Resources and Conflict Project

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Why Target Civilians?

- Why do combatants in civil wars use terrorism and other forms of violence against non-combatants?
  - Civil wars are, in part, struggles for popular support
  - Violence makes securing such support more difficult
- Project focuses on developing data about the resource base or endowments of rebel groups, and analyzing how these shape conflict dynamics, including violence against civilians, across post-Cold War civil conflicts
- Consider debate about ISIS since late 2014:
  - Income from oil, antiquities, taxes has declined
  - Controls less territory
  - Have these shifts in its resource base led it to engage in more terrorism overseas? Or would this have occurred in any event?
- Project seeks to develop and assess systematically such links between endowments and rebel strategy
Is there a Rebel Resource Curse?

- How do economic endowments of non-state violent actors influence their political-military strategies during conflict?
  - Natural resources (drugs, oil, gemstones)
  - Criminal activity (extortion, piracy, kidnapping)
  - Support from external actors
  - Control of territory

- Investigate how rebels’ endowments influences strategic choices:
  - Use of terrorism and violence against civilians
  - Strategies of government forces
  - Location and severity of conflict
  - Duration of civil wars
Influential work (Weinstein, 2007) suggests rebels’ endowments shape relationships with civilian population.

Rebels that exploit natural resources do not need as much support from population.

- More willing to victimize civilians and to engage in terrorism
- Examples: Blood diamonds in west Africa, oil and ISIS

Focus has been on the *what*—the physical characteristics of resources, such as ease with which they can be looted.

Little support for this contention in systematic studies of many rebel groups.

We suggest two reasons for this:

- Lack of adequate data
- *How* matters as well—politics of resource extraction influences conflict dynamics.
Rebel Contraband Dataset

- Unit of analysis: Conflict dyad-year from 1990 to 2012
  - List of groups from Uppsala Conflict Data Program
  - Example: LRA-Uganda 2012

- Key variables:
  - If and how much rebels profit from specific natural resources
  - How rebels profit—extortion, theft, booty futures, and smuggling
  - Rebel involvement in criminal activities (piracy, protection rackets, etc.)
  - Income, location, type and degree of uncertainty
  - Data sources: UN Group of Expert Reports, NGOs (ICG, Global Witness), UNODC, scholarly research, systematic searches of news media
  - Identifier variables to join with country-level, group-level, and GIS datasets

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Natural Resources and Rebel Strategy

- Permits first large-scale comparative study of link between income from natural resources and treatment of civilians
  - Statistical analysis of rebel-government conflict dyads from 1990 to 2012, controlling for external support, territorial control, rebel fighting capacity, and other factors
  - Profiting from natural resources increases expected number of civilian victims of rebel violence by over 150 percent
Natural Resources and Government Strategy

- How do rebel endowments influence government strategy?
- Different endowments have different political-military consequences
  - External support increases threat rebels pose to the government, making it more desperate and willing to attack civilians
  - Natural resource finance attracts recruits motivated by income rather than political cause, leading to less effective combatants
- Natural resource endowments associated with less government violence, external support with more government violence
Extortion and Smuggling

- How rebels profit from natural resources matters as well
  - Extortion: Rebels use violence to extract rents by establishing control over production locations
    - Reduces incentives for restraint:
    - Generates income that reduces need for popular support
    - Alienates producers by reducing their incomes
    - Includes both lootable resources (diamonds in west Africa) and non-lootable resources (pipelines in Colombia, oil in Syria)
  - Smuggling: Rebels use specialization in violence to move goods overseas
    - Strengthens incentives for restraint:
    - Success requires collaboration with non-combatants who have more opportunities to exit the relationship
    - Cannot establish control over entire area involved in smuggling
Extortion, Smuggling, and Rebel Strategy

- Rebels that extort/smuggle should exercise less/more restraint in treatment of civilians
- Statistical analysis of use of sexual violence by rebel groups from 1990-2012
- Sexual violence can be a strategic activity of rebel groups to coerce local population or to build cohesion among rebel combatants (Cohen, 2013)
- But powerfully alienates non-combatants
- Extortion associated with large increase in use of sexual violence, while smuggling associated with decline
Extortion, Smuggling, and Sexual Violence

Percentage Change in Odds of Higher Category of SV

Extortion  Smuggling  Abduction

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Extortion, Smuggling, and Conflict Duration

- Do conflicts involving natural resources last longer? Existing studies reach mixed conclusions.
- Most rely on country-level data or case studies, rather than the rebel group, and do not identify if rebels actually profit from nearby resources.
- Rebels that smuggle more resilient than those who extort.
  - Violent activities spread over larger area with weak government presence.
  - Not dependent on one geographic area or a single resource.
  - Smuggling increases group’s “power to resist.”
Figure 1: Extortion, Smuggling, and the Duration of Civil Wars
Territorial Control and Conflict Dynamics

- Has ISIS loss of territory driven it to strike overseas?
- Measuring territorial control is not straightforward
- Develop new method based on:
  - Identifying which actor controls location after battles
  - GIS algorithms to identify contested areas and zones of incomplete control
  - Use information about drive times and road networks to map radius of control
- Data for civil wars in sub-Saharan Africa from 1989 to 2008
Figure 2: Territorial Control in Angola, 2000
Territorial Control and Conflict Dynamics

- Control or seizure of territory increases threat to opposing side
- Opposing side responds to increased threat with violence against civilians
  - Prevent defection
  - Extract resources (military personnel, equipment, intelligence)
- Effect on government violence larger because:
  - Government forces typically have more military capabilities, which can inflict more harm on civilians
  - Loss of territory threatens government’s legitimacy and claim to exercise monopoly over violence
Government Attacks on Civilians When Rebels Control Territory

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Rebel Attacks on Civilians when Government Controls Territory

![Bar graph showing the relationship between the percentage of grid cell controlled by government and the number of rebel victims. The x-axis represents the percentage of grid cell controlled by government, ranging from 0 to 40, and the y-axis represents the number of rebel victims, ranging from 0 to 4. The graph shows an increase in rebel victims as the percentage of grid cell controlled by government increases.]
Conclusions and Next Steps

- How armed groups resource themselves influences use of violence against non-combatants
- Findings suggest potential trade-offs in seeking to protect civilians:
  - Finance from natural resources leads to more civilian victimization by rebels, but less by governments
  - Extortion: More sexual violence but not longer civil wars
  - Smuggling: No effect on sexual violence, but longer civil wars
- Next steps:
  - Detailed geo-coded data on mineral locations in developing world; will allow micro-level focus on how nearby resources influence location and scale of battles and victimization
  - Open source, near-real time semi-automated system for measuring territorial control from event data; researchers and organizations could use this to develop maps of territorial contestation in other conflicts