PART I

RETHINKING HOW ARMED CONFLICTS BEGIN

1

Introduction

In 2009, *The New York Times* declared that Uganda was "one of the safest, more stable nations in this patch of Africa."[1] Uganda had reached a turning point just four years prior when the last of several rebel groups that had operated there fled beyond its borders. This relative stability persists today. But for older Ugandans, memories of decades of political violence remain.

The last rebel group operating extensively on Ugandan soil was the notoriously violent Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). From the late 1980s until the mid-2000s, armed conflict between the LRA and the Government of Uganda led to the displacement of an estimated 1.8 million people in northern Uganda. Roughly 25,000 children were abducted by rebels into servitude as fighters, "wives," and porters, sometimes forced to harm or kill their family members.[2] The United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief called this situation in northern Uganda in 2003 the world's "largest forgotten emergency."

The LRA's ability to survive for over two decades and its disturbing willingness to use frequent, gruesome violence against civilians have led observers to classify it with the world's most reviled insurgent groups, like the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in

[1] Jeffrey Gettleman, "Rafting in Uganda – Wild on the Nile." *The New York Times*. May 20, 2009.

[2] Civil Society Organizations for Peace in Northern Uganda, "Counting the Cost: Twenty Years of War in Northern Uganda." February 2006. Estimates of abducted youth vary widely, with one estimate reaching more than 66,000. See J. Annan, C. Blattman, and R. Horton. 2006. The State of Youth and Youth Protection in Northern Uganda: Findings from the Survey of War-Affected Youth. Kampala: UNICEF Uganda.

Sierra Leone, and the Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso) in Peru. Although diminished in recent years – the LRA has not attacked within Uganda's borders since 2005 – its remnants have occasionally resurfaced in remote jungles of the northeastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), south and western Sudan, and the Central African Republic. At its height in Uganda, and more recently beyond Uganda, brazen acts of mass murder, sexual violence, and abduction marked the LRA's path.

How do groups like the LRA come about? Why are they sometimes not stopped before they become so violent and difficult to contain? Why on the other hand – in the wording of several former Ugandan insurgents and counterinsurgents I interviewed – are some rebel groups "nipped in the bud" by the states they confront, before becoming much of a threat?

These questions motivate this book, which aims to answer them with a straightforward approach: It scrutinizes how rebel groups start. It seeks to describe and explain what people who initiate rebellion do when they first come together with the aim of violently challenging a state and how nearby citizens and the state respond.

This approach is revealing – about how insurgencies begin and about the challenges of learning about violent conflict's emergence. When the LRA first started, it did not look much like the large, cruel organization it later became. Instead it was a small group with few weapons that sought to persuade local citizens – often through song and friendly interaction, not through coercion – to withhold information about their activities from the government. In fact, in its earliest days, the LRA looked similar to the other fifteen rebel groups that have formed in Uganda since 1986, the period that concerns this book and that followed the current president's seizing power.

To analysts of violent conflict, it may be surprising that so many rebel groups in addition to the LRA have formed in Uganda in recent decades. Little is known about many of these rebel groups because they began as small, clandestine groups, making just a faint imprint, if any, on the historical record. As a result, several that failed early are also missing from the standard databases on civil conflict and are thus not considered in the large swath of recent scholarly analyses that rely on these datasets. For example, the LRA is the sole Ugandan rebel group that appears after 1986 in the widely used Correlates of War dataset.[3] Only seven appear in the more fine-grained Uppsala Conflict Data Program and the Peace Research Institute of Oslo's (UCDP/PRIO) Armed Conflict Database.[4]

[3] Sarkees and Wayman 2010. [4] Gleditsch et al. 2002.

The absence of several groups reflects their rapid demise; most were defeated before gaining a capacity for mass violence. Only four groups – the LRA, the Holy Spirit Movement (HSM), the Uganda People's Army (UPA), and Allied Democratic Forces (ADF) – managed to become viable threats to the Ugandan government. The remaining twelve failed to hold a base on Ugandan territory for more than one or two months; they were either destroyed or forced to retreat across an international border. The early failure of these groups is also what makes them informative to study and poses the central puzzle that this book aims to address: If these groups formed under similar initial conditions, why did only some, like the LRA, become a viable threat to Uganda's stability?

This book is focused primarily on Uganda, but it speaks to a broader set of rebellions and fundamental questions about them. How does insurgency begin? Why and how do people start rebel groups?[5] Why do "weak states" often fail to expediently defeat new armed groups that challenge their authority, and how do weak states become strong?

In a sense, these questions are well-trodden. As Figure 1.1 shows, the majority of political violence in recent decades occurred within states, not between them. By one estimate, one-third of countries have experienced internal armed conflict since the 1950s.[6] Recognition of this pattern and interest in its causes have generated an expansive body of research on this topic since the early 1990s.

However, little if any of this work aims to examine *the initial stages of rebel group formation*. This is the case largely because doing so requires evidence that is quite hard to come by; rebel group formation often occurs in remote areas with minimal media presence or internet access. As noted previously, fewer than half of Uganda's rebel groups since 1986 are captured in fine-grained conflict datasets like that of UCDP/PRIO; over three-quarters of prominent recent studies of conflict onset rely on this dataset or less detailed ones.[7] For reasons I detail next and for which

[5] I limit my discussion in this book to armed conflict between a state and a non-state actor originating from within that state, and I use the phrases "rebellion," "civil conflict," and "internal armed conflict" interchangeably.

[6] Esteban, Mayoral, and Raj 2012.

[7] Arriving at this figure entailed identifying and reviewing all articles from January 2003 to December 2019 in ten prominent, peer-reviewed political science journals in order to identify those that undertook quantitative empirical analysis of the onset, incidence, or recurrence of civil war, internal armed conflict, rebellion, or state-based ethnic conflict (not intraethnic conflict or riots). The analysis identified 189 articles that met these criteria, 147 of which (77.8 percent) relied on the Correlates of War (COW) dataset, the UCDP/PRIO Armed Conflict Dataset (Gleditsch et al. 2002), Fearon and Laitin's (2003) dataset,

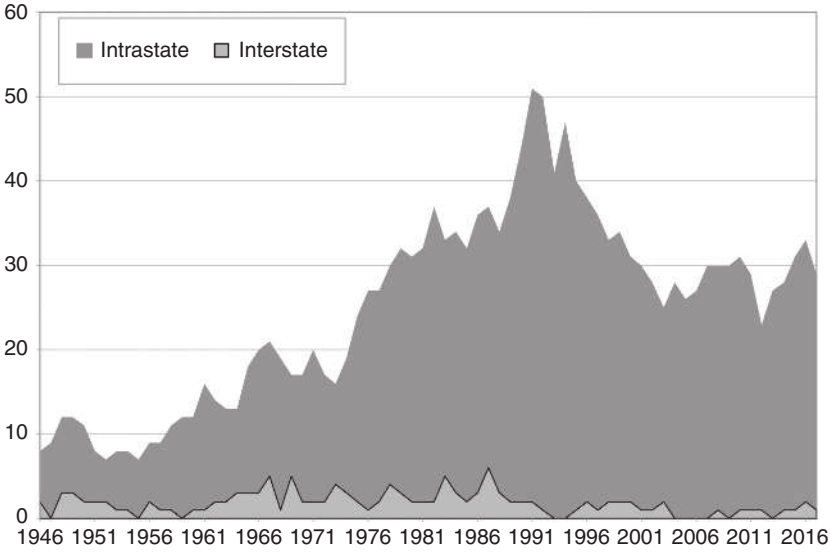

FIGURE 1.1 Incidence of internal armed conflict far exceeds interstate war since 1946
This is a stacked graph; the width of each shaded portion indicates the number of ongoing, state-based conflicts in each category and the upper threshold of the dark band indicates the total sum of ongoing intra- and interstate conflicts. Data are from the Uppsala Conflict Data Program/Peace Research Institute Oslo's (UCDP/PRIO) Armed Conflict Dataset. Intrastate conflicts occur between a state and a non-state actor. Interstate conflicts shown here are those between two or more states that resulted in at least twenty-five recorded battle-related deaths in a calendar year. Neither category includes "internationalized intrastate conflicts" (proxy wars).

I provide evidence in the chapters that follow, there is good reason to believe that, especially in weak states, such omissions exist far beyond data on Uganda.

A full understanding of the origins of insurgent violence must include rebel group behavior *before* groups hone their capacity for large-scale violence. From a theoretical standpoint, there is little reason to believe that the initial stages of rebellion are governed by the same forces as later

or Sambanis's (2006) dataset to measure the primary DV. The ten journals were *American Journal of Political Science, American Political Science Review, Conflict Management and Peace Science, Comparative Political Studies, International Organization, International Security, Journal of Conflict Resolution, Journal of Peace Research, Journal of Politics,* and *World Politics.*

stages. From a policy standpoint, there may be an opportunity for intervention in the period after a rebel group's formation but before its violence is broadly covered by news media, and thus on our analytic radar. For example, as Russell Hardin observed about Northern Ireland, "If the first few [Irish Republican Army (IRA)] cells had been stopped, there might not have been twenty-five years of such violence."[8] While the commonly used Correlates of War dataset dates the "onset" of the LRA conflict to 1993, the LRA initially formed in 1988. A focus into the earliest stages of insurgency promises to offer insight into how internal armed conflict ends *before* large-scale violence and its attendant humanitarian costs accrue.

In sum, the difficulty of observing the full range of rebel group starts in a given time and place and poses a fundamental obstacle for the study of conflict's emergence. The best chance for furthering knowledge on this topic is to obtain systematic evidence on rebel group formation in the rare contexts where it is possible to do so. This book does precisely that with a detailed study of all rebel groups that formed in Uganda since 1986 – including those that failed too early to be included in most retrospective accounts and datasets. In doing so, I aim to advance our understanding of how and why armed groups emerge in contexts like Uganda and why only some, like the LRA, become viable.

1.1 THE ARGUMENT

The argument at the core of this book is that *information* – especially what nascent rebels, the civilians that surround them, and states that they challenge do and do not learn and believe about one another – strongly influences the behavior of these parties during the initial stages of insurgency, and therefore whether or not aspiring rebels become viable threats. As described in the section on scope conditions, this argument applies primarily to rural areas of weak states, where insurgent groups are most likely to form.

When a small group in such contexts initially comes together and makes plans to violently challenge a state, few "facts on the ground" have been established. Local villagers, the state, and even the aspiring rebels themselves do not know how formidable the rebels will eventually become – and thus *rumors* about their strength and righteousness relative to the government, and thus their potential to succeed, are potent and

[8] Hardin 1995, 146.

unverifiable. In Chapter 3, I show that nascent rebel groups often do not yet even have a name. In such highly uncertain environments, rumors rule.

Insurgencies typically begin as small, clandestine groups – not as the well-known, army-like forces that they may later become. Because they are typically small and poorly resourced, nascent groups can be easily destroyed, even by relatively weak states. Therefore, the main threat to such vulnerable, incipient groups is whether or not they prevent the government from learning of their identity and location.

Many other studies of insurgency also put civilian support of the insurgents at the center of insurgents' ability to survive. However, their understanding of "support" usually emphasizes material support, such as joining the fighting ranks or providing food, money, weapons, or shelter. This book instead posits that incipient rebels need a very specific type of support from civilians: secrecy. Civilians who live where rebel groups form often learn basic information about where they were last seen and who they are. If just a few civilians provide this information to the government, this can lead to the nascent rebels' demise. This understanding of local noncombatants' role in nascent insurgency also differs from common views of violent conflict's emergence as a public, protest-like movement – a form of collective action that boils over into violence. This distinction yields several related insights at the core of the book.

First, understanding the dire threat that civilian informants pose to fragile, nascent rebels helps elucidate nascent *rebels' behavior*, especially regarding where they form and how they use violence (Chapter 4). Aspiring rebels, I argue, typically choose to form their groups in areas where they have an informational advantage – near their home area or where they have other strong connections to the local population – maximizing their chances of successfully controlling the information environment. Furthermore, due to a lack of monitoring capability and thus credible punishment mechanisms, nascent rebels rarely coerce civilians. Instead, during the initial phases, rebels often seek to score small, easy victories against government forces that minimize their military costs and serve as useful fodder for rumors. Such victories create opportunities to seed boastful rumors about the rebels' competence and good intent (and the government's lack thereof), which can help generate local pro-rebel narratives and influence nearby villagers to keep rebels' identity and whereabouts a secret. Even rebels that later become terribly violent, like the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, RENAMO in Mozambique, and even the LRA in Uganda, were more pacific toward local civilians when they initially emerged.

The theory presented here helps us understand why this is the case: in this early phase, incipient rebels' would-be capabilities and "true" intent are inherently ambiguous, and thus rebels attempt to signal positive traits to civilians through their use of violence (and lack thereof). These dynamics change, making rebel coercion of civilians and more daring attacks against the government more likely, after rebels have developed information networks in the communities where they operate as well as coercive capacity.

Second, because of the vulnerability of nascent rebels, the most important influence on whether nascent rebels will survive to become viable groups is the *behavior of local civilians* (Chapter 5). These civilians observe rebels forming in their midst and can choose to provide information (or not) about nascent rebels' identity and location to the government. Civilians make this decision based on their expectations about the rebels' capabilities and the justness of their cause, about which they learn from people they trust – their kin. Thus, the structure of kinship networks among civilians where rebels form importantly influences incipient rebels' chances for becoming viable; kinship networks shape what people hear and believe about nascent rebels. Specifically, I argue that the types of kinship network structures that tend to underlie ethnically homogeneous areas are more likely to spread rebels' rumors effectively, leading few civilians to leak information about rebels to the government. By contrast, because of unhelpful network structures among civilians in heterogeneous areas, pro-rebel rumors are less likely to spread there, and therefore more civilians decide to inform the government what they know about the rebels. In short, while rebel groups initially form in both ethnically homogeneous and heterogeneous areas, because the different kinship structures in each shape how information flows, only those that form in homogeneous areas are likely to survive long enough to become a viable threat.

Finally, this argument indicates the importance of *the state*'s *ability to access civilian information networks*, thereby ending nascent rebel groups and deterring new ones from forming (Chapter 6). Attempts at rebellion will be much more rare in areas where state's informational capacity is stronger since the likelihood of being detected there is higher. Knowing this, most potential rebel initiators will be deterred from attempting organized violence in the first place. This argument about the diminished likelihood of rebellion onset in areas of state strength is uncontroversial – in fact, many scholars, building on Max Weber's classic work, define strong states as those that do not have rebels operating on their territory. The primary contribution here, elaborated below, is to illuminate *why*

strong states see few rebel groups forming on their territory. While existing accounts emphasize the importance of states' military strength, infrastructure, or service delivery, I argue that the *informational penetration of the state,* especially in rural areas, is crucial to deterring rebel formation and limiting the likelihood of rebel viability.

1.2 CONTRIBUTION

1.2.1 Learning from Incipient Rebel Violence and Early-Failed Rebellions

While there is an expansive body of research that examines the "outbreak," "origins," and "onset" of internal armed conflict, due to the inherent difficulty of studying clandestine activities that occur in remote regions, few people explicitly study how insurgencies *begin*. Most classic theories about internal conflict only briefly reference, if at all, how groups of individuals with political goals initially come together and build organizations with the intent to commit violence against the state. Many center on rebellion-building activities like rebel recruitment or finance but take for granted the existence of an organization to absorb these resources.[9]

A lack of data about the start of internal armed conflict exacerbates this lack of theory. As noted earlier, almost 80 percent of recent quantitative articles on conflict onset use one of what Samuel Bazzi and Chris Blattman call "the four major datasets"[10] on internal armed conflict. None of these datasets aim to capture the initial phases of conflict, opting instead to include only conflicts (and thus rebel groups) when at least twenty-five battle-related deaths have been recorded in news media in a calendar year. In a data collection effort I describe at the end of this chapter and in Appendix D, I attempted to collect more comprehensive data about rebel groups that formed in eastern and central Africa since 1997. The most

[9] For example, for Gates 2002, 1, "a rebel group is assumed to have already formed and is engaged in armed military combat with governmental forces." Similarly, Weinstein (2007) primarily focuses on how initial endowments of rebel groups shape dynamics of recruitment and violence that occur after violence is well underway. Both works thus illuminate a set of issues very distinct from the initial dynamics of rebel group formation. Yet as Nathan Leites 1970, 51, notes in his classic work on insurgency and counterinsurgency, "(T)he distinction between tactical nuclear war and conventional war is hardly greater than the distinction between an embryonic and a matured insurgency: between one in a formative stage, where ... challenge to the established order is beginning; and one in the advanced stage, where the insurgent civil and military organization is already strong."

[10] Blattman and Bazzi 2014, 8.