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Integrated Militias Can Increase the Risk of Civil War Renewal

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Abstract:

Research on civil war identified multiple reasons for why some transitions to peace are more robust than others. However, scholars largely ignored a key determinant of successful peace: the role of pro-government militias and their absorption into the new or recovering state. Using new data on 160 pro-government organizations (PGOs) in 144 post-civil-war contexts, we show that integrating PGOs into the security apparatus significantly shifts the hazard of conflict renewal over time upward, while integrating them into the government decreases said risk. Substantively, by year 12, security-integrated contexts are at a staggering 45% higher risk of experiencing conflict renewal compared with non-security integrated contexts, while politically integrated contexts are at a 21% lower risk of experiencing conflict renewal compared with non-politically integrated contexts. Disaggregating renewal by context, we additionally find that the adverse impact of security integration is especially acute in government victory and bargained outcome contexts; in contrast, rebel victory contexts show no effect of security integration, but a negative and statistical impact of political integration on the hazard of renewal. We conclude with a brief discussion of the implications for research and policymaking.

Keywords: *Civil/Domestic Conflict, DDR, Militias, reintegration*

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The Supplemental Appendix is Available Online at:

http://www.orekoren.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/SupplementalAppendix11_3_21.pdf

The DSO Dataset is Openly Available Online at (please cite this paper if using it):

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Scholars identified several explanations for why some countries experience civil war renewal, including – among others – the strength of domestic political institutions (e.g., Karreth and Tir 2013), the type of conflict outcome (e.g., Walter 2009), and the extent to which rebel groups are incorporated into the post-war state (e.g., Hartzell and Hoddie 2019; Matanock 2017). A central question is whether and how *pro-government* organizations (PGOs) – militias, paramilitary units, civilian defense forces, and allied rebel groups – shape post conflict instability (Steinert et al. 2019). As governments often use auxiliary armed forces to win civil wars, the relationship between PGOs and the government attracted ample attention in recent years (e.g., Carey et al. 2013; Wehrey and Ahram 2015). But although much was written about the role PGOs play *during* civil war, questions on how such groups impact the probability of violence *after* the war has ended remain.

We believe that how the government deals with *pro-government* actors can have similar – possibly even greater – impact on conflict renewal than how states accommodate *anti-government* rebels using means such as political power-sharing provisions, disarmament and demobilization, and integration into the military (e.g., Walter, 2009; Hartzell and Hoddie, 2014; Matanock, 2017). By helping the government, organizations that fought on the winning side have

“earned” their ability to influence political and security processes, gain a share of the revenues obtained from state resources, and otherwise enjoy other spoils of victory (Day et al. 2020). Any government violations of these rights could thus lead to grievances and potential anti-state mobilization (e.g., Carey and Gonzalez, 2021).

Staying PGOs can contribute to the persistence of low intensity conflict and may even engender a new civil war in post conflict contexts (Steinert et al. 2019; Carey and Gonzales 2020). Going beyond the emphasis on PGO’s staying power in post conflict environment, we theorize that how the government deals with PGOs once they are no longer needed, and especially the manner in which they are *integrated* into the state, influences these organizations’ proclivity to reengage in violence. While there are several approaches governments can take to demobilize PGOs, we focus on absorption into the state via organizational integration, highlighting two specific approaches: security PGOs integration, incorporating PGOs into the security apparatus; and political integration, incorporating PGOs as political actors.

Drawing on relevant research, we argue that security PGO integration will exacerbate commitment problems in the post-conflict environment, leading to an increased risk of civil war renewal compared with leaving these organizations unintegrated. In contrast, political integration should reduce these commitment problems, lowering the risk of conflict renewal. We test this argument with new data on PGOs and the type of integration they experienced after the war, if any, and find support for both expectations. In the discussion, we outline some research and policy implications.

PGO Absorption and War Renewal

PGOs and post-civil war commitment problems

Civil wars often involve PGOs such as militias (Carey et al. 2013; Wehrey and Ahram 2015). After the war, PGOs may persist, engaging in violence to achieve organizational goals (Steinert et al. 2019). Research suggests that, if left to their own devices, PGOs may (re)engage in violence independently of the state, leading to a higher risk of war recurrence (Steinert et al. 2019; Carey and Gonzalez 2020). Being left out of the political and security discussion between the rebels and the government, these groups turn to violence to maintain their existential viability (Aliyev 2019).

This study is motivated by two related questions: What can victorious governments do with PGOs after they are no longer useful? More specifically, do attempts of PGO inclusion always generate beneficial outcomes? While there are a variety of solutions governments could take to address the PGO problem in the post-conflict environment, we focus – for theoretical and empirical reasons – on one specific set of solutions: absorbing these PGOs (back) into the state apparatus.

As discussed in detail in the appendix, by ‘integration’ we refer to the ability of PGO troops to participate as active members in key state institutions without facing significant limitations, thereby gaining access to the resources of and legitimacy conferred by these institutions. This can happen at the troop level, where individuals join the military or another security agency, or get involved in existing or new political parties; or at the group level, where whole PGOs are absorbed as new battalions within (or as) an official security organization, or as new parties within the electoral system. Accordingly, we highlight two broad categories of such integration. First, PGOs can be absorbed into different arms and branches of the *security apparatus* (e.g., military, border guards, etc.) in different capacities (as organic units or as individual troops). Second, PGOs can be integrated into the *political system* as a part of a set of

“political inclusion” measures. This could happen via giving the PGO a clear formal legal status, e.g., as its own party, or by absorbing it into existing parties, branches, and bureaucracies.

Integrating PGOs, however, is not a guarantee these groups will not renege on their commitments or use their new position to reengage in violence. Indeed, these absorbed PGOs may use their new standing and access to state capacities to further pursue their own agendas and even reengage in violence. This situation is especially likely considering the real possibility of commitment problems in post-conflict contexts (Walter 2009; Hartzell and Hoddie 2019). Although the different actors – government officials, military officers, PGO and rebel leaders – may formally state they want to uphold peace, they often lack the ability to trust demobilized troops. As a result, as is the case with rebels, PGOs may face heightened incentives to reengage in violence for at least two reasons.

The first relate to the PGO’s fear of rebels and the possibility that they will use their newly acquired power within the state to ‘settle wartime scores.’ This means that PGOs – fearing a potential first-move by the rebels and without information to the contrary – will have incentives to strike first. Motivated by this fear, members of the PGO may feel empowered in using their new access to resources or conferred legitimacy to attack demobilized rebels, especially if the latter enjoys relatively high access to power in the post-conflict environment, before they gain enough influence and power to physically attack PGO members or use other discriminative measures against them (Zena 2013; Steinert et al. 2019).

Second, PGOs may also fear *ex ante* that the government will fail to honor their commitment to include them in any power-sharing structures after the war, and to not repress them and their constituents (especially for PGOs representing ethnic minorities). Indeed, the government may have incentives to constrain the PGO’s access to state capacities, worrying that too much access may allow them to induce domestic political stability. Knowing the government

has incentives to act against it, e.g, by discriminating in resource allocation and promotions, or even actively repress it, PGO members may seek to drag the government back into war by attacking rebels – thereby rewriting political and security discussions along war-time fault-lines (“us” vs. the rebels) – or may even take up arms against the state. We therefore believe that the manner in which PGOs is included within the state after the civil war has important implications as to whether they reengage in violence.

Integration’s expected impacts on conflict renewal

As mentioned, we focus on two measures the government can take to (re)absorb PGOs into the state apparatus. But why should the manner in which PGOs are integrated influence their willingness to reengage in conflict? The key distinctions are the receptiveness of the integrating entity (decided by military commanders and government officials) and the possibility and implications of agency loss.

In the case of integration into the security apparatus, and especially the military, PGOs enter a bureaucratic, (often) professionalized entity. Senior military officers are rarely receptive to the idea of integrating a competing organization, especially if – as is often the case – PGO members had little training and recruited violent or criminal individuals, or if integrating ethnically-affiliated PGOs “may create an ethnic imbalance in the army, one where those units remain more focused on intercommunal disputes than the State chain of command” (Day et al. 2020, 20). To preempt this possibility, senior military officers can “counter-stack” specific senior positions, constraining, or even eliminating, the decision-making freedom of integrated PGO commanders and excluding them from important operations (Abbs et al. 2020; Day et al. 2020). This behavior, in turn, will spark tension between military and integrated PGO troops, generating grievances and resentment (Wehrey and Ahram 2015). While “the military embodies cohesion

and unity,” integrated PGO officers may seek to increase their authority over their former underlings, which can result with “standing for particularity, possible ambitions of separateness and negation of the state/nation model” (Gaub 2010, 13).

There is therefore a fear of agency loss if the PGO remains loyal primarily to its constituent ethnic group or wartime commanders. Its members may use their new positions to pursue organizational goals that are not only detrimental to domestic security but can also implicate the state in the violence. This is especially a problem as military integration gives integrated PGOs access to the same weaponry, authorities, and capacities as regular military and police troops. This exacerbates the situation compared with non-integrated contexts, because in this case, this access and legitimacy gives security-integrated PGOs a major advantage if choosing to reengage in violence compared with non-integrated PGOs. Security-integrated PGOs can use these new capacities and standings to settle wartime scores, attack former rebels, and even stage a rebellion within the military. For security officials, therefore, “[t]he decision to integrate former militias into the national army is typically a political expediency that impedes military professionalism and increases the likelihood of human rights abuses and instability” (Zena 2013, 1).

This argument is supported by case-based evidence. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), after the Second War of the Congo, “there were several instances of militias opting for integration into the armed forces, only to defect and return to violence, as they believed other militias were being treated more favorably” (Strachan 2018, 3). Moreover, even if they did not desert, “[m]any that remained within the FARDC have been ineffective, notorious for human rights abuses, and loyal to their former militia leaders rather than the FARDC chain of command” (Zena 2013, 5).

Alternatively (or additionally), post-conflict governments may choose to absorb PGOs at

the *political level*, as members of national parties or the executive branch, potentially even creating some form of co-governance arrangements. This approach is similar to rebel-focused inclusion measures, which allow such groups, for instance, to form their own political parties and participate in post-conflict elections (Hartzell and Hoddie 2019; Matanock 2017).

As a method of national absorption, political PGO integration is preferred to security integration for three reasons. First, political and military leaders will view political integration as an effective tool for coopting PGOs *without having to give them real access to national security capacities* (Wehrey and Ahram 2015). In doing so, political leaders push PGO leaders to accept the programmatic appeals of these parties, and their agendas therein, while limiting their ability to achieve these goals with violence.

Second, in autocracies and quasi-democracies, the political system may, in practice, provide limited substantive means of participation in decision-making. If this is the case, governments have strong incentives to integrate the PGOs politically rather than into the security apparatus to avoid giving them access to state security capacities and legitimacy, while still providing an official framework of integration into the state.

Finally, like governments, PGOs may have their own reasons to favor political inclusion. They gain official and – by extension – public recognition, which is crucial in helping these groups, especially violent or extremist ones, to obtain some degree of legitimacy that can persist in the long term. Political integration also gives PGOs clear formal legal status within the new or recovering state, allowing PGO leaders to pursue the interests of their constituents within a formal institutional venue, while also providing them with material benefits (e.g., regular income, revenue from state resources). These issues, in turn, reinforce PGOs' domestic status and permit them to “hedge” against future security threats by rebels or even by the state, while creating

stakes for these organizations in the post-war political system.

Being able to make credible commitments reduces the *ex-ante* uncertainty that other actors (especially demobilized rebels) may have about any *ex-post* PGO intentions. For the government, this creates stable expectations about the PGO's behavior in the post-conflict environment, improving the credibility of mutual commitments and reducing the risk of conflict renewal. We provide evidence from specific cases in support of both contentions in the appendix.

Data and Methods

The unit of analysis in our models is the post-conflict-year, where post-civil war contexts and conflict renewals are identified using Kreutz's (2010) dataset (which we extended to 2014). The dependent variable is the time until civil war (defined as conflict with 25 or more combatant casualties) renewed in a given post-conflict year (see discussion in the appendix). As our covariates are time varying, the indicator used to assess their impacts on the hazard of civil war – *Conflict renewal* – measures whether conflict (based on the definition used in Kreutz 2010) renewed during a given post-conflict year.

Consistent with our duration data structure, we use semi-parametric Cox proportional hazard models with standard errors clustered by country (a more robust assessment than clustering by post-conflict) to estimate the effects of our covariates on a post-conflict's peace duration. Our Cox models estimate the hazard rate of civil war renewal at year t for a given post-conflict id (i) as a function of a baseline hazard of renewal ($h_0(t)$) and our anticipated covariates ($\mathbf{x}'_i\beta$). We employ the more robust Efron's method to handle tied events. Note that proportionality assumptions hold for all variables in all our Cox models based on Schoenfeld residuals tests.

We rely on new data on PGOs for our two dichotomous independent variables, *Security integration* and *Political integration*, coding whether any respective type of integration has

occurred or not in a given post-conflict year. As we discuss in detail in the appendix, these new data have important advantages for testing our hypotheses. First, they extend on previous data, such as the PGMD (Carey et al. 2013), by including, in addition to militias, a large number of other organizations that fought on the winning side during the civil war. This allows us to assess the viability of our claims on a wider range of pro-government organizations than previously examined. Second, our data include specific information on whether and how PGOs were integrated (based on our theoretical and empirical definition), allowing us to determine not only if but also how integration impacts conflict renewal risk.

Information on the coding standards used, descriptive statistics, and bivariate regressions are all provided in the appendix. We also include several controls in our medium and full models, accounting for PGO-, rebel, and government-side confounders. These controls, discussed in the appendix, include population, GDP per capita, political openness, military expenditure and personnel, and oil revenue (% GDP) for state-side factors; whether there was DDR or legal power sharing arrangements for rebels, as well as war duration and the number of rebel troops for rebel side factors; and – given the range and difference in number of active PGOs – the number of PGOs recorded as being active in the post-civil war environment for our PGO-side factors.

Results

Table 1 summarizes our main results. We begin by estimating a baseline model, which includes only our two key variables of interest in addition to key government-side controls, followed by a medium model that adds several rebel-side controls, and finally our full model with all controls. Consistent with our first expectation, *Security integration*'s coefficient estimate has a positive and statistically significant (to at least the $p < .05$ level) on the hazard of conflict renewal during a given post-conflict year, suggesting states that integrated PGOs into the security apparatus are –

as our theory posits –more likely to experience conflict renewal compared with states that did not integrate them. Adding to research that highlights the potential destabilizing impacts of militias after civil war (Steinert et al. 2019; Carey and Gonzalez 2020), these results strongly suggest the risk for security-integrated states is higher. Turning to *Political integration*, the coefficient estimate is in the expected negative sign, meaning it is associated with a lower hazard of conflict renewal, but it is not statistically significant in any of our models. Hence, although the evidence does suggest that our argument regarding the pacifying effect of political integration may be valid, we cannot safely conclude this is clearly the case.

To assess the *substantive* strength of the results, we use our Full model (model 3) estimates to plot the expected termination rates – namely the rate at which observations were expected to experience renewed conflict (*Conflict renewal* =1) – for each of our two PGO integration indicators, once when their values are fixed at zero (no integration) and again when fixed at one (integration), holding all other variables at their means (for continuous variables), medians (ordinal), or modes (dichotomous) in Figure 1. As the left plot illustrates, the substantive effect of security integration, specifically, on predicted conflict renewal rates is quite large. By year $t = 12$, 94% of the security-integrated post-conflict cases are predicted to experience conflict, compared with 45% of the non-security-integrated cases. Additionally, although political integration did not have a robust statistical effect in Table 1, its substantive effect on lowering predicted conflict renewal and onset rates is substantial: by year $t = 12$, 43% of politically integrated PGO post conflict contexts experienced conflict renewal compared with 64% of non-politically integrated contexts.

In the appendix (Tables A4-A5), we consider and discuss numerous alternative explanations in a series of robustness checks for country-specific issues, multiple conflict renewals, zero inflation/selection, and other confounders.

Table 1. Cox PH Model Estimates of Peace Duration, 1989-2014.

	Baseline (1)	Medium (2)	Full (3)
PGO-side factors			
<i>Security integration</i>	0.727*** (0.303)	0.946** (0.447)	1.256*** (0.551)
<i>Political integration</i>	-0.090 (0.403)	-0.198 (0.536)	-0.602 (0.799)
<i>N. PGOs</i>	.	.	0.036 (0.113)
Rebel-side factors			
<i>Rebel DDR</i>	.	-0.359 (0.431)	-0.729 (0.530)
<i>Rebel power sharing</i>	.	0.306 (0.645)	0.753 (0.880)
<i>Rebel troops¹</i>	.	.	-0.041 (0.091)
<i>War duration</i>	.	.	0.017 (0.022)
Government-side factors			
<i>Population¹</i>	0.155 (0.092)	0.150 (0.092)	0.058 (0.201)
<i>GDP per capita¹</i>	-0.010 (0.040)	-0.010 (0.041)	-0.021 (0.054)
<i>Polity2</i>	-0.057*** (0.020)	-0.053** (0.020)	-0.070*** (0.027)
<i>Military expenditure¹</i>	.	.	0.189* (0.130)
<i>Military personnel¹</i>	.	.	-0.114 (0.197)
<i>Rents from Oil (% GDP)</i>	.	.	0.008 (0.010)
Observations	1,099	1,099	742
Log Likelihood	-351.559	-351.127	-242.498

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Values in parentheses are standard errors clustered by country.

¹ In natural log form.

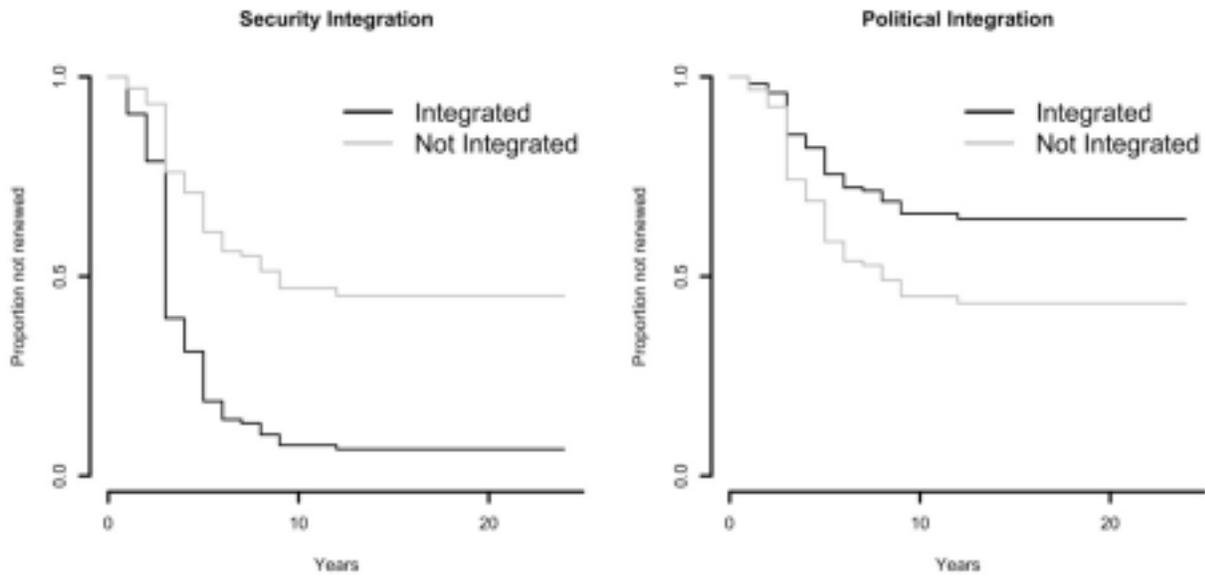


Figure 1. Expected Conflict Renewal Rates for Different Types of Integration

Table 2. Firth Cox PH Model Estimates of Peace Duration, 1989-2014.

	Gov. vic. (3a)	Reb. vic. (3b)	Barg. out. (3c)
PGO-side factors			
<i>Security integration</i>	1.653*** (0.652)	-0.909 (1.921)	2.716*** (0.960)
<i>Political integration</i>	0.037 (0.817)	-5.424* (2.995)	-0.189 (1.439)
<i>N. PGOs</i>	-0.102 (0.148)	0.758* (0.417)	0.036 (0.167)
Rebel-side factors			
<i>Rebel DDR</i>	-0.763 (0.617)	-1.632 (1.970)	-0.520 (0.845)
<i>Rebel power sharing</i>	0.246 (1.011)	5.610* (3.006)	-0.172 (1.640)
<i>Rebel troops¹</i>	-0.012 (0.118)	0.028 (0.488)	0.084 (0.195)
<i>War duration</i>	0.023 (0.027)	0.075 (0.067)	-0.038 (0.055)
Government-side factors			
<i>Population¹</i>	0.115 (0.249)	1.510 (1.026)	-0.214 (0.404)
<i>GDP¹</i>	-0.030 (0.069)	-0.348 (0.205)	0.013 (0.123)
<i>Polity2</i>	-0.033 (0.037)	-0.200 (0.132)	0.025 (0.063)
<i>Military expenditure¹</i>	0.387** (0.173)	-0.759 (0.667)	0.593 (0.303)
<i>Military personnel¹</i>	-0.466* (0.268)	-0.489 (0.854)	-0.337 (0.439)
<i>Rents from Oil (% GDP)</i>	0.014 (0.012)	0.031 (0.045)	0.008 (0.021)
Observations	728	728	728
Log Likelihood	-140.232	-3.373	-43.127

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01. Coefficients are Firth-corrected, with standard errors clustered by country in parentheses.

¹ In natural log form.

Finally, we examine whether our results vary based on the way the civil war had ended. For instance, government victories may involve organizations that can be more easily absorbed, and hence have a lower risk of triggering conflict renewals. This is especially relevant considering that government victories are becoming less frequent (Lyal and Wilson 2009). Additionally, post conflict contexts of wars won by rebels, who decide whether or not to integrate into the new state former rebel allies, may be more easily triggered into renewals. Finally, bargained outcomes often involve formal measures and third-party guarantees, which can impact commitment problems and standardize integration policies (Walter 2009; Hartzell and Hoddie 2019).

To this end, Table 2 re-estimates our full specification, using three different definitions of conflict termination: (i) wars won by the government, (ii) wars won by rebels, and (iii) wars that ended in a bargained outcome. The low number of renewals recorded by each variable increases

the risk of perfect ordering in the data, thereby introducing a risk of monotone-likelihood bias in these models. Accordingly, we estimate a set of *Firth-corrected* Cox models – this correction procedure is summarized in the appendix – which account for this bias (Anderson et al. 2020). The statistical results remain unchanged when a standard (non- corrected) model is used. However, the coefficient estimates are very sizeable in these models, implying unrealistically large effects.

As Table 2 illustrates, the effect of each integration type indeed varies across different termination types. Government victories seem to be at a higher (420% compared with 250% in Model 3) and significant hazard of experiencing renewal if they integrate PGOs into the security apparatus, but have a practically nil benefit of offering political inclusion. Rebel victories, in contrast, do not have a statistically significant increase in renewal hazard due to security integration, but a lower (99%, even after Firth-correction, compared with a 46% in Model 3) hazard of renewal if the politically integrate allied groups. Finally, bargained outcomes seem to be especially susceptible to the risk of conflict renewal in the case of security integration (15 times higher even after Firth correction), and again, political PGO inclusion has a practically nil effect. In line with our theory, this result may suggest rebel power-sharing measures increase PGO fears about the possibility of “score settling,” which creates greater incentives to leverage their position within the security apparatus to reengage in violence (Zena 2013; Strachan 2018).

Discussion

What do the results tell us about how actions taken by governments to deal with former allies increases conflict risk in the post-conflict environment? Our findings first suggest that scholars of peacebuilding and post-war stability should give attention to the incentives and inclusion measures concerning pro-, and not only anti-government organizations. This complements

research that focuses on rebel-side incentives, including demobilization and disarmament and power sharing (e.g., Hartzell and Hoddie 2019; Matanock 2017) by showing PGOs-side determinants are at least as important for post-war stability.

The findings also complement research on the impact of pro-government groups in post conflict situations, which suggests that – when not integrated into the state – these groups have a staying power that allows them to serve a destabilizing role, e.g., as generators of low intensity conflict or even as future active rebels (e.g., Wehrey and Ahram 2015; Steinert et al. 2019; Carey and Gonazles 2020). We add a crucial insight to this research by showing that even if these groups receive accommodation by the state, security integration can result with an even worse outcome. Understanding the political complexities underlying these groups' behaviors is hence necessary for future research on the role of nonstate actors in peacebuilding war renewal.

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