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Third Actors and Civilian Agency

Moving beyond a Dichotomous Understanding of Civil Wars

Though the field of conflict and security studies has come a long way to acknowledge the fragmented nature of war and the multiplicity of armed groups, much of theory building and data collection is still based on a dichotomous understanding of civil wars breaking out between incumbents and insurgents. The focus on structural characteristics of civil wars drives this perspective as these factors are used to explain conflict onset and intensity, two core outcomes of interest in the study of civil war. Following a process-oriented perspective, this book aims to move beyond the dichotomous understanding of civil wars and analyze how civilians contribute to the fragmentation of war, forming and joining third actors that shape the war's dynamics.

Civilians in civil war are not passive bystanders. How armed groups relate to civilian populations has been the focus of much revolutionary theory and practice. Controlling the local population is an important gateway to resources and power for government and rebel forces alike. Political violence against civilians is used to achieve such control, which has contributed to a perspective on civilians as being stuck "between two armies" (Stoll 1993) or "between two fires" (Zech 2016). However, rather than inducing passivity, such an in-between status creates grounds for civilian agency. In both Guatemala and Peru, for example, civilians formed self-defense forces to protect communities from war-induced violence (Stoll 1993; Zech 2016).

This chapter develops a framework to analyze community-initiated militias in civil war and proposes a theory of when, where, and how these militias form. We have a good sense of how and why civilians support rebels or the state. However, we know much less about how civilians coordinate and organize to form their own armed groups. Such "third actors" in civil wars play an important role in redefining relations among state and non-state actors.

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2.1 CONCEPTUALIZING MILITIAS IN CIVIL WAR

Though frequently used in scholarly and policy writing, the concept of militias has remained contested (Tapscott 2019; Schuberth 2015; Carey and Mitchell 2017). This is partly due to a normative connotation and an ahistorical understanding of the term, particularly in writings on African state failure. The term "militia" has frequently been used to denote loosely organized, roving bands of violence-wielding thugs, often without a political project (Hills 1997; Francis 2005). While I acknowledge that "militia" is a fleeting category, I maintain that it is analytically useful to separate militias from rebel groups and other armed actors. This book focuses on militias that operate *during* civil wars (Malejacq 2017). I define "militia" as an armed organization that exists outside of the regular security apparatus of the state and emerges as a countermovement against insurgent organizations (see Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger 2015). This definition excludes groups challenging or capturing the state militarily.[1]

My definition of "militia" improves upon existing ones that are either too narrow or too broad. In contrast to narrower definitions (Kalyvas and Arjona 2005; Mazzei 2009; Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013), I do not require a link to the state to define an armed organization as a militia. Militias can form independently and ally with the state at a later point. They are also highly dynamic and may change alliances often (Staniland 2015; Otto 2018). Counter to broader definitions, in which "militia" also includes rebel groups and various other armed organizations in failed states (Zahar 2000; Hills 1997; Okumu and Ikelegbe 2010), my definition emphasizes that militias have features distinguishing them from other armed organizations – in particular rebel groups.

An important difference from rebel groups is militias' reactionary agenda of guaranteeing security and protecting property. Militias do not promote a revolutionary agenda. Rather, they secure rules that already exist and present no systematic threat to the state.[2] The self-defense committees (*rondas campesinas*) in Peru, for example, did not "tie into a broader program for change," pointing to their "predominantly local thrust" and disinterest in electoral politics (Starn 1995, 565). Regardless of the paramilitaries' relative

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[1] As the case of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia [AUC]) shows, militias sometimes put severe pressure on the government by influencing politics through the legislature, even if they do not challenge them militarily (Gutiérrez-Sanín 2008). Thus, militias are not necessarily allies of the government and occasionally evolve into challengers to the government. The definition includes such groups as the AUC if their challenge to the government remains political. Once militias turn into military challengers of the state (insurgent groups), they are no longer considered militias in the sense of this definition.

[2] Some rebel groups form their own militias to administer territory under their control and perform certain tasks such as providing security at the village level, rehabilitating the village, and constructing houses or new public buildings. Examples of such militia forces are the *mujeeba* (also called *mujuba, mudjiba, mujiba, majiba, madjuba,* or *madjuhba*), the Renamo representatives and local police at the village level during the war in Mozambique (Jentzsch 2017; Hall 1990, 50–51). I discuss these militias briefly in Chapters 4 and 6.

strength and the Colombian state's weakness, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia [AUC]) sought to "reclaim," not "replace," the state (Mazzei 2009, 102). A second major characteristic is therefore militias' local character. Militias are often formed at the village level, are composed of local men and women, and operate in their own or neighboring villages (Kalyvas 2006, 107).[3] The Fertit militia during the second civil war in southern Sudan, for example, formed and operated in particular villages, as local leaders perceived rebel violence to be directed at their communities (Blocq 2014). The origin of the Kamajors in Sierra Leone also lies in the protection of particular villages and, later, of displacement camps (Hoffman 2011, 73–74). However, militias may evolve into more mobile forces as their resource base and alliances with other actors become stronger.

In sum, militias are important domestic third actors in civil wars, either directly supporting the state or substituting the state in certain regions. This does not mean that militias always protect the communities in which they operate; to the contrary, to protect the state, militias can perpetrate severe levels of violence against civilians.

2.2 A TYPOLOGY OF MILITIAS IN CIVIL WAR

Militias vary within and across civil wars, and also over time. Depending on the research goal, militias can be distinguished along various dimensions, such as their origin in relation to the state, primary objectives, and social base (Okumu and Ikelegbe 2010). To understand militia *formation*, it is useful to distinguish between militias on the basis of two factors: (1) whether the state or community members initiate the militia ("top-down" or "bottom-up" mobilization; Jentzsch, Kalyvas, and Schubiger 2015), and (2) whether the members of the militia engage in tasks that require their full- or part-time commitment (see Table 2.1).

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[3] This understanding of "militia" is congruent with the historical uses of the term. Historically, the term "militia" refers to a reserve force comprising citizens with limited military training that is available for emergency service to the state. The reserve force supplements the regular army and is therefore distinct from the force comprising full-time soldiers (Mackey 2017). In addition, the historical uses of "militia" can also explicitly refer to defense groups raised locally and independently of the state army. Historical examples of such a frontier phenomenon include the vigilantes in the eastern and western United States (Brown 1975). Early examples of militias in other regions of the world include forces that supported the militia of clansmen that defended the border regions against invaders in Macedonia under Philip II (d. 336 BC), or the fyrd among the Anglo-Saxon peoples of early medieval Europe that comprised able-bodied free men giving military service. The fyrd served as a model for the North American militia in the colonial period that later also played a role in the Civil War. By the early twentieth century, militias were transformed into the National Guard. The able-bodied portion of the population between the ages of seventeen and forty-five received "universal military training" and then served as a reserve pool from which the military could obtain volunteers (Mahon 1983).

TABLE 2.1. *A typology of militias*

		Level of professionalization	
		High	Low
Initiator	**State**	State-initiated full-time militias	State-initiated part-time militias
	Community	Community-initiated full-time militias	Community-initiated part-time militias

The first factor resembles the public/private (Okumu and Ikelegbe 2010) or semiofficial/informal distinctions (Carey and Mitchell 2017) in other typologies. However, in contrast to these cited typologies, I differentiate between "initiation" and subsequent "control" of militias by communities and states. My typology only covers the distinctions of militias at the point of their formation, since explaining formation is the book's research goal. State- and community-initiated militias may change their patrons during the course of war (Otto 2018); oftentimes, this is the case when states co-opt community-initiated militias or distance themselves from state-initiated militias due to their human rights violations, or when community-initiated militias reach out for resources from the state. During Sierra Leone's civil war, for example, the government co-opted the community-initiated Kamajors, which transformed the militia into a full-time, militarized armed group (Hoffman 2011).

The second factor, the type of commitment that militias display, has empirical implications for their degree of professionalization and the tasks in which they engage. For example, full-time forces stay in barracks, are on duty day and night, have continuous access to weapons, and sometimes even have uniforms. They may leave the barracks for missions outside the town or village they are stationed in, which implies that they conduct both offensive and defensive operations. Part-time forces are more likely to reside in their own houses, be on duty during the night, and go about their regular activities during the day. Those forces may have limited access to weapons and no access to uniforms. Their activities usually include patrolling, intelligence gathering, policing tasks such as arrests, and defense in the case of an attack.

The two dimensions result in the following typology (see Table 2.1). State-initiated full-time militias are professionalized and state-directed, such as the Janjaweed in Sudan's Darfur region (Flint 2009). State-initiated part-time militias can be illustrated by the Guatemalan civil patrols who patrolled villages by night, but otherwise went about their daily routines (Remijnse 2002; Bateson 2017). Community-initiated militias rarely emerge as full-time forces but rather evolve into them. For example, the Kamajor militias during the civil war in Sierra Leone represented community-initiated part-time militias before they evolved into a full-fledged army and community-initiated full-time forces

after they replaced the state army (Hoffman 2011). The typology simplifies militia formation processes and focuses on the state and the community as initiators of militia formation. These dimensions should therefore be understood as continua rather than dichotomies. For example, in addition to states and communities, political elites such as party leaders can form their own militias, which represent an intermediary type of militia.

Distinguishing between state- and community-initiated militias has empirical implications regarding militias' forms of organization and objectives. Concerning their form of organization, state-initiated militias typically have a clear link to the state through a commander appointed by the state military, training organized by the state military, and/or resources from the state. For community-initiated militias, commanders are typically chosen locally, training is organized by local social or political elites, and (initial) resources come from the local population.

A militia's objective depends on if either the state or the community initiates its existence. While the state's primary objective for creating a militia is to improve its control of the population and delegate violence to non-state actors (Carey, Mitchell, and Lowe 2013), community-initiated militias form to fulfill people's needs during war, such as improving security and protecting property from pillage by insurgents or criminal bands, as did the self-defense committees (*rondas campesinas*) in Peru (Starn 1999; Fumerton 2001). For incumbents, militias may provide a tool for local state building and population control and can turn into an important means of counterinsurgency by seeking to attract "turncoats" (Kalyvas 2006, 107; Kalyvas and Arjona 2005). Especially in (ethnic) insurgencies, the state might make efforts to win over collaborators ("ethnic defectors") (Kalyvas 2008a) and organize militias to fight the insurgency. Similarly, in wars between foreign occupiers and the local population, foreigners may mobilize local collaborators to fight against resistance movements (Branch 2007). For local communities, militias serve as a substitute to state forces that are unwilling or unable to protect a population in a certain region or a population of a specific characteristic. This self-help mechanism comes close to what the social historian Eric Hobsbawm (1969) calls "social banditry" – peasant mobilization to protect the status quo against those challenging it. "Social bandits" often do not join insurgencies since insurgents define their goals independently of peasants' needs.[4] Peasants, when they mobilize, often seek to protect what they have rather than demand social change (Scott 1976).

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[4] The Sandinista insurgency in Nicaragua, which the Miskitu Indians thought did not represent their values and needs, illustrates the gap between insurgent objectives and a particular group of peasants (Hale 1996). However, when the Sandinistas came to power in 1979, they mobilized many other peasants in an effort to restructure the agricultural economy, which received much support (Ortega 1990).

The state may co-opt community-initiated militias at a later stage of the civil war, but this often depends on the strength of the state. While militias are associated with auxiliaries of incumbents in wars in which the state has a military advantage, in wars with equal capabilities among the conflict parties, militias take on a more autonomous role (Kalyvas 2006, 107n44).

The proposed militia typology helps to structure the phenomenon of militias and provide useful analytical differences. In this book, I explain how community-initiated militias form as part-time forces. To ensure leverage of the theory, I compare the formation and evolution of these forces to those of state-initiated part-time forces.

2.3 CIVILIAN AGENCY AND MILITIA FORMATION

When, where, and why do communities form militias? In wars that are characterized by high levels of violence against civilians, people can choose a variety of strategies to provide for their own security. Intelligence gathering, nightly patrols, systems to alert people of imminent violence, identifying protected spaces to flee to, or declaring a peace community are all forms of unarmed security provision organized by a community. In addition, security provision can take on the form of armed groups for defensive or offensive purposes. This book seeks to understand the conditions under which communities form such armed groups – militias. The first part of the theory considers the *timing* of militia formation. The second part analyzes the *location* of militia formation. The third part specifies the *process* of militia mobilization.

2.3.1 The Timing of Community-Initiated Militia Formation

When do militias form? The timing of community-initiated militia formation refers to the strategic context in which militias form. The strategic context shapes the expectations of community residents and elites about future violence and thus their preferences about what actions to take.

Community residents form militias when insurgent and incumbent armies enter a military stalemate at the local level, which I refer to as a "community-empowering stalemate." A military stalemate can be defined as "a situation where neither combatant is able to make noteworthy advances on the battlefield due to the strength of the opposing side, and neither side believes that the situation will improve in the near future" (Walter 1997, 347). This is a common definition of a military stalemate related to the balance of military capabilities (Licklider 1993, 309; Schulhofer-Wohl 2019, 7). A stalemate on the district or provincial level can coincide with a stalemate on the national level, although it does not have to. Usually, stalemates characterize the strategic situation in which governments and insurgents find themselves on the national level – a situation that prevents decisive victory of one side

(Fearon 2004, 276).[5] However, given the disjunction between war dynamics on the local and the national levels (Kalyvas 2003; Lubkemann 2005), local military stalemates may exist regionally when there is no stalemate nationally, and in turn a national stalemate may not reflect the strategic situation at regional or local levels.

There are two possible types of military stalemates. A military stalemate arises either when territorial control is relatively constant, which means that the level of violence against civilians by the incumbent is relatively low, or when territorial control changes frequently and incumbent violence is high (Kalyvas 2006, 207). In the first case, incumbents – the armed actor in control – use civil war violence selectively to punish those civilians who they suspect of supporting the enemy. In this way, armed groups seek to ensure that civilians collaborate and provide them with the necessary intelligence about those who support the enemy (Kalyvas 2006). Incumbents attempt to expand their base of popular support, as occurred in El Salvador with the decrease in state violence against civilians and the provision of basic services (Wood 2003, 132, 150). Thus, a "*local* political equilibrium" between the El Salvadoran government and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) emerged (Wood 2003, 150).[6] In such situations war economies flourish, as the warring parties seek to reap benefits from the ongoing war, as happened in Liberia when a military stalemate arose two years after President Samuel Doe's death in September 1990 (Ellis 1999, 25, 169; cf. Le Billon 2001).

The second type of military stalemate is particularly conducive to the bottom-up mobilization of militias as it allows for more civilian agency. In this second type, the military stalemate results in a war of attrition, during which both sides try to hurt the other as much as possible. After the war in Chechnya, for example, evolved into a stalemate in 2002, "Chechen fighters were 'no longer able to confront Russian troops head-on, but they remain determined to inflict as much pain as possible in the name of Chechen independence'" (Kalyvas 2006, 164n33, citing a report from *The New York Times*). In this context, states often adopt scorched-earth tactics as their main counterinsurgency measure to kill potential collaborators indiscriminately and destroy the insurgents' popular support base. This was the case, for instance, in

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[5] Fearon's (2004) definition of a military stalemate is different from Walter's (1997) in that Fearon's model allows for fluctuating capabilities and therefore changing expectations about future success. In Walter's concept, a stalemate implies that no positive expectations exist about future decisive moves. I take a position between these two and assume that a military stalemate does not allow the contending parties to expect that they will prevail decisively over the other in the near future, but that capabilities may change and allow small advances that might prove advantageous in the negotiation process of a peace settlement.

[6] In El Salvador, this local equilibrium led some peasants to adopt a strategy of neutrality. These peasants saw themselves as standing between two armies and could only protect their lives and livelihoods by supporting both of them (Wood 2003, 153–54).

Mozambique during the anticolonial war, when the Portuguese colonial regime indiscriminately targeted potential collaborators of the liberation movement (Reis and Oliveira 2012). The high cost of military stalemates has led analysts to contend that conflict parties should prefer negotiated settlements to wars of attrition (Zartman 1989). However, problems in credibly committing to settlements in an environment of fluctuating state capabilities lead to prolonged civil war. The state's commitments are not credible, and the hope remains that one day one's own side prevails over the other (Fearon 2004).

Though civilians must bear much of the violence in such costly military stalemates of the second type, these stalemates can be community-empowering. Community residents form militias when indiscriminate violence is high, the incumbent's territorial control over a core area is relatively stable but constantly under threat, and peripheral areas change control often (see Kalyvas 2008a, 1059). In such a situation, incumbents find themselves virtually under siege; limited control over access roads leads to a lack of resources, which in turn leads to a failure of the incumbent to protect the population under its control.

Community-empowering military stalemates shape the preferences of communities and elites in the following ways. First, regarding community preferences, the population receives sufficient protection from neither the insurgent nor the incumbent forces. In such situations, neither cooperation with the dominant armed group nor defection to the enemy promises to improve civilians' security. By fleeing to an area between zones of control, civilians lose access to both their farming plots and relief goods, which also endangers their food security (Justino 2009). Civilians may think that they are better protected when they become combatants (Kalyvas and Kocher 2007). However, joining the insurgents is unlikely as people become alienated with the armed group that inflicts violence upon them. Similarly, people may avoid joining the incumbent security forces either because of the army's perpetration of violence against civilians or because joining does not promise protection as the fighting intensifies due to the lack of a military advantage. This difficult situation makes civilians vulnerable and war-weary, inducing a preference to form militias.

Second, from the administrative elite perspective, the population's frequent displacement disrupts the control over people, the delivery of relief supplies, and the provision of state services. Thus the local administration's primary goal is to protect and hold the population under its control. If the state security forces present in a community – these may include regular security forces or state-initiated militias – are too small or otherwise unable to fulfill this goal, and the administrative elites' demands for regional or national military commando support are not met, community residents and their leaders look for alternative solutions. This provides an opportunity for alternative forms of security provision. Administrative elites are forced to tolerate or even actively support the

formation of armed forces outside the regular state security apparatus and with substantial influence of community leaders.

In sum, community residents form militias when community-empowering military stalemates emerge. The population sees no better option for survival than organizing its own protection in the form of militias. In the absence of military support from regional or national commandos, administrative elites are forced to tolerate or even actively support the formation of such irregular forces.

2.3.2 The Location of Community-Initiated Militia Formation

Where do militias form? The strategic context of militia formation indicates that the experience of violence and state responses to that violence shape people's expectations about future violence and, thus, their preferences about their own response to that violence. However, expectations are influenced not only by events that occur within one's own community but also by events in neighboring communities. Communities' decisions to form militias are often influenced by neighboring communities' experience with militias. In fact, like other forms of violent collective action – riots, rebellions, revolutions – militias diffuse across geographic boundaries, be they defined by national borders or local boundaries.

I distinguish between initial diffusion – the spread of a militia – and sustained diffusion – the integration of a militia into the local security apparatus. *Initial diffusion* of militias depends on the relationship between the communities among which diffusion occurs. Ethnic, ideological, cultural, and historical bonds between communities facilitate initial diffusion, in particular when these bonds are reinforced by the (temporary) migration of "diffusion agents" – community residents and local elites – between these communities. Moreover, when militias reduce violence in neighboring communities, community residents learn that forming militias serves them better than staying passive. *Sustained diffusion* depends on the institutional context of the receiving community. When elites are relatively unified, local officials integrate militias into existing institutions. Relative unity among elites prevents community-initiated militias from becoming the private army of individual leaders. The community and its leaders need to trust and support a civilian-based armed group during war to facilitate its widespread mobilization. When elites are united in their understanding of the new armed group's aims and strategies, community residents and local elites have more trust in the militia's ability to curb violence, and hence support the new institution, ensuring its success.

The notion that revolutions do not occur in and of themselves but need to be nourished by the spread of ideas and actions across geographic and group boundaries is a recurring theme in many different episodes of collective action. Diffusion of ideas creates solidarity and fosters identification with others in the

same situation.[7] However, the concept of diffusion applies to much broader areas of scholarly research. Scholars interested in the evolution of policies, institutions, and organizations use diffusion to explain how ideas and models of action – opinions, attitudes, and practices – spread or disseminate across geographic or group boundaries. This research agenda assumes that "there are enduring, cross-boundary dependencies in the evolution of policies and institutions" (Gleditsch and Ward 2006, 912). Social movement scholars have adopted this perspective to inquire into the conditions and mechanisms of how both established and innovative collective action frames and repertoires across communities, movements, and nation-states spread (Givan, Roberts, and Soule 2010, 4; Strang and Soule 1998).[8]

Concerning the study of armed conflict, the regional and transnational dimensions of civil wars in Africa and Asia in the 1990s and 2000s triggered renewed interest in the geographic spread of civil war. Scholars have long recognized the interdependence of civil wars and nationalist movements (Lake and Rothchild 1998; Buhaug and Gleditsch 2008; Beissinger 2002). The movement of insurgent groups, refugee populations, and weapons across porous borders regionalizes civil wars (Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006; Salehyan 2007).[9] However, scholarly efforts to understand the process and precise mechanisms of how civil wars spread are relatively recent (Checkel 2013; Wood 2013, 233–34).

Dominated by studies of international politics, conflict scholars have analyzed the diffusion of violent collective action repertoires primarily as a transnational phenomenon rather than something that also occurs within states across community and group boundaries. By repertoires of collective action, I mean a set of forms of collective action available to a community or group (Tilly 1978; Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood 2017; Ahram 2016). I focus on how and why a particular form of violent collective action (forming militias) spreads across communities during civil war. Militias can spread across community boundaries either through direct contacts traveling between communities or mediation through third actors (see Tarrow and McAdam 2005; Givan, Roberts, and

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[7] On how the diffusion of ideas is necessary to form networks of solidarity for revolutions, see Gramsci (2000, 58): "This means that every revolution has been preceded by an intense labor of criticism, by the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas among masses of men who are at first resistant and who have no ties of solidarity with others in the same condition."

[8] The concept of diffusion stresses interdependencies as a precondition for a phenomenon to spread across boundaries (Wood 2013, 233). Interdependencies between units can take on various forms. Diffusion can occur through personal contacts, which resembles contagion, or through impersonal contacts by way of stimulation of an external source (Boudon and Bourricaud 1989, 126–32). Tarrow and McAdam (2005) refer to these pathways as relational diffusion and non-relational diffusion, and suggest a third pathway, that of brokerage. In other works, brokerage is also referred to as mediated (or indirect) diffusion through a third actor that connects previously unconnected units (cf. Givan, Roberts, and Soule 2010).

[9] For an overview of research on the diffusion of civil wars, see Wood (2013).

Soule 2010). I call such actors who temporarily migrate and spread forms of collective action "diffusion agents." I explain why diffusion is sometimes sustained, meaning that the community integrates the new form of violent collective action into its collective action repertoire. Communities – influenced by surrounding communities or diffusion agents – may try to adopt various forms of collective action during war; what is more compelling is whether these forms persist and become institutionalized, thereby influencing the dynamics of war across time and space.

Diffusion depends on the relation between two units and on the characteristics of the receiving unit. Research on the diffusion of civil wars suggests that ethnic or ideological bonds between units or refugee movements, including rebel combatants, to a neighboring state make the spread of violence more likely (Saideman 2002; Salehyan and Gleditsch 2006; Salehyan 2007). Research on how policies and norms diffuse shows that diffusion depends on the coalition of actors in the receiving unit and their ability to translate new policies and norms into the local context (Acharya 2004; Gilardi 2010). This means that once a bond is established or reinforced between two units, sustained diffusion occurs when the coalition of actors allows new forms to integrate into the local institutional context.

Applied to militia formation, militias initially diffuse when two communities are linked via ethnic, ideological, cultural, or historical bonds. A crucial mechanism that accounts for diffusion is the temporary or permanent *migration* of diffusion agents who reinforce such preexisting bonds (see Franzese and Hays 2008). Diffusion agents spread stories about militias' success in decreasing violence against civilians, leading to initial diffusion to other communities. Through such success stories, community residents learn that active resistance rather than passivity helps to achieve security. Success can be understood as the perceived ability of a militia to create stability in a village so that community residents no longer have to flee to protect themselves from insurgent violence. In the diffusion literature, this mechanism is referred to as *learning* – the updating of previously held beliefs (Dobbin, Simmons, and Garrett 2007, 462).[10]

An empirical implication of this argument is that in order to learn from other communities, community residents have to define their situation as sufficiently similar to the one in which militias already exist to believe that a militia will also improve their situation (Tarrow and McAdam 2005). This may be influenced by the strategic situation in which the community finds itself. As outlined above, local military stalemates are necessary for militia formation; this implies that if the same conditions of local military stalemates exist in a neighboring community, then militias should spread.

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[10] If communities form militias to signal their commitment to the state (Schubiger 2021), this might also be described as *emulation*, since communities do not necessarily change previously held beliefs (Elkins and Simmons 2005).

Community linkages and militia success in neighboring communities are necessary for initial diffusion, but they are not sufficient for the sustained diffusion of community-initiated militias. A last condition thus relates to the characteristics of the receiving community. The institutional context of preexisting security forces and authority structures is crucial for understanding when sustained diffusion occurs. Divisions among social, political, and military elites may prevent militia formation in the long term. Militias may change the balance of power within a community and – when tied to certain elites – risk that one group exerts more power than another. This risk may lead some elites to prevent or stop the militias from forming or isolate the emerging militia. In contrast, when social, political and military elites are relatively unified, militias do not risk upsetting the balance of power among elites and can be incorporated into the existing security apparatus.

An empirical implication of this argument is that militias that change the balance of power among elites serve the interests of elites only and resemble a private army. Unless the commanding elites have independent income, these militias typically have access to few resources and recruits, which limits their activities and potentially their life span. In contrast, a militia with broad-based support from a range of different elites has access to more resources, including the most crucial one – new members.

In sum, I expect that initial diffusion of militias occurs in communities that are tied to each other by ethnic, ideological, cultural, and historical bonds, and where one community experiences militias improving stability for its residents. Diffusion agents who travel from one community to another reinforce such bonds and tell the story of militia success. Communities learn from each other when residents are convinced that their situation is sufficiently similar to that of a neighboring community, such as in the case of a local military stalemate. Sustained diffusion occurs when social, political, and military elites are relatively unified in the receiving community, which prevents militias from becoming private, semiprofessional armies.

2.3.3 The Process of Community-Initiated Militia Mobilization

How do militias mobilize their members? The arguments above account for the formation and diffusion of militias by identifying the factors that change people's expectations about future violence and how they can respond to it. But once a community forms a militia, what makes the new organization grow? What are the mechanisms of social mobilization that operate in this instance? I suggest a causal path of militia mobilization that pays special attention to the social context. While the community level can explain militia formation and diffusion, it is at the individual and group levels that militia mobilization occurs (see Eck 2010, 10). Militias successfully mobilize when the militia leadership offers potential members a means to manage uncertainty about future events – about how best to protect oneself and one's family. Militias that appeal to

social conventions that invoke collective meaning within the community help manage uncertainty and are therefore more successful in attracting members than other militias.

Many approaches to mobilization for violence rely on a rational cost–benefit approach, which implies that if the benefits of joining an armed group outweigh the cost, then joining is a likely outcome (Olson 1965; Tullock 1971; Popkin 1979; Lichbach 1995; Weinstein 2007; Humphreys and Weinstein 2008).[11] This assumes that probabilities of receiving such benefits and avoiding related costs can be estimated, and thus acted upon. However, the costs and benefits of participation in rebellion are often difficult to calculate due to the unpredictable nature of war. What dominates decision-making during war is *uncertainty* about future events. In economics, the distinction between risk and uncertainty goes back to Knight (1921) and Keynes (1921) and implies that while estimates about future events are possible in risky environments based on known probability distributions, uncertain environments are too unstable and unpredictable to lend themselves to rational calculations (Nelson and Katzenstein 2014).[12] In irregular civil war, uncertainty is present when indiscriminate violence against civilians by insurgents and/or incumbents is the dominant form of violence. This is the case in contested areas in which no social contract between armed groups and civilians exists, or in areas of complete control in which the rival armed actor has no access to information (Kalyvas 2006; Arjona 2016). In such contexts, without the available information to calculate probable consequences of their actions, the question arises as to *how* people make decisions about how best to protect themselves. Accordingly, the focus here lies on the *process* of decision-making, not only the *outcome* of that process.

The process of decision-making under uncertainty is shaped by existing familiar repertoires and scripts. Applying the conceptual distinction between risk and uncertainty to decision-making in international relations, Nelson and Katzenstein (2014) argue that in the presence of uncertainty, actors' decisions are rooted in social conventions – shared templates and understandings that coordinate action – rather than rational calculation. In situations of crises and social change, individuals' decision-making process can no longer rely on

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[11] According to Kalyvas and Kocher (2007), however, the risk of joining the rebellion may actually be lower than the risk of remaining a noncombatant due to the nature of violence in insurgencies, which is predominantly indiscriminate, thus targeting innocent civilians. As combatants hide among civilians, the civilian population becomes a target for both sides. Instead of exposing combatants to more violence, insurgent groups may actually offer protection from such violence. This logic may apply to militias when we assume that insurgents inflict indiscriminate violence on the civilian population under government control, and thus the risk of nonparticipation in state-initiated or community-initiated militias equals or exceeds participation in such armed groups.

[12] Nelson and Katzenstein (2014, 365) argue that what is often presented as "uncertainty" in political economy should actually be called "risk."

established probability distributions. Rather, people rely on common knowledge from their immediate social environment to stabilize uncertainty and guide decision-making.

Regarding armed group mobilization, Nelson and Katzenstein's theory suggests that social conventions help manage the uncertainty of war. This fits with two major lines of research in conflict studies. First, Gutiérrez and Wood's (2014) call for attention to immaterial and other-regarding incentives rather than self-regarding, material incentives for armed group mobilization in high-risk circumstances, including the noninstrumental, community-building use of ideology. Second, a growing number of researchers have emphasized that, in making their decisions under uncertain conditions, individuals are embedded in social contexts. Strong communities are important in facilitating recruitment through information, support networks, and normative commitments (Petersen 2001; Parkinson 2013). Shesterinina (2016, 417) shows how families and friends provide "access to information that is critical for making difficult choices about whether to fight for the group, escape the fighting, or defect to the other side." But communities do not only provide crucial information but also access to a repertoire of collective action. Kaplan (2017, 34) argues that uncertainty during war encourages civilians to strive for "autonomy" and organize themselves. He observes in the context of unarmed civilians' responses to civil war violence that "[a]n option to make daily life more certain and increase chances of survival is to turn to indigenous – meaning local – organizations." Similarly, Arjona (2016) has shown that preexisting community organizations that regulate civilian life are an important condition for civilians' abilities to resist armed groups from intruding into their community.

My argument extends the second line of research, as I emphasize the social conventions – the "repertoire" or "script" – that communities can rely upon to respond to an uncertain situation. I bring together the question of individual motives with the nature of the group that seeks to attract participants to show that even though participants may be guided by various (non-)instrumental motives, it matters what *kind* of group they are asked to join.

Armed groups that rely on social conventions attract members through two main mechanisms: *commonality* and the *context for self-empowerment*. The first mechanism is commonality between the militia and potential participants: Building on social conventions, the militia is more familiar and less threatening to potential joiners. Such conventions are rituals and routines that transmit meaning to community residents and range from spiritual means to nonviolent forms of collective action. Relying on social conventions, militia institutions resonate with communities; which means that militias effectively frame their purpose of self-defense (Benford and Snow 2000). Resonance occurs when a militia's purpose is framed as credible and salient. Credible means that the framing reflects the militia's actual activities and that the militia leader has expertise to direct these activities. Salient means that the militia's purpose is central to the lives of the people and resonates with cultural narratives

(Benford and Snow 2000). For example, Ranger (1985) argues that in southern Africa, respect for traditional religion made liberation movements' ideology more relevant to peasant experiences and thus strengthened peasant support.[13] This implies that where militias bring with them "imported" ideologies and routines, successful mobilization is less likely. In addition to creating resonance, militias also need to provide innovation to motivate joiners. Community residents who neither feel protected by the state nor by the rebels "seek innovative courses of action" (Masullo 2015, 47) to overcome the limits of existing options. References to social conventions invite communities to adapt them to new social contexts, thereby creating a form of "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983) that legitimizes the new institution. The innovation may consist of new forms of legitimating leaders, new definitions of eligibility for membership, or new rules that govern participation.

The second mechanism, *a context for self-empowerment*, builds on the first. The reliance on repertoires rooted in the community facilitates people's autonomy in shaping their own future, creating a belief in agency and therefore a context for self-empowerment. This idea builds on Wood's (2003) concepts of "pleasure in agency" and "participation," which explain peasant support for rural insurgency in El Salvador. "Pleasure in agency" refers to participants' "ownership of successes of their collective actions" and expression of pride in the collective contribution to justice (Wood 2003, 234–35), while "participation" emphasizes the expectation of success of collective action, which raises hope and a sense of purpose (Wood 2003, 232). The concept of agency here refers to "protective strategies to retain autonomy, or self-rule" (Kaplan 2017, 34), as it has been used in works on civilian agency in nonviolent communities. The commonality and the innovative character of the new institution foster the sense of purpose and the expectation of success as it improves upon existing social conventions.

I stipulate that social conventions are a necessary condition for militia mobilization by providing commonality between the militia and potential participants and a context for participants' self-empowerment. A group that makes use of social conventions fares better in mobilizing members than a group that does not.

2.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

The research design for this book builds on within-case and cross-case process tracing, using subnational evidence from the civil war in Mozambique (1976–92).

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[13] This process is reflected in social movement research on diffusion. The diffusion of collective action repertoires is only successful if these repertoires can be adapted to the local context and/or mixed with already established repertoires (Campbell 2002).

2.4.1 Case Selection and Data Collection

The goal of this book is to explain the formation of community-initiated militias across time, the diffusion of community-initiated militias across space, and the process by which such militias mobilize their members. To develop and explore the theory, I designed a subnational study of how community-initiated militias in Mozambique formed and diffused during the country's civil war from 1976 to 1992 between the incumbent Frelimo and the insurgent Renamo. In particular, I study the largest militia, Naparama, and its spread across the northern territory.

Mozambique offers an excellent opportunity for study. The history of the war provides subnational variation on the variables of interest – military stalemates, levels of violence and territorial control, ethnic heterogeneity, and institutional (dis-)unity (Vines 1991; Wilson 1992; Nordstrom 1997; Weinstein 2007). Moreover, it is puzzling why community-initiated militias formed in Frelimo-held areas in Nampula and Zambézia provinces, as popular support for Renamo in these two provinces was stronger than in the southern region and the level of indiscriminate violence against civilians lower (Roesch 1992, 464; Finnegan 1992, 72). In addition, militias in Mozambique's war have not been studied in as much depth as the insurgent forces, even though their formation and activity provide important insights into why Mozambique experienced such a wide variation of violence. In the two provinces under study, Zambézia and Nampula, both community-initiated and state-initiated militias operated during the war. Thus, it is possible to compare how different types of militias form and mobilize.

In order to collect the necessary data, I conducted thirteen months of fieldwork in the capital and five districts in two provinces of Mozambique between 2010 and 2016.[14] I carried out more than 250 semi-structured interviews and oral histories with community members, former militia members, soldiers, and insurgents, public functionaries, and community leaders. I collected more than 10,000 pages of district and provincial government wartime reports and other government documents. In addition, I spoke to journalists, politicians, and researchers in various cities about the history of the war and its legacy.[15] From the interviews and archival material, I obtained detailed information on community histories; levels of violence and territorial control by insurgents and the government; motivations for joining the militia; the relationship between the militia, government, and the population; and current activities of former militia members who demand compensation from the government for their wartime contribution.

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[14] See map of Mozambique's provinces in Figure 4.1 and map of the Nampula and Zambézia provinces indicating the fieldwork sites in Figure 5.1.

[15] I discuss data collection methods in detail in the Appendix and the challenges of fieldwork in Chapter 3.

TABLE 2.2. *Overview of research design*

	Analytical strategy	Cases	Case selection
Formation	Within-case analysis	Naparama in Zambézia province	Militia presence varies over time
Diffusion	Controlled comparison	Lugela and Namarrói districts	High levels of war-affectedness;
	Case study	Mecubúri district	Militia presence varies across space
Mobilization	Controlled comparison	State- and community-initiated militias in Nicoadala district	High levels of war-affectedness;
	Case study	State- and community-initiated militias in Murrupula district	Militia presence varies according to type

2.4.2 Analytical Strategy and Methods for Data Analysis

To study the formation and diffusion of militias, I combine within-case analysis over time with cross-sectional comparisons. Within-case analysis is suitable to study the process of the formation of Naparama in northern Mozambique over time (the militia as unit of analysis). I use controlled comparisons for the cross-sectional analysis of why Naparama diffused to certain communities but not to others (the militia in a certain community as unit of analysis). I also compare the formation and evolution of Naparama with that of the state-initiated part-time militia (the militia as unit of analysis) (see Table 2.2).

I use process tracing to construct theoretical narratives that identify causal pathways, thereby confirming or disconfirming alternative explanations (Hall 2003).[16] Process tracing has elements of both theory generating and theory testing (Bennett 2008). It puts special emphasis on social processes by linking causal variables with different outcomes over time. It is therefore well suited for a theoretical framework that emphasizes causal mechanisms (Checkel 2008).

Process tracing has several advantages. First, process tracing is well suited to address the complex causes of militia formation and capture the endogenous relationships between different variables that account for how community-initiated militias form and diffuse. The method can help address complex causality, the problem of feedback loops, and endogenous relationships between variables (George and Bennett 2005). As a consequence, process

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[16] Scholars in the social sciences have developed many different approaches to process tracing. The different approaches can be broadly divided into the generation of theoretical narratives and the generation of historical narratives (Caporaso 2009). While the former is guided by theory and seeks broader generalizations, the latter seeks to explain specific (historical) events. The approach I follow in this book is the former.

tracing can reduce the gap that emerged between the ontology and the method-
ology in comparative politics – between the acknowledgment that the social
world is characterized by a diversity of causal relationships and the methods
that are unable to meet these challenges (Hall 2003).

Second, cross-sectional large-n studies often suffer from poor data quality.
As a result, researchers may mis-categorize certain armed groups as militias, or
they may not distinguish between different types of militias due to a lack of
sufficient data on all cases. By focusing on few cases and studying them in
depth, process tracing improves data quality and can better uncover omitted
variables. Process tracing allows for causal inferences within the limits of a
single case or few cases (Bennett and Elman 2006). To improve causal inference
and explore external validity, I conduct out-of sample case studies for each part
of the theory (Lyall 2015).

Third, identifying causal mechanisms is a crucial part of theory building and
a necessary building block to advance the research agenda on militias and
compare militias to other forms of violent collective action. Process tracing
improves theory building by understanding how causal mechanisms work that
connect different variables to each other while holding many variables constant
(Checkel 2008; Gerring 2010; Kalyvas 2008b). Finally, process tracing is a
suitable strategy for an approach that is grounded in methodological and
theoretical pluralism (Checkel 2008). Contexts of complex causality are well
suited for approaches that remain flexible with regard to their theoretical
assumptions, as it is possible to explain different aspects of the phenomenon
under study using theories with different assumptions about human behavior.

Process tracing, as I apply it, has two steps. First, I use the method to check
which of the proposed values of the causal and outcome variables, as suggested by
the alternative hypotheses, is congruent with the observed values of these variables.
Second, I trace the mechanisms that link the causal variables with the outcome
variables. For each case (each militia or each militia in a certain district), I map the
potential factors that lead to community-initiated militias forming and diffusing
and analyze the extent to which they affected the outcome.

I analyze the interview and archival data, as well as my field notes, with
software for qualitative analysis (TAMS Analyzer, Weinstein 2012), which
helps code portions of the text files and then group text portions belonging to
predefined codes. The qualitative data from my first field site, Nicoadala district
in Zambézia province, informed the theory development. Data from the
remaining field sites is used to further explore the theory.

The following chapter discusses in detail the opportunities and challenges of
conducting fieldwork in such a polarized society as Mozambique, which is
important to take into account when analyzing information collected about a
war that ended more than twenty years ago. In the subsequent chapters,
I present an overview of the history of the war and the empirical analyses of
when, where, and how militias formed in Mozambique.