

Military Aid and Violence Against Civilians in Civil Wars

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Introduction

This essay examines the impact of military assistance on the levels of violence against civilians during civil wars. The focus is on the attacks perpetrated by governments, not by rebels. It is assumed that governments target civilians because they believe that this tactic increases their opportunities to defeat the insurgency. Jean-Paul Azam and Anke Hoeffler have used this rationalist assumption to model the impact of foreign aid on civil war violence.¹ They claim that outside funding will raise the levels of counterinsurgent brutality. Their argument does not distinguish between forms of foreign assistance: it refers both to development and military aid.

In this essay, I claim that the relationship between foreign aid and state brutality is more complex than Azam and Hoeffler suggest. The authors have found that development aid is positively related to the level of state violence against non-combatants in African conflicts and they assume that this finding also reflects the impact of military assistance. Development and military aid, however, are very different forms of foreign assistance and evidence from El Salvador and Peru suggest that they may have different impacts on the dynamic of civil war. In these two countries, in effect, increased US military assistance did not lead to higher civilian casualties.

The difference in impact of development and military aid is explained by two factors. First, development aid only increases the funding of brutal regimes, whereas military assistance can also induce them to abandon brutality. Second, while traditional military aid programmes have been driven almost exclusively by strategic concerns, the programmes implemented in Peru and El Salvador also incorporated human rights considerations.

The essay is divided into four sections. The first section explains the rationale behind the assumption that regimes target civilians for strategic reasons. The second section discusses the argument of Azam and Hoeffler, which is based upon such assumption. It also explores its applicability to the Peruvian and Salvadoran conflicts. The

¹ Jean-Paul Azam and Anke Hoeffler, "Violence Against Civilians in Civil Wars: Looting or Terror?" *Journal of Peace Research* 39, no. 4 (2002): 461–485.

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third and fourth sections explain why the argument of Azam and Hoeffler may hold true for development aid, but not for military assistance.

1. The Logic of Targeting Civilians

In every civil war the civilian population suffers high economic and social costs, but in many conflicts civilians are also the object of direct attacks. Rationalist explanations of civil war violence suggest that the targeting of civilians functions as a military tactic.² The intuition is that this form of wartime violence is too pervasive, too recurrent and apparently too premeditated for it not to be part of a larger military policy. The terrorizing of civilians, however, is not typically an end in itself either. That is, warring parties do not perpetrate these actions because their goal is to destroy the lives and livelihoods of civilians *per se*. Instead, they seem to perpetrate these actions because of strategic considerations: they believe that the practice of terror increases the chances of prevailing in the conflict.

From a rationalist perspective, regimes (and their security forces) are rational agents and the targeting of civilians is a rational behaviour. An actor is said to be (instrumentally) rational if it optimizes some goal under a set of constraints that limit the range of behaviours that can be carried out. These constraints point to limits imposed by human and material resources, legal regulations, and institutional norms.³ Some people might object to the use of rational choice assumptions to study the terrorizing of civilians. They could argue that those who engage in such behaviour have to be irrational or mentally ill, a hypothesis often advocated by the media. However, social scientists and human rights activists have disputed this portrayal. One recurrent argument is that if the perpetrators of such acts were “abnormal people, then there would simply be too many psychiatric patients recruited into regular and paramilitary units.”⁴

One should not forget that instrumental rationality is not defined by the objectives of an actor, but by the mode in which the actor pursues its objectives in the presence of constraints. This means that an actor may have intolerable goals (from the point of view of liberal democracies), but still be instrumentally rational if it efficiently uses the

² Stathis Kalyvas, “Wanton and Senseless? The Logic of Massacres in Algeria,” *Rationality and Society* 11, no. 3 (1999): 243-285; “The logic of violence in civil war,” Paper presented at the first meeting of the Laboratory in Comparative Ethnic Processes (LiCEP), Duke University, Durham, USA, 21-23 April 2000; Benjamin Valentino, “Final Solutions: Causes of Mass-Killing and Genocide,” *Security Studies* 9, no. 3 (Spring 2000): 1-59; Benjamin Valentino, Paul Huth, and Dylan Balch-Lindsay, “Draining the Sea”: Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare,” *International Organization* 58 (Spring 2004): 375–407.

³ Todd Sandler and Walter Enders, “Transnational Terrorism: An Economic Analysis,” In *The Economic Impact of Terrorist Attacks*, eds. H.W. Richardson, P. Gordon, and J.E. Moore II, forthcoming.

⁴ Inger Skjelsbæk, “Sexual Violence and War: Mapping Out a Complex Relationship,” *European Journal of International Relations* 7, no. 2 (June 2001): 213.

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resources at hand to reach its objectives and adapts effectively to changing circumstances.⁵

The assumption that regimes are instrumentally rational, however, does not lead necessarily to the conclusion that the targeting of civilians is itself rational. It is not uncommon for rational actors to carry out irrational actions now and then (though not all the time). After all, none is perfect; it is just human to make the wrong decisions. Thus, the question needs to be asked whether the terrorizing of civilians can be considered rational, that is, an effective means for overcoming an insurgency. Jeff Goodwin, for example, has suggested that it is not, at least if it is indiscriminate. The reason is that this form of violence (which may target any civilian, regardless of his or her allegiance) creates incentives for security-minded individuals to join the opposite side.⁶

There are other authors, however, who argue that violence against civilians may be effective. They follow Mao Tse-tung in his claim that the insurgents depends on the civilian population in the same way, and to the same extent, that the fish depends on the sea. Since the fish could not survive if one dried the sea, it follows that state forces can prevail in the conflict by removing from the insurgents the civilian cooperation they require to subsist and operate. This policy of "draining the sea" encourages the practice of collective punishment and scorched earth techniques.⁷ The terrorizing of civilian induces the displacement of large segments of the civilian populations. This, in turn, makes it more difficult for the rebels to hide from state forces amidst the population and to obtain civilian cooperation. The result is a relative decline of their fighting efficiency, which limits their chances of survival.⁸

Stathis Kalyvas conciliates both perspectives by indicating that, even though indiscriminate terror may be counterproductive, as Goodwin argues, selective terror can be rational. This second form of violence, in effect, may permit to acquire and maintain civilian support (by increasing the costs of defection) and undermine the standing of the rebels (by relocating the populations that have defected), but without alienating security-minded civilians (because it will target only defectors, not collaborators).⁹

Azam and Hoeffler use the assumption that governments target civilians because of strategic reasons to model the impact of foreign aid on the levels of state terror during civil wars. They argue that an increase in the amounts of outside funding to such governments is likely to raise the levels of violence against civilians.¹⁰ The rationale is that foreign aid will increase the funding for the government. The additional funding, in

⁵ Todd Sandler, John Tschirhart and Jon Cauley, "A theoretical Analysis of Transnational Terrorism," *American Political Science Review* 77, no. 1 (1983): 38.

⁶ Jeff Goodwin, "The Limits of Repression: A Qualitative Comparative Analysis of Counterinsurgency," Paper prepared for the conference on "Mobilization and Repression: What We Know and Where Should We Go From Here?," University of Maryland, College Park, USA, 21-24 June 2001, 24-25; Kalyvas, "The logic of violence in civil war," 12.

⁷ Valentino, Huth, and Balch-Lindsay, "Draining the Sea: Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare," 385.

⁸ Azam and Hoeffler, "Violence Against Civilians in Civil Wars: Looting or Terror?," 461, 482.

⁹ Kalyvas, "Wanton and Senseless? The Logic of Massacres in Algeria," 251.

¹⁰ Azam and Hoeffler, "Violence Against Civilians in Civil Wars: Looting or Terror?," 482.

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turn, will induce the terror-seeking government to increase its attacks against civilians in the hope of enhancing its chances of prevailing in the conflict.¹¹ The argument does not differentiate between forms of foreign assistance. It refers to development assistance as much as to military aid. The argument, therefore, suggests that military aid is positively related to the degree of terror against civilians in civil wars.

2. From Africa to Latin America

Azam and Hoeffler test the claim that foreign assistance has a positive impact on state brutality against African data. They measure the independent variable (level of foreign aid) using statistics of Official Development Assistance (ODA). The event under study (state violence against civilians) is measured using a proxy variable: the outflow of refugees. After controlling for possible confounding factors, Azam and Hoeffler found that ODA is positively related to the number of refugees in African countries affected by civil war. Although the empirical analysis only examines the relation between ODA and outflow of refugees, Azam and Hoeffler assume that the findings also reflect the relation between any kind of outside funding (which would include military aid) and any form of state violence against civilians during civil wars.¹²

Azam and Hoeffler's assumption, however, is questionable. ODA and military aid are very different forms of aid. ODA has the promotion of social and economic development as its primary goal, and, for that reason, excludes the transfer of human and material resources for warfare purposes.¹³ Military assistance, by contrast, involves activities such as transmitting knowledge in defence management and military technical fields, organizing joint military exercises for training purposes, and providing military hardware and other material aid.¹⁴ To be sure, both ODA and military assistance are likely to increase the funding for brutal regimes. ODA, however, does not target the armed forces. This means that it cannot induce them to abandon the tactics of terrorizing civilians. The additional funding only makes it easier for the armed forces to obtain the tools of cruelty and so encourages them to increase their raiding against civilians.¹⁵ Military assistance, on the contrary, does target the armed forces and so can induce them to adopt warfare tactics that enhance the security of civilians.

Evidence from El Salvador and Peru suggest that increased military assistance does not necessarily lead to higher civilian casualties and, under some circumstances, may have an opposite effect. Both countries experienced civil internal conflicts during the 1980s and early 1990s. The Salvadoran conflict was fought between the conservative government and the *Frente Farabundo Marti para la Liberacion Nacional*, a coalition of five insurgent organizations. In Peru, the government confronted two rebel groups: the

¹¹ Azam and Hoeffler, "Violence Against Civilians in Civil Wars: Looting or Terror?," 463.

¹² Azam and Hoeffler, "Violence Against Civilians in Civil Wars: Looting or Terror?," 463, 480, 481-82.

¹³ OECD/DAC, *Helping Prevent Violent Conflict* (Paris, 2001), 40.

¹⁴ Andrew Cottey and Anthony Forster, "Reshaping Defence Diplomacy: New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance," *The Adelphi Papers* 365, no. 1 (April 2004), 7, 10.

¹⁵ Azam and Hoeffler, "Violence Against Civilians in Civil Wars: Looting or Terror?"

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Partido Comunista del Perú en el Sendero Luminoso de José Carlos Mariátegui (PCP-SL) and the *Movimiento Revolucionario Tupac Amaru* (MRTA). In both countries, the armed forces implemented a counterinsurgent approach that permitted, if not encouraged, systematic attacks against civilians. In El Salvador, the strategy of “draining the sea” also included the indiscriminate use of paramilitary death squads.¹⁶ The United States provided military assistance to both countries through the 1980s and early 1990s—though the level of military aid to El Salvador was considerably higher than the level of aid to Peru. Contrary to what Azam and Hoeffler would have predicted, however, the aid package did not always have a positive relationship to the level of state brutality.

Tables 1 and 2 compare the levels of US military aid against the level of state brutality in El Salvador and Peru during the 1980s and early 1990s. Military aid is measured in terms of millions of dollars. The level of brutality, in turn, is measured using a proxy: war-related casualties. Two assumptions are made. The first is that, in El Salvador as well as in Peru, the major part of such casualties consisted of civilians. The sources on war-related casualties for Peru distinguish among perpetrators. The analysis, therefore, focuses on casualties produced by state agents. The sources for El Salvador, however, do not make such distinction. So the second assumption, which is that most of the war-related casualties in El Salvador were the responsibility of state forces.

TABLE 1: US aid and war-related deaths in to Peru (1979-1996)

Year	Military Aid (US millions)	People killed or disappeared by state forces
1980	3.3	6
1981	4.3	9
1982	5.0	148
1983	4.6	990
1984	10.7	1728
1985	8.7	585
1986	0.6	344
1987	0.1	274

¹⁶ Geoff Thale, “Incentives and the Salvadoran Peace Process,” In *The price of peace: incentives and international conflict prevention*, ed. David Cortright (New York: Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict 1997), 184-85; Elisabeth Jean Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 26.

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1988	0.4	400
1989	3.0	663
1990	1.1	602
1991	6.3	483
1992	0.1	574
1993	0.0	174
1994	0.0	109
1995	0.3	50
1996	2.1	50

Sources: USAID, *US Overseas Loans and Grants Online* (Washington D.C., 2004); Comisión de la Verdad y Reconciliación del Perú, *Informe Final* (Lima, 2003).

In Peru, foreign aid was positively related to state brutality during the 1980s, but the relation became negative in the early 1990s. The Peruvian armed forces did not intervene in the conflict until December 1982. US military aid, therefore, could only have had an impact after that date. From 1983 to 1990, the level of military assistance was positively related to the number of people killed or “disappeared” by state agents. The situation changed in the early 1990s, however. From 1990 to 1991, US military aid increased by more than 500%, while the number of killings and disappearances decreased by around 20%. From 1991 to 1992, military assistance decreased by almost 100%, but the number of victims increased by 18%.

TABLE 2: US aid and war-related deaths in El Salvador (1980-1991)

Year	Military Aid (US millions)	War-related deaths	
		Minimum	Maximum
1980	6.0	16,415	19,457
1981	35.5	8,344	18,585
1982	82.0	7,469	14,924
1983	81.3	8,167	12,361

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1984	196.6	3,399	3,339
1985	136.3	1,980	3,992
1986	121.8	2,663	3,393
1987	111.5	2,937	3,102
1988	81.5	1,795	3,725
1989	81.4	1,628	6,354
1990	81.1	2,339	2,339
1991	66.9	1,992	1,992

Sources: USAID, *US Overseas Loans and Grants* (Washington D.C., 2004); Mitchell Seligson and Vincent McElhinny, "Low-Intensity Warfare, High-Intensity Death: The Demographic Impact of the Wars in El Salvador and Nicaragua," *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, 21 (1996): 211-241.

In El Salvador, the prediction of Azam and Hoeffler performed even worse. During the first half of the 1980s, the level of US military aid was negatively related to the number war-related casualties. From 1983 to 1984, military assistance more than doubled while the number war-related casualties dropped by far more than a half. From 1984 to 1990, both the level of US military aid and the number of war-related casualties declined. The dynamic of the first years of the conflict, however, suggests that the former cannot explain the latter. In fact, as Elisabeth Jean Wood and others have suggested, US military aid seem to have contributed to the decline of state-sponsored violence.¹⁷

3. Development Assistance and Military Aid

But, how exactly do military aid programmes induce a regime to abandon the tactic of targeting civilians? The answer to this question varies depending on whether the violence is indiscriminate (and counterproductive) or discriminate (and rational).

It has been assumed that the terror-seeking regime is an actor that behaves according to rationalist assumptions. If it engages in indiscriminate violence, therefore, a puzzle arises: why does a rational actor carry out an irrational behaviour?

Often, the reason is that governments in general, and military organizations in particular, do not tend to evaluate their policies or the rationale behind them. Organizations discourage self-assessment for two main reasons. First, it tends to promote innovation and change, and so it represents a threat to the position and relative power of top officials. Second, it may obstruct the implementation of policies. Indeed,

¹⁷ Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, 9.

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government policies cannot be effectively executed if there is undue institutional resistance. Bureaucracies may punish evaluation by means of disciplinary procedures and purges. Disciplinary procedures aim to “reform” evaluators, that is, to induce them toward conformism, and may include measures such as notes of reprehension and fines. Purges in contrast, aim to replace evaluators by conformists. In authoritarian regimes, they may also involve the physical elimination of those purged. This failure to self-evaluate obstructs organizational learning and allows ineffective doctrines to flourish and dominate military thinking.¹⁸

Military aid programmes can change this situation by providing training to potential evaluators and strengthening their position within the organization. Learned and powerful evaluators, in turn, may permit to reveal the factual inaccuracies, logical inconsistencies, or disguised costs of acting on the implications of existing doctrines. This process should foster organizational learning and the abandonment of counterinsurgency tactics that, as indiscriminate terror, tend to be counterproductive. The US programme of military assistance to El Salvador illustrates this dynamic. The provision of financial resources and military equipment gave the United States significant leverage over the Salvadoran armed forces. In practical terms, this means that the US government acquired the capacity to strengthen friendly individuals and groups, as well as to weaken those who were hostile to its priorities. The United States exploited this power for persuading the Salvadoran military to evaluate and replace its policy of indiscriminate terror.¹⁹

It should be noticed that the process of organizational learning can produce one of two outcomes. In the best-case scenario, it leads to the adoption of military tactics that do not involve targeting civilians at all. Nevertheless, it can also produce a shift from indiscriminate to selective violence against civilians. If this second scenario takes place, the following problem arises: how can military aid induce a rational regime to abandon a rational tactic?

The answer can be found in the economic concept of substitution. Governments confronting insurgencies must choose between different counterinsurgent tactics while being constrained by resources. For the purposes of our discussion, the tactics can be divided into those that involve targeting civilians (also known as iron-fist techniques) and those that seek to win the “hearts” and “minds” of the civilian population. Substitution possibilities between the two types of tactics exist if both produce the same basic effect (for example, the reduction of rebel activities) in varying amounts.²⁰ It is assumed here that substitution possibilities of this kind do exist.

Military assistance can induce rational regimes to abandon the policy of selective terror by producing a substitution effect. The aid programme may for example train their security forces in counterinsurgent tactics designed to win the “hearts” and “minds” of civilians. It can also provide the financial resources and military equipment that is

¹⁸ Stephen Van Evera, “Why States Believe Foolish Ideas: Non-Self-Evaluation by Government and Society,” work in progress, 4-5, 9.

¹⁹ Thale, “Incentives and the Salvadoran Peace Process,” 187.

²⁰ Sandler and Enders, “Transnational Terrorism: An Economic Analysis.”

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necessary to adequately implement such techniques. The transfer of expertise and hardware, if it takes place, will decrease the relative price of tactics that protect civilians, and by so doing, it will increase the relative price of iron-fist techniques. This change in prices, in turn, may induce a rational regime to substitute the policy of killing civilians for more constructive military tactics.

4. Military Assistance and Human Rights

The difference between ODA and military aid, however, is not enough for explaining why the former is positively related to the levels of state violence against civilians in Africa and the latter had the reverse impact on Peru (during the early 1990s) and El Salvador (during the first half of the 1980s). It is not hard to find historical cases where military aid programmes made it easier for terror-seeking regimes to obtain the tools of abuse and so encouraged them to increase their attacks against civilians. The question is thus: why were things different in Peru and El Salvador? The main reason is, I believe, that while traditional military aid programmes have been driven exclusively by strategic interests, the programmes implemented in Peru and El Salvador also incorporated human rights considerations.

Historically, military assistance has been part of a *realpolitik*, balance-of-power approach to international politics. Governments supplied military aid to foreign armed forces in order to advance narrowly-defined national interests, counteract or deter adversaries, protect spheres of influence or help allied regimes to manage internal threats, among others reasons. Military collaboration between the European colonial powers and their overseas territories reflected this approach, as did the foreign policies of the United States and the Soviet Union during most of the Cold War.²¹ The result was that these programmes provided training and supplied equipment designed to enhance the operational competence of the security apparatus with no concern for human rights or the protection of civilians. Since the 1990s, however, some Western countries have begun to use military aid as a means of pursuing non-traditional objectives. These include, though are not restricted to, fostering cooperation with former or potential adversaries, promoting civil-democratic control of the armed forces, and supporting partner countries in acquiring or strengthening the capacity to undertake crisis-management operations.²²

In the US programme of military assistance to Peru and El Salvador, traditional and non-traditional objectives coexisted, and there were tensions between the two. The United States provided assistance to Peru to offset the influence that the Soviet Union had on the armed forces. During the 1970s and the 1980s, in effect, Peru was the second largest recipient of Soviet aid in Latin America. In El Salvador, the United States intervened to prevent the emergence of hostile, left-wing government within its traditional

²¹ Cottey and Forster, "Reshaping Defence Diplomacy: New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance," 6-8.

²² Cottey and Forster, "Reshaping Defence Diplomacy: New Roles for Military Cooperation and Assistance," 6-8.

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sphere of influence.²³ In both countries, however, improving the human rights performance of the military was also an explicit US objective.²⁴

This being said, it should be noticed that even if military assistance programmes emphasize humanitarian concerns, they may fail to induce the target government to substitute completely the tactic of terrorizing civilians. The provision of military assistance is a strategic process, which means that the response of the recipient matters for the final outcome. The analysis, therefore, should focus not only on the priorities or behaviour of the donor, but also on how the recipient perceive and react to the knowledge and commodities offered. Even though major international actors such as the United Nations, the United States and the European Union often influence national policymaking in conflict-prone regions, there are cases in which they fail to have any impact. Governments facing insurgencies value their independence, as most organizations do, and so tend to resist the pressure of outsiders. Resistance is likely to be strong if there is an organizational consensus that terror and indiscriminate destruction are necessary evils.

In Peru and El Salvador, the military was relatively united in not worrying about human rights issues and consenting to illegal forms of warfare.²⁵ This is part of the reason why the US programmes of military aid had positive but in the end limited effects. The Peruvian and Salvadoran militaries improved their human rights record in quantitative but not in qualitative terms. There was a quantitative improvement not only because the number of human rights abuses declined, but also because important sectors of the political community were no longer considered legitimate targets of counterinsurgent operations. The improvement, however, was not qualitative, in view of the fact that the armed forces continued to use terror techniques against those individuals and groups that it still considered directly involved in the insurgency.²⁶

The US programme of military assistance, therefore, did not succeed in persuading the Salvadoran or the Peruvian armed forces to substitute completely the policy of counterinsurgent terror. But what is important to notice is that, in both cases, the provision of military aid did not have the destructive effect that Azam and Hoeffler would have predicted. Although US military assistance was positively related to the number of war-related casualties during the first decade of the Peruvian conflict, the relation became negative in the early 1990s. In El Salvador, in turn, the US aid programme appears to have been instrumental in the significant decline of state violence against civilians after 1983.²⁷

²³ Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador: from civil strife to civil peace*, 148.

²⁴ Thale, "Incentives and the Salvadoran Peace Process," 187.

²⁵ Thale, "Incentives and the Salvadoran Peace Process," 188.

²⁶ CVR, *Informe Final*; Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, 27-28; Human Rights Watch, *El Salvador's decade of terror: human rights since the assassination of Archbishop Romero* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 17-19.

²⁷ Wood, *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*, 9.

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Policy Implications

How should international actors respond to regimes that target civilians as a military tactic? The preceding analysis suggests two policy options. The first, advocated by Azam and Hoeffler, is to cut off any form of outside funding to them.²⁸ The idea is to deprive brutal governments of the resources they require to fight an insurgency (and so to terrorize civilians). The second option is to launch a military aid programme that incorporates human rights considerations. The idea here is to induce terror-seeking governments to change their policies and adopt counterinsurgent tactics that enhance the security of civilians.

The first policy proposal, however, has an important limitation: cutting off outside funding is reasonable only if the protection of civilians is considered more important than the fate of the regime. Azam and Hoeffler acknowledge this difficulty, but minimize its relevance. It is their view that in many contemporary conflicts, and particularly in those located in Africa, the fate of the government is not critical for most international actors.²⁹ The problem with this argument is that there are still civil wars where the survival of the regime matters. Examples include Colombia and Indonesia. In these cases, the policy of suspending assistance is not appropriate. It seems more reasonable to implement the second policy option, that is, organize a military aid programme that would transfer the resources required to fight an insurgency without targeting civilians.

²⁸ Azam and Hoeffler, "Violence Against Civilians in Civil Wars: Looting or Terror?," 461.

²⁹ Azam and Hoeffler, "Violence Against Civilians in Civil Wars: Looting or Terror?," 461.