

## Rebels and Conflict Escalation

Violence during war often involves upswings and downturns that have, to date, been insufficiently explained. Why does violence at a particular point in time increase in intensity and why do actors in war decrease the level of violence at other points? Duyvesteyn discusses the potential explanatory variables for escalation and de-escalation in conflicts involving states and non-state actors, such as terrorists and insurgents. Using theoretical arguments and examples from modern history, this book presents the most notable causal mechanisms or shifts in the shape of propositions that could explain the rise and decline of non-state actor violence after the start and before the termination of conflict. This study critically reflects on the conceptualisation of escalation as linear, rational and wilful, and instead presents an image of rebel escalation as accidental, messy and within a very limited range of control.

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# Rebels and Conflict Escalation

*Explaining the Rise and Decline of Rebel Violence*

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*This book is dedicated to the loving memory of Jan Geert Siccama  
(1944–2012), great mentor and friend.*

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## Preface and Acknowledgements

Rebels, such as terrorists, insurgents, guerrillas and warlords, pose prominent security challenges. These rebels are often perceived as subscribing to obscure political agendas and in possession of limited capabilities. How do their confrontations with the state escalate? This is the central puzzle this book aims to address. We find that there are several common escalatory trajectories that are observable across time and place. Knowledge about these routes could – we hope – make decision-makers more sensitive to the often unwanted and unexpected consequences of actions that seemed wise in the short term but turn out disastrous in the long run.

Many studies have been conducted, mainly since the early 1990s, to understand and explain the behaviour of rebels. Ideas originally developed to explain state behaviour, such as anarchy and rational actor models, have been used and extrapolated to explain the behaviour of rebels. Much of this work has found fault with the applicability of concepts such as the security dilemma and balance of power theories. Recent approaches have focused more on rebels as social movements with violent nuclei. Investigations have looked at the underlying and proximate causes of violence – opportunity and greed. Researchers have focused time and attention on the specifics of the indiscriminate and discriminate violence these rebels use. Furthermore, the possibilities and impossibilities for intervention and resolution – peacekeeping, counterterrorism and counter-insurgency – have been dissected.

This study builds on all the ideas that have been offered in the literature and that are relevant to understand rebel escalation. Therefore, I am foremost indebted to the excellent work conducted by peers and



colleagues. This study should also be read as a further invitation and as encouragement to those grappling with the same and similar questions to bring our knowledge and insights further. The findings of this study can only give rise to humility. Even though the study of rebel violence has made tremendous progress over the past years, there is still a lot we do not know and properly understand. Humility is also the overriding feeling when looking at the often, limited possibilities of controlling escalation.

This book has a very long history. Some of the research was conducted as part of a research project entitled ‘A History of Counter-terrorism 1945–2005’, funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research and Utrecht University. In particular, the case study material used in this study came out of the investigations of a team of four researchers looking at the workings of state countermeasures in cases of violence by political non-state opponents.

The input of the members of the initial project team deserve a mention. The energy and enthusiasm of Jörg LeBlanc, Alastair Reed and Bart Schuurman was unrivalled. Without their input this study could not have been completed. All three joined the project fresh from the lecture benches, and it has been a very rewarding experience to coach them and see them grow in their research to the maturity they have attained today. All three have now obtained their PhDs. It has been a great experience working together.

We started out with the question how to measure effectiveness of counterterrorism, a pressing question in light of the huge expenditure to deal with the terrorist threat. Evaluations of counterterrorism measures instituted remained inconclusive. States were in a rush to institute one stringent measure after another in order to appear to be on top of the threat; wars have been fought against terrorists, among others in Afghanistan. Security and surveillance operations have been stepped up. New anti-terrorism legislation has been implemented and financial flows have been curbed. Also, better integration of cultural minorities into Western societies has been stressed. We still do not really know which of these measures has any positive effect on curbing violent activity.

In our initial investigations, we very quickly came to the conclusion that the question of effectiveness could not be answered because our state-based framework of analysis hampered investigation. The state is clearly part of the dynamic rather than outside of it. Instead, we opted for a more holistic approach and a focus on the armed interactions themselves and tried to process trace the development over time and explain the rises in the levels of violence before the conflict between the state and rebels

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terminated. By focusing our attention on a series of case studies, we found that indeed state action was an important dependent, rather than an independent, variable.

I had written a first full version of this book based on the case study material. When I showed my colleagues the results of the main thinking process, Jörg asked me why there was not more theory in the manuscript. His comment, although quite uncomfortable at the time, turned out to be that proverbial grain of sand in the oyster shell. A second part of the research contained in this monograph emerged from a subsequent thinking process regarding the theoretical implications of the causal processes we had uncovered. I would like to thank the Institute for History of Leiden University for awarding me a sabbatical in which these ideas could come to fruition. Jörg's comment led me to a complete re-write of all the material. I am far happier with this new version. Whether that grain of sand has actually acquired the shiny gloss of a pearl, I leave up to the reader to decide. Apart from Jörg, I would like to thank Ivan Toft, who suggested the hypothesis approach, which has turned out to be very productive in bringing my arguments across. Also, the advice of Mike Rainsborough all those years to 'keep it simple' has been most valuable. I am not sure if I have managed to heed it.

Furthermore, my colleagues both near and far, whom I have bothered with half-finished (if not half-baked) ideas and thoughts, drafts and elaborate manuscripts while they had other and more pressing things to do, deserve my gratitude. Nelson Kasfir, Bart Schuurman, Alies Jansen and Samuel Zilincik deserve a special mention because they offered to plough through the manuscript, serving me with detailed suggestions on how to better present and phrase my message. Their time and feedback have been much appreciated, and any errors remaining, of course, are my own.

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This book is dedicated to my mentor and friend Jan Geert Siccama, who passed away suddenly in June 2012 at far too early an age and before the full gestation of all the ideas contained in this manuscript. He was always the voice of calm and reason when my arguments ran off in 1,001 directions. The reservations he had about the focus on changeable agendas in war I found myself tackling head on in the chapters that follow. This work could not have been completed without the unrelenting support of my family and friends. I thank my loving parents and particularly my late mother for teaching me the value of self-discipline and perseverance, which were very valuable in the creative process of writing this book. And last but certainly not least, I thank my husband and the rest of our six-member tribe who formed the necessary counterbalance when the book was in danger of outgrowing the confines of my desk.

## Abbreviations

AAA	Alianza Anticomunista Argentina, Anti-Communist Association
APO	Außerparlamentarischen Opposition or extra-parliamentary opposition
ANC	African National Congress, South Africa
BR	Brigate Rosse, Red Brigades, Italy
CDU	Christian Democrats
ELN	National Liberation Army, Colombia
EPL	Popular Liberation Army, Colombia
EO	Executive Outcomes
EPRLF	Eelam People's Revolutionary Liberation Front, Sri Lanka
EROS	Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students, Sri Lanka
ETA	Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, Basque Country and Freedom, Spain
FARC	Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia
FLN	Front de Libération Nationale in Algeria
FLQ	Front de Libération de Québec, Canada
FSLN	Sandinist National Liberation Front, Nicaragua
GN	Guardia Nacional, National Guard, Nicaragua
IED	Improvised Explosive Device
IPKF	Indian Peacekeeping Force, Sri Lanka
IRA	Irish Republican Army, Northern Ireland
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, Sri Lanka
M-19	El Movimiento 19 de abril April 19 Movement, Colombia
MNLF	Moro National Liberation Front, Philippines

<b>NPFL</b>	National Patriotic Front of Liberia
<b>NPRC</b>	National Provisional Ruling Council, Sierra Leone
<b>PAIGC</b>	African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde
<b>PKK</b>	Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan, Kurdistan Workers Party, Turkey
<b>PLO</b>	Palestinian Liberation Organisation
<b>PLOTE</b>	People's Liberation Organisation for Tamil Eelam, Sri Lanka
<b>PRN</b>	Process of National Reorganisation, Argentina
<b>RAF</b>	Rote Armee Fraktion, Red Army Faction, Germany
<b>RUC</b>	Royal Ulster Constabulary, Northern Ireland
<b>RUF</b>	Rebel United Front Sierra Leone
<b>SPD</b>	Social-Democratic Party
<b>TELO</b>	Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation, Sri Lanka
<b>TULF</b>	Tamil United Liberation Front, Sri Lanka
<b>UP</b>	Patriotic Union Party, Colombia