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Who Your Friends are Matters: Types of Supporters and Child Recruitment by Rebel Groups

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Abstract: Child soldiering has been identified as one of the most prevalent human rights violations perpetrated by rebels. The aim of this research is to elucidate the potential influence of third parties, external supporters, on child soldiering by rebels. The research hypothesises that rebel's likelihood of child recruitment could be differentiated depending on who the supporter is. The research argues that rebels with the backing of other insurgent groups are more likely to engage in child recruitment, whereas they may not engage in active child soldiering when having state supporters. The statistical results support the argument that rebels with rebel supporters are more likely to recruit child soldiers; however, the research also finds inconsistent outcomes on the impact of state supporters. This research emphasises the heterogeneity amongst types of supporters and contributes to the understanding of the relationships between external supporters and child recruitment, which has been relatively understudied.

Keywords: child soldiers; external supporters; rebel groups

JEL Classification: F50; H56

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1 Introduction

Rebel groups are financed through variety of ways, and obtaining support from external actors is one of the tactics that those groups may consider. Consequently, scholars have been examining how the involvement of external actors can influence such like civil wars and the tactical decisions of rebel groups (e.g. Salehyan et al. 2011; Wennmann 2011). Given that most rebel groups lack sufficient resources to defeat their opponents independently, receiving external support is an important source of power for some rebel groups, especially if they have no alternative source to maintain their authority. Indeed, approximately half of all insurgent activities have been facilitated by foreign patrons following the conclusion of the Second World War (Cunningham et al. 2013; Tamm 2016).

Despite the fact that numerous insurgent groups receive external support from third parties, extant studies tend to focus merely on the impact of external support per se on rebels (e.g. Carothers 2006; Salehyan 2010; Salehyan et al. 2014) and relatively little attention has been paid to the human rights abuses by rebel groups with external support (e.g. Fortna et al. 2018; Salehyan et al. 2014; Toft and Zhukov 2015; Wood 2014). In other words, there is not yet sufficient research examining the impact of such support on a specific group of people. Consequently, this research focuses on a specific group of people, namely children, and discusses how external supporters influence rebel child recruitment.

In this context, this research highlights how having different external supporters affect rebels' child soldiering. Examining the factors that may contribute to child recruitment in conflict zones is imperative, given the detrimental psychological and physical consequences for children, as well as the possibility that such experiences may exacerbate the risk of them becoming involved in violent cycles (Abidi and Cleave 2023). In particular, children engaged in armed conflict are susceptible to being considered both victims and perpetrators, as they may provide support to armed groups in a variety of capacities, including combatant, cook or carrier. Therefore, even though the research can consider other groups of people, this study focuses on child soldiering from above reasons.

Research on child recruitment remains under-discussed among scholars in comparison to other types of human rights violations in conflict zones, despite the significant use of children as combatants. Consequently, the impact of external support on rebels' use of child soldiers remains an under-researched area. A paucity of studies has been identified which explore the relationship between rebel use of children and external support. Yang (2023) and Faulkner (2019) are representative

studies which have examined this relationship empirically. Yang (2023)¹ has examined the impact of different types of support materials on child soldiering while Faulkner (2019) has focused exclusively on state sponsorship. Building on the findings of these studies, this research aims to explore how the presence of different types of supporters influences the likelihood of rebel groups engaging in child recruitment. This research is distinct from two previous studies in that it aims to contribute to the understanding of how having different types of external supporters affects rebels' use of children as combatants. Here, different 'types' refer to different actors, rather than indicating characteristics. Indeed, receiving support from different sponsors may have a divergent impact on rebel decision-making, as earlier researchers have pointed out (Ives 2021; Popovic 2018). Therefore, I hypothesise that it can also affect rebel groups' use of child soldiers.

This research specifically examines the impact of two distinct categories of external supporters on child soldiering by rebels: other rebel groups (hereinafter, "rebel supporters") and foreign state governments (hereinafter, "state supporters"). This research suggests that rebel groups which receive support from rebel supporters are more likely to recruit child soldiers,² whereas they are less likely to do so when they have state supporters. This is because having rebel supporters may have less restriction in terms of learning child soldiering tactics from their partners, or even increase their aggressiveness due to the nature of their partnership. By contrast, state supporters may hinder rebels from committing something immoral for the protection of their reputations. The purpose of this study is to identify whether a particular type of supporter has an impact on the child soldiering by rebels, rather than to examine which type of supporter exerts the most significant influence on the recruitment of child soldiers by rebel groups than others.

This study makes a significant contribution to several important themes in the study of conflict. Specifically, this research serves to broaden the discussion of the factors that drive child recruitment. As previously noted, the relationship between child soldiering and external support is not yet fully understood. Child recruitment has been discussed in terms of the environment children face or the characteristics or conditions of rebel groups, but not the impact of third parties. Once more, this research is distinguished from the findings of Faulkner (2019) and Yang (2023) as it

1 Indeed, the current research stems from my previous research (Yang 2023), which examines the impact of different types of external support materials (i.e., territorial support, monetary support, and troop support) on child recruitment by rebel groups.

2 Child soldiers are individuals who are aged under 18 based on international humanitarian regulations. For instance, the Geneva Convention additional Protocol II Article 4 (3)(c) and the Convention on the Rights of Child Article 38 (3) regulate the use of children under 15 years old; and the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict (OPAC) defines the prevention of using children under 18 years old.

examines the impact of *different external supporters* on child soldiering by rebels. This is pivotal as it may indicate that external actors possess substantial influence over the decision-making processes of rebels. Secondly, as rebel groups' decision-making processes are further complicated and influenced by diverse factors. This suggests that reasons for rebel child recruitment should also be diverse. Recruitment of children is a constantly occurring phenomenon worldwide; consequently, the examination of a new potential factor in child recruitment is of significant importance, both in terms of developing the study of the field and protecting and preventing children from being targeted. Lastly, scholars acknowledge the significant impact that external actors may exert on civil wars and rebel movements (e.g. Popovic 2018; Salehyan et al. 2011; Tamm 2016; Tunç et al. 2024). However, it remains unclear what extent outsiders can influence such dynamics. Their impact may be less than anticipated, yet their influence may exceed our expectations. Consequently, identifying the potential impact of external supporters on rebel child recruitment can contribute to the advancement of research in this field.

This research is divided into six parts. Firstly, I review existing studies on (1) the reasons for the use of child soldiers and (2) the impact of external supporters on rebels in order to understand the discussion of central concepts of this research. Secondly, the theoretical framework is presented in order to explain how different types of external supporters affect child recruitment by rebels. Subsequently, an analysis of the data and methods employed in the study is presented, accompanied by a discussion of the statistical results. This research is concluded with an examination of its implications for future research and policymaking.

2 Literature Review: Child Soldiering and Impact of External Supporters

2.1 Factors of Child Recruitment: General, Supply and Demand Factors

The factors associated with the child recruitment may be examined from three distinct perspectives: a general and systematic perspective, a supply perspective and a demand perspective.

Firstly, researchers have indicated that the proliferation of small arms increases the probability of rebels utilising child soldiers, as these weapons are light enough for children to manage (Bloom and Horgan 2019; Haer 2019; Singer 2006; Stohl 2002). The

substantial population of children has also had an impact on child soldiering (Dailaire 2011; Haer 2019). For instance, existing studies have demonstrated that the considerable number of young people in Africa increases the probability of child recruitment (Haer 2019; Peters et al. 2003). Indeed, a number of African countries, including Angola, have been found to have a higher proportion of young people than adults (Achilihu 2010; D'Costa 2015).

Secondly, there is a possibility that some children decide to join armed groups of their own volition, a factor which is generally explained by push and pull factors (Gutiérrez-Sanón 2010; Haer 2019). 'Push factors' are the aspects which motivate (push) children to join the armed forces. The dearth of educational opportunities is one possible factor that can act as a catalyst for children to join armed conflicts (Goodwin-Gill and Cohn 1994; Haer 2019; Machel 1996; Wessells 2016). In the Democratic Republic of Congo, where educational opportunities are limited, children often enrol in military schools, as the paucity of alternative employment opportunities may lead children to perceive joining armed conflicts as a viable career option (Brett and MacCallin 1996; Haer 2019). Conversely, there are 'pull factors' which induce (pull) children to make the decision to join armed groups due to positive rewards such as the pursuit of basic necessities, including shelter, sustenance, and attire. (Brett and MacCallin 1996). Furthermore, it has been identified that norms are a significant contributing factor in children's involvement in armed conflicts (Lasely and Thyne 2015; Machel 1996). The desire for prestige and power has also been identified as another motivation for children to engage in armed conflicts (Chen 2014; Francis 2007; Wessells 2005).

Finally, it is also common practice for finding reason of child recruitment from demand side perspective. For example, the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL), and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) have reportedly threatened, coerced, and abducted children to join their respective groups (Human Rights Watch 2008). The prevailing rationale for coercive recruitment is that children are more compliant and more susceptible to indoctrination than adults when exposed to drugs and alcohol, thereby increasing their risk-taking behaviours (Annan et al. 2006). In Sierra Leone, for instance, drugs were frequently used as a means of influencing children and inciting their involvement in violent activities (Human Rights Watch 2008). Furthermore, children are frequently enlisted to offset deficiencies in the adult military population, particularly when groups encounter challenges in recruiting enough adults (Brett and MacCallin 1996; Haer 2019; Singer 2006; Tynes and Early 2015; Woods 1993). This occurs because children are a cost-effective solution for armed groups seeking to enlist combatants, as they are unlikely to demand compensation and are relatively obedient (Beber and Blattman 2013; Vautravers 2009).

2.2 Impact of External Supporters on Rebel Groups

In the meantime, research on external supporters and their impact and relationship with rebels is being extensively examined. Firstly, the aims of supporting rebels are discussed. As scholars point out, external backers may support rebels to replace an existing regime with their preferred one by pressuring the beneficiary (Carothers 2006; Coyne 2008) or to establish a new government that is amenable to their interests (Salehyan 2010; Vanneman and James 1976). Additionally, some external supporters provide technical and financial assistance to rebel groups with the anticipation that these groups could evolve into political parties, which they may establish connections even after the conclusion of hostilities (Carothers 2006; Vanderhill 2013). Other studies indicate that, depending on resource allocation by external supporters, conflict diffusion (Karlén 2017), and the cohesion or fragmentation of rebel groups (Tamm 2016) can be affected.

Secondly, scholars also identified the divergent motivations and outcomes made by different external supporters. As the act of attacking another nation is inherently risky and costly, state supporters may support rebels to attack the government of rebel groups instead of using their military forces to save on expenditures (Byman 2006; Corbin 2011). Consequently, providing support to rebels may allow the principals (state supporters) to enhance efficiency and productivity through the deployment of a more cost-effective power (Corbin 2011). In a similar vein, state supporters are more likely to provide support to moderately strong rebels, who possess sufficient power to inflict costs on the targeted government, as these rebels are more likely to be structured or cohesive (Salehyan et al. 2011). Sharing a common identity and ideology also affects state supporters to decide backing rebels (Thaler 2022). Alongside the active research on state supporters, other studies focus on different supporters. For instance, the existing research suggests that rebel groups who are supported by non-ethnic supporters are likely to become fragmented due to the low trust between them, whereas ethnic supporters are likely to build a trust-worthy relationship that enhances the cohesion within groups (Ives 2021). Moreover, recent studies suggest that diaspora support rebel organisations for the purpose of kinship and change in the situation of the homeland (Daub 2025). Similarly, Petrova (2019) suggests that rebels receiving support from the diaspora are more likely to adopt non-violent tactics by drawing parallels between state supporters and the diaspora. Furthermore, another study indicates that rebel groups supported by state actors are more likely to increase attacks on civilians because external support reduces the incentive for rebel groups to seek civilian support (Salehyan et al. 2014).

The motivations and outcomes of support from the third parties are also suggested to be multifaceted. In accordance with the findings of Petrova (2019), this

research hypothesises that the outcomes of child recruitment are contingent upon who rebels receive external support from. By examining two different actors, I argue that rebel groups are more motivated to recruit child soldiers when they have rebel supporters than in the absence of such supporters.

3 Theoretical Arguments: Types of External Supporters and Child Recruitment

This research hypothesises that receiving support from different external supporters may have different effects on rebel groups' involvement in child recruitment. This is predicated on the premise that these actors possess divergent incentives and constraints, which can, in turn, have varying effects on rebel groups (Petrova 2019). This research focuses on two distinct categories of supporters: rebel supporters and state supporters. I argue that having external rebel supporters may increase the likelihood of child soldier recruitment by rebel groups. In contrast, support from state supporters does not appear to have a consistently significant correlation with the use of children by rebels.

3.1 Rebel Supporters and Child Recruitment by Rebel Groups

Rebel groups are likely to cooperate with each other during armed conflicts as, 50 % of rebel groups' activities between 1946 and 2008 established alliances with one another (Akcinaroglu 2012; Gade et al. 2019). Forming a collaborative relationship brings benefits to rebel supporters, as this relationship allows them to build a more organised and resilient group that enables them to defeat their targeted opponents (Topal 2024). Given this background, this section suggests that receiving support from other rebel groups is likely to encourage rebels to recruit child soldiers with ease from the following potential scenarios.

Firstly, in case when a supporter already uses child soldiering as their strategy could be considered. It is crucial for armed groups to acquire novel tactics from disparate groups, as this may influence their development and success (Asal et al. 2022). The adoption of novel tactics by armed groups can be a costly decision; however, if a group acquires a tactic from a supporter, it can assess the benefits of utilising that tactic against the costs incurred. Indeed, the collaboration between these groups has been shown to facilitate the diffusion of strategies at reduced costs (Horowitz 2010). As discussed in existing literature, collaboration between groups has the potential to enhance their collective capabilities and facilitate the

dissemination of specific tactics, such as the targeting of civilians, across the groups concerned (Asal et al. 2022). Such interactions are likely to occur in various settings, including training centres, during meetings, and umbrella organisations (Tynes 2018). In a similar vein, the utilisation of child soldiers can also be facilitated and transmitted when tactical intelligence is exchanged through group cooperation due to the nature of networks between armed groups³ (Heyman and Mickolus 1981; Tynes 2018). It can thus be surmised that this cooperative network, which serves as a forum for the discussion and refinement of tactics, may also facilitate the diffusion of the tactic of child soldiering with lower costs and risks (Tynes 2018).

This is supported by the case of the National Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) and the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in Sierra Leone. When Charles Taylor's NPFL exercised control over 90 % of Liberia's territory, the conflict in Liberia spilled over into Sierra Leone (Gershoni 1997). The RUF, which was the primary belligerent in Sierra Leone, received support from the NPFL. The initial objectives of the RUF were to establish a new Sierra Leone, proclaiming 'liberation' and 'democracy', however, the brutality of the conflict resulted in a decrease in civilian support for the group (Denov 2010). While the RUF received support from the NPFL, the RUF also adopted the NPFL's ideology and strategies, including the use of violence against civilians and other forms of human rights abuses (Day 2015; Nuxoll 2014). Consequently, the RUF's original ideological framework became effectively obsolete due to the influence of the NPFL (Restoy 2006). The RUF's utilisation of a significant number of child soldiers was influenced by the NPFL, as the initial composition of the RUF's military forces was largely comprised of Liberian troops (Restoy 2006; Utas and Jörgel 2008). Indeed, it is estimated that between 10,000 and 30,000 children were involved in the RUF movement, playing a pivotal role during the conflict (Abraham 2001; Denov 2010; Murphy 2003).

Second, the cooperation between rebels can increase their aggressiveness by enhancing the durability of rebels, as connections can lead to an escalation in violence and the adoption of new tactics (e.g. Asal et al. 2012; Horowitz and Potter 2014; Phillips 2014). This is because exchanging resources allows groups to acquire requirements such as personnel, weapons, or information and pooling resources (Phillips 2014). Consequently, these rebel groups are less inclined to seek support from civilians, thereby increasing the probability of their engagement in violent actions against civilians (Salehyan et al. 2014; Sawyer et al. 2017; Zhukov 2017). In essence, rebels who are accustomed to perpetrating violence against civilians are

3 While there is a distinction between terrorist networks and rebel groups, the formation of networks has been shown to enhance rebel groups' tactical productivity as terrorists (Gade et al. 2019; Lichbach 1995).

more likely to engage in forced recruitment (Cohen 2013; Eck 2014).⁴ Furthermore, existing study indicates that rebels with abundant resources are more prone to engage in the forced child recruitment as having more resources may decrease dependence on civilians (Haer et al. 2020). Consequently, this suggests that rebels may find it more straightforward to recruit child soldiers when having rebel supporters.

Thirdly, despite having rebel supporters allowing rebels to maintain their forces, given that rebel groups are less economically wealthy or organised than their opposing governments, or other potential types of supporters that rebels who receive support can consider taking cost-effective strategies to effectively maintain their power. The use of children could therefore be an attractive option for rebel groups, as children are less expensive labour, and they are more obedient and malleable than adults (e.g. Beber and Blattman 2013). Moreover, the recruitment of child soldiers is likely to prolong armed conflicts, thereby providing rebels with an opportunity to defeat state forces (Haer and Böhmelt 2017). Furthermore, child soldiers can contribute to the sustainability of rebel groups by instantly increasing the number of combatants, given the substantial size of the child soldier population (Haer and Böhmelt 2016).

Lastly, having rebel supporters can facilitate rebels' use of child soldiers, given the weak supervisory system. Despite arguments that some rebel groups may consider their reputation or adhere to international regulations (e.g. Jo 2015; Jo and Thomson 2013), it is difficult to expect rebels to respect human rights protection without strong monitoring systems or immediate punishment, as they are not directly bound by these regulations. Indeed, different from making an alliance with the state government, it is difficult to codify militant partnerships because of their clandestineness (Mattes 2012; Byman and Kreps 2010) and also, they are operating in anarchic environments which are less likely to have enforcement systems to each other (Vinci 2008). Consequently, providing support to rebel groups that utilise child recruitment as a tactic may not hinder rebel supporters from offering their backing. Though rebel supporters may be reluctant to continue supporting rebel groups that recruit child soldiers, monitoring these groups is challenging for supporters due to a lack of capability and supervisory systems.

In conclusion, having rebel supporters may allow rebels to recruit child soldiers more easily, regardless of whether they acquire knowledge from their supporters, due to the characteristics that rebel supporters possess and the imperfect partnership mechanism between rebels. Taken together, these points lead to the following argument:

⁴ Cohen (2013) and Eck (2014) have found a correlation between sexual violence and forced recruitment.

Hypothesis 1: Rebel groups who receive support from other rebel groups are more likely to recruit child soldiers than those without rebel supporters.

3.2 State Supporters and Child Recruitment by Rebel Groups

Compared to rebel supporters, rebel groups that receive support from state sponsors are more likely to be constrained in their decision-making processes. As state supporters, which are foreign governments, find it difficult to intervene directly in the conflict as this could be a costly option, they instead invest material support in rebel groups to achieve their goals (Salehyan et al. 2014). Therefore, state supporters may prefer to support rebel groups who do not deviate from their values. In comparison to other categories of supporters, state supporters may possess a greater capacity to influence rebel groups to adhere to their directives when they establishing relationships with rebels, which in other words means that rebels' decision-makings can be constrained by states supporters. State supporters prefer to provide support to rebel groups that are relatively weak, as such groups are less likely to take actions which are contrary to the interests of supporters (referred to as 'agency slack') (Hawkins et al. 2006; Lidow 2016; Salehyan et al. 2011; Sinno 2008; Tamm 2016).

Secondly, the research suggests that state supporters may exercise a greater influence over recipients compared to other supporters. Supporting rebel groups can be a risky investment for a state government (Marshall 2019; Salehyan et al. 2014). Even in cases where a supporting actor has entered into a contractual agreement with their recipient, information asymmetry between the supporter and recipient can still occur. This phenomenon is termed 'adverse selection' (Marshall 2019; Salehyan 2010). Should a rebel group engage in actions that contravene the principles of their supporter, this could result in a significant deterioration in the reputation of the supporter, both nationally and internationally (Marshall 2019; Salehyan 2010; Salehyan et al. 2014; Vanneman and James 1976). In particular, the use of violence against civilians results in a loss of reputation for state supporters among their domestic audiences (Berkowitz 2018). Consequently, state supporters may be disinclined to provide support to rebels who may not violate their principles and deteriorate their reputation. Therefore, even if insurgents gain support from state supporters and obtain a certain capability, they are less likely to recruit children, which may deteriorate the image of the sponsor.

Taking the aforementioned points into consideration, external state supporters are likely to impose constraints on the activities of their agents in order to mitigate their reputational risks. In particular, state supporters who are committed to the protection of human rights or the establishment of democratic governance are likely

to oppose any violations of these principles. In such cases, state supporters are likely to eschew providing support to rebel groups that are considered to be high-risk and costly (Marshall 2019; Putnam 1998) and may opt to constrain or withdraw their support from these groups. Faulkner (2019) argues that external democratic state support acts as a deterrent to rebel groups recruiting children as soldiers. However, not only democratic societies, but also some authoritarian governments, are committed to the protection of human rights. Indeed, a significant number of authoritarian regimes states have ratified international humanitarian regulations on child recruitment. Despite the fact that their intentions to respect and ratify human rights treaties may differ from those of democratic states (Hollyer and Rosendorff 2011), violations of the regulations may also have a negative impact on their reputations, which may be exacerbated if they provide support to rebels violate human rights.⁵ This is potentially because if state supporters continue to provide support to such a group that engages in human rights abuses, it is probable that their reputation will deteriorate further, as it may suggest that these state supporters are encouraging rebel groups to engage in human rights abuses by providing resources to do so. Therefore, regardless of regime type,⁶ rebel groups with state supporters may be less motivated to actively recruit children than with other supporters in order to maintain the relationship with their supporters.

In conclusion, I hypothesise that state supporters may hinder rebels in making their own decisions, due to the strength of their restriction on rebel movements, which differs from the relative flexibility of a loose partnership between rebel supporters. Based on the aforementioned points, this study hypothesises as follows:

Hypothesis 2: Rebel groups who receive support from external state supporters are less likely to recruit children.

5 This does not indicate that such actions are not perpetrated by state actors. Rather, they can engage in human rights violations directly. However, it is important to note that such actions may, on occasion, be obscured by adherence to international human rights regulations (see, Hafner-Burton and Tsutsui 2005). This, in turn, affords the opportunity to maintain one's reputation despite involvement in human rights abuses directly. Conversely, should they were to endorse a group engaging in human rights violations, this could potentially result in a more rapid deterioration of their reputation than when they perpetrate violence by themselves. This is due to the fact that supporting a rebel group is more conspicuous to other audiences. Consequently, when state actors provide assistance to rebel groups, they are more inclined to seek to circumvent unwarranted criticism that is not attributed to them, and to support groups that do not compromise their reputation.

6 In Appendix G, I found that regime type of external supporters does not bring any impact on child recruitment by rebels.

4 Research Design

In order to conduct a systematic test of the aforementioned hypotheses, data from Haer et al (2020) ⁷ is utilised, which was developed from the Child Soldier Data Set (CSDS). The data spans from 1990 to 2011. It can be combined with data from the UCDP External Support Dataset (Meier et al. 2023) as the conflict dyad-year⁸ is utilised as the unit of analysis.⁹ The UCDP External Support Dataset also includes yearly information with detailed explanations of external support and also the object of support, and covers the period from 1975 to 2017. This research examines the period between 1990 and 2011, in which the two different data sources overlap.

4.1 Dependent Variable: Use of Child Soldiers

A binary variable is employed to measure the usage of child soldiers by rebel groups. If a rebel group recruited child soldiers in a given year, the variable is coded as 1; otherwise, it is coded as 0. Table 1 presents the distribution of child recruitment by rebel groups, which have been clustered into rebel dyads. In total, 302 rebel groups were observed. Approximately 77 % of the rebel groups were found to have engaged in child soldiering. This research does not distinguish between forced and voluntary recruitment of children, given that children may be involved in armed conflicts by coercion, but also by their own decision.

Table 1: Distribution of child recruitment collapsed over rebel groups³.

Child recruitment	Frequency (<i>N</i>)	Percentage (%)
No child recruitment	68	22.52
Child recruitment	234	77.48
Total	302	100.00

³The table is calculated over rebel groups for understanding how many rebel groups are likely to engage in child soldiering during observation years.

⁷ Their research is motivated to introduce forced recruitment by rebel groups, but their data also provides overall child recruitment which covers both voluntary and forced recruitment.

⁸ Government is connected to one rebel group in a particular conflict year (Haer et al. 2020).

⁹ Haer et al. (2020)'s dataset takes a conflict dyad-year as its unit of analysis, but the observations on child recruitment change based on a conflict dyad-period. Therefore, I also run the cross-sectional analysis in Table 3.

4.2 Independent Variables: Types of Supporters

The UCDP External Support Dataset (Meier et al. 2023) is employed for the purpose of classifying the types of supporters. The dataset provides information regarding the recipient side, thereby enabling the researcher to ascertain the identity of the supporter in a given year. This study examines the influence of two distinct external actors – rebel supporters and state supporters – on the engagement of rebel groups in child soldiering. As previously stated, the term “rebel supporters” describes different rebel groups, whereas the term “state supporters” refers to foreign state governments.

In order to test the aforementioned hypotheses, a dichotomous variable is employed. If rebel groups received support from other rebel groups, the value is taken to be 1; otherwise, it is 0.¹⁰ The variable indicating the presence of state supporters is coded in a manner analogous to that employed for rebel supporters. As illustrated in Table 2,¹¹ approximately 17 % of rebel groups received support from

Table 2: Descriptive statistics collapsed over rebel groups.

Variables	Observation	Mean	Standard deviation	Min	Max	VIF
Child soldiering	302	0.775	0.418	0	1	.
Rebel supporter	293	0.17	0.333	0	1	1.10
State supporter	293	0.352	0.442	0	1	1.10
Conflict duration	302	4.308	6.068	1	42	1.31
Battle-related deaths	289	6.019	1.481	1.04	10.014	1.13
Youth population (log)	290	3.632	0.256	2.698	3.904	2.23
GDP (per capita) (log)	302	7.663	1.03	5.425	10.637	2.27
Political wing	299	0.361	0.481	0	1	1.12
Fighting capacity	284	0.366	0.545	0	2	1.24
Territorial control	299	0.699	1.018	0	3	1.40
Forced child recruitment by government	302	0.374	0.485	0	1	1.19

¹⁰ The data indicates that rebel groups are more likely to receive support from other rebel groups that are not active in the same country. Conversely, there is a paucity of instances where rebel groups receive support from other rebel groups that are active in the same country (e.g., the Eritrean People’s Liberation Front (EPLF) in Ethiopia received support from the Ethiopian People’s Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF)). Despite the latter case is limited, this research also encompasses rebel supporters who are active in the same country, as at least this level of support is offered from disparate actors.

¹¹ Table 2 is also clustered into rebel dyads to understand the percentage of rebel groups who receive support from each type of supporter. The table for descriptive statistics for full observation is presented in Appendix B.

other rebel groups. Conversely, external state supporters provided assistance to approximately 35 % of rebel groups during the same period.

4.3 Control Variables

Several control variables which may affect rebel groups' use of child soldiers are used in this study. Models include *conflict duration* because rebel groups may engage in child soldiering when a conflict lasts longer in order to replenish the number of soldiers and prevent a military shortage (Haer et al. 2020). This variable originates from the Non-State Actor (NSA) dataset (Cunningham et al. 2009, 2013).

Models also include *battle-related death* as a control variable, reflecting the intensity of a conflict. If a conflict causes significant fatalities, rebel groups are more likely to engage in active child soldiering (Haer and Böhmelt 2017; Singer 2006), as they do when a conflict lasts longer. This data derives from the UCDP/PRIO Battle-Related Deaths Dataset (Gleditsch et al. 2002).

The models furthermore control *GDP per capita*, since poverty can result in children becoming involved in armed conflict that the study statistically supports the increase of child recruitment under conditions of poverty (Achvarina et al. 2007). Concurrently, rebels in developing countries prefer to use children who are less likely to ask for incentives (Vautravers 2009) that those groups may save resources. Therefore, in order to control for the poverty of a state, the variable of GDP per capita is controlled, which is calculated using the natural logarithm (Gleditsch 2002).

The study controls for *the youth population* by taking the natural logarithm. Larger populations of children can be one of the possible reasons for increased child recruitment (Dallaire 2011; Haer 2019). It refers that if there are more children in the population, more children can be potential soldiers. The data is sourced from the World Bank.

Rebel groups having their own *political wing* may deter them from actively using child soldiers because they may seek to be perceived as legitimate actors both domestically and internationally by adhering to humanitarian regulations (Jo and Thomason 2013). To assess this variable, the research utilises the NSA dataset (Cunningham et al. 2009, 2013). If rebel groups have their own political wings, it takes 1, and otherwise 0.

I control *rebel groups' fighting capacity* compared to the government's force. As previously discussed, if rebels are sufficiently powerful, they are less inclined to rely on children as rebels may recruit children for the purpose of increasing their own strength (Haer and Böhmelt 2016). The NSA dataset (Cunningham et al. 2009, 2013) is utilised for measurement. I coded 0 when rebel groups' fighting capacity is lower

relative to government forces. It takes 1 if the fighting capacity is moderate, and 2 when the rebel groups' fighting capacity outstands the government forces.

It is expected that rebel groups can more easily recruit people when they control a certain place compared to when they do not (Haer et al. 2020; Kubota 2013), and this assumption can be applicable to children as well. *Territorial control* takes an ordinal value: if rebel groups do not have territorial control, it takes 0 whereas takes 3 if rebel groups have strong control of the territory. I use the NSA dataset (Cunningham et al. 2009, 2013).

If governments recruit children coercively, rebel groups may also actively recruit children (Haer et al. 2020). This is because, if a state disrespects its citizens, the citizens (including children) may have an incentive to cooperate with rebels to improve their condition of human rights situation in their country (Høiskar 2001). Conversely, another possibility is that a low level of human rights protection in a certain country may facilitate a rebel that is active in that country and which may also be disrespecting the human rights of civilians, including children. Haer et al. (2020) code *forced recruitment by the government* as a dichotomous variable: 1 if there was forced recruitment and 0 if not.

Table 2 also includes the variance inflation factor, which detects multicollinearity between variables, for key independent variables and control variables. Across variables, no variables exceed a value of 5, thereby indicating that the variables examined in this study are not affected by multicollinearity.

5 Empirical Results

The objective of this study is to examine the impact of having different supporters on the engagement of rebel groups in child soldiering. To achieve this, logistic regression analysis will be employed. Considering the lack of independence among the observations, the standard errors are clustered by rebel-government dyads. Furthermore, in this main statistical test, the independent variables are not lagged. Whilst the utilisation of lagging independent variables can serve as an effective method for addressing the issue of endogeneity, it remains a non-universal solution (Bellemare et al. 2017).¹²

Table 3 presents the results of the models that elucidate the influence of external supporters on rebel groups' child soldiering. Model 1 is the baseline model, which demonstrates the effects of the primary independent variables. Model 2 introduces

¹² Although lagging the variables cannot remove the concern of endogeneity, in Appendix E, I lagged the independent variables to justify my argument even after I control the timing. The statistical result reports that rebel groups are prone to recruit children when they have rebel supporters.

control variables that may potentially influence on the extent of child soldiering among rebel groups. The findings of both models suggest that rebel groups supported by rebel supporters are more likely to engage in the recruitment of child soldiers in comparison to rebels lacking such support. As previously indicated, the expanded data set by Haer et al. (2020) changes its dependent variable across conflict periods. Consequently, Model 3 was run on the basis of the conflict dyad-period as the unit of analysis. Despite modifying the unit of analysis, the statistical outcome remains consistent with the argument that rebel groups are more likely to exploit children when they garner support from rebel supporters. Conversely, rebel groups that receive support from states are likely to increase the likelihood of the use of child soldiers when other variables are not controlled (Model 1), while the statistically

Table 3: Types of external supporters and child recruitment by rebel groups.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Rebel supporter	1.584*** (0.470)	1.714*** (0.583)	1.911** (0.835)
State supporter	1.184*** (0.422)	0.800 (0.521)	0.931** (0.446)
Conflict duration		0.362*** (0.103)	0.288*** (0.103)
Battle-related deaths		0.0513 (0.106)	0.151 (0.123)
Youth population (log)		1.943* (1.038)	2.290** (1.003)
GDP per capita (log)		0.491 (0.317)	0.635** (0.274)
Political wing		−0.368 (0.474)	−0.312 (0.375)
Fighting capacity		0.0345 (0.343)	−0.380 (0.315)
Territorial control		0.157 (0.221)	0.181 (0.211)
Forced recruitment by government		1.272** (0.636)	1.562*** (0.459)
Constant	1.546*** (0.207)	−11.42* (5.991)	−14.30** (5.586)
<i>N</i>	1,045	951	259
Chi ²	20.27	38.53	74.59
Pseudo- <i>R</i> ²	0.0713	0.352	0.273
Log likelihood	−326.6	−197.4	−99.20

Standard errors of the pooled logit models are clustered around each conflict dyad and are displayed in parentheses.

p* < 0.10, *p* < 0.05, ****p* < 0.01.

significant correlation disappears when confounding variables are controlled in Model 2. The potential reason for the inconsistent results for state supporters' impact could be considered from the superior influence of other confounding variables. Nevertheless, the impact of foreign states remains significant in Model 3. The inconsistency of outcomes could be considered for further discussion. With regard to the control variables, *conflict duration*, *youth population*, and *forced recruitment by government* are statistically significant and positive in all models.

It should be noted that the aforementioned results do not preclude the possibility that rebel groups may simultaneously receive support from both types of supporters. In order to ensure the robustness of the statistical results, an additional model was run. In this model, cases where rebel groups possess both types of supporters concurrently were excluded,¹³ and the influence of each supporter was analysed (see Appendix C for details). The statistical results indicate that the receipt of support exclusively from other rebel groups during conflict is associated with a positive and statistically significant correlation with the recruitment of children. In other words, the probability of a rebel group recruiting child soldiers is higher when they have rebel supporters, even when the analysis excludes rebel groups that have state supporters simultaneously. Again, the inconsistent outcomes of having state supporters remain a curious point, so it is recommended that the impact of having state supporters be examined in greater detail in a future discussion.

Figure 1 illustrates the marginal effects of having each type of supporter. The model estimates the probability of child soldiering when rebel groups have a certain type of supporter. Figure 1 indicates that the probability of child soldiering is approximately 11 percentage points higher when rebel groups receive external support from rebel supporters than when they do not. Conversely, rebel groups that receive external support from state supporters are not statistically different from zero.

In conclusion, the analyses revealed a significant relationship between receiving support from other rebel groups and child soldiering by rebel groups, whereas unclear relationship was identified between having state supporters and rebel groups' child soldiering. This research emphasises the need to develop a discussion regarding the relationship between external support and child soldiering by rebel groups.

¹³ The results show that rebel groups are more likely to engage in child soldiering when they receive support from rebel supporters even after I exclude the cases of rebel groups who have two different types of external supporters at the same time. For detailed explanation, please check Appendix C.

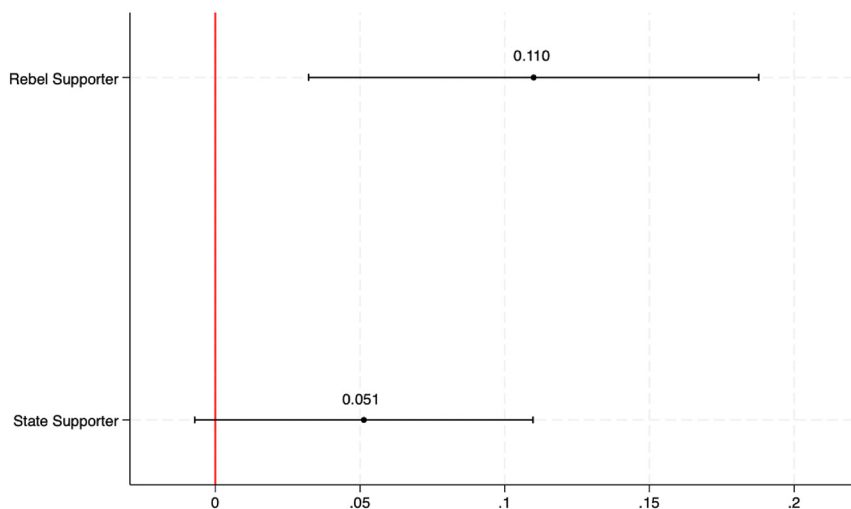


Figure 1: Substantive impact of child recruitment by rebel groups. **Note:** Dichotomous measures. Horizontal bars pertain to 95 % confident intervals.

6 Conclusions

Existing literature on child recruitment by armed groups in civil wars is largely descriptive or focuses on reintegration efforts for child soldiers into society (e.g. Beber and Blattman 2013; Brett and MacCallin 1996; Halton 2011). Despite recent studies examining child soldiering empirically to gain insight into its roots, several potential facilitators of child soldiering remain unexamined. Indeed, there has been a notable absence of research examining the influence of external supporters of rebel groups on the recruitment of children by such groups. This research represents one of the earliest attempts to examine the influence of external actors on rebel groups' decisions regarding child recruitment, with the development of two distinct theoretical frameworks. Whilst earlier studies have already demonstrated the impact of having democratic state supporters (Faulkner 2019),¹⁴ this research identifies the heterogeneous effects of different types of supporters on child recruitment, thereby emphasising the importance of examining the potential impacts of external supporters on rebel groups' decisions regarding child soldiering.

¹⁴ However, in Appendix G, I could not find the impact of democratic external supporters on preventing child recruitment by rebels. It could be assumed from reasons such as the data, this research used for analysing the arguments are different.

The findings of this study indicate there is a correlation between who rebels receive support from and the involvement of child soldiering. In particular, the receipt of external support from rebel supporters is associated with an increased likelihood of the utilisation of child soldiers. It is noteworthy that the provision of external support by foreign states does not appear to be associated with the recruitment of child soldiers consistently across the models. This finding is somewhat surprising in light of previous research that has demonstrated the impact of foreign support on the abuse of civilians by rebel groups (Salehyan et al. 2014).

However, it should be noted that this study is subject to certain limitations. First and foremost, data on child soldiers should be expanded. Despite the expansion of the original child soldiers' dataset by Haer et al. (2020) to include annual information, the authors report that the resulting data set has a limited number of annual observations. Consequently, the current data set only allows for the identification of whether or not militant groups have child soldiers, or whether they comprise a certain percentage of the prevalence of children in each group. Therefore, further research would benefit from a more precise estimation of child soldiers. It is important to understand the extent to which having a specific supporter can affect rebel groups' child recruitment, as well as to conduct research on child soldiers themselves.

Secondly, it is evident that some rebel groups receive support from a multitude of actors, with some even receiving support from a diverse array of actors simultaneously. To illustrate, the Taliban received support from five distinct states and two disparate rebel groups (Högladh et al. 2011). This research solely examined the presence of a specific type of external supporter among rebel groups in a given year, without delving into factors such as the number of supporters or the presence of multiple supporter types, which can also influence the prevalence of child soldiering. Similarly, other types of external supporters, such as diaspora or organisations, were not examined in this research. Given the existing research indicating a correlation between rebel groups' resort to violent tactics and support from the diaspora (Petrova 2019), it would be beneficial to examine whether other forms of external backing influence rebel groups' decisions regarding child soldiering. In accordance with this argument, it seems reasonable to suggest that the involvement of specific external actors in the activities of rebel groups may be a factor influencing the decision to engage in child recruitment. Consequently, it would be a fruitful avenue for future research to expand the range of supporters beyond the current study.

Thirdly, the types of external supporters can be further categorised based on their defining characteristics. For instance, the probability of rebel groups engaging in child recruitment may be contingent upon the regime type of the supporter. While the results presented in the appendix indicate that the regime type of supporters does not affect rebel groups' child recruitment, a more detailed examination is

required. Moreover, it is possible that some rebel supporters may seek secession or seize power in their own countries. Future research should aim to examine these characteristics in greater detail, with a view to understanding how they influence rebel groups' child recruitment.

In terms of policy implications, this research offers valuable insights for policymakers seeking to protect children from armed conflict. It is challenging for policymakers to monitor interactions between rebel groups and third parties in conflict zones. However, it is crucial for them to carefully observe any potential cooperation between rebel groups and third parties in order to prevent or reduce child participation in armed conflicts. Furthermore, the recognition that the presence of a specific external supporter may act as a motivating factor for rebel groups to utilise child soldiers provides a key insight for policymakers, enabling them to consider another crucial element that may drive rebel groups' child recruitment.

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