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Nobody More Terrible than the Desperate: Conflict Conditions and Rebel Demand for Foreign Fighters

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that the structural conflict conditions surrounding insurgencies produce rebel demand for external participation. Drawing on a data set of 140 militant organizations between 1998 and 2012, we find robust evidence that violence between insurgent groups is most likely to cause one or more of them to recruit externally. The effect is especially pronounced when regimes also employ punitive “stick” measures against opponents. Rather than a particular ideology being the best predictor of foreign fighters, it is desperate conflict conditions that lead insurgents to invest in the costs and uncertainties of outside assistance.

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There is nobody more terrible than the desperate.

– General Alexander Suvorov, 1799

Foreign fighters have become a preeminent international security concern because of the tens of thousands of women and men who left their countries to join the insurgency and proto-state established by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).¹ Beyond ISIS and the Middle East, in recent decades foreign fighters have joined organizations in Africa, Europe, and Asia as well.² Some of these groups have had religious ideologies, others have fought in ethnic conflicts or other civil wars. Few studies of foreign fighters though have addressed the question of which factors make conflicts more likely to draw foreign fighter involvement.³

We argue that this question has not been addressed because scholarship on foreign fighters has largely focused on the agency of insurgents rather than the structural conditions of the conflicts; that is, the sources of supply rather than the causes of demand. Most studies of foreign fighters focus on agency, with individual volunteers or rebel groups as the unit of analysis; they have found the motives and social networks of individual volunteers and the internal dynamics of insurgent groups to be the determinants of foreign fighter participation. However, these do not account for why foreign fighters are drawn to some conflicts but not to others. Likewise, other studies have used national-level variables to attempt to explain foreign fighter mobilization, but these have focused on conditions in the states of origin of the volunteers,

rather than the conflicts where they all converged as belligerents, and have drawn inconclusive results.

This article asks instead why some civil wars draw foreign fighters and some do not. We posit that conflict-level structural conditions best explain variation in foreign fighter presence in insurgencies. Research on foreign fighters indicates that insurgencies can recruit abroad when they employ atrocity propaganda depicting an existential struggle for group survival.⁴ We therefore hypothesize that the conflict conditions that produce higher levels of violence against civilians, state repression and violence between rebel factions, are likely to produce greater incidence of foreign fighters because they create incentives for insurgents to seek outside assistance and the rationale for outsiders to intervene.

To test this proposition, we employ the BAAD 2 Insurgency data set,⁵ with coded observations of 140 militant organizations between 1998 and 2012, and found foreign fighters observable during 86 total organizational years for insurgencies. We find that rivalry between insurgent groups is most likely to cause one or more to recruit externally. This effect is especially pronounced when governments, and especially those that are not full democracies, employ strongly punitive measures against the rebels. Inter-group rivalry and punitive counter-insurgency measures produce the incentives for rebel factions to recruit externally and for volunteers to respond to framing of existential threat to an identity group. However, we find that other conflict factors associated with higher levels of violence, including zero-sum conflicts over ethnic or religious identity and territorial control, have little effect on the likelihood of foreign fighters. We examine potential explanations for these findings including outbidding and the use of framing of threat narratives by the insurgents.

Foreign Fighters in Civil Wars

One reason for the increasing attention paid to foreign fighters is that the number of these groups has been rising sharply in recent decades, a trend that holds among all insurgencies and not just jihadi factions. This trend is reflected in studies of foreign fighters over decades⁶ as well as in our data for 1998–2012.

As with other types of actors who employ political violence, many marginally differing definitions of foreign fighter appear in the literature, but nearly all consider them to be members of non-state armed factions who do not have legal status within a conflict state. We adopt perhaps the most widely used definition, “noncitizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil wars.”⁷ Insurgencies bolster their strength by recruiting through community institutions of trans-national identity groups linked to the rebels and their cause, including houses of worship, ethnic schools, and ideological clubs, offering a narrative of existential threat to the shared community that conjures an obligation of self-defense and revalues the perceived collective action costs. This model of foreign fighter involvement does not predict which conflict conditions or pull factors, other than effective outreach by the insurgents, are likely to draw foreign fighters. It does entail a common rebel strategy of highlighting state repression, so we would expect foreign fighters to correlate with at least the appearance of repressive regimes and punitive counter-insurgency strategies.

Another common feature of foreign fighter recruitment is that rebels make strategic decisions to invest resources in locating and facilitating outside help, but research indicates that they are aware that involving outsiders reduces their control over their own organizations by introducing external ideological stakeholders and fighters with potentially differing agendas and creating reliance on smuggling networks to facilitate their transportation. In some cases, they knowingly accept poorly-trained volunteers with connections to countries that make them security liabilities. While foreign fighters in some instances are skilled and experienced fighters or bear valuable connections to militant networks, the decision to rely on external help is one made from a position of weakness.⁸

Conflict Conditions Impacting Foreign Fighters

Despite the research on how armed groups have succeeded in creating supplies of foreign fighters, there has been less examination of the sources of demand for them. Possibly this is due to a focus on jihadi groups such as ISIS which have expressed global ambitions. Mendelsohn (2020: 112) argues for more attention to the conditions that produce armed group demand for foreign volunteers, but with a focus on explanatory variables based on rebel groups. He theorizes that armed groups seek foreign fighters when they have operational need for them and can make operational use of them, and when the foreign volunteers are an ideational fit for the group and acceptable to the political considerations of its constituency.⁹

Duyvesteyn and Peeters (2015: 27) analyzed seven cases of jihadi foreign-fighters to determine why some of those cases attracted many thousands while others attracted only a few hundred: Afghanistan (1980–1992), Bosnia (1992–1995), Somalia (1993–2015), Chechnya (1994–2009), Afghanistan (2001–2014), Iraq (2003–2015), and Syria (2011–2015). They argued that foreign fighter involvement positively correlates with three factors: Access to the battlefield, internal cohesion or group unity of the rebels, and perceived chances of success by potential foreign fighters.¹⁰ Despite this assessment, most of these cases, including those with the biggest estimated foreign fighter cohorts, actually featured high levels of fratricidal violence, both between jihadi groups and against other rebel factions.¹¹

Foreign Fighters Impacting Conflict Conditions

To date we know far more about how foreign fighters determine the contours of conflicts than we do about how the contours of conflicts determine the presence of foreign fighters. It is important to note that the presence of foreign fighters has been associated with higher levels of civil war violence. Therefore, the presence of some foreign fighters may actually create the conditions of violence against noncombatants that draw larger numbers of them to the conflict. Moore (2019) finds that the presence of foreign fighters increases rates of violence against civilians as the homophily between foreign fighters and locals decreases. Co-ethnic foreign fighters are less likely to engage in violence against civilians than non-co-ethnics.¹² By contrast, the

propensity for violence against civilians by foreign fighters increases with the geographic distance of their country of origin from the conflict state.

Foreign fighters may have predatory relationships with the local civilian populations they are ostensibly there to defend, and some rebel groups deploy them to target civilians when local fighters are reluctant to do so.¹³ Rebel groups that employ foreign fighters are significantly more likely to use violence against civilians, but only if the group has a centralized command structure (Doctor & Willingham, 2020).¹⁴ That is, it is not the presence of foreign fighters alone that produces higher levels of violence against civilians, rather it is that insurgencies that pursue strategies of violence against noncombatants use foreign fighters to do so. Insurgencies from the Bolsheviks to ISIS have assigned units of foreign volunteers to implement torture and prison punishments against local populations and as death squads.¹⁵ In some instances, such in Chechnya, Iraq, Yemen, and Syria, they have provoked local rebels into escalating levels of violence against both the military and pro-regime civilians for reasons of ideology or attracting the support of foreign terror networks.¹⁶

Additionally, foreign fighters appear to be subjected to high levels of violence according to both anecdotal records of being used indiscriminately on the battlefield by local insurgent commanders and by records of casualty rates.¹⁷ Among ISIS foreign fighters, fatality rates appear to have been above 50 percent even though only about 13 percent acted as suicide bombers in martyrdom attacks.¹⁸ When foreign fighters join rebels, it appears that the demand for suicide missions rises to accommodate the supply of volunteers.

Foreign fighters can produce both inter and intra-group competition among insurgents, causing fragmentation and potentially further increasing violence. ISIS foreign jihadis pushed aside various local militant groups and illicit networks. This led other rebel groups to pursue intra-communal violence as well, outbidding for public support through escalation against the regime and each other.¹⁹ Schwampe (2018: 58–64), in introducing the concept of “foreign fighter groups” that travel between conflicts, found that Bosnians switched from supporting the locally-based rebel army to jihadi foreign fighter units because they had a cachet for being internationally acclaimed resistance fighters, no standing reputation for corruption, and were perceived to offer a better opportunity for victory.²⁰

It is the potential for intra-group fragmentation that has yielded analyses indicating that insurgencies would be wise not to welcome foreign fighters. In particular, Bakke (2014) found in her study of Chechnya that foreign fighters “may have strengthened the insurgent movement’s resource mobilization effort” but they “also contributed to a split of the original movement into an Islamist branch and a nationalist branch, as well as defections to the Russian side.”²¹ In this analysis, interlopers harm rebel cohesion by reframing the contest to attract outside support, and their use of more aggressive tactics is counter-productive because it increases state repression and reduces the likelihood of a negotiated settlement.²²

Theory and Hypotheses

Despite these complications, rebel demand for foreign fighters continues across civil wars, but apparently only under certain conditions because only just over one-quarter

of insurgencies are known to have had foreign fighters.²³ With the information available, we predict that insurgencies will regard foreign fighters as desperate measures for desperate times. Foreign fighters volunteer in response to messaging of existential threat to particular identity groups, so we would expect to see extensive violence against civilians in the conflicts that they join. At the same time, the rebels who recruit them view their situation as sufficiently dire to expend resources seeking unreliable outside help. We posit that the dire conditions are most likely to be caused by state repression and by fratricidal rivalry among rebels.

Stick Counterinsurgency Strategy

All governments face a continuum of choices in how to respond to militant domestic groups and rebels, and the spectrum of positive and negative incentives is frequently described in the horse-training analogy of choosing between the carrot and the stick, a formulation also used in international security to describe strategies of applying soft and hard power.²⁴ Carrot/Reward strategies include peace talks, negotiations, ceasefires or any deals in which the government offers incentives for the group to end violence or concedes to the group in any way. Stick/punishment methods include normal police work, investigating crimes, arresting members, bringing cases to courts and any military actions against the group. If both types occur in one year, then it is a mixed strategy for that year. Domestic counterterrorism is based on the group's home base, and international counterterrorism includes any foreign nation or international body.

In effect, regimes reify their adversaries as political opponents within legitimate processes of negotiation when they afford them carrots. But when the state uses the stick against resisters and their supporters it brands them as outlaws, illegitimate, and as threats to order. Framing adversaries as threats entails higher levels of violence, including against noncombatant supporters of opposing groups.

State capacity is a determinant of sticking opponents. State attacks against civilian noncombatants, whether direct lethal assaults or through indirect measures of repression are organized state policies.²⁵ Regimes use punitive strategies against civilian populations when the state is unable to quell or defeat insurgents.²⁶ Alternatively, governments that are seen to provide equitable security and efficient redistribution of resources can mollify aggrieved populations, but those that cannot afford such transfers use military means to attempt to break the rebels instead.²⁷

Regime type is relevant to this dynamic as well. Few foreign fighters have been involved in wars within democracies. There have been a few instances in history of full democracies slipping into civil war and attracting foreign fighters, including 1930s Spain. But in the modern era most democracies in the BAAD2 dataset that have experienced foreign fighters have been partly-democratic regimes, or anocracies. The literature generally holds that the tendency to wield the stick somewhat greater among autocratic regimes, employing higher levels of violence against rebel populations, including mass killings, because of ingrained rival group discrimination.²⁸

Although some studies find counterinsurgency utility in stick strategies in specific instances²⁹, the approach is typically held to backfire even when the regime provides compensatory resources to the affected population.³⁰ Reprisal policies, including those

targeting civilians, have strong correlations with asymmetric retaliatory strategies by rebels, particularly through terrorist attacks.³¹ Intrusive law enforcement measures can help militants overcome collective action challenges by increasing the resolve of activists and pushing bystanders into becoming supporters,³² potentially including external supporters as well. They can also increase the propensity of insurgents to ally with other rebel groups whose resources provide them with credible security commitments.³³

Foreign fighters are generally recognized as recruits to insurgent groups who have responded to recruitment propaganda depicting their identity community as facing an existential threat, as jihadis initially depicted Sunni Muslims in Syria, and the Kosovo Liberation Army depicted ethnic Albanians in Yugoslavia. If this model is accurate, then conditions in the states experiencing the civil wars should reflect conditions of high levels of repression or violence against the foreign fighter insurgents' identity group. The use of Stick strategies provides the grist for the type of atrocity propaganda observed in foreign fighter recruitment. Ethno-nationalist insurgencies receive external support from nationalist elites in neighboring states who want to "rescue" them by forcibly redrawing borders. Conversely, insurgents in home countries solicit support, including arms, money, and foreign fighters, from diaspora members living abroad.³⁴ However, ethno-nationalist insurgencies do not appear to draw diaspora foreign fighters unless and until they can credibly claim a threat of genocide.³⁵

Hypothesis 1: Organizations that are being targeted with stick or mixed strategies (both stick and carrot at the same time) will be more likely to deploy foreign fighters.

Rebel Rivalries

The anecdotal evidence that foreign fighters cause civil wars to become more violent appears to be strong, but it is less evident that foreign fighters are the source of rebel fragmentation rather than a symptom of it or a response to it. Inter-rebel group violence is associated with power differentials, both when the state is incapable of challenging insurgents on rebel-held territory and when one insurgent group is more powerful than its rivals and is comfortable attempting to eliminate them.³⁶ Attacks against local civilians by rebels who are ostensibly on the same side of the conflict may produce greater fragmentation by provoking "fratricidal flipping," in which the attacked faction will ally with the state in order to defeat the offending insurgents.³⁷ Additionally, "frustrated or weak" states may turn to supporting one rebel group against another when the incumbent regimes finds itself unable to defeat insurgents itself.³⁸

Rivalry between militant factions can lead to attacks against out-group civilian populations in a bid to drive up political support and demonstrate the effectiveness of the militant organization relative to other factions, producing a conflict spiral (Bloom, 2004).³⁹ Generally, as with the presence of foreign fighters, inter-group rebel rivalry corresponds with increased violence against civilians. Factions in more fragmented movements are significantly more likely to use violence against each other and their rival's civilian supporters.⁴⁰

Rivalries can lead to attacks against in-group civilians who support other factions by insurgents who fear that they will direct crucial resources to rival groups. Shifts in the fortune of rebel groups vis a vis competitors can lead to rapid fluctuations in targeting of civilians.⁴¹ Alternatively, inter-field rivalries, that is between groups representing different ideologies or constituencies, also promote polarization within the civilian population that can lead to longer-term conflicts and reduce the opportunity for negotiated settlements.⁴²

The regime may be too weak to defeat the rebels arrayed against it, but in some circumstances, fragmentation among insurgent forces may similarly prevent any faction from being strong enough to prevail. In those instances, lacking sufficient local support to take power and facing threat from rival insurgent factions as well as from the regime, factions will turn to external supporters to expand the scope of conflict and change the balance of forces.⁴³

Foreign governments will support rebel groups on the basis of ethnic ties as well in the interest of undermining rival regimes.⁴⁴ External support can include foreign state support but also support from non-state actors such as ethnic diasporas and non-government groups.⁴⁵ Foreign state intervention increases the propensity for opposition violence with the provision of resources and political support for insurgents.⁴⁶ “Outside support (from foreign states or diasporas) and state violence also significantly increase the severity of violence” by domestic militant groups in response.⁴⁷

While there are obvious benefits to rebel groups in receiving external support, there are also costs. Governments may respond with greater levels of repression. There are also occasions when the foreign interests diverge from those of the local rebels, leading to withholding support or transferring it to another group, leaving the rebels without capacity that they had not developed while enjoying external support.⁴⁸ As noted, similar schisms are commonplace between local and foreign fighters, and possibly occur on every occasion.⁴⁹ Foreign state sponsorship of rebels further disincentivizes negotiations with the regime,⁵⁰ and the same logic holds for sponsorship by trans-national actors such as diasporas or terrorist networks.

Levels of violence by armed groups against civilian populations in civil wars are a product of the incentives for cooperation that rebels and civilians perceive.⁵¹ Insurgencies that use foreign fighters may have fewer incentives to cooperate with the civilian supporters of the regime or rival factions, because these foreign fighters rely to a greater degree on external material support. Also, unlike local insurgents, foreign fighters do not need to fear reprisal attacks against their own communities and may therefore exercise less restraint.⁵²

The literature on rivalry between rebel groups notes that external state actors are frequently responsible for fomenting escalating levels of violence between insurgents and their supporters. Factions compete against their rivals for external support, and foreign states will provide arms and resources to their favored agents, who then seek to consolidate power.⁵³ This dynamic also holds for non-state sponsors of insurgencies, which provided financing, arms, and foreign fighters to jihadi factions in Afghanistan and Chechnya. Trans-national militant networks have tended to reward the most ideologically extreme factions, and these have been responsible for increasing fratricidal violence between rebel factions and violence against noncombatants.⁵⁴

Rebel groups also have fewer incentives to rely on the support of the local population when they receive logistical support from abroad, and their relationship becomes more predatory.⁵⁵ Based on this logic, and with empirical evidence of foreign fighters increasing rebel use of violence and conflicting with local political leadership, we expect to see foreign fighters associated with increased rebel fragmentation as well. Rebels who need to trade local support for foreign fighters who engage in violence against civilians on their own side evidence desperation, just like states that target noncombatants do.

Hypothesis 2: Organizations with more rivalries will be more likely to deploy foreign fighters

Data and Methods

To empirically test our hypotheses about why some conflicts produce foreign fighter participation while others do not, we use the Big Allied and Dangerous II Insurgent dataset (BAADI2) which has data on 140 organizations yearly from 1998 till 2012.⁵⁶ The BAADI2 insurgency dataset codes all code-able organizations found in the Uppsala Armed Conflict Data Program's dataset which rose above the 25-battle death mark at least once during the time period in question. The organization is coded for the entire time period as long as it is extent and still has not renounced violence even if it does not break the 25-battle death mark in that year. There are 1386 organizational years in the dataset. Our dependent variable was coded as a zero if foreign fighters were not found to be used by the organization in that year and as a one if they were.

We coded foreign fighter presence with state variables including *regime type* and *stick or mixed* counter-insurgency strategies, and insurgency variables including *territorial control*, *leadership structure*, *foreign state support*, *insurgent group alliances and rivalries*, and ideologies including *religious*, *ethnic* and *leftist*. The data for foreign fighters was coded using the 2016 updated version of the Foreign Fighter Project dataset.⁵⁷ This data incorporates 353 civil wars between 1816–2015 combined from the Correlates of War Intrastate War and the UDCP/PRIO Armed Conflict dataset, both of which use a measure of 1,000 conflict-related deaths for inclusion in the source sets, with the PRIO set counting using battlefield deaths. Insurgencies are coded dichotomously depending on whether foreign fighters could be identified among the insurgents. The dataset includes 91 cases of foreign fighters, or 26 percent of all insurgencies over the last two hundred years, 26 of which occurred during the time period covered by the BAADI2 dataset.

Our independent variables are selected both from the hypotheses in the paper as well as control variables chosen because they are likely to generally have an impact on the behavior of insurgent organizations. We control for *regime type* by using a variable created in the Quality of Government (QoG) dataset⁵⁸ that is based on both the Polity IV⁵⁹ and Freedom House regime measures⁶⁰ to cover states that are missing from Polity IV. All of our organizational level variables that we are using as independent variables are drawn from the BAADI2 dataset.⁶¹

We include three ideology variables in the analysis which are coded as either a zero or one depending on if the organization claims that ideology. These ideologies are

Table 1. Insurgent organizations deploying foreign fighters for at least one year 1998–2012.

Al-Fatah
Allied Democratic Forces (ADF)
Allied Democratic Forces of Guinea (RDFG)
Al-Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP)
Al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb (AQLIM)
Al-Shabab
Ansar Al-Dine (Mali)
Boko Haram
Convention of Patriots for Justice and Peace
Democratic Front for the Liberation of Rwanda (FDLR)
Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement (ETIM)
Forces Nouvelles (FN)
Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement)
Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU)
Islamic State of Iraq and al Sham (ISIS)
Justice and Equality Movement (JEM)
Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA)
M23
Rally of Democratic Forces (RAFD)
Sudan Liberation Movement
Taliban
United Front For Democratic Change (FUC)

religious, ethnic or leftist. Territorial control and foreign state support were also coded as binary variables as well. If an organization was subjected to a *stick or a mixed* (meaning the organization was also being subjected to conciliatory policies in the same year as they were being “sticked”) strategy that is coded as a one in the relevant year. By stick, we mean any repressive or punitive strategies being used against the organization.

Both *alliance* and *rivalry* variables are count variables of the number of this type of connection with other insurgent organizations in the dataset in that year each organization has. The most amount of alliance connections is fifteen and the most rivalries any organization has in any one year is four. Finally, we include two ordinal variables, one for *leadership structure* and one for *size*. The size variable is coded from a one to a four with an organization that receives a one having up to 100 members and if an organization is coded as a four having 10,000 or more members. The *leadership* variable also goes from one to four with coding as a one if having multiple leaders and coding as a four if it has a single leader. Table 1 lists all the organizations (22) that at least in one year from 1998 to 2012 had foreign fighters who were fighting for them.

Analysis

Findings

Table 2 shows how many organizations in any one year had such foreign fighters as well as the percentage of organizations in that year that had foreign fighters. The table makes clear that while there are changes from year to year the trend appears to be moving generally upward with less than 3% of the organizations having foreign fighters in 1998 while more than 13% of organizations have foreign fighters in 2012. Table 3 provides the descriptive statistics of the different variables we are using.

Table 2. Number and percentage of insurgent organizations using foreign fighters each year.

Year	No FF	FFs	Total	% of orgs in year
1998	74	2	76	2.63
1999	75	2	77	2.60
2000	77	3	80	3.75
2001	78	4	82	4.88
2002	79	4	83	4.82
2003	86	5	91	5.49
2004	86	8	94	8.51
2005	82	10	92	10.87
2006	87	10	97	10.31
2007	88	11	99	11.11
2008	89	9	98	9.18
2009	90	12	102	11.76
2010	88	13	101	12.87
2011	94	13	107	12.15
2012	93	14	107	13.08
Total	1,266	120	1,386	

Table 3. Descriptive statistics.

Variable	Variable name	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Foreign Fighter	NEWforeign_fighter	1,386	0.0866	0.2813	0	1
Stick and mixed strategy directed at organization	SMSTICKMIXED	1,386	0.6861	0.4642	0	1
Size	size_rec	1,386	2.6876	0.7047	1	4
Leadership Structure	Ldrshp	1,386	2.8918	0.4938	1	4
Alliance count	a_degree	1,386	0.8182	1.5961	0	15
Rivalry count	r_degree	1,386	0.3247	0.6403	0	4
Religious ideology	Reli	1,386	0.3463	0.4760	0	1
Ethnic Ideology	Ethn	1,386	0.5433	0.4983	0	1
Leftist ideology	Left	1,386	0.2121	0.4090	0	1
Foreign State Support	Fdstate	1,386	0.0815	0.2737	0	1
Territorial control	Terrcntrl	1,386	0.2468	0.4313	0	1
Polity IV dataset inferred	fh_ipolity2	1,380	5.0709	2.8424	0.25	10

Since the *foreign fighter* variable we are analyzing is a binary variable, we use logistic regression analysis. To control for year effects we use STATA's `i.year` command and we also clustered the variables using the organizational codes for each group. Table 4 provides the results of our findings. To analyze the data we use the `prchange` and `prtab` command created by Scott & Freese (2006). The results of the regression as well as the percent change in probability from minimum to maximum for the statistically significant variables.

As one can see from the data presented in table four, very few of the variables in the logistic regression are having an impact on the dependent variable. Of all the variables only four, *rivalry*, *stick strategies*, *religious ideology* and *regime type* have any kind of impact on whether or not an insurgent organization is using foreign fighters in a year from 1998 to 2012. Of the four variables, the *rivalry* count is having the strongest impact (by far) of any of them (23.37%) followed by the negative impact that *regime type* is having (-8.81%) with being subjected to a *stick strategy* is having a small impact (3.72%) and *religious ideology* having the smallest impact at (3.35%).

Our findings supported both of the hypotheses about civil war violence and foreign fighters. Not only does insurgent cohesion not make foreign fighters more likely, but

Table 4. Logistic regression with percentage change in probability from minimum value to maximum value.

Variable	Variable name	Coefficient	Robust standard error	Percent change in probability
Stick and mixed strategy directed at organization	SMSTICKMIXED	2.118***	0.499	3.72%
Size	size_rec	0.622	0.325	NS
Leadership Structure	ldrshp	0.030	0.430	NS
Alliance count	a_degree	0.122	0.127	NS
Rivalry count	r_degree	0.731**	0.345	23.37%
Religious ideology	reli	1.221**	0.591	3.35%
Ethnic Ideology	ethn	0.062	0.630	NS
Leftist ideology	left	-2.160	1.174	NS
Foreign State Support	fdstate	-0.814	0.533	NS
Territorial control	terrctrl	0.616	0.600	NS
Polity IV dataset inferred	fh_ipolity2	-0.311***	0.092	-8.81%
Year dummies	_year_1999	-0.251	0.151	
	_year_2000	0.513	0.754	
	_year_2001	0.846	0.879	
	_year_2002	0.940	0.735	
	_year_2003	1.039	0.726	
	_year_2004	1.654	0.757	
	_year_2005	1.895	0.779	
	_year_2006	1.538	0.764	
	_year_2007	1.617	0.741	
	_year_2008	1.562	0.741	
	_year_2009	1.867	0.746	
	_year_2010	1.962	0.754	
	_year_2011	2.081	0.729	
	_year_2012	1.581	0.810	
Constant	_cons	-7.160	1.679	
Number of obs = 1,380		Two tailed significance ** $p < .05$, *** $p < .01$		
Wald chi2(26) = 145.91				
Prob > chi2 = 0.0000				

the greatest predictor of rebel demand for foreign fighters is rivalry among insurgents. There is support for the expectation that state deployment of *stick and mixed strategies* against rebel supporters draws foreign fighters, as rebel groups seek additional external support and are able to overcome collective action barriers by demonstrating threat to their community. We also find that states that are more democratic will make foreign fighter deployment less likely, and thus conversely the more autocratic a regime the more likely an organization will deploy foreign fighters. We should note that while *religious ideology* is having an impact and despite the attention that jihadi foreign fighters have garnered in recent decades, *religious ideology* has only a small effect on foreign fighter likelihood.

Discussion

The results provide interesting findings about the conditions under which foreign fighters are most likely. They indicate that, rather than any particular religion, ideology or ethnicity operating as a factor in trans-national recruitment, the presence of foreign fighters is attributable to variables in the conflict conditions. The most significant variables, the presence of *rival insurgent groups*, *non-democratic regimes*, and *Stick strategies* by those regimes create both rebel group demand for external support as

well as the conditions of desperate struggle and atrocity against civilians that insurgencies historically use to recruit foreign fighters. Factors which other studies have found to exacerbate civil war violence and intractability, such as *ethno-nationalist ideology* and *territorial control*, do not appear to make foreign fighters more likely.

Insurgent rivalry as a significant predictor of foreign fighters is a surprising finding based on prior research on foreign fighters. Case studies have tended to present foreign fighters as either products of collaboration between trans-national networks and local fighting factions, or else as uninvited interlopers who produce factionalization within the leadership of local rebel groups.⁶² Local rebels may perceive foreign fighters to be especially ideologically committed and more willing to fight, but conflicts soon arise because of their differing values, agendas, and lack of regard for local civilians, both supporters whom they abuse and enemies against whom they commit war crimes.⁶³ Cultural tensions, battlefield losses and poor financial dealings may exacerbate these tensions as seen in Iraq and Syria.⁶⁴

Insurgent rivalry produces an incentive for rebel factions to seek external support to bolster their strength when they fail to draw sufficient local support. Factions may select particular targets that will appeal to external audiences rather than local ones,⁶⁵ or may switch their ideologies to align with international movements from which they can draw foreign fighters. At the same time, by relying on foreign fighters and funding from trans-national movements, fragmented rebel groups establish different constituencies and funding sources, reducing the incentives for local factions to cooperate and making it less likely that insurgencies where some factions have trans-national connections will unify under local control.⁶⁶ Foreign fighters with fewer ties to local communities are also more likely to engage in violence against civilians, reinforcing fragmentation.⁶⁷

The significance of *non-democratic regimes* in predicting foreign fighters is not surprising given that few insurgencies with foreign fighters have ever been involved conflicts with full democracies. The interaction between *non-democratic regimes* and *stick strategies* also makes sense given the greater likelihood of human rights abuses by regime with low levels of democracy.⁶⁸ From a recruitment standpoint, insurgent recruiters can use the consequences of *stick strategies* to persuade volunteers that it is imperative that they intervene in the conflict to save the lives of “their” people. For example, various insurgent groups highlighted war crimes by the Assad regime against civilians to argue why immediate external assistance was necessary to prevent further atrocities.

Compared to the structural factors of *rivalry* and *non-democratic regimes*, *stick strategies* by the state and the religious ideology of insurgents have smaller, but still significant, impacts. *Stick strategies* create both rebel group demand for external support as well as the conditions of desperate struggle and atrocity against civilians that insurgencies historically use in propaganda to recruit foreign fighters.

In Chechnya, the application of *stick strategies* by Russia damaged the rebels sufficiently that they caused the insurgents to seek outside support and adopt more extreme ideology and violent tactics to gain external financing. A consistent claim throughout the research on foreign fighters is that *stick strategies* transformed the Chechen conflict from a locally-driven ethnic separatist campaign to a transnationally led religious one that resulted in severe human rights violations by jihadis.⁶⁹ The higher levels of violence employed by some foreign fighters in cases like Chechnya may also backfire in hardening the

position of the state vis a vis the insurgents.⁷⁰ Therefore foreign fighters may be the proximate cause of state efforts to “stick it” to particularly difficult rebel populations.

The findings indicate only a minor increased likelihood that insurgencies with *religious ideologies* will have foreign fighters. For researchers who associate foreign fighters with Sunni Muslim jihadi networks the limited effect of religion may be surprising. In examining *rivalry* between jihadi factions that rely on foreign fighters, Hamming (2017) notes that Al-Qaeda (which does not seek to form proto-states) did not engage in outbidding via civilian targeting against IS despite defections both in Syria and globally, remaining true to its espoused ideology and strategies.⁷¹ Nonetheless, and largely driven by foreign fighters, the two jihadi factions did engage in deadly rivalries in Syria, Afghanistan and elsewhere that inevitably impacted civilian populations.

It would be reasonable to assume that religious extremism plays a role in greater foreign fighter intransigence and instrumental violence. However, there does not appear to be a particularly strong propensity for insurgencies with *religious ideologies* to attract foreign fighters. This variable had only a small predictive effect for the foreign fighters in our dataset, and the period 1998–2012, arguably demonstrated a period effect of civil wars during decades when trans-national jihadi networks were more active than other ideologies. For example, in the twentieth century for decades there were far more Communist foreign fighters than there have been jihadis.⁷² Predictions of when modern era foreign fighters are likeliest have included when Muslims are under foreign occupation,⁷³ but this was not the case in our dataset.

Research on the effectiveness of insurgencies with foreign fighters has found no significant benefit to *ethnic* coherence between local and foreign insurgents.⁷⁴ It also appears that *religious ideology* has limited benefit to rebel groups in seeking the participation of foreign fighters, as compared to all cases of foreign fighters overall. While foreign fighters in recent conflicts like Syria and Ukraine may have been religious extremists, the data indicate this was far less instrumental to their participation than was the insurgent fragmentation in both conflicts.

Despite the focus on militant Islamism in studies of foreign fighters and trans-national terrorism, scholarship on civil wars has long indicated that religion is not a significant factor in conflict absent compounding regime factors such as weak governance capacity and discriminatory policies.⁷⁵ Data on foreign fighters indicate that, despite the focus on al-Qaeda and ISIS, only about half of foreign fighters have been jihadis.⁷⁶ While there have been a number of jihadi-led insurgencies in recent decades that have attracted foreign fighters, even during the period covered in our data when these groups were particularly successful in attracting foreign fighters it still appears that conflict-level factors were more significant in drawing foreign fighters than any particular religious identity was. Instead, the logic of necessity creates an imperative for insurgencies to seek foreign fighters regardless of their ideology.

Even some jihadi groups like ISIS that are attempting governance, rely upon uncompromising strategies are a result of fierce rivalries with other rebels that make conciliation impossible and lead them to depend instead on assistance from external sources of support because their hardened, local constituencies would oppose compromises.⁷⁷

Insurgencies fought over religious identity are held to be particularly intractable because religious communities have established civil society hierarchies that are resilient to loss of leadership and able to overcome collective action barriers relatively readily because confessional conflicts are perceived to be zero-sum contests.⁷⁸ Toft (2007: 166) found that religious civil wars are four times more deadly for civilians, and they are even less likely than other civil wars to be resolved by negotiated settlement.⁷⁹ Given that half of foreign fighters have been jihadis and that religious civil wars are more likely to result in civilian deaths, we would expect both that foreign fighters to appear in religious ideology conflicts and that there would be foreign fighters in conflicts with high levels of violence against noncombatants.

Conclusion

We believe that our findings point strongly in a specific direction for which factors make it more likely that insurgencies recruit foreign fighters. In a word, there is one key element that drives insurgent organizations to turn to foreign fighters and that word is desperation. Rebel organizations that are being targeted for violence by governments using a *stick strategy* and organizations that have many *rivals* are more likely to turn to foreign fighters because they are facing serious threats both from states and competing nonstate actors. This is compounded a bit by the *regime type* they find themselves in, with democracies being harder places to bring foreign fighters as well and *religious ideology* clearly being attractive to foreign fighters- but the threatening environment created by *stick strategies* and *rivalry* clearly have the strongest impacts.

We should note in closing that the data we have does not currently allow us to test the impact of atrocity stories resulting from *stick* policies, or whether inter-rebel violence makes foreign fighters more likely to volunteer on their own, or what kinds of levels of desperation on the part of the organization cause them to invest more resources in recruiting abroad. The literature on terrorist radicalization, particularly online radicalization and lone actor terrorism, supports the formulation that organizations releasing propaganda and hoping that it generates new followers does constitute recruitment even if the volunteers are self-directed. The extent to which rebel groups portray their community's situation as desperate and the impact that might have bears further study once data is collected at that level that can be applied to this type of analysis.

Perhaps relatedly, the relationship between illiberal or anocratic regimes and foreign fighters also requires future study. It is not immediately clear whether insurgents are more successful in recruiting to fight against unsympathetic dictators or whether *non-democratic regimes* rely more on *stick strategies* and generate the conditions for more recruitment abroad. Future research also needs to apply this kind of analysis not just to insurgent organizations but also to terrorist organizations to see if the causal mechanisms are different for organizations that primarily target civilians.

Determining why foreign fighters appear in some conflicts but not others is a question of both theoretical and policy importance. Why did the civil war that began in Syria in 2011 draw so many foreign fighters, but the one that began at the same time in Libya did not? More recently, with the loss of its territory,

hundreds of ISIS fighters and supporters have traveled to join its affiliates from Sinai to the Philippines. Identifying the conflicts with the factors most likely to draw foreign fighters would be useful for predicting where ISIS supporters and other militants are likely to go next because conflict structure as well as individual agency appear to play roles in foreign fighting. And given that a rising proportion of civil wars, including those not involving jihadis, have also been drawing foreign fighters and that these insurgencies have had higher rates of success than purely local ones, it is important to identify which other conflicts are likely to see foreign fighters in the future.

Notes

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