

Thesis Prospectus

Their Brothers' Keepers: Ethnicity, Insecurity, and State Support for Insurgency

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## I. Issue Overview and Research Question

State support for rebel groups is a political phenomenon that has been examined from a variety of angles and methodologies. Much of the extant scholarship focuses on vulnerability (Herbst 1989), kin ties (Saideman 2002), and international rivalry (Salehyan 2008). Other work, such as Byman and Kreps (2010) and Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011), makes a vital contribution by framing support in a principal-agent context, where states (principals) delegate responsibility in conflict to armed groups (agents). More interesting yet is emerging work on “rebel diplomacy” (See Coggins 2015) that details how rebel groups engage with external actors in order to further their aims.

This work seeks to build upon established research while examining the specific ways that these factors influence which rebel groups receive support, specifically how ethnicity plays a role in the strategic interactions between states and rebels that Coggins refers to as “rebel diplomacy”. Extant work goes far to suggest the salience of ethnicity as a driver of support for insurgents, but does little to explore ethnicity’s contextual nature (See Chandra) and thus whether or not it plays more of an instrumental or ideational role in the internationalization of civil conflict.

The central research question that drives this thesis is: **“When considered alongside other factors, what role do ethnic ties play in determining which rebel groups receive state support?”**

Though this study will incorporate non-ethnic armed groups into its large N analysis, this is primarily due to test the influence of other factors, such as national capability and rivalry.

Much literature within comparative politics has noted the impact of such ascriptive identities on domestic political issues and civil wars (Cederman, Wimmer, and Min 2010). **Ethnicity, however, plays an important and thus far ill-explored role at different (i.e. regional and international) levels of analysis.** Some of the extent literature explores how identity can be an intangible-yet important-factor in territorial disputes (See O’Lear et al 2005) and irredentism (See Ayoob 1995). Other works examine transnational kin ties impact on state recognition (Coggins 2008). The extant literature indicates the salience of ethnicity, but its role as a causal mechanism in determining state support is still, on the whole, ill-explored.

Within the regional framework of analysis, I posit that ethnicity will be of particular salience as a determinant of state support for rebel groups, **particularly in recently decolonized regions (in the “Third World”.**

## II. Theoretical Overview and Review of Literature

The first segment of the project will consist of a literature review and a description of the theoretical underpinnings of the work. The central research question of this work begs another question: why do certain groups receive support from states and not others? I draw upon several bodies of theory to create a testable theoretical model to answer this question.

Ethnic groups are defined by Rothschild (1981: 2) as “collective groups whose membership is largely determined by real or putative ancestral inherited ties, and who perceive these ties as systematically affecting their place and fate in the political and socioeconomic structures of their state and society”. Saideman (2002) posits that “If ethnic identity influences individuals’ preferences towards domestic policies, these same identities should influence preferences towards foreign policies”. The views and preferences of members of a state’s “winning coalition” (Buono de Mesquita, Smith, Siverson, and Morrow 2002) are posited as the mechanism by which policies are chosen. Koga (2011) follows this logic and identifies three assumptions of the ethnic tie hypothesis: that ethnic identities influence the preferences of individuals... that politicians care primarily about gaining or retaining office...that politicians need the support of others to maintain political office”. This is rooted in the socio-psychological concept of in-group bias (Cosser 1956). **However, ethnic identity is socially constructed and, as Chandra (2012) notes, highly contextual. This paper will further explore the centrality of this ascriptive factor as a variable in determining which groups receive state support.**

When engaged in civil conflict, rebel groups will often engage diplomatically with foreign powers in order to gain support and legitimacy for their cause. This strategic use of talk abroad is employed in addition to violent tactics domestically as a tactic in civil wars. The literature on this topic is still nascent, and this paper seeks to extend the logic of other, more established literatures to it in order to enrich it and make a stronger argument. As previously mentioned, ethnic ties are a significant determinant of support for rebel groups. But simply stating this only examines one half of a strategic interaction. As ethnicity is salient as a domestic organizing principal for many insurgent groups, it may also play a significant role in determining how these groups interact with foreign patrons: and in which contexts they receive support. Thus, I posit that ethnic rebel groups will engage in ethnically-framed talk with states with whom they share a common kin tie. This action is a clear “strategic move” (Schelling 1960) that reduces transaction costs in the principal-agent bargaining relationship through the usage of common language and symbols. Likewise, this could serve as a credible signal of shared preferences and reduced agency costs, resolving an information problem that actors face when entering a principal-agent relationship. Principals fear adverse selection, which occurs when agents have divergent preferences over outcomes (Rauchaus 2009). The usage of shared symbols and language in rebel diplomacy can ameliorate this fear.

Horowitz (1985) notes that “Nowhere, of course, is politics simply reducible to the common denominator of ethnic ties”. Though this is in reference to the impact of domestic ethnic affiliations, its logic is applicable to international contexts as well. Extant literature on the international relations of ethnic conflict does not deny the salience of kin ties but fails to explicate exactly **how and when** these ties are important. Indeed, it treats ethnicity much in the same way that primordialist scholarship does: as a “given”. In contrast to this, other scholars take an instrumentalist perspective towards ethnicity. Fenton (2003) describes this as when

“behavior in terms of ethnic attachments could be seen to be serving some individual or collective political or economic ends, then the ethnic action could be reinterpreted as instrumental”. In this case, a state might be prompted to support a rebel group irrespective of any ethnic affiliations: it might entertain rebel diplomats, but their behavior may play an insignificant role in determining whether or not they receive support. Other factors such as rivalry may be far more salient to state leaders, and supporting kin abroad may only be used as a cover for other, more material interests. Indeed, in the case of a rivalrous relationship between an external state and the host state of the rebel group, preferences are already assured: the enemy of one’s enemy is often their friend.

However, conflict can harden ethnic identities. Lake and Rothchild (1996) and Van Evera (2001) note how, at the domestic level, ethnic violence can result in the reification of such ascriptive identities and that identity change is highly unlikely during periods of conflict due to the impact of “national memories”. The former also note how ethnic “entrepreneurs” and activists can enhance the salience of ethnicity as an organizing principal and drive leaders to take more ethnically-aligned positions. If ethnicity is the primary driver of these actions at the domestic level, it may also play such an ideational role at the international level, particularly when leaders are dependent upon the support of a “winning coalition” of the same ethnicity as the rebel group in question.

Ayoob (1995) extensively describes the impact of colonialism’s distortions on “conflict between neighboring, usually contiguous, states over disputed territories and populations”. The impact of colonial boundaries is an important, region-level variable that has a strong and deleterious effect on states’ security. Ayoob notes that the “inadequate stateness” of Third World states (i.e. their lack of legitimacy and political capacity), caused by exacerbated ethnic cleavages and inadequate time for state building, and is a source of major security concerns. I posit that such conditions will lead to a higher incidence of state support for ethnic rebellion, not only due to a higher incidence of such forms of rebellion, but **because such external support is inextricably tied to internal concerns of security and legitimacy.** In its essence, the **aggregate impact of a region made of weak and conflict-prone states will be a conflict-prone region.** State leaders in the Third World often rely on domestic kin networks (as in Syria or Rwanda) or ethnic-based political strategies to maintain authority. Failing to support kin abroad would directly threaten their already tenuous legitimacy and grasp on power, especially if these kin are close to their base of power. Groups may seek to exploit this fact, and, alternatively, states may seek to predatorily influence elements within ethnic movements for their own gain.

The intellectual launching pad for this thesis was literature on secessionism and support for ethnic rebels, such as Saideman (2002), Koga (2011), Coggins (2008), and others. The former revealed that my original research question-which did not assess the impact of systemic variables-had already been answered. After deciding on a new approach, I explored literature on regional security, such as Buzan and Waever (2003) and Lake and Morgan (1997). International relations theory, particularly the work of constructivists like Wendt (1992)and Barnett also

informs this project's epistemology. As such, my thesis will represent a reconciliation of several bodies of literature into a cohesive product.

### III. Methodology

**Sample:** UCDP External Support – Primary Warring Party Dataset v. 1.0-2011

**Unit of analysis:** “Warring party-year, providing information on the existence, type, and provider of external support for all warring parties (actors) coded as active in UCDP data, on an annual basis” (Hogbladh et. al 2011)

**Dependent variable:** External support (and the type of said support) for a certain group. The UCDP dataset distinguishes 10 different types of support (excerpt from Codebook below).

“**Troops as secondary warring party** (literal X), **Access to Territory** (literal L), **Access to military or intelligence infrastructure** (literal Y), **Weapons** (literal W), **Materiel/Logistics** (literal M), **Training/Expertise** (literal T), **Funding/Economic Support** (literal \$), **Intelligence material** (literal I), **Other forms of support** (literal O), **Unknown support** (literal U)” (Hogbladh et. al 2011)

**Independent variables:** The independent variables that will be tested in the model are ethnic ties international rivalry, and national capabilities.

**Key control variables:** This study will control for distance, the presence of natural resources, and “third world” status (to be coded)

**Preliminary model specification:** This study will use linear regression to test its hypotheses. Formal games may also be utilized, but primarily as a means of intuitively presenting strategic interactions rather than as the primarily empirical tool of the work.

This thesis will utilize the following model linear model

$$Y = b_0 + (\text{eth})b_1 + (\text{riv})b_2 + (\text{riv})(\text{eth})b_3$$

**H1:** *Groups will receive state support in cases of interstate rivalry regardless of any ethnic tie with their patron*

If supporting ethnic kin is merely a means of ensuring *ex ante* preference similarity or a justification for enacting a rivalry, then principals should be less willing to support agents in situations where they face less of a likelihood of victory, i.e. against a stronger host government. In this case, we can hypothesize:

**H1a:** *Groups will receive state support only if their host state has a lower CINC than their patron*

In contrast to the instrumentalist perspective, an ideational role for ethnicity would result in the following...

**H2:** *Groups will receive state support if they have an ethnic tie with their patron in both rivalry and non-rivalry contexts*

As domestic concerns over legitimacy and ethnic kin linkages would predominate in this situation, international outcomes would be less important, thus..

**H2a:** *Groups will receive state support regardless of their host state's relative national capabilities*

#### **IV. Case Studies**

Though this project will utilize large  $n$  analyses, several cases will be selected and analyzed in further detail to explicate a particular phenomenon. These cases will be drawn from the Palestinian national movement. This movement is of particular interest as the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians “is a domestic conflict that is in some ways the key to the whole Middle Eastern RSC” (Buzan and Waever 2003). Barnett (1998) reaffirms Ayoob’s contentions about Third World leaders’ concern with regime survival in the face of “societies that openly questioned the legitimacy of the state and the government’s ability to accomplish the myriad tasks of state building in the modern era”; Halpern (1963) categorizes such states as “weak artifices”. He likewise affirms the importance of cross-regional ethnic ties-as encapsulated in Arabist ideology-in support for the Palestinians and how said behavior greatly influenced their domestic legitimacy. Fawcett (2013), Hinnebusch and Ehteshami (2014) further explicate this idea. Pearlman (2011) and Sayigh (1997) are of particular usefulness as they provide great detail about movement-level variables that influence Palestinian groups’ behavior vis a vis external supporters. **This case study will allow us to see “rebel diplomacy” in action: Palestinian groups actively engaged external governments in order to gain legitimacy and material support.**

## V. Tentative Bibliography

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