

Magically Powerful Leaders and the Resilience of Rebel Groups

Abstract:

Some rebel leaders are believed by their followers to be prophets, messiahs, or to have magical powers beyond that of other group members. However, despite the important role that such leaders play in militant organizations, there has been little systematic analysis of the consequences of these individuals leading armed movements. To remedy this, we examine how such leaders affect the longevity of rebel movements. Specifically, we expect that rebel groups with leaders perceived to have such powers will, on average, survive longer because such leaders are better able to motivate and coerce recruits to continue fighting. Using novel data on rebel organizations in Africa, we find support for our argument.

The infamous commander of the Lord’s Resistance Army (LRA), Joseph Kony, claimed to wield a variety of magical abilities including the power to read others’ minds and to make his soldiers immune from bullets (Al Jazeera 2014; Kelly 2015). In Angola, Jonas Savimbi and his commanders in the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA) claimed to have a variety of powers that the average soldier in the group did not, including the ability to transform into animals and turn bullets into water (Brinkman 2012). Similarly, Allieu Kondewa, the military commander of the Civil Defense Forces in Sierra Leone, was believed to be able to transform into a snake and turn invisible (Kelsall 2009). Some leaders in Renamo in Mozambique claimed to have the powers of flight and precognition (Weigert 1995).

Aside from sincere belief, is there strategic value in rebel leaders proclaiming that they have magical powers? Prior scholarship maintains that rebel leaders can derive significant benefits from presenting themselves as having magical powers (e.g., Beber and Blattman 2013; Ellis 1999; Gates 2017; Włodarczyk 2009). By projecting magical powers, rebel leaders can enforce hierarchy, maintain discipline, and motivate troops to persist, helping their organizations endure despite adversity (Beber and Blattman 2013; Gates 2017; Włodarczyk 2009).

However, despite the importance that magically powerful rebel leaders play in sustaining their groups (Beber and Blattman 2013; Gates 2017; Włodarczyk 2009), there has been little systematic, *quantitative* analyses of the effects of these types of leaders on the longevity of rebel organizations. To remedy this, we employ new data on the presence of rebel leaders who claim to have magical or spiritual powers (Soules and Avdan 2024) to examine how such practices affect the durability of rebel movements. We find consistent evidence that groups survive longer when they feature leaders who are believed to wield magical powers beyond that of the average member of their organizations.

Our paper makes three contributions. First, our quantitative tests complement qualitative work on the effects of magically powerful leaders. This work largely maintains that there is a strategic logic to rebel leaders making claims about their magical abilities (e.g., Beber and Blattman 2013; Ellis 1999; Gates 2017; Włodarczyk 2009). Second, we also 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 2024) and women (Avdan et al. 2025). This quantitative work focuses on magical practices employed across the entire ranks. However, a subset of these groups also has leaders who make claims of having magical abilities that exceed that of the average member of their organization. Our study diverges from these other statistical works by highlighting why the presence of magically powerful leaders, and not just general magical practices across the ranks, is important.

Third, we contribute to the quantitative literature on the impact of religious ideologies on group longevity. Much of this literature investigates radical Islamist groups specifically (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.

The paper proceeds as follows: we first define key concepts and scope conditions, then develop a theory of how magically powerful leaders bolster rebel resilience. Next, we outline the research design and conclude by discussing the implications of our findings.

Key Concepts and Scope Conditions

First, turning to scope conditions, this study focuses specifically on African militant organizations for both theoretical and empirical reasons. Theoretically, existing literature studies

magical practices that are largely derived from traditional African religions (Beber and Blattman 2013; Ellis 1999; Gates 2017; Wlodarczyk 2009, 2013). Empirically, to the best of our knowledge, the only existing cross-group dataset on the magical practices of rebel organizations is specific to Africa (Soules and Avdan 2024).

In this context, magical practices involve practitioners manipulating everyday objects to fuse together the spiritual and physical worlds to achieve favorable outcomes in the physical realm (Wlodarczyk 2009). Said differently, these practices and belief systems emphasize the ability of practitioners to influence everyday outcomes through their own abilities to tap into the powers of the spiritual world (Wlodarczyk 2009). Magical belief systems heavily stress practitioners' agency in manipulating spiritual forces to shape events than other religions do (Wlodarczyk 2009).

In rebel organizations, these practices include rituals, incantations, and the wearing of charms intended to protect and/or enhance fighters' abilities (Wlodarczyk 2009). Existing work has identified two common categories of magical practices in rebel organizations (Wlodarczyk 2009). First are practices across the entire organization, including both the rank-and-file and leaders. For instance, in many groups, regardless of rank, members will wear amulets that they believe will protect them from harm, including making them immune to bullets (Wlodarczyk 2009). Second are magical powers attributed to some rebel commanders, which applies to a subset of groups that adhere to magical belief systems. This includes powers believed to not be wielded by the average member of the group, such as shapeshifting, flight, invisibility, and foresight (Wlodarczyk 2009). For instance, in Renamo, many members, including the rank-and-file, underwent rituals that they believed would protect them from harm on the battlefield.

However, some commanders in the group claimed to have powers surpassing this, including flight and precognition (Weigert 1995; Wlodarczyk 2009).

To clarify, “magically powerful leaders,” do not necessarily refer to the top or highest-ranking leader of the rebel organization, but instead encompass both upper echelons of leadership and mid-level commanders. Wlodarczyk (2009) documents that in some rebel organizations, both high-ranking and mid-level commanders will claim to wield additional magical powers beyond the reach of the average foot soldier. Furthermore, existing data on magically powerful leaders does not distinguish between high-ranking and mid-level commanders (Soules and Avdan 2024).

Magically Powerful Leaders and the Power to Resist

Rebel group strength can be conceptualized in at least two different ways. The first is rebels’ “power to hurt,” which is their ability to use force to achieve favorable outcomes, such as obtaining concessions or outright victory. Second, the “power to resist” is the ability of militant organizations to withstand government repression and survive (Cunningham et al. 2009). While related, these are analytically distinct: a group may be able to endure without necessarily imposing high costs on its adversary, and conversely, groups capable of inflicting harm may still collapse under sustained pressure. Factors that increase groups’ power to resist do not necessarily augment their power to hurt, and vice versa (Cunningham et al. 2009). Our paper focuses on the power to resist, because, as we will detail later, we expect that magically powerful leaders will help contribute to the longevity, but not overall success, of rebel organizations. We expect that magically powerful rebel leaders will help increase their groups’ power to resist by producing more motivated fighting forces that suffer from fewer command-and-control problems.

Motivating Recruits

We posit that magically powerful rebel leaders will motivate recruits through two mechanisms: 1) strengthening ideological commitments to the rebellion and 2) offering spiritual protection. First, rebel leaders that claim to have special divine or spiritual blessings, which imbue them with magical powers, are effective at gaining and maintaining the support of their members (Wlodarczyk 2009). Similarly, others (e.g., Svensson 2007) postulate that ideological commitments help radical Islamist rebel groups survive longer. These arguments are premised on militants' beliefs: if rebels believe in the justness of their cause, they will be more likely to continue fighting, even in the face of adversity (Basedau et al. 2022; Leader Maynard 2019; Walter 2017). Additionally, ideologically committed recruits are less likely to desert or defect in the face of adversity, prolonging their groups' lives (Oppenheim et al. 2015; Weinstein 2005, 2007).

While these arguments pertain to magical beliefs held by group members *in general*, we stress here that magically powerful leaders bolster ideological commitments beyond the effects of the magical practices of the rank-and-file members. Such leaders have greater persuasive leverage through their spiritual authority. Followers believe magically powerful leaders have specialized powers and more intimate ties to the supernatural. Consequently, such leaders can persuade their followers that the fight is spiritually ordained and blessed and thereby motivate their troops to keep fighting (Wlodarczyk 2009). Leaders' messaging of the rebellion as just, morally righteous, and spiritually preordained reduces desertion rates, thus sustaining group numbers and psychologically strengthening the fighting force (e.g., Wlodarczyk 2009).

For instance, Wlodarczyk (2009) explains that one justification that the LRA gave for continuing its fight against the Ugandan government is that the group's leader, Joseph Kony, had

allegedly received spiritual blessings from Acholi elders to take up arms. Other rebel leaders, including Alice Auma (more commonly known as Alice Lakwena) of the Holy Spirit Mobile Force (HSMF) (Wlodarczyk 2009), Frédéric Bitsangou (a.k.a., Pastor Ntoumi) of Ntsiloulous (Coyault 2018), and Ne Muanda Nsemi of the Bundu Dia Kongo (BDK) (Human Rights Watch 2020), all claimed to have received spiritual blessings for their armed struggles. Brinkman (2012) argues that Jonas Savimbi was able to largely maintain the loyalty of UNITA soldiers because of his respect for, and utilization of, local religious traditions.

Furthermore, as noted above, rebels often engage in magical practices, such as wearing protective amulets, because they believe doing so will make them immune from harm on the battlefield (Wlodarczyk 2009). Beliefs in magical protections play an important role in convincing rebels to continue fighting, thereby bolstering group survival (Wlodarczyk 2009). In at least some of these cases, rebel leaders are believed to be able to give and take away their cadres' magical powers (Wlodarczyk 2009). Magical leaders lend magical protection to members, convincing them that they will be protected if they continue to fight. Importantly, members' sense of immunity or invincibility derives from their beliefs in group leaders' magical abilities. Fighters may believe, for instance, that they are shielded on the battlefield, that they can repel enemy forces without injuries or fatalities. For example, in the HSMF members believed that Alice Auma's spiritual possession granted protection to fighters on the battlefield, such that bullets would not harm them (Avdan et al. 2025). Even as HSMF's resources and prospects waned, these beliefs supported members' commitment to the fight.

Cadres may also believe that magical protections translate into tactical superiority, assuring success against enemy forces. Additionally, if members believe that enemy forces are intimidated by the group's spiritual leadership, they are more likely to remain true to the cause. Even in the

face of battlefield losses, perceptions of intimidation bolster group cohesion because members believe in eventual success. This psychological fortification leads to a more loyal fighting force.

Command-and-Control

Second, the presence of magically powerful leaders helps mitigate command-and-control problems, producing fighting forces that are more likely to be obedient and are less to desert (Gates 2017; Wlodarczyk 2009). Specifically, Wlodarczyk (2009) explains that in some rebel organizations, commanders claim to have exclusive magical powers such as flight and invisibility that foot soldiers cannot access. Exclusive access to special powers helps leaders so better establish and maintain hierarchy and discipline within their organizations (Wlodarczyk 2009). Magically powerful leaders in groups such as the LRA and HSMF have established strict codes of conduct, threatening to either strip cadres of their powers or exact spiritual punishment for disobedience or desertion (Gates 2017; Wlodarczyk 2009). For instance, such threats, including threats to track down and punish deserters, help explain why the LRA had low desertion rates (Gates 2017).

Rebel groups with disciplined, obedient forces are more likely to endure (Haer et al. 2011; Weinstein 2005, 2007). Desertion rates decline when the perceived costs of leaving are high (Beber and Blattman 2013; Gates 2002; McLaughlin 2014), allowing groups to maintain the manpower needed to sustain operations. Magically powerful leaders can reinforce this dynamic by invoking threats of spiritual punishment, using fear of the supernatural to deter disobedience and desertion and thereby bolster organizational resilience.

At first glance, while it may seem threats are unnecessary if magically powerful leaders can motivate recruits, rebel groups often combine persuasion and coercion to motivate and socialize recruits (Gates 2017). For instance, Joseph Kony used his purported magical powers to both motivate and intimidate his recruits (Gates 2017). 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 to 2011 (Soules and Avdan 2024). 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 to 2011. Due to the time invariant nature of the MAGICC dataset, only cross-sectional analyses are conducted in this paper.

The list of actors in MAGICC is taken from the Non-State Actor (NSA) dataset (Cunningham et al. 2013). Given the difficulties associated with collecting temporally varying measures of these concepts, the MAGICC dataset is cross-sectional and all variables are static. While the geographic and temporal constraints of the MAGICC dataset produce a somewhat limited sample size, to the best of our knowledge, it is the only cross-group dataset on the magical practices of rebel organizations.

Additionally, existing datasets that measure rebel groups' religious ideologies tend to *not* capture magical practices, which are often *not* directly tied to the broader ideologies and goals of groups (Soules and Avdan 2024; Włodarczyk 2009). Indeed, Soules and Avdan (2024) estimate that only just over 15% of rebel groups they identify as engaging in some sort of magical practices are coded as having religious ideologies in prominent rebel group datasets, such as the Women in Armed Rebellion Dataset (Wood and Thomas 2017), the Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence dataset (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020), the Rebel Appeals and Incentives Dataset (Soules 2023), and the ACD2GTD (Polo and Gleditsch 2016). The Rebel Organization Leaders (ROLE) dataset (Acosta et al. 2023) contains rich information on a diversity of characteristics of rebel leaders but does not contain information on whether they are perceived to have magical abilities.

The MAGICC dataset contains two sets of binary variables. The first taps whether the group engages in magical practices, such as wearing protective amulets or implementing magic-based initiation rituals for recruits, across the entire organization (both rank-and-file and leadership). The second captures whether an organization has a leader or leaders who claim to have magical powers beyond the average member. This includes leaders who claim to be prophets or messiahs, such as Frédéric Bitsangou (a.k.a. “Pastor Ntoumi”), the leader of Ntsiloulous, or Ne Muanda Nsemi, the leader of Bundu Dia Kongo (BDK). The variable also measures whether leaders have other powers not accessible to most members of the organization. For instance, while many members of Renamo in Mozambique engaged in protective rituals, leaders in the group claimed to have powers beyond that, such as flight and precognition.

Both types of variables have two different versions, one with a more inclusive threshold for evidence, and one with a stricter standard for evidence. The degree of inclusivity is based on the

directness and consistency of the evidence (Soules and Avdan 2024). Given that the theory focuses on the role of magically powerful leaders, we use this measure from the MAGICC dataset. For the main analysis, we employ the more exclusive measure of magically powerful. In the sample, 9 of the 106 (~8.49%) organizations meet the stricter threshold for this variable. As a robustness check, we also analyze the measures with a more inclusive threshold, which includes 14 (13.21%) groups.

Dependent Variable

The central hypothesis contends that groups will survive longer when they feature magically powerful leaders. In the main analysis, we focus on the total lifespan of groups. Much of the prior literature analyzes the duration of individual conflict episodes, capturing distinct periods of more intense fighting (e.g., Basedau et al. 2022; Kreutz 2010). However, our theoretical framework guides us to focus on the entire lifespan of groups, rather than on periods of individual fighting. Specifically, we expect that groups with magically powerful leaders are less likely to be stamped out or dissolve completely, as a combination of persuasion and coercion incentivizes and deters foot soldiers from deserting, defecting, or surrendering. However, we do not expect that such leaders will help groups sustain *more intense* fighting. Indeed, in subsequent analysis, we do *not* find evidence that magically powerful leaders are associated with the length of individual conflict *episodes*.

Instead, in the main analysis, we measure the duration of groups based on the length of time between the earliest and most recently recorded activity. Specifically, using data from the UCDP Conflict Termination Dataset (Version 3, originally introduced by Kreutz (2010)), we measure the time between the first battle-related death and the last year a group is active in the dataset.

We then employ Cox Proportional Hazard models, a form of duration analysis, to test this hypothesis.

As an example of why we focus on the entire lifespan of a group, rather than individual conflict episodes, consider the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda. From the outset, the group has been led by Joseph Kony (UCDP Conflict Encyclopedia). As noted earlier, beliefs in Kony's magical powers have been key to the group's longevity (Gates 2017; Włodarczyk 2009). The LRA first entered the UCDP Conflict Termination Dataset in 1988 and left in 2014. However, during this time, it was involved in five separate conflict episodes with the Ugandan government in the UCDP Conflict Termination Dataset (Kreutz 2010). The intensity of fighting fluctuated during this time period, but the LRA survived, even when the intensity of fighting ebbed. We believe that the ability to persist despite shifts in the intensity of fighting is a crucial dimension of rebel resilience.

Control Variables

We also hold constant a variety of potentially confounding factors. First, rebel groups' religious ideologies can affect their socialization tactics (e.g., Hegghammer 2009) and duration (e.g., Basedau et al. 2022). Accordingly, using data from the Foundations of Rebel Group Emergence (FORGE) dataset (Braithwaite and Cunningham 2020), we include a binary indicator of whether a group formed around a religious ideology. Second, we extend data from the Rebel Appeals and Incentives Dataset (Soules 2023) and include a binary indicator of whether a group has a multi-ethnic membership, to account for the possibility that ethnically homogenous organizations are more resilient (Weinstein 2007) and that rebel leaders leverage magical powers to unite diverse segments of their organization (Włodarczyk 2009).

We also consider rebel group strength. Indeed, weaker groups might be more likely to adopt magical practices to motivate recruits when facing significant power discrepancies with the governments they are fighting (e.g., Capeci and Knight 1990). Rebel group strength also affects their longevity (Cunningham et al. 2009). Using data from the aforementioned NSA dataset (Cunningham et al. 2013), we include a binary indicator of whether the rebel group is much weaker than the government it is fighting. The recruitment of child soldiers, particularly their forced recruitment, is associated with the use of magical practices (Soules and Avdan 2024). Rebels are also more likely to employ coercive recruitment strategies later in their lifetimes (Eck 2014). In response, we include a three-point ordinal indicator of the extent to which groups forcibly recruit children, using data from Haer et al. (2020).

We also incorporate conflict and country-level factors. Rebel groups that use magical practices often employ high levels of violence against civilians (Wlodarczyk 2013). Rebels' use of violence also affects their longevity (Fortna 2015). Thus, we introduce the logged number of battle-related deaths across a group's lifetime, using data from the UCDP Battle-Related Deaths Dataset (version 24.1, Davies et al. 2024). State capacity also affects the probability that rebels adopt magical practices (e.g., Capeci and Knight 1990) and their ability to survive (Cunningham et al. 2009). To account for this, we include the logged per capita GDP of the country the group is fighting for the first year it forms, with data from Fariss et al. (2022). Finally, we also account for regime type by using the Polity V Project's 21-point ordinal indicator of democracy (Marshall and Gurr 2020).

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, meaning that coefficients greater than 1 indicate a greater likelihood of termination, while values less than 1 capture decreased likelihood of termination.

Across all models, we find strong, statistically significant evidence that groups with magically powerful leaders survive longer. The substantive effects are strong as well. For instance, in Model 4, we see that magically powerful leaders are associated with an approximately 55% increase in probability of survival for organizations. Thus, this evidence suggests that magically powerful leaders have a large, significant effect on the survival of rebel organizations. The Kaplan-Meier survival estimates for the stricter measure of magically powerful leaders are shown in **Figure 1**.

Table 1: Magically Powerful Leaders and Rebel Group Duration

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Magical Leaders		0.448*** (0.126)	0.436** (0.148)	0.452* (0.203)
Religious Ideology	0.628* (0.154)		0.529*** (0.101)	0.619** (0.136)
Multi-Ethnic Rebels	1.315 (0.332)		1.324 (0.282)	1.354 (0.323)
Much Weaker	0.744 (0.175)		0.751 (0.161)	0.683 (0.167)
Child Forced Recruitment	0.868 (0.175)		0.620*** (0.114)	0.813 (0.174)
Battle-Related Deaths (Logged)	0.736*** (0.0451)			0.747*** (0.0475)
Polity2	1.028 (0.0272)			1.040 (0.0294)
per capita GDP (Logged)	1.038 (0.204)			1.037 (0.191)
Observations	100	106	103	100

Robust standard errors in parentheses

Hazard ratios reported

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

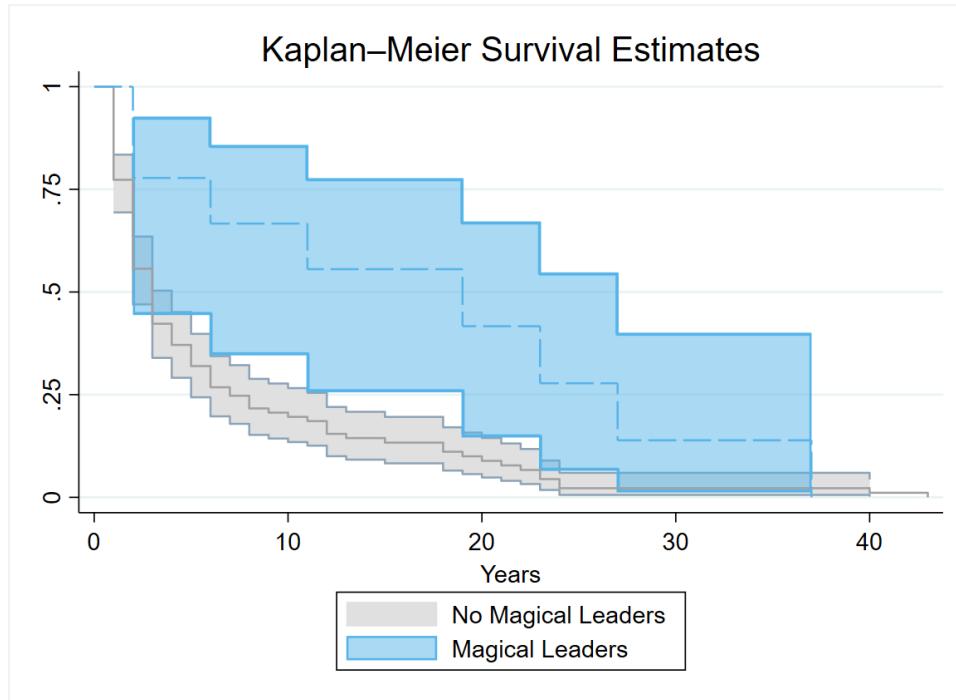


Figure 1: Kaplan Meier Survival Estimates – Exclusive Measure of Magically Powerful Leaders

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

As noted above, the MAGICC dataset also provides an alternative binary indicator for magically powerful leaders, based on a less restrictive threshold of evidence. We rerun the main analysis using this measure. Across all models, the presence of magically powerful leaders is associated with longer group lifespans. However, while this association is statistically significant in the first two models, it drops just below statistical significance when the full set of control

variables is included (**Appendix Table 1**). Overall, we find that both measures of magically powerful leaders are significantly associated with the duration of groups, though the results are more consistent when using the measure that has the stricter evidentiary standards.

Other Forms of Magical Practices

One possibility is that when magic is practiced 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. Indeed, magically powerful leaders are a subset of these organizations, as many groups in the sample engage in magical practices without having leaders who proclaim to have powers beyond that of the average member. 38 of the 106 groups in the sample (~35.85%) meet the lower threshold for inclusion, while 21 (~19.81) meet the stricter threshold. We reevaluate 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 (**Appendix Table 2**).

However, there is the possibility that these measures do not adequately differentiate between the effects of general magical practices and the effects of magically powerful leaders, as only a subset of groups that practice magic also possess magically powerful leaders. To address this, we use the data in the MAGICC dataset to create a binary indicator of whether a group is coded as employing magical practices across the entire organization but *not* as having leaders who possess magical powers beyond the average member. We create a stricter version of this variable using

the stricter measures of organization-wide and leader specific magical practices. We also create a more inclusive version of this variable using the less restrictive versions of the group-wide and leader specific indicators. We do this to try to isolate the effects of general magical practices. Across all models, we do not find any statistically significant evidence between either of these measures and the duration of rebel groups, affirming that magically powerful leadership and not magical practices in general drive our results (**Appendix Table 3**).

Conflict Episodes

As discussed above, 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. Said differently, 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 (**Appendix Table 4**). Thus, there is not really evidence to suggest that magically powerful leaders help group sustain more intense fighting for longer periods of time. However, again, we find strong evidence that such groups exist longer.

Conflict Outcomes

Importantly, we do not expect magically powerful leaders to help increase rebel groups' power to hurt. Indeed, resources that help rebel organizations survive longer do not always assist

them in achieving their long-term goals (e.g., Conrad et al. 2019). While magical practices can help motivate and coerce rebels to continue fighting (Włodarczyk 2009), it is less clear if such practices will provide groups with the leverage they need to achieve their long-term goals.

Beliefs in magical practices might translate into battlefield success in the short-term, but they might not be as effective in the long-term. One main function of magic, including magically powerful leaders, is to intimidate enemy forces who come to believe that rebels are too magically potent to defeat (e.g., because they are immune to bullets) (Włodarczyk 2009). For instance, in the early stages of the civil war in Mozambique, government forces would sometimes run when they heard Renamo forces approaching because they believed that members of this group possessed significant magical powers (Włodarczyk 2009). Such a response might have affirmed members' beliefs in their magical abilities, further motivating them.

However, as Renamo started to suffer battlefield losses over time, many began to doubt its claims about magical powers, and government forces eventually cracked down on the group (Włodarczyk 2009). Nevertheless, commanders in Renamo continued to use threats of magical punishments to coerce recruits into staying (Włodarczyk 2009). This could have helped the group sustain its military operations even in the face of battlefield losses. Thus, while perceptions of magical powers might help rebels survive the tumultuous early years of conflicts, they may not translate to success, as rebel leaders struggle to continuously credibly signal that they are magically powerful.

The UCDP Conflict Termination Dataset also contains several measures of the ways in which groups end (Kreutz 2010). This includes favorable outcomes, such as earning a peace settlement or achieving total victory over government forces, and unfavorable outcomes, such as the group being completely defeated by government forces or ending through low levels of activity.

Building on the analysis described above, we examine how the presence of magically powerful leaders affects the ways in which conflict episodes terminate. Specifically, due to the limited number of groups in the sample, we compare all favorable outcomes (peace agreements and rebel victory) to all unfavorable outcomes (government victory and conflicts fizzling out). Across a series of competing-risk duration models, we do not find evidence that the presence of magically powerful leaders increases or decreases the probability of conflict-episodes ending favorably or unfavorably for rebel groups (**Appendix Table 5**).

Conclusion

Rebel leaders in a variety of conflicts have made claims to magical powers ranging from invisibility, the power to transform into animals, and flight, to proclamations that they are messiahs or prophets. These leaders are expected to be able to form resilient organizations through a combination of persuasion and coercion (Ellis 1999; Włodarczyk 2009). However, despite the important role that these leaders play in many civil wars, there is a lack of systematic, cross-rebel group quantitative analysis examining the consequences of their participation in these conflicts.

To remedy this, we use new data on magically powerful rebel leaders in civil wars to investigate how they affect the longevity of their groups. We find strong evidence that rebel organizations that feature magically powerful leaders survive longer, demonstrating the utility of magical belief systems. Importantly, our paper connects magical leadership to the power to resist, as distinct from the power to hurt. Practically, the utility of magically potent leaders lies in prolonging rebels' lifespans, even if such leadership does not always lead to outcomes such as battlefield wins or concessions.

Scholars should take the roles of spiritual leaders in civil wars more seriously, as their omission from studies of conflict presents an incomplete understanding of groups' survival prospects. Claims to magical potency may be a strategic tool in the rebel's arsenal. Indeed, these results suggest that rebel leaders' claims that they can fly, turn invisible, raise the dead, and employ magical powers in a variety of other ways are rational tactics that provide benefits to rebel organizations.

Future research could explore the variation in how different types of magical practices shape command structures, recruitment, and defection. Expanding MAGICC to other regions could also shed light on regional variation in the effects of magical belief systems in insurgencies. Finally, scholars might consider how governments adapt when facing rebel opponents who derive authority from perceived supernatural power.

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