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# Rebels and Escalation

Controlling escalation is an illusion. It was an illusion during the period of the Cold War, when, fortunately, the reality of controlling nuclear escalation between the superpowers never presented itself. Unfortunately, today the reality of attempting to control escalation regularly presents itself. Many contemporary belligerents are either insufficiently aware of the escalatory potential of their actions or tend to be preoccupied by short-term considerations. This book details the variety in the processes of escalation and challenges the idea of seeing escalation as an entirely rational and linear phenomenon over which control can be exercised.

In the past few years, significant scholarly attention has been devoted to the changing character of war. Experts have noted shifts in the participants in war, its driving forces, its political utility and its practices. Far less attention has been given to the changes within individual wars over time. This book aims to address those changes that occur within wars, once hostilities have started and before they terminate. It operates from the premise that, as Carl von Clausewitz, the founding father of the scientific study of war has formulated: 'the original political objects [of war] can greatly alter during the course of war and may finally change entirely *since they are influenced by events and their probable consequences*' (Clausewitz 1993, 104, italics in original). How can confrontations that appear at first sight to start small-scale and inconspicuous – a bomb attack or skirmishes by a band of rebels in the countryside – end in large-scale conflicts with huge investments in human lives and material, dragging on for years, if not decades? How does this process of escalation occur?

Clausewitz stipulated that war, in fact, possesses a natural propensity to escalate (Clausewitz 1993; Cimbala 2012). War is a duel on a large

scale, and the opponents seek out each other's weak points to gain the upper hand. This process, in principle, does not possess any boundaries. War has a natural tendency to escalate into infinity. This is absolute war. The main limits to escalation, in a Clausewitzean sense, are politics and friction. The first can be related to factors affecting the will of the actor to persevere and the second mainly to the capabilities to do so. Both form the parameters along which war escalates, constituting war in practice. Political will refers to the idea and use of power in a specific context. Capabilities, in contrast to will, are often but, not exclusively, material and revolve around those instruments and resources that can be used to press the willpower.

This book starts from the premise that Clausewitzean thinking applies to rebels just as much as it applies to states: 'Clausewitz theory of war will remain valid as long as warlords, drug barons, international terrorists, racial or religious communities will wage war' (Echevarria 1996, 80; Duyvesteyn 2005; Schuurman 2010).

Clausewitz used an analogy of war as a chameleon, which is very illustrative for the central problem this book aims to address.

> War is more than a true chameleon that slightly adapts in characteristics to the given case. As a total phenomenon its dominant tendencies always make war a paradoxical trinity – composed of primordial violence, hatred and enmity, which are to be regarded as a blind natural force, of the play of chance and probability within which the creative spirit is free to roam; and of its elements of subordination, as an instrument of policy, which makes it subject to reason alone. (Clausewitz 1993, 101)

The analogy of the chameleon has been subject to a series of interpretations, because it touches the heart of what Clausewitz sees as the nature of war (Bassford 2007). According to Hew Strachan, 'war may indeed be a chameleon in that it changes its nature slightly in each individual case (its "character") but not its nature in general, which is made up of the trinity' (Strachan and Herberg-Rothe 2007, 3). While the political logic presses war into a constraining framework, the production of violence, including the ebb and flow of the levels of violence, derives from its three immutable elements: passion, reason and chance linked to people, government and armed force, respectively, which make up the trinity of war (Clausewitz 1993). Indeed, 'it is the interactive character of war – Clausewitz's famous chameleon "that adapts its characteristic to a give case" – that has proven the most original avenue for analysis' of war (Evans 2003, 141; Duyvesteyn 2012). These ideas will act as a guide in the investigations

that follow. How does the trinity of people, government and armed forces contribute to, and shape, the production of violence?

The aim of this study is to think through the processes of escalation and de-escalation. The focus will be in particular on non-state actors or rebel violence, as this particular violent agent dominates in our contemporary experience of violence.[1] In fact, violent non-state actors have been a predominant actor in war for the past two centuries (Holsti 1996). Furthermore, in contrast to a large part of the literature in war studies, this book will not devote much attention to the causes of war but will focus in particular on the dynamics after its initial outbreak and before its termination. There is a need to carefully think through violence in war, and its escalatory and de-escalatory workings.

The main argument of this book is that escalation in the case of rebel conflict, rather than a clearly conceptualised ladder with ever-increasing thresholds of pain, is a messy process marked by unexpected consequences of choices that were rushed into or given little prior strategic thought. The study, exploratory in nature, uses existing material to piece together the potential pathways of escalation. These will be presented in the shape of propositions, which will await further testing and refinement. Important generic thresholds can be observed, mainly with hindsight, in which situations of war gain unprecedented characteristics denoting an aggravation of conflict. Escalation ensued, for example, when the saliency of the perceived issues at stake was raised, either as a result of violence or concessions. Escalation materialised when countermeasures were enacted, new actors became involved or new weaponry was introduced. Escalation also took shape when an extremity shift occurred within the rebel group, largely unrelated to external factors or pressure. De-escalation resulted in the past when groups de-legitimised themselves through strategic mistakes, lost the support of external sponsors or a convergence of norms between belligerents took place.

The case for explaining rebel escalation and de-escalation will be set out in this chapter. We will unpack the idea of the rebel and introduce the concepts of escalation and de-escalation. In subsequent chapters, the existing literature on the rise and decline of rebel violence will be discussed and a method for measuring escalation and de-escalation will be proposed. The rest of the study is set up along thematic lines. The three key elements in war, as identified by Carl von Clausewitz – politics, military

[1] Please note that the terms 'war' and 'armed conflict' will be used interchangeably denoting the same phenomenon.

and people – will be used as a starting point for discussion. These essential elements can in some senses be seen to overlap with an imaginary trajectory of conflict from incipient, aggravated, extremely violent to a winding down, lessening of aggression and eventual resolution. The ideas about the main thresholds of escalation will be illustrated by short vignettes or brief case examples to show how these different processes have played out in the past. The vignettes will be based on experiences of armed conflict since 1945. Firstly, the idea of rebels as strategic actors, embracing a political agenda linked to means and methods to carry this out, will be presented.

## REBELS

### The Rebel Actor

Looking at rebels, among which we count guerrillas, terrorist and insurgents, we are confronted with the fact that they form a very diverse, and according to some, even largely unstable analytical, category.[2]

> Not only do underground organizations differ according to their goals, they also have varying organizational models and favor different forms of action. Any attempt to develop interpretative hypotheses about "terrorism" is therefore destined to fail without a typology that can identify their range of application. (Della Porta 1992, 4–5)

The rich material that scholars in the field of civil war studies have presented over the past years has, indeed, questioned practically every aspect of rebel violence. Rebels cannot be seen as unitary actors; their political agendas are highly changeable, as are their means and methods. Distinguishing them even from the state, that is seeing them as non-state actors is difficult in light of examples of state–rebel collusion (e.g. the discussion about militias: Staniland 2012c; Jentzsch 2014; Schneckener 2017; see also Idler and Forest 2015). Nevertheless, there continues to exist a pressing research agenda, also recognised by the many scholars involved in this enterprise. There is a need to explain the varied empirical reality of political violence in the international system today. Actors distinct from the state play a major role here. The aim of this paragraph is to unpack the concept of the rebel group and come to a workable delimitation of the phenomenon.

[2] These concepts will be further analytically separated later.

Rebels come in many shapes and guises. Some are well organised, hierarchical and centralised. Others are loose, flat networks or even systems, without a clear centre or leadership. Furthermore, there are several ways of looking at the development of rebels over time. Firstly, rebels can be the product of social movements, in particular social mobilisation. There is a large literature available on the establishment and growth of social movements (e.g. Goodwin and Jasper 2009). Social movements can be accompanied by a radical fringe from which violent rebel groups can spring (Marsden 2016). Examples are those groups originating from left-wing activism in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF) in Germany and the Brigate Rosse in Italy but also the groups fighting independence struggles in the decolonisation period, such as in Algeria and Indochina.

Secondly, rebels can be the product of small-scale conspiracies or even individual enterprises. This is where terrorist strategies are historically derived from (Miller 1995). A small group of individuals, who adhere to a radical agenda, can decide to band together to trigger change. An example of an individual terrorist campaign is the so-called UNA bomber, Ted Kaczynski, who single-handedly terrorised the United States between 1975 until 1998 with a bombing campaign aimed at symbols of technological progress which he opposed, universities and airports (Chase 2003). The idea of leaderless resistance originates within right-wing extremist circles (Kaplan 1997; Michael 2012). Also, the Focoist idea of a small dedicated cadre igniting a people's revolution can be included here (Debray 1973).

Thirdly, rebels can also be a construct from the outside with little relation to any form of an organised unit (Simpson 2012). An interesting recent example is the conflict in Afghanistan, where it has been argued that 'the generic insurgency … is a rhetorical rather than operational construct'. More than 'one-third of all violent attacks nationwide (and more than half in the South [of Afghanistan]) attributed to the insurgency involve local power tussles between communities and tribes – not Taliban members or insurgents – which perceive themselves as marginalized in the distribution of political power, land, water, and other government-controlled resources' (Barakat and Zyck 2010, 197). The insurgency is thus argued to be a perception, construct or even a convenient label.

Of course, rebels can move from a small group conspiracy into a social movement and vice versa and both can be perspectives constructed by the outside rather than a factual reality. The discussion about Al Qaeda as an

ideology or idea rather than an organisation is one such example (Sageman 2011).

Scholarship focused on civil war has in recent years moved beyond the conceptualisation of rebel groups as unitary actors. Attempts have been made to model rebels according to their level of organisation. Using the ideas of network, scholars have developed different perspectives on actor coherence (Sanín and Giustozzi 2010; Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour 2012; Pearlman and Cunningham 2012; Krause 2014; Staniland 2014: Bultmann 2018). By looking at the number of organisations in a social movement, the degree of institutionalisation across these organisations and the distribution of power among them, actor cohesion can be measured (Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour 2012). The main idea is that the larger the number of organisations in the movement, combined with a weak degree of institutionalisation and a large power disparity, the greater the chances of violence. Conversely, one dominant, institutionalised and powerful actor will decrease the chances of fragmentation in the conflict. To what extent this actor will be able to escalate and act wilfully remains to be seen.

What is important at this stage is that the structure of rebel groups has been found to have important consequences for the engagement in violence (Staniland 2012b; Cunningham 2013). Movement structures which carry the favour of the members are more likely to withstand external pressure and violence compared to groups with contentious structures. The latter are more likely to disintegrate when outside pressure is applied (McLauchlin and Pearlman 2012).

We have seen in recent years that violence among rebels themselves and against unarmed civilians rather than the state has increased (DeRouen and Bercovitch 2008; Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan 2009). Some scholars have gone as far as doubting whether the state as an object of struggle is of any significance at all in contemporary armed conflict (Kilcullen 2006). It cannot be denied, however, that the state often remains the referent object. Issues of contention often relate to imperfect state formation and consolidation: territorial contestation or power divisions in political systems (Weinstein 2007; Uppsala Conflict Data Program 2020; Newman and DeRouen Jr. 2014). The warlords in Afghanistan fought for access to the state. The militias in Sudan claim that the government in Khartoum had forfeited its right to legitimate rule in Darfur. The Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, or FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia), apart from being involved in the drugs trade, envisioned an overhaul of the perceived unjust political

and social order in the country. The Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) fighting in Turkey aimed for the recognition of Kurdish minority rights and an independent Kurdish state. Therefore, this study has opted to predominantly focus on rebel–state interaction in particular, rather than intra-rebel conflict.

However, in a large part of the academic literature, there appears to be a disconnect between the activities of the rebel group and the state. As noted by some critical security scholars, rebel violence can only be understood in conjunction with the role of the state (Blakeley 2007; Jackson 2007). Most of the theories attempting to understand rebel violence are 'ultimately socially constructed in opposition to state authority and so there is an inescapable sense in which the state itself must play a role in their creation' (Parker 2007, 156–157). Overall, existing theories award '*some* regular importance to the actions of governments. In particular, official "coercion" –sometimes designated "repression" or "retribution" – is generally considered to affect the frequency, magnitude and intensity of violent action' (Snyder 1976, 278, emphasis in original). The state is, therefore, logically part of the phenomenon of rebel violence rather than outside of it. Still, many studies into terrorist or insurgent campaigns accept the role of the state uncritically; the 'conflict management approach conceptually mistreats violence by ignoring the state's role in it' (Snyder 1976, 283).

This state-centred perspective leads to a very fundamental disconnect between rebel violence in the shape of terrorism and insurgency and the countermeasures taken against these strategies. Few of the existing studies, perhaps with the exception of specific case studies, treat the strategy in conjunction with countermeasures. Countermeasures are highly dependent on the policy perspective the state maintains. In the case of the United States, 'counterterrorism policy is not just a response to the threat of terrorism, whether at home or abroad, but a reflection of the domestic political process' (Crenshaw 2001, 329). When terrorism is seen as a criminal act, counterterrorism is a law enforcement problem. When terrorism is seen as a security problem, counterterrorism becomes a police and security services problem. Counterterrorism and counterinsurgency are often taken unjustifiably, as distinct and separate from terrorism and insurgency.

Despite the challenges to the rebel concept highlighted in this paragraph, the rebel group in all its different guises remains an important subject for investigation. For the purposes of this study, a rebel group will be defined as a sub- or non-state actor which has mounted a violent challenge against state power. It is identifiable as an actor through its

threats and acts of violence. Furthermore, the rebel group is a political actor. The reasons for ascribing political agency to the rebel group will now be outlined.

## Rebel Ends

According to some notable recent assessments, rebels are non-strategic and non-political actors. Scholars putting forward this point of view have questioned the validity of an instrumental approach to rebel violence, and they have doubted the existence of a means–ends relationship in rebel conflict. These claims have been based both on theoretical and empirical arguments. These ideas are part of a wider discussion about what war is about, which started in the early 1990s with the publication of Martin van Creveld's book *Transformation of War* (Van Creveld 1991). Van Creveld argued that war is not a product of politically guided actors seeking the attainment of goals. Rather, war is pursued for its own sake, for personal recognition, prowess and honour. Subsequently, others pointed at the wilful targeting of civilians, barbarity, ethnic factors, culture and greed to argue that war was beyond the political reins that Clausewitz had argued, kept it in check (Keegan 1993; Kaplan 1994; Kaldor 2001; Collier and Hoeffler 2004; Abrahms 2008, 2011, 2018). Several scholars have in fact argued that rebel violence should not be seen as possessing any kind of strategic attributes at all but as primarily geared towards communication, theatre and performance (Crelinsten 1987, 2002).

Nevertheless, there is plentiful evidence in social science investigations that rebel violence does bear witness to larger means–ends logics. For the case of terrorist groups, for example, Ted Robert Gurr has concluded that violence is a conscious choice made by groups in conflict (Gurr 2006). To illustrate this point, on more than one occasion, substitution behaviour by groups using terrorism has been witnessed, which will be further elaborated in Chapter 6 (Sandler, Tschirhart, and Cauley 1983; Cauley and Im 1988; Enders 2004; Arce and Sandler 2005). Substitution, or the waterbed effect, points to a shift or refocus of activities. If an attack is made more difficult in one area or with one particular means, a shift can be observed to other targets or instruments. This can be interpreted as a sign of collective rationality. Some have described these activities as a 'collectively rational strategic choice' (Crenshaw 1990, 9; Kydd and Walter 2006). Other studies have also hinted at the strategic rationale behind ostensibly a-strategic phenomena, such as suicide terrorism, which fits into a pattern of nationalist campaigns (Pape 2005) or barbarous

warfare, which possesses a measure of strategic logic in poverty-stricken areas such as West Africa (Richards 1996). Yet others have described rebels as strategic calculators when it comes to alliance behaviour in often highly complex conflicts (Christia 2012) or compliant with international law and regulations in warfare (Jo 2015). Also based on interviews with rebel group leaders and cadres, the evidence points to rational and deliberate policy development (Dudouet 2012, 96). All these studies indicate and demonstrate that rebel groups are political and strategic operators.

A potentially more significant challenge than proving that rebels are strategic and political actors comes from investigations of micro-level conflict. On the individual level, interviews with individual combatants and polls among populations involved in political violence have shown a diverse set of reasons why people engage in violence. Self-preservation, peer pressure, social bonds and self-betterment are often referred to issues in these studies (Peters and Richards 1998; Argo 2009; Ladbury 2009; Alexander 2012). Remarkable is that categories are similar for very different conflict locales with different rebel groups espousing different political agendas. Furthermore, some scholars have claimed that 'people participate in terrorist organizations for the social solidarity, not for their political return' (Abrahms 2008, 94).[3] This series of explanations is notable for the absence of politics or ideology as a motivating factor.

These insights are part of a challenge, which social science has tried to grapple with for many decades; explanations on the individual level about engagement in violence are often difficult to translate into explanations about group behaviour and strategic effect, especially in an interactive fashion with the state. While valuable in terms of dissecting the development and logic of war, explanations focusing on individual worth, social meaning and honour possess little all-encompassing explanatory value for either the empirical phenomenon that is the focus of this study or the escalation of rebel violence. When individuals continue to engage in violence out of peer pressure, a quest for self-worth or social solidarity, this does explain primarily individual motivation but says little about the behaviour of the larger group, its leadership and the actual employment of force, let alone explain sudden spikes in the level or spread of violence, that is escalation. Still, we will return to the topic of individual engagement in Chapter 7.

A subsequent question is whether there is indeed a link between group behaviour and strategic effect:

[3] This obviously also applies to war in a wider sense (Keegan 2011).

> [g]roups may use violence to pursue both organizational and strategic ends, but the link between the two is not well understood. Is the achievement of one necessary for the achievement of the other? Are organizational and strategic goals complementary or contradictory, and under what conditions? (Krause 2013, 292)

There are a few studies that have been successful in explaining the interaction between individual disposition towards continued engagement in political violence in conjunction with the interests and agenda of the rebel group leadership and specifically strategic output (Della Porta 1995b; McCormick 2003). One suggestion has been that organisational considerations take centre stage when rivalries exist among the social movement family from which the rebel derives (Krause 2014). When there is a strong and hegemonic organisation representing the specific agenda, strategic considerations have free reign. When there is rivalry, organisational survival and infighting play out, which preclude a concentration of generating strategic effect. While insightful, it does not solve the puzzle of the generation of strategic effect as a result of diverse individual participation in rebel groups.

Other avenues to link the distinct sets of explanations are as follows: firstly, the war systems ideas, which stress economic self-betterment as an important force overlapping with the interest of a continuing existence of a war economy (Reno 2000; Weinstein 2007; Keen 2012). Secondly, socialisation and rebel culture could also act as a transmission mechanism among the leadership, group and individual levels (Wood 2003; Sageman 2004; Mitton 2012; Beevor 2017). Rebel culture, for example, in the case of Sierra Leone, benefited the strategic necessities of the rebel leadership, in this case the Rebel United Front (RUF), which also links the two sets of explanations (Mitton 2012).[4]

This investigation will not solve the fundamental research problem. We deem it justifiable to continue based on the means–ends presumption, awaiting further investigation. In cases where ideas about group dynamics do offer causal explanations for escalation, this will be addressed separately (see again Chapter 7 in particular).

While this study takes as a starting point the nature of war as essentially political, following Clausewitzean thought, the black box of politics can and should be pried open more. Some scholars have argued that politics can only be time and place specific; therefore, any endeavour to investigate the specifics of politics will end up demonstrating the limits of the social

[4] The Sierra Leonean case will be further investigated in Chapter 3.