Foreign Sponsorship of Armed Groups and Civil War

RESEARCH NOTE

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Under what conditions do armed groups escalate their campaigns to civil war? Existing research suggests foreign states' material support is critical to explaining armed groups' conduct during civil war and, thereby, war intensification, duration, and outcomes. Thus far, little attention has been paid to understanding whether and how foreign support influences whether armed groups fight civil wars in the first place, largely due to data limitations. Armed group-level datasets have included only those already engaged in significant civil war violence, which introduces selection bias that precludes investigating factors that influence which groups fight civil wars. Leveraging the new Armed Groups Dataset (AGD), which measures characteristics of armed groups engaged in lower-level violence, we conduct a preliminary empirical investigation into the explanatory role of foreign sponsorship in group-level variation in civil war. While foreign sponsorship and civil war are correlated, there is little evidence that sponsorship has substantial independent explanatory value in predicting civil war. Rather, the evidence is consistent with claims that armed groups' organizational characteristics account for both access to foreign sponsorship and, independently, their likelihood of escalating civil war.

¿En qué condiciones escalan los grupos armados sus campañas hacia la guerra civil? Las investigaciones existentes sugieren que el apoyo material de los Estados extranjeros resulta fundamental para explicar la conducta de los grupos armados durante la guerra civil y, por lo tanto, la intensificación, la duración y los resultados de la guerra. Hasta ahora, se ha prestado poca atención a intentar comprender si el apoyo extranjero influye, en primer lugar, sobre el hecho de que los grupos armados luchen en guerras civiles. Esto se debía, en gran parte, a las limitaciones de datos. Los conjuntos de datos a nivel de grupos armados han incluido solo a aquellos que ya están involucrados en una guerra civil y que tienen un grado significativo de violencia. Esto introduce un sesgo de selección que impide investigar los factores que influyen sobre qué grupos luchan en guerras civiles. Utilizamos el nuevo Conjunto de Datos de Grupos Armados (AGD, por sus siglas en inglés), que mide las características de los grupos armados involucrados en actos de violencia de bajo nivel (Malone 2022), con el fin de llevar a cabo una investigación empírica preliminar sobre el papel explicativo que juega el apoyo extranjero en las variaciones a nivel grupal en la guerra civil. Aunque el apoyo extranjero y la guerra civil se encuentran correlacionados, existe poca evidencia de que el apoyo extranjero tenga un valor explicativo independiente sustancial que permita predecir una guerra civil. Más bien, las pruebas resultan coherentes con aquellas afirmaciones que mantienen que las características organizativas de los grupos armados explican tanto el acceso al apoyo extranjero como, de forma independiente, la probabilidad de que estos intensifiquen la guerra civil.

Dans quelles conditions les groupes armés transforment-ils leur campagne en guerre civile ? Les travaux de recherche existants suggèrent qu'un soutien important d'États étrangers est décisif dans l'explication du comportement des groupes armés lors de guerres civiles, et donc l'intensification, la durée et les issues d'une guerre. Jusqu'ici, l'on s'est peu intéressé à l'influence du soutien étranger sur l'implication de groupes armés dans des guerres civiles pour commencer, en grande partie à cause de données limitées. Les ensembles de données au niveau des groupes armés n'incluent que ceux déjà impliqués dans d'importants actes de violence lors de guerres civiles, ce qui introduit un parti pris sélectif qui exclut les facteurs explicatifs de l'engagement de groupes dans les guerres civiles. À partir du nouvel ensemble de données sur les groupes armés (Armed Group Dataset—AGD), qui mesure les caractéristiques des groupes armés impliqués dans des actes de violence de moindre importance (Malone 2022), nous menons une enquête empirique préliminaire sur le rôle explicatif du soutien étranger vis-à-vis des variations au niveau du groupe lors de guerres civiles. Bien qu'il existe une corrélation entre le soutien étranger et les guerres civiles, peu d'éléments pointent vers une importante valeur explicative à elle seule du soutien quand il s'agit de prédire une guerre civile. Les éléments confirment plutôt les affirmations selon lesquelles les caractéristiques organisationnelles des groupes armés expliquent à la fois l'accès au soutien étranger et leur probabilité d'escalade en guerre civile.

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Authors' Note: The authors thank Barbara Elias for helpful comments, as well as Alex Chinchilla, Noel Anderson, and participants in the 2022 APSA panel. We also thank seminar participants at the Georgetown University Government Department, especially Elizabeth Saunders and Shea Minter, and at the UConn Political Science department, especially Evan Perkoski, Oksan Bayulgen, Matt Singer, Tom Hayes, Imge Akaslan, and Cory Runstedler. The data underlying this article are available on the ISQ Dataverse, at: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/isq.

Rubin, Michael A., and Iris Malone. (2024) Foreign Sponsorship of Armed Groups and Civil War. *International Studies Quarterly*, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqae065
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Introduction

Under what conditions do armed groups escalate their resistance campaigns to civil war? Existing research suggests that foreign sponsorship—third-party states' material support—ranks among the most important factors explaining why some countries and conflicts escalate to civil war.[1] Nevertheless, substantial variation in civil war violence occurs *within* countries. Some armed group campaigns operating within and against the same state intensify into civil wars and others do not. To interrogate the role of foreign state sponsorship in civil war, then, requires examining these conflict processes at the level of armed groups' campaigns.

Foreign sponsorship shapes group conduct and conflict intensity, duration, and outcomes once civil war is underway.[2] Yet, comparatively little attention has been paid to understanding the role of foreign sponsorship in whether armed groups fight civil wars in the first place. Because foreign-supplied weapons, training, and funding enhance armed groups' capabilities to sustain organized violence against a more powerful state, foreign sponsorship may play a critical role in accounting for group-level variation in civil war participation (*foreign-sponsorship-is-pivotal* perspective). Nevertheless, many armed groups wage civil war without foreign support, including some of the most lethal and durable insurgencies, such as Sendero Luminoso (Peru), the Tigray People's Liberation Front (Ethiopia), and the Communist Party of Nepal. Furthermore, many sponsored armed groups fail to escalate their campaigns to civil war. Despite substantial material support from Egypt, Iraq, and Libya, the Abu Nidal Organization never escalated its resistance campaign for Palestinian independence to civil war. Because sponsorship is costly and risks backlash, governments may only be willing to support sufficiently organized, cohesive, and militarily capable armed groups—those most likely to escalate their campaigns to civil war regardless of external support (*foreign-sponsorship-is-epiphenomenal* perspective).

In this research note, we present an initial empirical investigation into the relationship between foreign sponsorship and civil war at the armed group level. Until recently, data on armed groups' organizational characteristics were available only for those that surpassed some threshold of civil war violence.[3] These data are useful for understanding the processes by which such conflicts intensify. However, to explain why some campaigns evolve to civil war violence in the first place requires comparisons among the full scope of armed groups that *could* fight a civil war. Nascent armed groups differ profoundly in their organizational goals, characteristics, and conduct,[4] such that their exclusion from analysis would introduce selection bias. The Armed Groups Dataset (AGD)[5] addresses these data limitations by including measures of key organizational characteristics for armed groups above and below conventional violence thresholds, active globally between 1970 and 2012.

Though the inclusion of nascent armed groups permits group-level analysis of the relationship between foreign sponsorship and civil war, because the AGD is cross-sectional, we lack information about the timing of sponsorship relative to civil war onset required to more precisely test competing hypotheses distinguishing the *foreign-sponsorship-is-pivotal* and *foreign-sponsorship-is-epiphenomenal* perspectives.[6] Instead, we begin to adjudicate between these arguments by assessing the extent to which including a variable for foreign sponsorship provides value in predicting whether a group fought a civil war. As causal explanations that do not help predict outcomes out-of-sample are "of dubious validity and marginal value,"[7] if the *foreign-sponsorship-is-pivotal* perspective is valid, then adding sponsorship to a model of civil war should meaningfully improve predictive performance over a baseline including only the key predictors of sponsorship. If adding sponsorship fails to substantially improve predictions of civil war, this suggests underlying group attributes may explain the correlation between foreign sponsorship and civil war.

Our analysis proceeds in two stages. First, we investigate group-level variation in foreign sponsorship. We demonstrate group-level attributes, including factors directly related to the likelihood of civil war such as whether the group has a political wing or members with combat experience, influence why some armed groups receive sponsorship but not others. Second, we investigate group-level variation in civil war. We find that including sponsorship in the model provides little value to predicting civil war over a baseline including only the predictors of sponsorship. These findings represent an important contribution by suggesting foreign sponsorship may not be critical to whether an armed group fights a civil war.

Further research is needed to interrogate these preliminary conclusions, including data collection to capture the sequencing of sponsorship with respect to civil war outbreak and in-depth case studies to interrogate causal mechanisms. Additionally, the results should not be interpreted as suggesting foreign sponsorship does not have pernicious effects on conflict. Even if sponsorship does not make civil war more likely overall, it may hasten escalation to civil war and, as existing research suggests, increase conflict intensity and duration.

Stages of Armed Conflict and Foreign Sponsorship

To examine variation in armed groups' engagement in civil war, we must first distinguish *civil war* from *nascent rebellion*. Civil war is defined as "armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of hostilities."[8] Crucially, violence intensity is but one feature defining civil war alongside the warring parties' political objectives, level of organization, forms of violence deployed, and the degree to which violence is sustained as part of a campaign.[9] Therefore, we refer to even low-intensity conflicts as civil war, provided they meet these criteria.

Nascent rebellion includes the initial stages of armed group formation and mobilization, in which small conspira-

[1] Saideman (2002); Gleditsch (2007); Salehyan (2009); Poast (2015).

[2] Balch Lindsay and Enterline (2000); Cetinyan (2002); Regan (2002); Cunningham (2010); Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed (2017)

[3] For example, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP)/Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) Armed Conflict Dataset uses a threshold of 25 battle-related deaths in a year. Others use higher thresholds such as 100 (Kalyvas and Balcells 2010) or 1,000 (Sarkees et al 2003, Sarkees and Wayman 2010) yearly battle-related deaths.

[4] Lewis (2020), Malone (2022)

[5] Malone (2022).

[6] The Militant Group Alliances and Rivalries (MGAR) database (Blair et al. 2022) includes time-variant information on "alliances" between states and armed groups. Perhaps because "alliance" is distinct from sponsorship, the AGD includes many more instances of foreign sponsorship that do not qualify as alliances in MGAR.

[7] Beck, King, and Zeng (2000, p. 21).

[8] Kalyvas (2006, p. 5).

[9] Civil war involves multiple *organized* belligerents (distinguished from one-sided violence and violence among unorganized groups) with violence "of a certain magnitude," (Kalyvas 2006, p. 17) sustained over time (distinguished from minor "skirmishes" (Blattman 2022, p. 6)).

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torial organizations remain unable to sustain large-scale violent campaigns against the state. Nascent groups instead focus on "soft targets" (e.g., civilian targeting, infrastructure attacks, assassinations, etc.) or conduct only opportunistic and/or episodic attacks against military targets.[10] As even low-intensity civil war is relatively rare—most armed groups remain in the nascent phase until their demise—examining nascent groups is critical to understanding conflict processes.

As noted, previous research has examined the consequences of foreign sponsorship only among the subset of armed groups whose campaigns surpass an arbitrary violence threshold. This would not be limiting with respect to our understanding of the role of sponsorship in conflict processes overall, were it the case that states primarily support armed groups only after they have escalated their campaigns. Yet, armed groups often obtain sponsorship during nascent rebellion, such that excluding nascent groups introduces selection bias into efforts to understand the role of foreign sponsorship in civil war risk. In addition to the 159 nascent armed groups in AGD that received sponsorship, according to San-Akca (2016), 81 (64 percent) of the 126 foreign-supported armed groups that fought civil wars between 1970 and 2010 first received support before reaching the 25 battle deaths threshold. Some groups access external support at their founding. Splinter groups may inherit their parent organizations' supporters, as Al-Shabaab retained support from the Eritrean government when it splintered from the Islamic Courts Union (ICU).[11] States occasionally form new armed groups through their own initiative. The Rhodesian and Apartheid South African governments helped form Renamo to pressure the Frelimo government in Mozambique to end its support for ZAPU and African National Congress (ANC) resistance movements, respectively.[12] More often, armed groups actively seek support during the nascent rebellion phase. The ANC cultivated diplomatic relationships with governments around the world to lobby for material support and encourage sanctions against the Apartheid regime in South Africa.[13]

Does Foreign State Sponsorship Affect Civil War Risk?

Though scholars have devoted less attention to explaining group-level variation in the transition from nascent rebellion to civil war,[14] we draw on insights from the neighboring literature examining escalation from low- to high-intensity civil war. Foreign sponsorship enhances armed groups' capabilities and incentives to sustain campaigns of greater violence,[15] while prolonging violent campaigns and affecting how they end.[16] For example, Lashkar-e-Taiba's (LeT) capabilities to sustain violence in India have been linked to support from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) agency.[17] Therefore, one might expect that foreign sponsorship of nascent armed groups is critical to whether the group escalates their campaign to civil war.

Others challenge this *foreign-sponsorship-is-pivotal* perspective. While external support may enhance an armed group's violent capabilities, this should impact the terms of negotiation and not the risk of escalation, as the parties should adjust their bargaining positions to reflect the balance of military capabilities to avoid costly conflict.[18] Furthermore, external support to an armed group rarely occurs in isolation, but rather triggers *competitive intervention* to support the government adversary,[19] nullifying the armed group's relative gains in military capabilities such that sponsorship may not impact the risk of civil war.[20] American and South African support to UNITA rebels in Angola's civil war triggered Soviet and Cuban support to the MPLA government in ways that roughly maintained the balance of capabilities and incentives for civil war violence on both sides.[21] When political actors expect their use of violence would trigger significant external support for their adversary, as Bolivian dissidents feared American support to the incumbent government throughout the Cold War, they view violent insurgency as futile and shift toward nonviolent tactics unlikely to escalate to civil war.[22]

These critiques focus on countervailing mechanisms in the causal process linking sponsorship to conflict escalation. Because potential sponsors are strategic, to understand the relationship between foreign sponsorship and civil war requires, in addition, interrogating the determinants of state sponsorship that also affect civil war risk directly. If foreign sponsors tend to back armed groups with the capabilities to escalate their violent campaigns to civil war, then sponsorship—by itself—may not be important to explaining whether a group fights civil war. As the *foreign-sponsorship-is-pivotal* perspective emphasizes how sponsorship influences armed groups' capabilities to sustain organized violence against their adversary, we focus in particular on observable group attributes related to organizational and military capabilities.

Under What Conditions Do Armed Groups Receive Foreign sponsorship?

Governments sponsor armed groups abroad as a means to achieve key political objectives, typically those related to foreign policy and international security, especially when more direct forms of confrontation are judged too costly relative to the expected benefits of achieving these objectives. Governments sponsor armed groups as a strategy to coerce an adversary into granting political or policy concessions with respect to interstate disputes, or to weaken the adversary's military capabilities or readiness.[23] For example, Iran supports militant groups throughout the Middle East to balance against Saudi regional influence, and supports Hamas and Hezbollah to threaten and maintain leverage in its rivalry with Israel.[24] Under certain conditions, governments may sponsor armed groups abroad in order to satisfy domestic constituencies, such as when transnational ethnic kin

[10] Pye (1964); Hobsbawm (1971); Crenshaw (1981); Byman (2008); Lewis (2020).

[11] Wise (2011), Mapping Militants (2019), Klobucista, Masters, and Sergie (2022).

[12] Hall (1990), Global Security (2019).

[13] Davis (1987), Ellis (2013).

[14] Lewis (2020) is one prominent exception.

[15] Hovil and Werker (2005); Weinstein (2006); San Akca (2009); Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011); Maoz and San-Akca (2012), Siroky and Wood (2014); Asal and Shkolnik (2021)

[16] Balch Lindsay and Enterline (2000); Regan (2002); Cunningham (2010); Sawyer, Cunningham, and Reed (2017); Karlén (2017*a*); Sambanis, Skaperdas, and Wohlforth (2020).

[17] Bajoria (2010)

[18] Thyne (2006).

[19] Anderson (2019).

[20] Gibilisco and Montero (2022).

[21] Anderson (2019).

[22] Cunningham (2016).

[23] Schultz (2010), Bapat (2012), San-Akca (2016), Groh (2019), among others.

[24] Byman (2022).

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groups are fighting a repressive regime.[25] As in any political strategy, states are more likely to substitute into sponsorship as its costs decline, or expected benefits rise, compared to available alternatives.[26]

Chiefly, potential sponsors worry about the risk of conflict escalation to direct confrontation with the target state.[27] For example, throughout its history Israel has adopted a range of militarized responses to impose costs on its neighbors for supporting violent resistance groups targeting Israel.[28] Additionally, by delegating violence to an armed group, the sponsor surrenders some foreign policy autonomy and accepts the risk the sponsored group may pursue its own divergent political and military objectives (*agency slack*).[29] Rebel leaders may use funding or weapons to enrich themselves through capturing resources and markets within the conflict zone rather than to fight the target state. They may continue to fight even as the sponsor attempts to rein in violence to negotiate with the targeted state, as Pakistan-backed militants in Kashmir did despite the Pakistani government's attempts to diffuse tensions with India following the spike in violence in December 2001.[30] Therefore, states sponsor when these risks of agency slack are lower.

Of course, governments may evade agency slack by opting for direct military confrontation with the target state. But militarized interstate disputes can risk escalation and become prohibitively costly, especially when the target has substantial conventional military capabilities. Therefore, states are more likely to sponsor foreign armed groups when the stakes are high, but conventional military, economic, and diplomatic means of coercion are limited; such as in the context of international rivalries[31] or when facing more conventionally powerful adversaries.[32]

Armed groups facing powerful state adversaries have plenty to gain from access to foreign support, but by accepting sponsorship, surrender strategic and tactical autonomy.[33] They may be forced to abandon political goals that conflict with the sponsor's bottom line, in order to respond to a supporter's concerns about the potential for agency slack.[34] Sponsoring states often require that the armed group reveal critical information about the organization, which sponsors can later use for coercion. Sponsorship risks fueling accusations the armed group is merely a foreign proxy, costing loss of legitimacy among their domestic support base.[35] Rwanda's government leveraged its support for the M23 rebels in Democratic Republic of the Congo to influence their use of violence, which proved detrimental to the group's domestic reputation.[36]

Because they are central to selection bias issues relevant to assessing the *foreign-sponsorship-is-pivotal* perspective, we pay special attention to armed group attributes, motives, and capabilities that influence both sponsorship and civil war risk. When potential sponsors' and rebels' political motives are aligned, sponsors fear less that the armed groups' actions will detract from or threaten their own interests, and rebels expect lower costs associated with surrendering autonomy. Sponsorship is more likely when foreign governments and armed groups share ethno-linguistic, religious, ideological, or other ties,[37] as these identity or ideological traits can help signal an armed group's political interests, or how it might legitimate the use of violence.

Because they aim to coerce the target state, sponsors also condition support based on observable characteristics of relative strength and resolve.[38] Groups with prior combat experience may be able to use their knowledge about military operations, attacks, and counter-terrorism procedures to mobilize an effective challenge. Rebel victory at the Battle of Saratoga was a turning point in France's decision to offer assistance to the American Revolution.[39] In weighing which mujahedeen groups to sponsor against the Soviet-backed regime in Afghanistan, analysts within the Carter administration advocated for groups with a record of military successes.[40] Groups with strong command and control structures and well-defined political wings are also more durable, capable of threatening the target state, and exhibit control over lower units and thereby prevent group fragmentation and unsanctioned use of violence.[41] Still, group capabilities can cut both ways, as weak groups cannot sustain a violent campaign against the state even with, while strong groups present a severe risk of agency slack.[42]

Research Design

The *foreign-sponsorship-is-pivotal* perspective suggests that foreign sponsorship has a critical impact on the risk of civil war: boosting an armed group's organizational capacity to conduct the form and scope of violence characterizing civil war. By contrast, the *foreign-sponsorship-is-epiphenomenal* view suggests the correlation between sponsorship and civil war is largely explained by the confounding effect of group attributes. States may condition support on the armed groups' observable organizational characteristics that make them *ex ante* more likely to escalate their campaigns even without sponsorship; especially central command and control, organizational structure, combat experience, and a record violence as evidence of military capabilities.

We adjudicate between these claims empirically by leveraging the Armed Group Dataset (AGD).[43] The data are organized at the dyad level, meaning there is one observation for each armed group-target state pairing. Crucially, AGD includes a broader range of armed groups compared to previous datasets focused only on groups that reach a

[25] Asal, Ayres, and Kubota (2019) show that, at least in the post-Cold War period, foreign sponsorship is associated with transnational kinship ties. Though focused on direct interstate militarized confrontation, Davis and Moore (1997) demonstrate that politically powerful constituencies can shape their government's foreign policy with respect to countries in which they identify ethnic kin groups.

[26] Byman (2005), San-Akca (2016).

[27] Gleditsch (2007); Pearlman and Atzili (2018).

[28] Pearlman and Atzili (2018), Chapter 2.

[29] Byman and Kreps (2010); Salehyan (2010); Bapat (2012); Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood (2014); Karlén (2017*b*); Farasoo (2021); Thaler (2021).

[30] Bapat (2012), pg. 1.

[31] Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011); Maoz and San-Akca (2012); Toukan (2019).

[32] Byman (2005); Groh (2019).

[33] San-Akca (2016).

[34] Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011); San-Akca (2016); Berman and Lake (2019).

[35] Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011); Hughes (2014).

[36] Shepherd (2018).

[37] Saideman (2001, 2002); San-Akca (2016).

[38] Byman and Kreps (2010); Salehyan (2010); Bapat (2012); Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood (2014).

[39] Boot (2013, pgs. 77–78).

[40] Memorandum Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency for Members of the Special Coordination Committee, Washington, February 28, 1979, Foreign Relations of the United States, 19,771,980, Volume XII, Afghanistan, Document 38: https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus197780v12/d38. Paper Prepared in the Central Intelligence Agency, Washington, undated, Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977–1980, Volume XII, Afghanistan, Document 45: https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v12/d45.

[41] Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011); Shapiro and Siegel (2012); Shapiro (2013).

[42] Salehyan (2010); Bapat (2012).

[43] Malone (2022).

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certain level of civil war violence.[44] The AGD includes organizational information for 1,343 armed groups in 1,432 conflict dyads between 1970 and 2012. In our analysis, we examine a subset of 1,198 groups in 1,274 conflicts relevant to our interest in explaining variation in civil war.[45]

Both the *foreign-sponsorship-is-pivotal* perspective and *foreign-sponsorship-is-epiphenomenal* counterargument imply that we should observe a positive correlation between sponsorship and civil war at the actor-level. To adjudicate between the competing arguments, we take a two-pronged approach. First, we specify a logistic model to estimate the correlates of external sponsorship. We determine the key group-, country-, and neighborhood-level attributes that predict foreign sponsorship in two ways: statistical regression and classification predictive modeling. Second, we examine the extent to which foreign sponsorship improves our ability to predict which armed groups fight civil wars, compared to a baseline model including only the predictors of sponsorship, itself. If the *foreign-sponsorship-is-pivotal* perspective is valid, then including the sponsorship variable should significantly improve model performance. If, instead, the *foreign-sponsorship-is-epiphenomenal* claim has merit, then sponsorship would not improve predictive accuracy over the baseline model.

Because our approach relies upon assessing each model's predictive performance, we partition the data into separate training and test sets and fit all models to only the training data. The training dataset includes 1,082 conflicts.

Measuring Civil War

To investigate actor-level variation in civil war empirically, we operationalize the distinction between armed groups in nascent rebellion from those in (at least low-intensity) civil war based on the UCDP criteria: an armed group must be formally organized, including having a declared name for the group, engaged in "armed conflict involving consciously conducted and planned political campaigns" against the state, and surpass at least 25 battle deaths in a year.[46] Though our definition of civil war does not explicitly state a rigid threshold level of violence, 25 battle deaths is sufficiently low as to reduce concerns that armed groups' campaigns will be excluded from consideration as civil wars based on the battle deaths criterion alone.[47] In our main sample, 260 conflicts (20.4 percent) meet this definition, 78 (6.1 percent) of which reached higher-intensity civil war violence of at least 1,000 battle deaths per year.

Measuring External Support

We code whether an armed group receives foreign state sponsorship during its history. Sponsorship refers to at least one form of material, financial, territorial, or political support willingly given by an external actor to an armed group; to include weapons, training, intelligence, and sanctuary, provided to armed groups, and excludes foreign military interventions in which external states commit military personnel to a conflict. Support in the form of sanctuary is included only when there is evidence the sponsor state intentionally chooses to provide a safe haven for the group.

In the main sample analyzed here, 328 (25.7 percent) of groups receive sponsorship.[48] Figure 1 illustrates the bivariate relationship between sponsorship and civil war. 855 (67.1 percent) neither receive sponsorship nor escalate civil war. Among the armed groups that receive sponsorship, approximately half become violent enough to lead to civil war.

Armed Group Attributes

Because the positive correlation is consistent with both the *foreign-sponsorship-is-pivotal* perspective and *foreign-sponsorship-is-epiphenomenal* counter-argument, to adjudicate between these competing claims requires we adjust for potential confounders that influence which groups receive support and their likelihood of civil war. Conventional wisdom suggests political aims predict external support, which we code based on the UCDP issue incompatibility: whether an armed group fights due to territorial or regime-related reasons. We code whether an armed group and potential sponsor[49] have shared ideology or ethnic ties. Shared leftist ideology is a binary variable based on shared support of Marxist, Maoist, communist, or other left-leaning beliefs and could receive support from a left-wing state actor.[50] A shared Sunni Islam ideology is coded as "1" if the group is Sunni and the potential sponsor is Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Iraq during Saddam Hussein's rule, Sudan, Kuwait, Qatar, Pakistan, or Afghanistan. Alternatively, shared Shia ties are coded as "1" if an armed group is Shia and the potential sponsor is Iran after 1979, Iraq after 2004, or Syria. These binary indicators are coded "0" if any of these conditions are not met. An ethnic tie is coded the armed group has an ethnic constituency or ethnic-based political objectives, and that ethnic group is politically relevant within the potential sponsor state, based on the Ethnic Power Relations dataset.[51]

The AGD also codes information about an armed group's organizational capabilities. We code a group's combat experience, which may bolster a group's strength, based on whether the group's initial membership base is drawn from ex-police, ex-military, ex-rebel soldiers, or foreign fighters. For example, the M23 began in 2012 when soldiers in the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo

[44] See, especially, the Non-State Actor Dataset (Cunningham, Gleditsch, and Salehyan 2013), Dangerous Companions Project (San-Akca 2016), and UCDP External Support Dataset (Meier et al. 2023).

[45] Currently, information for key variables is unavailable for transnational groups that only conducted attacks outside the target government's territory (e.g., embassy attacks). Because we are focused on explaining civil war in domestic conflicts, this is an appropriate subset for our analysis. In Appendix D, we present supplementary analyses dropping groups with exclusively environmental or anarchist objectives that are not typically engaged in political and military mobilization characteristic of civil war (e.g., Earth Liberation Front), with consistent results.

[46] Davies, Pettersson, and Öberg (2022), UCDP Dyadic Dataset Codebook, Version 22.1, pg. 4.

[47] Many scholars follow the UCDP labeling conventions, referring to what we label low-intensity civil war as "minor" civil *conflict*, and only describe as "major" civil *war* those conflicts that surpass 1,000 battle deaths in a year. Ultimately, these thresholds are arbitrary, and others have used alternatives without loss of conceptual clarity. Kalyvas and Balcells (2010), for example, use 100 annual battle deaths. Crucially, the label has no bearing on the article's main theoretical and empirical objective, which is to explain why some armed groups escalate from nascent rebellion to low-intensity civil war (or minor/civil conflict, if you prefer).

[48] 24.5 percent of all groups included in AGD received some form of support. Material support is the most common type (12.4 percent) followed by financial (10 percent) and training (7 percent). Table 2 in the Appendix reports the distribution of civil war types of support in the dataset.

[49] We restrict the list of potential sponsors to a politically relevant third-party actor (neighboring states or major powers).

[50] See San-Akca (2016). Left-wing governments include, for example, the Soviet Union (1970–1991), Ethiopia's Derg regime (1974–1987), People's Republic of Angola (1975–1992), China (1970–2012), or Cuba (1970–2012).

[51] Cederman, Wimmer, and Min (2010). We consider the ethnic group's political power status in the sponsor state because it determines whether the relevant population can influence the state's policy-making. See Saideman (2001); Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham (2011); San-Akca (2016).

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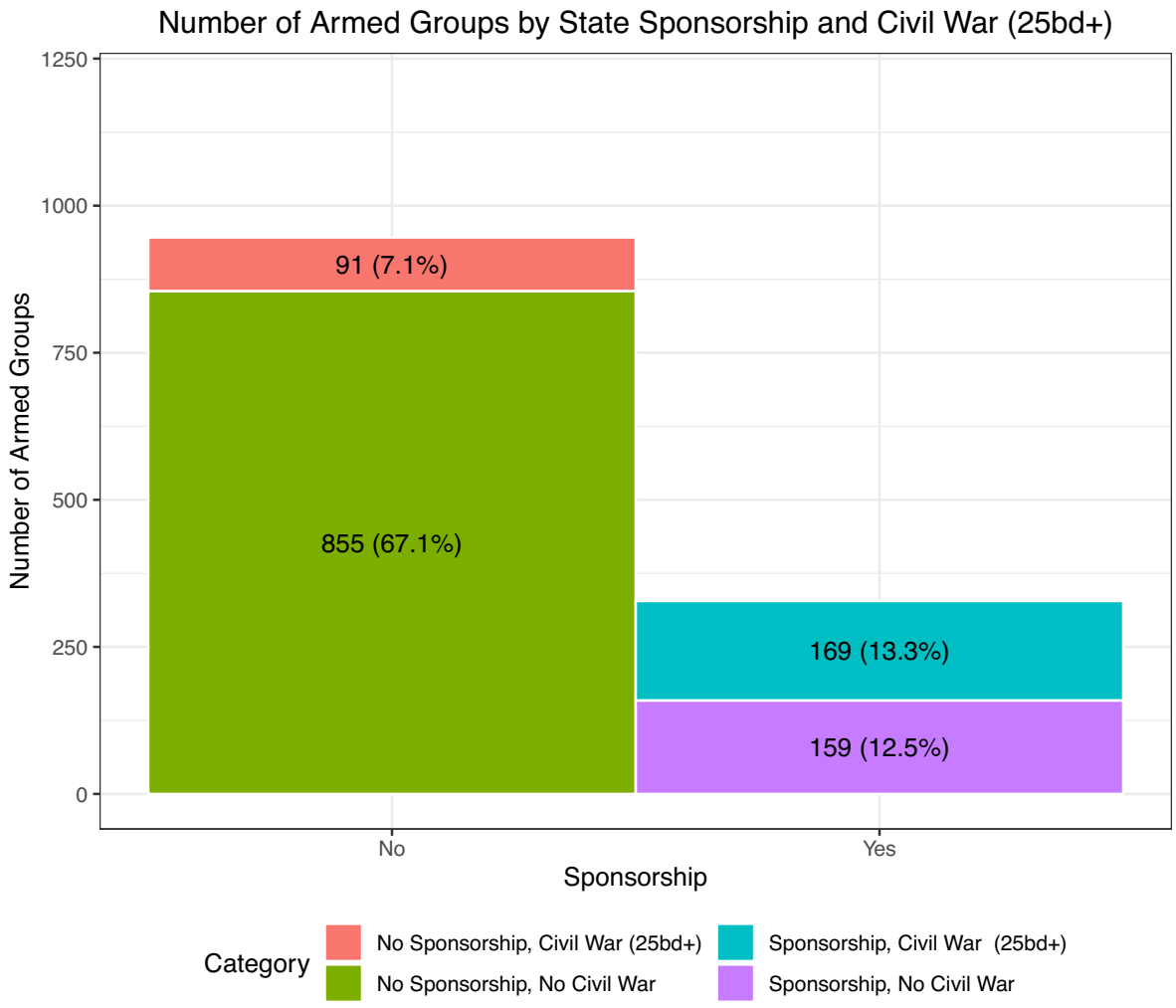

Figure 1. Civil war and foreign state sponsorship.

(FARDC) mutinied and broke off to launch their own militant campaign against the state.[52]

Some armed groups may have larger latent capabilities due to social network ties. Access to different local networks can help an armed group accrue enough support to elude detection, increase group cohesion, and intensify attacks.[53] For example, students (e.g., Taliban), labor unions (e.g., Tupamaros), or refugees living in the same camp (e.g., PALIPEHUTU) can provide a natural membership base for rebel mobilization. Armed groups that organize around such membership bases may be able to recruit in larger numbers, making them more capable to escalate war. We also include variables recording the group's origins; whether the group formed from a previous armed, or nonviolent, group, as a splinter or merger.

Neighborhood-Level Attributes

We also include features of the neighborhood in which an armed group operates, to capture a potential sponsor's motive and opportunity. This includes data from use data from Penn World Tables and the World Bank on macroeconomic factors as well as information from the Polity V dataset on regime type. Similar to approaches in the conflict contagion literature,[54] we operationalize these grievances and opportunities in several ways. We create a binary indicator using Thompson and Dreyer (2011) to measure whether the target state has an ongoing rivalry with any neighboring state. Using data from the Correlates of War Militarized Interstate Disputes data, we create a binary for whether there is any ongoing militarized dispute with a neighboring state.

We also include two measures that capture whether an armed group's target state may be vulnerable to outside infiltration. We create a spatially weighted indicator measuring the average log GDP per capita for any neighboring states within 500 km of the target state. This captures the likelihood that stronger neighbors could make it harder to deter sponsorship and also leave a target state more susceptible to political instability. We also include measures of the target state's average neighborhood regime score, since anocratic states are less stable and more susceptible to civil conflict.

Results and Discussion

First-Stage Analysis: Correlates of External Support

We build a logistic model in which the outcome variable is whether a particular group receives support. We estimate

[52] Shepherd (2018, p. 6).

[53] Parkinson (2013); Staniland (2014); Larson and Lewis (2018); Lewis (2020).

[54] See, for example, Buhaug and Gleditsch (2008).

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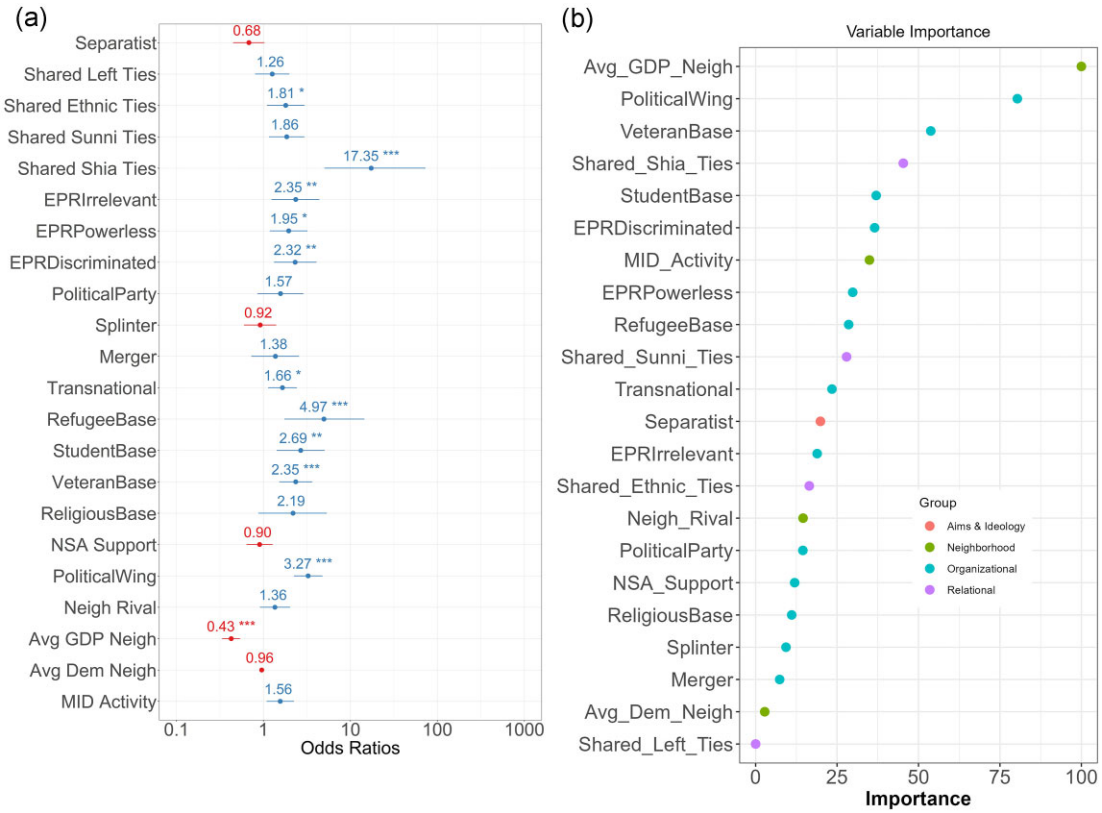

Figure 2. Correlates of state sponsorship N (training dataset): 1082. Figure 2a reports coefficient and standard error estimates from a logit regression model, without country-fixed effects. Full results and results from the fixed effects model, are reported in the Appendix. Figure 2b reports the variable importance from a logit classification model. Full results are reported in the Appendix.

the correlates of external sponsorship in two ways: statistical regression and classification predictive modeling, and cluster standard errors by target state to account for heterogeneity within states where armed groups operate.[55]

Figure 2a provides evidence group-level motives are strongly associated with external support. Armed groups that share ethnic kinship with either a neighboring state or major power are significantly more likely to receive support than armed groups without this shared tie. Similarly, the shared Shia ties indicator captures Iran's nurture and support of Shia groups across Middle East states like Asaib al-Haq, Al-Ashtar Brigades, and Hezbollah.

There is even stronger evidence that a group's organizational foundations—including its recruitment base and development of a political wing—are significantly associated with external support. The political wing and organizational recruitment variables represent observable organizational characteristics that can signal key information about the group's capacity to mobilize. The odds of support for a combat-experienced group are significantly higher than groups without veteran fighters. The results similarly suggest that armed groups that form around refugees, migrants, or other displaced communities (RefugeeBase) are more likely to receive support as non-refugee groups.

There is also evidence particular neighborhood-level attributes increase the likelihood of sponsorship. The point estimate in Figure 2a shows that GDP per capita in a country's neighborhood is associated with a substantial decrease in the odds of sponsorship. Weaker neighborhoods are more prone to foreign meddling and subversion. Similarly, target states experiencing an ongoing militarized interstate dispute may be prone to opportunistic behavior by outside sponsors looking to back armed groups.

The coefficient plot shows that many group indicators have a statistically significant relationship with external support. However, it does not compare which indicators are most substantively important for predicting sponsorship. Further, there is a chance some of these results arise due to overfitting. When there are a large number of potential indicators relative to the total number of observations, a variable can appear statistically significant due to Type 1 error. To check against over-fitting, we examine out-of-sample predictive heuristics.[56]

Figure 2b presents a variable importance plot to illustrate the predictive significance for each attribute. In logit models, the relative importance of a variable is measured by how much its exclusion results in a *mean decrease in accuracy*—how much the global predictive accuracy of the model changes when a permutation of the model excludes that one variable relative to other correlated covariates. The more a single variable's exclusion reduces the accuracy of the model, the more important it is.

The results show that the most important predictors of state sponsorship are neighborhood-level opportunities and organizational capabilities. Average economic wealth and ongoing interstate disputes are significant predictors of

[55] Appendix C includes tables reporting the full results.

[56] Ward, Greenhill, and Bakke (2010).

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Table 1. F-Test comparing model complexity fit.

	Resid. Df	*Resid. Dev*	*Df*	*Deviance*
Sponsorship-only	1,080	897.06		
Base	1,059	782.47	21	114.59
Base + sponsorship	1,058	691.85	1	90.63

support. The next three most important predictors in the variable importance plot relate to whether a particular armed group has a political wing, shares a religious tie with a politically relevant potential sponsor, or has a veteran base (indicating members with prior combat experience). These are consistent with the notion that the more suitable candidates for external support are armed groups already operating in relatively advantaged situations. Combat experience and relatively weaker target state adversaries can make it easier for an armed group to conduct enough violence to get over the civil war violence threshold.

Second-Stage Analysis: Effect of Sponsorship on Civil War

We next turn to explore the extent to which the sponsorship variable accounts for variation in civil war over and above that explained by the group- and country-level predictors of sponsorship. We fit three logistic models that examine the likelihood an armed group's campaign escalates to at least low-intensity civil war and compare predictive performance.

$$Civil\ War_i = X_i\beta_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (1)$$

$$Civil\ War_i = \alpha(Sponsorship)_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (2)$$

$$CivilWar_i = \alpha(Sponsorship)_i + X_i\beta_i + \varepsilon_i \quad (3)$$

In these equations, α estimates the effect of state sponsorship on the likelihood of civil war, β_i estimates the effect of different group-level and country-level indicators, and ϵ captures remaining variation. Model 1 includes only the group and neighborhood attributes that drive sponsorship in a model predicting civil war. Model 2 includes only the sponsorship variable by itself, to explore how well just information about whether an armed group received external sponsorship predicts civil war. Model 3 includes both information about the first-stage attributes and state sponsorship. If the *foreign-sponsorship-is-pivotal* perspective has validity, we should see the predictive performance of Model 3 exceed substantially that of Model 1.[57]

We first assess model performance using an F-Test; an elementary statistical method that captures the model's unexplained residual variation in civil war (ϵ) by the sum of squared residuals (SSR). Smaller SSR translates to a better model fit because there is less misclassification. If foreign state sponsorship explains a significantly larger amount of independent variation, as the *foreign-sponsorship-is-pivotal* perspective implies, then its inclusion should decrease the SSR by a significant amount.

The results in Table 1 question this expectation. A more complex model combining information about state sponsorship and the first-stage attributes does not perform significantly better than a model just including our original set of group-level and neighborhood-level attributes. Thus, we fail to reject the null hypothesis that adding information about state sponsorship improves model fit. This suggests state sponsorship may not be explaining much additional variation in civil war beyond the baseline group-level and country-level indicators.

To provide a more robust examination, we next assess how well each model performs on an out-of-sample set of armed groups. We draw a series of probabilistic estimates about the civil war risk for each armed group in the test set based on each model and translate them into binary indicators ($y\circ$), such that $y\circ = I(Pr(\text{Civil War} \geq 0.5))$. For each model, we estimate the error rate between the predictions and what we actually observed in the test data.

Figure 3 presents the predictive performance of all three models on an out-of-sample set of observations, with implications consistent with the ANOVA results. The Receiver Operating Curve (ROC) plots the sensitivity rate against the false positive classification rate.[58] The Area Under the Curve (AUC) measures how well the information in the classifier correctly predicts whether an armed group leads to civil war. A higher AUC indicates better predictive performance because it implies more accurate classification of true positives and a minimal classification of false positives.

The ROC plot shows little difference between the baseline and full models. The AUC for the baseline model without sponsorship is already quite high (0.897), meaning it can already account for much of the variation in civil war at the conflict level. Adding sponsorship to the baseline model only increases the model's AUC slightly to 0.921. Overall, there is little evidence to suggest sponsorship by itself provides significant explanatory power outside of the factors that are predictive of sponsorship.[59] While increasing the accuracy of predicting civil war even slightly has value, the marginal increase in predictive performance associated with adding sponsorship to a baseline model based exclusively on predictors of sponsorship that is, itself, already highly predictive is not consistent with the notion that foreign sponsorship is critical to civil war.

Conclusion

This research note investigates the extent to which foreign state support influences why some armed group campaigns escalate civil war. Existing research has been limited by data availability: predominant datasets do not include armed groups in the nascent rebellion phase, which truncates variation in the civil war outcome of interest. Comparing groups that escalate civil war to those that remain in nascent rebellion, and accounting for the group attributes that influence both sponsorship and civil war, we find little evidence to support the *foreign-sponsorship-is-pivotal* perspective that sponsorship represents a critical boon for armed groups on their path to civil war. If sponsors select on observable group-level attributes to determine which actor is the most "suitable" for civil conflict, and these attributes are also correlated civil war, then sponsorship by itself does not provide much explanatory value.

[57] Appendix C.2 reports the full results from each regression model.

[58] Sensitivity measures the number of true positives over the sum total of true positives and false negatives.

[59] We report additional metrics of predictive performance in Appendix Section C.2.

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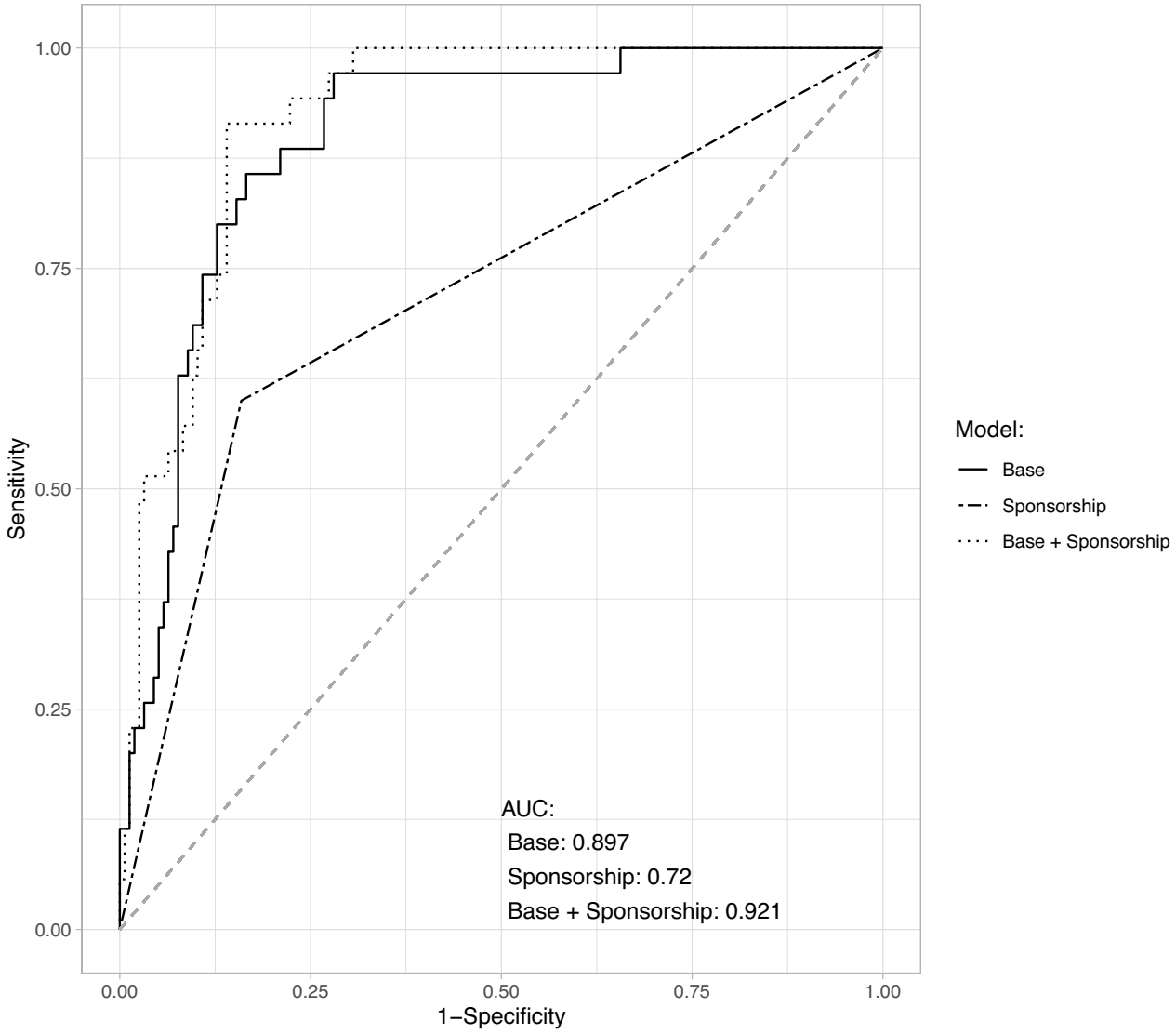

Figure 3. Three models of civil war—receiver operating curves.

These findings do not suggest foreign sponsorship has no, or merely benign, consequences for civil wars. The results are consistent with the possibility that sponsorship hastens escalation to civil war, and with existing research examining variation *among armed groups engaged in civil war* that suggests sponsorship may increase the duration and intensity of civil wars. However, the findings do challenge claims that foreign sponsorship represents a principal driver of whether groups fight civil war at all. Political or policy actions aimed at deterring or denying foreign support to armed groups are unlikely to prevent civil war, even if they do delay or reduce the carnage. To prevent civil war requires orienting international security politics and policy towards the core factors that generate political conflict in society and facilitate the organization of armed resistance.

The AGD permits the opportunity to empirically investigate variation in civil war in ways impossible in previous datasets recording organizational characteristics only for armed groups that surpass a threshold level of civil war violence. Yet, the current data remain limited in ways important to the inferences we may draw regarding the causes of civil war at the actor level. AGD lacks temporal variation, required to determine the sequence of sponsorship and civil war onset and to track the dynamics of organizational attributes and capabilities over the course of conflict. Further, AGD does not distinguish variation in the scope or form of sponsorship nor the sponsor's ultimate political objectives. Additional data collection is needed to fill these gaps in order to test competing claims regarding the relationship between foreign sponsorship and civil war onset.

The classification model reveals a variety of factors influence which armed group states will support. Future research examining the heterogeneity across cases may provide additional insight into how states screen armed groups for suitability. New data on external support to nascent group lends itself to additional research questions about the consequences of external support. Researchers might explore how organizational characteristics influence conflict duration, violent activities, or likelihood of victory.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available in the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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Data Statement

The data underlying this article are available on the ISQ Dataverse, at: https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/isq.

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