Research notes

cmps

Conflict Management and Peace Science
1–13

DOI: 10.1177/07388942261441423
journals.sagepub.com/home/cmp
Sage

Magically powerful leaders and the resilience of rebel groups

Nazli Avdan[1] and Michael J Soules[2]

Abstract

Rebel leaders are sometimes believed by followers to be prophets or messiahs, or to possess supernatural powers. Despite their prominence in militant organizations, the consequences of such leadership for rebel group dynamics remain understudied. We examine how perceived supernatural authority shapes the longevity of armed movements. We argue that groups led by leaders believed to possess extraordinary powers survive longer because these leaders can more effectively motivate and coerce followers to sustain participation in conflict. Using novel data on African rebel organizations, we find evidence that perceived supernatural authority is associated with increased organizational durability over time.

Keywords

civil war, magical practices, rebel group survival

Rebel leaders in multiple civil wars have claimed access to extraordinary magical powers. For example, Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) commander Joseph Kony asserted the ability to read minds and render fighters immune to bullets (Al Jazeera, 2014; Kelly, 2015), while leaders in UNITA and RENAMO claimed powers ranging from transformation and flight to precognition (Weigert, 1995; Brinkman, 2012). Similar claims have appeared elsewhere, including among militia leaders in Sierra Leone (Kelsall, 2009).

Beyond sincere belief, magical claims afford strategic value. By projecting magical authority, rebel leaders can enforce hierarchy, maintain discipline and motivate fighters to persist, enabling organizations to endure despite adversity (Beber and Blattman, 2013; Gates, 2017; Wlodarczyk, 2009). Despite the prominence of such leaders, there has been little systematic quantitative analysis of their effects on rebel group longevity. Using new data on magically powerful rebel leaders

[1]Department of Political Science, University of Kansas, USA
[2]Department of Political Science, University of Houston, USA

Corresponding author:
Nazli Avdan, Department of Political Science, University of Kansas, Blake Hall, 504, 1541 Lilac Ln., Lawerence, KS 66045, USA.
Email: n716a235@ku.edu

(Soules and Avdan, 2025), we find consistent evidence that groups featuring such leaders survive longer.

Our work makes several contributions. First, our paper advances our understanding of non-material forces sustaining insurgent cohesion. Existing work emphasizes the role of ideology in overcoming collective action problems (Gutiérrez-Sanín and Wood, 2014; Weinstein, 2007) and fostering emotional and moral motivations that sustain rebellion (Wood, 2003). More recent scholarship extends these insights by showing how non-material forces shape governance dynamics and enable rebels to mobilize and differentiate themselves (Akcinaroglu et al., 2025; Arjona, 2016), cultivate leadership-driven intrinsic incentives (Hoover Green, 2018) and generate legitimacy through organizational practices and networks (Sen, 2024).

Crucially, while scholarship has made strides in showing how rebels draw on non-material resources – such as ethnoreligious identities (Cederman et al., 2010) and religious ideology (Basedau et al., 2022) – to mobilize constituencies, it largely treats these forces as shaping the conflict process broadly rather than examining how ideational forces affect organizational trajectories.

Group-level analyses treat ideology as an organizational attribute and do not isolate how leaders' immaterial authority affects rebel outcomes. Therefore, as a second contribution, we also extend extant quantitative literature on the effects of religious ideology on longevity, which has to date, largely focused on radical Islamist groups (e.g. Basedau et al., 2022; Nilsson and Svensson, 2021). Our results show that other religious manifestations in rebel organizations (i.e. non-Islamic, magically powerful leaders), also contribute to their longevity. Third, we move beyond treating non-material forces as residual to structural factors such as resource endowments (Weinstein, 2007) or elites' access to power structures (Cederman et al., 2010). We show that spiritual authority concentrated in leadership, not just broader group ideology, enhances rebel resilience.

Turning to our empirical contributions, our quantitative tests complement qualitative work on the strategic logic behind rebel leaders' claims to possessing magical abilities (e.g. Beber and Blattman, 2013; Ellis, 1999; Gates, 2017; Wlodarczyk, 2009). Finally, we expand on recent *quantitative* work on the effects of rebel organizations' magical practices on civilian victimization (Soules et al., 2025) and recruitment of children (Soules and Avdan, 2025) and women (Avdan et al., 2025). We depart from these works, however, in isolating the effects of magical leadership, rather than the general practices across the ranks.

Key concepts and scope conditions

Turning to scope conditions, this study focuses on African militant organizations for both theoretical and empirical reasons. Theoretically, the existing literature on magical practices in rebel organizations is rooted largely in belief systems derived from traditional African religions, which emphasize practitioners' capacity to directly manipulate spiritual forces to influence material outcomes (Ellis, 1999; Beber and Blattman, 2013; Gates, 2017; Wlodarczyk, 2009, 2013). Empirically, the only existing cross-group dataset on magical practices in rebel organizations is specific to Africa (Soules and Avdan, 2025).

In this context, magical practices involve rituals, incantations and the use of charms intended to fuse the spiritual and physical worlds, often to provide protection or enhance fighters' abilities (Wlodarczyk, 2009). Superstition in battle is not new: during World War II, soldiers used rabbit's feet, crosses and other artefacts as charms. While superstitions may vary across individual combatants, rebel organizations leverage community-wide spiritual traditions and ritualize these practices during initiation rites and socialization processes, and on the battlefield (Wlodarczyk, 2009). Unlike

religious ideology, which typically grounds authority in doctrine or divine ordination, magical belief systems stress *individual agency:* the belief that specific practitioners can personally access and wield supernatural powers (Wlodarczyk, 2009). Like religious beliefs, magical beliefs seek to explain the natural order by reference to supernatural forces (Basedau et al., 2022), but they go beyond that, allowing practitioners to wield supranatural, mystical power to manipulate events (Wlodarczyk, 2009). While civilian religious leaders (e.g. priests) may similarly invoke symbolism and ritual to motivate combatants, they typically rely on theological doctrine and institutional authority.[1]

Prior work distinguishes between two forms of such practices within rebel organizations. The first comprises organization-wide practices shared by both leaders and rank-and-file members, such as the widespread wearing of amulets believed to confer protection, including immunity from bullets. The second comprises extraordinary powers attributed to a subset of commanders, including abilities such as invisibility, flight, shapeshifting or foresight, which are believed to exceed those available to ordinary fighters (Wlodarczyk, 2009).

'Magically powerful leaders' does not necessarily refer to the top or highest-ranking leader of the rebel organization, but instead encompasses both upper echelons of leadership and mid-level commanders, who have been documented to claim exceptional powers (Soules and Avdan, 2025; Wlodarczyk, 2009). Magically powerful leaders encompass both those who proclaim messianic and prophetic authority (BDK, Forces of Paul Joseph Mukungubila) and supernatural powers beyond that of the common foot soldiers (Renamo, Ntsiloulous), with some groups (LRA) having both features (Soules and Avdan, 2025). Anecdotal accounts depict spiritual authority as a top-down process in which leaders present themselves as messianic figureheads or as possessing unique supernatural powers, as exemplified by Kony in the LRA and Savimbi in UNITA.

Magical leadership merits scrutiny independent of general magical practices because leadership is critical to rebel resilience in the face of shocks. When rebels confront setbacks such as battlefield losses, coherent and consistent messaging maintains commitment to the organization (Weinstein, 2007, p. 264). Second, spiritual authority approximates charismatic authority à la Weber: 'a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities' (Weber, 1947, p. 358 cited in Lidow, 2016). Charisma, alone, however, relies on persuasion and may be more fragile over time (Lidow, 2016). By combining persuasive and punitive authority, magical authority sustains shared spiritual beliefs even amid setbacks. Consequently, beyond enhancing cohesion, magical leaders can credibly commit to punishing insubordination.

Magically powerful leaders and the power to resist

Rebel group strength can be understood along two dimensions: the *power to hurt*, or the capacity to impose costs on the state to achieve concessions or victory; and the *power to resist*, or the ability to withstand repression and survive over time (Cunningham et al., 2009). While related, these dimensions need not move together, as groups may endure without inflicting substantial harm, or collapse despite their capacity for violence. We focus on the power to resist, as we expect magically powerful leaders to contribute to organizational longevity rather than to battlefield success. We posit that magically powerful rebel leaders will enhance group longevity through (1) ensuring retention and recruitment and (2) command-and control.

Retention and recruitment

First, leaders can frame the fight as spiritually ordained, attracting recruits, sustaining momentum and reducing desertion (Wlodarczyk, 2009). For example, Wlodarczyk (2009) documents how the

LRA justified its continued insurgency by claiming that its leader, Joseph Kony, had received spiritual blessings from Acholi elders. Similar claims appear across other African rebel movements: Alice Auma (Alice Lakwena) of the Holy Spirit Mobile Force (HSMF), Frédéric Bitsangou (Pastor Ntoumi) of Ntsiloulous and Ne Muanda Nsemi of the Bundu Dia Kongo all invoked spiritual authorization for their armed struggles, while Jonas Savimbi similarly sustained loyalty within UNITA through the strategic use of local religious traditions (Brinkman, 2012; Wlodarczyk, 2009; Coyault, 2018; Human Rights Watch, 2020).

Second, beliefs about protection afforded through practices, such as the wearing of amulets, enhance commitment to the cause, encouraging fighters to continue fighting even under adverse conditions. In some cases, rebel leaders are believed to control access to these magical protections, granting or withdrawing them from cadres (Wlodarczyk, 2009). Additionally, beliefs that the adversary is intimidated by magically powerful leaders bolster combatants' perseverance on the battlefield. Beliefs in access to such powers can also attract recruits to groups (Wlodarczyk, 2009). To illustrate, members of the HSMF believed that Alice Auma's spiritual possession shielded fighters from bullets, sustaining commitment to the fight despite the deterioration in the group's resources and prospects (Avdan et al., 2025).

Third, since magically powerful leaders possess a form of charismatic authority, they can continuously attract new members, even if disillusionment within existing ranks shrinks numbers. In this sense, leaders who are believed to possess supernatural or extraordinary powers are perceived as uniquely legitimate and commanding, which not only reduces defection and indiscipline, but also draws in new recruits, allowing groups to replenish their ranks, even if attrition occurs. Thus, for interrelated reasons, magically powerful leaders can help recruit and retain members.

Importantly, some rebel groups combine magical practices with substance use to motivate fighters, often through the ritualized consumption of drugs or alcohol during initiation and to disinhibit combatants during fighting (Ashby, 2002; Singh and Singh, 2010). For example, Mai-Mai factions in the DRC were notorious for magical-religious practices involving hallucinatory plants, with demobilized militants reporting feeling 'no fear, more powerful, and more aggressive' while intoxicated (Hecker and Haer, 2015). Where ritualized violence and substance use coincide, chemical intoxication and magical beliefs may reinforce aggression.

Crucially, when supernatural powers are attributed to leaders, followers' sense of invincibility derives from spiritual authority and shared traditions rather than chemical intoxication alone. Consistent with this distinction, the convergence of spiritual practices and substance use is not universal. Some groups explicitly prohibited or discouraged intoxicants, with leaders invoking spiritual traditions or moral discipline to maintain unity and focus. For instance, Kony prohibited drug and alcohol use within the LRA, and Savimbi discouraged inebriation among UNITA fighters to preserve cohesion and combat readiness.

Command-and-control

The presence of magically powerful leaders helps mitigate command-and-control problems, producing fighting forces that are more obedient and less prone to desertion (Gates, 2017; Wlodarczyk, 2009). In groups such as the LRA and HSMF, leaders have leveraged claims of supernatural authority to impose strict codes of conduct, threatening spiritual punishment or the loss of protection for disobedience or desertion (Gates, 2017; Wlodarczyk, 2009). These threats, including the ability to track and punish deserters, raise the perceived costs of exit and help explain the LRA's notably low desertion rates (Gates, 2017). By increasing discipline and reducing attrition, such mechanisms

enable rebel organizations to maintain the manpower necessary for sustained operations, enhancing organizational endurance over time (Beber and Blattman, 2013; Haer et al., 2011; Weinstein, 2007).

Thus, our central hypothesis is that:

H1: Rebel groups with magically powerful leaders will survive longer than groups without.

Research design

Sample and independent variable

To evaluate the hypothesis, we employ data from the Magical Acts by Groups in Civil Conflicts (MAGICC) dataset, which contains information on the magical practices of 106 African rebel organizations that were active at least at some point during the period of 1989–2011 (Soules and Avdan, 2025). Groups that were formed before 1989 or died after 2011 are still included in MAGICC if they were active at some time point during the dataset's time period. Group duration is calculated based on the first and last years of activity overall, not just the duration of activity during the period of 1989–2011. Given the difficulties associated with collecting temporally varying measures of these concepts, the MAGICC dataset is cross-sectional and all variables are static. Owing to the time invariant nature of the MAGICC dataset, only cross-sectional analyses are conducted in this paper. Descriptive statistics are presented in the Online Appendix (Table A1), as is the full list of groups coded as featuring magically powerful leaders (Table A2).

The list of actors in MAGICC is taken from the Non-State Actor (NSA) dataset (Cunningham et al., 2013). To enter the NSA dataset, an actor must be an organized, non-state, opposition group, fighting a government over territory or state control. The conflict must at least once generate 25 battle deaths in a calendar year for a group to enter the NSA dataset (Cunningham et al., 2013, p. 519). There is an important concern that stronger, longer-lived organizations are more likely to cross the battle death threshold, and that these selection effects could bias analyses of group survival (e.g. Blaxland, 2021; Lewis, 2020). We believe that this concern is partially mitigated by the fact that the NSA dataset has a low threshold for inclusion (25 battle-related deaths) and thus, weaker, shorter-lived groups do sometimes enter the dataset. This contrasts to the 1000 battle-related death threshold used in some other work (see Sambanis, 2004).

While the geographic and temporal constraints of the MAGICC dataset produce a somewhat limited sample size, to our knowledge, it is the only cross-group dataset on the magical practices of rebel organizations. Existing rebel group datasets that code religious ideology rarely capture magical practices, which are often distinct from groups' stated ideologies or political goals (Soules and Avdan, 2025; Wlodarczyk, 2009). Indeed, only a small share of groups identified as engaging in magical practices are coded as religious in prominent datasets, including the Women in Armed Rebellion Dataset, the Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence dataset, the Rebel Appeals and Incentives Dataset (RAID) and ACD2GTD (Polo and Gleditsch, 2016; Wood and Thomas, 2017; Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020; Soules, 2023). Similarly, while the Rebel Organization Leaders dataset provides detailed information on rebel leadership characteristics, it does not capture whether leaders are perceived to possess magical abilities (Acosta et al., 2023).

The MAGICC dataset includes two sets of binary variables capturing the presence of magical practices and magical leadership: the first set codes whether organizations institutionalize magical practices across the group. The second captures whether organizational leaders claim access to supernatural powers beyond those available to rank-and-file members, including prophetic or

exceptional abilities. Magically powerful leaders comprise a subset of these organizations, as many groups in the sample engage in magical practices. A variety of sources were drawn on for the coding, including existing narratives about armed groups in other datasets, academic journal articles and books, government and think-tank reports, and news stories (Soules and Avdan, 2025). The use of diverse sources increases our confidence that the presence of magically powerful leaders is not being systematically overlooked.

Both variables have versions based on exclusive and inclusive standards of evidence (Soules and Avdan, 2025); we use the exclusive measure of magically powerful leaders in the main analysis. In the sample, nine of the 106 (~8.49%) organizations meet the stricter threshold for this variable. As a robustness check, we also analyse the inclusive versions of measures, encompassing 14 (13.21%) groups. Seven of the 27 countries in the sample have at least one rebel group that meets the exclusive threshold, while there are 10 with groups that meet the more inclusive threshold.

Dependent variable

Our central hypothesis concerns rebel group longevity rather than the duration of individual conflict episodes. Accordingly, we focus on groups' total lifespans, as our theory predicts that magically powerful leaders reduce the likelihood of organizational collapse – by deterring desertion, defection and surrender – rather than sustaining more intense fighting. Consistent with this expectation, we find no evidence that magical leadership affects the length of individual conflict episodes. We therefore measure group duration as the time between the first recorded battle-related death and the group's last year of activity using the UCDP Conflict Termination Dataset (Kreutz, 2010) and estimate Cox proportional hazards models to assess the effect of magical leadership on group survival.

To illustrate why we focus on group lifespans rather than individual conflict episodes, consider the LRA in Uganda. Led by Joseph Kony throughout its existence, the LRA's longevity has been closely tied to beliefs in his magical powers (Gates, 2017; Wlodarczyk, 2009). Although the intensity of fighting fluctuated over time, and the group experienced five separate conflict episodes, the LRA persisted from 1988 to 2014, surviving even during periods of low-level violence (Kreutz, 2010).

Persistence despite fluctuations in fighting intensity is a key dimension of rebel resilience. Descriptive statistics indicate that groups with magically powerful leaders have substantially longer lifespans than those without: under the stricter coding threshold, such groups have a median lifespan of 12 years (mean $\approx$ 15), compared with a median of 3 years (mean $\approx$ 6) for other groups.

Another concern is possible reverse causality, as leaders in longer-enduring groups may be more likely to claim magical powers either out of desperation or simply because they have had greater opportunity to do so. Our time invariant data do not allow us to fully rule out the possibility, but we think this concern is mitigated for at least a couple reasons. First, we examined the qualitative narratives included in the supplemental materials for the MAGICC dataset (Soules and Avdan, 2025), which indicate that several groups – including the BDK, the LRA and Ntsiloulous – were initially mobilized by leaders claiming special access to spiritual or religious guidance. Thus, there is evidence that the magical powers of leaders mattered early on for at least some groups.

Second, we posit that it would often be difficult for leaders to only make claims of magical powers at later stages of the conflict. Specifically, cadres may question why leaders only later acquire magical powers. Early claims of magical power attract recruits receptive to such claims, whereas later claims risk scepticism among existing members. Again, our analysis lends itself only to an association between these variables, not causality.

Control variables

Turning to potential confounders, first, given the possible effects of rebel groups' religious ideologies on socialization tactics (e.g. Hegghammer, 2009) and duration (e.g. Basedau et al., 2022), we introduce a binary indicator to capture groups formed around a religious ideology, from the Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) dataset (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020). Second, extending data from RAID (Soules, 2023), we include a binary indicator of multi-ethnic membership to account for ethnically homogeneous groups' potential greater resilience and the use of magical authority to unify diverse groups (Weinstein, 2007; Wlodarczyk, 2009).

Weaker groups may be more likely to adopt magical practices and are also less likely to endure (Capeci and Knight, 1990; Cunningham et al., 2009). Using data from the NSA dataset (Cunningham et al., 2013), we include a binary indicator for groups that are much weaker than the government they oppose. Because forced child recruitment is associated with the use of magical practices and tends to occur later in a group's lifespan (Eck, 2014; Soules and Avdan, 2025), we control for this factor using a three-point ordinal measure of forced child recruitment from Haer et al. (2020).

Next, we account for conflict severity using the logged number of battle-related deaths over a group's lifetime, as violence against civilians is associated with both magical practices and rebel longevity (Fortna, 2015; Wlodarczyk, 2013), drawing on data from the UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset (v.24.1; Davies et al., 2024). Finally, we control for state capacity and regime type, as both affect rebels' adoption of magical practices and organizational survival (Capeci and Knight, 1990; Cunningham et al., 2009). State capacity is measured using logged per capita GDP in the group's year of formation (Fariss et al., 2022), and regime type using the Polity V Project's 21-point democracy indicator (Marshall and Gurr, 2020).[2]

Results

The results for the tests of the central hypothesis are displayed in Table 1. The standard errors are clustered on the country in which the rebel group operates. The hazard ratios are reported. Across all models, we find strong evidence that groups with magically powerful leaders survive longer, although the cross-sectional nature of the data limits causal interpretation. Given the relatively small number of cases involving magically powerful leaders, we also assess the sensitivity of these results to individual observations. As shown in the robustness analyses below, the main findings remain statistically significant across most specifications, although some attenuation occurs in the most saturated models when specific cases are excluded.

The substantive effects are strong. For instance, in Model 4, we see that magically powerful leaders are associated with an approximately 55% increase in probability of survival for organizations. The Kaplan–Meier survival estimates for the stricter measure of magically powerful leaders are shown in Figure 1.

Additional analyses

We also conduct additional analyses that expand on the main findings of this paper, the results of which are available in the online appendix.

More inclusive measure of magical practices. Using the inclusive measure in MAGICC, all models demonstrate that the presence of magically powerful leaders is associated with longer group

Table 1. Magically powerful leaders and rebel group duration.

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Magical leaders		0.448***	0.436**	0.452*
		(0.126)	(0.148)	(0.203)
Religious ideology	0.628*		0.529***	0.619**
	(0.154)		(0.101)	(0.136)
Multi-ethnic rebels	1.315		1.324	1.354
	(0.332)		(0.282)	(0.323)
Much weaker	0.744		0.751	0.683
	(0.175)		(0.161)	(0.167)
Child forced recruitment	0.868		0.620***	0.813
	(0.175)		(0.114)	(0.174)
Battle-related deaths (logged)	0.736***			0.747***
	(0.0451)			(0.0475)
Polity2	1.028			1.040
	(0.0272)			(0.0294)
Per capita GDP (logged)	1.038			1.037
	(0.204)			(0.191)
Observations	100	106	103	100

Robust standard errors in parentheses. Hazard ratios reported.
*** $p < 0.01$, ** $p < 0.05$, * $p < 0.1$.

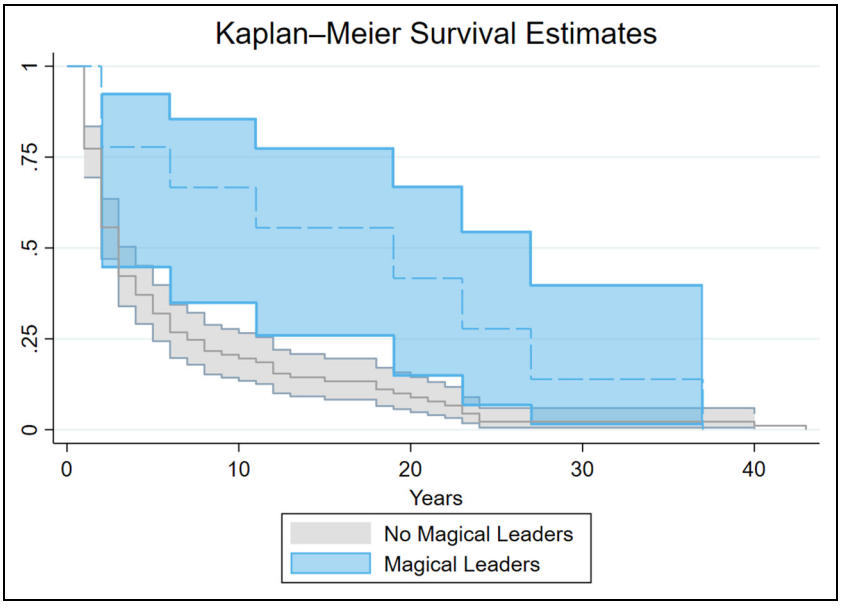

Figure 1. Kaplan–Meier survival estimates – exclusive measure of magically powerful leaders. The colored figure will be available in the online version.

lifespans, with the caveat that statistical significance drops just below statistical significance when the full set of control variables is included (Table A3).

Other forms of magical practices. One possibility is that when magic is practised across the entire organization, both rank-and-file and leadership, rebel groups also live longer. As noted earlier, the MAGICC dataset also contains a measure of whether a group engages in magical practices across the entire group. Thirty-eight of the 106 groups in the sample (∼35.85%) meet the lower threshold for inclusion, while 21 (∼19.81) meet the stricter threshold. We re-evaluate the main analysis, using these measures as the main explanatory variables instead.

Across all models, the use of magical practices across the entire organization is associated with a longer lifespan for groups. This association is statistically significant in five of the six models conducted, dropping just below statistical significance in the bivariate model with the stricter measure of magical practices (Table A4).

Because only a subset of groups that employ magical practices also have magically powerful leaders, we assess whether our results are driven by general magical practices rather than leadership. We construct binary indicators identifying groups that institutionalize magical practices but lack magically powerful leaders, using both stricter and more inclusive coding thresholds. Across all models, these measures are not statistically associated with rebel group duration, indicating that magical leadership – rather than magical practices per se – drives the observed effects (Table A5). While our empirical approach cannot disentangle these mechanisms, this distinction points to an important direction for future research on how different forms of symbolic authority shape organizational dynamics.

Conflict episodes. In the main analysis, we measure duration as the total length, in years, that a rebel group survives. However, scholars often examine the duration of individual conflict episodes. Some rebel groups are involved in multiple conflict episodes, while others are involved in only one. This approach measures the duration of bouts of fighting, whereas the original analysis examines the duration of groups.

Using the previously discussed UCDP Conflict Termination Dataset (version 3, Kreutz, 2010), we instead examine individual conflict episodes. While magically powerful leaders are still associated with longer conflicts, this association is never statistically significant (Table A6). However, we find strong evidence that such groups exist longer.

Conflict outcomes. We do not expect magically powerful leaders to increase rebels' capacity to achieve battlefield success or long-term victory. Resources that help organizations endure do not necessarily enhance their ability to prevail (Conrad et al., 2019). While magical beliefs and leadership may motivate or coerce fighters to continue fighting, their effectiveness in generating sustained battlefield leverage is less clear (Wlodarczyk, 2009).

In the short term, perceptions of magical power may intimidate adversaries. For example, during the early stages of the Mozambican civil war, government forces sometimes fled when Renamo fighters approached, believing them to be immune to bullets (Wlodarczyk, 2009). However, as Renamo suffered battlefield losses, these beliefs eroded, and government forces eventually cracked down on the group. Despite this, commanders continued to invoke threats of magical punishment to deter desertion, helping sustain operations even amid military setbacks (Wlodarczyk, 2009).

We examine whether magically powerful leaders affect how conflict episodes terminate. Using competing-risk duration models that contrast favourable outcomes (peace agreements or rebel victory) with unfavourable ones (government victory or conflicts ending through inactivity), we find

no discernible impact of magical leadership on the likelihood of favourable termination outcomes (Table A7). These findings echo recent work on the impact of secular ideologies on insurgent endurance: Balcells and Kalyvas (2026) argue, revolutionary groups exhibited a 'Marxist paradox', whereby ideological commitment to political goals, social networking via indoctrination and a cohesive, disciplined apparatus expanded insurgents' lifespan while not necessarily bestowing success.

Selection effects. Analyses of rebel group duration may be biased because stronger or longer-lived organizations are both more likely to enter the sample and more likely to be observed engaging in magical practices, simply owing to greater information availability. Although the low battle-death threshold for inclusion partially mitigates this concern, we conduct additional analyses to further address potential selection and information biases.

We re-estimate the main models while controlling for the duration of a group's pre-conflict incubation period – measured as the time between group founding and the onset of sustained fighting using data from the FORGE dataset (Braithwaite and Cunningham, 2020; Blaxland, 2021) – and for variation in information availability using the V-Dem government censorship measure (Pemstein et al., 2024). Across these specifications, magically powerful leaders correlate with longer group lifespans, although statistical significance is retained in only the first two models and falls just below conventional thresholds in the most saturated specification ($p \approx 0.199$, Table A8).

Rarity of magically powerful leaders. As noted earlier, magically powerful leaders are relatively rare, which raises the possibility that results may be sensitive to the inclusion of individual cases. To assess this, we conduct leave-one-out analyses, re-estimating the main models nine times, each time excluding one of the groups coded as having magically powerful leaders under the stricter threshold. Across these tests, the results remain statistically significant in most specifications. While exclusion of three groups (the Ninjas, Ntsiloulous and BDK) reduces statistical significance in the most saturated models, the association remains robust in bivariate and group-level specifications (Tables A9–A17). Given the small number of cases, this sensitivity probably reflects limited statistical power rather than instability in the underlying relationship.

Conclusion

Rebel leaders in a wide range of conflicts have claimed access to magical powers, from invulnerability and transformation to prophetic or messianic authority, allowing them to combine persuasion and coercion to sustain organizations (Ellis, 1999; Wlodarczyk, 2009). Despite their prominence, however, there has been little systematic, cross-group quantitative analysis of the consequences of such leadership.

Using new data on magically powerful rebel leaders, we show that claims to supernatural authority enhance organizational survival. Our paper contributes to a recently revitalized interest in how ideology shapes insurgencies, showing that non-secular ideologies mirror secular ideologies – such as revolutionary socialism (Balcells and Kalyvas, 2026) – restructure followers' thinking and acting, going deeper than commitments to a deep cause.

As noted earlier, the time-invariant structure of the data limits our ability to definitively rule out reverse causality. While qualitative evidence and theoretical considerations suggest that magical leadership precedes organizational outcomes, future research with temporally disaggregated data would be better positioned to adjudicate this relationship.

More broadly, this distinction opens several avenues for future research. Scholars might examine how different forms of magical authority shape recruitment and retention, command structures and defection, explore regional variation by extending the MAGICC dataset, and assess how governments adapt when confronting rebels whose authority rests on perceived supernatural power.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Ahaan Bagwe for his excellent research assistant. We thank Michael Rubin for his excellent feedback.

ORCID iD

Nazli Avdan https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0984-6120

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Notes

1. A prominent example is the Russian Orthodox Church's endorsement of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, including priests blessing troops with holy water. We thank an anonymous reviewer for this example.
2. Some of these control variables, such as the recruitment of child soldiers and group strength, might be affected by the presence of magically powerful leaders, and thus, induce post-treatment bias. To account for this, we conduct additional analysis in which we exclude post-treatment control variables. We continue to find support for our central hypothesis when doing this (Table A18). More details about these tests are available in the Online Appendix.

References

Acosta B, Huang R and Silverman D (2023) Introducing ROLE: A database of rebel leader attributes in armed conflict. *Journal of Peace Research* 60(2): 352–361.

Akcinaroglu S, Berkowitz J, Moreno Leon CE, et al. (2025) Unique offerings: Ideological competition and rebel governance. *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 42(6): 690–712.

Al Jazeera (2014) Profile: Joseph Kony. *Al Jazeera*, 6 May 2014. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/5/6/profile-joseph-kony

Arjona A (2016) *Rebelocracy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Ashby P (2002) Child combatants: A soldier's perspective. *The Lancet* 360: s11–s12.

Avdan N, Davis S and Soules MJ (2025) Magical practices and the recruitment of women into rebel groups. *International Studies Quarterly* 69(4): p.sqaf079.

Balcells L and Kalyvas S (2026) Ideology and revolution in civil wars: The 'Marxist paradox'. *American Political Science Review* 120(1): 141–159.

Basedau M, Deitch M and Zellman A (2022) Rebels with a cause: Does ideology make armed conflicts longer and bloodier? *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 66(10): 1826–1853.

Beber B and Blattman C (2013) The logic of child soldiering and coercion. *International Organization* 67(1): 65–104.

Blaxland J (2021) Thinking outside the (temporal) box to explain protracted intrastate conflict. *Journal of Peace Research* 58(6): 1271–1283.

Braithwaite JM and Cunningham KG (2020) When organizations rebel: Introducing the foundations of rebel group emergence (FORGE) dataset. *International Studies Quarterly* 64(1): 183–193.

Brinkman I (2012) Town, village and bush: War and cultural landscapes in south-eastern Angola (1966–2002). *Afrika Focus* 25(2): 31–43.

Capeci Jr DJ and Knight JC (1990) Reactions to colonialism: The North American ghost dance and East African Maji–Maji rebellions. *The Historian* 52(4): 584–601.

Cederman L-E, Wimmer A and Min B (2010) Why do ethnic groups rebel? New data and analysis. *World Politics* 62(1): 87–119.

Conrad JM, Greene KT, Walsh JI, et al. (2019) Rebel natural resource exploitation and conflict duration. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 63(3): 591–616.

Coyault B (2018) The warrior prophetism of the reverend pastor Ntumi: The origin and development of the Nsilulu movement in the Republic of the Congo (1998–2019). *Afrique Contemporaine* 267–268(3): 11–45.

Cunningham DE, Gleditsch KS and Salehyan I (2009) It takes two: A dyadic analysis of civil war duration and outcome. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 53(4): 570–597.

Cunningham DE, Gleditsch KS and Salehyan I (2013) Non-state actors in civil wars: A new dataset. *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 30(5): 516–531.

Davies S, Engström G, Pettersson T, et al (2024) Organized violence 1989–2023, and the prevalence of organized crime groups.. *Journal of Peace Research* 61(4): 673–693.

Eck K (2014) Coercion in rebel recruitment. *Security Studies* 23(2): 364–398.

Ellis S (1999) *The Mask of Anarchy. Updated Edition: The Destruction of Liberia and the Religious Dimension of an African Civil War*. New York: NYU Press.

Fariss CJ, Anders T, Markowitz JN, et al. (2022) New estimates of over 500 years of historic GDP and population data. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 66(3): 553–591.

Fortna VP (2015) Do terrorists win? Rebels' use of terrorism and civil war outcomes. *International Organization* 69(3): 519–556.

Gates S (2017) Membership matters: Coerced recruits and rebel allegiance. *Journal of Peace Research* 54(5): 674–686.

Gutiérrez-Sanín F and Wood EJ (2014) Ideology in civil war: Instrumental adoption and beyond. *Journal of Peace Research* 51(2): 213–226.

Haer R, Banholzer L and Ertl V (2011) Create compliance and cohesion: How rebel organizations manage to survive. *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 22(3): 415–434.

Haer R, Faulkner CM and Whitaker BE (2020) Rebel funding and child soldiers: Exploring the relationship between natural resources and forcible recruitment. *European Journal of International Relations* 26(1): 236–262.

Hecker T and Haer R (2015) Drugs boosting conflict? A micro-level test of the linkage between substance use and violence. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 27(2): 205–224.

Hegghammer T (2009) The ideological hybridization of jihadi groups. *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology*: 9

Hoover Green A (2018) *The Commander's Dilemma: Violence and Restraint In wartime*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Human Rights Watch (2020) DR Congo: Bloody crackdown on political religious group. Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/05/19/dr-congo-bloody-crackdown-political-religious-group.

Kelly J (2015) Indoctrinate the heart to impunity: Rituals, culture and control within the Lord's Resistance Army. Harvard Humanitarian Initiative. https://hhi.harvard.edu/publications/indoctrinate-heart-impunity

Kelsall T (2009) *Culture under Cross-examination: International Justice and the Special Court for Sierra Leone*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kreutz J (2010) How and when armed conflicts end: Introducing the UCDP Conflict Termination Dataset. *Journal of Peace Research* 47(2): 243–250.

Lewis JI (2020) *How Insurgency Begins: Rebel Group Formation in Uganda and Beyond*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lidow NH (2016) *Violent Order: Understanding Rebel Governance Through Liberia's Civil War*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Marshall MG and Gurr TR (2020) *Polity 5: Political Regime Characteristics and Transitions, 1800–2018.*. Vienna, VA: Center for Systemic Peace.

Nilsson D and Svensson I (2021) The intractability of Islamist insurgencies: Islamist rebels and the recurrence of civil war. *International Studies Quarterly* 65(3): 620–632.

Pemstein D, Marquardt KL, Tzelgov E, et al. (2024) The V-Dem measurement model: Latent variable analysis for cross-national and cross-temporal expert-coded data. V-Dem Working Paper No. 21, 9th edn. Cham: University of Gothenburg/Varieties of Democracy Institute.

Polo SM and Gleditsch KS (2016) Twisting arms and sending messages: Terrorist tactics in civil war. *Journal of Peace Research* 53(6): 815–829.

Sambanis N (2004) What is civil war? Conceptual and empirical complexities of an operational definition. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 48(6): 814–858.

Sen S (2024) Rebel network theory: The case of Moro Islamic Liberation Front. *Conflict Management and Peace Science* 41(6): 735–754.

Singh AR and Singh AN (2010) The mental health consequences of being a child soldier – an international perspective. *International Psychiatry* 7(3): 55–57.

Soules MJ (2023) Recruiting rebels: Introducing the rebel appeals and incentives dataset. *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 67(9): 1811–1837.

Soules MJ and Avdan N (2025) The magical practices of rebel organizations: Introducing the Magical Acts by Groups in Civil Conflicts dataset. *Journal of Peace Research* 62(6): 2175–2184.

Soules MJ, Avdan N and Howarth K (2025) Magical practices and indiscriminate violence in armed conflicts. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*. DOI: 10.1080/1057610X.2025.2545791.

Weigert S (1995) *Traditional Religion and Guerrilla Warfare in Modern Africa*. Springer.

Weinstein JM (2007) *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wlodarczyk N (2009) *Magic and Warfare: Appearance and Reality in Contemporary African Conflict and Beyond*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 153–166.

Wlodarczyk N (2013) African traditional religion and violence. In: Juergensmeyer M, Kitts M and Jerryson M (eds) The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wood EJ (2003) *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wood RM and Thomas JL (2017) Women on the frontline: Rebel group ideology and women's participation in violent rebellion. *Journal of Peace Research* 54(1): 31–46.