

The Takeaway

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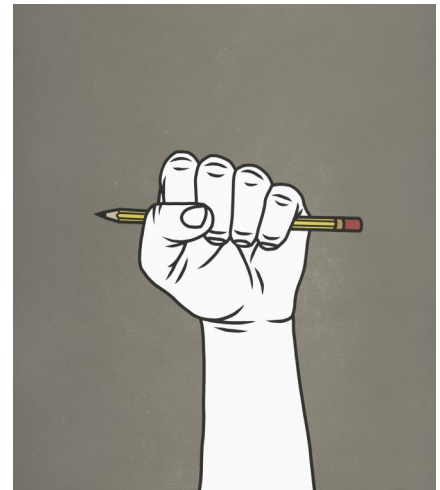
The Elitism of Armed Rebellion

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The global fame—or ignominy—of rebel leaders is often determined by the degree of violence and upheaval they and their armed organizations generate. Names like Joseph Kony, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, and Jonas Savimbi are inseparable from the violent political projects of the Lord's Resistance Army, the Islamic State, and UNITA, which these individuals led, respectively. But are these men representative of rebel leaders as a class of political actors in international politics?

Some rebel leaders leave colorful paper trails littered with details because they gave numerous public speeches, were prolific writers and propagandists, drew enough interest that observers chronicled their lives in biographies and obituaries, or, in some cases, spoke English and hence received more attention by Western media and academics. Others, however,



WHAT'S THE TAKEAWAY?

Civil wars are the dominant form of warfare today, yet we have little systematic information on the leaders of rebel organizations.

A new Rebel Organization Leaders (ROLE) database helps fill this gap.

ROLE data shows that rebel leaders constitute a rather distinguished, well-educated, and elite group.

ROLE offers insights on how rebel leader biographies affect conflict initiation, dynamics, and outcomes.

remain in relative obscurity, whether because their armed organizations were quickly defeated by the state's armed forces or because international media and policymakers chose to pin their attention elsewhere.

Given the importance of civil wars in international politics, it behooves us to know more about who leads these violent campaigns of rebellion against the state.

Collectively, then, we have voluminous details on some rebel leaders and minimal information on others, leading to patchy and incomplete knowledge of the individuals who take the helm of non-state militant groups. This lacuna is striking for at least two reasons. First, civil wars are the dominant form of warfare today; most wars today occur *within*, rather than between, states, and correspondingly, most people who die in war are dying in civil, as opposed to interstate, wars.¹ Given the importance of civil wars in international politics, it behooves us to know more about *who* leads these violent campaigns of rebellion against the state. Second, the dearth of knowledge about rebel leaders marks a notable contrast with our extensive documentation and scholarship on heads of state. That there is better information on state leaders is of course unsurprising. But for analysis of civil wars, it does mean a significant imbalance of information about the adversaries, with disproportionate information available on governments as compared to rebels.

THE REBEL ORGANIZATION LEADERS (ROLE) DATABASE

Who, then, are these individuals who lead rebel organizations? Where do they come from, and what backgrounds, experiences, and skills do they bring to bear in armed conflict?

Recognizing the gap in our understanding of the leadership of armed groups, my collaborators and I compiled the Rebel Organization Leaders (ROLE) Database.² The first dataset of its kind, ROLE contains a wide range of biographical information on the top leaders of all rebel organizations engaged in civil wars between 1980 and 2011, which amounts to 425 individuals. Whereas previously we would have been hard pressed to answer simple questions such as the average age or educational profiles of rebel leaders in contemporary conflicts, ROLE offers scholars the ability to distill basic descriptive information about them. Furthermore, ROLE enables researchers to ask new questions about how leader experiences, backgrounds, and qualifications, such as previous combat experience or their upbringing abroad, might affect their conduct and decision-making in war.

In Figure 1, I highlight a few intriguing findings from ROLE while referring readers to the data introduction article for a fuller discussion of the dataset's design, structure, descriptive statistics, and potential uses.³

NEW INSIGHTS ON REBEL LEADERS

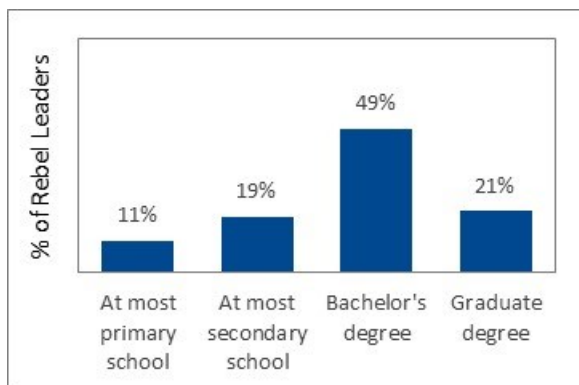
One of the fascinating insights we glean using ROLE is that the top leaders of contemporary armed groups are, on the whole,

overwhelmingly well-educated. Of the rebel leaders on whom we located schooling information, a remarkable 70 percent held degrees in higher education. More than one in five (21 percent) obtained a master's or doctorate degree, a much higher figure than the proportion of leaders who never attended or finished secondary school (11 percent).⁴

South Sudanese leader John Garang exemplifies the well-educated rebel leader: with a scholarship in hand, Garang left his home country of Sudan to earn a bachelor's degree at Grinnell College in Iowa before obtaining a Ph.D. in economics at Iowa State University in the late 1970s. He was then offered a fellowship at UC Berkeley but chose to return to Sudan, where he launched a campaign for South Sudanese independence. Garang, indeed, is among the 19 percent of rebel leaders who pursued education in the West.

Other information from ROLE further advances the idea that rebel leaders constitute a rather distinguished and even elitist cast. The data shows that 38 percent of rebel leaders came from families with political or other notable elite connections. For exam-

Figure 1: Rebel Leaders' Educational Profiles



Source: Data from the ROLE database.

ple, Masoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) which fought for Kurdish independence from Iraq, comes from a prominent Kurdish family whose members, including his father Mustafa Barzani, have fought for the Kurdish cause for generations. Moreover, ROLE demonstrates that many rebel leaders are fairly cosmopolitan, as reflected in their ample international experiences: 38 percent studied abroad and 15 percent worked abroad at some point prior to assuming rebel leadership. In all, 60 percent acquired significant international experiences before becoming a rebel leader, whether for work, study, military training, or in exile.

Thus, if there is some truth to the notion that rebel foot soldiers are often of the peasantry or come from the lower or working classes—as depicted in emblematic images of the Viet Cong—we should largely disabuse ourselves of the notion that rebel leaders are similarly situated in society. Some certainly are, but the bulk of leaders more closely resemble well-heeled, globe-trotting, educated elites than toiling workers.

These data are not merely of descriptive value; separate studies my collaborators and I conducted suggest that rebel leaders' backgrounds and experiences have notable causal effects on wartime dynamics. For example, we find that rebel leaders with prior international experiences are significantly more likely to succeed in securing foreign support once war is underway.⁵ A possible explanation, we argue, is that experiences abroad provide opportunities for would-be leaders to meet and become acquainted with many foreign individuals, some of whom

later become valuable points of contact when leaders search for external sponsors. Garang, for example, mobilized his friends from his graduate school days in Iowa, who soon had strong connections to the US government, to lobby for American support for South Sudanese independence.

Leader biographies, in other words, offer interesting insights in their own right, but once systematically arranged in a cross-national dataset, they can also help explain important political outcomes in international politics.

CONCLUSION

As I write (in late August 2021), a crisis unfolds in Afghanistan following the Taliban's takeover of the state and the total collapse of the US-supported government. In the melee, many observers have pointed to President Joe Biden's deep-seated skepticism of military force, "rooted in lessons he learned from Vietnam," as a way to explain why he ordered the rapid drawdown of US forces from the country.⁶ Others have identified the top Taliban leaders and scoured their profiles to assess how they might perform as governors.⁷ The importance of understanding leaders' backgrounds, experiences, personalities and other characteristics is both intuitive and long established in scholarship.

ROLE should help observers and scholars gain fresh insights on how rebel leader biographies affect conflict initiation, dynamics, and outcomes.

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Notes:

¹ Strand, H., Rustad, S.A., Nygård, H.M., & Hegre, H. (2020). Trends in armed conflict, 1946–2019. *Conflict Trends*, 8. Oslo: PRIO.

² Acosta, B., Huang, R., & Silverman, D. (forthcoming). Introducing ROLE: A database of rebel leader attributes in armed conflict. *Journal of Peace Research*.

³ Acosta, Huang, & Silverman (forthcoming).

⁴ We have schooling information on 70 percent of the leaders. It may well be that leaders on whom we lack educational data are less educated than their peers. But, even in the extreme case in which none of the leaders on whom we lack educational data earned at least a bachelor's degree, over 50 percent of all leaders will still have earned one, and thus the main point here holds.

⁵ Huang, R., Silverman, D. & Acosta, B. (forthcoming). Friends in the profession: Rebel leaders, international social networks, and external support for rebellion. *International Studies Quarterly*.

⁶ Viser, M., Gearan, A., & Thebault, R. (2021, August 21). 'America First Lite': Afghanistan withdrawal brings a Biden Doctrine into focus. *Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/biden-doctrine-afghanistan/2021/08/21/df07e02a-0106-11ec-85f2-b871803f65e4_story.html.

⁷ Bulos, N. (2021, August 19). The Taliban is back in power. These are the leaders. *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/world-nation/story/2021-08-19/taliban-back-in-power-these-are-their-leaders>.

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