

REBEL AUDIENCE COSTS AND CHILD SOLDIERS:  
EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICAL MOVEMENTS, REBEL  
LEADER ELECTIONS, AND FORCIBLE RECRUITMENT

By

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## **Abstract**

The forced recruitment of child soldiers is a widespread practice employed by rebel groups around the world. What determines when rebel groups engage in this brutal strategy? We argue that it depends on their susceptibility to audience costs imposed by the local community. Rebel groups that rely on local constituencies for food, funds, and shelter have a strong incentive to maintain their support base and refrain from abusive practices like the forced recruitment of children. Utilizing data from three distinct datasets, we test the effect of political movement parent organizations and rebel leader elections on the forced recruitment of child soldiers. We demonstrate empirically that rebel groups that are founded from political movements are less likely to forcibly recruit child soldiers. Our analysis also shows that when combined, groups that both form out of political movements and hold elections as a form of leader ascension are far less likely to engage in forced child soldier recruitment. We argue that our explanatory variables indicate an underlying susceptibility to audience costs and that our results demonstrate the importance of audience costs in rebel group strategy and the perpetration of human rights abuses.

## **Introduction**

Child soldiers are recruited broadly in conflicts throughout the world. Evidence suggests that the number of children at risk of being recruited into conflict over the past 30 years has risen, with 337 million children in 2020 living in areas where child recruitment is prevalent. With 22 governments and 110 rebel groups reportedly recruiting child combatants in 2020, more than 1 in 8 children currently live in a combat zone associated with child soldiering (Haer et al., 2021). However, the practice of child soldiering is not ubiquitous and the strategy of forcibly recruiting child soldiers varies widely across rebel groups. In the dataset presented in this paper, we include observations on 255 unique rebel-government dyads. Of these 255, 103 rebel groups demonstrate some measure of forcible child soldier recruitment. This means that over 40% of these rebel groups forcibly recruit child soldiers where 60% of rebel groups in this dataset do not. Given the devastating consequences of child soldiering, the source of this variation is of critical importance.

Child soldiering is a brutal practice that has broad humanitarian implications. Child soldiers are subject to combat violence, grueling labor, arbitrary beatings, and forced sexual services which often result in sexually transmitted infections. In addition, rebel groups can force children to commit atrocities, often targeting their own community and even their own family in violent massacres. For child soldiers, memories of their own actions may torment them for years and limit their ability to ever re-engage with their community. Even after a conflict has ended, the recruitment of child soldiers scars communities and can destabilize societies for decades to come. Child soldiers, especially girls who have been raped, struggle to reintegrate into their community as they are often stigmatized or outright rejected. Those who are accepted into the community struggle due to a lack of education and vocational skills. One way or another, child

soldiering leads to devastating consequences for these young victims and their communities (Machel, 2001).

Given these devastating effects, it is important to understand the sources of variation in the recruitment of child soldiers in order to inform ongoing policy and advocacy that can mitigate and reduce this inhumane practice. Since Graca Machel's initial 1996 UN report entitled "The Impact of Armed Conflict on Children," vividly highlighted the damage children face from conscription into armed conflict, the international community has strived to eliminate the practice through a mix of international laws, norms, charities, and initiatives (Bernd and Beber, 2013). None of these are more notable than the Optional Protocol to the Convention of the Rights of the Child and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court which since 2002 have acted to criminalize the recruitment of child soldiers (Vargas-Barón, 2010). More recent efforts like the United Nations "Children, Not Soldiers" campaign which operated in eight countries including Afghanistan, Myanmar, and South Sudan resulted in the release and reintegration of thousands of child soldiers by the end of 2016 (United Nations, 2021).

Despite gradual success, a significant amount of work remains to reduce and eradicate the use of child soldiers. Organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch also conduct research analysis and information campaigns to promote policies that put an end to child soldiering. For example, in 2018 Amnesty International launched a campaign raising awareness of child soldiering in South Sudan and called on the government to do more to protect its vulnerable youth population (Amnesty International, 2021). Furthermore, in 2018 the United Nations in collaboration with the World Bank, Member States, and civil society organizations launched the Global Coalition for Reintegration. The coalition focuses on the effective implementation of policies that can ensure long-term reintegration for child soldiers in post-conflict settings (Global Coalition for Reintegration of Child Soldiers, 2021). Better understanding when rebel groups do or do not engage in the recruitment of child soldiers can help to inform future initiatives designed by the international community to reduce this brutal practice.

To explain this differentiation, we offer susceptibility to audience costs as a determining factor in whether or not rebel groups forcibly recruit child soldiers. We hypothesize that rebel groups that are subject to audience costs will be less likely to engage in the recruitment of child soldiers because the practice of forcible recruitment is likely to be unpopular, particularly among local populations - the audience of the rebel group. Because there is no direct measure for audience costs, we offer two characteristics as proxies to indicate the susceptibility of a rebel group to audience costs. We hypothesize that rebel groups that are founded from political movements foster ties to a specific local constituency, making them more susceptible to audience costs and thus less likely to forcibly recruit child soldiers. We also hypothesize that rebel groups that elect leaders are more likely to rely on local support, making them more susceptible to audience costs

and thus less likely to forcibly recruit child soldiers as well. We argue that audience costs in this context will have a deterrent effect, meaning that audience costs are present if the rebel group is statistically less likely to engage in the behavior of forcible child soldier recruitment.

We take the example of the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) as a baseline rebel group that forcibly recruits child soldiers. In 1972, the Addis Ababa Agreement was signed, ending the 17-year conflict now called the First Sudanese Civil War. The agreement had granted the Southern region of Sudan a measure of regional autonomy within the Democratic Republic of Sudan. Though regional discontent over religious differences and disparities between development in the North and South had been rising, violations of the Addis Ababa Agreement on the part of President Jaafar Numeiri caused tensions to boil over. With rich oil fields in the South, the Northern government attempted to redraw regional boundaries, encroaching on Southern territory to benefit from this lucrative resource (Tounsel, 2016). By 1983, President Numeiri attempted to divide the South into distinct regions, headed by Governors of his choosing and had dissolved the regional governments. In response to violations of the Addis Ababa Agreement and the degradation of the regional autonomy of South Sudan, the Sudan People's Liberation Movement/Army (SPLM/A) was formed in 1983. SPLM/A relied heavily on Anya Nya veterans from the First Sudanese Civil War and defecting Sudanese military officers. The group was led and founded by Dr. John Garang de Mabior who himself was dissatisfied with the treatment of South Sudan and defected from his post in the National Army (Scott 1985).

Even at the beginning of the conflict in the early 1980s, the SPLM/A recruited child soldiers and had a policy of "taking boys away from their homes" where they would receive military training and eventually join the conflict. This policy was the foundation for the SPLM/A's Red Army, a division of SPLM/A soldiers made up exclusively of children (Ensor 2012). These minors were recruited at young ages, meaning that 10-year-olds were still senior to other children who could be as young as 4 years old when they were first introduced to the SPLM/A (Santoro, 2000). By the end of the 20-year conflict in 2004, SPLM/A had 2,500 to 5,000 active child soldiers in its ranks and claimed to have already demobilized 16,000 child soldier recruits by that time (Child Soldiers International 2004). We argue that the decision to forcibly recruit child soldiers by groups like SPLM/A is due to a lack of susceptibility to audience costs. Because SPLM/A was formed by forces defecting from Sudan's existing military, its foundations likely made it less vulnerable to local audience costs than other rebel groups who form directly from the community and are discouraged from this behavior.

On the other hand, al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya (alternatively known as Islamic Group or IG) demonstrates the characteristics of a rebel group that aligns with our theory in its decision not to forcibly recruit child soldiers. After Gamal Abdel Nasser died in 1970, he was succeeded by Anwar Sadat who distanced himself from Nasser's social and economic policies branded as

“Arab socialism” and placed himself more in line with Islamic values. Part of the shift brought on by Sadat was an amnesty towards the Muslim Brotherhood, a movement which faced severe repression during the Nasser era. Seeing a continued strategy of direct confrontation with the government as a losing battle, the Brotherhood pivoted by renouncing violence and pursuing its goals through peaceful means (Vidino 2015). During the early days of his regime, Sadat supported the Muslim Brotherhood and related organizations as a tactical counterweight to popular Nasserist organizations which he initially saw as the greatest threat to his authority (Blaydes and Rubin 2008). However, by the late 1970s the relationship between the Brotherhood and Sadat had worn thin, particularly as he softened relations with Israel in 1977 leading to a peace treaty in 1979 (Vidino 2015). It was during this time that al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya was founded. In 1977, the group split from the Muslim Brotherhood movement and endorsed violence against the Egyptian government with the goal of establishing an Islamic state. In its early days, the Islamic Group recruited mainly among Egyptian university students, particularly in Upper Egypt, fostering ties to the Southern region of the country (Fandy 1994). In the 1990s, the Islamic Group launched a bloody campaign against the government. The group engaged in a surge of violent attacks from 1992 to 1997 until it declared an end to “all armed operation” in 1999 (Schuck 2016). In that time, the group employed a terror-based approach that targeted Egyptian politicians, secular writers and intellectuals, and even tourists and foreigners (Blaydes and Rubin 2008).

And yet, despite the group's violent tactics throughout this period, al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya did not engage in the recruitment of child soldiers. We argue that the decision to not forcibly recruit child soldiers for groups like al-Gama'a al-Islamiyya is based on their susceptibility to audience costs. We theorize that because the Islamic Group was formed out of a political and social movement, like the Muslim Brotherhood, it was inherently connected to a local constituency for support. This is in contrast to the SPLM/A which was formed by defecting military members, a parent organization type that indicates no direct accountability to the people. We expand on these examples as we offer a group's susceptibility to audience costs as a critical determinant when explaining extreme behaviors like the forcible recruitment of child combatants.

To assess this hypothesis, we build a unique dataset that combines information from three distinct studies. First, we utilize Haer, Faulkner, and Whitaker's scale of forced child soldier recruitment to measure the use of this practice among rebel groups (2019). Second, we rely on Braithwaite and Cunningham's Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) Dataset to analyze rebel groups by their “parent organization” or the group from which it was founded (2019). Specifically, this allows us to examine rebel groups that are founded out of a “political movement,” analyzing the effects of this parent organization type on forcible child soldier recruitment. Third, we employ Cunningham and Sawyer's leader ascension dataset to analyze the effect of rebel leader elections on a rebel group's recruitment of child soldiers (2019).

We find that rebel groups that form out of political movements are less likely to engage in the forced recruitment of child soldiers. Further, when combined with rebel group elections, we show that groups that both form out of political movements and hold elections as a form of leader ascension are far less likely to engage in forced child soldier recruitment. We argue that these results indicate an underlying susceptibility to audience costs. Political movement parent organizations and rebel leader elections indicate some level of social support. Being sensitive to the community, we show these types of groups are unlikely to commit human rights abuses like the forcible recruitment of child soldiers.

## **Literature Review**

Child soldiering remains a widespread practice with estimates for the number of active child soldiers around 250,000 for each year of the 21st century and with 93,000 verified child soldiers recruited into conflict between 2005 and 2020 (Dupuy and Peters, 2010; UNICEF, 2018). Despite the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, and significant acceptance among the international community with 140 signatories, the practice of recruiting child soldiers by both governments and rebel groups remains a part of conflicts throughout the world (Simmons, 2009). However, though many rebel groups engage in child soldier recruitment, the practice is by no means ubiquitous across all rebel groups. This simple variation in rebel group behavior creates the question: what conditions prompt rebel groups to forcibly recruit child soldiers?

Two general explanations exist to understand why and when rebel groups would violate international law and engage in the recruitment of child soldiers. The first category focuses on supply-side explanations. These studies help to explain what factors exist in society that might make children more vulnerable targets of rebel group recruitment. Explanations often cited within this school of thought include: the level of youth unemployment, poverty, economic conditions, availability of education and other means for youths to improve their social status, the size of the general population of children, and the availability of children within vulnerable communities like those living in internally displaced persons (IDP) or refugee camps. For example, high levels of youth unemployment can reduce opportunities for children to contribute to the family unit or to provide for themselves. Children that live in poor economic conditions with high levels of poverty are often enticed to engage with rebel groups that can provide for their basic needs when their families are unable to. This means that for many child soldiers, engagement with rebel groups is a matter of survival (Brett and Specht, 2004). Rebel groups that can provide children with food, shelter, and a sense of purpose and community are able to capitalize on poor economic conditions that increase the availability of child recruits. Similarly, when educational opportunities are scarce children are more likely to seek out alternative opportunities like participation in rebellions (Cohn and Goodwin-Gill, 2003). Furthermore, there has been compelling research that shows the availability of children in vulnerable situations will

increase the likelihood of child soldier recruitment. This research is particularly aimed at children in IDP and refugee camps who not only are living in poor economic conditions but also lack basic security, providing access for rebel groups to take advantage of children in these vulnerable situations and engage in child soldier recruitment (Achvarina and Reich, 2006).

The second school of thought around child soldier recruitment focuses on demand-side factors that can help explain why rebel groups may be encouraged to recruit child soldiers and actively engage in child soldiering. Many demand-side explanations rely fundamentally on the idea that child soldiers can effectively improve the fighting capacity of the rebel group. Haer and Böhmelt empirically demonstrate that “child soldiers are indeed more likely to be associated with higher fighting capacities of rebel groups” (2016). Specifically, scholars have argued that child soldiers can prove themselves to be fierce and effective combatants given their ability to be indoctrinated more easily than adult soldiers (Schauer and Elbert, 2010). This means that a rebel group can foster extreme loyalty in child soldiers who may become dependent on the group and less likely to defect or abandon the cause than adult recruits (Gates and Reich, 2010). To that end, because of their ability to be indoctrinated, child soldiers exhibit less fear and often demonstrate a belief that they are invincible, making them more willing to engage in extreme tactics like suicide than their adult counterparts (Brett and Specht, 2004). Combined with advancements in weapons technology in the 20th century making firearms lighter and easier to operate, children have the potential to become just as lethal as any adult on the battlefield (Singer 2006). Though some scholars like Andvig and Gates (2010) and Beber and Blattman (2013) caution against overemphasizing the fighting effectiveness of child soldiers, these arguments illuminate why rebel groups would be interested in recruiting child soldiers to increase their battle readiness.

In a similar way, child recruits may increase the fighting capacity of a rebel group even without serving directly in combat roles. Though evidence suggests that most child soldiers do eventually engage in active combat-oriented roles, child soldiers can also act in support roles outside of the combat zone (Singer, 2006). These positions might have child soldiers carrying out tasks like “scouting, spying, acting as decoys, couriers or guards” or participating in “logistics and support functions such as portering, cooking and domestic labour” (Coalition to Stop the Use of Child Soldiers, 2010). Even outside of combat there are a wide range of tasks required to sustain a rebel group. Children that can fill roles that support adult combatants help to keep rebel group members engaged and fighting for the rebellion. In this way, some scholars have noted that child soldiers can be viewed as complements to adult soldiers, offering particular advantages and filling support roles that may improve the effectiveness of the overall group (Haer and Böhmelt, 2016).

Beyond the fundamental benefits of recruiting child soldiers to improve the fighting capacity of the group, rebels may demonstrate demand for child combatants for reasons outside of their fighting efficacy. Along this line of reasoning, many scholars point to the cost-effectiveness of

recruiting child soldiers in comparison to traditional recruits. Child soldiers naturally require less resources from the rebel groups who do not have to provide food and clothing in the same quantities they would have to supply to adults. These simple differences can help rebel groups cut costs and effectively provide supplies to more combatants to sustain the fighting (Andvig and Gates 2010). It is also easier for rebel groups to exclude children from profits and spoils gained through the conflict. This means that rebel leaders and adult members are able to benefit from the support child soldiers provide without having to pay children proportionally, taking the pros and leaving the cons (Haer, Faulkner, and Whitaker 2020).

In summary, the literature on child soldiering demonstrates the importance of “supply and demand” conditions in determining both the vulnerability of children and the incentives for rebel groups to recruit them. Economic conditions may reduce a child’s “income possibilities” and increase the population of vulnerable child recruits. On the other hand, a combination of technological and psychological traits can increase the “military efficiency” of children and reduce the “cost of monitoring” child combatants compared with adult recruits. Given the potential tactical and economic benefits, rebel groups take advantage of vulnerable populations and recruit child soldiers (Andvig and Gates 2010).

### **What is missing?**

Supply side factors discussed in the child soldiering literature have been shown to impact the availability of children and the sustainability of child soldier recruitment for rebel groups. However, the key independent variables of these arguments, most commonly poor economic conditions, a lack of availability of education, and the presence of vulnerable populations like those living in refugee and IDP camps, are also found to be correlated with a potential supply of adult recruits. For example, if unemployment is high throughout the economy, this would increase the supply not just of vulnerable children but of adults who lack opportunities to find work and provide for their basic needs (Faulkner, Powell, and Lasley 2019). Therefore, supply-side factors like these need to be taken in tandem with demand-side factors that can explain why rebel groups engage in child soldier recruitment and take advantage of an increase in supply.

Though evidence has shown that rebel groups are more likely to recruit child soldiers when punishment or accountability from the international community is considered unlikely, there is a gap in knowledge around social systems that constrain rebel group behavior based not on pressure from international actors but rather local communities that can influence behavior within the rebel group itself. For example, evidence indicates that rebel groups that are engaged in a secessionist movement are less likely to recruit child soldiers because the goal of the rebellion fundamentally requires gaining long-term international legitimacy and recognition as a state (Lasley and Thyne 2015). This finding solidifies the idea that rebel groups are not immune

to audience costs. In Lasley and Thyne's work, rebel groups looking to secede are clearly aware of how they rely on the support of the international community to achieve the goals of their rebellion and modify their behavior in accordance with that fact. This is an important indicator that rebel groups are sensitive to the communities that support them, meaning that certain rebel groups may be as sensitive to the support of local communities as secessionist groups are to international ones.

Research has also sought to explain child soldier recruitment based on the source of income the rebel group enjoys. Rebel groups that benefit from natural resources are shown to be less restrictive of extreme behaviors like child soldier recruitment (Haer, Faulkner, and Whitaker, 2020). This study builds the case that child soldier recruitment is more likely when rebel groups have alternative resources that do not make them reliant on support from local communities. Research like this again supports the idea that rebel groups are subject to audience costs. Though the study focuses specifically on the exploitation of natural resources, there is room to interpret that the driving factor behind the recruitment decision in this context is not the exploitation of natural resources itself, as much as the liberty those resources provide to groups, making them less reliant on the support of local communities and thus insulated from the audience costs associated with extreme behaviors like forcible child soldier recruitment.

Mehrl adds to the literature by showing empirically that child soldiering "increases civilian victimization only for groups who lack incentives to show restraint towards civilians because they receive no support from them" (2021). Though the study takes child soldiering as its explanatory variable rather than its dependent variable, the research helps to build the case that rebel groups who enjoy civilian support are tied to the community and restrain their behavior in ways that ensure continued support for their cause.

In this study, we focus on the role of audience costs as the mechanism behind findings like these and explore audience costs as a broader explanation for rebel group behavior in regard to child soldier recruitment.

### **Where do audience costs come in?**

We understand that when rebel groups engage in the recruitment of child soldiers, they place children in violent and exploitative situations. In the case of forced recruitment, these children are not only placed within the violent rebellion but are done so against their will and the will of their families. In that context, local communities react negatively to the forced recruitment of child soldiers and are less likely to support the rebel group and its goals. Furthermore, certain rebel group characteristics define the extent to which the rebel group relies on the support of local communities for recruitment, funds, food, shelter, arms, and information. While some rebel groups rely heavily on the support of local communities, others rely instead on support from

foreign governments or natural resource wealth (Haer, Faulkner, Whitaker 2020). It is then logical that rebel groups that rely on support from local communities are far more interested in preserving their reputation than those that do not. Accordingly, we would expect that rebel groups that rely on local constituencies are less likely to engage in extreme behaviors like the forced recruitment of child soldiers.

Building on this logic and the body of literature describing child soldiering, we offer audience costs as an explanation to better understand when rebel groups forcibly recruit child soldiers. Fundamentally, we understand that rebel groups are subject to audience costs with some level of variation. The variation behind this susceptibility can help to explain the subsequent variability we observe in rebel group behaviors. Given the nature of audience costs, we would expect that a susceptibility to audience costs would be most observable with extreme or harmful behaviors like the forced recruitment of child soldiers.

We hypothesize that rebel groups that are subject to audience costs will be less likely to engage in the recruitment of child soldiers because the practice of forced child soldier recruitment is likely to be unpopular, particularly among local populations - the audience of the rebel group. Because there is no direct measure for audience costs, we offer two characteristics as a proxy to indicate the sensitivity of a rebel group to its reputation within the community. We argue that audience costs in this context will have a deterrent effect, meaning that they are present if the rebel group is statistically less likely to engage in the behavior of forcible child soldier recruitment.

**Hypothesis 1** *Rebel groups that are founded from political movements will be more susceptible to audience costs and thus less likely to engage in the recruitment of child soldiers.*

Taking the Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), as an illustrative example, the group was founded in 1945 out of the existing Komalay Jiyaway Kurdistan organization, a political movement which insisted on non-military practices in the advancement of a nationalist strategy. Similarly, the main goal of the later KDPI was also the establishment of Kurdistan as an autonomous province (Vali, 2014). However, when Ayatollah Khomeini took power in 1979, his “holy war” on the Kurds sparked years of conflict between the KDPI and the Iranian Government which would not end until 1996 when the KDPI renounced its armed struggle (Ghazanjani, 2020). Despite years of bloody conflict, there is no evidence that KDPI engaged in the forcible recruitment of child soldiers. We argue that because the group was formed from a political movement KDPI was tied to local Kurdish communities for support and thus more susceptible to the audience costs imposed by the community when engaging in violent behaviors. We believe this factor determined KDPI’s decision not to forcibly recruit child soldiers.

**Hypothesis 2** *Rebel groups that elect leaders are more likely to have a locally based constituency, relying on local support and making them more susceptible to audience costs and thus less likely to engage in the recruitment of child soldiers.*

Here the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) exemplifies the possible significance of rebel leader elections. The group was founded in 1994 with the goal of establishing an independent Palestinian state. After the PNA's formation from the Palestinian Liberation Organization, the group engaged in two years of armed rebellion between 2000 and 2002. However, during the time where the PNA engaged in conflict against Israel, the group did not recruit child soldiers. We argue that because the PNA held elections to determine its leadership these leaders were inherently subject to audience costs. Conceivably, these elections made PNA leadership accountable to constituencies within the Palestinian community which prevented the group from engaging in forced child soldier recruitment as it was incentivized to maintain its power base.

## **Data and Methods**

In order to test our hypotheses, we design a set of analyses. Our dataset is based on a collection of variables from three distinct studies.

*Dependent variable: Forced recruitment of child soldiers*

We relied on data collected and coded by Haer, Faulkner, and Whitaker to record if a rebel group engaged in the forcible recruitment of child soldiers (2019). The Haer, Faulkner, and Whitaker data was based on the Child Soldier Data Set (CSDS) by Haer and Böhmelt (2015, 2017) and includes an ordinal measure of forced recruitment based on reports put out by NGOs like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, government organizations like the U.S. Department of State, and a variety of journalistic and academic sources from around the world. The variable is coded on a three-point scale “with 0 meaning no evidence that the group was involved in forcible recruitment of children, 1 meaning that fewer than 20% of all children involved in the rebel group were forcibly recruited, and 2 meaning that more than 20% of all children involved in the group were forcibly recruited.” We consider forcible child soldier recruitment to include a range of coercive practices like “abduction, raids on schools, and ‘one family one person’ policies,” where community members are required to enlist a child into the ranks of the rebel group. Given the distribution of our dependent variable as an ordered categorical variable, we employ an ordered logistic regression (ologit) model to run our tests.

*Independent variables: Rebel leader elections and political movement parent organizations*

We regress the forcible recruitment of child soldiers on a set of substantively important explanatory variables. First, the Rebel Leader Ascension Dataset allows us to analyze the effect of rebel leader elections on forced child soldier recruitment (Cunningham and Sawyer, 2019). Groups are coded as holding elections based on “clear reports of an electoral selection process.” Harvesting the election variable allows for comparison against all other leader selection types in the Rebel Leader Ascension Dataset. This means that groups where leaders are chosen by

elections are compared to other ascension types like selection by an elite cadre or a third-party outside of the community.

We then added variables from the Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) Dataset which contains information about the characteristics of rebel group “parent organizations” along with the goals and ideology of rebel groups (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). We accessed FORGE data on “parent organizations” which classifies rebel groups based on 15 distinct variables indicating the type of organization from which the rebel group was founded.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, we focus throughout our analysis on one parent organization type - political movements. Groups with this parent type are defined as having sprung from “organizations that have expressed primarily political demands” but “have not organized as parties with the intention to contest elections and/or field candidates for political office.” We take these groups as representatives of a social movement typically acting on behalf of certain constituencies with political demands.

### *Control variables*

We also include a standard set of 11 control variables in each of our model specifications. Specifically, we draw on the work of Haer, Faulkner, and Whitaker for a standard set of control variables which includes well-studied characteristics that may influence the level of forced child soldier recruitment (2019).

We include six control variables that define the context in which the conflict takes place. Many of these variables mirror the classic “supply and demand” discussion around when rebel groups decide to recruit child soldiers.

First, we include a variable on the *conflict’s duration*. Evidence suggests that the longer a conflict becomes, the more rebel groups will have to search for new recruits, increasing their “demand” for children and incentivizing forced recruitment (Tynes and Early 2015). Second, we control for the number of *battle-related deaths* which indicates the intensity of the conflict. Similar to the conflict’s duration, we expect that the larger the number of deaths in combat, the more likely a rebel group will turn to child recruits to fill their ranks, another “demand-side” variable (Haer and Böhmelt, 2017; Singer, 2006). Third, we include a variable that measures whether or not the *government* engages in the forced recruitment of child soldiers, which has been shown to increase the likelihood that the corresponding rebel group will recruit child soldiers in return (Tynes and Early 2015). Fourth, we include a measure of *Democracy* to control for the country

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<sup>1</sup> When running our analysis, two distinct parent organization types drop out. These include groups that originated from a labor movement or trade union and groups that came from a non-military faction of the current government. This omission was necessary because when integrating the FORGE data with our child soldiering variable, these groups do not have enough observations to produce variance in their outcome. Thus, these two scarce parent organization types are dropped from our analysis.

regime type, a variable that defines the context in which the rebel group operates (Lasley and Thyne, 2015). Fifth, because “supply-side” explanations for child soldier recruitment often describe poverty as a motivating factor, we use *GDP per capita* to control for how child soldiering might be more common in poorer countries (Tynes and Early, 2015). Sixth, we control for the size of the *youth population* which, similarly to poverty, is considered to be a “supply-side” factor that increases the potential for child soldier recruitment (Dallaire 2011).

We also include five control variables that speak to the nature of the rebel group itself. These are specific group related factors that may influence a group's decision to forcibly recruit child soldiers.

First, we include *natural resource exploitation*, the explanatory variable used by Haer, Faulkner, and Whitaker to show that when rebel groups profit from natural resources, they are less dependent on local communities and are thus more likely to engage in harmful practices like the recruitment of child soldiers (2019). Second, we control for *foreign support for rebel groups* which, similar to natural resource wealth, reduces a rebel group’s reliance on local communities and increases their ability to forcibly recruit child soldiers (Faulkner 2016). Third, we include a variable on the ability of a rebel group to control territory. *Territorial control* allows rebel groups to maintain training camps, establish headquarters, and generally improve its credibility within a community. This increases the capacity of a rebel group which may make it easier to attract adult recruits but also boost the group’s ability to forcibly recruit children (Kubota, 2011). Fourth, we use a variable to capture how much control leaders exercise over the group. The more a rebel group demonstrates *centralized command*, the more leaders are able to reign in their members. Groups that exhibit low levels of central control are shown to be more likely to commit human rights abuses like the forced recruitment of child soldiers (Weinstein, 2005). Fifth, we control for whether a rebel group has a *political wing*. Having a political wing indicates that the rebel group is dedicating resources to establish its legitimacy within the national or international community. Groups that are said to be “legitimacy-seeking” are believed to be less likely to engage in harmful practices within their communities, potentially reducing the likelihood of a decision to forcibly recruit child soldiers (Jo, 2015; Lasley and Thyne, 2015).

The descriptive statistics recorded in table 1 shed more light on the composition of the dataset in regard to the described variables.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics.

	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
Forced Recruitment Index	668	0.919	0.776	0	2
Group Has Elected Leader	668	0.082	0.275	0	1
Parent = Rebel Group	664	0.416	0.493	0	1
Parent = Terror Group	664	0.139	0.346	0	1
Parent = Political Party	664	0.203	0.403	0	1
Parent = Political Movement	664	0.096	0.295	0	1
Parent = Youth Organization	664	0.116	0.320	0	1
Parent = Current Armed Forces	664	0.039	0.194	0	1
Parent = Former Armed Forces	664	0.039	0.194	0	1
Parent = Religious Organization	664	0.075	0.264	0	1
Parent = Foreign Armed Forces	664	0.036	0.187	0	1
Parent = Refugee Population	664	0.032	0.175	0	1
Parent = Ethnic Group	664	0.027	0.162	0	1
Parent = Other	664	0.002	0.039	0	1
Natural Resource Exploitation	668	0.519	0.500	0	1
Foreign Support for Rebel Group	668	0.430	0.495	0	1
Conflict Duration	668	12.894	9.652	1	42
Territorial Control for Rebel Group	668	0.841	1.009	0	3
Rebel Group Central Command	668	1.930	0.622	1	3
Rebel Group has Political Wing	668	0.355	0.479	0	1
Government Forced Recruitment	668	0.475	0.500	0	1
Democracy	668	12.452	6.198	1	20
Battle-Related Deaths (logged)	668	6.230	1.383	2.079	10.129
GDP per capita (logged)	668	7.849	0.989	5.314	10.186
Youth Population (logged)	668	3.596	0.215	2.690	3.904

## Results

Table 2 demonstrates our results from three logistic regression models. Model 1 tests the effect of rebel leader elections on forced child soldier recruitment but excludes data on political movement parent organizations. Model 2 focuses on rebel organizations that spring from political movements by comparing groups with political movement parent organizations against all other parent organization types within the dataset. This model focuses on parent organizations and excludes data on rebel leader elections. Model 3 combines our binary election variable with the parent organization type to determine the effect of the combined variables. This divides rebel groups into three categories: groups that hold elections but do not come from a political movement, groups that come from a political movement but do not hold elections, and groups that both hold elections and developed from a political movement.

**Table 2.** Rebel group elections, political movement parent organizations, and forced child soldier recruitment.

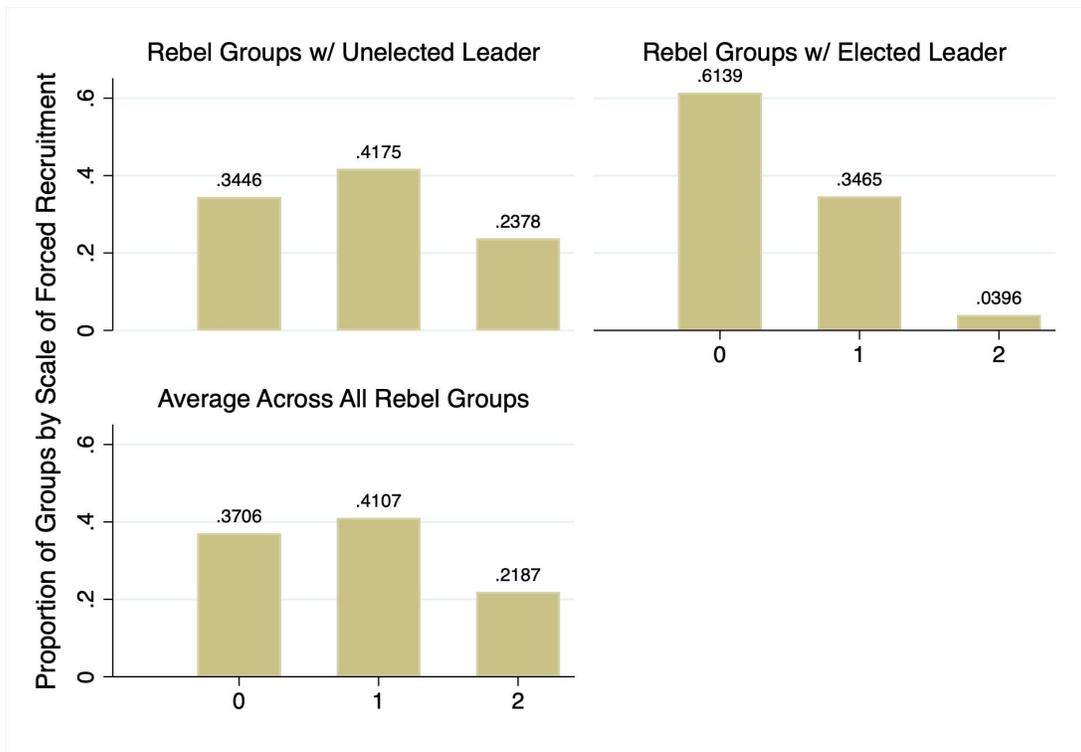
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Group Has Elected Leader	-1.596 (1.010)		
Parent = Political Movement		-3.007** (1.251)	
Elected = 0 + Movement = 1			-1.956 (1.524)
Elected = 1 + Movement = 0			0.0613 (0.583)
Elected = 1 + Movement = 1			-5.276*** (0.783)
Natural Resource Exploitation	1.383** (0.566)	1.475*** (0.538)	1.304** (0.545)
Foreign Support for Rebel Group	-0.133 (0.386)	-0.0467 (0.394)	-0.159 (0.419)
Conflict Duration	0.0434 (0.0276)	0.0509* (0.0301)	0.0521* (0.0313)
Territorial Control for Rebel Group	-0.0395 (0.361)	0.0244 (0.351)	0.0454 (0.351)
Democracy	0.0154 (0.0486)	-0.0202 (0.0536)	-0.00315 (0.0541)
Battle-Related Deaths (logged)	0.435*** (0.135)	0.396*** (0.133)	0.369*** (0.140)
GDP per capita (logged)	-0.501 (0.343)	-0.523 (0.334)	-0.625* (0.360)
Youth Population (logged)	1.646 (1.653)	1.675 (1.954)	1.764 (1.882)
Rebel Group Central Command	1.252*** (0.375)	1.640*** (0.423)	1.550*** (0.428)
Rebel Group has Political Wing	0.673 (0.550)	1.091** (0.540)	1.088** (0.534)
Government Forced Recruitment	1.111** (0.472)	1.230*** (0.463)	1.311*** (0.475)
Observations	668	664	664

Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1

In accordance with Model 1, rebel group elections are found to have a negative relationship with forced child soldier recruitment. This supports our hypothesis that rebel groups that hold elections for the selection of their leaders will typically be more reliant on the support of a local community, making them less likely to forcibly recruit child soldiers. Illustrating this trend, Figure 1 shows a graphical representation of how rebel groups that hold elections are distributed across the forced child recruitment scale with more than 60 percent of these groups exhibiting no signs of forced child soldier recruitment. However, though the relationship is negative, we find that rebel group elections fall short of statistical significance on their own. Though for many groups elections might increase their susceptibility to audience costs, there are reasons that the election variable may not perfectly capture susceptibility to audience costs in all cases throughout the dataset. In some instances, a rebel group may have held an election early on in its formation and has since changed its methods of leader selection, making the election variable no longer a representative indicator of its practices. In addition, for certain groups, elections may not reflect an underlying concern for the community, leaving them free to engage in harmful practices like forced child soldier recruitment. More significant than on its own, is the interaction effect we find when the election variable is combined with groups which were founded from political movement parent organizations.

**Figure 1.** Distribution of rebel groups on the scale of forced recruitment based on leader elections.

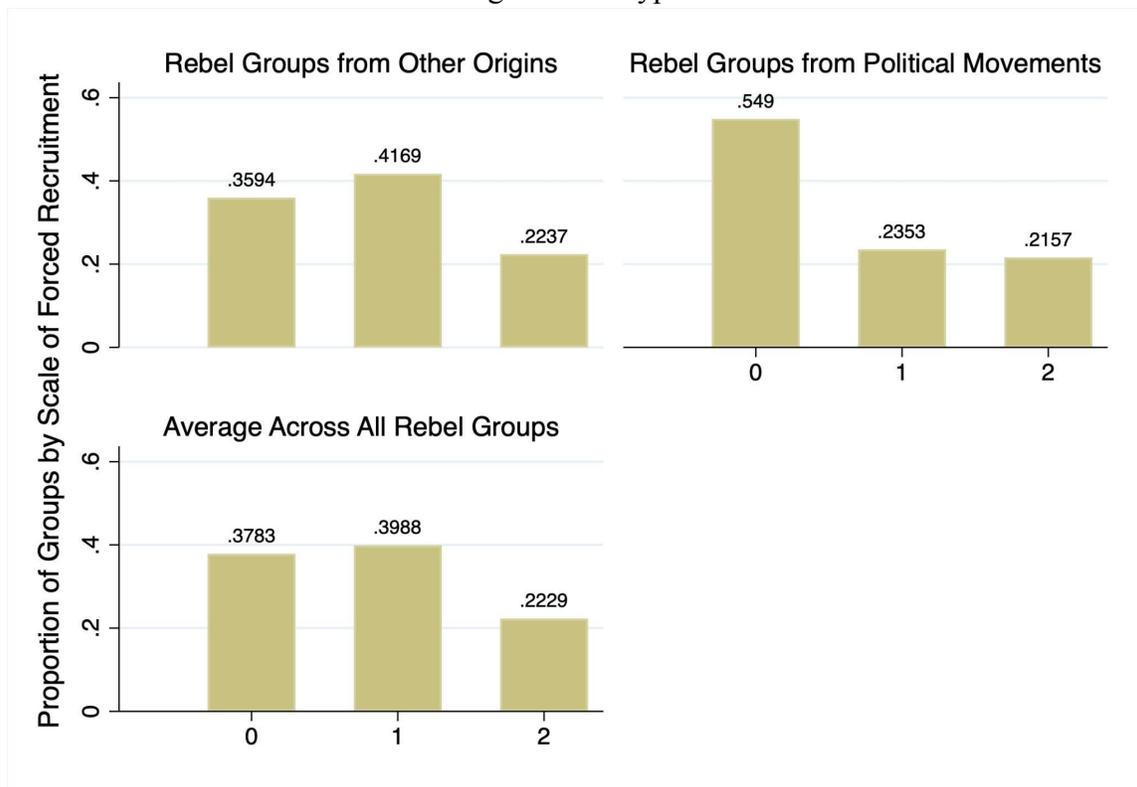


As demonstrated by Model 2, rebel groups that are formed out of a political movement parent organization are less likely to forcibly recruit child soldiers. This finding meets the threshold for statistical significance and supports our hypothesis that rebel groups founded out of social

movements will be more susceptible to audience costs. We argue that these types of groups are more likely to have social ties and community support when compared to rebel groups formed from military or terrorist organizations as demonstrated by their restraint from engaging in a practice that is harmful to the community. Demonstrating our results graphically, Figure 2 represents how rebel groups that are founded from political movements are distributed across the forced child recruitment scale with about 55 percent of these groups exhibiting no signs of forced child soldier recruitment. Conversely, only about 36 percent of rebel groups with other parent organization types show no recorded observations of forcible recruitment.

This finding empirically illustrates the difference between the variation we observe in the cases of the SPLM/A and the Islamic Group. Though our results do not definitively show that groups like SPLM/A are more likely to recruit child soldiers, we can say that the Islamic Group’s foundation from a political movement does make it less likely to recruit child soldiers. We interpret this variation as an indicator of the group’s susceptibility to audience costs. With a political movement parent organization like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Group formed from within the community and relied on a local constituency for support that it valued and sought to maintain. On the other hand, the SPLM/A, formed by defecting military members, had fewer social ties, little accountability, and was by comparison unencumbered in its decision to forcibly recruit child soldiers.

**Figure 2.** Distribution of rebel groups on the scale of forced recruitment based on parent organization type.



When combined, Model 3 shows that groups that both hold elections and developed from a political movement have a negative and statistically significant relationship with forced child soldier recruitment. We believe that in combination, these two variables indicate strongly that audiences matter to rebel groups. As discussed with elections, it is conceivable that a rebel group may have held an election but after some time no longer holds itself accountable to the voters. Similarly, we can imagine a rebel group that is formed out of a political movement with specific social ties that eventually deviates from its origins and behaves less and less like a group formed on a social basis. However, when a rebel group demonstrates both of these characteristics, we can see how the variables make it much more likely that a rebel group is incentivized to hold itself accountable to its social base and pay attention to the popularity of its actions, mitigating severe human rights abuses like the forced recruitment of child soldiers.

The Somali National Movement (SNM) illustrates how groups that both form out of a political movement and hold elections for their leaders behave. SNM was founded by members of the Isaaq clan-family in opposition to Somali President Siad Barre's regime (Ridout, 2012). The group initially operated out of Saudi Arabia and the United Kingdom as early as 1979 and was formed out of the Somali Democratic Islamic Movement (Renders, 2012). In time, the group's political motives were matched with operations on the ground and SNM began launching armed attacks out of Ethiopia around 1983. More than having a political foundation, SNM had a strong internal organization that facilitated democratic elections. The group had a Central Committee which deliberated on important decisions and regularly held congresses to elect leaders. Over time, many clans joined SNM and the group gained popular support among northern Somalis. The group's elections made it so that leadership positions were diffused and awarded to members of several clans and families outside of the initial Isaaq circle (Ridout, 2012). Throughout its operations, there is no evidence to suggest that SNM engaged in the forced recruitment of child soldiers. Our findings show how the group's founding as a political movement was combined with strong electoral institutions to create broad and inclusive democratic processes which fostered deep ties between SNM and the Somali people. The group not only began with a social base but was held accountable throughout its operations through leader elections, increasing its sensitivity to audience costs. We argue the group was restrained by these characteristics and refrained from the forced recruitment of child soldiers as it was interested in maintaining support.

All three models include our full range of control variables with results that are consistent with previous studies on child soldiering. For example, our control variables show that natural resource exploitation, conflict duration, battle-related deaths, central command, and the forced recruitment of children by governments also have a statistically significant effect that makes the recruitment of child soldiers by rebel groups more likely.

Table 3 demonstrates the predicted probability that a rebel group forcibly recruits child soldiers using the ordinal scale of forced recruitment to map changes based on our independent variables.

We find that rebel leader elections are associated with a 37.2 percent decrease in the probability that the group will forcibly recruit child soldiers. This means that groups that do not hold rebel leader elections demonstrate a 75.1% chance of forcibly recruiting child soldiers compared to groups that do hold elections and show only a 38% probability of forcibly recruiting child soldiers. Further, we find that groups that are formed out of a political movement are associated with a 63.2% reduction in the probability that the group will forcibly recruit child soldiers. Based on our ordinal ranking, groups founded from a parent organization other than a political movement show a 57% chance of forcibly recruiting up to 1 out every 5 child soldiers associated with the group and a 21.7% probability of forcibly recruiting more than 1 out of every 5 children enlisted as combatants. By comparison, groups that are founded from political movements demonstrate a 14.1% chance of forcibly recruiting up to 1 in every 5 child soldiers and only a 1.7% probability of having a broader forced recruitment strategy that enlists more than 1 out of every 5 child combatants into the conflict forcibly. Last, when taken together, groups that both hold elections and have a political movement as their parent organization demonstrate a 98.1% probability of not forcibly recruiting child soldiers. This would be a 77.2% decrease in the likelihood of recruiting child soldiers when compared with organizations that neither hold leader elections nor have a founding in a political movement. As a result, groups that display neither trait demonstrate a 79.1% probability of forcibly recruiting child soldiers to some degree. This is contrasted by groups that fall under both explanatory variables and demonstrate only a 1.9% probability of forcibly recruiting child soldiers.

**Table 3.** Predicted probabilities of forced child soldier recruitment.

		Scale of Forced Recruitment		
		0	1	2
Model 1	Unelected leader	0.248	0.548	0.203
	Elected leader	0.620	0.331	0.049
Model 2	Other parent type	0.213	0.570	0.217
	Parent = Political Movement	0.845	0.141	0.017
Model 3	Unelected + Other parent type	0.209	0.583	0.208
	Unelected + Political movement	0.652	0.313	0.036
	Elected + Other parent type	0.199	0.582	0.219
	Elected + Political movement	0.981	0.018	0.001

## Conclusion

Child soldiering is an inhumane practice that violates international law and shatters communities around the world by stoking conflict and abusing hundreds of thousands of children. Though child soldiering is widespread, the forcible recruitment of children demonstrates considerable variation across rebel groups. For governments, NGOs, and academics, part of the problem in addressing child soldier recruitment is that we don't fully understand the dynamics of rebel groups that drive them to engage in this brutal practice.

In this thesis, we argue and demonstrate empirically that "audience costs" matter. We find that rebel groups that are founded from political movements are less likely to forcibly recruit child soldiers. When combined with rebel leader elections, the two variables have an even larger impact on the group's decision to forcibly recruit child combatants. We show that rebel groups that both hold elections and form out of political movements are less likely to engage in child soldiering. We use these explanatory variables as a testable proxy for a rebel group's susceptibility to audience costs. For a cross-national, cross-case study of this kind, our independent variables are plausible indicators of audience costs.

However, we of course have not observed audience costs in operation. To do that we would need a more intensive ethnographic study of the individual groups. That is to say that despite the significance of these empirical findings, definitively observing audience costs is difficult. This kind of statistical approach has given us a general pattern across many rebel groups, but for any one individual rebel organization there may be additional dynamics that determine its social ties. Thus, we suggest that additional scholarship may be needed to observe these audience costs in operation. For example, further evidence analyzing rebel leader elections could strengthen our results. This might take the form of a study defining the types of claims rebel leaders make when running in a leadership election. Do leaders demonstrate audience costs by committing to their followers that they won't recruit child soldiers? More developed case studies could provide this type of information to answer these questions and observe audience costs more directly.

Our results open additional questions for future research. In our analysis we ran an additional model that tests each parent organization type individually. This fourth model with individual results is listed in table 4 in the appendix. This provides additional insight on each parent organization and its effect on forced child soldier recruitment. In doing so, we found evidence that suggests that rebel groups formed from ethnic groups also have a statistically significant effect, making them less likely to recruit child soldiers. This could align with our overarching theory that rebel group characteristics, like parent organization, determine the strength of the group's ties to a community or social group, which in turn determines its sensitivity to audience costs and willingness to commit human rights abuses like the forced recruitment of child soldiers. We believe that groups that are based on an ethnic identity would need to be cautious

about forcibly recruiting children from the population. However, from the data available on ethnic groups that do engage in this practice, it is currently unclear if the rebel groups target children from the same ethnic group or another ethnic group in forced recruitment. This finding warrants future investigation.

In fact, ethnic groups were the only other parent type that appeared to have a statistically significant effect on child soldier recruitment, raising further questions. Somewhat surprisingly, labor organizations and youth organizations do not have statistically significant results. We attribute this to the fact that both groups have far too few observations in the dataset to produce compelling results. Groups formed out of youth organizations had too few observations to create significant results and because labor organizations had only one observation in total, the variable was dropped from the analysis entirely. If in the future we had access to more data and could cover a longer period of time that included more countries and more rebel groups, maybe then the effects of these parent organizations could be analyzed more thoroughly and a relationship similar to what we found for political movements might emerge. We therefore use political movements as a representative of other socially based parent organizations like these.

Our findings are particularly useful for organizations that are interested in reducing child soldiering. Given the profound harm of forcible child soldier recruitment and the immense long-term challenges of reintegrating child soldiers into society, understanding rebel group characteristics that reduce the likelihood of engaging in this practice is of critical importance (Machel, 2001). This research can inform international organizations deciding where resources for child soldier prevention and reintegration should be dedicated by demonstrating that rebel groups with these characteristics are less likely to engage in forcible recruitment and do not require prioritization in these efforts. In addition, the international community can expand upon these findings with policy intended to affirm group characteristics that prevent forcible recruitment strategies. This could include providing support to groups with a social base like those formed from political movements and encouraging groups to hold leader elections as a means of demonstrating credibility and accountability to the community. Though governments often work to drive a wedge between rebel groups and local populations, this research suggests that there are social benefits when rebel groups engage with and feel accountable to local communities.

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## Appendix

Table 4 - Model 4 with individual parent organizations and forced child soldier recruitment.

	(4)
Parent = Rebel Group	0.106 (0.673)
Parent = Terror Group	0.930 (0.938)
Parent = Political Party	0.757 (0.880)
Parent = Political Movement	-3.203** (1.271)
Parent = Youth Organization	0.524 (0.781)
Parent = Current Armed Forces	0.565 (1.523)
Parent = Former Armed Forces	-1.302 (1.396)
Parent = Religious Organization	0.609 (0.732)
Parent = Foreign Armed Forces	0.538 (1.170)
Parent = Refugee Population	-1.684 (1.435)
Parent = Ethnic Group	-3.649* (1.878)
Parent = Other	0.110 (0.854)
Natural Resource Exploitation	1.462** (0.590)
Foreign Support for Rebel Group	-0.134 (0.446)
Conflict Duration	0.0565 (0.0374)
Territorial Control for Rebel Group	-0.138 (0.394)
Democracy	-0.0132 (0.0584)
Battle-Related Deaths (logged)	0.413*** (0.140)
GDP per capita (logged)	-0.924** (0.403)

Youth Population (logged)	0.707 (2.123)
Rebel Group Central Command	1.768*** (0.469)
Rebel Group has Political Wing	0.967 (0.649)
Government Forced Recruitment	1.197** (0.536)
Observations	664

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Robust standard errors in parentheses

\*\*\* p<0.01, \*\* p<0.05, \* p<0.1