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The Enemy of my Enemy is my Friend... The Dynamics of Self Defense Forces in Irregular War: The Case of the Sons of Iraq

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Abstract: This paper assesses the effect that leveraging civilian defense force militias has on the dynamics of violence in civil war. We argue that the delegation of security and combat roles to local civilians shifts the primary targets of insurgent violence towards civilians, in an attempt to deter future defections, and re-establish control over the local population. This argument is assessed through an analysis of the Sunni Awakening and ancillary Sons of Iraq paramilitary program. The results suggest that at least in the Al-Anbar province of Iraq, the utilisation of the civilian population in counterinsurgent roles had significant implications for the targets of insurgent violence.

Key Words: Pro-Government Militias, Civilian Defense Force, Violence against Civilians, Civil War, Iraq, Counter-Insurgency, Sunni Awakening, Sons of Iraq.

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Introduction

What effects do Pro-Government Militias (PGMs) have upon the dynamics of violence during civil war? PGMs are organized armed groups that are aligned with the incumbent but not identified as members of the conventional armed force.¹ Existing literature has largely overlooked the broader effects that PGMs have upon the nature and intensity of civil violence. For while previous research has shown a relationship between the presence of PGMs and conflict escalation along ethnic lines, few studies have discussed the underlying mechanisms through which the delegation of tasks to PGMs shapes the targets of violence in civil war.² This article partially addresses this gap in the literature, exploring the effects that the presence of a specific type of PGM, civilian defense forces (CDF), can have on insurgent violence towards civilians. To do this, this article focuses on the Sunni Awakening and the ancillary Sons of Iraq militia recruited by the US during their counterinsurgency campaign in Iraq.

Between 2005 and 2008 US military forces encouraged Sunni tribal groups to turn against the insurgent movement across various parts of Iraq. Originally concentrated in the Al-Anbar, Salah-ad-Din, Diyala and Baghdad districts, the Sunni Awakening saw Sunni tribal groups violently turn against the insurgency. This Awakening was later consolidated into a semi-official PGM called the Sons of Iraq, which eventually included over 100,000 paramilitary fighters operating in more than two-thirds of Iraqi provinces. This article argues that the Sunni Awakening militia fall into the category of civilian defense force (CDF), a distinct form of militia that have been largely overlooked by civil war scholars.³ Like other CDFs, the Sunni militia were recruited from local populations, operated only within their home territory (i.e. are sedentary), and had little offensive capability.⁴

Existing academic and military literature has described the important role that the Sunni militia played in the US counter-insurgency campaign, specifically during the transition from insurgent to incumbent control in Al-Anbar province.⁵ However, it remains unclear what the effects of encouraging civilian active collaboration against the insurgents were during this time. This article argues that the formation of CDFs effectively refocuses the primary targets of insurgent violence from the incumbent to civilians. When faced with a recalcitrant and actively hostile local population, the insurgents retaliate to deter future defections and re-establish their control over contested areas. During the time of transition from insurgent to incumbent control, the emergence of a CDF affects the targets of insurgent violence and its intensity. This, coupled with increased counter-insurgent activity, creates a short-term spike of violence.

This claim is assessed using a combination of descriptive data and testimonies from those involved in the Awakening. The results demonstrate that at least in the Al-Anbar province of Iraq, where the Sunni Awakening and the ancillary Sons of Iraq program were initiated, the creation of the CDF groups resulted in a predicted spike in Iraqi civilian deaths. Our single case analysis, although not without its limitations, generates inferences applicable to other contexts regarding the consequences of delegating tasks to a CDF. This article therefore provides an important contribution to the counter-insurgency literature, as well as the growing collection of work centered on the effects of pro-government militias, insurgent group fragmentation, defection and side-switching.⁶ It also has significant ethical and policy implications regarding the use of similar CDF strategies elsewhere. This article proceeds by highlighting the underlying rationale in the supporting civilian groups against insurgents. A theory

linking CDFs to a change in the dynamics of civil war violence is then presented. Finally, the method of analysis is discussed before the results are presented.

Civilian Defense Forces

Categorization

CDFs are a specific form of militia, distinct from other similar para-institutional armed actors. Firstly, they are recruited from the civilian and insurgent population. Unlike other militias, such as the organization of ‘native’ paramilitary armies (e.g. Sepoys), CDFs are composed of civilians and defected insurgents from within specific areas contested by the incumbent and insurgent forces. Secondly, they are not mobile fighting forces, such as the Janjaweed militias in Sudan, but remain sedentary within the areas from which they were mobilized. Thirdly, unlike other militia forces, CDFs are usually not overtly offensive in nature, but are delegated intelligence, security, and limited combat roles within their local areas.⁷ Unlike paramilitary ‘death squads’ ubiquitous in many Latin American countries during the Cold War, CDFs do not actively seek to engage or ‘neutralize’ insurgents and their civilian sympathizers. CDFs therefore constitute pro-incumbent militias that harness the active participation of civilians and defected members of the insurgency in the counterinsurgency effort, taking up intelligence, security and limited combat roles. Either emerging autonomously from state direction or mobilized directly by incumbent forces, CDF are common features in irregular wars ranging from the ‘civil defense patrols’ in Peru (1980-2000) and Guatemala (1981-1996) to Turkish ‘Village Guards’ and Filipino Citizen Armed Force Geographical Units (CAFGU).

Rationale for use of CDF I: Identifying insurgents

The organization of civilian populations into local CDFs and the utilization of such pre-existing civilian-based militias are a well-established tenet of counterinsurgency thinking.⁸ Primarily, such forces help incumbents overcome the identification problem. Rebels often mix in with local populations, making it difficult for the incumbent forces to identify the insurgents. In the absence of reliable intelligence incumbents are often forced to deploy indiscriminate forms of violence, targeting innocent people loosely affiliated with an insurgency, in an attempt to modify the behavior of the ‘guilty’ parties.⁹ This can often be a counterproductive approach, alienating the very people the incumbent is attempting to win over to their side.

The mobilization of local civilians into anti-insurgent forces is often seen as a way in which the incumbents can overcome the challenge of identification. CDFs are comprised of local residents and insurgent defectors who can readily identify insurgents living among them. Members of local communities generally know who the cell members are, or at the least those residents likely to be hiding them.¹⁰ In this way, local militia forces can act in their own “self-defense”, attacking insurgents and denying them access to local communities. In addition, they can aid incumbent forces to identify and locate insurgents selectively. As an example of this, many US counterinsurgent training manuals dating back to the Cold War elucidate how the CDF concept is conceived as an efficient way to separate the insurgents and suspected sympathizers from the rest of the local population.¹¹

Rationale for use of CDF II: Increasing local support

Secondly, according to the counterinsurgency literature, using CDFs is an expedient means through which the incumbent can gain the allegiance and active participation of local inhabitants, denying insurgents control of the people and access to their

resources. Irregular warfare is a politico-military struggle, largely centered on the battle to control or influence the population. Winning an irregular war therefore depends not only upon military might, but on the ability of both sides to mobilize support for their cause and deter collaboration with their opponents.¹² In this sense CDF paramilitarism is a political tool, in which the local populations increase their support for the government by participating in their own defense. By mobilizing the population in support of the counterinsurgent cause, the incumbent erodes the popular support for the insurgency and encourages insurgent defection.¹³ The organization and mobilization of civilians to support the incumbent through their active participation in counterinsurgent activities, including combat, is a popular counterinsurgent tactic.¹⁴ The subcontracting of defense and combat capabilities to local populations is meant to aid incumbent forces to win the support of the civil population and identify those who do not.

The effects of CDFs: Civilianizing warfare

Building on these well-established functional roles of government-sided CDF militias (reducing the problem of identification, and increasing the active support of the local population), we argue that the delegation of security and combat roles to local civilian groups has two additional and simultaneous effects. Firstly, the mobilization of a CDF has a significant impact upon the targets of insurgent violence. The formation of CDF is inherently an exercise against the insurgents, reducing their support from local populations. Consequently, insurgents often resort to violence to deter civilians from defecting from the insurgent cause, and joining the CDF program.¹⁵ As the civilian population is persuaded to actively engage in actions against the insurgents (both in a security role denying insurgents sanctuary and combat against them), a wedge is

driven between the insurgents and the population, demanding a response from insurgent groups. This result is sometimes acknowledged in US counterinsurgency doctrine. For example, appendix D of a wikileaked 2003 Special Forces training manual is particularly candid about the politico-military function of 'CDF' paramilitary organizations. It states that when the Civilian Self Defense Force (CSDF) concept is implemented,

The insurgents have no choice; they have to attack the CSDF village to provide a lesson to other villages considering CSDF. In a sense, the psychological effectiveness of the CSDF concept starts by reversing the insurgent strategy of making the government the repressor. It forces the insurgents to cross a critical threshold - that of attacking and killing the very class of people they are supposed to be liberating.¹⁶

In this way, the organization of local defense units or the delegation of tasks to such forces is meant to neutralize the insurgent's efforts to gain support from the people. The insurgents are required to fight for the support of the population as they try to avoid the loss of civilian control and cooperation. The strategy is therefore ethically complex, with counterinsurgents instigating a position in which insurgents are likely to escalate violence (and against civilians). Yet, it is ultimately the insurgents themselves who must take responsibility for their chosen course of actions.

Secondly, in relation to this, provoking defection from the insurgency is an important component of the CDF concept, causing or at least facilitating insurgent group fragmentation and infighting. The implementation of a CDF policy helps to deteriorate the cohesion of the insurgent movement.¹⁷ The local populations' gradual acceptance of the CDF program causes the insurgency to fold in on itself, as local

civilians who previously provided active (i.e. joining in the insurgency) and passive support to the insurgents defect from the insurgent cause and join in active collaboration against the insurgency. The defection of local civilians and insurgents represents a threat to the strength and stability of the insurgency. In response to this threat remaining insurgents are likely to focus their violent attention on actual and potential defectors. Side-switching in this way is a common feature of irregular warfare, which counterinsurgents can exploit to their advantage. Leveraging civilian populations to join in active collaboration with the incumbents therefore shifts the primary targets of insurgent violence downwards away from the incumbent state forces and onto local civilians, as well as inwards against defectors, as control is wrestled from the insurgents and they lose their support base. In other words, a central dynamic that results in leveraging CDF forces is a redirection of insurgent attacks downwards and inwards towards those that no longer support them.

However, as incumbent forces gain control of region the intensity of violence should significantly subside.¹⁸ The intensity of the insurgent violence against civilian populations, adapting Kalyvas' logic, is a function of the level of insurgent control.¹⁹ In areas of contested sovereignty, disputants compete for denunciations and defections (in this case with the CDF program), and thus there is a high likelihood of indiscriminate violence against civilians.²⁰ However, once a CDF has gained the active participation of the local communities, the possibilities for insurgent infiltration are minimized. Therefore violence against civilians is most likely is the period of transition from insurgent to incumbent control in which the CDF triggers side-switching and fear of defection within the insurgent movement. We therefore argue that the mobilization of CDF forces produces a short-term spike in the intensity of

violence amongst and towards local populations, but then stabilizes if and when control is attained.

Thus, in the short-run we should expect to see the formation of a CDF increase violence against civilians. In many cases the increased targeting of civilians will reduce the level of violence against state forces, although there is always the possibility insurgents continue on a dual track of attacking both incumbents and seeking to prevent defection. However, the imminent threat posed by the formation of a CDF in areas under insurgent control should provide considerable cause for concern amongst insurgent organizers. Thus, insurgents should be expected to increasingly target inwards to discourage defection amongst their ranks and downwards against local populations from supporting the anti-insurgent movement. While recent literature has been attentive to many of the causes of insurgent violence against civilians²¹, this article develops this work by examining the mechanisms at play in leveraging CDF and the dynamics of violence against civilians that this can cause.

Assessing the impact of Civilian Defense Forces: The case of Iraq

The Sunni Awakening and the subsequent creation of the Sons of Iraq program in Al-Anbar province from 2005 to 2009 offers an ideal case to assess the effect of CDFs. In 2004 to 2006 Coalition forces had ‘lost’ militarily in Al-Anbar province against the anti-occupation insurgency and Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI).²² Insurgents retained control over many areas and even proclaimed the establishment of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.²³ Major cities such as Ramadi and Fallujah were largely under insurgent control, supported by various local Sunni tribal groups. Across Iraq attacks against Coalition forces grew to their highest levels. Moreover, in the absence of reliable intelligence, Coalition forces adopted an indiscriminate form of force against

their ‘enemies’, best exemplified by the search and destroy tactics used in the recapture of Fallujah and the Haditha incident.²⁴

Yet in a dramatic turn-around of events that began in late 2005 and continued through to 2007, various Sunni tribes shifted their allegiance from the insurgency and AQI to form an alliance with the Coalition forces. This Sunni Awakening, or al-Sahwa in Arabic, arose out of a combination of complex divisions primarily between Sunni tribal leaders and their perceived loss of power vis-à-vis members of al-Qaeda.²⁵ The Sunni Awakening and the defection of numerous tribes from the insurgency was not really a product of Coalition counter-insurgent design, but driven by independent forces. However, it is clear that the US military support for side-switching of this kind was an essential element that provoked its growth. For US military commanders encouraged defection, turned a blind eye to vigilante attacks against the insurgency and civilians supporting it, and clearly supported the establishment of the Sunni Awakening councils in September 2006.²⁶ Supporting the Awakening formed part of an intentional (albeit unexpected) counterinsurgent strategy on behalf of the US commanders to stabilize Al-Anbar province starting in Ramadi.²⁷ Ad-hoc alliances were forged in order to use tribal affiliations, local knowledge, and local population’s active resistance to expel the insurgents and AQI from areas under insurgent control. Before the official establishment of the Sons of Iraq program, groups of “awakened” tribal members conducted attacks on known insurgents and AQI members as part of a militia called “Thuwar al-Anbar”, to which US forces turned a blind-eye or actively supported.²⁸ It is this period of side-switching in Anbar which is most important for the present study.

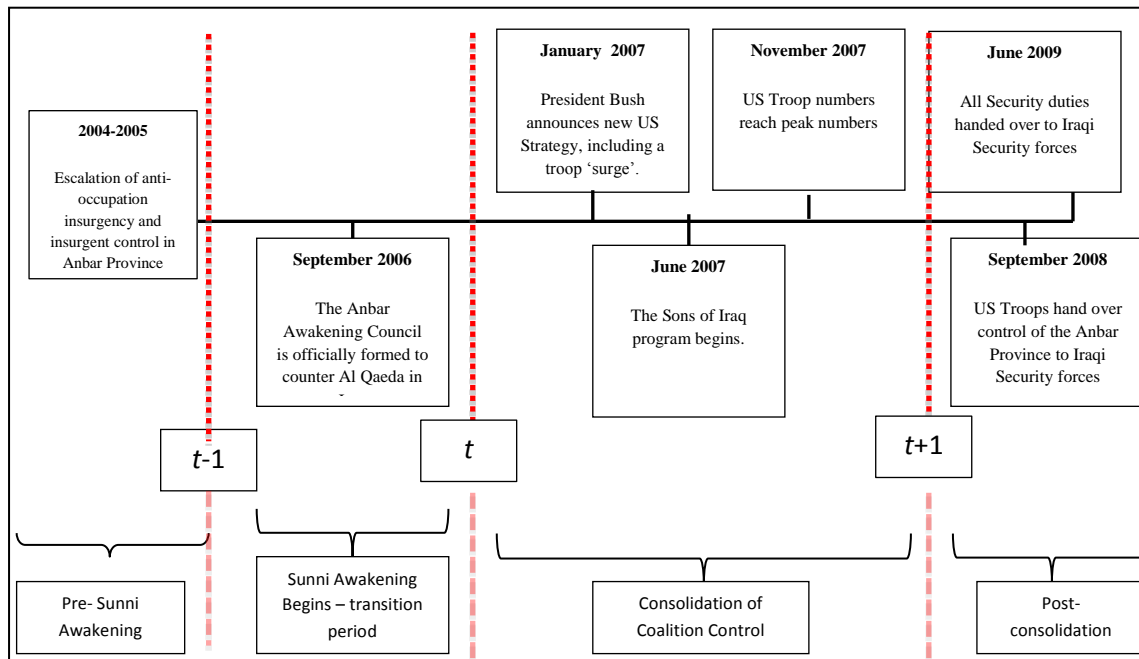
The Awakening process as well as Coalition control over Anbar province was later consolidated by the US military in the summer of 2007 with the establishment of a semi-official civilian militia originally titled ‘Concerned Local Citizens’ at the outset and then later revised to Sons of Iraq (SOI). Many defectors, some of which were previously part of the insurgency, were handed responsibility for local security and given a “special mandate to suppress, arrest, or kill local jihadist cadre”.²⁹ Originally concentrated in the Al-Anbar, Salah-ad-Din, Diyala and Baghdad districts, the SOI program then rapidly expanded to include over 100,000 paramilitary fighters at its peak in 2008. The SOI eventually operated in more than two-thirds of Iraqi provinces, helping to increase Coalition control in previously contested areas (e.g. Anbar). The SOI helped to defend their own interests within their community, but also functioned as contracted military forces for the Coalition. Each ‘Son’ received \$300 monthly salary for their services, which cost the US around \$16 million a month throughout 2008.³⁰ Existing analyses of the Awakening have tended to focus on explaining its rise and analyzing its potential political ramifications.³¹ To date only limited attention has been focused on examining the effect that the Sunni Awakening had upon the dynamics of violence in Iraq.

Observable implications

Figure 1 below presents the key events within the US-led counterinsurgency campaign along a simple timeline. These events suggest four distinct time periods within which the campaign was fought in the Anbar province. The time period prior to t-1 represents counterinsurgency within Iraq prior to the Sunni Awakening in which insurgent forces had control over much of Anbar province. The threshold t - 1 (May 2006) represents the point at which the Sunni Awakening began to arise, a few months

before its official proclamation.³² This crucial time-period (between $t-1$ and t) involved Sunni tribal leaders defecting from the insurgency and eventually formally announcing their renunciation through the formation the Awakening councils in Al-Anbar province. While the official announcement occurred in September 2006 (coinciding with US retaking control in Ramadi), defection from the insurgency began in the previous months and continued over the next year. According to our argument laid out above, we expect insurgent forces to respond to this defection by making those ‘awakened’ Sunni tribes (and supporting local communities) their primary targets in order to deter future defections and punish those that have done. Second, those individuals and tribal groups defected to the Sunni Awakening should attack those remaining insurgents living within their communities. Therefore according to our theory, between $t-1$ and t we should observe a significant increase in Iraqi civilian deaths.

Figure 1 - timeline of Iraq counterinsurgency campaign



Between t and $t + 1$ Coalition control and the Awakening was consolidated primarily in Anbar province but also across much of Iraq. US commanders had begun to formalize and/or institutionalize the support of Sunni CDF forces. The SOI numbers increased from 12,000 in June 2007 at its inception, to a peak of 105,000 in May 2008 across the country.³³ By the time the SOI was institutionalized in Anbar province, Coalition forces had consolidated control with increased troop numbers in the Surge, and should have been able to provide enhanced assistance to SOI forces to protect themselves and their local communities more effectively from insurgent attacks. Therefore, we should expect a decrease in Iraqi deaths during this time (between t and $t + 1$), as Coalition control is consolidated, with active support from the local population. The intense violent transition period should have occurred primarily before t (and after $t - 1$) where defections were retaliated against by insurgents. However, remaining insurgent attacks after t and $t+1$ should target CDF forces in a fight for access to the local population. As the SOI program formalizes past successes,

insurgent control should be diminished, helping to create complete Coalition control of these areas and therefore the relative stability characterized by the post-Awakening period. Therefore between t and $t + 1$ we should observe a reduction in Iraqi deaths.

Finally, from $t + 1$ as the Coalition force mission began to decline across much of the country, significant numbers of SOI were still in existence. The SOI continued to form an important part of US strategy, with security delegated to these forces and newly established Iraqi police forces. Moreover, Coalition forces began handing over security functions to the Iraqi military and police during this time, which would enable a decline in Coalition troop deaths. However, Iraqi deaths should remain either constant or decrease only slightly as remaining elements of the insurgency take reprisals against Sunni Awakening and SOI forces as well as the newly commissioned Iraqi military and police services. The logic of the violence in irregular war should see further contest for control of the civilian population in which the insurgents use violent means to attempt to regain control over and collaboration of the local population. Hence from $t + 1$ we should observe constant or small decrease in the number of Iraqi deaths.

From the preceding discussion we can derive our general hypothesis:

The onset of the Sunni Awakening and formation of local defense forces produced a sharp and immediate increase in civilian casualties within Al Anbar province, which declined as incumbent control stabilized.

Research design

Inferences generated from a single case study are less secure and generalizable than those resulting from a large-N analysis. Nevertheless, the analysis of a single case can be particularly informative for the kind of theory development proposed by this paper. A single case can provide a tough assessment of theory when the most likely or unlikely cases can be identified. Most likely cases are those in which a theory suggests that a particular outcome should occur within a specific context. In this case, the strength of the effect generated by a single variable should be so extreme that the underlying causal mechanisms are observable when considered alone.³⁴ When this outcome is observed the theory is supported. If the outcome is not observed then the hypothesized mechanism underlying the theory is strongly impugned. As George and Bennett suggest, the failure of a theory to be confirmed within a ‘most likely’ case cannot “be blamed on the operation of the other variable in the framework.”³⁵ Therefore, while cases of this nature do not empirically prove or disprove a theory, they can still confirm or infirm its potential applicability in other contexts.³⁶

The Iraqi case provides a unique opportunity to assess the underlying logic of the violence in an irregular war (counterinsurgency). The Al-Anbar province in 2005-2006 was largely under insurgent and AQI control. The strength of the insurgency in this area led the Coalition to all but abandon control of the province in 2006.³⁷ Given this and the fact that the Sunni Awakening was born in Anbar, it is the most likely case within which we would expect to observe the impact predicted by the hypothesis: that the divestment of security to local civilian populations produced a sharp increase in civilian casualties.

To perform this analysis we use both qualitative and quantitative data. The quantitative analysis is predominantly descriptive in nature. Drawing upon a range of both official and non-official sources we assess the variance in levels of Coalition and Iraqi fatalities across time. The use of aggregate data to explain local or regional level dynamics has in the past produced a poor match between civil war data and theory. Inferences at the individual or group level were commonly based upon aggregate or country level data. This approach falls prey to the ecological fallacy. As a result we also draw upon disaggregated data at the province level. While this does not fully mitigate the issue of aggregation, it is the lowest level of analysis feasible given the data available.

Coalition deaths are taken from the iCasulties.org website. This is an independent resource that compiles information on casualties incurred by the Coalition forces in Iraq. The data is generated using reports and official press releases from the U.S Department of Defense, CENTCOM and the British Military of Defense.

The numbers of Iraqi deaths are captured using the Worldwide Incidents Tracking System (WITS), a database compiled by the US Government. This dataset includes all incidents that meet the U.S statutory criteria for terrorism, "...premeditated, and politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents."³⁸ WITS is based on factual reports from a variety of open sources. Using this data means we include the sum fatalities suffered by Iraqi nationals each month, at the disaggregated province level. Rather than focus solely upon non-combatants all Iraqi nationals are included. This is based upon the assumption that independent observers, the media and military officials will not always be able to determine ex post the difference between non-

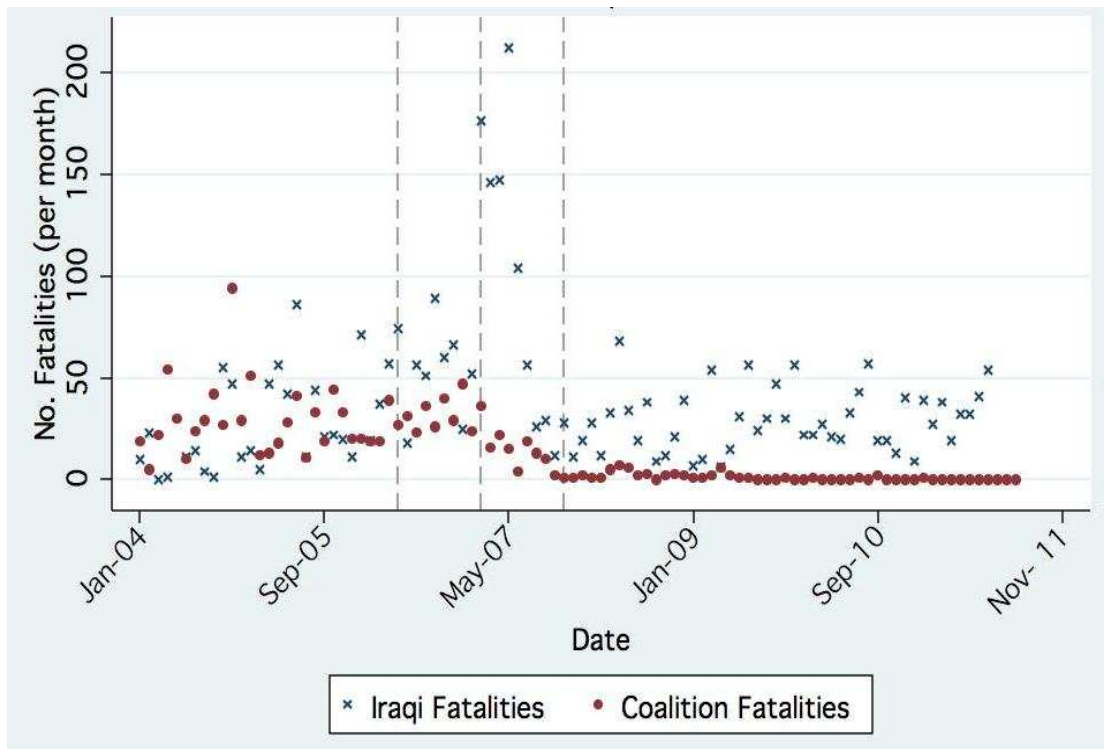
combatants, insurgents and CDF militias. This is not a serious limitation given the nature of our hypothesis and the nature of this data based on “terrorist” incidents. More troubling is the varying credibility of the sources that this dataset relies upon, coupled with the selection bias that media accounts introduce. The issues of bias in wartime fatality counts have been raised in a number of previous works³⁹ and suggest that this data should be treated with caution.

As a result of the problematic nature of compiling accurate and detailed data, we also draw upon other data sources, such as Iraq Body Count⁴⁰, and a collection of qualitative accounts of events during these crucial time-frames. For instance, we analyze numerous interviews conducted by the US Marines with US military personnel and influential Iraqi leaders, and participants in the Sunni Awakening and SOI program.⁴¹ We also include indicative accounts by members of the US military and the media on the course of events throughout the analyzed time periods. These are primarily descriptive in nature and include anecdotal examples in support of our conclusions.

Analysis

Figure 2 presents the total number of Coalition and Iraqi fatalities for each month from February 2004-September 2011 in Anbar province. In each case the data is disaggregated to the month level. The dots indicate the number of Coalition fatalities, while the crosses indicate the monthly number of “non-combatant” Iraqi fatalities caused by “subnational groups or clandestine agents” or in this case, Iraqi civilian deaths caused by members of the insurgency.

Figure 2: The total number of Coalition and Iraqi battle-related deaths in Anbar province 2004-2011



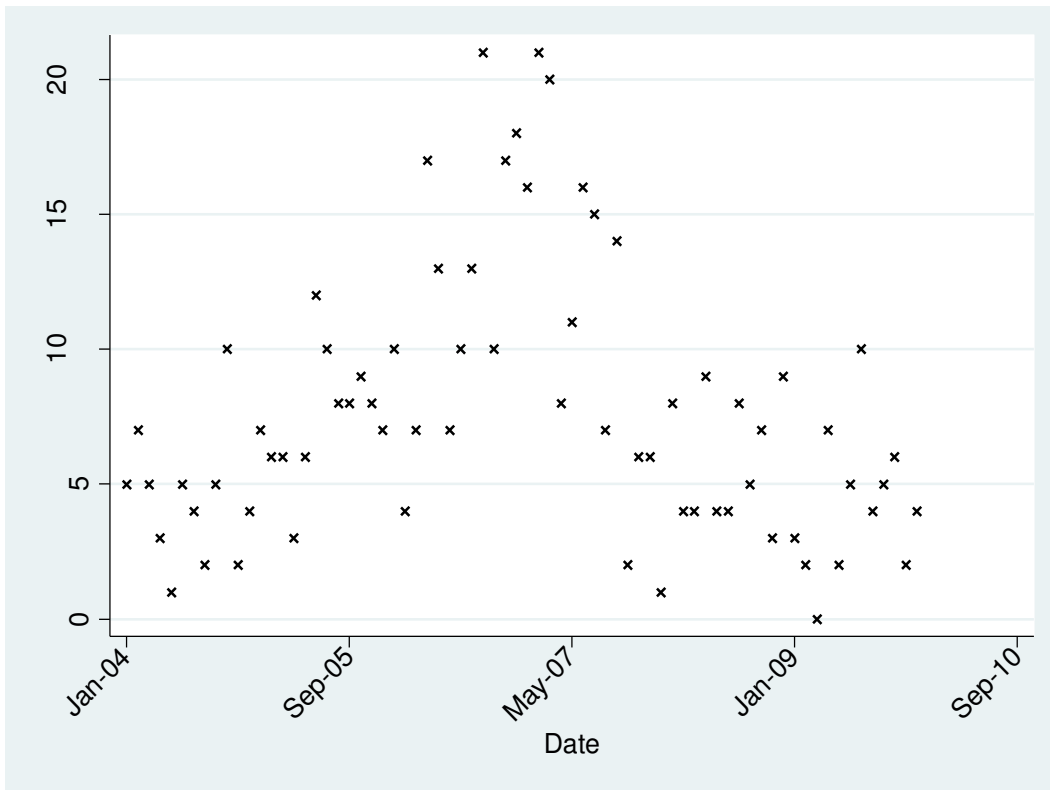
Prior to the dawn of the Sunni Awakening (t-1) the Coalition forces suffered an average of 29 deaths a month ($\sigma = 18$). The onset of the Sunni Awakening produced only a minor change in Coalition deaths with the mean rising mildly to 31 ($\sigma = 8$), but experiences a significant drop going into 2007. However, with the onset of the CDF movements Iraqi non-combatant fatalities (perpetrated by insurgent groups) increase over 100%, rising from an average of 27 to 52 deaths a month ($\sigma = 22$). This seems largely supportive of our hypothesis. The notable increase in Iraqi deaths at the onset of the Awakening suggests the targets of insurgent violence begun to shift away from the Coalition and sharply increased the civilian targeting. This is further supported from t when Coalition deaths immediately decline. Coalition casualties drop by 50% to an average monthly death toll of 17 ($\sigma = 8$). Concurrently, Iraqi deaths due to “terrorism” reached their peak for the entire conflict in the first half of 2007, in which more than a hundred Iraqi civilians died each month. May 2007 was the most costly month in the entire conflict, with 212 Iraqi non-combatants reported to die as a result

of violent incidents perpetuated by insurgents. This strongly suggests a significant change in the focus of the violence, with the targets of AQI and the insurgency shifting from Coalition forces to the CDF forces and local population.

From May 2007 onwards the number of Iraqi deaths also declined rapidly as Coalition control was largely consolidated. By the end of the US troop surge, Iraqi deaths had fallen to lower than the pre $t-1$ level.⁴² While a little later than predicted, this finding appears to strongly support our hypothesis. This is further supported by the period following $t+1$, in which Coalition troop fatalities are almost completely eliminated – it is during this time period that security responsibilities were handed over to Iraqi military and police forces. At the same time, Iraqi deaths did not decline in the same manner, remaining at an average death toll of approximately 30 deaths a month. This continuation of insurgent violence between against Iraqi “non-combatants” suggests a period of retaliatory killings, an expected outcome resulting from the creation of local community militias.

Other sources of data help to confirm the time-frame of a wave in insurgent violence against civilians. For instance, the documented number of incidents conducted by anti-government/occupation forces in which civilians were killed in Anbar province per month according to Iraq Body Count shows a steadily increasing number from late 2005, while decreasing dramatically from the point at which the CDF alongside Coalition forces consolidated territorial control from mid to late 2007 (see Figure 2 below).

Figure 2: The total number of incidents committed by insurgents (with civilians killed) in Anbar province 2003-2009



The analysis suggests that the Sunni Awakening and leveraging CDF militias in Iraq 2006-2008 had a strong effect on the dynamics of violence that ensued in Al-Anbar province. In particular, the above analysis suggests that side-switching and the creation of CDF do have the tendency to cause a spike in violence, and particularly amongst and towards civilians supporting opposing sides of the conflict.

However, these findings do not definitively validate the hypothesized outcome, primarily due to other causal mechanisms such as the surge at play during the important time-frame of analysis. Moreover, the data is not sufficiently disaggregated to conclusively demonstrate that such increases in insurgent violence against civilians in Anbar was directed to deter defections or as a response to Sunni tribal side switching, rather than an increase in operations in general for other reasons.

Yet, personal accounts of the violence that followed the initiation of the Sunni Awakening and the implementation of the SOI program lend further support to our hypothesis. For instance, US Major Smith and Colonel Macfarland (who were both part of the US military mission that capitalized on the Awakening) describe how at the early stages of the Sunni Awakening members of the insurgency and AQI “attempted to intimidate future recruits by murdering and desecrating the body of a local sheik who had been instrumental in our early push at recruiting tribe members into the ISF [Iraqi Security Forces]”.⁴³ Similarly, a number of other accounts detail how tribal leaders who had made the switch as well as those who were contemplating it were targeted in a campaign of terror by AQI and the insurgency in attempts to punish their abdication and deter future defections.⁴⁴

Instead of intimidating Sunni tribes, however, these terror tactics helped perpetuate the Sunni Awakening. They had the opposite intended effect, partially, according to US military accounts, of the initial support lent to such defections. Tribal leaders, led by Sheik Sattar gathered in Ramadi in September 2006 to organize against Al Qaeda, forming the Awakening Council. Immediately following the council in which tribal leaders were “either openly supporting the Awakening or withdrawing their support from [the insurgency and Al Qaeda],” many Sunni tribes began a “campaign of eradication and retaliation against [insurgent] members living among them”.⁴⁵ This was met, in turn, by further reprisals from the insurgency. Sheik Sattar Al-Rishawi, one of the leaders of the Sunni Awakening, for instance, was himself killed in a targeted explosion in 2007. Hence, AQI violence was both an effect and a cause in shifts of allegiance amongst Sunni tribal members. A virtuous cycle occurred whereby attacks by AQI helped further alienate local Sunni groups driving them into the arms of American forces to join the counterinsurgent effort. The Sunni Awakening

and the SOI program further snowballed, when AQI and insurgent members retaliated for this disobedience by brutally attacking the Albu Soda tribal area. With US air support aiding the Albu Soda tribe to defend themselves, they managed to fight back the insurgents, killing a number of them. Subsequently, they explain, AQI's "intimidation attempt spectacularly backfired: tribes joined the Awakening movement at a rate that proved difficult to keep up with".⁴⁶ This is crucial as the emergence and the growth of the more official self-defense program depended on the violent interaction between tribal groups, civilians in the local areas, and the insurgents including AQI. Equally important was the synergy with the US troop surge, which provided adequate military support and protection for Awakened tribal members in order for the cascade of defections and denunciations in the form of the CDF movement to take effect.⁴⁷

A number of people interviewed by the US military also describe how at the early stages of the Awakening (t-1), when much of Anbar was under AQI control, their defection meant they had to hide from their neighbors and members of their own tribe.⁴⁸ Moreover, all relate to how the insurgents and AQI immediately retaliated and made them the primary target upon their defection. For instance, one interviewee describes the early stages of the Awakening and the confrontation created with the insurgency and members of AQI: "I started fighting Al Qaeda publicly in 2005. During this time, from my cousins, my families, and my tribe's sons, about 37 were killed because of this fighting".⁴⁹ He further describes how retaliation on both sides ensued as they attempted to punish defection. Another describes a battle that ensued after his November 2006 defection in which he and his men "killed more than 90 people from Al Qaeda. Among my tribesmen, I suffered 10 more casualties, consisting of women, older people, children—innocent people".⁵⁰ In sum, the initial stages of the

CDF turn were characterized by insurgent retaliation for defection and denunciation as the Awakening spearheaded the shift of control from the insurgents to Coalition forces.

As Coalition control over Anbar (and other areas of Iraq) was gradually solidified (t+1), the Awakening and SOI, in conjunction with Coalition forces, contributed significantly to the relative stability. This was partially due to the fact that the local militia “provided a great deal of intelligence on members of insurgent groups, many of whom were members of their tribes”.⁵¹ Numerous US military reports confirm that the primary way in which the Awakening and the SOI program contributed to Coalition control is through the provision of intelligence, identifying insurgents and their whereabouts.⁵² Tribal leaders and SOI members had valuable knowledge of the local people and their activities, and they often reported on known proponents of the insurgency and AQI, including their neighbors and fellow members of their tribes. One way to gauge this is the increase of insurgent weapon caches and IEDs found by US forces through intelligence provided by SOI members.⁵³ Moreover, numerous media reports indicate that the insurgency continued to target members of defected tribes and those taking part in the SOI.⁵⁴ Thus, while relatively minimal compared to the t-1 to t time period, after consolidation of control after t+ 1 members of the Awakening and the SOI program were targeted through 2010 and 2012 as a form of retaliation for their defection from the insurgency.

Conclusions

This article has examined the dynamics of violence that occurred during the process of side-switching in the Sunni Awakening and in the creation of CDFs in Al-Anbar province of Iraq. The results suggest that the defection and mobilization of local

civilian groups shifted the nature of the counterinsurgency in two important manners. Firstly, the delegation of security to these forces in Al-Anbar drove a wedge between the insurgency (AQI and Iraqi insurgents) and the local inhabitants, in which a competition for control over the population was waged. It therefore seems that at least in Al-Anbar province, gaining civilian active collaboration with counterinsurgent efforts has significant consequences for those involved in the short-run, especially in areas not under incumbent control. It has been shown how insurgents responded violently to defections, targeting Sunni Awakening leaders and tribal members who had defected from the insurgency. Throughout the process of defection in the Sunni Awakening and in the consolidation period of creating formalized CDF structures in the form of the SOI, those defecting, and the civilian population from which they were drawn, were made the targets of AQI and the remaining remnants of the insurgency. Secondly, as part of this process, such defections helped split and fractionalize the insurgency. The defection of tribal leaders turned members of the insurgency against themselves, contributing to the overall observed spike in violence against Iraqi civilians.

From a more critical perspective, the intentional support provided to the tribal group's side-switching as part of a concerted counterinsurgency effort is tantamount to a divide and rule-type tactic, whereupon the delegation of security and coercion to indigenous groups as a militia necessarily polarizes local alliances and relationships by forcing insurgents to respond to those that are now actively against them. This, while not officially a stated part of the US counterinsurgent rationale behind the SOI program, is part of an interesting set of dynamics in the logic violence in irregular wars. Although the SOI were largely disbanded by the Shiite Al-Maliki administration, the legacy of the Awakening and the SOI continue to affect the course

of conflict in the context of current (June-July, 2014) ISIS advances (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant).⁵⁵ Furthermore, this model would predict comparable patterns of violence to that of the Awakening and SOI if similar forces were leveraged in areas under ISIS control.

Future research could build upon the mechanisms proposed in this paper, and assess the validity of our argument in a broader context. CDF forces have played a pivotal role in wide variety of conflicts, exploring their influence on the dynamics of violence in a wider context could strengthen and support our findings (e.g. Guatemala, Peru, Philippines). In addition, a number of additional dynamics touched upon in this paper could be further explored to deepen our understanding of militia forces. Firstly, our hypothesized effect of side-switching and accompanying support for CDFs is dependent to a large degree on the strength of insurgent forces, the rate of defection, and the strength of incumbent forces to support the process of defection. In other cases where, for example, incumbent forces are not strong enough to facilitate and support the defection process, insurgents might act differently to prevent their loss of control. Secondly, tribal affiliations and hierarchy may have played a key role in lubricating the Sunni tribes' defection from the insurgency and the consolidation of a Sunni-American alliance. Once tribal leaders had declared their affiliation with the Sunni Awakening, lower ranking members followed suit or they faced expulsion from their tribal areas and risked being identified by fellow members of their tribe as part of the insurgency. Essentially, the nature of tribal affiliations and structures played a role in turning a greater number of former insurgents and neutral individuals into dedicated counterinsurgents allied against al-Qaeda and the insurgency. This is an interesting dynamic that requires further investigation to make a firm conclusion about ethnic defection and recruitment into CDF force paramilitary structure.⁵⁶ Finally, the

presence of foreign forces is an area not directly addressed in this paper. In Iraq the AQI fighters overlapped their efforts with the indigenous insurgencies, which created divisions in the insurgency and helped pave the way for the Sunni Awakening. It was the presence of foreign AQI members that threatened the political standing and power of Sunni tribal leaders to which they reacted negatively. This foreign hard-line element contrasts with other types of insurgencies which are more endogenous and perhaps 'ideological' in nature, such as in Latin America during the Cold War. Exploring the influence of a foreign element offers one interesting avenue for future studies.

Notes

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³ Seth G. Jones, *The Strategic Logic of Militia* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2012).; David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1964).

⁴ For more on CDF see Peic, Goran. "Civilian Defense Forces, State Capacity, and Government Victory in Counterinsurgency Wars." *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37, no. 2 (2014): 162-184. Barter, Shane Joshua. "Unarmed Forces: Civilian Strategy in Violent Conflicts." *Peace & Change* 37, no. 4 (2012): 544-571.

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⁶ Paul Staniland, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries*.; Kristin Bakke, Kathleen Cunningham and Lee Seymour, "A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion, and Infighting in Civil Wars," *Perspectives on Politics* 10, no. 2 (June, 2012).

⁷ Bruce Campbell, "Death Squads: Definition, Problems and Historical Context," in *Death Squads in Global Perspective: Murder with Deniability*, eds. Bruce Campbell and D. Brenner (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁸ Roger Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency* (Westport: Praeger, 1964), 105.; Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*; Michael McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Counterterrorism, 1940 -1990* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992).

⁹ Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 150.

¹⁰ Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, 90

¹¹ McClintock, *Instruments of Statecraft: U.S. Guerrilla Warfare, Counterinsurgency, and Counterterrorism, 1940 -1990*

¹² U.S. Department of Defense, *Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept* (Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Defense, 2007), 6 footnote 6.

¹³ Trinquier, *Modern Warfare: A French View of Counterinsurgency*, 105

¹⁴ Will Clegg, "Irregular Forces in Counterinsurgency Warfare," *Security Challenges* 5, no. 3 (Spring, 2009), 1-25.; Erineo Espino, *Counterinsurgency: The Role of Paramilitaries Storming Media*, 2004).

¹⁵ Reed Wood, "Rebel Capability and Strategic Violence Against Civilians," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 5 (Sept., 2010), 601-614.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of the Army, *Foreign Internal Defense Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Special Forces: FM 31-20-3* (Washington D.C.: Department of the Army, 2004), D1.

¹⁷ Jason Lyall, *Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents? Evidence from the Second Chechen War.*; Staniland, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries*; Bakke, Cunningham and Seymour, *A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion, and Infighting in Civil Wars*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 203

¹⁹ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 196-202

²⁰ This is provided that there is enough impetus behind the CDF program to push the threshold beyond a stalemate 50-50 position in which both sides have incentives to use selective violence in attempts to win the population over to their side *Ibid.*, 204

²¹ Wood, *Rebel Capability and Strategic Violence Against Civilians*, 601-614; Jeremy Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).; Kristine Eck and Lisa Hultman, "One-Sided Violence Against Civilians in War: Insights from New Fatality Data," *Journal of Peace Research* 44, no. 2 (Mar., 2007), 233-246.; Benjamin Valentino, Paul Huth and Dylan Balch-Lindsay, "'Draining the Sea': Mass Killing and Guerrilla Warfare," *International Organization* 58, no. 2 (2004).

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²³ Uppsala Conflict Data Program, “Conflict Encyclopedia, Iraq, General One-sided violence Information, Actor information“ Available online at http://www.ucdp.uu.se/gpdatabase/gpcountry.php?id=77®ionSelect=10-Middle_East#, viewed on 10 March 2014. Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey Friedman and Jacob Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security* 37, no. 1 (2012), 7-40.; Jim Michaels, *A Chance in Hell: The Men Who Triumphed Over Iraq's Deadliest City and Turned the Tide of War* (New York: St. Martin's, 2010).; McCary, *The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives*; Ricks, *Situation Called Dire in West Iraq*;

²⁴ Luke Condra and Jacob Shapiro, "Who Takes the Blame? the Strategic Effects of Collateral Damage," *American Journal of Political Science* 56, no. 1 (2012), 167-187.; Michael Schwartz, *War Without End: The Iraq War in Context* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2008).; Patrick Cockburn, *The Occupation: War and Resistance in Iraq* (New York: Verso, 2007), 138-140.; Colin H. Kahl, "In the Crossfire Or the Crosshairs? Norms, Civilian Casualties, and U.S. Conduct in Iraq," *International Security* 32, no. 1 (Summer, 2007), 43-45.

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²⁸ Michaels, Jim. *A Chance in Hell: The Men Who Triumphed Over Iraq's Deadliest City and Turned the Tide of War*. New York: St. Martin's, 2010 pages 136-139.

²⁹ Schwartz, *War without End: The Iraq War in Context*, 246-247

³⁰ Greg Bruno, "The Role of the "Sons of Iraq" in Improving Security," *Washington Post* 28 April, 2008.; SIGIR, *Sons of Iraq Program: Results are Uncertain and Financial Controls are Weak*

³¹ Biddle, Friedman and Shapiro, *Testing the Surge: Why did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?*, 7-40; Daniel Green, *The Fallujah Awakening: A Case Study in Counterinsurgency*; McCary, *The Anbar Awakening: An Alliance of Incentives*, 43-59; Farook Ahmed, *Sons of Iraq and Awakening Forces.*; Austin Long, "The Anbar Awakening," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 50, no. 2 (25 March, 2008), 67-94.

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³³ SIGIR, *Sons of Iraq Program: Results are Uncertain and Financial Controls are Weak*, 4

³⁴ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge: BCSIA, 2004), 253.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 253

³⁶ Todd Landman, *Issues and Methods in Comparative Politics : An Introduction* (Milton Park: Routledge, 2008), 89.

³⁷ J. Steele, "Military Admits Problems in Anbar After Leaked Report," *Guardian* 14 September, 2006.)

³⁸ United States Law Code, Title 22, section 2656f, subsection (d)(2),

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⁴⁰ Iraq Body Count website <https://www.iraqbodycount.org/> accessed 9 March 2014

⁴¹ T. Williams and Colonel K. Wheeler, eds., *Al Anbar Awakening: American Perspectives*, Vol. I (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 2009).; Colonel Gary Montgomery and T. CWT McWilliams, eds., *Al Anbar Awakening: Iraqi Perspectives*, Vol. II (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 2009).

⁴² In comparison to August 2005 - May 2006, in which the average number of fatalities was 27.

⁴³ Smith and Macfarland, *Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point*; Long, *The Anbar Awakening*, 75

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 79; J. Finer and E. Nickmeyer, "Sunni Leaders Attacked in Iraq," *Washington Post* 19 August, 2005.; Hala Jaber, "Sunni Leader Killed for Joining Ceasefire Talks," *The Sunday Times* 5 Feb, 2006.

⁴⁵ Smith and Macfarland, *Anbar Awakens: The Tipping Point*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Biddle, Friedman and Shapiro, *Testing the Surge: Why did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?*, 7-40; Michaels, *A Chance in Hell: The Men Who Triumphed Over Iraq's Deadliest City and Turned the Tide of War*; Dale Andrade, *Surging South of Baghdad: The 3d Infantry Division and Task Force Marne in Iraq, 2007–2008* (Washington D.C.: Center of Military History: United States Army, 2010), 211-214.

⁴⁸ Montgomery and CWT McWilliams, *Al Anbar Awakening: Iraqi Perspectives*

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 93-96

⁵¹ Ahmed, *Sons of Iraq and Awakening Forces*

⁵² SIGIR, *Sons of Iraq Program: Results are Uncertain and Financial Controls are Weak*, 6

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 6

⁵⁴ Khalid Al-Ansary. "Gunmen Storm Sunni Enclave, kill 24" Reuters. 3 April, 2010. Available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/2010/04/03/us-iraq-violence-idUSTRE6320EK20100403> Chulov, Martin. "Suicide Bomber Kills Dozens of US-Backed Militia in Baghdad" The Guardian. 18 July, 2010. Available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jul/18/iraq-suicide-bombings-kill-militia>

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⁵⁶ Staniland, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries*