

Reciprocal Destabilization: A Two-Level Security Dilemma Involving Rebellions, Refugees, and Regional Conflict

Michael D. McGinnis

Department of Political Science and
Workshop in Political Theory and Policy Analysis
Indiana University
Bloomington, Indiana 47405
mcginnis@indiana.edu

Abstract

Why do governments so often provide support to rebels fighting the government of a neighboring state? Also, once a pattern of “reciprocal destabilization” has been established between neighboring states, their leaders often find it difficult to cease such assistance. This paper uses examples of reciprocal destabilization from recent conflicts in the Horn of Africa and Kurdistan to illustrate a few stylized facts about this phenomenon. An informal model is then used to motivate a series of hypotheses which specify the conditions under which reciprocal destabilization should be expected to occur and persist. The paper concludes with a discussion of two ways in which these hypotheses might be tested in future research.

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Any observer of contemporary conflicts is likely to have noticed instances in which two neighboring governments support rebel groups that are fighting against the other government. For example, both Iran and Iraq supported rival Kurdish factions throughout their 1980-88 war. Cross-border support for rebels can persist over many years and may even survive dramatic changes in regime. For example, successive Sudanese governments provided support for Eritrean (ELF and EPLF) and Tigrean (TPLF) rebels fighting the Ethiopian government, and diverse Ethiopian regimes returned the favor by allowing southern Sudanese rebels (first the Anyanya and later the SPLA) to operate from bases in their own territory.

This paper reports my initial efforts to come to terms with this puzzling phenomenon of reciprocal destabilization. By supporting rebels fighting each other, each government ends up facing a more pronounced domestic security threat (than would be the case if its own rebels lacked any external support). Since both governments would be better off if each stopped this practice, agreements to this effect would seem to be an obvious next step. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that bilateral agreements to cease this practice are rarely effective.

For example, Iran agreed to stop supporting Iraqi Kurds in 1988 but resumed supporting Kurdish operations (especially the KDP) during the 1990-91 Gulf War. An earlier regime (the Shah's) had made a similar agreement with Iraq in 1975, but support resumed soon after the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Throughout this period, Turkish forces attacked PKK rebel bases in Iraq, Iran, or Syria. I strongly suspect that if one were to look at this conflict at any specific time period in the last several decades, one will see that, despite the shifting alignments among governments and Kurdish rebels, at least one Kurdish faction will be obtaining significant support from at least one neighboring state in that time period.

As will be detailed below, neighboring countries in the Horn of Africa seem to have had especially difficult problems in managing the cross-border operations of rebel groups. Reciprocal destabilization can be observed as early as 1967, when the leaders of Ethiopia and Sudan signed an agreement to stop supporting each other's rebels but then promptly violated that agreement (Woodward 1996:121). When the leaders of Ethiopia (Mengistu) and Somalia (Siad Barre) signed an agreement in 1988 to stop supporting rebels in each other's territory, both were facing severe security problems from other sources. Nonetheless, Mengistu's regime continued to support the USC faction in southern Somalia (Woodward 1996:128). According to recent reports, the current regime in Ethiopia continues to support several factions in Somalia's complex inter-clan conflict (IRIN 2001).

One sequence of events suggests that this phenomenon of reciprocal destabilization (RD) might have a structural basis that transcends changes in regime types, that RD constitutes, in effect, a relatively stable equilibrium in certain conflict situations. Consider what happened in the Horn of Africa around the pivotal year of 1991. Before that time, the Mengistu regime in Ethiopia had been allowing SPLA forces to use its territory as bases in its fight against Sudan's government, which in turn was providing similar support to EPLA and TPLA rebels fighting the central Ethiopian regime. In 1991 these rebels (and affiliated factions) took power in Addis Ababa, and, in gratitude to Sudan's long-standing support, forced the SPLA out of its Ethiopian bases. Not long afterwards, however, Sudan was again supporting rebels operating against both of the new regimes in Ethiopia and Eritrea (which became independent in 1993), and the SPLA

was again operating from within Ethiopian territory (Clapham 1996:241; Woodward 1996:125-131). The irony is clear: the Islamic government in Sudan was now supporting rebels against states ruled by updated versions of the rebel organizations that the same government of Sudan had supported just a few years earlier. (That the formerly allied leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea soon got their countries involved in a brutal border war is another sad irony in this case.)

In short, the pattern of reciprocal destabilization demonstrates a remarkable ability to restore itself after changes in regime or even successful conflict outcomes. This paper investigates why it proves so difficult for neighboring governments to stop this process of reciprocal destabilization. In part, this reflects operation of the logic of the Prisoner's Dilemma game, in which the rational actions of individually selfish actors make both worse off. The governments may try to stop supporting each other's rebels but find, for various reasons (to be detailed below) that they are unable to do so. But there is more to the story, and this paper will also discuss aspects of the nature of the state, and inter-state systems, in the developing world.

The first section outlines the conceptualization of reciprocal destabilization as a manifestation of a two-level security dilemma. The second section provides brief overviews of recent examples of RD from the regions of the Horn of Africa and Kurdistan. The next two sections outline an informal model that can explain the stylized facts inferred from these examples. The paper concludes with some suggestions for how this model's implications might be tested in future research.

Reciprocal Destabilization as a Two-Level Security Dilemma

I argue that reciprocal destabilization can result from a structure of interaction that I will call a "two-level security dilemma game." It is a two-level game (Putnam, 1988) in the sense that it involves actors at both the national and sub-national levels. This particular game, unlike Putnam's exemplar of the domestic ratification of international negotiations, involves two inter-related levels of security competition.¹

The informal model developed here resembles the classic "security dilemma" in that efforts by two governments to enhance their own security ultimately produces an outcome in which each faces an even worse degree of insecurity. In the standard interpretation of a security dilemma (Herz 1950; Jervis 1978; Posen 1993) the dynamic is driven by the fact that each actor's defensive efforts tend to be misinterpreted as potentially threatening to the other side. In the two-level security dilemma examined here the initial efforts may be more directly provocative, since cross-border support constitutes interference in another state's domestic affairs. As noted earlier, both Iraq and Iran used support for Kurdish rebels as a tactical move in a broader war fought primarily over issues unrelated to the status of Kurdistan.

In other circumstances, reciprocal destabilization can be triggered by more defensive maneuvers. That is, one government may support rebel groups active in its neighboring country in order to undermine the effectiveness of rebel groups already operating within the first state. Since many rebel armies conduct military operations on both sides of a border, support for one rebel faction may serve to make other factions less threatening. In this case, reciprocal

destabilization can occur even in the absence of any pre-existing animosity or antagonism between the two neighboring governments. Indeed, interstate tensions might arise as a consequence of one or both government's pursuit of rebel forces across their common border.

Whether or not each state is directly trying to destabilize the other, it turns out that this practice soon takes on a logic of its own, one that is very difficult to overcome in any lasting sense. Over time, influential elements in one or both states may come to develop a pronounced interest in maintaining existing levels of disruption, in order to use chaotic conditions as a cover for their own self-serving actions. Although this paper begins by using the simplifying assumption that these states can be treated as if they were unitary rational actors, some aspects of this phenomenon will require us to relax that assumption and consider the conflicting interests of the sub-components of each state.²

Examples from the Horn of Africa and Kurdistan

In order to motivate this analysis, this section provides brief, selective, and simplified overviews of recent conflicts in the Horn of Africa (specifically involving Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan) and the region occupied by the stateless Kurds (in Iran, Iraq, Turkey, and Syria). These narrative overviews will devote particular attention to changes in the patterns of foreign support for the many rebel organizations operating in these two regions. Events in these conflicts are used as a basis for stylized facts (or inductive generalizations) that the theoretical model detailed in subsequent sections is designed to explain.

*The Horn of Africa*³

From its independence in 1960 Somalia supported separatist movements within all its neighbors (Ethiopia, Kenya, and what would later become Djibouti). Long-standing support for rebels in the Ogaden region of Ethiopia escalated to a border war in 1977-78. Somalia's invasion was countered by massive Soviet (and Cuban) intervention, which saved Mengistu's Marxist regime. Afterwards, the Mengistu regime supported dissident Somali factions, especially the SNM in the north of Somalia. As noted earlier, Mengistu and Somalia's dictator Siad Barre signed an agreement in 1988 to stop supporting rebels in each other's territory, since both were facing severe security problems from other sources. Nonetheless, Mengistu's regime continued to support the USC faction in southern Somalia. The SNM, forced to move its operations into Somalia, contributed mightily to the collapse of the Somali state in 1991. Humanitarian interventions by the US and the UN came and went without having much of an effect on the overall pattern of conflict in Somalia. While chaos reigned in the south, the SNM became the basis for the self-proclaimed republic of Somaliland, which has yet to achieve any international recognition. A modicum of order was also established in Puntland (which does not have any pretensions to independence). Currently, Ethiopia is reported to oppose the recently declared Somali government by giving support to Somaliland, Puntland and other factions in Somalia's complex inter-clan conflict (Ali Musa Abdi 1999; IRIN 1999, 2001)

During this same period, the Ethiopian state survived two major transformations, the first from an ancient feudal monarchy under Haile Salaisse to the Marxist-Leninist regime under

Mengistu in 1974, and second, to a quasi-democratic multi-ethnic state after 1991. Both the Haile Salaisse and Mengistu regimes faced rebellion in Eritrea, a region that had been incorporated into the Ethiopian state only in 1962. Initially this struggle was led by the Muslim-centered ELF but by the 1970s a broader rebel organization, the EPLF, was dominant. This rebellion was joined by a separate rebellion centering around the Tigrean region, but unlike the EPLF, the TPLF was not waging a separatist war. Sudan, despite several changes in its governmental form and leadership, supported rebel groups fighting against the central regime in Ethiopia throughout the entire period since the 1960s (Clapham 1996:221). As noted below, Ethiopia's leaders were quick to return the favor.

Most observers agree that the EPLF, in particular, was not very dependent on external support. Instead, it was very successful in mobilizing voluntary support from its own people, and from the Eritrean *diaspora* (see Clapham 1966, 1998). Both the EPLF and TPLF managed their respective zones of control in a humane manner, especially in contrast to areas run by the SPLA, which has regularly come under criticism for its long record of human rights abuses (Africa Rights 1997, Human Rights Watch/Africa 1994). In any event, all of the combatants in these inter-locked conflicts benefited from their long-standing relationships with international humanitarian organizations (Africa Rights 1994, 1997; Clapham 1998; McGinnis 2000).

The Sudan has been plagued by two long and bitter civil wars in which multiple factions in the south fought either for a separate southern state or for fundamental change in the government of the Sudan as a whole. The first war, from about 1956 to 1972, was led by the Anya Nya forces. In return for Sudan's support for the Muslim-dominated ELF, Ethiopia provided support and logistical support for the Anya Nya rebels. Haile Salaisse's regime helped arrange a peace agreement between Sudan and its southern rebels in the 1972 Addis Ababa accords. Still, Sudan continued to support Eritrean rebels, now focused on the EPLF (which emerged as the dominant force after a conflict with the ELF). Clapham (1996: 152, 217) explicitly attributes retribution as the basic reason why Ethiopia's Mengistu regime began to support the SPLA in the second civil war in the Sudan (after 1983). Although plagued by factional struggles, the SPLA controlled significant portions of Sudan and was in charge of refugee camps within Sudan (supported by the UN through Operation Lifeline Sudan). Ethiopian support was abruptly terminated when Mengistu lost power in 1991. After all, both the Eritrean and Tigrean rebels had long been supported by Sudan's government, and kicking the SPLA out was an obvious gesture of gratitude to their common patron.

As the SPLA moved its base of operations fully into Sudan, a major factional split occurred, with the SSIM (under Riak Machar) emerging as the primary challenge to John Garang's SPLA. But the SPLA had considerable military success in this period, achieving control over a significant part of the southern Sudan. The SSIM formed a temporary alliance with the government of Sudan, while the SPLA aligned with various Northern opposition groups, but for our purposes it is not necessary to follow through all these shifting alignments. Instead, it suffices to note that the SPLA was soon again operating out of bases in Ethiopia and Eritrea (Clapham 1996, Woodward 1996). At times the Islamic government in Iran supported Muslim opposition groups in Eritrea, but at other times Sudan tried to improve its relations with Eritrea.

The most recent piece of this puzzle was provided by the outbreak, in 1998, of a bloody border war between Ethiopia and Eritrea. This war diverted attention from the Sudanese border, thus opening up more room for Sudanese rebels to operate there. Also, there have been reports that Ethiopia and Eritrea have supported rival factions in the Somali conflict, and that the Eritreans have been supporting both Somali and Oromo rebellions inside Ethiopia (Ali Musa Abdi. 1999, IRIN 1999, 2001).

*Kurdistan*⁴

Space precludes any effort to detail the entire unhappy tale of Kurdish efforts to carve out their own state in the region of Kurdistan, which extends across the borders of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. Many Kurdish factions have participated in violent conflicts with one or more of these governments. Turkey has been primarily concerned with the activities of the PKK, which has routinely operated from bases in Syria, Iran, or Iraq. Within Iran, the PDKI has been the most successful rebel organization. The Iraqi government has been most directly concerned with the efforts of the KDP and PUK to carve out a separate Kurdish region within Iraq. Each of these rebel groups has been supported by neighboring countries and then betrayed by these same patrons. The most dramatic example was provided by the Shah's termination of support for the KDP in 1975, in exchange for territorial concessions by the government of Iraq. Iran's activities were taken in collaboration with the United States, and both of these patrons seem to have been interested in providing the KDP with enough support to cause problems for Iraq but not nearly enough for it to have a realistic chance of succeeding (Bulloch and Morris 1992: 136-141). It was during this period that Henry Kissinger made his famous comment to the effect that covert action should never be confused with missionary work (Bulloch and Morris 1992: 140; Yavuz and Gunter 2001: 37).

As mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this paper, this agreement broke down after the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Sensing opportunity, Iraq invaded Iran and provided ample support for the KDPI, which managed to wrest control of portions of Kurdish Iran. But Iran eventually turned the tide and moved the front back into Iraq, at which time both the KDP and PUK achieved considerable success within Iraq, largely due to Iranian support, especially for the KDP. The PUK reached an agreement with Iraq (Entessar 1992:132), but all this was changed by the 1988 cease-fire between Iran and Iraq, which included an agreement to stop support for Kurdish rebel organizations. The full force of Saddam Hussein's military capability, including chemical weapons, was brought to bear against the Kurds. Of course, after losing the Gulf War against U.S.-led coalition forces, Iraq's ability to conduct military operations in Kurdistan was limited. Currently both the PUK and KDP control regions in northern Iraq, benefiting both from the oil-for-food arrangement and from illegal trade circumventing the UN sanctions against Iraq. The KDP receives support from Turkey, primarily because of its opposition to the PUK, which has formed close relations with the PKK. So, in this case, Turkey is pursuing its own domestic security by supporting a Kurdish faction that operates primarily within Iraq. In short, it's hard to imagine a better contemporary example of the cynical machinations of *realpolitik* than the shifting pattern of relations among governments and rival Kurdish factions in recent decades.

Stylized Facts About Reciprocal Destabilization

My reading of these cases, as summarized in these brief overviews, has led me to propose the following stylized facts.

1. If one country supports rebels in a neighboring country, for whatever reason, the second country typically finds some way to reciprocate.
2. This support may continue even after a major regime change in one of the states.
3. Even if support for rebels is stopped by a newly established regime, or as part of a tactical move on the part of an existing regime, a similar form of support eventually re-emerges.
4. Bilateral agreements to stop supporting each others' rebel groups are easily overturned by subsequent developments.
5. Although external aid may be disrupted (by regime changes or tactical moves by their patrons), rebel organizations find ways to survive and even prosper after losing one source of aid.
6. Rebel organizations typically obtain formal or informal control over refugee camps located in neighboring countries (or, in the case of the SPLA, camps set up to care for “internally displaced peoples” within southern Sudan). This control enables these rebel groups to divert at least some humanitarian aid to support their military operations (see McGinnis 2000).

There are certainly many complexities in these cases that are not reflected in these neatly-stated stylized facts. Furthermore, without more systematic analysis it may be impossible to determine how well these observations would extend to conflicts in other regions or other historical eras. Still, I expect that similar patterns would be observed in many other conflict situations. In any event, these observations provide the departure point for the remainder of the analysis presented in this paper. The informal model detailed in subsequent sections lays out an integrated explanation of these stylized facts.

The Underlying Pattern of Conflict

Before we can worry about the possibility of cross-boundary support for rebellion, we have first to have some viable rebellion that might attract such support. That is, we are not interested in modeling rebellions which owe their origins to external support. Instead, we focus on rebellions nurtured by some domestic opposition group.

Many, many factors affect the success or failure of rebellions (see, *inter alia*, Lichbach 1995). For the purposes of this paper we focus on two factors: (1) the political grievances of

some segment of the population that could potentially support this rebellion and (2) the ingredients that contribute to the success of military operations (especially money, guns, and access to some sanctuary). Other factors are also essential, most notably effective leadership. In this case, however, we assume that there exists a potential pool of sufficiently talented political or military entrepreneurs that few opportunities to organize rebellion are left untapped. That is, whenever some ethnic (or other identity) group widely shares significant grievances that are unlikely to be resolvable by legal means within their respective countries, this creates an opportunity for those who would like to engage in violent operations as an effort to redress these grievances.⁵ If these leaders can obtain access to weapons (or enough money to buy weapons) and are able to retreat into safe sanctuaries, then they are likely to preside over rebel organizations that will show some stamina, even if they fall short of ultimate success.

In short, a rebel organization requires both grievances and guns to survive over the long-haul. Because this paper is primarily concerned with exploring the relationship between external support and long-lasting rebellions, I assume that the states in question are such that they generate sufficient grievances to potentially support a significant rebellion. Given the nature of most states in the developing world, this turns out to not be a very restrictive assumption at all. Most of these states distribute resources and access to policy-making influence in a grossly unequal manner. That is, most states will include some ethnic or other group that feels its interests are not being met, and are most unlikely to ever be met, under the current regime.

It is also useful to impose a generic geo-political structure on the states to be considered here. That is, we assume that disaffected groups are most likely to be concentrated in outlying sections of the country. Again, this is not a particularly restrictive assumption, as many developing countries include outlying territories which are poorly integrated with the capital city or other more developed regions in which, by definition, the most influential groups are located.⁶ In many such states, the central government retains at best a weak measure of control over at least portions of their borders.

A related phenomenon is the widespread existence of national frontiers that impose an artificial division among members of a single ethnic group. As is well-known, many ethnic groups straddle national boundaries in this manner, especially in Africa (see Clapham 1996, Herbst 2000). The operation of an ethnic-based rebellion is greatly facilitated by the existence of fellow ethnic groups across the border, for this makes it likely that safe refuges or other support may be forthcoming from peoples with whom individual rebels share family or other ties. However, such ties can also provide a source of discord, as is readily apparent in the prevalence of cross-boundary Kurdish factionalism. This model does not require the existence of fellow ethnic members across the border, but for such cases it is likely to provide an especially good fit.

Members of disaffected groups face difficult collective problems in their efforts to collectively organize to better achieve their interests within the political process of their respective states. Despite the best efforts of the government to frustrate these efforts by exacerbating these collective action dilemmas (Lichbach, 1995), eventually a few extra-legal organizations may arise that endeavor to redress the grievances of a or b.⁷ We assume that the typical situation is one in which several such organizations form, although they may differ widely in their effectiveness or capabilities.⁸

At some point, the most successful of these organizations comes to present a security problem for the government. The unrest causes distress to important members of the government's support coalition or otherwise interferes with the pursuit of their own interests. In response, the government uses force to try to repress this rebellion. For our purposes, we need only consider cases in which repression is ultimately ineffective, in the sense that the rebellion persists, even if only a low levels of overt violence.

We now have the basic pre-conditions needed before a pattern of reciprocal destabilization can emerge. Given two neighboring states, the governments of which have routinely ignored the interests of disaffected groups residing near their common boundary, any rebellion against one government provides an opportunity for the other to begin supporting that rebellion. This support can begin in one of two ways.

Case (i): Direct Support. In our first case, one government could provide support to rebels operating inside a neighboring state's territory even before the consequences of that conflict spill over into its own territory. Such support would be a particularly attractive option if the two states are regional rivals (McGinnis 1990) or have some outstanding sources of dispute.

Case (ii): Indirect Support. A second path to cross-border destabilization efforts begins when people fleeing from the conflict zone cross the international border and become refugees. This influx of refugees presents the government of the second state with a decision. Should it facilitate the establishment of refugee camps or take efforts to force the refugees back across the border? The latter option is likely to be very costly and ineffective, given the relatively weak control the state authorities maintain over the borderlands, even in the absence of conflict. The former option will be even more attractive if, as has certainly been the case in recent decades, there exists a network of international humanitarian organizations willing and able to provide assistance to refugee camps (Africa Rights 1994; de Waal 1997; McGinnis 2000). Since such organizations are, for the most part, going to have to work through local authorities, this provides a new source of income for local government officials.

We can now summarize the pre-requisite assumptions that prepare us for the possible existence of cross-border support. We need an active rebellion based in disaffected groups within one country that either (1) elicits support from a second country or (2) triggers refugee flows across the border into that second country. This second path is especially noteworthy, because it demonstrates that we do NOT have to assume that there already exists some major boundary or other dispute between two nations in order to observe a pattern of reciprocal destabilization.

Each country includes members of multiple ethnic or other identity groups. Governments in both states allocate resources and/or enforce domestic laws in such a way as to create real grievances on the part of significant domestic groups. In many cases at least one major sub-group in each country has significant number of fellow members that live across the border in the territory of the other state. (This last step is not necessary for our analysis.) Finally, some rebel movements have become sufficiently well-organized to pose at least a potential security threat to each government. Under what conditions will one or both states support these rebel organizations?

A Game Model of Reciprocal Destabilization

We begin by treating the two governments 1 and 2 as if they are unitary rational actors. Each government faces a domestic rebellion organized around rebel organization R_j for $j=1,2$. Each government may also face rebellions from other factions, but R_j denotes the primary domestic threat to the government of state j . Let s_j denote government j 's security level, in the absence of foreign support for R_j . In general, a state's security is a function of its own military capability and that of its neighboring states and internal rebel groups, along with relevant indicators of the state of relations among these actors. In order to avoid the complications entailed in specifying optimal levels of military expenditures, in this paper we treat increased domestic or external threats as imposing additive decrements to this base level of security.⁹

This simplification allows us to focus on a fundamental choice confronting the leaders of two neighboring states, each of which already faces a domestic rebellion of some consequence. As shown in Figure 1, each government j chooses whether or not to provide support (in the form of weapons, money, or sanctuary) to R_k . Doing so is costly to j , and these costs are denoted by c_j . If k supports R_j government j experiences a decrease in its perceived security level which we denote by d_j . Providing support to a neighbor's rebel groups also conveys a level of benefits b_j to the donor government. (Possible components of this b_j term will be detailed below.) With this notation the payoffs defined in Figure 1 are defined.

Figure 1. A 2x2 Game Model of Rebel Support

		Does 2 support R_1 ?	
		NO	YES
Does 1 support R_2 ?	NO	(s_1, s_2)	$(s_1 - d_1, s_2 - c_2 + b_2)$
	YES	$(s_1 - c_1 + b_1, s_2 - d_2)$	$(s_1 - d_1 - c_1 + b_1, s_2 - d_2 - c_2 + b_2)$

Note: Payoffs for row player 1 are listed first in each cell.

Providing support for rebels in the other state will be a dominant strategy whenever $b_j > c_j$. Given the way we've set up the problem, this condition is very likely to hold. Since there are few if any sources for the direct costs of providing such aid, the c_j term can be assumed to be negligible.¹⁰ If so, reciprocal destabilization (the YES, YES cell in Figure 1) is the equilibrium outcome for this game.

This game satisfies conditions for a Prisoner's Dilemma game when each player prefers the NO-NO outcome to the YES-YES outcome. That is, this is a PD game when both governments would be better off if neither supported rebels fighting the other government. If c_j approximates zero, this condition reduces to $b_j < d_j$ for both j . Under these conditions both governments would prefer to avoid supporting the other's rebels. Assuming this game is repeated over time, the Folk Theorem asserts the players could establish and maintain a cooperative equilibrium, under the right conditions. What complications might make a cooperative agreement to stop providing aid difficult to achieve or maintain?

At least some of the classic conditions for cooperation (as identified by Axelrod 1984 and Oye, 1985) are present in this game. Clearly, the shadow of the future looms large, for local security threats are unlikely to go away on their own account. Perhaps the biggest obstacle to cooperation in this situation is the difficulty the governments have in fully observing each other's behavior. Such aid is often covert. A further complication is that neither government may have secure control over its own borderlands. In effect, by not policing its own borderlands a government can be said to offer implicit support for rebel armies operating across that border. These difficulties are compounded once one weakens the assumption of unitary rational action, for there may well be some elements in either government that directly benefit from the provision of covert aid, the diversion of humanitarian aid to refugees, or other means of obtaining benefits from a general state of disruption.¹¹

These practical difficulties may, by themselves, be sufficient to undermine many efforts by neighboring states to overcome this dilemma. However, in many cases the situation may be even worse, for it may be the case that at least some of the relevant actors do not even see this as a dilemma at all. That is, some actors may prefer reciprocal destabilization to mutual cooperation (see Figure 1). If both players have this preference ordering, then they are playing the game of Deadlock (Snyder and Diesing 1977; Downs et al. 1985), and there is no reason to expect any meaningful effort towards cooperation.

Actors may obtain four potential benefits from supporting rebels in a neighboring state, two related to security concerns and two to economic considerations. Not all may be present in all circumstances, and the relative magnitudes of each component may help differentiate situations of potential cooperation from ones where cooperation will not even be attempted.

Security benefits.

There are two components to consider, corresponding to the direct and indirect routes to reciprocal destabilization discussed above. First, if the two governments are engaged in a long-lasting dispute of their own, independent of their domestic rebellions, then each may support rebels in the neighboring state in order to distract that government's attention from itself. This incentive is particularly strong during wartime (as in the Iran-Iraq War discussed above).

Second, each government may consider its own rebels to be a the primary threat to its own continued existence. In this case, it may be useful to strengthen some other rebel organizations that operate in the same area and perhaps draw on a similar resource base. In this way the threat from the first rebel organization may be muted, as it diverts attention to defend itself against operations by the other rebel group. This possibility is most apt in situations when a common ethnic group is supporting separate rebellions in both countries. In this case rebel armies from the two countries may act as rival claimants to the political aspirations of the same ethnic group. Even in cases where the two rebel armies draw support from different ethnic groups, they may still compete over control of the borderlands where refugee camps are located, or over other supply routes. In both cases, then, support for neighboring rebel armies may significantly ameliorate the donor government's own security problems.

Strictly speaking, the term "two-level security dilemma" is appropriate for either path to the outcome of reciprocal destabilization. In either case, assuming their preferences satisfy conditions for a PD game, both governments would be better off if neither supported domestic rebels fighting the other government. However, the dilemma is most pressing under the indirect path, for then the joint decrease in security occurs even though both governments are taking primarily defensive measures (against the threat posed by their own domestic rebels). In any event, this action might be interpreted as provocative, to the extent that the rival organizations supported also direct their operations against the neighboring government. In practice, rebel armies are likely to conduct operations against both official government forces and other rebel forces. Thus, under either set of circumstances, the puzzle of reciprocal destabilization can be interpreted as the unintended outcome of reduced security for both governments. Efforts to correct this problem might be thwarted by problems of transparency. Or, more seriously, significant elements of one or both governments may find RD preferable to mutual cooperation. Such preferences are especially likely for actors primarily motivated by economic benefits.

Economic benefits.

As discussed earlier, refugee camps are a ready source of income for those local forces (government officials or rebel leaders) who control access to recipients of humanitarian aid. Although this incentive may not suffice to induce major government officials to encourage the establishment of refugee camps, the rewards to local officials may be substantial. More generally, local agents of the state may benefit from their ability to conduct extra-legal activities such as smuggling (Fearon and Laitin 1999; Berhal and Malone 2000). In extreme cases, the official state apparatus may serve primarily as a cover for such extra-legal activities, as in the "shadow states" dominated by warlords (Reno 1998). In any event, these economic incentives are likely to become more entrenched over time, making it increasingly difficult to disrupt a pattern of reciprocal destabilization once it has persisted for several years.

In sum, governments (as a whole or local agents thereof) may provide cross-border support for rebels for four reasons: to weaken (1) the other government or (2) rival rebel armies in their own country, (3) to create a need for larger refugee camps from which more humanitarian aid can be diverted, or (4) to sow general disruption from which economic gains may be reaped (especially from illegal cross-border trade). Furthermore, different elements of the government may be pursuing different combinations of these motivations at the same time. In short, there seem to be plenty of reasons to expect reciprocal destabilization to persist.

If prospects for cooperative efforts to stop reciprocal destabilization are so bleak, what can explain the seeming frequency with which such efforts at such cooperation are made? In cases of regional rivalry, each state might be trying to achieve an advantage over the other, by pretending to stop aid but not really doing so. In other cases, Great Power patrons of these governments or international lending agencies might exert pressure for them to cooperate to enhance regional stability. In such cases those elements of the government who benefit most directly from the delivery of cross-border aid might simply continue their actions while the public diplomacy unfolds. In still other instances, as perhaps was the case for the Mengistu-Siad Barre accord in 1988, leaders may be honestly attempting to cope with this dilemma, only to have their efforts undermined by the basic logic of the system.

Another complication not included in the analysis given below is that governments may take the initiative to help create rebel organizations, rather than waiting for leaders to emerge on their own. That is, governments may seek out individuals who might be amenable to pursuing goals that are congruent with its own goals, and by providing these individuals with covert assistance help make them into leaders of rebel movements. Of course, there is no way of assuring that these individuals will always follow one's preferred direction, once they have managed to establish a viable organization. Still, there is no reason to require governments to be quite so passive as they are portrayed in the argument laid out above.

Directions for Future Research

This analysis implies several tentative conclusions concerning the conditions under which a pattern of reciprocal destabilization is most likely to occur and to persist or be disrupted.

Reciprocal destabilization is more likely to be observed between regional rivals than in other dyads.

Reciprocal destabilization is more likely to occur when a single ethnic group is engaged in a rebellion against neighboring governments.

Cooperation on ending support is most likely when one or both governments is facing another major security threat or is under pressure from external donors.

Cooperative efforts are less likely to be successful when refugee camps are attracting major flows of humanitarian aid or when there are significant gains to be made in illegal cross-border trade.

Cooperative efforts are less likely to be successful the longer the pattern of reciprocal destabilization has been in effect.

Of course, each of these propositions includes an implied *ceteris paribus* caveat, that is, each condition holds only if all other factors are kept constant. At this point I remain uncertain about how to investigate these hypotheses in a more systematic manner. One direction for research would be a large-n study to investigate the conditions under which patterns of reciprocal destabilization are most likely to occur. However, the argument laid out in this paper requires several layers of assumptions, and cases would have to be selected that satisfy the geo-political configurations specified above. Thus, it is not clear that the appropriate universe of cases would include all examples of civil wars or internal conflicts, or all disputes between contiguous states.

Regan's (2000) recent book on foreign intervention in internal conflicts can be used to illustrate the potential problems associated with a large-scale quantitative analysis of reciprocal destabilization. Regan generates a comprehensive data list of foreign military and economic interventions in the post-World War II era. His operational definition of intervention requires that the action be considered to be "convention-breaking" activities that are directly targeted on

the “authority structures” of the government and intended to change the military balance of forces between the contending forces (Regan 2000: 10). This definition clearly includes the direct provision of military or economic aid to rebel forces discussed in this paper, although it may not include more informal or implied support such as allowing rebels to operate bases within one’s territory. Indeed, it turns out that few of the instances of reciprocal (or unilateral) destabilization discussed in an earlier section of this paper are included in his data set.

Regan’s data set also includes civil conflicts in which no foreign interventions occur. He uses a minimal threshold of 200 fatalities to define instances of intrastate conflict (Regan 2000: 21). From his appendix (pp. 153-158) I have selected all of the cases related to the conflicts discussed above (since the year 1960); these cases are listed in Table 1.

Of the 16 cases listed in Table 1, only five (or six) comport with my earlier discussion of these conflicts. Regan lists Sudan as intervening in the Eritrean struggle for independence (1962-91). His data set includes both newly independent Somalia’s support for a limited rebellion inside Ethiopia (1960-64) and Somalia’ direct intervention in the Ogaden War (1977-85). Ethiopia is counted as intervening in the conflict (1982-91) that culminated in the collapse of the Somali state, but not in the subsequent unrest within Somalia (1991-ongoing) Most surprisingly, Ethiopia is not listed as intervening in either of the two long civil wars in Sudan.

All of the cases from Regan’s data set involving Iran or Iraq are included in Table 1, even though some may not have anything to do with their respective Kurdish revolts. Iran is listed as intervening in support of opposition groups (presumably including Kurdish ones) within Iraq in a period (1985-93) encompassing much of the Iran-Iraq War. (The Iran-Iraq war itself does not appear in this list because it was clearly an interstate war.) Iraqi interference during the period of Iran’s Islamic Revolution (1978-79) is included, but there may not be a direct connection to Kurdistan in this case. No other regional bases of support are included for any of the other Kurdish revolts discussed above.

In short, this data set falls short of capturing the diversity of cases of indirect intervention outlined in my historical overviews of these two conflict regions. Before proceeding, I want to clarify that this observation is NOT intended to be a criticism of Regan’s fine work. Instead, it points to the difficulties associated with any effort to treat this phenomenon from a systematic perspective. It is naturally going to be very difficult to detect all low-level conflicts with minimal casualties, even if they persist over long periods of time. In some cases, a pattern of reciprocal cross-border destabilization may become institutionalized at the ground level but still leave little trace in the official sources used to generate comprehensive data sets.

An alternative direction for research would be to follow the "analytic narrative" approach of Bates et al. (1998). The model laid out in this paper highlights certain factors or critical decision points in the development of a pattern of reciprocal destabilization. By examining the historical development of a few conflict cases we could see whether these factors or decision points do indeed turn out to have the implications suggested here. This would require more detailed examination of a few cases, beyond the Horn of Africa and Kurdistan cases used in the development of this model. This path seems to be the more promising direction for future research on this topic, and I hope to pursue it further.

Notes

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- ¹ See Simon and Starr 1996, 1997 for related analyses of two-level security management.
- ² For further discussion of alternative interpretations of this state as unitary rational actor assumption, see McGinnis 1991a,b, McGinnis and Williams, 2001.
- ³ For historical accounts of conflict in the Horn of Africa, see Clapham 1996, 1998, David 1991; de Waal 1997, Markakis 1987, 1998, Woodward 1996.
- ⁴ For histories of conflicts in Kurdistan, see Bulloch and Morris 1992; Chaliand 1994; Entessar 1992, Yuvuz and Gunter 2001.
- ⁵ Strictly speaking, even a political entrepreneur who has no intention to actually redress these grievances, but instead engages in violence for more selfish purposes, may be able to use the existence of these grievances as a means of garnering more support than would be forthcoming for overtly criminal organizations. For further discussion of the similarities between these two forms of activity, see Fearon and Laitin 1999 and Berdal and Malone 2000.
- ⁶ This assumption does, however, preclude consideration of urban-based rebellions.
- ⁷ These organizations may also pursue more narrowly self-interested goals of its members, such as engaging in looting, kidnapping, drug production, or other criminal activity, but they at least make some effort towards realizing the political aspirations of these disadvantaged groups. As Fearon and Laitin 1999 demonstrate, some aspects of rebellions reflect a failure on the part of non-rebels to organize collectively to offset the abuses of the rebel organizations themselves.
- ⁸ Organizing rebellion within the framework of a single organization is an even more difficult collective action problem. Virtually all rebel movements include competing factions.
- ⁹ For alternative specifications of security functions, see McGinnis 1990, 1991a,b; Simon and Starr 1996, 1997. McGinnis 2000 considers the decisions of individual participants in rebellions.
- ¹⁰ One potential source of costs would be an increase in the likelihood that the neighboring government may insist on the right to conduct operations of "hot pursuit" into one's own territory, in order to attack rebel bases. However, such operations violate the first state's sovereignty and thus are likely to face opposition. In any event, rebel groups confront fewer costs on carrying out military operations across the border than will either government.
- ¹¹ Keen 1994, MacRae and Zwi 1994, and de Waal 1997 provide sobering accounts of the ways in which political and economic actors can benefit from unrest caused by wars or famines.

Table 1. Civil Conflicts and Intervention in the Horn of Africa or Kurdistan, 1960-present

<i>Time Span</i>	Country	Casualties	Intervenor(s)	Target	Outcome
1960-64	Ethiopia	300	<i>Somalia</i>	<i>Government</i>	<i>Failure</i>
1962-91	Ethiopia	45,000	US Cuba Cuba USSR USSR <i>Sudan</i>	Government Opposition Government Opposition Government <i>Opposition</i>	Failure Failure Failure Failure Failure <i>Failure</i>
1977-85	Ethiopia	30,000	Cuba USSR <i>Somalia</i>	Government Government <i>Opposition</i>	Success Success <i>Failure</i>
1987-91	Ethiopia	45,000	USSR	Government	Failure
1992- Ongoing	Ethiopia	2,000			
1982-91	Somalia	20,000	US US <i>Ethiopia</i>	Government Opposition <i>Opposition</i>	Failure Failure <i>Failure</i>
1991- Ongoing	Somalia	300,000	UN US	Neutral Neutral	Failure Failure
1963-72	Sudan	200,000	Belgium	Government	Failure
1983- Ongoing	Sudan	990,000	Libya Iran	Opposition Government	Failure Failure
1961-66	Iraq	5,000	Syria	Government	Failure
1974-74	Iraq	1,000			
1985-93	Iraq	180,000	UN US <i>Iran</i>	Opposition Opposition <i>Opposition</i>	Success Success <i>Failure</i>
1991- Ongoing	Iraq	500,000	UN US UK	Opposition Opposition Opposition	Success Success Success
1978-79	Iran	10,000	<i>Iraq</i>	<i>Government</i>	<i>Failure</i>
1981-82	Iran	4,000			
1984- Ongoing	Turkey	15,000	Germany	Opposition	Failure

Source: Selected from a more comprehensive data set in Regan (2000:153-158). Italics were added to denote cases discussed in the current paper.

Abbreviations

ELF	Eritrean Liberation Front
EPLF	Eritrean People's Liberation Front
KDP	Kurdish Democratic Party (Iraq)
KDPI	Kurdish Democratic Party of Iran
PKK	Worker's Party of Kurdistan (Turkey)
PUK	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (Iraq)
SPLA	Sudan People's Liberation Army
SSIM	Southern Sudan Independence Movement
TPLF	Tigrean People's Liberation Front (Ethiopia)
USC	United Somali Congress

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