurgency (since calculating third-party states face attenuated risks of aiding revolutionaries).

Similarly, the Composite Index of National Capability (CINC) is included to account for the *strategic importance* of a country experiencing an intrastate conflict. Measuring a state's population, energy consumption, steel and iron production, and military personnel and expenditures (Singer et al., 1972), this index controls for the deterrent effect that greater strategic importance may have on third-party states' decisions to intervene. We also account for the possibility that strategic calculations of potential interveners can be motivated by the alliances an insurgent group may forge by having a *transnational presence* (Salehyan, 2007), such as a military base or personnel abroad. Finally, *government-biased military support* controls for the effect that an external military intervention in support of a government's counterinsurgency may have on rival states' decisions to initiate counter-interventions on behalf of rebels (Findley and Teo, 2006).

Table 1. Determinants of external military intervention.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Faction size	0.322**	0.358**	0.337**
	(0.154)	(0.159)	(0.170)
Insurgent political wing	–1.481	–	0.704
	(1.110)		(0.0002)
Insurgent legal wing	0.775	–	–1.340
	(0.521)		(1.193)
Central strength	0.669	–	0.680
	(0.486)		(0.485)
Mobilization capability	–0.231	–	0.012
	(0.398)		(0.409)
Transnational presence	–0.056	–	0.044
	(0.268)		(0.289)
Territorial control	0.435	–	0.167
	(0.520)		(0.559)
Government-biased military support	0.476*	0.313	0.302
	(0.267)	(0.279)	(0.243)
Regime type (democracy)	–	–0.089	–0.499
		(0.884)	(0.873)
Strategic importance (CINC score)	–	–15.320	–12.780
		(96.700)	(76.800)
Per capita gross domestic product	–	–0.0003	–0.0003
		(0.0003)	(0.0003)
Cold War[3]	–	0.701	0.321
		(0.527)	(0.572)
Constant	–7.500**	–5.720*	–6.650**
	(1.396)	(1.390)	(1.470)
N	400	400	400

Notes: corrected logit estimates using rare events model, ** = p <0.05; * = p <0.10; robust standard errors in parentheses.

Findings

As expected and as Table 1 illustrates, our group-level determinants (model 1) confirm that rebel-biased interventions are more probable with larger insurgencies.[2] Having a (legally-recognized) political wing – which may signify that the rebel group takes opportunities for diplomacy seriously – has no effect on the probability of third-party intervention. Perhaps we should expect to see that intervention in support of an insurgency with a (legally-recognized) political wing is less likely, since the international community may infer from the group's political arm that a negotiated outcome can be achieved without resorting to violence. And given the costs and risks of intervention, third-party states may be reluctant to enter into the conflict if this potential for reconciliation exists. However, some sense can be made of these variables' statistical insignificance, for it is difficult to discern whether the political channels ostensibly available to rebel groups to diplomatically resolve their grievances are not merely superficial.

Regarding the alleged strategic logic of military intervention and extant explanations of the causal salience of rebel group size, if decisions to intervene on behalf of insurgencies *were* determined by the likelihood of rebel victory or the relative strength of rebel forces, we should expect

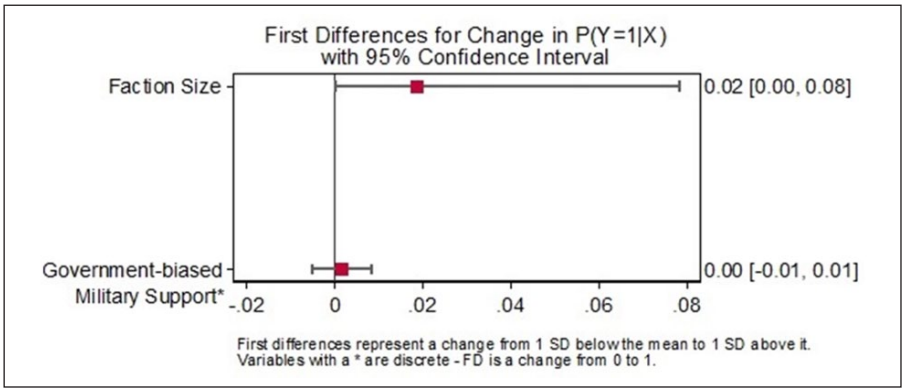

Figure 1. Rebel group size predicted probabilities (combined model).

to see some statistical significance with both central strength and mobilization capacity. Yet, these variables remain insignificant. This verifies our claim that faction size *as something other than* a proxy for relative strength or capabilities motivates third-party states to commit their militaries to fight on behalf of insurgencies. Similarly, if interventions *were* shaped by strategic considerations of potential interveners, territorial control should also be significant. For it is possible to infer that when a rebel group has the capacity to autonomously govern and defend a given territory, it is also more likely to prevail against the state – increasing the likelihood that any intervention on its behalf would be strategically-driven. Yet, territorial control also remains insignificant in this model. Model 1 does reveal that intervention is more likely when a third-party state intervenes in support of the established government, which might suggest that the international community often does not reach consensus on decisions to intervene in intrastate conflicts. Consider, for example, that in the late 1990s, the NATO coalition intervened in Kosovo to support the secessionist army fighting the Serbian government, while other states, like Russia, sent support to Serbia in opposition to this multilateral initiative.

While faction size remains statistically significant in model 2, no exogenous state-level attribute is found to be significant. That variables like regime type, strategic importance, and GDP all fail to influence the probability of rebel-biased intervention suggests that third-party states primarily base decisions to intervene militarily on the characteristics of insurgencies – undergirding our claim that the perceived legitimacy of rebel forces is an important determinant of external intervention.

To ensure that these findings are not contingent on the specifications of either model, the significance of rebel group size is tested in one comprehensive model, and model 3 confirms again that neither the relative capabilities of rebel groups, nor the strategic considerations of intervening states, determine when states intervene militarily. The first difference plots in Figures 1 and 2, which pertain to the determinants in model 3 and the unexplained causal influence of faction size, respectively, corroborate these findings. Figure 1 illustrates that size has a modest albeit statistically significant impact on multilateral external interventions (where an increase in one standard deviation of the logged value of faction size increases the probability of intervention by two percent); whereas Figure 2 confirms that this correlation obtains *even when* controlling for measures of relative strength – which testifies to the unaccounted-for causal influence of size that we attribute to perceived legitimacy.

Not shown here are further models in which faction size is dropped to determine whether the size of rebel forces is actually subsuming the effects of the other group-level variables (external

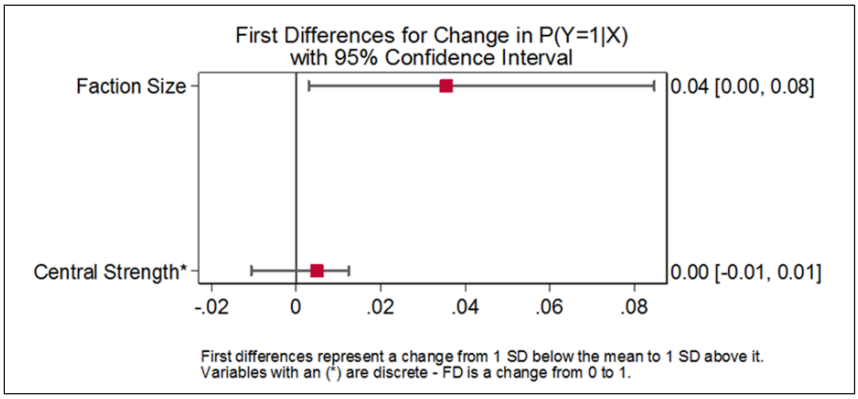

Figure 2. Rebel group size versus relative capabilities.

Appendix materials can be accessed at http://levszentkiralyi.com/research/legitimacy). Dropping faction size, however, does not alter our findings: none of the other variables that measure rebel group attributes gain significance. Similarly, not shown here are first difference plots for models 1 and 2, which reveal comparable statistically significant relationships between faction size and intervention. Further, while Figure 2 only depicts the statistical insignificance of central strength, similar results hold for the other measures of insurgency strength (mobilization capability and territorial control) – affirming that extant scholarship fails to fully explain how the size of an insurgency is correlated with rebel-biased intervention.

Theoretical underpinnings of faction size as a proxy for legitimacy

We suggest that this unaccounted-for statistical significance of the size of rebel forces is attributable to the perceived legitimacy of the insurgency: that when smaller factions rebel, their revolutions are more likely to be viewed by the international community as radical or extremist, motivated by some disenfranchised group within society, whose illegitimate campaign diverges from the majority's interests and its judgment that the states rules justly. This was the case, for example, during the early phase of the Iranian Revolution (1978–1979), led by Ayatollah Khomeini, where demonstrators were condemned for 'belong[ing] to the fanatic fringes of Iranian society and that their cause would not appeal to the wider masses' (Kuran, 1989: 45). And when an insurgency is presumed to lack legitimacy, state sovereignty is respected and intervention is unlikely.

Correspondingly, when greater numbers of insurgents engage in armed resistance against the state, their revolution is more likely to be judged as representing the interests of the society at large. For as the population experiencing government repression grows, and as the population standing in solidarity with the resistance against this abuse swells, an insurgency establishes an umbrella of legitimacy – cementing the presumption that its cause and campaign are legitimate. And with the legitimacy of the state's rule coming under greater scrutiny, state sovereignty is no longer privileged over the grievances of the rebel group, making rebel-biased military intervention more likely. Indeed, as some have noted, especially among countries that espouse a principle of non-intervention, the 'aura of legitimacy…is the diplomatic *sine qua non* of intervention' (Brands, 1988: 623), and in the absence of the former, the latter is unlikely.[4]

Consider that the perceived legitimacy of the Libyan insurgency was explicitly underscored by France, Britain, and the US shortly before the intervention. In March 2011, French President

Sarkozy was the first to publicly recognize the Libyan opposition to Qaddafi, which was soon echoed by British Prime Minister Cameron, who insisted that the Libyan government had 'lost any legitimacy it may have once had' (Reuters, 2011). President Obama similarly declared that Qaddafi's regime had forfeited its legitimacy (Obama, 2011a) and that we 'cannot stand idly by when…innocent men and women face brutality and death at the hands of their own government' (Obama, 2011b).

Consider also that with the on-going Syrian conflict, France, the Arab League, and the US all formally recognized the opposition to Assad's regime, which calls itself the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (Erlanger and Gladstone, 2012). The endorsements offered by French President Hollande and foreign ministers of the Arab League ground the legitimacy of this coalition of rebel forces, and confirm its status as the 'legitimate representative' of all those standing in opposition to the Syrian government (Erlanger and Gladstone, 2012). Obama similarly announced that Syria's coalitional rebel group is 'the *de facto* administration of regions under rebel control' and the 'legitimate representative of the Syrian people' (McGreal et al., 2012). These declarations stemmed from the international community's condemnation of Assad's harsh response to growing protests and its insistence that Assad step down to allow for popular reform. Though air strikes commenced in Syria against the militant Islamic State (ISIS), one of the many factions fighting against the oppressive Syrian government, and though the US has committed to arming and training moderate rebels of the Free Syrian Army, these military initiatives are intended to eliminate the security threat ISIS poses (Stephens, 2015). While it remains to be seen whether a rebel-biased intervention aimed at undermining Assad's regime will follow, the foregoing statements of legitimacy complement the hypothesis advanced here, since the size of (moderate) Syrian opposition forces has remained formidable (Stephens, 2015).

These examples speak to what scholars have described as the strengthening of an international norm over the past two decades to prevent governments from perpetrating or countenancing violence against their citizens (Kuperman, 2008; Simes, 2003). This 'emerging norm' (UN, 2004: 66) is commonly couched in terms of the 'responsibility to protect,' following the 2005 UN World Summit, at which more than 170 countries formally recognized the obligation to help to 'protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity' – condoning the use of collective external force when necessary – and also to 'encourage and help States to exercise this responsibility' (UN, 2005: 30).

While this initiative was intended to justify interventions against states that engaged in or failed to prevent *gross* violations of human rights (Kuperman, 2008: 50), this international norm has commonly been invoked to justify interventions that aim 'to protect civilian targets of state violence' more generally (Kuperman, 2008: 51–52). Among the contemporary military interventions that the UN Security Council has formally sanctioned in response to *non*-genocidal violence are those in Somalia (1992), Haiti (1994), Central African Republic (1996), Sierra Leone (1999), Liberia (2003), Ivory Coast (2004), and Libya (2011). Consider also that the United States' justification for the NATO air strikes against Libya – a multilateral intervention into a violent albeit non-genocidal conflict – expressly noted the Qaddafi regime's lack of 'accountability,' its lack of 'responsiveness' to the expectations of Libyan citizens, and its forfeiture of 'the legitimacy to lead' (Obama, 2011a).

The White House's statement underscores that central to this shared responsibility to protect is the conviction that governments are accountable to their citizens, which implies that states that perpetrate or fail to prevent violence against innocent civilians are derelict in their obligations. For the state's authority is commonly viewed (at least among liberal democracies) as contingent on the respect of its powers by those it governs. Hence, when the citizenry rejects the state's authority and rule of law, its legitimacy becomes dubious (Parekh, 1997: 53), since it is also commonly believed

that citizens have some claim against their government to not 'undertake activities that compromise, damage or sacrifice their interests' (Parekh, 1997: 56). Consequently, abusive or negligent states are said to 'forfeit their immunity to non-interference' (Parekh, 1997: 66), justifying foreign involvement to coercively end the violence. This is to say that this international norm has come to entail the promotion of liberal democratic ideals – a foreign policy goal that governments often invoke to justify intervening in the domestic affairs of other countries.

Carothers suggests that 'almost every established democracy engages in at least some diplomatic and aid efforts to support democracy in other countries' (Carothers, 2004: 260) – efforts that often take the form of military intervention. Scholars have noted, for instance, that American presidents have regularly appealed to democracy-promotion to justify decisions to intervene militarily in foreign civil wars (Carothers, 2004: 80; Cox et al., 2000: 10; Meernik, 1996: 391; Pickering and Peceny, 2006: 542), paralleling other foreign powers that have 'consistently and increasingly spoken of the need to encourage democracy' (Doyle and Sambanis, 2000; Meernik, 1996: 400). Britain, for example, deployed troops to Sierra Leone 'to end that nation's civil war and bring free elections;' whereas France committed troops to the Ivory Coast to facilitate 'a cease-fire among warring parties and prepare for free and fair elections' (Pickering and Peceny, 2006: 539). This illustrates 'the larger pattern of expanding democracy-promoting activities within advanced industrial governments' (Carothers, 2004: 260; Pickering and Peceny, 2006: 540 fn.1).

That said, the international norm to resist the tyranny of abusive states and prevent oppression within negligent ones entails that wherever oppression exists, the international community has a collective responsibility to eliminate it. This not only implies that oppressive or negligent governments are *prima facie* illegitimate and that those who resist such regimes have just cause to do so, but also that the size and legitimacy of insurgencies, the stringency of this collective responsibility, and the likelihood of external intervention, all covary with the pervasiveness of the abuse. For as the targets or victims of repression increase, the population with grievances against the state increases; and as the size of this group swells, so too does the population of potential participants with vested interests in the outcome of the conflict – from which the rebel group can recruit insurgents. As the size of rebel forces standing in solidarity against oppression grows larger, the more apparent it becomes to the international community that the insurgency represents the collective interests of the masses (which can be inferred from the level of domestic support rebels garner), and the more urgent the responsibility of third-party states to eliminate the violence becomes. As the global community recognizes an insurgency as acting on behalf of the broader population, the legitimacy of its defiance cements, which undercuts the inviolability of state sovereignty. When the state's sovereign right against intervention is judged to have been surrendered, foreign involvement to end the repressive violence becomes justified. Hence, the larger the rebel group, and thus the more legitimate its insurgency is perceived to be, the greater the probability is and the stronger the justification becomes for third-party states to intervene militarily.

This theoretical explanation aligns with the findings of Valentino et al. (2004) that strategic use of indiscriminate violence by the state against civilian populations is more likely when the insurgent group is larger and enjoys greater domestic support. We may glean from their analysis that by deliberately targeting the insurgency's civilian 'support base' (Valentino et al., 2004: 393) in an effort to retain power, such regimes decisively forfeit any claim to legitimacy. In a similar vein, Wood (2010) suggests that smaller rebel groups, constrained by fewer resources to recruit insurgents, are more likely to use violence against the civilian population they claim to protect, so as to compel noncommittal civilians to join the cause. This, too, aligns with our account, since using violence against civilians should move the international community to question the legitimacy of the rebel group (as occurred in Syria) – with larger insurgencies, which allegedly refrain from targeting civilians, escaping this scrutiny.[5]

This theoretical explanation also accounts for variation in appraisals of group legitimacy, since some potential interveners neither subscribe to the emerging international norm, nor espouse liberal democratic governance. Consider, for example, the recent vetoes by Russia and China in the UN Security Council concerning the imposition of greater sanctions on Syria to pressure Assad's administration to end the violence. Commentators have speculated that this opposition to a 'western-backed' resolution is due in large measure to concerns Russia and China have with creating a precedent that would make it easier for their own sovereignty to be infringed upon (CBS News, 2012). With this variation comes variation in how states judge which rebel groups are legitimate and warrant external support at the expense of state sovereignty.

Ascribing legitimacy and the Second Sudanese Civil War

A cursory sketch of a nested-analysis from our results buttresses the argument above by demonstrating the correlation between a rebel group's size and its manifestation of a further mark of legitimacy: the aforesaid propensity to refrain from perpetrating violence against innocent civilians. For the Second Sudanese Civil War reveals how the largest rebel group was also the only insurgent faction in Sudan's wars to comply with international laws concerning the treatment of civilian non-combatants.

The Second Sudanese Civil War (1983–2005) was a protracted secessionist conflict marked by extensive civilian casualties, and by multiple rival rebel factions challenging the Sudanese government in Khartoum for independence and claiming to represent the people of what eventually became South Sudan (Cockett, 2010). These groups emerged from the First Sudanese Civil War (1963–1972), in which the rebels won few concessions from the government and nearly four out of five of those killed were considered non-combatants. That nearly 500,000 people died during the conflict might suggest large-scale fighting between military and insurgent forces; however, the primary rebel group, Anya Nya, never numbered more than 12,000 fighters and what nominal external support the group received was limited to strategic aid from regional rivals of the Khartoum government (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2016).

To the contrary, while the second conflict also entailed bitter fighting and many civilian casualties, the leading rebel group, the Sudanese People's Liberation Movement (SPLM), swelled from 2,500 to more than 40,000 insurgents (Cockett, 2010) and received external support from multiple countries, including the United States (Boswell, 2012). The SPLM, whose resistance spearheaded the eventual peace treaty with the Sudanese government and the referendum for independence, was able to garner this support and become the main recipient of foreign aid to non-state actors because, unlike Anya Nya, the group engaged in mass recruitment from within the civilian population and deliberately chose to honor international norms against perpetrating violence against civilians – strategies that served to establish the legitimacy of its campaign in the opinion of the international community.

Jo (2015), who offers a detailed analysis of why insurgencies purposefully uphold such norms, and who, in parallel fashion, emphasizes the causal salience of the perceived legitimacy of rebel groups, finds that the SPLM was one of the few insurgencies that strove to safeguard the human rights of civilians during war. Drawing on her research program (1989–2010) and integrating the *one-sided violence* variable[6] into our model, our preliminary empirical analysis confirms a small positive correlation between the size of rebel forces and compliance with international laws against perpetrating violence against innocent civilians. This initial finding, to which the Sudanese case above lends credence, has strong theoretical grounding: for one of the key factors that may determine a rebel group's success with recruiting members is its ability to protect its constituent population. And rebel groups that attack civilian populations can be expected to have difficultly recruiting

insurgents and, thus, to remain smaller and unable to convince the international community that they represent the broader public and merit external support.

Prospects for future research

Acknowledging the limitations of our analysis and the clear policy implications of this subject matter, further research is necessary to better understand the influence legitimacy has on the likelihood of external military intervention. Among the initial improvements this research program calls for is a direct measurement of rebel group legitimacy. This is a complex variable to measure quantitatively, and any acceptable measure would have to go beyond content analysis and coding public statements of intervening third-party states or relevant members of the international community, since such statements are open to interpretation and the motivation behind them may remain uncertain.

One alternative may be to deduce a rebel group's legitimacy from a measure of the *illegitimacy* of the government it defies. Quantitative measures that might speak to the illegitimacy of the state – and, thus, derivatively to the legitimacy of its challenger – might include the number of years the standing government has existed (its durability), or the military alliances the state has forged, the international economic agreements it has made, or its membership in international governmental organizations. Each such possibility, however, has its shortcomings. Regarding durability, for example, to infer the legitimacy of an insurgency from a government's tenure would mean that only rebel groups that defy nascent regimes are legitimate – a measure that is conceptually tenuous and would bias any empirical findings. Further, this measure would entail that authoritarian regimes, which are quite durable thanks to the heavy hand with which they often rule, are among the most legitimate of established governments. Yet, this certainly is not obvious, since it is the oppressive rule and the absence of political channels by which to diplomatically redress grievances that commonly drive dissidents to collective armed violence to exact reform. In any event, any such *indirect* approach would not solve the problem at hand – of justifying a more accurate, direct measure of rebel group legitimacy – but, rather, would simply change the context.

Another option might be to examine how insurgent groups govern or interact with the civilian populations they claim to represent. We might measure legitimacy, for instance, by the state-like functions a rebel group assumes: securing autonomous rebel-held territories, safeguarding its support base against counter-insurgent violence, providing basic services like access to potable water and health care, engaging in resource production, and establishing regional economies or markets independent of the state. However, these measures all turn on relative capabilities, since it is those rebel groups with greater capacities that can maintain autonomous strongholds, provide protection and public services, exploit natural resources, develop markets, and so on. Hence, any such measure must be able to discriminate the causal influence of material and military capabilities from that of legitimacy.

Perhaps a more promising approach may be to investigate the origins of rebel groups. Many insurgent groups evolve and splinter off from political parties or social movements that seek reform through conventional political channels. When this occurs, if a rebel group retains the endorsement or the support base of the political party or organization from which it emerges, we may infer the group's legitimacy: for this measure could speak to the insurgency's efforts to resolve its grievances peacefully, to its cohesion, and to the broader public support the group enjoys – considerations that should shape the international community's perception of the justifiability of its campaign against the established government.

Closing thoughts: policy implications

Foreign policy concerning external military intervention is complex and both politically and normatively contentious. Rebel-biased interventions can violate the sovereignty of target states, they risk intensifying the violence insurgents and civilians alike may face, they can extend the duration of civil conflicts and impose extensive costs on intervening states, and they may beget full-fledged interstate wars. Consequently, decisions to interfere in the domestic affairs of other countries and to support insurgencies militarily are calculated risks; and for this reason, third-party states are highly circumspect in judging which insurgencies merit military assistance. As this paper has argued, among the causal factors that influence when military intervention occurs is the umbrella of legitimacy that both vindicates challenges to state authority by larger rebel groups and also affords third-party states sufficient justification to intervene against the established government – a justification that is generally absent with smaller rebellions, which are commonly judged to be radical and to fail to represent the interests of the broader public. While an adequate discussion falls beyond the scope of this analysis, two policy implications of these conclusions, each with strong normative import, deserve brief mention here in closing.

First, as previous scholarship has demonstrated and as this study re-confirms, it is precisely those (smaller) insurgencies that are *most* in need of military assistance to procure their freedom and circumvent further oppression that are denied it. Consider the 'small rebel groups' in Darfur whose abuses by the Sudanese government and call for military aid were ignored by the international community, which insisted on the need for diplomacy between rebels and the Sudanese government, and for 'a moderate approach' to facilitating an end to the violence that would not aggravate leaders of Sudan (Washington Post, 2004). The concern here is not simply that smaller rebel groups are generally left to stand and die alone, but rather that their calls for aid are commonly ignored *in virtue of* being branded by international actors as illegitimate or extremist – often irrespective of the broader context of their struggle or the violence and repression they endure. This was the initial perception, for example, of the Iranian Revolution under Khomeini in the late 1970s (Kuran, 1989: 45), and of the ethnic Albanian insurgency in Kosovo in the late 1990s (Drozdiak, 1998). Yet, the broader context of any rebel group's struggle, whose participants may well take grave risks to defy the state and champion justifiable reform, are quite relevant to whether or not an insurgency merits the assistance of the international community.

Second, knowledge of the fact that third-party states are unlikely to support smaller rebel groups militarily provides already oppressive regimes strong incentives to respond belligerently to developing insurgencies. If established governments can quickly contain or quell fledgling uprisings, they may effectively circumvent any multilateral interventions against them – a firm reprisal against open resistance that previous research has shown to be common among states whose authority is challenged by revolutionaries. Gent explains, for instance, that 'military victories, especially by the government, are more likely earlier in the lifetime of a conflict than later' (Gent, 2008: 725), from which we may deduce that the struggles of smaller rebel groups go unheeded as governments generally *do*, in fact, promptly move to quell these tenuous campaigns for reform. And any foreign policy stance toward external military intervention that ignores this contentious incentive structure similarly ignores the importance of context in any collective defiance of state authority.

While appreciating the myriad concerns that states must weigh in deciding to commit military forces to a foreign rebellion, such implications should press us to consider whether our conventional foreign policies toward military intervention, which generally dismiss calls for aid by smaller rebel groups, are both politically and morally sound – knowing that '[f]or many challengers, outside aid is literally a matter of life or death' (Bob, 2005: 4).

Acknowledgements

We wish to thank Jaroslav Tir, Aysegul Aydin, Doug Lemke, Idean Salehyan, Johannes Karreth, Moonhawk Kim, Jeffrey Lyons, Kim Lee Tuxhorn, María Fernanda Enríquez S., Barbara Green, and Mark Kesselman and two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. A previous version of this paper was presented at the 2012 Peace Science Society conference.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. The State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs estimates that between 20,000 and 100,000 rebels participated in the fighting.
2. Squaring faction size in additional models does reveal some evidence of a curvilinear relationship with intervention.
3. Demarcating insurgencies that occurred during and after the Cold War, this variable is important because the norm of a shared responsibility to protect is a modern development – only formally ratified in 2005. Moreover, accounting for this variable should further ensure that instances of multilateral intervention are not driven by calculations of superpowers.
4. It is not uncommon for intervening states to appeal to the legitimacy of the cause or group to which support is offered in order to 'cloak' their true self-interested motives for becoming involved in an intrastate dispute (Brands, 1988: 614, 623). However, as our findings demonstrate, insincere appeals to legitimacy that mask the strategic calculations of intervening states can be controlled for.
5. This admittedly is an oversimplification. Suggesting that the size of the oppressed population is correlated with the number of civilians willing to take up arms against the government ignores numerous debates about how and why rebel groups form, how they recruit and mobilize insurgents, gain broad public support, etc. (see Fearon and Laitin, 2003: 75–90; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008: 436–455; Kalyvas, 2001: 99–118; Kalyvas and Kocher, 2007: 177–216; Weinstein, 2007; Wood, 2010: 601–614).
6. One-sided violence is defined as intentional attacks by an actor on a non-combatant population.

References

Andreas, Peter (2004) The Clandestine Political Economy of War and Peace in Bosnia. *International Studies Quarterly* 48(1): 29–51.

Betts, Richard (1994) The Delusion of Impartial Intervention. *Foreign Affairs* 73(6): 20–33.

Bob, Clifford (2005) *The Marketing of Rebellion: Insurgents, Media, and International Activism*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Boswell, Alan (2012) The Failed State Lobby. *Foreign Policy*, July 9, 2012. Available at: http://foreignpolicy.com/2012/07/09/the-failed-state-lobby/

Brands, HenryWilliam, Jr (1988) Decisions on American Armed Intervention. *Political Science Quarterly* 102(4): 607–624.

CBS News (2012) Russia, China again veto Syria resolution. July 19, 2012. Available at http://cbsnews.com/news/russia-china-again-veto-syria-resolution-in-un/

Carothers, Thomas (2004) *Critical Mission: Essays on Democracy Promotion*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Cockett, Richard (2010) *Sudan: Darfur and the Failure of a State*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Cox, Michael et al., eds. (2000) *American Democracy Promotion*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Cunningham, David, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and Idean Salehyan (2009) It Takes Two. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53(4): 570–597.

Doyle, Michael and Nicholas Sambanis (2000) International Peacebuilding: A theoretical and quantitative analysis. *The American Political Science Review* 94(4): 779–801.

Drozdiak, William (1998) Rise of Kosovo Guerrillas Puts NATO Powers in a Bind. *Washington Post*, July 8, 1998. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1998/07/08/rise-of-kosovo-guerrillas-puts-nato-powers-in-a-bind/7e4540af-b6b7-403a-8d2b-ff626c6d9310/

Erlanger, Steven and Rick Gladstone (2012) France Grants Its Recognition to Syria Rebels. *New York Times*. November 14, 2012. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/14/world/middleeast/syria-war-developments.html

Fearon, James and David Laitin (2003) Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War. *American Political Science Review* 97(1): 75–90.

Findley, Michael and Tze Kwang Teo (2006) Rethinking Third Party Interventions into Civil Wars. *Journal of Politics* 68(4): 828–837.

Fulbright, J William (1967) *The Arrogance of Power*. New York, NY: Random House Publishing.

Gent, Stephen (2008) Going in When it Counts. *International Studies Quarterly* 52(4): 713–735.

Gleditsch, Kristian Skrede and Kyle Beardsley (2004) Nosy Neighbors. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48(3): 379–402.

Humphreys, Macartan and Jeremy Weinstein (2008) Who Fights? *American Journal of Political Science* 52(2): 436–455.

Jo, Hyeran (2015) *Compliant Rebels: Rebel Groups and International Law in World Politics*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Kalyvas, Stathis (2001) 'New' and 'Old' Civil Wars. *World Politics* 54(1): 99–118.

Kalyvas, Stathis and Matthew Kocher (2007) How Free is Free-Riding in Civil Wars? *World Politics* 59(2): 177–216.

King, Gary and Langche Zeng (2001) Explaining Rare Events in International Relations. *International Organization* 55(3): 693–715.

Kuperman, Alan (2008) The Moral Hazard of Humanitarian Intervention. *International Studies Quarterly* 52(1): 49–80.

Kuran, Timur (1989) Sparks and Prairie Fires. *Public Choice* 61(1): 41–74.

McGreal, Chris, Martin Chulov, Luke Harding and Ewen MacAskill (2012) Obama steps up pressure on Assad by recognising rebels. *Guardian*, December 12, 2012.

Meernik, James (1996) United States Military Intervention and the Promotion of Democracy. *Journal of Peace Research* 33(4): 391–402.

Newell, Richard (1980) Soviet Intervention in Afghanistan. *World Today* 36(7): 250–258.

New York Times (2011) Libya – revolution and aftermath. November 8, 2011.

Obama, Barack (2011a) Our Goal is Focused, Our Cause is Just, And Our Coalition is Strong. White House Blog, March 18, 2011. Available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/03/18/president-libya-our-goal-focused-our-cause-just-and-our-coalition-strong

Obama, Barack (2011b) Today We Are Part of a Broad Coalition. White House Blog, March 20, 2011. Available at: https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/03/20/remarks-president-libya-today-we-are-part-broad-coalition-we-are-answering-calls-thr

Parekh, Bhiku (1997) Rethinking Humanitarian Intervention. *International Political Science Review* 18(1): 49–69.

Pearson, Frederic S, Robert A Baumann and Jeffrey J Pickering (1994) Military Intervention and Realpolitik. In Frank W Wayman and Paul F Diehl (eds) *Reconstructing Realpolitik*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 205–225.

Pickering, Jeffrey and Mark Peceny (2006) Forging Democracy at Gunpoint. *International Studies Quarterly* 50(3): 539–559.

Regan, Patrick (2000) *Civil Wars and Foreign Powers: Outside Intervention in Intrastate Conflict*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Regan, Patrick and Aysegul Aydin (2006) Diplomacy And Other Forms of Intervention in Civil Wars. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 50(5): 736–756.

Reuters (2011) Gaddafi must leave now. 11 March 2011. Available at: http://www.reuters.com/article/us-libya-usa-idUSTRE71K6D520110226

Salehyan, Idean (2007) Transnational Rebels. *World Politics* 59(2): 217–242.

Salehyan, Idean and Kristian Skrede Gleditsch (2006) Refugees and the Spread of Civil War. *International Organization* 60(2): 335–366.
Salehyan, Idean, Kristian Skrede Gleditsch and David E Cunningham (2011) Explaining External Support for Insurgent Groups. *International Organization* 65(4): 709–744.
Simes, Dimitri (2003) America's Imperial Dilemma. *Foreign Affairs* 82(6): 91–102.
Singer, J David, Stuart Bremer and John Stuckey (1972) Capability Distribution, Uncertainty, and Major Power War, 1820–1965. In Bruce Russett (ed.) *Peace, War and Numbers*. Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE Publications, 19–48.
Stephens, Michael (2015) Are There 70,000 Syrian 'Moderates' Ready to Back UK? BBC News, December 1, 2015. Available at: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-34975978
United Nations (2004) A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility. December 3, 2004. Available at: http://www.un.org/en/peacebuilding/pdf/historical/hlp_more_secure_world.pdf
United Nations (2005) Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly. October 24, 2005. Available at: http://www.un.org/womenwatch/ods/A-RES-60-1-E.pdf
United States Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs, Libya Desk (2012) Personal correspondence. July 16, 2012.
Uppsala Conflict Data Program (2016) UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia Available at: http://ucdp.uu.se/
Valentino, Benjamin, Paul Huth and Dylan Balch-Lindsay (2004) 'Draining the Sea': Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare. *International Organization* 58(2): 375–407.
Washington Post (2004) How Many More Deaths? July 28, 2004. Available at http://washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A19774-2004Jul27.html
Weinstein, Jeremy M (2007) *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
Wood, Reed (2010) Rebel Capability and Strategic Violence Against Civilians. *Journal of Peace Research* 47(5): 601–614.

Author biographies

Levente Szentkirályi is a Political Science Ph.D. Candidate at the University of Colorado.

Michael Burch is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Eckerd College.