



Magdalena Kirchner. *Why States Rebel: Understanding State Sponsorship of Terrorism.* Leverkusen: Barbara Budrich, 2015. 281 pp. \$58.00, paper, ISBN 978-3-8474-0641-9.

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Why do states sponsor terrorism? Many intrastate conflicts see third-party states intervening to support rebel groups, but doing so carries both costs and risks. These groups can be difficult to control, causing conflict escalation and drawing the third party deeper into the conflict. Support can also cause international backlash, including being designated a state sponsor of terrorism by the US Department of State, with the diplomatic and economic costs that entails. In the book *Why States Rebel: Understanding State Sponsorship of Terrorism*, Dr. Magdalena Kirchner seeks to explain why states support rebels, how that support evolves over time, and under what circumstances they cease support.

To answer these questions, Kirchner develops an analytical framework based on various strains of realist theory. She relies primarily on neorealist and neoclassical realist theories of alliance formation to explain why some states decide to ally themselves with rebel groups, rather than form alliances with other states or resort to internal balancing (i.e., investing in armaments). While neorealist theories can explain why states balance (i.e., systemic power imbalance), neoclassical realist theories explain why states choose alliances over arming. As Kirchner argues, regimes that are politically vulnerable domestically find it hard to invest in their militaries, so they seek to balance

threats by allying with other actors. But the very factors that encourage these states to form alliances also make them vulnerable to abandonment and entrapment once they are in an alliance because of their relatively weak intra-alliance bargaining power. Rebel groups therefore provide an alternative avenue for external balancing.

Some of the same dilemmas of interstate alliances are also present in state-rebel alliances. Rebel groups might be emboldened by external support and escalate the local conflict, causing the supporter to become entrapped. Or, groups might abandon the effort, leaving the supporter alone again. States must consider these risks when deciding whether and how much material support and explicit endorsements they will provide to a group. However, domestic politics play a key intervening role. Opposition groups or key allies sometimes worry about the escalatory risks of sponsorship, restraining the regime from making alliance adjustments. For instance, if a sponsor is domestically vulnerable but fears abandonment by its nonstate ally, it might stand firm against an adversary in public, while privately curtailing support for the group. As such, domestic political vulnerability both causes states to seek nonstate allies and prevents them from adjusting to alliance dilemmas sufficiently.

Kirchner evaluates her theoretical argument by studying Syria's support for three different rebel groups: Fatah, the Kurdish Worker's Party, and Hizballah. She leans on both within- and across-case variation to show how Syria varied its support over time in response to changes in the regime's domestic political stability, the external threat environment, and the behavior of the rebel groups. It is a rich empirical study that shines a light on the intricacies of external rebel support, and the various graphs in these chapters show how much state sponsorship can vary over time in response to changes in domestic and international politics.

The book leaves some questions unanswered. It is framed as a study of state sponsorship of terrorism, but repeatedly treats support for rebel groups and support for terrorist groups (or rebels using terrorist tactics) interchangeably (e.g., listing scholarship on external support on pp. 20 and 77). This conflation seems to be the result of a very broad definition of terrorism ("the illegal and illegitimate use of violence," pp. 17-18) reliant on state(s) designation of a group as terrorists (p. 24), but rebellion and terrorism are neither empirically nor theoretically interchangeable.[1] To many states, terrorism violates norms of conflicts, so we would expect the risks of supporting terrorists to be larger than the risks of supporting rebel groups pursuing more traditional tactics. As Kirchner notes, there are specific mechanisms for punishing terrorist support, such as the US Department of State designation. However, the theoretical argument put forth by Kirchner does not clearly distinguish sponsorship of terrorism from rebel support, nor the response of other states. Kirchner notes that support for terrorists can prompt external counterbalancing, but that is also true of regular rebel support.[2]

One way to distinguish between these types of support is to look at how different regimes might be more or less vulnerable to international sanctions. As Kirchner argues, politically vulnerable

regimes might be more willing to support terrorist groups than other states, but we can imagine that some of these factors would also expose them to the particular risks of terrorism sponsorship. For instance, economically underdeveloped regimes or patronage-based governments might be more vulnerable to economic sanctions, so they should be more wary of pursuing these types of policies. Kirchner touches on some of these risks in a couple of places (pp. 72 and 80) without incorporating them explicitly into the theory, so the reader is left wondering why politically vulnerable regimes are both more likely to support terrorists and vulnerable to the risks of such support.

Overall, *Why States Rebel* is a welcome addition to the debate on external support for rebels. The book provides a comprehensive study of Syria's sponsorship of three key groups in the region over a long period, which deepens our understanding of the politics of the region. On theory, the book's focus on domestic politics and variation in support over time is its biggest strength, but the broader argument is at times hard to follow because of its many moving parts. While realist theories provide the basic insights and framework for Kirchner's approach, the book is at times too dependent on these theories and their terminology to provide a concise theoretical argument. Interesting elements, like the risks of international blowback to sponsors, become digressions rather than a core part of the argument.

Notes

[1]. Andrew H. Kydd and Barbara F. Walter, "The Strategies of Terrorism," *International Security* 31, no. 1 (2006): 49-80.

[2]. Michael G. Findley and Tze Kwang Teo. "Rethinking Third-Party Interventions into Civil Wars: An Actor-Centric Approach," *Journal of Politics* 68, no. 4 (2006): 828-37.

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