

**Who Joins and Who Suffers?**  
**The Impact of Rebel Recruitment and Foreign Fighters on Anti-Civilian Violence**

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**Abstract**

Current literature agrees that the inclusion of foreign fighters (FFs) increases violence against civilians. However, the evidence behind this claim is mixed, with some groups limiting violence despite FFs in their ranks. This study considers rebel groups' preexisting dynamics before FFs arrive- primarily their recruitment styles. Through a combination regression utilizing two novel datasets, this study argues that FFs' impact on anti-civilian violence is conditional on how rebel groups solicit and socialize their recruits. This contributes to ongoing shifts toward interpersonal dynamics as explanations for violence, highlighting foreign fighters as predictors of overall rebel group behavior.

## Introduction

How do rebel groups' recruitment of foreign fighters (FFs) impact anti-civilian violence? One frequently cited explanation for FF violence is their lack of shared identity with local civilian populations, which reduces empathy and accountability (Hegghammer, 2010; Malet, 2013). As cultural outsiders, FFs are often unfamiliar with local customs, norms, and communities, making them more likely to disregard civilian welfare. This disconnect results in weaker ties, less restraint, and more brutal behavior toward civilians.

Despite conventional wisdom touting foreign fighters as definite amplifiers of violence, the evidence behind this claim is surprisingly mixed. This puzzle can be illustrated with a comparison of two Syrian al-Qaeda splinter groups: the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra. While both groups recruited foreign fighters and drew from the same ideologies, they perpetuated starkly different outcomes of civilian harm.

ISIS utilized an indiscriminate recruitment strategy, accepting a diverse array of FFs regardless of ideological resonance, cultural competence, or military experience. Consequently, many of the recruited FFs prioritized material and personal gain over the ideological goals of the group. Once in ISIS, these FFs received preferential treatment in the forms of higher pay, priority access to civilian loot, and privileged social status relative to local fighters. These privileges sowed rifts between local and foreign fighters, sparking factionalism and internal competition within the group.

Moreover, ISIS FFs often imposed themselves on the local population. They used threats of violence to extract goods and services, and engaged in psychological abuse, including sexual violence and looting. In part due to their recruitment tactics and organizational structure, ISIS's inclusion of unchecked, materially driven FFs caused civilian harm.

Contrarily, Jabhat al-Nusra was far more selective and ideologically rigorous about their recruitment. The group only admitted (1) Arabic-speaking FFs, (2) those with the explicit goal of toppling the Assad regime, and (3) individuals committed to adhering to the group's interpretation of jihadist principles. Unlike ISIS, al-Nusra discouraged looting and prohibited its FFs from public-facing roles to limit their interaction with the civilian population. Moreover, al-Nusra had a decentralized command structure that enforced FF accountability to local fighters and civilians. These institutional features helped to mitigate some of the risks commonly associated with foreign fighters. While not free of infighting or misconduct, al-Nusra's selective recruitment strategy and organizational discipline allowed it to maintain lower levels of noncombatant harm, despite having FFs in their ranks.

This comparison suggests that the presence of foreign fighters may not automatically lead to civilian victimization. Although both groups recruited FFs, their impact on anti-civilian harm was vastly different. The relationship between foreign fighter presence and anti-civilian violence may be conditional on how FFs are recruited and integrated into rebel groups. Are all FFs equally harmful to civilian populations, or do internal group dynamics, such as recruitment strategy and socialization, shape how they behave? Some rebel groups may seek out highly

motivated fighters who resonate with the group's ideologies. Other groups may attract materially driven individuals who prioritize looting and other personal gains over the goals of the group. The question is not simply whether FFs are recruited into rebel groups, but how they are recruited and under what conditions they operate.

By combining rebel recruitment strategies with counts of FFs, I analyze the interaction between recruitment style and foreign fighter presence in determining anti-civilian violence. This study advances discussions about rebel organizational behavior, particularly how internal decisions shape external violence. It also highlights foreign fighters as active participants in rebel organizational change, rather than monolithic background actors. Lastly, it offers a conditional theory of civilian harm, emphasizing how group-level structures influence individual-level violence.

## Literature Review

Rebel groups employ strategic tactics when recruiting new members to their ranks. To fit their growing organizational needs, rebel groups must think of their members as embedded in social environments that reshape their interests (Checkel 2017). This involves appealing to a mix of rebels' material and ideological needs. When screening potential new members, rebel groups must seek out signs that are too costly for mimics to fake, but affordable for the genuinely trustworthy recruit (Hegghammer 2013). They propagate an alarmist discourse and emphasize external threats (Hegghammer 2011). In comparison to those that recruit based on material incentives, groups that rely more on ethnic or ideological appeals (i.e. assuaging an ethnic grievance, toppling a regime) will be less likely to perpetrate sexual violence against civilians (Soules 2023, Eck 2010).

Moreover, rebel groups are more likely to strategically recruit experts when in periods of rebuilding, transitioning, or striving for dominance (Perkoski and Worsnop 2025). While the Rebel Appeals and Incentives Dataset measures the degree to which the rebels rely on material and ideological appeals to recruit (Soules 2023), it does not account for the *type* of person the group is recruiting – especially foreign fighters.

A rebel group is more likely to commit one-sided violence (OSV) when it feels the need to signal strength (Raleigh, 2012) or when there is competition with another group (Nemeth, 2014). This desire to signal strength permeates within armed groups as well, with its members perpetrating one-sided violence to project their own reputations of strength (Stretesky & Pogrebin 2007). OSV was also shown to be a socialization method among fragmented groups, especially those whose members contained children (Cohen & Nordås, 2015), women (Cohen, 2013), or abductees (Cohen, 2016; 2017). Since rebel group infighting is more likely to occur with a high number of factions and low institutionalization (Bakke, Cunningham, and Seymour, 2012), fragmented rebel groups are more likely to use OSV to signal strength and rally its members together.

### ***Social Cohesion***

Recent literature has shifted toward analyzing organizational variation among rebel groups, examining how recruitment, socialization, and command structure impact group cohesion and civilian treatment (Perkoski & Worsnop, 2025; Soules, 2023; Checkel, 2017). This literature argues that acts of aggression can be used as a method to strengthen armed groups, viewing rebels as embedded in larger social dynamics that both constrain and incentivize them to act (Checkel, 2017; Fujii, 2017). Uniting under similar ideologies and motivations, diverse groups of fighters and actors – including civilians- can form a coherent group (Sanín & Wood, 2014).

Armed groups with marginalized members are more likely to perpetrate OSV. The more disparate a rebel group's power balance is, the less likely they are to be cohesive as a group (Bakke et al., 2012) and thus in need of a bonding mechanism. Groups who use abduction tactics to recruit their members were found to be more fragmented, and thus more likely to commit conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) (Cohen, 2016). The same was true for groups containing women, who were found to be abducted at higher rates than men (Cohen, 2013). Moreover, militias that have recruited children are associated with higher levels of CRSV (Cohen and Nordås 2015). The greater the social disparities are amongst rebel group members, the more likely the group is to seek out a social activity to bring said members together.

If one is made to feel like an outsider due to their age, gender, or abduction status, public acts of violence might be seen as cultivating a sense of belonging (Cohen, 2017; Fujii, 2017). Committing acts of violence helped gang members project a tough reputation (Stretesky & Pogrebin, 2007), which can help alleviate feelings of isolation in an armed environment. If rebel groups are socializing its recruits with violent norms (Gates, 2017), violence may be a way for marginalized members to gain social acceptance in the group.

The social cohesion literature focuses on outsiders who are forcefully integrated into rebel groups, such children or abductees. Due to them being forcibly recruited, these outside recruits are more likely to differ from the group, causing the group to be fragmented and inflict OSV. While these studies have highlighted the importance of recruitment and socialization on organizational outcomes, they rarely address the specific roles of foreign fighters, who complicate this relationship. Though often seen as "outsiders," FFs join voluntarily and are thus not fully represented by the existing literature on coercive outsider recruitment.

### ***What Makes FFs Different?***

I utilize the Doctor and Willingham (2022) definition of a foreign fighter, which is an actor who has “(1) Joined an active, armed nonstate group; (2) lacks citizenship of the state in conflict; and (3) is not a member of an official military organization.” Although they are all rebels, foreign fighters differ from their local counterparts in crucial ways. FFs often bring expertise and knowledge from abroad, giving them privilege relative to local fighters who join at similar times. FFs often solicit funds from their home countries and are more likely than their local counterparts to participate in suicide missions (Mironova, 2019). Additionally, the inclusion of FFs reduces the need to capture the ‘hearts and minds’ of civilians (Salehyan et al., 2014; Doctor,

2021) making them key assets to rebel groups. These benefits make FFs highly coveted in their recruitment pools.

However, FFs also introduce risks. Due to prior combat experience at home, FFs may earn higher positions and get paid more money than they would have otherwise. Depending on how their groups organize them, FFs can utilize their privilege to redirect group resources for personal gain, ruining social cohesion with the rest of the group. Moreover, rebel groups with FFs often faced nationality, skin color, and language-based cleavages (Mironova 2019), resulting in infighting among group members. However, co-ethnic rebel alliances tend to be shallow, with co-ideological alliances being deeper and more formal (Balcells et al., 2022), suggesting that personal differences can be set aside for the ideological cause of the rebel group.

The literature generally agrees that foreign fighter inclusion increases OSV toward civilians. Groups with foreign fighters are more likely to inflict conflict-related sexual violence (CRSV) than groups that do not (Doctor, 2021). Additionally, rebel groups without inclusive civilian structures caused more OSV when they had FFs than those that did not (Schwartz, 2024). Although rebel groups with FFs cause more OSV (Moore 2019; Schwartz 2023), groups with co-ethnic foreign fighters are less likely to abuse civilians (Moore, 2019). Thus, while the trend is clear, the mechanisms behind it remain contested.

### ***Organizational Factors***

*Organizational factors* are those that pertain to rebel management. Rebel groups that have FFs and centralized command structures are more likely to abuse civilians than those with decentralized command structures (Doctor & Willingham, 2022; Doctor, 2021). Additionally, groups that fostered violent norms (Gates, 2017; Nemeth, 2014) were also found to increase anti-civilian violence. Splinter factions are less likely to commit violence than the parent group (Robinson & Malone, 2024) but once FFs are introduced, violence increases (Schwartz, 2023).

### ***Rebel-Civilian Relations***

The second literature camp regards *rebel-civilian relations* as the mechanism behind FFs' impact on anti-civilian violence. Assuming FFs are somewhat disconnected from civilians, this camp argues that incentives for civilian victimization are shaped by the rebel groups' material and personal connections to civilians. Since FFs reduce the incentive to rely on civilians, groups with FFs are more likely to abuse civilians (Wood, 2014; Mironova, 2019; Doctor, 2021). Rebel groups with foreign territorial control are more likely to deploy anti-civilian violence (Stewart & Liou, 2017; Moore, 2019) than those with domestic territories.

Although 'foreignness' seems to be an indicator of increased violence, positive civilian perceptions of rebels can reduce violence, making the relationship between rebels and civilians somewhat mutual. Rebel groups who adopt inclusive governing structures, such as building schools and hospitals, create community embeddedness for FFs, which reduces anti-civilian violence (Schwartz, 2024). Moreover, FFs having ideological resonance with civilians were

shown to positively affect insurgency strength (Bakke, 2014), with fractionalized civilian bases associated with higher levels of anti-civilian violence (Ottman, 2017; Fjelde & Hultman, 2014).

While much has been written on how civilians are recruited, the current literature lacks sufficient analysis into how foreign fighters are recruited. The literature directly pertaining to FFs does not note the means in which they appear in these groups, and how that can shape their actions as rebels. As voluntary actors with a relative amount of privilege, foreign fighters are in a unique position that goes understudied in the current recruitment literature. Additionally, most studies treat FF presence as a binary variable, overlooking the number or proportion of FFs within a group, potentially limiting the studies' nuance.

As voluntary outsiders, FFs should, in theory, be more ideologically resonant with the rest of the group, reducing violence. If ideological resonance lowers OSV, then FF presence should also lower OSV. However, empirical studies suggest the opposite. FF inclusion is shown to *increase* anti-civilian violence, suggesting that ideological resonance alone does not fully explain FFs' behavior.

### **Theory and Hypotheses**

I argue that the extent to which foreign fighters increase OSV depends on how rebel groups recruit and integrate them into their organization. While FFs are often associated with increased civilian victimization, this effect is not solely a result of their outsider status. Instead, FF impact on anti-civilian violence is conditional on rebel group dynamics, particularly recruitment style. This theory assumes that FFs voluntarily join rebel groups and that they are not kidnapped or otherwise forcibly recruited. This theory also assumes that rebel groups face a heterogeneous array of potential FFs with diverse motivations for joining.

Rebel groups differ vastly in their tactics used to recruit rebels. Some groups emphasize ideological commitment, such as political, nationalist, or religious ideology; others use material incentives like salaries, status, or access to civilian loot (Soules, 2023). Through their recruitment strategies, rebel groups are not only signaling their goals but inadvertently shaping the type of people that join them.

FFs bring crucial benefits through diasporic support, language skills, and former combat experience, making them highly coveted by rebel groups. As a result, FFs are often privileged relative to local recruits. They may receive higher pay, priority access to looted goods, or greater freedom during group operations. However, this preferential treatment of FFs can produce unintended consequences that can be detrimental to the group. When rebel groups recruit based on material benefits, they are more likely to recruit 'profit-driven' FFs, who join for material gain rather than for the advancement of the group's aims. As they are less constrained by the group's ideopolitical mission, these profit-driven FFs should be more likely to perpetuate self-interested behaviors, including theft, exploitation, and anti-civilian violence.

ISIS, which recruited indiscriminately, prioritized and rewarded foreign fighters who were materially driven. Moreover, the group allowed these more self-interested fighters to roam

free and act on those personal incentives. This aligns with literature that suggests that materially motivated fighters- especially those in groups with weak discipline structures- are more likely to perpetuate violence. If foreign fighters are recruited for similar material benefits, these risks of violence should increase. Not only do FFs lack sociocultural ties to the local population that might make them more likely to respect civilians, but their materially driven rebel groups encourage or otherwise fail to restrain their violence. To prove their loyalty and toughness to their peers, FFs may engage in performative violence. When rebel groups reward anti-civilian violence in the form of looting or sexual slavery, FFs become active contributors to noncombatant harm.

**H1:** FFs are more likely to increase OSV when they are in groups who recruit on material incentives.

In contrast, rebel groups that recruit on ideological grounds are more likely to discipline their members to advance the goals of the group. Not only does this bond disparate members together under a common goal, but this also allows for the group to adopt restraint towards civilians. As it only recruited ideologically resonant fighters, Jabhat al-Nusra screened and disciplined its FFs to better advance the goals of the group. Since the group's main goal was not necessarily material gain, they were less overt about harming civilians as they were preoccupied with advancing their ideological goals.

In hostile groups that may otherwise cast doubt on their commitments, FFs can use violence to signal strength and bond with the rest of the group. Contrarily, if a rebel group aims to project a positive image of themselves to civilians, they should be less likely to harm civilians. In cases like these, rebel groups discourage disrespect or harm of civilians, lest the group's reputation be tarnished. The inclusion of FFs, who are more likely to misunderstand civilian culture, could create friction between rebels and civilians. However, ideologically driven FFs will strive to fit in and prove themselves- thus not perpetuating violence for the sake of the group's reputation.

**H2:** Foreign fighters are more likely to increase OSV when their primary motivation for joining is material gain rather than ideological commitment.

### **Research Design**

To test this theory, I will conduct a negative binomial regression using a combination of two novel datasets, the Rebel Appeals and Incentives Dataset and the Rebel Foreign Fighter Dataset. I analyze 250 group-conflict-years from 1989 to 2011, encompassing the datasets' temporal and group-conflict availability.

### ***Independent Variable: Recruitment of Foreign Fighters***

The first half of the independent variable is *recruitment type*, measured with the Rebel Appeals and Incentives Dataset (RAID) from Soules (2023). The RAID contains information on recruitment styles of 232 rebel groups from 1989-2011, using an ordinal measure of the extent to which they rely on ideological (relative to material) appeals.

To tailor this study to foreign fighters, I also include a variable for *foreign fighter count* in a rebel group from the Rebel Foreign Fighter Dataset (RFFD) presented in Schwartz (2024). The RFFD includes explicit coding for the counts of foreign fighters, which I felt was missing in prior research. Building off previous datasets like Malet (2016) and Hegghammer (2010), the RFFD includes 535 observations from 65 conflicts from 1985-2022. The RFFD's *FF Best* variable gives a count of the best estimate of foreign fighter number in a particular conflict.

Through an interaction of *recruitment type* and *FF count* variables, I aim to analyze whether either effect is conditional on the other. Since both datasets contain variables with names of rebel groups, I will join the datasets along this variable.

### ***Outcome Variable: One-Sided Violence***

The outcome variable is *anti-civilian violence*, measured with a count of the recorded number of civilians killed by a rebel group in a conflict-year according to the UCDP One-Sided Violence Dataset. It is especially useful in that it distinguishes between state and nonstate actors.

Since both dependent variables are count-based, a negative binomial model seems to be the most appropriate. Moreover, since anti-civilian violence can occur infrequently in large spikes, the data has the potential to be overdispersed, making negative binomial the more suitable choice. Before running this model, I will need to filter the OSV data for deaths by rebel groups, as the dataset includes OSV perpetuated by state actors as well.

### ***Control Variables***

I control for conflict intensity, as higher intensity often leads to more violence, regardless of if FFs are involved. This control is a count best estimate of battle-related deaths from the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset. Since rebel groups are more likely to form in autocratic regimes, causing these autocracies to respond with violence, I also control for regime type using the Polity V Score and for military intervention using the Military Intervention by Powerful States dataset.

Moreover, I control for rebel group notoriety using the Big Allied and Dangerous 2 Dataset's (BAAD2) measures of media attention and transnational activity, to account for more widely known groups potentially recruiting FFs at higher rates or having more material benefits to offer their recruits.

## **Challenges and Limitations**

Since I am joining datasets, especially on group names, I run the risk of mismatching different cases. For example, if one dataset contains “ISIS” and the other contains “Islamic State of Iraq and Syria”, these would not match even though they are referring to the same rebel group.

Additionally, the FF estimates in the RFFD have varying source reliability, which Schwartz (2024) accounts for with a *reliability* variable on a 1-4 scale. These estimates were rated a 4 if the number was reported by an academic, government, or institutional body and corroborated by a second document. Estimates and averages from these bodies with no corroboration received 3’s. Estimates from secondary news sources received 2’s and 1’s depending on their corroboration. While the dataset prioritizes reliable sources and codes for unreliable ones, my main independent variable having varying reliability can muddy any of my findings.

On the dependent variable side, the UCDP OSV dataset only reports on conflicts with at least 25 confirmed fatalities per year per perpetrator. While this reduces ‘noise’ from smaller events, this exclusion possibly limits my study’s generalizability to smaller conflicts.

## **Conclusion**

While prior studies show how rebels impact violence, this study examines how the types of rebels recruited shapes violence. Moreover, this study adds to the growing literature around rebel motivations, which are notoriously difficult to study, and applies them to the unique foreign fighter context. Building upon previous works, this study will contribute to foreign fighter literature that proactively treats foreign fighters as predictors of rebel group behavior, rather than as a supplementary detail of the group. This study also utilizes two novel datasets to analyze the interaction of the extent to which foreign fighters join rebel groups and how they increase anti-civilian violence. Since wartime violence rarely exists in a vacuum, conducting studies with multi-causal explanations better captures the realities of rebel group dynamics.

The findings from this study may prove useful regarding dispute settlements involving rebel groups. For instance, if groups that use ideological recruitment are less likely to harm civilians, they may be more receptive to negotiated settlements – especially if those settlements contain clauses that protect civilians. However, the inclusion of foreign fighters has the potential to ruin cohesion and spoil the groups’ bargaining tactics, making negotiation more difficult. If policymakers screened for transnational support or an ideological recruitment style, the findings from this study may better inform them about the organizational actions of these rebel groups. Moreover, if materially based recruitment of FFs is linked with less cohesion and more violence, then policymakers who wish to locate rebel group bases may choose to target transnational flows of coveted resources and money into conflict zones.

While this study focuses on a rebel group’s recruitment tactics, their social dynamics, like norm fostering or fragmentation, also play a role in shaping violence. Often lacking familiarity with local customs, language fluency, and social ties to local populations, FFs are almost always positioned as cultural outsiders. FFs’ outsider status can create tension within the rebel groups, particularly when they are treated preferentially. Preferential treatment can cause resentment

among fighters, weakening social cohesion and sparking factional cleavages. A potential avenue for future research lies in the interaction between foreign fighter inclusion and social dynamics, and their impact on overall rebel violence.

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