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Legitimacy in Conflict Contexts: Shifting Rebel Engagement in Sierra Leone and the Presence of Private Contractors

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Abstract

The growth of non-state actors has significantly changed the nature of conflict. Rebel groups increasingly challenge state rule while private military and security companies (PMSCs) increasingly enter conflict spaces on behalf of a variety of actors, including states seeking to suppress insurgencies. This case study of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) during Sierra Leone's civil war between 1991-2002 contributes to emerging work on rebel behavior by examining how rebel's legitimacy-seeking behavior might evolve when PMSCs enter a conflict context. I explore the ways that PMSCs can shift perceived incentive structures surrounding insurgents' interpretations of and engagements with legitimacy during conflict, thus fostering opportunities for shifts in rebel behavior. In Sierra Leone, the RUF engaged in public facing tactics drawn from normative and identity-based frameworks intended to de-legitimize EO and by extension, the state as a client, while also diversifying governance and increasingly relying on highly public displays of violence directed toward civilians and pro-government forces.

Document Type
Masters Thesis

Degree Name
M.A.

First Advisor
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Keywords
Civil war, Conflict, Legitimacy, Private military and security companies (PMSCs), Private contractors, Private military

Subject Categories
African Studies | International and Area Studies | International Relations | Peace and Conflict Studies | Political Science | Public Affairs, Public Policy and Public Administration | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Statement

Legitimacy in Conflict Contexts: Shifting Rebel Engagement in Sierra Leone and the Presence of Private Contractors

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Josef Korbel School of International Studies

University of Denver

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

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June 2023

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Title: Legitimacy in Conflict Contexts: Shifting Rebel Engagement in Sierra Leone and the Presence of Private Contractors
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Abstract

The growth of non-state actors has significantly changed the nature of conflict. Rebel groups increasingly challenge state rule while private military and security companies (PMSCs) increasingly enter conflict spaces on behalf of a variety of actors, including states seeking to suppress insurgencies. This case study of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) during Sierra Leone's civil war between 1991-2002 contributes to emerging work on rebel behavior by examining how rebel's legitimacy-seeking behavior might evolve when PMSCs enter a conflict context. I explore the ways that PMSCs can shift perceived incentive structures surrounding insurgents' interpretations of and engagements with legitimacy during conflict, thus fostering opportunities for shifts in rebel behavior. In Sierra Leone, the RUF engaged in public facing tactics drawn from normative and identity-based frameworks intended to de-legitimize EO and by extension, the state as a client, while also diversifying governance and increasingly relying on highly public displays of violence directed toward civilians and pro-government forces.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Hilary Matfess for all her support and time throughout the course of this project, including countless hours meeting to shape this research, editing and reviewing various iterations of this work, and assisting in the preparation of the oral defense.

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Introduction

Contemporary politics are characterized by the weakening, or at least the symbolic retreat of, the state and the increasing prominence of a variety of non-state actors (Krahmann 2005). Upheavals in state monopolization of power have brought new actors to the fore during conflict as non-state groups, including rebels and private military and security companies (PMSCs), increasingly take up arms against states or bolster state forces (Weiss 2013). Evolutions in the nature of conflict have also reframed both the targets of conflict and the perceived aggressors, and modern insurgencies may complicate war by introducing fluidity and confusion into attempts to determine *who* and *what* states are combating. The line between civilian and combatant is also murky, and a clear delineation between the two tends to reduce the complexities of people's roles during wartime by failing to recognize the structural forces that shape and reshape positionality throughout the course of conflict. PMSCs, now a ubiquitous feature of conflict, also increasingly operate proximally to or are hired to suppress insurgencies. In this paper, I consider the evolution of wartime relations and rebel behavior when both insurgents and PMSCs operate in the same conflict context by analyzing the Revolutionary United Front's (RUF) shifts in legitimacy-seeking tactics under the umbrella of PMSC engagement. In Sierra Leone, the RUF responded to PMSC activity by seeking legitimacy through normative aversions to mercenary activity, a national identity

alignment with the Sierra Leonean people, and by implementing governance institutions as well as increasing reliance on brutality directed toward civilians and pro-government forces.

RUF behavior is emblematic of the ways that non-state armed group (NSAG) activity has shifted understanding regarding *who* can make a play at legitimacy in the international arena. Notorious for its brutality (Arbucia 2020), the rebel group engulfed the Sierra Leonean government in an 11-year civil war, over the course of which over 2.6 million people were displaced and some 70,000 people died while state capacity was severely eroded (Kaldor & Vincent 2006). Yet, the RUF also contended for legitimacy through more 'acceptable', nonviolent avenues. NSAGs often establish quasi-state institutions such as social service provision and forms of media engagement. Civil war is not inherently and unbendingly defined by a lack of governance, but may see the continuation of pre-war governance or spur new practices (Terpstra 2020).

At the same time that NSAGs have increasingly emerged as central actors in challenging state rule, Western powers' have grown progressively more reluctant to intervene in conflicts deemed peripheral to state interests (Singer 2003; Avant 2005; Grant 2014), leaving gaps in military supply. To fill the demand generated by Western reticence and contend with threats to state power, retired security professionals formed private military and security companies (PMSCs) to support military and security operations. Executive Outcomes, Sandline International, and Academi (formerly Blackwater) were some of the earliest, and most high-profile, PMSCs to enter conflict

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zones and offer both direct combat functions and support services, though a variety of companies today also offer strictly non-combat functions for a wide breadth of clientele.

While literature has since engaged with much interest in the impacts of PMSCs on human security and conflict outcomes, and separately, the behavior of NSAGs during conflict, analysis has not yet been conducted on the ways in which rebels might respond behaviorally to the presence of PMSCs. The role of private forces in defending state legitimacy has introduced new competitive relations between states and NSAGs. In what follows, I track the RUF's behavioral shifts and public engagements as linked to the presence of EO. I explore the ways that PMSCs can shift perceived incentive structures surrounding NSAG interpretations of and engagements with legitimacy during conflict, thus fostering opportunities for shifts in rebel behavior.

This research is an initial effort to trace rebel construction of legitimacy upon the introduction of new types of non-state actors in conflict spaces, and has implications for the behavior of NSAGs in the contest for power, the conduct of warfare in its brutality and its governance, and the incentive structures around legitimacy-seeking behavior. PMSCs can inform not only the available strategies at conflict-engaged actors' disposal, but also the application of those strategies. Private forces introduce a nuanced concept of legitimacy, providing historically illegitimate NSAGs opportunities to position themselves as *more* legitimate relative to private armies, in which the presence of PMSCs becomes a vehicle to delegitimize the state. I find that the RUF engaged in public facing tactics drawn from normative and identity-based frameworks intended to de-legitimize EO and by extension, the state as a client, while also diversifying governance and

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increasingly relying on highly public displays of violence. I suggest this underscores how PMSCs can change the incentive structure of conflict, not only by nature of entering as a new type of actor, but also by internationalizing conflict and leading NSAGs to engage in new behaviors, perhaps creating consequences for brutality. Civilians now bear the brunt of war's costs (Weiss 2013), and though the civilian-combatant dichotomy is a simplistic prescription of wartime roles, rebel-PMSC relations have reverberating effects on conflict participants and non-participants alike.

Attempts to mitigate human suffering must consider not only the direct cost of private engagement, better understanding in which ways and under what circumstances PMSCs may improve security, or conversely, undermine it, but also the ways that NSAGs may shift violence according to PMSC activity threatening their survival. As Western troop disengagement seems a perennial feature of contemporary politics, so too are PMSCs and the ways in which their presence can prompt behavioral responses from increasingly active insurgencies, molding and re-molding competition in the crown for legitimacy. Understanding the ways in which PMSCs can prompt NSAG behavioral shifts may lead to new avenues for engaging with rebels during wartime and mitigating harm.

Literature Review

Explanations for Rebel Behavior

      I weave together two disparate strands of literature, focusing on rebel behavior and third party intervention during conflict. Though states rely on PMSCs to deter rebels in conflicts across the world, existing theories analyzing rebel behavior have overlooked the ways that new non-state actors, in this case private forces, can reframe and foster new rifts in conflict contexts. As relations morph, so too might the behavior of rebels whose capacities, status, and place within war are impacted by private engagement. While states have historically been granted legitimacy by nature of sovereignty, rebels have increasingly challenged that perception, often posing formidable threats to the state's perceived monopoly on legitimate governance. The heterogeneity of rebel groups' organizational structure, ideology, recruitment strategies, composition, governance, and patterns of violence has been well established (Albert 2022; Eck 2014; Florea 2020; Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood 2017; Huang & Sullivan 2021; Wood 2010). Rebels engage in a myriad of divergent activities, sometimes concurrently, and do not enact violence uniformly or arbitrarily. Insurgencies have both delivered services, such as through the establishment of relief organizations (Flanigan 2008; Matfess 2022; Reno 2010) and engaged in egregious or illegal behavior, such as through violence or the propagation of illicit markets (Gutiérrez 2021; Humphreys & Weinstein 2006; Jackson 2010; Mehrl

2021; Mitton 2015; Moore 2019; Salehyan, Siroky & Wood 2014; Wood 2010).

Heterogeneity has spurred efforts seeking to understand the circumstances under which

rebels may be more likely to engage in civilian victimization and governance, both of

which I reflect on in this paper.

Explanations of RUF violence during war tend to center on organizational

disorder and/or social breakdown. Humphreys & Weinstein (2006) attribute high levels

of abuse by the RUF to its composition not on a national-identity basis, but to the

prevalence of individuals within the organization motivated by private goals and the

group's wider inability to maintain internal discipline. Others posit that a breakdown of

intergenerational connections, particularly between youth and ruling elites in rural areas,

made it increasingly challenging to regulate young members of war-affected

communities, leading to egregious abuses (Richards 1996; Peters, 2011a). Social

breakdown as a catalyst of RUF violence has also been linked to the creation of

alternative social ties intended to sever recruits' connections with their communities

through means such as forcing them to commit atrocities against their own towns and

villages (Mitton 2015). Many combatants of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) in

Sierra Leone, for instance, were also forcibly conscripted, often at a young age (Arbucia

2020). These realities introduce uncertainty into liberal notions of autonomy and choice

in wartime roles. RUF brutality has also been explained by a breakdown in military

discipline and ideological orientation, as well as an abandonment of regulated behavior

facilitated by a splintering and fracturing of the group (Peters 2011a: 142).

These theories largely suggest that RUF brutality was an unavoidable byproduct of organizational chaos and instability, downplaying systematic and emotional factors, and each explanation on its own risking a reductionist and insufficient framing for explaining much of the gruesomeness and brutality that marked RUF campaigns (Mitton 2015).

Instead of a moral *breakdown* or a *lack* of organizational structure, Mitton (2015) explains much of the RUF's violence by an *inverted* moral structure that promoted and rewarded, instead of discouraged and punished, violence generally and particularly gruesome forms of violence toward civilians and pro-government militias. Strong emotions imbued throughout the RUF psyche also outlined and fostered violence. Mitton (2015) suggests that RUF anger and humiliation was prompted by military losses, arguing that subsequent violence was a product of revenge as much as it was one of tactic and strategy toward war-related aims. Some of the earliest atrocities committed by the RUF, for instance, can be explained by anger related to economic and social marginalization, a harm which civilians became synonymous with and so a target of brutality (Mitton 2015). While a valuable contribution, this explanation doesn't address RUF governance or atrocity within the wider framework of legitimacy, nor the emergence of public facing engagement in relation to PMSC presence. At the same time that psychological elements can begin to elucidate mechanisms of brutality, RUF violence does contain legitimacy-seeking features. An underexplored intersection of RUF behavior is the tandem development of public-facing elements, governance, and brutality. Research has not grappled with the relational shifts that foster a diversification of legitimacy-seeking tactics when different types of exogenous actors enter the playing

field. The entry of PMSCs can provide unique scaffolding for rebel attempts at legitimation, shifting insurgent behavior in ways that supplement explanations rooted in organizational specificities, social breakdown, and psychology.

Other drivers of rebel violence have also been suggested and to analyses of rebel heterogeneity. Moore (2019) argues that rebels composed of primarily foreign combatants are more likely to abuse civilians relative to groups that consist of primarily local fighters. Increasing levels of rebel strength have also been theorized to relate to lower levels of violence, as the decision to rely on violence may be informed by the inability of groups to offer incentives to garner civilian loyalty that rival those of the state (Wood 2010). Concurrently, foreign government support may increase rebels' levels of civilian abuse by decreasing the need to rely on the local populace for resources, undermining incentives to avoid violence (Salehyan, Siroky & Wood 2014). Foreign state sponsorship can also precipitate changes to inter-rebel relations in a conflict context. Assuming neither rebel group is sponsored at a conflict's onset, the sponsorship of one rebel group is associated with an increase in inter-rebel fighting, even relative to contexts where both competing groups are supported (Stein 2021). When rebel groups do exhibit violent behavior, they differ dramatically in the extent and forms of violence enacted. Specific patterns of violence reflect systematic differences across organizations, conflicts, time periods, and geographic spaces (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood 2017). In African civil wars, for instance, mass rape, instead of mass killing, often occurs, while in Colombia, the FARC engaged in kidnapping far more than any other actor (Gutiérrez-Sanín &

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Wood 2017). Social context and shifting relations also shape violence. Fujii (2021) conceptualizes violence as a process of group-making rather than a representation of groups, arguing that relations are porous (Fujii 2021) In Rwanda, strong group dynamics and local ties affected participation in the genocide (Fujii 2009). Exogenous engagement unfolds in many forms, though, including in the form of PMSCs, which may also foster new patterns of both violence and governance.

Legitimacy-seeking behavior may also not be predicated on violence, or on violence alone, and many insurgents have established governance and service institutions that mirror and rival, or even surpass in efficacy, those provided by the state (Albert 2022; Eck 2014; Flanigan 2008; Florea 2020; Huang & Sullivan 2021; Matfess 2022; Reno 2010; Wood 2010). In de facto states governed by rebels, the presence of peacekeepers may also increase the state-building activities of insurgencies by reducing perceived threats to rebel governance over a territory, inadvertently spawning the growth of a variety of institutions including welfare, education services, policing, and executive functions (Florea 2020). Between 1945 and 2012, almost 64% of rebel groups created at least one governing institution (Albert 2022). However, the implementation of traditional governance systems and functions is not mutually exclusive from civilian victimization. As examined in detail below, rebels can victimize civilians and provide functions resembling those of a legitimate government concurrently. Heterogeneity is a staple not just between rebel groups, but also *within* rebel groups, as they may engage in diametrically opposed tactics in the same vein. Rebels have also committed to

international norms and their related obligations in pursuit of legitimacy (Herbst 2013), though when rebels have made commitments, they are typically done so outside of the venues that states participate in (Hyeran et al 2021). Through atypical avenues, about 20% of rebel groups signaled their intention to abide by norms governing behavior during wartime between 1974 and 2010 (Hyeran et al 2021). Organizational elements have also been linked to a willingness to engage with international norms and laws. Three features – the presence of a rebel political wing, the inclusion of secessionist aims, and external sponsorship from actors under pressure from human rights organizations - increases the likelihood of compliance with international norms (Hyeran 2015). Rebel engagement with international norms is not static though, and while research on rebels exemplifies that non-state actors are aware of global frameworks governing behavior, it overlooks how different types of exogenous actors can provide opportunity for new rebel engagement.

Third-party intervention may also shape behavior. Huang & Sullivan (2021) demonstrate that while direct foreign military intervention on behalf of an armed group does not affect the likelihood of welfare institutions, the provision of funding, weapons, or training does increase the likelihood that the group provides social services. Foreign troop presence can also affect the narratives that rebels may rely on to legitimize their insurgency, as indicated by the Taliban's adoption of a morally legitimate struggle against external interference, a byline more heavily disseminated during the occupation of foreign troops (Terpstra 2020). While the introduction of foreign troops can shape the particularities of rebel behavior, so too can their exit during civil war. Foreign troop

withdrawal can serve as a seedbed of alternative governance by creating power vacuums which armed groups may be eager to fill (Terpstra 2020). This paper adopts a new frame tracing rebel behavior by engaging with the relations that develop in respect to PMSC intervention specifically. I extend analyses from the effects of state intervention on rebel behavior to consider the ways that PMSCs may also foster opportunities for behavioral evolution among insurgencies.

Rebel ideology has also been argued to shape behavior and affect wartime violence. Insurgent groups prescribing to a leftist ideology are argued to commit lower levels of wartime sexual violence than religious groups, both Islamist and non-Islamist (Sarwari 2021). Marxist or communist aligned rebels also tend to institute more governance institutions relative to alternative ideologies (Florea 2020). Ideological delineations can also take on reductionist elements though, failing to account for evolutions over time or lacking viewpoints representative of rank-and-file members. Dichotomization and categorization can also obscure the blending of various ideological underpinnings and the convergence and divergence of beliefs that can shape a more complex outlook not easily labeled. However, ideological considerations remain important for analyzing disparate behavior linked to forms of rebel governance and violence, and in lieu of more nuanced measures, remain tangible yardsticks to capture rebel beliefs. Competition between rebels and states also fosters insurgent mimicry in other ways. When governments kill more civilians, rebels too increase civilian killing (Hyeran 2015). I build off of literature on rebel heterogeneity and behavior to further probe rebel relations during wartime and supplement existing theories of social

breakdown, organizational structure, ideology, and third party intervention in understanding insurgent behavior. NSAGs may perceive, and accordingly respond, to different actors in different ways, so PMSCs may encourage novel forms of contestation.

The Consequences of Third Party Intervention

In a separate strand of literature, scholars have also sought out to identify the direct effects of third party interventions, including those of PMSCs, on conflict outcomes, post-conflict stability, and human security. PMSC intervention in Sierra Leone, for instance, is credited with inflicting significant military defeats on the RUF and halting conflict (Francis 1999). Broadly, third party intervention on behalf of either the government or opposition bolsters the likelihood of that side's prospective victory while also decreasing the length of time until that victory is reached (Balch-Lindsay, Enterline & Joyce 2008). An increase in the quality of UN peacekeeping troops is also related to reduced levels of civilian victimization during internal conflicts, while increasing troop size and higher levels of diversity are also related to successful operations (Haas & Ansorg 2018). I focus on PMSCs as a new intervener, analyzing the ways that PMSC-rebel overlap can catalyze new forms of insurgent engagement and indirectly shape conflict.

Conflicts of the 1990s, such as those in Angola, Sierra Leone and the former Yugoslavia, unfolding under feeble governments and Western aversion to engagement, were a turning point in the suppression of insurgency, where the first modern PMSCs

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emerged (Singer 2003). In the African context, PMSCs often act as either 'force multipliers' or provide troops for outside intervention (Leander 2005). These PMSCs were different from their historical counterparts, and like NSAGs, have directed great effort toward enhancing legitimacy (Cusumano 2020; Joachim & Schneiker 2012). Though the international community engaged with anti-mercenary norms with renewed vigor in the latter half of the 1900s, the term had begun to develop a strong association with anomie by the 16th century (Percy 2007). By the 1990s, more private companies, instead of ad hoc groups or lone individuals, began to offer their services. These norms had perhaps re-solidified as aversions to mercenary activity became more deeply entrenched in the global collective consciousness. The international community became more vocal about the dangers associated with private actor engagement, particularly mercenaries understood to act outside of international laws and norms. This historical impetus has shaped the modern industry significantly. While PMSCs can borrow legitimacy from the contracting state, establishing and maintaining distance from the term mercenary is a prerequisite to establishing legitimacy independent of the hiring body (Phelps 2014). PMSCs may publicly embrace humanitarian values, for instance, to normalize and legitimize their presence (Joachim & Schneiker 2012). Private forces market themselves as ethical, and often more efficient, defenders of security.

Despite the distance PMSCs have attempted to curate from mercenary activity, their introduction in conflict contexts has sounded alarm bells for their potential consequences on civilian safety, conflict outcomes, and the likelihood of sustainable peace. Many scholars have expressed concern that lower levels of oversight and

accountability regulating PMSCs relative to state forces fosters a permissive environment whereby PMSCs are more likely to engage in civilian victimization and other poor behavior than their public counterparts (Center for Civilians in Conflict 2022; United Nations 2022). While PMSCs can undermine human security (Center for Civilians in Conflict 2022), an empirical relationship substantiating a definitive link has not been established. While Lees & Petersohn (2021) argue that PMSCs are indifferent about the democratic standing of the states they operate in, blanket statements paint the industry with a broad, and perhaps reductionist, brush. That is not to suggest that PMSCs do not pose risks to community safety; only that limitations in data and heterogeneity in the marketplace result in a patchwork of interactions with communities that consistently evade the search to draw definitive and systematic conclusions about their impact. Memories of Blackwater's involvement in Iraq, resulting in the 2007 Nisour Square massacre that led to the death of 17 civilians (Apuzzo 2014), and DynCorp's alleged engagement in sex slavery in Bosnia in 2000 (Simm 2013), among other high-profile incidents, have not only stained the reputation of PMSCs, but also exemplified the risks of private operations and accelerated calls for accountability and oversight during private engagement in conflict and non-conflict contexts alike.

PMSCs are a breeding ground of diversity in behavior and operational output. While private operations present risks, in Iraq, private security companies (PSCs) reportedly initiated less firefights with opposition than their state military counterparts, though local PSCs tended to initiate fighting more often than their international peers (Petersohn 2013). PMSCs can also exert significant influence over the tides of conflict,

often increasing conflict severity in terms of the number of battlefield casualties (Petersohn 2014; Petersohn 2015; Lees & Petersohn 2021), an outcome related to their fulfillment of contractual obligations (Petersohn 2014). Conflicts unfolding in resource heavy areas, such as those in Angola and Sierra Leone, may also be associated with increased intensity, and lootable resources have not only been co-opted to sustain rebellion, but have also been leveraged as an alternative source of payment for governments hiring PMSCs (Lees & Petersohn 2021). In Angola and Sierra Leone, PMSCs have been identified as a palliative conflict halter, but not a long term stabilizer (Faulkner 2017). The impact of private forces on the temporal length of conflict may also vary by client type. Increased competition between PMSCs is associated with a reduction in conflict duration when hired by governments, though that effect does not hold for rebel-hired PMSCs (Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski 2013). Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski (2013) attribute this to the competitive environment government-hired PMSCs tend to operate in, arguing that while PMSCs working for rebels are typically local and operate in a less competitive environment, PMSCs operating for governments tend to compete for contracts and are more inclined to avoid prolonging conflicts in order to secure future business. Despite engagement with the impacts of PMSCs on conflict outcomes directly though, research has yet to consider the ways that PMSCs might indirectly impact conflict outcomes and human security by shifting incentive structures for rebel governance and victimization.

The prevalence of PMSCs and NSAGs operating in the same conflict context, and interacting with one another, however, also gives rise to new relationships and

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interactions that are valuable in understanding rebel behavior over time. This case study

contributes to the emerging work on rebel and PMSC behavior by analyzing the

perception of legitimacy and the ways that private forces can create ripples, not only in

the tides of conflict, but also in NSAG behavior. As rebel's perception of legitimacy

evolves, and is shifted by the presence of PMSCs, this also has implications for the

relationship conflict participants share with each other, civilians, and with the

international community, as well as their positionality within war, fostering the

emergence of new modes of engagement among NSAGs. I build off of literature

analyzing the direct impacts of PMSCs on conflict outcomes, conflict intensity,

sustainability of peace, and theories of their effects on human security, interlacing this

work with that of rebel behavior.

Methodology and Scope of the Present Study

Sierra Leone was a cauldron of rebel activity and PMSC engagement. Through campaigns most notably marked by atrocity against civilians and pro-government forces, the RUF threatened state power significantly, fostering a market for PMSCs contracted to reinforce overwhelmed and under-resourced government forces. Twelve unique PMSCs were hired by the government between 1991 and 1999, including Executive Outcomes (EO) and Sandline International (Akcinaroglu & Radziszewski 2013), both of which are credited with playing a key role in undermining RUF capacity and halting conflict (Leander 2005). Emerging from the war was a berth of literature attempting to grapple with the causes of the most brutal violence and understand the motivations of atrocity, as well as the impacts of PMSC activity. The present study builds on this work and examines the relationship between RUF behavior and EO activity, analyzing the RUF's legitimacy-seeking behavior positioned against the backdrop of EO engagement.

EO's presence in Sierra Leone serves as a case study for several reasons. Sierra Leone houses a robust repository of statements, documents, and press releases of both rebels and the government during the conflict, allowing for an in-depth qualitative analysis of RUF sentiment and engagements. Further, the conflict contained relatively few protagonists, reducing the scope of the web of relations that would shape RUF

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behavior. In places such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, a conflict in which over 100 different rebel groups are reported to be active (U.S. Department of State), relationships with private forces are complexified by NSAG fragmentation and proliferation. The Kamajors and the Civil Defence Forces (CDF) were notable pro-government militias engaged in skirmishes with the RUF throughout the course of the war, but were not competitors with both the government and the RUF, reducing the need to account for inter-rebel competition that may interact with, and subsequently shape, rebel response to the presence of private forces. While many PMSCs were present during Sierra Leone's conflict years, EO was high profile and high impact, increasing the likelihood of eliciting a rebel response, and their presence as well as activities are more readily documented than many other PMSCs active in the conflict. EO also remained active in the country for well over a year, allowing for a substantial temporal focus. Gurkhas Security Guards (GSG), for instance, while active in the conflict in 1995, did not perform offensive operations and withdrew just two months into their contract after an RUF ambush killed many of their personnel (Truth & Reconciliation Commission, Sierra Leone 2004).

A content analysis of RUF and government statements, documents, and press releases from Sierra Leone Web served as the primary data for this project. While these documents may not be a direct indicator of rank-and-file membership sentiment, they do capture public-facing legitimacy-seeking behavior. To supplement qualitative content, descriptive statistics from two datasets capturing RUF behavior are also included. Violence against civilians is measured to account for the frequency of civilian

victimization during EO activity. The UCDP Georeferenced Event Dataset captures individual events of violence by state and non-state actors between 1989 and 2021, geocoded to the specificity of individual villages and disaggregated to the daily level. Because of the structure of this data, only one-sided violence against civilians can be captured. In addition to civilian victimization, I identify the presence of governance institutions, relying on the Rebel Quasi-state Institutions (Rebel QSI) dataset, which includes social service provision and political and economic institutions delivered by 235 different rebel groups between 1945 and 2012. Annual-level data introduces limitations into the interpretation of rebel governance, muddying the extent to which RUF governance diversification is directly aligned with EO engagement on a more granular temporal scale. This dataset is an important contribution to understanding rebel governance, but sometimes shifts in engagement occur mid-year. EO's entry in April/May of 1995 makes it more difficult to analyze changes within the framework of EO's participation in the conflict. While Sierra Leone is a valuable case study, it is also limited in scope, and is not necessarily generalizable to a variety of other conflict contexts in which PMSCs were or are currently engaged. Further, because information on contracts is notoriously limited, gaps in industry transparency hamper a more nuanced understanding of EO activity, relations, and behavior, which may have affected RUF engagement.

Additional engagement with quantitative data to empirically test the relationship between PMSCs and rebel behavior in terms of civilian victimization and governance institutions would be a welcome addition to move beyond the specificities of RUF-EO

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interactions and link Sierra Leone to other conflict contexts. However, data on PMSC

contracts is scarce, and existing datasets, which include the Commercial Military Actor

Database (CMAD), the Private Security Events Database (PSED), and Akcinaroglu &

Radziszewski's (2013) dataset, while contributing to our understanding of PMSC activity

in different, and important, ways, are not fine-grained enough to track the entry, exit, and

activities of PMSC actors in a variety of conflict contexts beyond the annual level.

Empirical testing would require that each dataset tracks activity more granularly to align

with UCDP's monthly tracking of civilian victimization though. At the same time, this

study begins to grapple with the public-facing elements, civilian relations, and

governance institutions under the framework of EO presence, finding that PMSCs can

shift the conflict context in ways that move beyond duration and outcomes. In what

follows, RUF's legitimacy-seeking behavior is separated into three thematic areas:

normative engagements, national identity, and governance and victimization.

Legitimacy through normative engagements

RUF's normative engagement of legitimacy-seeking behavior was rooted in the resolidification of anti-mercenary norms that emerged during the 1990s. The equivalency of 'mercenary' with illegitimacy engendered PMSC distance from this term to become part and parcel of private forces' search for legitimacy (Phelps 2014). Responding to this norm, EO engaged in a process of professionalization and became the first private force to intentionally attempt to create distance between the activities of private forces and mercenaries. EO and Sandline International solidified the presence of the contemporary private military industry by selling combat-support services not as an outfit of individual contractors or rogue fighters, but as corporate entities (Avant 2005; Singer 2003). By mirroring the organizational structure of established corporations, firms like EO and Sandline attempted to disassociate from mercenaries and legitimize their presence in conflict contexts (Barlow 2007; Spicer 1999). Even EO's logo denotes a professionalism analogous to consultancy services rather than the combat operations that were offered (Cusumano 2020), an intentional attempt to elicit synergy between images of EO and legitimate, as well as ethical, service providers operating within the constraints of professional corporate structures.

The RUF pulled on EO's intentional attempts to separate its own activity from that of mercenaries, engaging in legitimacy-seeking behavior by drawing on normative aversions to private actor engagement in conflict. The RUF evoked historical ties between EO and rogue fighters pillaging war-torn countries for personal profit. In combination with the RUF Manifesto (1995), PMSCs were labeled as mercenaries seven times by the RUF throughout the course of the conflict. While the Manifesto was written for, but not by the RUF, it is still representative of group sentiment and was emphatically adopted by the RUF.

Consider the language in the 1995 Manifesto:

The presence of foreign troops and the importation of mercenaries indicate a continuation of a policy of war and the choice of the military option.

This document also moved beyond generalizations to specifically name and degrade EO's attempts at legitimacy by not only pulling on anti-mercenary norms but by also dehumanizing EO personnel:

The importation of the 'apartheid dogs of war', Executive Outcomes, to strengthen the chosen policy of war by the rebel NPRC is a case in point. What irks the population most is the fact that these mercenaries are business men to the boot and they are mining away the non-renewable resource of diamonds (Manifesto 1995)

The above statement attempts to render EO personnel as sub-human and illegitimate actors in the conflict by referring to them as animals - "dogs" – and

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representative of colonialism - "apartheid." It also draws on civilian sentiment alongside global normative frameworks, though there is no evidence that the general populace was either vehemently anti or, alternatively, pro, EO's presence. Even after EO's withdrawal in 1997, the RUF continued to pull on remnants of their engagement, referring to EO as "South African mercenaries" in 1999. Beyond discrediting EO, then, post exit reminders of EO's presence indicates that the RUF also attempted to delegitimize the Sierra Leonean government by referring to PMSC engagement retroactively, directing attention toward the hiring actor. As civil war resumed following EO's departure in 1997, the RUF harkened back to their engagement two years later to tarnish the reputation of the Sierra Leonean government as a contractor of PMSCs.

When private firms engage in egregious behavior, reputational costs are offset to the client (Phelps 2014). By fostering negative perceptions of EO, the RUF also attempted to instill poor perceptions of the Sierra Leonean government contracting out to PMSCs. RUF framing renders not only EO, and more broadly, other PMSCs engaged in the conflict, as illegitimate, but also suggests that the Sierra Leonean government reliant on private forces is illegitimate. In a 1998 statement, the RUF described two former governments as "corrupt", and in a 1999 statement, referred to the president, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, as "dishonest." Coupled with a framing of PMSCs as 'guns for hire', the RUF linked EO presence to the illegitimacy of Sierra Leone's government more broadly. RUF reliance on the wider normative environment to de-legitimize activity by private forces is also notable for the government's avoidance of engaging with these norms. Government statements do not reference or recognize the activity of EO or any PMSC,

even while owing RUF military defeats to the activity of other pro-government actors, including Economic Community of West African States Monitoring Group (ECOMOG) and the Civil Defence Forces (CDF).

In 1998, the government stated "We are particularly grateful to the Republics of Nigeria, Guinea, Ghana and other member Republics of ECOWAS." Later that year, ECOMOG troops were referred to as "gallant" and as having done a "marvelous job in repelling the rebel offensive." The CDF was also recognized for playing an "important role in the defence of the country." Intentional sidestepping of the role that EO, and other PMSCs, played in reversing the tides of conflict is valuable for understanding normative allergies to private activity despite explicit government engagement with PMSCs. Engagement with international norms denotes an important component of RUF positionality within the conflict: a connection to wider global normative frameworks and an acute awareness of place and space in the international order. The RUF acknowledged and leveraged the wider frameworks that shamed the outsourcing of public security functions to private actors, strategically aligning itself with a denouncement of this activity to graft legitimacy to the same framework purported by accepted members of the international community. Despite exclusion and alienation from the international community, the RUF had integrated global standards into public statements, indicating that even though NSAGs are siloed from state processes, they are embedded within the international community nonetheless.

By characterizing EO as a mercenary actor, the RUF attempted to degrade and subvert the PMSC's professional standing and de-legitimize its participation in Sierra

Leone, and by extension, to de-legitimize the government. Rebels often invest significant resources in overseas diplomacy during civil war to win support from an international audience, demonstrate capabilities to engage in state-like activities, and bolster their image on a domestic level (Huang 2016). The RUF publicly leveraged anti-mercenary norms to discredit EO's presence while at the same time violating other international prescriptions of wartime behavior. In wartime contestation, the RUF leveraged anti-mercenary norms to align with the international community's values, de-legitimating the government by proxy of its reliance on private forces.

Legitimacy through national identity

Alongside invoking international norms, the RUF attempted to delegitimize EO's presence and the government by virtue of national identity. This framing attempts to legitimize the RUF's place in the war and circumvents the ways in which the RUF had not only catalyzed the conflict but was also the primary antagonist to peaceful settlement. The RUF leaned on an identity marker as being authentically Sierra Leonean, attempting to 'other' EO as foreign and discredit the government's reliance on external forces to solve an internal matter. Pro-government and government actors were portrayed not only as an imposition, but also as an affliction. National identity ties are intended to elicit a sense of collective between domestic audiences and the RUF while alienating the government through EO's position as an outsider.

Labeling the PMSC as "apartheid dogs of war" in the 1995 Manifesto, then, served two purposes: delegitimation through dehumanization and delegitimation through reference to EO as an embodiment and testimony of African exploitation. EO's ties to oppressive colonial practices suggested a government permissive of white Western imperialism, inherently positioning the RUF as liberators, not perpetrators. Similarly, a 1999 statement labeling EO as "South African mercenaries" suggests not only the

violation of an emerging normative scaffolding expressing distaste toward mercenary activity, but also EO's presence as a foreigner without 'claim' to place in the conflict. The RUF also extended the logic of EO's illegitimate presence to the government.

In attempts to capitalize on EO's position as an outsider and catalyze negative perceptions of government engagement with PMSCs, the RUF also drew on values of camaraderie, collective identity, and brotherhood that had not been offered by the 'illegitimate' Sierra Leonean government. After EO's departure, the RUF quickly resumed fighting and denied the admittance of UN peacekeepers (Faulkner 2017), violating the Abidjan Peace Agreement that had been signed in November of 1996. Notably, the promise of EO withdrawal became a prerequisite to the RUF's signing of the peace agreement, indicating their recognition that the PMSC was pivotal in shifting the tides of conflict (Faulkner 2017). EO retreated from Sierra Leone amid mounting international pressure in early 1997, shortly after which a military coup, the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC), overthrew democratically elected Kabbah (Faulkner 2017). With a new vanguard at the helm of government leadership, the RUF announced a partnership with the AFRC in 1997:

Today, we have rejoined you. We have come back as prodigal sons, brothers and sisters, to meet our families in our different homes, so that we all can sit in our houses in peace and tell tales to our young ones of how Sierra Leone was once cleansed of the mess that unpatriotic politicians brought to her in yonder years. Let the farmers take their tools and go to their farms in peace, let the young women go to the stream and swim in peace, let them sing to their loved ones under the moonshine in peace, let Sierra Leoneans walk in peace, let us talk in peace, let us travel in peace, and just let us live in peace. We have finally discovered the right atmosphere for a peaceful co-existence.

We must accomodate each other if we want to live in peace, and that is the miracle that has occurred in Sierra Leone throught the coming of the Armed Forces Revolutionary Council (AFRC). We have accepted to join forces with this government because it is the

first to demonstrate a genuine feeling of brotherhood for us - it is the government that has seen us as Sierra Leoneans who came together to stand for a cause for the general good. (June 18 1997)

In their quest for legitimacy, the RUF reminded the public of their seemingly immutable identity marker as Sierra Leonean, justifying a place in the conflict and attempting to build trust through a national identity likened to familial ties. Despite this portrayal of brotherhood, though, the relationship between the AFRC and the RUF was reportedly not as harmonious as depicted, and tensions quickly hampered the ability to establish a genuine partnership (Mitton 2015). While reinforcing lineal kinship, the RUF concurrently apologized for atrocities committed during the war while downplaying and skirting organizational-level culpability for violence. They laid responsibility for the onset of brutality at the hands of the government and emphasized their 'justified' place in the conflict by implying they were acting in the country's interest. Familial connections attempted to reaffirm the 'us' vs 'them' narrative that implies a disconnect between the government and EO and civilians:

For the past six years or so, we have been living in an environment of hatred and divisiveness. We looked at our brothers and killed them in cold blood, we removed our sisters from their hiding places to undo their feminity, we slaughtered our mothers and butchered our fathers. It was really a gruesome experience which has left a terrible landmark in our history. But the atrocities that occured must not be taken in the context of a personal vendetta. They were the result of the rottenness of a system which could not be uprooted except by brutal means. We did not take to the bush because we wanted to be barbarians, not because we wanted to be inhuman, but because we wanted to state our humanhood to a society so deep that had the RUF not emerged, we wonder if we would not have still been under the yoke of that wretched regime.

In the process of cleaning the system, however, we have wronged the great majority of our countrymen. We have sinned both in the sight of our Sierra Leonean brothers and sisters, for all the terror and the mayhem we unleashed on you in our bid to make Sierra Leone a country that all Sierra Leoneans would be proud of.

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Reminders of familial ties and ownership of atrocity, though attenuated by a de-emphasis on culpability for civilian harm, is an attempt to humanize the RUF relative to the overt dehumanization of EO. Feelings of disgust fueled perceptions of dehumanization that were embedded in emotions toward civilians as well (Mitton 2015), as EO's presence and perceived cordial relations with the civilian population led to a manifestation of dehumanization toward outsiders of the RUF at large. Even while public facing engagements emphasized brotherhood, RUF distrust toward civilians was rampant and the RUF began to perceive civilians as disgusting (Mitton 2015) . Public-facing engagement attempted to bridge the gap between the RUF and civilians, while overlooking the sense of mistrust and disgust directed toward civilians at the organizational level. The following year, the RUF de-emphasized their role in the conflict again while also justifying their presence:

The present crisis did not start on March 23rd 1991, when a group of young Sierra Leoneans decided to take the destiny of their nation into their own hands and uproot the corrupt APC system of governance (2 February 1998)

A sense of ownership is positioned against a *lack of* ultimate responsibility. The RUF both justifies involvement by taking ownership of engagement while creating distance from responsibility for years of human suffering. This statement's reliance on national identity is also important for the way it obscures and molds identity to strategic ends. In its early stages, the RUF was composed, at least in large part, of former National

Patriotic Front of Liberia (NPFL) fighters from Liberia, not combatants from Sierra

Leone (Mitton 2015). The war began as an invasion from Liberia, and though the RUF's

composition evolved over the course of the conflict, statements explicitly ignore the

conflict's cross-border roots. In the 1995 Manifesto, the RUF claimed Sierra Leonean

identity while obfuscating the organization's origins:

We find it so reasonable to make a simple demand that all foreign troops, including
military and intelligence advisers and trainers leave the soil of Sierra Leone to give the
required space for Sierra Leoneans to settle their own internal conflict. The presence of
foreign troops and the importation of mercenaries indicate a continuation of a policy of
war and the choice of the military option.

Supplemented by EO's standing as a private for profit actor, the RUF suggested

that EO's status as an outsider would prevent the PMSC from understanding, or acting in

the interest of, Sierra Leonean needs. The RUF also links national identity explicitly to

values and ethics, positioning their own aims as one of general 'good' relative to the

government and outsiders representing general 'bad', leaning on arguments of morality to

dichotomize conflict participants. The 1995 Manifesto refers to the APC and the NPRC,

the military coup that followed, as "rotten" and "corrupt", equating the Sierra Leonean

government to a sort of disease of immorality:

"We, the African people of Sierra Leone, do not want this curse to afflict us for we have

suffered enough and continue to suffer under the rotten APC system"

Rhetoric analogizing immoral government behavior to a disease is a powerful tool to link RUF identity to that which is representative of the Sierra Leonean people. It also positions the RUF war within the framing of preventing an invading and pervasive sense of corruption imbued in the government and the forces fighting on its behalf. These emotions also foster disgust-evoking and dehumanizing associations, serving a utilitarian purpose for those committing violence by motivating, and perhaps, justifying, such acts (Mitton 2015). The RUF also links national identity to morality. Images of disease and affliction were coupled with a reliance on national identity as a united front against immorality, positioned proximally to the 'foreignness', and therefore 'badness', of PMSCs. The RUF promoted a narrative of 'us' vs 'them' not only to alienate and de-legitimize the activity of private forces for the purposes of alienating the government, capitalizing on national identity to imply a collective, and moral, interest behind RUF engagement in the conflict.

Pro-government behavior also became analogous to disease at an organizational level, and by the mid-1990s, when EO had bolstered CDF forces significantly, RUF brutality was shaped not only by hatred, but also by the emotion of disgust, perceiving the CDF as an infection (Mitton 1995). If the CDF was an infection that had to be eradicated, then EO was the foreign presence that had contributed to its spread, and so was also a target for de-legitimation and removal. This logic spread beyond captured CDF fighters and civilians though, and was imbued in attitudes toward EO personnel as subhuman "apartheid dogs". PMSC foreignness was also intended to stoke mistrust and distaste for involvement because of the link the RUF capitalized on between images of a

foreign invader and a disease that evoked disgust within the organization. Pathogen-related threat frameworks have been linked to the exacerbation of in group out group dynamics (Daley, Gallagher & Bodenhausen 2022), a perception which also played into RUF portrayal of EO as a foreign invader. EO was subhuman in part because it was perceived as an invading body spurning RUF advances and threatening RUF survival through military strength. RUF attempts at legitimation relied on narratives of unity and camaraderie that were positioned against subhumanity and foreign invasion. National identity was leveraged to otherize EO, and, ultimately, other pro government forces and the government itself, as an undesirable out group, legitimating the RUF insurgency.

Legitimate governance and high-profile victimization

Upon EO entry, the RUF's pattern of violence shifted as the group began to substitute the frequency of civilian victimization with public displays of violence, while also diversifying governance institutions. Rebel groups often engage in distinct patterns of violence molded to wider social features, fostering different forms of victimization across organizations and across time (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood 2017). The FARC's pernicious reliance on extortion increased rapidly in 2000, for instance, to enforce rebel tax collection (Gilbert 2022). Atrocity and high-profile brutality in Sierra Leone became more prevalent in 1995 amid military defeats inflicted upon the RUF (Mitton 2015), signaling an important shift in the nature of violence. Alongside evolutions in civilian victimization, the RUF also engaged in more governance that both attempted to professionalize and publicize RUF presence and activity, such as through education services and the creation of a media outlet.

Research suggests that variance in the services provided by PMSCs can influence rebels' perceptions of state's relative capabilities, in which combat services in particular may be perceived by rebels as an indicator of state weakness and heighten the likelihood of conflict resurgence (Faulkner 2017). Building off of this literature, PMSCs can not only affect perceptions of relative capability, but may also reframe incentive structures

and relations in conflict, propagating a shift in rebel behavior. In Sierra Leone, the threat of military defeat that EO represented indirectly heightened rebel brutality while decreasing frequency of civilian victimization. Emotions of shame and disgust, elevated by EO's success, strengthened animosity toward civilians at the rank-and-file level, but also informed rhetoric regarding PMSC involvement at the organizational level. The RUF also elevated their own presence through governance institutions, including public communications with domestic and international audiences.

RUF behavior was not a stagnant feature of the war. EO's military superiority threatened to shame the RUF by exposing weaknesses in combat prowess, and violence was leveraged to suggest strength despite battlefield defeats. EO shifted the incentive structure by restricting access to legitimacy through some avenues, such as military superiority, and fostering the potential for legitimation through other tactics, such as brutality and governance. The role of terror, for instance, became much more prominent when EO strength denied the RUF legitimacy through military strength. Amputations and other gruesome acts, including the removal of eyes, lips, and ears (Arbucia 2020), also forced those who survived to present these scars physically on their body. The RUF had been brutal from the war's outset, but violence heightened when they engaged in reprisal killings towards the mid-1990s (Mitton 2015).

Much of the suffering of war becomes invisible to outsiders once the fighting has ended or bodies have been buried. The enduring memory of war often operates more covertly, invisible under the naked eye, but amputations perhaps attempt to consolidate legitimation more symbolically by making *permanently* visible to domestic and

international audiences the impact and 'capability' of the RUF. Survivors of amputation and violence that attempted to deform the human body became a living reminder of RUF presence and power. 'Theatrical' brutality made the RUF's presence and activity both highly visible, and fixed, commanding attention even after the event of atrocity had ended. This attempted to convey more military strength than the RUF actually had. RUF violence and particularly gruesome civilian victimization sparked a perverse fascination by Western audiences that importantly eclipsed the incalculable scope of human suffering during, and after, the civil war. Gruesome violence also shifted the conflict into a high-profile 'performance' that attempted to curate legitimacy through fear.

EO's visibility was matched by the RUF's visibility in highly public and grotesque violent behavior, and displays of violence can be understood as a response to EO's quick infliction of military reversals on the rebels. Because EO quashed any hopes the RUF had of cultivating legitimacy by ousting the government purely through military superiority, the group navigated alternative ways of legitimation in the PMSC's presence. Public statements were not released by the RUF until 1995 according to Sierra Leone Web, indicating a shift in engagement. While perhaps in part a product of group formalization over time, this also signals an intentional shift in legitimacy-seeking behavior that moves beyond a fortuitous alignment with entrenchment. The RUF engaged in an admixture of behavior characterized by a decrease in levels of undisplayed violence beginning early-mid 1995, defined in this context as the frequency of civilian victimization. As frequency decreased when EO arrived, levels of displayed violence

reportedly increased, consisting of more amputations, ritualistic-like killings, and a generally heightened level of gruesomeness.

Displayed violence served as a legitimacy-seeking tactic by becoming a mark of RUF presence, asserting rebel power in the conflict and attempting to coerce legitimation through terror. Further, in perverse ways akin to EO's logo as a symbol of professionalization, the RUF's highly visible brutality made displayed violence a 'logo' of the insurgent identity, formalizing their presence by integrating violence as a signature of RUF activity. Putting violence on display can achieve strategic ends, signaling to other actors the presence and identity of perpetrators, integrating violent behavior into the criteria for belonging (Fujii 2021). Displayed violence allowed the RUF to reassert their position in the conflict, which was deeply threatened by EO presence, an intrusion the RUF identified as particularly violating because of EO's position as nascent outsiders portrayed to be profiting from the spoils of a domestic war. To compensate for reduced military capability, the RUF outwardly presented greater levels of military strength than actually existed by amputating arms and hands of villagers (Coll 2000; Richards 1996), as well as legs, lips and ears (Arbucia 2020). This behavior became more frequent after military defeats by EO and the pro-government forces it bolstered that began to threaten the group's survival beginning in mid-1995.

Emotions of disgust and shame imbued throughout the identity of many RUF fighters toward their opposition, and systematically buttressed within the RUF at an organizational level, were reified by military reversals, which catalyzed increased levels of violence and brutality against the Kamajors and Nigerian peacekeepers (Mitton 2015).

Attempts to deter and punish pro-government activity and reverse the shame felt by defeats on the battlefield increased targeted violence toward actors adjacent to, or within, the state security apparatus (Mitton 2015), each who benefitted from EO activity. CDF and Kamajor capacity and prowess were bolstered by EO support, suggesting RUF reprisal for collusion with EO. While contractually obligated to support the Sierra Leonean Army (SLA), EO diversified its relations by strengthening the Kamajor's military capability and providing them with food, intelligence, training, and strategic planning when corruption made the SLA an unreliable force (Howe 1998), and EO is, in some part, credited with elevating the Kamajors to a serious contender in the conflict (Maciąg 2019). Emotions that fostered atrocity and brutality were embedded throughout the organizational structure of the RUF. Shame related to the CDF was also linked to the threat peace represented to RUF pride and status through the loss of social respect and the loss of territorial, economic, and political gains that had been afforded by war (Mitton 2015). EO's presence, then, was also emblematic of shame, threatening to undo all the nuanced privileges of war and a legitimacy that had been built on pride through violence and RUF 'localness'. The role of shame and disgust were reflected not only in individual acts of atrocity, but also infused throughout the RUF's engagement and media strategy related to EO's presence. References to EO as "dogs" and analogizing PMSC presence to that of a foreign invader suggests a pathogen-like orientation while national identity discredits EO's military strength by delegitimizing their place in the conflict.

Military defeats and reduced capacity did not decrease legitimacy-seeking behavior, but EO's presence and strength did motivate the RUF to leverage violence in

novel ways. The RUF attempted to create the illusion of greater formidability through brutality emblematic of an almost theatrical performance in delivery. However, this finding is somewhat quixotic given research on civilian victimization. Typically, insurgent proliferation during conflict leads already active groups to increase civilian victimization as a product of intergroup competition that can shift relative strength,threaten existing groups' access to resources, and motivate civilian defection (Wood & Kathman 2015). RUF-EO engagements were perhaps analogous in the ways that EO threatened access to resources and inadvertently motivated opportunities for civilian defection to government and pro-government forces, but the RUF was not in direct contestation with EO for legitimacy. While EO shifted the tides of conflict, they represented government and pro-government forces. This unique positionality did reshape behavior toward civilians, but in alternative ways. Heightened levels of civilian victimization can take many forms, and in Sierra Leone, levels of atrocity increased in place of frequency.

Desperation to reduce costly battlefield losses during wartime also often engenders civilian victimization by states (Downes 2006). Given this link, we might expect the RUF to respond similarly to EO's formidable presence. Yet, the RUF actually scaled back the frequency of civilian victimization when EO arrived, substituting increasingly gruesome *forms* of violence for *frequency* of violence. The RUF committed the highest levels of civilian victimization between December of 1994 and February of 1995 in terms of campaign frequency and civilian death toll. January and February of 1995 in particular hosted large scale civilian massacres in which RUF fighters killed up

to or over 100 civilians. On 5 January of 1995, 200 civilian deaths were recorded in one incident. Another violent campaign on 2 February of 1995 recorded 300 civilian deaths. While 12 events of civilian victimization were recorded in December of 1994, 26 events *ended* in December of 1994 and 17 had occurred over a period longer than one week. In January of 1995, 28 instances of civilian victimization occurred and in February of 1995, 16 violent campaigns were conducted by the RUF. By March of 1995, that number had decreased to 12 violent events. Between April and May of 1995, the RUF carried out 11 violent attacks on civilians. While violence varied, frequency of civilian victimization generally stabilized and fewer large scale massacres occurred.

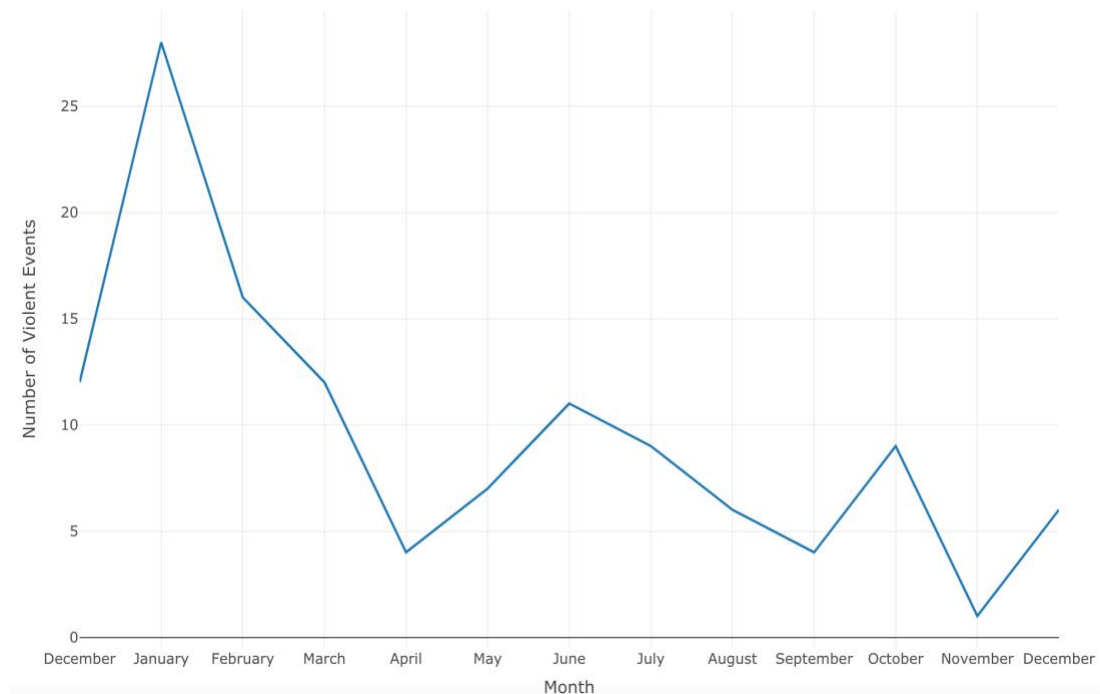**Figure 1: Frequency of Civilian Victimization by the RUF December 1994 - December 1995**
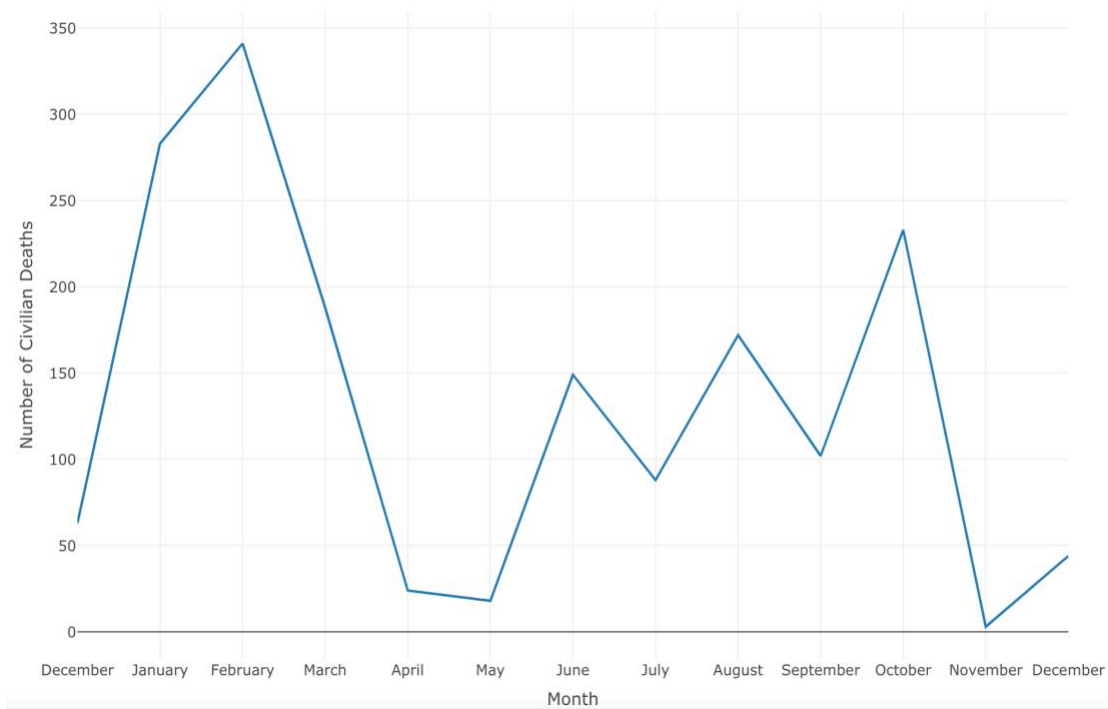
Figure 2: Number of Civilian Deaths Resulting from RUF Attacks December 1994 - December 1995

This does not necessitate a causal relationship, particularly as data limitations do not allow for statistical tests. Military reversals by the CDF and Kamajors, bolstered by EO, did redirect some levels of civilian victimization toward those forces strengthened by EO's presence. By increasing government capacity, private forces shaped dynamics identified by others (Hultman 2007; Wood 2014), in which military reversals engendered civilian victimization. This victimization can take many forms however, and in this case, military losses prompted by EO's presence fostered increased brutality rather than increased frequency. While perhaps in part a consequence of forced retreat to the bush, reduced frequency developed in tandem with a rise in new forms of violence which were particularly high-profile and brutal. As the CDF began to inflict military reversals on the RUF towards the end of 1995 and in 1996, the RUF increased the level of atrocity directed toward civilians (Mitton 2015). The spike in brutality not only aligns with

increasing strength of pro-government forces, but also with EO activity in the conflict, which boosted capability of these forces significantly. EO's support was critical for strengthening pro-government forces and for spurning RUF advances during the war, so the RUF had to seek legitimacy outside of military defeat. The threat that EO presented to the RUF's survival inadvertently fostered new rebel-civilian relations, contributing to increased levels of civilian victimization as the RUF responded to defeats on the battlefield through punishment and legitimacy through the instillation of fear. EO's high profile presence may have inadvertently encouraged a high profile response from the RUF, which emerged in the form of highly visible violence.

Limited research that does exist does not indicate an outwardly antagonistic relationship between EO and local populaces. Beyond combat functions, EO's activity to some extent focused on cultivating relations. EO gathered intelligence from the countryside's civilian population and from the Kamajors, reportedly being perceived as "saviours" amid RUF brutality (Maciąg 2019). EO also reportedly gained internal support and reduced external criticism upon their arrival in Sierra Leone by generally behaving well toward African civilians, a sentiment echoed in the following statement by an EO commander: "We train our soldiers to behave with the locals" and to "not become their enemy [...] we build trust and acquire more intelligence" (Howe 1998). There is reason to be wary of these interpretations as equivalent to general civilian sentiment. These portrayals inadvertently speak to elements of white saviorism, as EO was largely composed of white ex-South African Defence Force members. The role that underlying power dynamics can play in shaping subsequent interpretations of EO presence should

not be ignored or downplayed and statements capturing civilian sentiment without civilian backing should be read with caution.

The gap in credible understanding of civilian perception toward EO limits the ability to deduce accurate PMSC-civilian relations during the war, but for the purpose of this study, it is not civilian perception of EO that affects RUF engagement, but the RUF's *perception* of civilian sentiment. Reports identifying conciliatory, or even appreciative civilian attitudes, towards EO's presence may not be reliable representations of EO-civilian relations. However, these reports do describe a specific understanding and interpretation of EO presence which are indicative of a wider and audience's *perception* of the PMSC's engagement in the war, whether representative of general populace sentiment or not. Under this framework, EO represented a threat to RUF competition for civilian loyalty and support, even if won through violence and force, by supplementing the government and pro-government forces that stood in opposition to the RUF.

The RUF increasingly came to see civilians as the enemy in their war against the government and local populations became an accessible substitute for CDF forces, leading to an uptick in atrocities against civilians intended to discourage support for the CDF and punish perceived collusion with the pro-government forces (Mitton 2015). Where EO had proven an elusive enemy, civilians may have been a convenient substitute. While legitimacy could not be coerced through military defeats over EO, the RUF could demonstrate power over civilians through brutality and attempt to deter local populations from perceived support of EO. Civilian support may have been interpreted as granting EO legitimation, a process which the RUF intended to violently disrupt. The RUF relied

on instillation through fear achieved by theatrical brutality, relying on more visible forms of violence to affirm RUF presence despite military reversals.

During wartime, relations between rebel governors and the governed may take on a symbiotic and mutually dependent relationship, fostering not only civilian dependence on rebel governance but also leading rebels to rely on civilians for resources, support, and loyalty (Huang & Sullivan 2021). The RUF captured diamond mines as a source of revenue to fuel their war against the government, though EO quickly retook many RUF-controlled mines in the first few months of operations (Howe 1998). However, civilian populations remained valuable throughout the war as forced conscripts and through the opportunities towns and villages provided to the RUF for looting. EO's bolstering of government and government-adjacent forces thwarted violent attempts by the RUF to reify legitimacy through its campaign of terror and fear. At the same time that the RUF wielded violence and instilled fear in the local populace throughout Sierra Leone, civilian populations remained an important resource for the RUF, and RUF rhetoric pleads for domestic and international support for a cause framed as just and intended to rid the country of government and pro-government parasites. All indications suggest the RUF won little support among local populaces though, failing to gain a widespread or even concentrated backing for their campaigns, whether through terror or governance. Despite a government bedeviled by inefficiency (Reno 1995), forces emblematic of maintaining the status quo, such as the CDF, and perhaps even EO, emerged to present themselves as a more legitimate and desirable option to the general civilian populace than the RUF. The RUF, then, supplemented brutality with governance institutions mimicking that of the

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state, as explored in detail below. Both tactics attempted to deter civilian loyalty to representatives of government interests.

EO may have been believed to have a civilian support base, particularly as they bolstered the CDF, a group that opposed the RUF and was rooted in community defense coalitions. This fostered an RUF reliance on punitive violence perhaps intended to penalize the civilian population's *perceived* loyalty to EO and deter cooperation with the PMSC. Atrocities were leveraged to spread terror during the conflict, and the RUF often inflicted brutal violence to deter and punish pro-government behavior (Mitton 2015). Though RUF statements might suggest otherwise, the RUF had never relied on legitimacy through purely 'voluntary' civilian loyalty to their cause. One Sierra Leonean commander explained that a 'hearts and minds' campaign was of little value in a West African context, indicating that tactics of fear signaled to the government its inability to protect its people (Hoffman 2004). This attempted to undermine the perceived foundations that provide a government with legitimacy. Instead, the ability to kill or brutalize civilians was also an indicator of the ability to protect, so brutality was intended to coerce civilian loyalty by demonstrating greater power (Hoffman 2004). What RUF brutality also suggests is a message to the government and civilians that even with the presence of better equipped, better resourced, and better trained PMSCs, civilians remained unprotected from victimization. The RUF attempted to win legitimacy through fear, and when EO's arrival threatened their existence, legitimacy through terror took new, and more visible forms. Fear, however, did not preclude the establishment of institutions that attempted to compete with the state.

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At the same time that displayed forms of violence were attracting attention and punishing as well as inciting fear in civilian populations, the RUF was also diversifying governance. Though only available at the annual level, legitimate governance functions provided by the RUF evolved alongside the tides of violence. In 1994, the RUF had expanded to health services and taxation from military functions the year prior. By 1995, the RUF carried out education, health, taxation, media, and illegal resource activity alongside military operations. Many of these same activities were maintained after EO's departure. Particularly because data is not fine-grained, RUF evolution does not necessitate a causal link to EO, but it is notable for the ways governance developed alongside displayed violence. The RUF began to morph its behavior into that of a representative of the state, presenting itself as a legitimate authority to civilians, not only through fear, and conversely the power to protect, but also through service provision. To establish themselves as credible alternatives to the state, rebels may establish order and provide social services (Huang & Sullivan 2021).

Figure 3: Evolution of RUF Governance Institutions 1991-2002
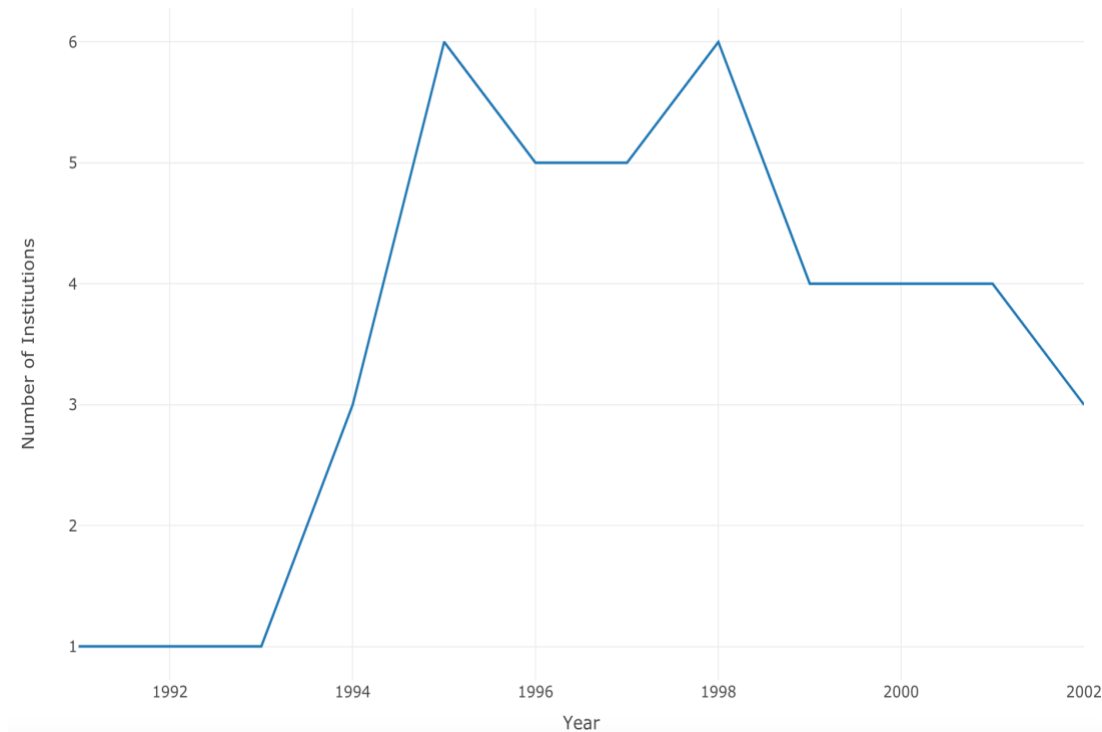
With the introduction of PMSCs, the RUF expanded both coercive and cooperative ways to control civilian's lives, engaging in their own form of professionalization. PMSCs encouraged diversification when military strength had been severely eroded by the activity of private forces. The RUF mimicked government services to confer legitimacy while punishing pro-government forces and civilians for military defeats. While not the focus of this research, it is also notable that RUF imitation of the government was not one directional, and that both rebels and the state learn from each other in an interactive relationship. The Sierra Leonean government also may have mimicked the RUF during the war too, mirroring rebel rhetoric. For example, the government also relied on disease, as indicated by a 2000 statement: "the complex security situation in the country continues to frustrate the efforts of my government to

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stabilise the economy and create prosperity for our people. It is a situation that my government will not tolerate and with your support, I am sure, WE SHALL OVERCOME our current malaise." This complexifies myopic, one-directional tracks of rebel mimicry of the state by revealing state language that appears to mirror that of rebels. While outside the scope of the current study, the ways in which these engagements feed in different directions should be explored further.

Displayed violence and social service provision are both a function of RUF professionalization. The RUF encouraged combatants to take pride in their skills as fierce fighters, representing a professionalization of violent behavior in which members began to perceive brutality as a fulfillment of job-related obligations (Mitton 2015). Considered alongside the evolution of private combat activity, RUF professionalization mirrors, in a way, the professionalization of EO. Fear-based legitimacy-seeking tactics are not mutually exclusive from those tactics that attempt to win legitimacy through tactics such as social service provision, and can actually reinforce, instead of contradict, each other. EO's presence had 'internationalized' the civil war in many ways, and the RUF engaged in a two-pronged approach that mirrored EO's professional standing and responded to the threat EO presented to rebel status and survival. The RUF coupled diverse governance functions that could theoretically 'win' genuine civilian support with high-profile brutality intended to infuse fear throughout civilian populations. Emotions of shame and disgust, stoked by EO involvement, were also embedded throughout RUF ethos, shaping rhetorical and behavioral spheres of legitimacy-seeking.

Conclusion

PMSCs can reframe competition during conflict, affecting the ways rebels perceive and engage with legitimacy and spur new modes of insurgent behavior. PMSCs may engender new relations with domestic and international audiences, which may foster shifts in rebel engagements during wartime. EO's presence provided an opportunity for the RUF to engage in new modes of legitimacy-seeking behavior and appeal to different audiences in new ways. Competition for legitimacy can have public-facing elements and lead to new engagements with international norms, and can also be linked to rebel diplomacy and evolving insurgent-civilian relations. PMSC interaction with rebels in a competitive conflict context can carry consequences for how NSAGs, and perhaps others, engage with legitimacy. PMSC engagement can mold rebels legitimacy-seeking behavior and positionality within conflict by shifting or fostering public-facing activity by insurgents. Understanding the new audiences and modes of engagement that rebels might rely on allows practitioners to better understand the complex relations that shape NSAG behavior and construct negotiation and engagement tactics accordingly. Despite exclusion from traditional state venues, NSAGs are also connected to and subsumed within the international community, engaging with international norms to legitimize their existence as part of this global framework. Normative engagements urge scholars and

practitioners to rethink rebel group's understanding of space and place in the international arena.

The mass suffering and loss brought on by conflict also compels practitioners and scholars to address and acknowledge the variety of ways that the human cost of war can emerge and unfold. Civilian safety can be affected by PMSC presence directly, but there may also be less obvious, more inadvertent ways that PMSCs affect relations during conflict, moving the needle of civilian safety in either the direction of improvement or deterioration. This research addresses the web of relations that emerged during Sierra Leone's conflict and identifies that the RUF engaged in legitimacy-seeking behavior through normative appeals to international and domestic audiences, through a reliance on national identity as a cornerstone of belonging, and through public displays of brutality coupled with governance mimicking that of states. Much concern has been directed toward PMSCs' direct effect on civilian safety as cases of abuse emerge and awareness around the risk of abuse grows, but calls for mitigating harm have not yet explored the ways that PMSCs can indirectly shape civilian safety by shifting rebel-community relations during conflict.

Understanding the threat that EO presented to the RUF, not only in terms of survival, but also status, recognizes the ways that PMSCs are viewed within the wider competitive conflict environment. Differentiation in service type among PMSCs can also foster divergence in rebel response. EO's high profile involvement in combat services is more public and visible than perhaps more covert operations such as logistics or technical support, and may foster shifts in rebel perception not only of relative capability of the

state (Faulkner 2017), but also rebel interpretation of pro-government forces, of external actors, and of civilians, and their relations to each during conflict. Future research should probe the relationship between service type and rebel legitimation strategies in a variety of contexts and locales. Rebels are not sclerotic actors, instead habitually adapting and morphing their governance and legitimacy-seeking tactics to emerging threats and evolving contexts. Insurgencies define and redefine the scaffolding of legitimacy as new relations develop and conflict shifts. RUF adaptation to and engagement with EO's presence also undergirds the relational dynamics of conflict and the web of complex competition. Relationships during conflict are often fluid, and NSAG engagement with opposition may take new forms as PMSCs, perhaps particularly those private forces that effectively shift the tides of conflict and credibly threaten rebel existence, become protagonists in conflict zones. PMSC presence can motivate rebels to engage in new tactics, inclining researchers, policymakers, humanitarians and practitioners to reconceptualize legitimacy and more deeply explore rebel behavior when PMSCs start waging warfare.

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