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*The USIP Learning Agenda: An Evidence Review*

# External Support for Nonviolent Action

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## Introduction: External Support and Nonviolent Action

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In 2018, Sudan was one of the world's most politically repressive regimes. By means of violence and intimidation, President Omar al-Bashir had stayed in power for decades, despite the 2011 breakaway of South Sudan and a conviction for genocide and crimes against humanity by the International Criminal Court. Bashir's ruling coalition seemed solid, his opponents were divided, and independent civil society was in shambles. Yet after protests in late 2018 grew into a massive, nationwide movement opposing his rule, Bashir was ousted in April 2019, and a joint civilian-military council initiated a transition intended to end with free and fair democratic elections. While a 2021 military coup has put the outcome of that transition in serious doubt, the Sudanese people, through courageous ongoing mobilization, have challenged the coup leaders and continue to push for democracy.

The bravery, tactical creativity, and unity around the shared goals of the Sudanese people were the primary drivers of the surprising revolutionary outcome and are the primary factors that maintain that mobilization today.<sup>1</sup> However, in the years leading up to Sudan's ongoing nonviolent revolution, domestic and international supporters also played a significant role in facilitating the creation of the free spaces that led to mobilization; training activists and civil society leaders in nonviolent action, dialogue and negotiation, and strategic planning; and supporting the movement through diplomatic pressure on the Sudanese government to end repression and yield to the people's demands.

Nonviolent action campaigns such as Sudan's revolution are an increasingly common way for oppressed people faced with nonresponsive or repressive political systems to seek redress of their grievances. Campaigns for the most difficult political goals have succeeded roughly half the time, even when faced with violent repression.<sup>2</sup> They have also led to some of the most consequential political transformations of our time. Countries that achieve major political changes through nonviolent action are much more likely to democratize and much less likely to experience civil war or other political violence, and their future political regimes tend to be more protective of basic freedoms.<sup>3</sup>

For these reasons, the international community has been deeply interested and invested in supporting nonviolent action. This support has taken diverse forms, from direct financial assistance to diplomatic and economic sanctions, and has sometimes played an important role in facilitating movement success. Yet these interventions are often haphazard or are not informed by what scholars and activists know about how nonviolent action works.

This evidence review synthesizes the past thirty years of scholarly and practitioner evidence on external support for nonviolent action campaigns such as the recent revolution in Sudan. Specifically, it examines external support for nonviolent action campaigns that have sought to achieve greater social, political, or economic rights in contexts where these rights

are deeply restricted. It seeks to evaluate what we know academically about the impact of particular means of external support and to generate practical lessons for how external support can be most effectively directed.

Three major theorized mechanisms underlie the core theory of change of most attempts to provide external support to nonviolent action:<sup>4</sup> First, that before movements begin, external support can help protect free space for initial mobilization, and foster participation once movements have started; second, that when movements are at their peak, external support can reduce government repression and increase the nonviolent discipline of movements; and third, once movements have passed their peak, external support can help them achieve their short-term goals and sustain those gains over the long term. These mechanisms are the focus of our exploration in this evidence review.

To evaluate the efficacy of these mechanisms, we conducted a systematic review of thousands of books, journal articles, and practitioner reports from the leading academic presses, journals, and practitioner organizations concerned with nonviolent action.<sup>5</sup> The methodology for this review, described in more detail below, was based on a consultative workshop with several of the leading experts in the field of nonviolent action.

The central finding of our research is that, while there is an extensive literature on nonviolent action and social movements, the literature specifically focused on external support is rife with gaps. With only a few notable exceptions, these studies have significant issues that limit the possibility of drawing definitive conclusions.<sup>6</sup> Most either consider the question of external support only tangentially, or examine only one case, or draw conclusions about the impact of external support that are only vaguely supported by the evidence. Thus, our review's primary takeaway is a call for a more rigorous and comprehensive research program on external support, tied in with careful program-evaluation strategies from organizations that engage in external support for nonviolent action movements.

Throughout the review, we also emphasize the complex ethical considerations at the heart of external support for nonviolent action. While nonviolent action has a striking success rate and often many positive impacts on the societies in which it takes place, it comes with many risks. These risks, which can be severe, are almost all borne by the brave activists on the frontlines, not the external supporters sitting comfortably in international offices. Given the risks involved and the uncertainty of impact for several common types of support, we recommend the adoption of a "do no harm" approach that gives deference to local initiative and knowledge; focuses on learning; and is based on careful, contextually informed strategic planning.

With these gaps and limitations in the existing literature in mind, some general lessons can be drawn from the existing literature. In each section, we provide detailed descriptions of external support strategies that are likely to be most useful in addressing each of the core challenges under discussion, as well as debates over the impact of these strategies of external support.

## Positive Peace: How Nonviolent Action Supports Peacebuilding

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Nonviolent action has not traditionally been thought of as part of the peacebuilding field. While peacebuilders might admire the courage shown by activists engaged in nonviolent action, they typically also think of it as separate from peacebuilding: nonviolent action almost necessarily involves the heightening of short-term tension and conflict. So how does nonviolent action fit into peacebuilding, and why should external support for nonviolent action campaigns have a place in the peacebuilding toolbox?

Addressing conflict after the fact is a limited and ineffective way of forging long-term sustainable peace: “Negative” peace, created through merely the cessation of ongoing violence, is an important but incomplete step. Instead, it is crucial to foster “positive” peace through removing the underlying grievances and vulnerabilities to conflict.<sup>7</sup>

Nonviolent action can help foster positive peace. The factors that lead to violent conflict and undermine positive peace almost always derive from broken social or political institutions, in which grievances are poorly represented and governance works for the benefit of the few at the expense of the many. When the social contract breaks down in this way, aggrieved populations must seek extra-institutional solutions. Nonviolent action provides a tool kit through which meaningful change can be brought about without resort to violence. It thus plays an important preventive role by substituting for violence and helping to peacefully resolve the risk factors for conflict.

Nonviolent action can also be a powerful tool for resolving violent conflict once it has broken out. Rebel groups and state militaries are ultimately social institutions that require cooperation to function. Ordinary people, who bear the most direct costs of violent conflict, can withdraw that cooperation. This can look like mobilizing to pressure violent actors to move conflict away from vulnerable populations, as in the peace communities of Colombia, or to resolve their differences peacefully at the negotiating table, as in the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace campaign that brought an end to the Liberian civil war.<sup>8</sup> In some cases, nonviolent action offers an alternative avenue for violent groups to achieve their goals by shifting to nonviolent means, as was the case in East Timor and Nepal.<sup>9</sup>

Finally, nonviolent action can help bring about a postconflict order in which the grievances that would lead to a recurrence of conflict are otherwise resolved. The association between nonviolent action and democratization is highly robust and has been replicated across numerous studies.<sup>10</sup> Nonviolent action can also be a powerful avenue for reducing political corruption.<sup>11</sup> In the long term, nonviolent action campaigns tend to lead to much lower rates of violent conflict in the future.<sup>12</sup> For all these reasons, improving the theory and practice of nonviolent action and supporting nonviolent action campaigns should be a core concern of peacebuilders, as well as anyone interested in promoting democracy, freedom of expression, and human rights.

## Nonviolent Action: A Theory of Change

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Like democracy or development, nonviolent action tends to evoke generally positive, though sometimes skeptical, attitudes. It is often associated with idealistic figures, such as Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and the Dalai Lama. But what does nonviolent action really mean, and how does it work? Before diving into the evidence on external support, we first define our key terms of *nonviolent action* and *external support*, clarify the scope of cases we are examining, and specify the theory of change that we evaluate.

### DEFINING NONVIOLENT ACTION AND EXTERNAL SUPPORT

In this paper, we follow Nadine Bloch and Lisa Schirch in defining *nonviolent action* as “a method of advancing social, political, and economic change that includes tactics of protest, noncooperation, and intervention designed to shift power in a conflict without the threat or use of violence.”<sup>13</sup> Any collective action outside of normal political institutions that does not rely on the fear of physical harm can be included in this category. Nonviolent action is a set of tactics, rather than a set of ideological or moral beliefs. It is thus not necessarily associated with pacifism or other ideologies that eschew violence.<sup>14</sup> Nonviolent action can also be employed by many types of actors, including social movements, civil society organizations, political parties, student groups, and others. It can be used for goals of greater peace and democracy but can also be cynically deployed to achieve political advantage. Nonviolent action should never be considered an end in itself; it should be evaluated in terms of its goals and its effects on the political system and in relation to other options available for political struggle.

Nonviolent action provides the backbone for numerous forms of civic engagement, from the most revolutionary movements seeking fundamental political transformation to local-level struggles that seek minor changes in policy or practice. It has been key for many movements fighting corruption and seeking to establish good governance.<sup>15</sup> It has been used to protect key environmental resources and fight against climate change.<sup>16</sup> And it has been at the core of the global movement for peace.<sup>17</sup>

This evidence review focuses on a subset of nonviolent action: campaigns that take place in repressive environments in which political, social, or economic rights are severely restricted by the state and that seek to end those restrictions through a fundamental restructuring of the political order. Such campaigns tend to take place in authoritarian regimes, in which a lack of political representation makes rights violations more common, but they also take place in democracies. The US civil rights movement, for instance, would fall into this latter category. These campaigns often frame their demands in terms of bringing about greater democracy or human rights, but they do not always do so; hence, we do not use the terms *pro-democracy movement* or *human rights movement* and instead opt for a simpler description.

*External support for nonviolent action* is any action by a party not engaged in a nonviolent action campaign intended by the supporter to facilitate that campaign's successful achievement of its goals. This can involve everything from providing direct financial assistance to groups and individuals involved in nonviolent action to making public condemnations of the nonviolent action campaign's opponent. We adopt an intentionally broad and inclusive definition of external support in recognition of the fact that external support has taken a wide variety of forms.

External support can come from a range of actors, including, but certainly not limited to, individuals, foreign governments, diaspora groups, international nongovernmental organizations, and regional organizations. Support can come before a movement has begun, while a movement is ongoing, or after a movement has concluded. Given the audience for this evidence review, we focus on international forms of support, but sometimes draw lessons from support given to nonviolent action campaigns by other actors in the same country, when relevant.

## **EXTERNAL SUPPORT AND THE THEORY OF CHANGE**

Given the many types of external support and potential external supporters, we structure the review's evaluation of external support around nonviolent action's core theory of change, rather than arbitrarily dividing it in terms of those types or actors. The central insight underlying this theory of change is that any political or social system requires complex relationships of cooperation and support.<sup>18</sup> Nonviolent tactics, when strategically deployed, can disrupt those relationships. Protests can communicate the illegitimacy of a policy or rally participants to shift loyalty away from an opponent. Strikes and boycotts can disrupt the social and economic functions that sustain an opponent. Direct forms of nonviolent physical intervention, such as sit-ins or nonviolent blockades, can materially disrupt an opponent.

Nonviolent tactics are rarely deployed in isolation. Rather, tactics are typically used as part of sustained nonviolent action campaigns, in which actors sequence different types of action to undermine the loyalty of their opponents' various "pillars of support"—that is, the groups and institutions that maintain them.<sup>19</sup> When a sufficient number of those pillars have withdrawn their support, movements can achieve success by converting their opponents to their view, or pressuring them to the negotiating table, or disrupting their structures of power to such an extent that they are no longer capable of maintaining the conflict.<sup>20</sup>

To reach this point, a nonviolent action campaign faces several challenges, each of which may be made easier (or harder) through the action or inaction of external actors. Table 1 breaks down these challenges based on where they fall in the three major phases of the nonviolent action campaign life cycle.<sup>21</sup>

In the precampaign phase, the key challenge is for movement leaders to mobilize the first participants to make the (often highly costly) decision to begin a campaign. This typically requires the existence of at least minimal "free spaces" in which potential activists can meet,

**Table 1. Challenges of Nonviolent Action by Campaign Phase**

<b>Campaign phase</b>	<b>Major challenges</b>
Precampaign	Mobilizing initial supporters Generating broad participation
Campaign peak	Countering the impact of repression Maintaining nonviolent discipline
Postcampaign	Achieving short-term success Sustaining long-term gains

discuss grievances, build trust, and plan.<sup>22</sup> Free spaces often emerge through nonpolitical civic action—for instance, through community groups, hobbyist organizations, or even soccer clubs.<sup>23</sup>

Once initial mobilization has occurred, organizers must turn it into a campaign with widespread participation.<sup>24</sup> Broad participation makes more nonviolent action tactics feasible, provides greater leverage against opponents, and makes ties between supporters and an opponents’ pillars of support more likely.<sup>25</sup> The absolute percentage of the population participating, however, may be less important than the breadth of the coalitions of participants. Success is associated with campaigns that have supporters across ethnic or political divides—in particular, from the groups that were once the core supporters of their opponents.<sup>26</sup>

When campaigns reach their peak phase, they face new challenges. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has said: “Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor. It must be demanded by the oppressed.”<sup>27</sup> While nonviolent action tends to face less repression than violent action, most nonviolent action campaigns have faced some form of violent repression from their opponents.<sup>28</sup> Thus, nonviolent action campaigns must be able to reduce the impact of their opponent’s repression. Repression of nonviolent action ranges from laws restricting freedom of association and speech and restrictive regulations on independent organizations to lethal violence against activists in the streets and in their homes.

Repression in itself does not indicate that nonviolent action has failed. Indeed, it is often a crucial turning point in which the opponent’s injustice and violence is revealed, causing their support to disintegrate and support for the nonviolent action campaign to surge—the so-called backfire effect.<sup>29</sup> However, when sustained over time, repression can undermine the viability of a nonviolent action campaign and lead to its suppression<sup>30</sup>—thus, blunting repression’s impact, ensuring movements are able to continue functioning despite it, and highlighting its injustice in order to spark backfire is another key challenge.<sup>31</sup>

Repression of nonviolent action, in turn, often leads to shifts from nonviolent action to violence.<sup>32</sup> This can create an escalating spiral of back-and-forth violence that leads either to a

campaign's failure or to its pernicious transformation into civil war. Thus, it is crucial for campaigns to be able to maintain nonviolent discipline—that is, to remain nonviolent even in the face of violent provocations by their opponents.

If nonviolent action campaigns can meet these challenges, they may achieve some measure of success. Yet new challenges arise in the postcampaign phase. Rights and protections promised during the height of a nonviolent action campaign may not be implemented when activity dies down. And even if granted, short-term gains may not last. The final set of challenges for nonviolent action campaigns (assuming they overcome the challenges of the pre-campaign and campaign peak) are thus to ensure first that their goals are carried out and second that they are sustained for the long term, typically through the creation of new political institutions.

What we seek to evaluate is whether external support can positively impact the ability of nonviolent action campaigns to overcome each of these challenges. There are diverse mechanisms through which this positive impact might come about. For example, in the precampaign phase, supporters may seek to promote an enabling environment in which the initial mobilization step is less fraught. This could be accomplished by encouraging repressive regimes to respect international norms around freedom of speech, sponsoring the growth of apolitical civil society in repressive environments, or conducting trainings with potential future campaign leaders. External supporters may seek to promote participation by broadcasting news of the initial mobilization across a wide range of audiences. Once campaigns are at their peak, external supporters often seek to reduce repression and increase nonviolent discipline through diplomatic appeals to potential repressors, threats of sanctions, or targeted boycotts. In the postcampaign phase, they may help movements succeed by mediating between campaigns and their opponents, withdrawing support from those opponents at key moments, and providing postcampaign support to ensure that initial breakthroughs are followed by real fundamental change.

## Methodology: How We Conducted the Evidence Review

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In this section, we describe our methodology for conducting the evidence review, providing detail on how we identified sources, evaluated their quality, and selected which to include. We faced significant challenges in identifying a comprehensive set of sources of evidence. Nonviolent action bridges many academic and practical fields (including political science, sociology, and peace studies), with diverse terminology and research questions.<sup>33</sup> Rich insights can also be gleaned from closely related fields, such as the study of social movements or democratization. There is no centrally accepted set of academic journals that specialize in the study of nonviolent action.<sup>34</sup> Thus, it was crucial to consult with leading academic and practitioner experts before determining the sources of evidence to review.<sup>35</sup>



Our primary consultation was a half-day virtual workshop with key academic and practitioner stakeholders. The workshop focused on coming to consensus around two key questions: First, what is nonviolent action's theory of change? Second, what are the key sources for the evidence review? To facilitate this discussion, before the workshop, participants completed a short survey identifying the most influential books, publications, academic journals, and practice-based data on nonviolent action. We compiled these survey results and used them to inform discussion on the sources to include in the evidence review and search terms that should be used in the search.

Based on that consultation, we compiled three lists of sources of evidence to consult:

*Books:* A list of influential books on nonviolent action from major academic presses published over the past thirty years. We included any books from that period identified by experts during the consultative workshop or otherwise identified by us as influential based on our expertise in the field.

*Journals:* A set of academic journals in which significant scholarship on nonviolent action has been published. We identified journals based on our own knowledge of the field and in consultation with the experts in our planning workshop. We then examined the corpus of these journals with keyword searches.<sup>36</sup>

*Organizations:* Publications by leading organizations at the intersection of research and practice on nonviolent action. Specifically, we sought to examine publicly available research from organizations that engage in public-facing research on nonviolent action, practice nonviolent action themselves, or externally support nonviolent action campaigns.

A summary of these sources is included in appendix table A.1. We sought to be as broad and inclusive in our selection of sources as possible, in light of the diversity of the field, though time and resource limitations prevented us from including all conceivable sources. Our initial set of potential sources included more than 2,000 books, articles, reports, and other documents. Most of these were articles in academic journals.

To narrow down this list, we, along with a small team of research assistants, conducted an initial rapid review of titles and abstracts to determine a source's relevance to our core research questions. If this rapid review determined that the source was relevant, the team member examining it then read the source and entered several key pieces of information about it on a shared spreadsheet. In addition to providing basic bibliographic information, they identified whether the article addresses external support for nonviolent action movements, what forms of external support it discusses and at which stages, what impact the external support had on the outcomes described above, the research methods employed, and specific countries examined.

When all the sources in our list had been examined, we went through all those determined to be at least minimally relevant to evaluate their quality and the general insights from

the literature as a whole. We evaluated sources based on three key criteria: the depth of discussion of external support, the logical consistency of their argument, and the strength of evidence that they brought to bear on their claims. Appendix tables A.2 and A.3 highlight these patterns. Sources that discussed external support in depth, made logically consistent arguments about its impact on nonviolent action, and supported those arguments with significant evidence were given preference for discussion in the evidence review. Additionally, we collected data on the authors of the sources, focusing on the location of their institutional affiliations at the time of publication, as displayed in appendix table A.4. We hoped that by gathering this information we could better understand the positionality of those conducting research on external support to nonviolent action and movements.<sup>37</sup>

We discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the literature as a whole later in the evidence review. Yet one important point bears mentioning here: nearly all the evidence in this literature is observational. It relies on observing qualitative or quantitative patterns of correlation in the real world to draw conclusions. Few studies (only two among the sources we examined) employ experimental techniques that, for instance, compare randomly assigned treatment and control groups to demonstrate a causal relationship. This is understandable. One cannot, for instance, randomly assign one country to experience a nonviolent action campaign and another to not do so. However, this means that all the evidence presented here (as with the literature on most social science questions) should be approached with humility and caution.

We move now to the heart of our evidence review, examining the impact of external support on the key challenges of nonviolent action in the precampaign, campaign peak, and post-campaign stages.

## **Precampaign: Facilitating Mobilization and Participation**

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The key challenges of the precampaign phase have to do with providing space for initial mobilization and fostering widespread participation once the initial mobilization has occurred. The impact of such participation on nonviolent action's success is well established. Nonviolent action campaigns are more likely than violent campaigns to succeed, largely because they can attract participants from much more diverse segments of society and have lower barriers to participation.<sup>38</sup> Higher levels of participation have bolstered movement resilience, provided greater opportunities for tactical innovation, and prompted key defections among opponent supporters.<sup>39</sup> Activists and organizers can build broad bases of support and influence to be better able to achieve their goals by gaining more participants and supporters through mobilizing activities and forging alliances and coalitions. This was the case in Chile, where different segments of civil society, including church groups, labor unions, students, opposition political parties, and others came together in a national campaign to successfully end the military dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet.<sup>40</sup> This section details the impacts, both positive and negative,

that external support can have on a movement's ability to mobilize and attract participation in the precampaign and early stages of a movement.

## EVIDENCE ON MOBILIZATION AND PARTICIPATION

While the importance of mobilization and participation for nonviolent action is well supported, there is limited understanding as to how external actors can effectively create an enabling environment for those citizens in especially repressive contexts who choose to engage in the effort. It must be first noted that support from external actors in this area, particularly foreign governments, should be “always secondary to local actors,” with external actors being able only to boost existing capacities and unable to create or sustain movements that rely on voluntary participation.<sup>41</sup> As Stephen Zunes notes, the provision of direct material assistance to activists and movements can aid mobilization but cannot be its initial spark.<sup>42</sup> With that in mind, the literature does provide some insights into how external actors have directly or indirectly impacted participation and mobilization in movements.

With respect to enabling the initial steps of mobilization, one key avenue of external support covered by several scholars has been the provision of training and convening spaces where movement actors engage in networking, strategic planning, and peer learning. International convenings can provide activists operating in repressive contexts a safe space in which to engage with other activists and strategize about different actions and approaches for mobilizing support. Multiple qualitative studies point to how international support for a meeting of Serbian activists in Slovakia aided in the development of a broad coalition of Serbian democratic actors and international donors. This coalition met on a regular basis to strengthen opposition to the repressive regime of Slobodan Milosevic.<sup>43</sup> Before major nonviolent uprisings in Georgia and Ukraine, activists from both countries participated in trainings with Serbian activists sponsored by different external actors to learn from their experiences.<sup>44</sup> And in Colombia, internationally supported trainings that brought together peace communities to learn from one another during the country's civil war were found to have enhanced local peace-building capacities.<sup>45</sup>

Especially in repressive environments where civic space is limited, convenings with activists held outside their home countries may provide them the space to still engage in necessary movement-related activities. However, this too might come with heightened risk, as international travel may raise flags for activists, who are often under government surveillance. Convening space need not have only an international dimension to be influential. For example, multiple qualitative and quantitative studies have shown that the Lutheran Church in East Germany provided a crucial free space in which activists could meet and discuss their goals, as well as organizing less confrontational or ostensible apolitical activities. These meetings provided the seed for future mobilization and the core networks for the massive demonstrations that ultimately led to the destruction of the Berlin Wall and the reunification of Germany.<sup>46</sup>

Studies based on these and other cases suggest such training, convening, and opportunities for networking among activists both domestically and transnationally can boost mobilization capacities, foster relationships, and deepen understanding in nonviolent organizing.<sup>47</sup> Nonetheless, more systematic research is needed to better understand how and when trainings directly lead to increased mobilization and participation, particularly how those who receive trainings go on to use what they have learned to build coalitions, engage potential supporters, and mobilize communities and resources.

Another aspect of external support that has been found to impact mobilization is economic sanctions. According to Julia Grauvogel, Amanda Licht, and Christian von Soest, threats of economic sanctions can spark mobilization of nonviolent action, particularly when they are framed in terms of human rights and come from multiple governments simultaneously.<sup>48</sup> Combining both statistical and narrative evidence, the authors find that threats of sanctions can create a political opportunity around which opposition groups unify and mobilize as the threats are perceived as signals of international disapproval of targeted governments and support for opposition struggles. However, while the threat of sanctions may spark mobilization, the actual implementation of sanctions can spur regime supporters to increase their support for the government and lead to a crackdown on the opposition, a challenge we return to later.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, the severe economic impacts of sanctions can bring dire consequences for the population of targeted governments. The unilateral sanctions the US government has imposed on Cuba, Iran, and Venezuela, for example, have raised concerns that such economic measures can lead to humanitarian catastrophes and the denial of basic human rights.<sup>50</sup> Rather than mobilizing against the authoritarian practices of their governments, citizens struggling amid devastating economic crises may find it more in their interest to protest against the foreign governments that have imposed sanctions on their countries.

International condemnation of abusive and repressive regimes that credibly signals the existence of external allies may play a role in mobilization beyond the threat of formal economic sanctions. In an in-depth qualitative study, sociologist Sharon Nepstad finds that condemnation by Pope John XXIII of the assassination of Salvadoran archbishop Oscar Romero played a key role in mobilizing a transnational nonviolent action campaign between North and Central American Christians.<sup>51</sup> And Christine Mason finds that shows of international solidarity were key in sparking the mobilization of nonviolent resistance in East Timor.<sup>52</sup>

Regarding increasing participation once a movement has begun, most robust research points to forms of external support that facilitate information sharing, publicize movements' activities, and highlight their grievances.<sup>53</sup> Scholars have well documented the importance of foreign media coverage in garnering support for and increasing participation in movements in the countries in which they are based, as well as abroad, through spreading awareness, providing free flows of information, swaying public opinion, and documenting key events.<sup>54</sup> In an in-depth qualitative study, Jacob Høigilt describes how increased media coverage by international nongovernmental organizations helped spur the growth of Palestine's Boycott, Divest,

and Sanctions movement.<sup>55</sup> And several studies with varying methodologies have described the key role played by the television network Al Jazeera in boosting participation in the 2011 uprisings across the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>56</sup>

David Hess and Brian Martin note how foreign media coverage of state repression against peaceful protesters, in particular, can play a crucial role in causing repression to backfire.<sup>57</sup> This is a process in which international attention to repression awards the movement new sympathizers while encouraging members of the international community, such as foreign governments and human rights groups, to speak out in favor of nonviolent protesters, further legitimizing and attracting support for the movement. Spotlighting violent repression across global audiences has also sparked grassroots solidarity campaigns and the mobilization of resources in other countries in support of a movement.

Much like international media attention, other forms of external support, such as diplomacy, sanctions, and naming and shaming, can signal to activists that the world is watching.<sup>58</sup> These forms of support, intended to put pressure on authoritarian regimes and directly or indirectly provide legitimacy for a movement, can serve as a morale boost that increases participation and mobilization capacity. In Belarus, after international observers accused the government of fraud in the 2006 elections, opposition organizations leveraged the condemnation by shifting from accusation to large-scale mass mobilization.<sup>59</sup> A case study of apartheid-era South Africa suggests that economic sanctions may be more impactful when pushed at the grassroots level, rather than from the top down by governments, which may spark the backlash effects mentioned earlier. While the governments of the United Kingdom and the United States “repeatedly circumvented the declarations of intergovernmental organizations” for economic sanctions on South Africa, grassroots movements mobilized for “people’s sanctions” in both countries, leading to increased participation of colleges, businesses, banks, and other corporations in economic boycotts against the apartheid regime.<sup>60</sup>

Diaspora groups, in particular, have also been found to have positive impacts on movement participation by providing their political, financial, and other forms of support.<sup>61</sup> External support by diaspora groups may have particular legitimacy, given such groups’ personal links to their home countries and the deeply embedded social networks they often still participate in. Their help in establishing foreign offices and contacts, launching advocacy campaigns, and garnering political support for movements may be especially helpful when domestic groups and organizations face restrictive operating environments that limit their ability to maintain large-scale participation and mobilization.<sup>62</sup> Both the Orange Revolution in Ukraine and Armenia’s 2018 Velvet Revolution benefited greatly from the support of diaspora members.<sup>63</sup>

Scholars have also pointed to several aspects of external support that have had negative impacts on participation. In a study combining cross-national statistical analysis and several in-depth qualitative case studies, Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan show that some civic and nonprofit organizations that receive foreign funding are less likely to engage in the kinds of tactics, such as mass demonstrations, that are intended to generate active and voluntary

citizen participation.<sup>64</sup> Additionally, while external support from certain actors may boost a domestic movement's legitimacy, it may also have the opposite effect, with movement actors being seen as foreign agents, limiting their ability to mobilize and generate broad-based participation.<sup>65</sup> According to Evgeny Morozov, during Iran's 2009 Green Revolution, attempts by US officials to support activist leaders gave credence to Iranian government accusations that their nonviolent action campaign was merely a tool of Western interests. This undermined the movement's domestic legitimacy, reduced participation, and ultimately contributed to its failure.<sup>66</sup> In some cases, too great an emphasis on foreign intervention can also lead to a free-rider problem, whereby potential participants in nonviolent action stay home because they believe that the international community will solve their problems.<sup>67</sup>

Support from foreign state actors may come with strings attached and bureaucratic red tape and have the effect of limiting participation. Such support may also be contingent on alignment with geopolitical interests rather than solidarity with movements in their struggles for peace and justice. Thus, support from diaspora groups and citizens in other countries who work in solidarity with movements based on shared principles of respect of human rights and justice may have a stronger positive impact on participation and mobilization. While numerous studies suggest the links between external support and a movement's ability to generate participation and mobilize people and resources, there are still gaps in identifying how such support can sustain movements over time and what forms of support may be helpful at different points in a movement's life cycle.

## **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF MOBILIZATION AND PARTICIPATION**

Participation is a key resource for successful nonviolent action. Strength in numbers is one of the ways in which nonviolent action can generate the bargaining power needed to make long-term change. Thus efforts to provide opportunities for initial mobilization and increase participation for those seeking to engage in nonviolent action are likely to be influential. Based on the evidence outlined above, we find three important elements to increasing participation: such efforts should be guided by activists, directed at nonstate actors, and include international coverage.

It is critical that potential supporters take direct guidance from the activists driving movements. Often, activists and participants of movements are reduced to being mere beneficiaries of external support rather than actors with agency able to make their own decisions regarding their own struggles. The activists and organizers are the ones with the deepest understanding of the political, social, and economic contexts in which they are working and are best able to decide what is needed from external actors to build effective movements that garner widespread support and participation. External actors must also take heed when activists and organizers advise them against providing forms of support they deem may be harmful. Having this basic understanding can help ensure that negative impacts of external support are minimized.

While much of the literature focuses on foreign governments as external supporters, there is much to be gained from widening the lens to focus on a broader range of supporters. States have a complex set of interests that may temper their ability to effectively support nonviolent action. When they do provide such clear, direct support, nonviolent action groups can be seen as foreign agents, which can negatively impact their domestic legitimacy. External nonstate groups may thus be more effective external partners.

Diaspora groups, which often have vested interests in a movement's success, act both as direct participants in a movement and as external supporters. Their support, through advocacy, lobbying their own governments, launching solidarity campaigns, and engaging in other efforts, can contribute to raising international attention and mobilizing global support for a movement. This is equally true of support from citizens and grassroots organizations, private foundations, and NGOs in other countries. These nonstate forms of support can respond directly in accordance with the changing needs of the movement. This differs from foreign government support, which often must clear significant bureaucratic and political hurdles before it can have any impact. And while naming and shaming, in the form of public statements condemning repression, can also pressure governments and may be helpful for a movement (a finding we examine in more depth in the section on repression below), there are other, more direct forms of support they can engage in that may positively impact participation and mobilization. These include the provision of small grants and other forms of flexible funding and material aid that can help ensure that frontline activists and organizations have what they need when the time comes for mobilizing mass support and generating active participation.

Finally, international attention and media coverage of nonviolent action campaigns and the repression they endure can be a critical form of support. Bringing international awareness to repression can spark mobilization and encourage sympathizers to join the ranks of a movement or contribute to frontline activists in other ways. Such reports can then be shared through social media and other platforms to keep the spotlight on the movement and mobilize people into action, signaling to on-the-ground activists that they are not alone. Authoritarian environments often limit free speech and access to information, and in these cases international media coverage that broadcasts movement messaging in the country and around the world can be crucial. It is therefore important for international news media to report on government repression whenever and wherever it occurs, deeming all struggles for justice, human rights, and peace as newsworthy.

## Campaign Peak: Countering Violent Repression

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Nonviolent action campaigns often face some form of government repression as those in power seek to thwart their efforts to change the status quo. While repression is a challenge throughout the campaign life cycle,<sup>68</sup> this challenge reaches its zenith at the campaign



peak, when the high profile of nonviolent action may trigger the most extreme government responses.

There is an extensive academic and practitioner literature on the causes and consequences of government repression. The use of repression by regimes wishing to put an end to domestic dissent is of particular importance to foreign policy makers, given that the implications of this repression include violations of human rights and possible escalation to civil war. While the debate as to whether repression leads to greater or lesser mobilization continues to spark new research, more recent examinations find that it is more likely to harm mobilization of nonviolent action.<sup>69</sup> This suggests that one key resource for nonviolent action campaigns is the ability to deter repression or to reduce its negative effects. Importantly, repression that is publicized can bring attention to nonviolent action campaigns, increasing international awareness and garnering international support. On the other hand, prolonged repression can also suffocate movements and deter participation.

External actors can play a significant role in constraining regimes from engaging in repression against nonviolent campaigns.<sup>70</sup> However, research has found evidence linking external support to both reduced use of repression and increased repression in different cases. Thus, much like repression's effect on mobilization, external support's effect on repression is mixed. External support that tends to benefit nonviolent action campaigns either significantly increases the cost of repression by the target government or increases a campaign's ability to withstand repression.<sup>71</sup> On the other hand, some efforts of external actors have led to a backlash by regimes and an escalation of repression.

## **EVIDENCE ON COUNTERING VIOLENT REPRESSION**

Repression at the peak of a nonviolent action campaign can be reduced first by putting pressure on regimes to make commitments to human rights before a campaign begins. Scholars have found that, in particular, efforts related to the creation of human rights laws and the subsequent reporting and monitoring of human rights behavior increase the cost of repression for regimes and lower the cost of engaging in mass nonviolent action.<sup>72</sup> In a cross-national quantitative study, Cullen Hendrix notes the importance of commitments made to regimes in the process of generating international agreements, reducing their willingness to engage in repression later down the road. He finds that commitments from intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) not to prosecute these regimes for their responses to possible dissent, in particular, actually reduced their use of repression against nonviolent action campaigns in cases examined in Africa.<sup>73</sup> Cécile Mouly, María Belén Garrido, and Annette Idler suggest that the additional reporting and monitoring of repression and human rights violations following the training of nonviolent activists reduced repressive responses, including from insurgent groups in Colombia.<sup>74</sup> When these precampaign agreements are not enough, numerous efforts to condemn violations and repression, or to punish regime behavior, have also shown, in some



studies, to reduce repression or at least reduce the harm it brings to the maintenance of non-violent action.

A common response by IGOs, NGOs, and foreign states when regimes respond with repression against nonviolent campaigns is to publicly condemn these actions, increasing media attention and focus on the nonviolent movement. These acts of naming and shaming often serve to increase the political costs of repression for regimes or even galvanize support for the nonviolent action campaign, lowering the overall effects of repression on campaigns.<sup>75</sup> James Franklin finds that, particularly in cases where the regime was dependent on foreign direct investment or economic aid, public condemnation creates fear over potential loss of investment or aid and incentivizes reduction in violence against protesters.<sup>76</sup> Manuel Castells argues that increased international media attention was crucial for increasing the cost of repression during the Arab Spring, in the cases of Tunisia and Egypt in particular.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, Anika Binendijk and Ivan Marovic link international media attention to reduced levels of violent repression in a comparative qualitative study of the Color Revolution uprisings in Serbia and Ukraine.<sup>78</sup> While the latter two studies were limited to only a couple of countries, Franklin's analysis was applied to all of Latin America, systematically linking the effects of public condemnation on repression. However, his conditional hypothesis regarding the dependence on aid deserves further attention, considering that this research also suggests regimes less dependent on aid and foreign direct investment may be less susceptible to efforts to constrain repressive behavior. In addition to these verbal responses by external actors, more direct actions to constrain regimes can reduce repression experienced by nonviolent campaigns. Direct mediation and diplomacy or withdrawal of aid have been linked to decreases in repressive violence in the cases of Nepal, Georgia, and Ukraine.<sup>79</sup> Andrew Wilson asserts that diplomatic negotiations mediated by the European Union increased the costs of repression during Ukraine's Orange Revolution in 2004, reducing violence and increasing the campaign's bargaining leverage.<sup>80</sup>

Subindra Bogati and Ches Thurber discuss the role shifting to nonviolence plays in the process of encouraging stronger responses from external actors.<sup>81</sup> They find that, in the case of Nepal, when Maoist rebels committed to nonviolent action, external actors such as India started withdrawing their support from the regime, encouraging a similar reduction of violence by the regime there. In this case, while the subsequent withdrawal of aid from India was inevitably linked to the reduction of violence by the regime, it must be noted that this sequence of events started with actions by the Maoists to commit to nonviolent action. While Nepal highlights the potential positive role of external support in the form of punishing the repressive regime, it also serves as a reminder that the causal relationship between external support and successful non-violent action does not solely move in a top-down, external actor-centric direction.

Other efforts to punish regimes for their violent repression have had mixed results. Sanctions, in particular, have proved difficult to link to reductions in repression. Some have argued that sanctions can increase the cost of repression, creating a space for nonviolent action to flourish,<sup>82</sup> but only a few have examined this policy response further to unpack the efficacy of

sanctions in deterring repression.<sup>83</sup> Studies by Marwan Darweish and Andrew Rigby as well as Kurt Schock point to the case of sanctions and trade restrictions in South Africa as an example of reducing repression through coordinated international responses.<sup>84</sup> However, a cross-national quantitative study by political scientist Reed Wood that evaluates trends in some global data on sanctions and repression finds the opposite tends to be true, providing greater support for a potential backfire hypothesis with respect to sanctions.<sup>85</sup> Wood finds that sanctions indirectly increase repression against nonviolent resistance, as they tend to increase the grievances felt by these groups, leading to greater mobilization and a subsequent strong repressive response. This mixed support for sanctions, therefore, deserves greater study, especially considering the link to sanctions, in Wood's work, and the possible increase in mobilization.

Directly attempting to shield nonviolent activists from harm has also been shown to be an effective method for reducing the effects of repression on nonviolent action. Transnational activist network (TAN) solidarity marches, the creation of safe havens or convening spaces, and unarmed civilian protection units are some of the ways external actors on the ground in countries undergoing nonviolent campaigns can reduce repression.<sup>86</sup> Both Andreas Hackl and Uri Gordon find that protective accompaniment reduced the effects of repression of pro-Palestinian activists engaging in mass mobilization. According to Shaazka Beyerle, protective accompaniment and capacity building in Guatemala by IGOs and TANs reduced repression experienced by nonviolent protesters there. As George Lakey notes, similar efforts supported nonviolent action in El Salvador and Guatemala, lowering the impacts of repressive violence.<sup>87</sup> Lakey highlights how a TAN called Peace Brigades International sent activists to protect movement leaders, reducing the impacts of repression and preventing political assassinations.

Some of these studies find that safe spaces created by NGOs and IGOs allow nonviolent activists not only to have a place to organize and mobilize domestic support but also to steer clear of regime violence.<sup>88</sup> Thus, it is not always necessary for external actors to assist in lowering repression, as equipping nonviolent action campaigns with the tools to withstand repression can be similarly effective.

Unfortunately, some of the above strategies employed by external actors have backfired in some nonviolent action campaigns, leading to subsequent demobilization or even violent escalation. International recognition of nonviolent action campaigns by external actors, for example, has been linked to increasing preemptive crackdowns by regimes to increase the costs of mobilization.<sup>89</sup> Thomas Carothers argues that democracy promotion, in particular, has drawn increased ire from autocratic regimes, leading to accusations of nonviolent activists as puppets of the West, even in cases where no support was provided, and has been used to justify violent crackdowns of nonviolent action campaigns.<sup>90</sup> In some cases, increased international pressure and support of the nonviolent movement have led to assassinations of movement leaders, as in the case of Benigno Aquino in the Philippines.<sup>91</sup> In other cases, such as East Timor, disappearances and heavy policing followed the recognition and international pressure of IGOs or foreign states.<sup>92</sup> More direct external support, in the form of financial

assistance, has also had some mixed results, in some cases leading to increased repression by regimes. For example, Shaazka Beyerle finds that financial aid and training support to anti-corruption groups leads to government crackdowns of these groups in particular.<sup>93</sup>

Scholars report that external-actor policies linked to breakdowns in nonviolent discipline of movements have also been shown to increase repressive responses from regimes. Provisions of military or economic aid to governments that are facing nonviolent resistance legitimizes regime use of violence against peaceful protestors.<sup>94</sup> When external actors provide military or economic assistance to the opposition rather than the regime, the rise of violent factions or armed groups not only can supplant nonviolent action but also can legitimize repressive responses from the target government.<sup>95</sup> Threats of force and increased support for armed groups in the Balkans by NATO and its allies increased the legitimacy of violent crackdowns.<sup>96</sup> The same has been true for increased support for the Free Syrian Army and other armed factions in Syria, justifying violent responses even against nonviolent groups by Syrian president Bashar al-Assad.<sup>97</sup>

Finally, some have argued that external support in the form of direct mediation or increased international pressure has no effect on a target regime's willingness to engage in repression. These cases suggest a potential hardship for nonviolent action campaigns seeking to maintain mobilization in the face of repression. In multiple cases, including Indonesia, Gambia, Moldova, and Tunisia, international actors such as foreign states and IGOs increased pressure on regimes repressing nonviolent action without any resulting change in the level of government violence.<sup>98</sup> Interestingly, the case of Tunisia has been used to demonstrate both the effectiveness of external-actor efforts to reduce the effects of repression and the futility of external support. Michael Willis suggests that the international backing of civil society organizations working to mobilize nonviolence in Tunisia had no effect on the government's willingness to use repression, despite other scholars' suggestions that the international presence was useful for Tunisian activists.<sup>99</sup>

The key findings of this literature suggest a few policy implications about how external support can constrain governments using repression or, more important, prepare activists to withstand repression. However, there is also some need for further investigation into those foreign policies that have had mixed results in supporting nonviolent action campaigns in the face of repression.

## **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF COUNTERING VIOLENT REPRESSION**

One key resource for nonviolent action campaigns is the ability to overcome, or at the very least maintain participation in the face of, violent repression. This often can be achieved either by training nonviolent activists in methods to protect campaigns from repression or by directly constraining the target regime. In the former case, campaigns can better survive repressive

violence, maintain their ability to mobilize participants, and encourage possible security defections. Forms of external support conducive to a campaign's ability to withstand repression can be provided during both the precampaign and campaign peak phases of nonviolent action. In the latter case, the evidence regarding external support's ability to constrain the target regime directly is mixed, including some warnings for foreign policy makers about the negative externalities of their efforts. The studies discussed here suggest a potential methodological hurdle to better understanding the link between external support, repression, and nonviolent action campaigns: namely, repression is an endogenous response to the behavior of external actors and of nonviolent action campaigns. Nonviolent action campaigns and external actors, in turn, also adjust their behaviors in response to repression. Thus, unpacking the potential policy implications here will require more systematic study of repression's role in nonviolent action campaigns, as is evident in the plethora of mixed results discussed. For now, three key practical implications follow from the existing literature: supporting movement participation, applying direct international pressure, and constraining versus supporting regimes.

The evidence presented here regarding public condemnation of target regimes is mixed, with some scholars suggesting it helps bring attention to nonviolent movements, others that it can lead to backfire, and still others that it does nothing. However, most of the more compelling studies on this subject find that NGOs and TANs, or foreign states that support them, can also prepare nonviolent organizers in advance in methods for resisting repression. Subsequent reporting and monitoring of repressive action can cause violent regimes to consider potential losses in international aid or foreign direct investment, incentivizing them to use less repressive tactics. External actors wishing to support nonviolent action campaigns should consider the benefits of these indirect strategies for the participation of nonviolent action campaigns. Naming and shaming from IGOs and NGOs, while not always effective, can increase the domestic and international mobilization base of nonviolent campaigns by bringing awareness to their movement and to the government's response to the movement, without necessarily needing to target the repressive behavior directly. A note of caution, however, is that some of these efforts in the precampaign phase have been linked to repressive backlash of regimes in ways that stifle campaign participation. While campaigns do not necessarily require an absence of repression to successfully mobilize, overcoming prolonged repression is difficult.

Other forms of international pressure—such as diplomatic mediation, withdrawal of aid or foreign direct investment, and the involvement of international observers—have been effective in some cases but not in others. This suggests a need for further systematic analysis of these policies to evaluate the conditions under which they may succeed in constraining regimes from repression. Withdrawal of aid and threats of sanctions appear to be effective at deterring repression. However, these approaches are more effective in cases where the target government is more dependent on economic aid, trade relations, and foreign direct investment, suggesting that more work is needed to unpack how to constrain less economically dependent regimes.

Importantly, many studies have found that these more direct types of responses from the international community do help to delegitimize the violent repression inflicted by regimes. Thus, even if these strategies do not have a discernible impact in lowering repression, they may provide additional positive externalities worth supporting while also putting the onus on the regime to change, rather than potentially impacting the goals of the campaign itself.

One way external actors can be certain to legitimize repressive violence is to continue supporting regimes, even when they repress nonviolent campaigns. While the goal of this evidence review is to examine the role of external support to nonviolent campaigns, not to their target regimes, more research has been done on the latter. This owes, in part, to the prevalence of studies concerned with states or violence (or both), rather than with nonstate actors or nonviolence (or both). Nevertheless, these studies highlight some serious notes of caution for foreign-policy makers.

External support for repressive regimes, even when the opposition they repress is nonviolent, legitimizes that repression. The literature noted above finds clear links between external support to target regimes and increased repression against nonviolent campaigns. Similarly, supporting violent or armed factions increases the regime's legitimacy for use of violence in response to resistance, including in response to nonviolent groups.

Other punitive measures, short of military support, have a mixed history of reducing repression. On the one hand, some scholars have found sanctions to be an effective tool in constraining target governments from violence. On the other hand, many point to the same example of South Africa as evidence of this efficacy, calling into question the multitude of examples where this approach was not successful.

While appearing “soft” on repressive regimes by not taking more direct action, such as sanctions or military support of opposition groups, can be politically costly, at least for foreign states wishing to constrain regime violence, the evidence here is overwhelmingly in support of more indirect measures. Punitive approaches such as aid withdrawal can be helpful but can also exacerbate the grievances associated with resistance in the first place. Increasing media attention, refusing to support the target regime, and training groups in resisting repression have the greatest positive impact on nonviolent action campaigns, according to existing studies.

## Campaign Peak: Fostering Nonviolent Discipline

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Many scholars have suggested that nonviolent discipline—that is, maintaining nonviolence even in the face of violent provocation—is crucial to the success of nonviolent action campaigns.<sup>100</sup> Yet limited work has examined the role that external support plays in maintaining or fostering nonviolent discipline. Especially in relation to nonviolent discipline, external actors should proceed with caution. A nonviolent action campaign's ability to maintain nonviolence

throughout, or even to encourage shifts from violence to nonviolence, increases their ability to garner domestic and international legitimacy and can also increase the likelihood of post-conflict stability.<sup>101</sup> Maintaining nonviolent discipline can also ensure that movements do not erupt into civil wars, as seen in Syria, creating long-term geopolitical crises. In the case of Syria, multiple external actors have been involved from the early stages of the conflict, suggesting the consequences of external support for nonviolent discipline deserve greater attention from academics and policy makers.

While some external actors are more likely to provide external support to a resistance campaign because of the latter's choice of nonviolent tactics, there are others who are more agnostic concerning this choice and are instead driven by their own strategic interests. External support that can foster or assist in maintaining nonviolent discipline cannot be agnostic about a resistance campaign's choice of nonviolent tactics. However, we also know that most external support cannot be divorced from the strategic interests of external supporters. As the literature discussed here suggests, the role external support has played in a campaign's effort to maintain nonviolent discipline has been quite mixed as a result of these often competing considerations.

## **EVIDENCE ON FOSTERING NONVIOLENT DISCIPLINE**

As with other indicators of nonviolent action success, the consequences of external support for nonviolent discipline tend to vary with the timing and type of support. The resulting effect on nonviolent discipline can lead either to maintenance or increase of nonviolent action, shifts from violent armed struggle to mass nonviolent mobilization, or the breakdown of nonviolent discipline and a shift to violence. While some forms of external support are exclusively linked to one of these outcomes, in some cases the potential of external support to promote nonviolent action has been mixed. Owing to a lack of systematic examination of these outcomes, it is unclear whether these examples are case dependent. Nevertheless, important patterns in the literature provide some guidance for external actors wishing to promote nonviolent action.

Nonviolent discipline in the peak phase of a campaign can be facilitated through external support during the precampaign phase. In particular, scholars have found that training and education in nonviolent methods, including building skills necessary to resist violent repressive responses from the target government before mass mobilization, allow leaders to maintain nonviolent discipline.<sup>102</sup> In separate qualitative studies, both Veronique Dudouet and Jason MacLeod find that in West Papua, advanced training in nonviolent action supported by NGOs showed activists the potential benefits of nonviolence, giving the strategies legitimacy and building activist confidence that they could succeed using nonviolence. Similarly, Juan Masullo finds that the education programs and convening spaces provided by NGOs and religious organizations in Colombia allowed for the maintenance of nonviolent discipline among peace communities, even in the face of ongoing violence.

More direct mediation, diplomacy, or recognition of the nonviolent action campaign's cause by foreign states or IGOs in the peak phase of nonviolent action has also supported nonviolent discipline.<sup>103</sup> Bogati and Thurber find that foreign state mediation, specifically from India during cease-fire efforts, was associated with an increased use of nonviolent strategies and nonviolent discipline in Nepal. With examples of this sort in mind, scholars such as Joanna Allan have argued that the presence of allies and external advocates during nonviolent movements can reinstate the belief in the success of nonviolent strategies and demonstrate the legitimacy of these methods. Maria Stephan and Jacob Mundy have found similar responses in the Western Sahara, where international diplomatic efforts coincided with an increased support for nonviolent action domestically.

Other studies have suggested mixed results for these kinds of direct actions, especially from foreign states. However, direct actions from diaspora communities have been linked not only to supporting nonviolent discipline but also to encouraging shifts from violence to nonviolence.<sup>104</sup> In a cross-national quantitative study, political scientist Marina Petrova finds diaspora support during violent uprisings increased the likelihood of shifts from primarily violent to primarily nonviolent methods. Her research suggests that the support from diaspora communities can be used to mobilize those wishing to adopt nonviolent methods of resistance and demonstrate domestic and external legitimacy for this strategy. Importantly, testing these hypotheses using a global sample, she has found a generalizable pattern, compared with past approaches that have been limited to a small subset of single-case studies.

Another method of peak-phase external support potentially linked to nonviolent discipline is support designed to constrain the target state from engaging in repression against nonviolent activists, allowing them to maintain nonviolent mobilization.<sup>105</sup> As discussed in the previous section, IGOs or NGOs can pressure states that provide economic aid to regimes repressing nonviolent action, increasing the cost of repression while also decreasing the costs of nonviolent action.<sup>106</sup> Maciej Bartkowski and Annyssa Bellal also suggest that sanctions can constrain regimes from repressing nonviolent activists, helping them to maintain nonviolent discipline. However, these suggestions are indirect and theoretical and do not provide any clear link between the external support and nonviolent discipline. Meanwhile, others have found that such actions can potentially harm nonviolent discipline.

While a number of scholars have linked support from transnational activist networks to various indicators of successful nonviolent action, some of the evidence suggests that certain TAN activities have contributed to breakdowns in nonviolent discipline.<sup>107</sup> Matthew Eddy finds that the support from TANs and NGOs in providing unarmed protection to nonviolent protests backfired in Israel/Palestine, leading to diminished nonviolent discipline. Similarly, Timothy Smith suggests that coordinated protests and TAN provision of convening spaces increases the support for violent factions as well, leading to shifts from nonviolence to violence in some cases. These links are worth noting; however, the consensus on support from TANs is that it is preferable to support from foreign states in contributing to the success of nonviolent



resistance. A number of studies skeptical of the actions of foreign states provide key insights into the impact on nonviolent discipline.

Expectations about who will support a movement, or even who will support the target regime, can influence the perceived efficacy of nonviolent strategies and increase the likelihood of violent strategies.<sup>108</sup> Importantly, the support external actors such as foreign states or IGOs provide to regimes facing a nonviolent uprising has legitimized violent responses, breaking down nonviolent discipline in some places—for example, Syria.<sup>109</sup> Nonviolent discipline is often directly harmed when external actors are willing to provide economic or military aid to factions or members of the resistance interested in pursuing a violent strategy, legitimizing violence and harming goal cohesion within movements, as was the case during the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Stephen Zunes suggests that one of the primary struggles for nonviolent action campaigns wishing to maintain nonviolent discipline is the support of a foreign state that is indifferent about movement goals and instead comes with its own set of strategic interests.<sup>110</sup>

Other scholars who have attempted to identify links between external support and nonviolent discipline have found less clarity. Legal principles established by the international community under the Responsibility to Protect framework have not had the intended effect on reducing acts of violence. Specifically, Peter Ackerman and Hardy Merriman suggest the failure of this legal principle could also have implications for nonviolent discipline.<sup>111</sup> Following the Arab Spring, scholars and policy makers were convinced that social media and transnational diffusion of nonviolence must be linked to supporting or maintaining nonviolent discipline, but results from studies examining this link have found no discernible correlation.<sup>112</sup> Some scholars have argued that nonviolent discipline itself increases the chances of attracting external support, suggesting a reverse causal relationship between external support and nonviolent discipline and a possible need to address endogeneity in future studies.<sup>113</sup> Even if these processes are mutually reinforcing, the literature examined here suggests that external support is certainly having an effect on nonviolent discipline. This literature, though limited in scope, provides a number of key insights for policy makers.

## **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF FOSTERING NONVIOLENT DISCIPLINE**

The role of external support in promoting nonviolent discipline remains unclear. Few of the studies discussed above are designed to directly test the link between external support and nonviolent discipline, so their inferences are often based on indirect observations. As research has progressed on nonviolent action campaigns, there has been a growth in more direct approaches to evaluate the conditions that favor maintaining nonviolent discipline, with external support only recently receiving some of this attention. The research discussed here that represents part of this shift includes the following practical implications: precampaign support and campaign peak outcomes, diaspora community engagement, and backing away from military support.



From the very start of a campaign, external actors should be more concerned about non-violent discipline and recognize it for the resource it is to long-term campaign success. These actors will want to consider programs that train opposition activists in nonviolent methods, resistance to repression, and civic engagement during the precampaign phase of movements. According to the studies discussed here, these programs build confidence in the success of nonviolent methods, help movement leaders to coordinate mass mobilization and nonviolent actions, and develop the skills needed to resist longer engagements against potentially violent regimes.

While many of these external support methods have been often considered the purview of NGOs or TANs, an increasing number of foreign states, such as the United States, have shifted resources toward these organizations, in light of the successes of movements like Otpor in Serbia. Importantly, this type of support is better used and better received if it is not conditional and does not disrupt the goals of the grassroots organizers,<sup>114</sup> allowing them to maintain domestic legitimacy.

Early and committed efforts at mediation and diplomacy not only signal external legitimacy of nonviolent movements, they also increase pressure on the target regime to offer concessions. As we discuss later, this latter connection is not as clear. However, diplomatic efforts and recognition of nonviolent uprisings by IGOs and foreign states, specifically strong neighboring states, as in the case of India's support in Nepal, foster greater domestic support for nonviolent action. Committing to mediation and recognition early appears to signal international legitimacy of nonviolent action during the key mobilization stage. Importantly, these efforts are made more successful when they do not coincide with provisions of economic and military aid to the target government or armed groups.<sup>115</sup>

While the research is still in its infancy, the studies discussed here suggest diaspora communities can have a positive impact on nonviolent discipline. Studies of civil conflict have also linked diaspora support to the onset and dynamics of violent resistance, suggesting caution in evaluating the linkage between diaspora communities and nonviolent resistance. However, both sets of studies demonstrate the strong and direct impacts diaspora communities can have on civil uprisings and suggest further research is needed in this direction.

The support to armed factions, military and economic aid to target regimes, and promotion of foreign state strategic interests above the goals of the nonviolent movement leads to breakdowns in nonviolent discipline and increases shifts toward armed struggle. While it would be naïve to suggest that foreign states with strategic interests in uprisings on the brink of violence will refrain from intervening, existing evidence does suggest more indirect or diplomatic methods are more successful in fostering environments that are safe for the ongoing use of nonviolence over violence. Additionally, this suggestion includes greater care in choosing when to provide support and respecting the agency of nonviolent groups. Existing work also suggests difficult decisions about whether and how to act in the face of potentially violent

resistance in areas of strategic interest. These challenges may be diminished by supporting education and training programs during the precampaign period.

The suggested practical implications may assist in future policy making regarding the support of nonviolent movements and, in particular, the fostering of nonviolent discipline. With respect to this particular outcome of nonviolent action, however, significantly more research is needed, and a greater focus on the role of a nonviolent action campaign's autonomy from supporters seems like a reasonable way forward.

## Postcampaign: Achieving and Sustaining Success

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International attention to nonviolent action often wanes when dramatic scenes of millions in the streets are no longer appearing on television screens and social media feeds. Yet overcoming the challenges of the campaign peak, as described in the previous two sections, is only the beginning of what is necessary for nonviolent action to achieve sustainable change. The post-campaign period brings many of its own challenges. In the short term, promises from opponents must be realized. The historical record is rife with examples of promises from governments facing nonviolent action that were never realized once the nonviolent action campaign was over. Even when such promises are ostensibly carried out, they may not last, as long-term oppressive power structures reassert themselves. This section examines the evidence on when and how external support can help or hurt nonviolent action campaigns with these short- and long-term challenges.

### EVIDENCE ON ACHIEVING AND SUSTAINING SUCCESS

The literature is mixed on whether external support has a consistent effect on the short-term success of nonviolent action campaigns. Numerous case studies describe such external support as key to campaign success. The nonviolent action campaign against Slobodan Milosevic in the 1990s is one example frequently cited in the literature. Many scholars describe a coordinated international effort involving financial support to key movement actors, election monitoring, and diplomatic pressure as crucial to Milosevic's ouster.<sup>116</sup> In a qualitative case study, Josiah Taundi argues that diplomatic isolation by African leaders and targeted Western sanctions were the most important factors in forcing the Mugabe government to come to a power-sharing agreement with the democratic opposition in 2009.<sup>117</sup> Gene Sharp argues that threats of aid withdrawal and international boycotts were central in leading a pro-democracy campaign in Thailand to success in the early 1990s.<sup>118</sup> And Daniel Ritter goes so far as to argue, based on a series of comparative case studies from the Middle East, that international factors, in particular the degree to which an autocratic regime relies on support from a liberal patron state, are determinative of whether nonviolent action campaigns succeed in general.<sup>119</sup>

Yet these optimistic takes on the impact of external support are belied by numerous studies finding little to no impact of external support on campaign success when looking at campaigns more broadly. In their global cross-national quantitative study comparing nonviolent and violent campaigns, Chenoweth and Stephan find that external support did not have a statistically significant impact on whether maximalist nonviolent action campaigns achieve their goals.<sup>120</sup> Their statistical finding is supported by numerous case reports indicating that while external support is often described as helpful, it did not play a crucial factor. In a study comparing multiple nonviolent national liberation movements, Bartkowski finds that international actors were generally ineffective in helping movements achieve their goals.<sup>121</sup> Across forty cases of nonviolent campaigns leading to major political change, Jack DuVall similarly finds that external support never played a decisive role in leading to success.<sup>122</sup>

The primary difficulty in assessing the impact of external support on campaign success lies in the multiple factors associated with such a complex outcome. Campaigns that succeed necessarily have much working in their favor. As Chenoweth and Stephan observe, “Nonviolent campaigns that enjoy enduring large-scale participation and generate defections are the most likely to succeed regardless of whether external assistance is forthcoming.”<sup>123</sup> While various forms of external support may influence campaign success, other factors tend to predominate. Many of the mechanisms through which external support might impact success also give significant ground for disagreement. Signals of international diplomatic pressure typically occur in a noisy, complex environment that can easily be interpreted in multiple ways.

This complexity means that, even across studies examining the same case, scholars often disagree over external support’s impact on campaign success. Scholarship on the 2011 uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt provides a good example of this dynamic at work. Some scholars, such as Castells, give a definitive causal role to Western diplomatic pressure in the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings.<sup>124</sup> In particular, Castells argues that the withdrawal of support previously extended to authoritarian regimes at key moments led to breakthroughs in these cases. However, others argue that the same pressure had no impact on the success of these movements and indeed argue that there was no meaningful withdrawal of support by Western sponsors.<sup>125</sup>

The form of external support for which there is most consistent evidence of a direct impact on success is the withdrawal of preexisting external support for the campaign’s opponent. Across a wide set of cases, when a powerful international patron withdraws its support (economic, diplomatic, or moral) from a client state facing a nonviolent action campaign that has previously relied heavily on that support, success for the nonviolent action campaign often quickly follows.

The 1986 People Power movement in the Philippines is one of the clearest examples of this dynamic. The US government had long been of two minds about the movement and its opponent, Philippine authoritarian president Ferdinand Marcos. The Reagan administration saw Marcos as a valuable bulwark against communism, while Congress and much of the State

Department saw him as a brutal dictator whose autocratic rule led to widespread human rights violations and long-term instability. This divided attitude led to bifurcated support policies, with various forms of support flowing both to Marcos and his opposition. However, at the peak of the movement, when the widespread support for the opposition and the level of violence that would be necessary to quell it became clear, President Reagan wrote to Marcos asking him to resign. Multiple studies confirm that it was this loss that convinced Marcos to leave office.<sup>126</sup>

The shift in Soviet Union policy from a Brezhnev Doctrine of direct military intervention in its client states to Mikhail Gorbachev's so-called Sinatra Doctrine of noninterference, in the late 1980s, played a similar, though less immediate, role in the Eastern European anti-Communist movements. With the shadow of uprisings in Hungary in 1956 and Czechoslovakia in 1968 crushed by Soviet military might no longer hanging over them, activists had a widely expanded scope of action to directly challenge their governments. Those governments, which had long included the prospect of Soviet military support in their calculus of rule, were caught off balance and compelled to grant concessions or negotiate with their opponents. The result was the staggering wave of successful nonviolent revolutions across Eastern Europe, beginning in Poland and eventually spreading to the Soviet Union itself.<sup>127</sup>

Other forms of support that the literature links to success tend to rely on more indirect mechanisms, many of which we describe earlier in this paper. Training and convening with experienced activists can help newer movements to plan more effectively, leading to better strategic plans that, in turn, increase the likelihood of success, as in the civil rights movement or anti-sweatshop movements in the United States.<sup>128</sup> Jeffrey Pugh's work particularly highlights the importance of training as an avenue for increased success.<sup>129</sup> Logistical support that enables campaigns to spread the word about government abuses can help trigger security force defections, which then play a key role in leading to success.<sup>130</sup> Yet which of these mechanisms will be most relevant in a particular campaign is heavily context-dependent.

External support appears to play the most crucial role in achieving success where domestic capacity to directly influence an opponent's pillars of support is most limited. Campaigns where an ethnic or other identity-based divide separates the opponent from the campaign is one of these situations, and secessionist campaigns are a particularly extreme example of it.<sup>131</sup> Many of the most influential cases in which external support is generally agreed to have directly led to campaign success come under these circumstances. The anti-apartheid campaign in South Africa, where a transnational solidarity movement helped spark a coordinated regime of economic, diplomatic, and cultural sanctions, is one particularly good example.<sup>132</sup> The campaign for the independence of East Timor, in which domestic nonviolent activism was complemented by a global campaign to withdraw military, economic, and diplomatic support for the government of Indonesia, is another that many have pointed to as a case in which, without external support, success would have been unlikely.<sup>133</sup>

This characteristic of the literature on nonviolent action connects well to the broader literature on transnational activist networks, most prominently the work of Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, which suggests that international support may be particularly crucial in achieving success when domestic avenues of pressure are less available and a particular opponent relies on international forms of financial, diplomatic, and moral support to sustain itself.<sup>134</sup> Foundational peace scholar Johan Galtung refers to this dynamic as the “great chain of non-violence,” where indirect connections between the nonviolent action campaign and the opponent can substitute when direct connections are not present.<sup>135</sup>

Yet even when transnational support can be mobilized in large numbers and from numerous influential actors, if key domestic factors are not present, then success is unlikely. The movement for the independence of Tibet, for example, has successfully garnered immense levels of international support. Yet in an in-depth qualitative study, Tenzin Dorjee finds that, while this support has raised some costs for the Chinese government, it has had little effect on the Tibetan struggle.<sup>136</sup> On a smaller scale, Gordon finds that, despite widespread support from Israeli and international NGOs for local-level Palestinian struggles against the erection of the separation barrier in the West Bank, even short-term goals were almost never achieved.<sup>137</sup>

There is also a significant strain of critique in the literature arguing that external support not only fails to help movements succeed but can actively undermine their capacity to do so. For instance, international support can reorient activists’ priorities away from the goals and issues most important to their domestic supporters and toward the priorities of international funders. This dynamic is most visible when financial resources are in question, and activists may professionalize their organizations or shift their goals to apply for grants.<sup>138</sup> However, it is relevant to a broader international focus, as well. For example, in an in-depth qualitative study, Ruth Reitan argues that a strategy based almost entirely on gaining international recognition undermined the nonviolent action campaign for independence led by the Kosovo Democratic Party in the 1990s. While Kosovar leaders such as Ibrahim Rugova were shuttling back and forth between Western capitals in search of diplomatic recognition, Kosovars on the ground increasingly saw their leaders as “out of touch and lacking creativity in changing tactics or constructing new ones.”<sup>139</sup> This perception, in turn, undermined popular support for the party and led to the rise of armed resistance in Kosovo.

After short-term success, how can external support ensure not just that concessions are offered and goals achieved immediately after a campaign, but that such victories are maintained over the long term? This is, if anything, an even trickier problem for which the literature gives no easy answers. For example, while there is robust evidence, described earlier, that nonviolent action promotes democratization and long-term civil peace, the specific avenues through which such promotion takes place are still poorly understood. One study combining cross-national statistical analysis with three in-depth case studies suggests that, in contexts of political transitions after nonviolent action campaigns, it is crucial that civil society be able to

maintain civic mobilization to hold transitional leaders accountable but shift goals from revolutionary maximalist struggles into struggles focused on building new institutions.<sup>140</sup>

One way of supporting this sustained civic mobilization is to build up the ordinary institutions of civil society such as labor unions, religious institutions, and professional organizations. Nonviolent action is not the primary focus of these “quotidian civil society organizations.”<sup>141</sup> However, their deeply embedded social networks often make them powerful actors in nonviolent action campaigns. Since these networks continue to exist after a campaign concludes, they often serve as a source of sustained mobilization to keep transitions on track and prevent states’ attempts at autocracy or breakdowns into violence. For example, during the transition in Tunisia after the 2011 revolution, polarization between the major political parties threatened to derail the transition and possibly lead to civil war. However, a series of dialogues, convened by the so-called National Dialogue Quartet (made up of Tunisia’s largest labor union, employers association, lawyers association, and human rights league), averted this crisis and led to the successful passage of a democratic constitution. The quartet’s ability to bring the main political actors to the table sprang from their position as respected independent groups who represented significant constituencies that had been mobilized during the 2011 revolution and could be remobilized if necessary.<sup>142</sup>

Programming that can build or support these kinds of quotidian civil society organizations may thus serve a key role in promoting nonviolent action campaigns’ ability to turn short-term success into long-term change. When such organizations already exist, training in nonviolent action that can help leverage their networks may be one avenue for improving their effectiveness. Evidence from the United States suggests that training is one way external supporters can ensure continued civic mobilization. Jonathan Coley and his colleagues show that training in nonviolent action during the civil rights movement led activists to long-term careers in politics and community organizing after the civil rights movement was over.<sup>143</sup>

## **PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF ACHIEVING AND SUSTAINING SUCCESS**

The complexities of evaluating external support’s contribution to campaign success and long-term sustainability in the postcampaign phase make it impractical to propose a single, across-the-board set of interventions that are well supported in the literature, with the possible exception of the kinds of dramatic withdrawals of patron support as in the Philippines. Instead, the literature suggests that, to impact campaign success, interventions must be informed by more careful strategic thinking based on the dynamics of nonviolent action discussed earlier in this paper. Given that the most important factors for success are domestic, the forms of support that will most directly lead to success and sustain that success must necessarily complement those existing dynamics. Thus, when designing forms of external support to help a nonviolent action campaign achieve and sustain its goals, the first principle must be knowledge of

the situation, the dynamics of nonviolent action, and the perspectives of actors on the ground most directly impacted by and with knowledge of the situation. We follow Chenoweth and Stephan's call for the effectiveness of external support to be approached from a strategic perspective, recognizing the context-dependency of intervention and fostering dynamic, flexible thinking to best ensure success.<sup>144</sup> The literature supports three complementary avenues for external support to ensure the best chances of success: strategic analysis, coordinated action, and withdrawal of support by key actors.

The first step in evaluating whether a form of external support may help a nonviolent action campaign succeed is a careful strategic analysis of the conflict situation. Numerous tools developed by activists or academics in the nonviolent action space can be helpful in this regard. For example, the pillars-of-support analytical tool provides one way of thinking through the key constituencies and institutions that maintain the power of a campaign's opponent.<sup>145</sup> Once those constituencies, and the connections between those constituencies, the nonviolent action campaign, and the potential external supporter, are well understood, then ways in which targeted avenues of support or withdrawal of support affect those constituencies can help inform which forms of external support are likely to be most effective.<sup>146</sup>

Strategic analysis will also require consideration of how external support may shift the priorities and efforts of a nonviolent action campaign. Anything that shifts campaign priorities away from a domestic to an international focus is likely to undermine success. External actors must consider the complex dynamics of how their support will not just directly affect the outcome they are concerned with but will also have second- and third-order effects throughout the conflict. The perspectives of local actors are a necessary component of any such analysis.

The urgency of many nonviolent action campaigns, in which events move quickly and violent repression is often an imminent threat, will quite likely preclude most external supporters from developing deep and comprehensive knowledge of any particular conflict. Yet even in the most urgent situations, a cursory strategic analysis, using some of the rapid tools developed for activists such as the pillar analysis tool, can provide crucial insights for directing support.

Once sufficient strategic analysis has been performed, potential external supporters are likely to have the greatest impact when their actions are clearly coordinated. Scholars point to this as one of the key factors in cases where external support facilitated success, such as Serbia.<sup>147</sup> Achieving such coordination is difficult in most cases, given the variety of actors with varying mandates, potential avenues of support, and areas of specialization, from governments to intergovernmental organizations to international nongovernmental organizations to domestic third parties. As with strategic analysis, coordination is likely to be a matter of minimizing the downsides of conflicting action. However, after identifying key external actors as part of a strategic analysis, convening as many of those actors as possible and coordinating action among them is likely to bring outsized benefits.

The one specific area of support that the literature most clearly indicates will lead to success of a nonviolent action campaign is the defection of a powerful international patron. When



leaders of powerful patron states can directly and credibly threaten to withdraw needed forms of support from their prior clients, particularly when such withdrawal of support comes at key moments during the life cycle of a nonviolent action campaign (when domestic pressure is already at its peak), such withdrawals often tip the scales.

As shown in the Philippine case, for defection to have its maximum effect may require that it come from the pinnacles of state power. Even widespread opposition to Marcos from within the US Congress and State Department did little to influence him until withdrawal of support came from President Reagan. For those outside of the corridors of power able to make such policy choices, speaking truth to power is one critical avenue for ensuring greater success of nonviolent action campaigns. Ensuring that key decision makers are correctly informed about the consequences of maintaining support for authoritarian opponents of nonviolent action, and about the positive long-term effects of nonviolent action, may help motivate those withdrawals of support.

## **Taking Stock of the Evidence: Major Gaps and New Frontiers**

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This evidence review provides crucial insights on the links between external support and various indicators of successful nonviolent action. However, it also highlights many gaps in our collective knowledge on this subject. Until quite recently, little attention has been paid to understanding nonviolent action from a foreign-policy perspective—focusing on the ways external actors and their decisions affect the onset, dynamics, and outcomes of nonviolent action campaigns. There are still many limitations in the systematic and broader study of patterns and trends across different types of external support by different external actors.<sup>148</sup> The following suggestions are in the spirit of building on a rich literature, primarily based in case study analysis, and increasing support for a shift in research focus toward understanding how external support is impacting nonviolent action.

We have identified two key areas for growth in this literature. These growth areas may guide scholars of nonviolent action and external support to areas where gaps in the existing literature can be addressed. They also suggest future research that can improve inferences for external actors related to the decisions to support nonviolent action campaigns.

### **SELECTING A SUBSET OF CASES**

The literature's aggregate findings suggest that the story regarding the impact of external support on nonviolent campaigns is overwhelmingly positive. Most of the cases examined link external support to increased mobilization, maintenance of nonviolent discipline, countering repression, and to a lesser extent, achieving campaign goals. While we hesitate to be skeptical of these findings, we are concerned that potential negative externalities of external support



and failures of external support to change the trajectory of certain nonviolent campaigns may be poorly understood or understated. Many of the cases that contradict the more positive view include either blatantly negative outcomes for nonviolent action campaigns or suggestions that the positive impacts of external support were actually quite minimal.<sup>149</sup>

One factor contributing to this limited aggregate picture is that most studies focus on a small subset of well-known campaigns. Of the 320 nonviolent action campaigns for maximalist political goals identified in the Nonviolent and Violent Campaigns and Outcomes (NAVCO) data, perhaps only a quarter (optimistically) have received systematic attention in the case-study literature.<sup>150</sup> This is highlighted by the frequency of mentions of specific cases outlined in table A.5 of the appendix. The most frequently discussed country, by a wide margin, is the United States (the civil rights movement being the most frequent movement discussed), followed by Israel/Palestine. While much can be learned from the experience of these countries, they have many important differences from the majority of countries where major nonviolent action campaigns to expand rights take place.

Much of our knowledge on these cases comes from historians or regional specialists, for whom the dynamics of nonviolent action are often a minor area of focus. Additionally, the existing data sets most frequently used to evaluate patterns beyond single-case studies (for example, NAVCO 1 and 2) were not originally designed to examine questions about external support and therefore have key gaps that limit researchers' ability to use these data for that purpose. Major areas for further research include case overlap, regional coverage, and data collection efforts.

## **CASE OVERLAP**

There is significant overlap in the cases of successful nonviolent resistance that guide recommendations for policy makers. These cases are quite likely obvious to the reader, given how frequently they have appeared in this review. Serbia's Otpor movement is often given as a shining example of external actors supporting effective nonviolent resistance through financial assistance and condemnation of Milosevic's actions. Similarly, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa is regularly held up as an example of successful sanctions against a repressive regime. Cases like these are indeed crucial to understand efforts to support nonviolent action campaigns. However, these and other instances of successful external support to nonviolent campaigns rarely evaluate comparable cases where similar support was provided but not successful. As seen in appendix table A.2, the most common research method in our sources is a single case-study analysis. Similarly, cases of the failure of external support tend to overlap a small subset of examples, most notably the case of nonviolent resistance in Israel/Palestine. Given the many ways in which Israel/Palestine has been an outlier, without more systematic comparisons across these cases, we must take inferences from them about external support's efficacy with a grain of salt.

## REGIONAL CASE COVERAGE

In addition to the overlap in cases that receive attention, the studies we examine appear to give considerably less attention to two major areas: Latin America and Africa. Among the twenty most-mentioned cases in our review, only two represent Latin America, and only one (South Africa) is from sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>151</sup> These two regions have received significant attention in the civil conflict literature, with entire data sets devoted to understanding conflict in these regions alone. In the work on nonviolent campaigns and external support, however, relatively little research has examined these regions, though a few cases do emerge. This gap exists despite a vibrant mix of nonviolent methods and strategies employed by movements in both regions. This absence also suggests that scholars are giving too much focus to violence in these regions and limiting the kinds of foreign-policy inferences that can be made.

## DATA COLLECTION EFFORTS

There has been an increasing effort to collect data on nonviolent campaigns at various levels of analysis.<sup>152</sup> These observational data efforts have sought to address the gaps in understanding nonviolent action by going beyond single case studies and attempting to address the issues described in the previous two points. These data collection efforts are contributing to our ability to identify patterns in nonviolent action and improve policy inferences. However, most of these data are focused on the nonviolent campaigns or groups and are not designed to address questions about external support. One recent exception that pioneers what methodological growth in this area could look like is the Ex-D data set, recently collected by Erica Chenoweth and highlighted in a recent International Center on Nonviolent Conflict monograph by Chenoweth and Stephan.<sup>153</sup> We are eager to see scholars apply this data to address a variety of questions about external support, as well as to use it as a springboard for additional data collection efforts.

Finally, another key issue exists in ongoing data collection efforts. Most cases do not make it into these data sets until they have reached the level of mass mobilization. Thus, existing data is still missing key links between precampaign external support and the emergence of nonviolent groups. Efforts in events data sets such as the Phoenix automated event data project, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project, and NAVCO 3.0 to capture emergence of nonviolent action through an events data approach are a promising step in addressing this gap.<sup>154</sup> Nevertheless, more work is needed to expand not only case selection but also variance in the available data on types of external support and types of external actors.

## IMPROVING METHODOLOGY

A glaring area in critical need of improvement is the research methods used by scholars and practitioners to link external support with nonviolent action campaign outcomes. Similar to

the existing gaps in case-selection approaches, the tools used to evaluate these cases increase the difficulty of drawing clear inferences about how and when external support impacts nonviolent campaigns. Appendix tables A.2 and A.3 illustrate both the prevalence of single-case studies on this subject and the absence of more systematic analysis of external support in nonviolent action campaigns; only 18 percent of the studies represent attempts to systematically evaluate external support and its effect on nonviolent action. This evidence review suggests three areas that warrant improved methodological efforts in the analysis of external support and nonviolent action. These are increased attention to policy-outcome links and causal mechanisms, evaluation of temporal dynamics, and more rigorous evaluation strategies. These three areas are, of course, mutually reinforcing.

### ***Policy-Outcome Links and Causal Mechanisms***

Many of the studies examined here rely on single-case studies. The cases are primarily focused on evaluating the conditions that have led to more or less successful nonviolent action. Thus, in most cases, external support is not the primary focus. Scholars will often reference external support, but few of them directly link the external support to specific outcomes. When links between external support and certain outcomes are highlighted, few studies unpack the causal mechanisms that contributed to the support's relationship with certain outcomes. When seeking relevant sources, we eliminated far more studies than we were able to rely on for clear inferences on external support and the outcomes of nonviolent action.

There are ample opportunities for future research here, in evaluating the relationship between external support and the various outcomes we highlight in this evidence review and in examining some of the additional strategic implications from the literature. First, extensive theoretical work can be done to understand why external actors provide support to nonviolent campaigns and how they choose which types of support to provide. Second, some of the work here suggests that nonviolent campaigns do certain things to attract support, including choosing nonviolent strategies in the first place.<sup>155</sup> These gaps can be addressed through case studies or through large-*N* empirical studies. In the former case, clearer process tracing is needed, while in the latter, the suggested improvements to existing data are needed.

### ***Temporal Dynamics***

Relatedly, existing research tends to be slightly agnostic concerning the timing of external support and various dynamics of nonviolent action. To better understand when external support is effective at promoting outcomes like increased nonviolent mobilization, reduced repression, or successful peaceful transitions, future studies need to address the temporal nature of foreign-policy decisions or support provisions. In this evidence review, we follow Chenoweth and Stephan in dividing various indicators of successful nonviolent action into three phases—precampaign, campaign peak, and postcampaign—to better distinguish when external support

is having an impact on nonviolent campaigns.<sup>156</sup> This division is intentional. The success of nonviolent action is not limited to the final outcome of achieving stated objectives, nor is external support limited to taking place once nonviolence has been mobilized and a clear uprising is underway. Future studies can improve inferences about the efficacy of external support by more directly modeling the timing of support and various shifts in the dynamics of nonviolent action.

### ***Improved Evaluation Methods***

Much more challenging, but potentially rewarding for understanding the fine-grained, detailed impacts of external support, are evaluation strategies that rigorously test the effects of external support interventions in real time. In this regard, the gold standard is the double-blind randomized controlled trial (RCT). While RCTs are, of course, ubiquitous and necessary in medicine and increasingly common across social science, in our review we did not find a single published study that employed such an approach to evaluate an instance of external support for nonviolent action. Even in the broader literature on nonviolent action and protest, RCTs are a rarity.<sup>157</sup> When randomization is employed at all, it is typically done as part of more limited survey or lab experiments that can only indirectly speak to real-world programmatic impacts.<sup>158</sup>

Peacebuilders are often hesitant to employ RCTs in their program design, both from discomfort over the novelty of such a rigorous evaluation method, and from a desire to not treat those with whom they work as lab rats. There are indeed strong ethical considerations in incorporating any kind of experimental design into an intervention with powerful potential consequences.<sup>159</sup> Yet we believe that the benefits, both practical and ethical, far outweigh the costs. In medicine, no new treatment can receive government approval without having gone through a series of RCTs to test for safety and efficacy, and distributing interventions without such evidence is often a criminal offense. Yet peacebuilding interventions that have the potential for more wide-ranging consequences are routinely implemented at massive scale among vulnerable populations with little to no robust evidence base.

Some interventions cannot be randomized. An RCT on the effects of a withdrawal of diplomatic support for an opponent of a nonviolent campaign at a peak moment of campaign mobilization, for instance, would be ludicrous. However, creative uses of randomization can be implemented across many different kinds of external support. For example, the United States Institute of Peace is currently conducting a series of RCTs testing the impact of its Synergizing Nonviolent Action and Peacebuilding training curriculum, with the potential to generate some of the most rigorous findings on the impact of one specific avenue of external support to date. Collaboration between academics and practitioners in evaluation design to incorporate elements of randomization will add significant value to the literature.

## Conclusion

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In April of 2020, the Varieties of Democracy project reported that, for the past ten years in a row, democracy worldwide had declined.<sup>160</sup> More than 68 percent of the world's population now lives under an authoritarian political system.<sup>161</sup> Meanwhile, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program reports that the number of armed conflicts in the world is the highest it has been since World War II.<sup>162</sup> In March of 2022, this rise in conflict was tragically illustrated as Russia launched an unprovoked invasion of Ukraine. The world is experiencing a time of remarkable political fragility.

We emphasize the significant role that nonviolent action will have in contributing to a new global expansion of peace and democracy. This was the case in past democratic waves, from the anti-colonial struggles of the 1960s to the anti-Communist revolutions of the 1980s. As nonviolent action campaigns grow more common, they will of necessity be at the center of any political transformation.<sup>163</sup> It is bottom-up action by ordinary, unarmed civilians discontented with the status quo and empowered to challenge it that will lead to long-term change. Indeed, this evidence review suggests the most successful efforts to support nonviolent action campaigns have targeted their efforts to mobilize and resist repression from the ground up.

So, how can policymakers and practitioners not directly engaged in those struggles support them? Was the theory of change we presented early in this evidence review—that external supporters can positively impact the key mechanisms through which nonviolent action works—supported by the evidence? Our answer is mixed. We have highlighted several practical implications for each of the stages of a nonviolent action campaign, including findings on promoting opportunities for mobilization, increasing participation, reducing the effects of repression, maintaining nonviolent discipline, and improving the odds of success (takeaways summarized below). As we have also pointed out, however, our confidence in these findings is limited by the shortfalls of the literature.

Many of these shortfalls can be overcome by building a more rigorous knowledge base, following the recommendations in the previous section. Yet in our deep dive into the literature, we were repeatedly struck by the degree to which external support for nonviolent action comes with inescapable uncertainty. There are no home-run means of external support that will lead the campaigns supported to have a 100 percent success rate. Even if a rigorous knowledge base is built and everything is seemingly done right in designing external support, factors internal to the struggle may lead to suboptimal or even disastrous outcomes.

The principles of humility and “do no harm” should thus be primary values for all those interested in supporting nonviolent action. External supporters are not the protagonists of the story. They are secondary characters. They may play a key role at certain moments, but they should never forget the primary actors who will have the greatest impact on the campaign's outcome and for whom the stakes of the nonviolent action campaign are highest. These are

the activists, civil society leaders, and ordinary citizens who, through great courage and tremendous risk, seek to bring their countries into a better future.

In practical terms, these principles mean that external supporters should be honest, both with themselves and with the activists they support, about what they do and do not know and what their support can reasonably accomplish. The temptation toward simplistic programmatic prescriptions, or implicit or explicit promises of safety or success if a particular set of tactics or programs is employed, should be studiously avoided. The dangers of nonviolent action are real, and even carefully crafted external support may end up having little impact on reducing them.

This strongly stated principle of humility might seem to leave little room for action. Would it be better for potential external supporters to leave activists to their own devices? How can one say anything meaningful with so many limitations in the literature and so much inescapable uncertainty?

While the uncertainty of external support's impact warrants humility and caution, the stakes involved in nonviolent action in the twenty-first century make inaction unacceptable. To choose to do nothing in a moment of crisis because one lacks perfect certainty about one's impact also violates "do no harm" principles. In a globalized world, in which networks of power and influence stretch far beyond borders, it is naive for those interested in peace, democracy, and social justice to simply wait for change to happen. No such compulsion limits a growing network of authoritarian regimes that work together to stamp out any nonviolent opposition.<sup>164</sup>

In this evidence review, we have sought to model what the process of coming to evidence-based conclusions and sharing those conclusions about external support for nonviolent action could look like. This process is honest about its limitations, but it clearly presents what diligent study of relevant cases and statistical patterns tell us. It constantly refers to the need for careful, case-specific study; deference to local knowledge and consent; and concern for the uncertain implications of action in any individual nonviolent action campaign. Yet it seeks to overcome this uncertainty through triangulating many different types of evidence, looking to broad historical trends, and, where gaps in knowledge exist, clearly laying out the kinds of research and study that could help reduce those gaps.

Program design for external support to nonviolent action can follow a similar process. Starting from the principle of humility, practitioners acknowledge that no policy or program can guarantee success. They seek out a wide range of sources about the specific mechanisms that their intervention seeks to impact, either individually or combined into a meta-analysis like this evidence review. They then present this evidence to those likely to be most affected by their potential actions, learn from their experience, and defer to their insights. And they leverage their interventions as opportunities to learn and contribute to filling the gaps in knowledge that hamper effective external support.

Researchers can also do more to fill those gaps and help shape better evidence-based policy and practice. Future research on this subject should be approached not only with the existing gaps in cases and methodology in mind but also with a critical eye to the potential ethical considerations that spring from the resulting policy implications. This evidence review suggests several areas where external support can indeed facilitate successful nonviolent action. However, there is also ample evidence that external support can do harm. Questions that might guide future work on this subject include, but are not limited to, the following: Are some external actors better situated than others to effectively support nonviolent action campaigns? How does external support shape the autonomy or goals of nonviolent campaigns? What are the different consequences of indirect versus direct methods of external support? How does the timing of external support shape the participation, nonviolent discipline, and success of nonviolent campaigns?

The challenges facing nonviolent action campaigns for peace, democracy, and social justice in the twenty-first century and those seeking to support them in achieving their goals are significant. Addressing these challenges will require concerted efforts by academics and policy makers to build on what has been presented in this evidence review. Yet with care and attention to the dynamics of nonviolent action and focus on working from a place of deep knowledge and understanding, they can be better overcome

## External Support for Nonviolent Action: Summary

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- **To promote mobilization and increase participation:** Consider whether your participation as an external actor will indeed achieve these goals and whether your support is welcome by those doing the grassroots organizing. State support comes fraught with challenges, while international nongovernmental organizations, diaspora communities, and other nonstate actors may be more effective. Focus on interventions that train activists before peak mobilization times, and provide free spaces for organization. During peak mobilization times, focus on spreading information and amplifying activist voices, grievances, and experiences. Broaden avenues of external support to engage a wide range of actors.
- **To reduce the effects of repression:** Raise the costs of repression for the opponent. This sometimes takes the form of verbal condemnation, though such condemnation is often ineffective when not backed by concrete action. Be careful about the consequences of more direct action, though, as the most forceful responses, in particular military intervention, are likely to spark a repressive backlash. Calling attention to repression can increase movement participation. Ignoring or even supporting the maintenance of repression can be harmful to nonviolent action.

- **To improve nonviolent discipline:** Focus on providing training and education in nonviolent action before the peak of a campaign so that activists are well prepared for the potential of violent repression and have strategies in place to maintain nonviolent discipline when it occurs. Reduce external support for armed groups that can delegitimize nonviolent strategies; and instead provide recognition, diplomatic engagement, and mediation to nonviolent action campaigns.
- **To help nonviolent campaigns succeed:** Focus on understanding their opponents' pillars of support and the key avenues through which that support can be withdrawn. This can be done through well-established activist tools of strategic analysis. Once strategic analysis has been completed, focus on coordinating strategy across different potential external supporters. If the campaign's opponent has a close relationship with a powerful external patron, focus on motivating that patron to withdraw its support.
- **To promote long-term sustainable change after nonviolent action campaigns conclude:** Focus on supporting the quotidian institutions of civil society such as labor unions, religious institutions, and professional organizations. Build the capacity of groups independent from the state that have deep ties to their communities to mobilize for nonviolent action if gains are at risk of being lost.



## Appendix

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**Appendix Table A.1.** Total Number of Sources Reviewed

Source categories	Total number of sources	Number of relevant sources
Journal articles	1,716	167
Organization reports	386	82
Books	31	31

**Appendix Table A.2.** Relevant Sources, by Empirical Method

Empirical methods	Number of sources
Experiment	2
Mixed methods	18
Quantitative	46
Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA)	1
Qualitative (multiple cases)	52
Qualitative (single case)	111
Reflective/review	50

**Appendix Table A.3.** Relevant Sources by Depth of External Support Discussion

<b>Depth of discussion</b>	<b>Number of sources</b>
Systematic analysis	49
Detailed discussion	105
Passing mention	126

**Appendix Table A.4.** Authors' Institutional Affiliations

<b>Location of institution</b>	<b>Number of institutions</b>
Africa	10
Asia	15
Australia	8
Europe	84
North America	210
South America	2

*Note:* This table only includes data for authors of the sources we categorized as relevant to the study and whose institutional affiliations could be identified. The total of unidentified institutional affiliations was forty-nine.

**Appendix Table A.5.** Countries Discussed at Least Four Times in Relevant Sources

<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of mentions</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of mentions</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Number of mentions</b>
United States	28	Indonesia	8	Morocco	5
Israel/Palestine	22	East Germany	7	Brazil	4
Egypt	20	Guatemala	7	Ecuador	4
South Africa	20	Kosovo	7	El Salvador	4
Ukraine	15	Poland	7	Georgia	4
Iran	14	United Kingdom	7	Kenya	4
Philippines	12	Argentina	6	Kyrgyzstan	4
Serbia	11	Armenia	6	Libya	4
Syria	11	Belarus	6	Maldives	4
India	10	Burma	6	Spain	4
China	9	Chile	5	USSR	4
Nepal	9	Colombia	5	Zambia	4
Tunisia	9	East Timor	5		

## Endnotes

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33. For instance, the term *nonviolent action* itself is only one of many similar terms frequently used in the literature, such as *nonviolence*, *ahimsa*, *unarmed resistance*, *civil resistance*, and *satyagraha*.
34. The only academic journal fully devoted to unarmed resistance that we are aware of is the *Journal of Resistance Studies*, and this is a very recent creation.
35. We selected academic experts based on three criteria: They must have at least two peer-reviewed publications (either in leading journals or in books published by academic presses) focused on nonviolent action in the past ten years, be employed at a research institution such as a university or think tank, and be recognized as leading experts by the USIP Nonviolent Action tool leads. We selected practitioner experts based on two criteria: they must be members of an organization that primarily engages in nonviolent action or training for nonviolent action, and they must have at least three years of experience working in nonviolent action or training in nonviolent action.

36. Our search string was “Nonviolent Action OR Nonviolent Resistance OR Civil Resistance OR Non-violence OR Unarmed Insurrection OR Nonviolent Revolution.”
37. While we acknowledge that authors’ institutional affiliations do not give us sufficient information to give us a complete and accurate understanding of their stance or positioning in relation to their research study, this information does at least provide us some insight as to who is conducting the research.
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145. The “Pillars of Support” analysis tool involves analyzing the makeup of the key groups and institutions that support the opponent of a nonviolent action campaign, and how that support enables the opponent to maintain itself. For an in-depth description of the tool, see Srdja Popovic, Slobodan Djindjic, Andrej Milivojevic, Hardy Merriman, and Ivan Marovic, *A Guide to Effective Nonviolent Struggle* (Belgrade, Serbia: Center for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies, 2007), 32–43.
146. Numerous tools like the pillar analysis tool are in widespread use in nonviolent action training circles. For a further description of pillar analysis and numerous other nonviolent action strategic planning tools, see Bloch and Schirch, *Synergizing Nonviolent Action and Peacebuilding*. (SNAP). For a checklist tool intended to quickly evaluate the strength of a nonviolent action movement and its opponent, see Ackerman and Merriman, “The Checklist for Ending Tyranny,” 63–80.
147. Jennings, “Serbia’s Bulldozer Revolution.”
148. Some recent exceptions include Jackson, *Mobilizing for Change*; and Chenoweth and Stephan, *The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns*.
149. See, for example, Carothers, “The Backlash against Democracy Promotion.”
150. The NAVCO data project, led by Erica Chenoweth, is the premier data source on nonviolent action. It includes three major datasets: NAVCO 1 (currently on its third iteration), which collects data at the level of the campaign; NAVCO 2 (currently on its second iteration), which collects data at the level of the campaign year; and NAVCO 3 (currently on its first iteration), which collects data at the level of the event. For more detail on each of these, see Chenoweth and Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works*; Erica Chenoweth and Orion A. Lewis, “Unpacking Nonviolent Campaigns: Introducing the NAVCO 2.0 Dataset,” *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 3 (2013): 415–23; and Erica Chenoweth, Jonathan Pinckney, and Orion Lewis, “Days of Rage: Introducing the NAVCO 3.0 Dataset,” *Journal of Peace Research* 55, no. 4 (2018): 524–34.
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155. The strategy of the Kosovo Democratic Party is one particularly striking example of this dynamic at work. For more, see Reitan, “Strategic Nonviolent Conflict in Kosovo”; and Howard Clark, *Civil Resistance in Kosovo* (London: Pluto Press, 2000).
156. Chenoweth and Stephan, *The Role of External Support in Nonviolent Campaigns*.

157. Recent striking exceptions include Davide Cantoni et al., “Protests as Strategic Games: Experimental Evidence from Hong Kong’s Antiauthoritarian Movement,” *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 134, no. 2 (2019): 1021–77, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjz002>; and Lauren E. Young, “The Psychology of State Repression: Fear and Dissent Decisions in Zimbabwe,” *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 1 (2019): 140–55.
158. For example, see S. Nima Orazani and Bernhard Leidner, “The Power of Nonviolence: Confirming and Explaining the Success of Nonviolent (Rather than Violent) Political Movements,” *European Journal of Social Psychology* 49, no. 4 (2018), 688–704; Devorah Manekin and Tamar Mitts, “Effective for Whom? Ethnic Identity and Nonviolent Resistance,” *American Political Science Review* 166, no. 1 (2022): 161–80; and Sirianne Dahlum, Jonathan Pinckney, and Tore Wig, “Moral Logics of Support for Nonviolent Resistance: Evidence From a Cross-National Survey Experiment,” *OnlineFirst* (June 15, 2022): <https://doi.org/10.1177/00104140221100198>.
159. For more on these challenges in the related field of development economics, see Christopher B. Barrett and Michael R. Carter, “The Power and Pitfalls of Experiments in Development Economics: Some Non-random Reflections,” *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* 32, no. 4 (2010): 515–48, <https://doi.org/10.1093/aep/32.4.515>.
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