

Why rebel groups attack civilians

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In civil war, rebel groups often target civilians despite the fact that their actual target is the government and that they are often dependent on the support of the civilian groups they attack. This may seem illogical, but there are rational reasons for this type of violence. Swedish peace and conflict researcher Lisa Hultman describes these reasons.

“Rebels are almost always considerably weaker than the government and are often lacking the means for defeating government forces by military action. Therefore, they seek alternative means to pressure the government into making concessions. Violence towards civilians is one such strategy,” explains Lisa Hultman of the Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University.

In her dissertation “Targeting the Unarmed: Strategic Rebel Violence in Civil War”, she shows that rebel groups primarily target civilians when they believe it will help them debilitate the government.

“A strong parallel can be drawn between these types of attacks and terrorist attacks, namely that groups that rebel against a democratic state are more inclined to attack civilians,” she states.

Rebel groups take advantage of the fact that such attacks put democratic states in a more vulnerable position than dictatorships since the people living in democracies can hold the government accountable for upholding national security. By attacking the population that the government is dependent on, rebels cause the government indirect harm.

This conflict strategy is most often employed when rebel groups are at a military disadvantage. Hultman's research shows that rebel groups that lose battles, and thus fail to exert force on the government by military means, are more likely to kill civilians. The purpose of the extreme violence employed by the rebels is to demonstrate that they are prepared to take whatever means necessary to attain their political goals. With this strategy, rebels hope to convince the government that continued conflict would prove costly, thus influencing them to make immediate political concessions.

“Violence towards civilians should be viewed as an intentional group strategy rather than individual action taken by undisciplined rebels. If the international community had a better understanding of why and when rebel groups target civilians, we would be in a better position to prevent such violence,” says Hultman.

Source: Uppsala University

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