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Militias as a tool for Encouraging Ethnic Defection: Evidence from Iraq and Sudan

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Abstract: Ethnic defection and pro-government militias are two recurring features of ethnic conflicts. There is a strong connection between these two elements, with incumbents using militias to absorb defectors from rebel constituencies into their ranks. However, relatively little work has been carried out on this link. Most works exploring ethnic defection have treated these *defector militias*, as the article refers to them, as the result of ethnic defection. This research offers an alternative hypothesis: Rather than tools for administrating and controlling defection, governments in ethnic civil wars often view militias as a tool for enhancing and facilitating ethnic defection. The socio-political functions of militias may triumph over military ones in governments' consideration to form and sustain such defector militias. The article employs two case studies to support this hypothesis, these of the ethnic conflicts in Northern Iraq and Southern Sudan.

Keywords: Militias; Counterinsurgency; Ethnic Defection; Iraq; Sudan

Wordcount: 11,259

Gaining legitimacy and at least a semblance of support among even a small portion of rebel constituencies, namely the communities rebels emerge of and claim to fight for, is crucial for incumbents engaged in ethnic conflicts. Architects of counterinsurgency (COIN) operations invest great resources in encouraging ethnic defection among insurgents, namely the shift of individuals' and groups' loyalty from their so-called kinship group to incumbent's side.¹ Simultaneously, governments' reliance on pro-government militias in COIN operations is yet another recurring feature of ethnic conflicts. One study has pointed out that between 1982 and 2007, incumbents in 61 countries relied on militias along their regular forces in civil wars.²

The concurrent rise of these two trends in ethnic conflicts is not coincidental. Many of the pro-government militias have been populated by ethnic defectors, now fighting their co-ethnics for their governments. Indeed, several recent studies³ have identified that, *defector militias*,³ as the article refers to them, play an important part in facilitating the process of defection.⁴ The

¹ Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Ethnic Defection in Civil War," *Comparative Political Studies* 41, no. 8 (2008): 1043–68; Huseyn Aliyev, "The Logic of Ethnic Responsibility and Progovernment Mobilization in East Ukraine Conflict," *Comparative Political Studies* 52, no. 8 (2019): 1200–1231; Paul Staniland, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Insurgent Fratricide, Ethnic Defection, and the Rise of Pro-State Paramilitaries," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (2012): 16–40.

² Sabine S. Carey, Neil J. Mitchell, and Will Lowe, "States, the Security Sector, and the Monopoly of Violence: A New Database on Pro-Government Militias," *Journal of Peace Research* 50, no. 2 (2012): 249–58.

³ The terminology for auxiliary irregulars has varied, referring to them as *indigenous forces*, in Emil A. Souleimanov and Huseyn Aliyev, "Asymmetry of Values, Indigenous Forces, and Incumbent Success in Counterinsurgency: Evidence from Chechnya," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 38, no. 5 (2015): 678–703; *civilian defence forces* in Govinda Clayton and Andrew Thomson, "The Enemy of My Enemy Is My Friend... The Dynamics of Self-Defense Forces in Irregular War: The Case of the Sons of Iraq," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37, no. 11 (2014): 920–35; Sabine Carey and Neil Mitchell, identifying the need to broadly categorize these actors, have defined them as *pro-government militias*. In Sabine C. Carey and Neil J. Mitchell, "Progovernment Militias," *Annual Review of Political Science* 20 (2017): 127-147. Admittedly, referring to these actors as defectors both lumps together a variety of actors as well risks coming up as making a moral judgement against the so-called defectors. After all, as far as these fighters are concerned, their goal may not be an act of defection, but one that serves their preferred kinship group. Still, the conceptualisation of these forces as defector militias serves to underline the argument about the incumbents' designation of these forces.

⁴ Sabine C. Carey and Neil J. Mitchell, "Pro-Government Militias and Conflict," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, no. October (2016): 1–24; Carey and Mitchell, "Progovernment Militias;" Jason Lyall, "Are Coethnics More Effective Counterinsurgents? Evidence from the Second Chechen War," *American Political Science Review* 104, no. 1 (2010): 1–20; Clayton and Thomson, "The Enemy"; Yelena Biberman, "Self-Defense Militias, Death Squads, and State Outsourcing of Violence in India and Turkey," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 41, no. 5 (2018): 751–81; Jesse Driscoll, "Commitment Problems or Bidding Wars? Rebel Fragmentation as Peace Building," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (2012): 118–49; .

organization of defector militias against members of their kinship group is likely to deepen existing cleavages and parochial identities (sectarian, tribal, or social), intensify antagonism and undermine the legitimacy of the insurgents. It also increases the defectors' dependence on the incumbents and serves the latter to legitimize their struggle to their constituencies, by pointing out the support they have among "loyal" subjects, against the "treacherous" rebels. Governments benefit greatly from defection, and militias are important tools in their disposal.

However, while studies have linked militia recruitment and defection, most have yet to provide a solid evidence or systematic review of this process. This article addresses the task of solidifying the hypothesis about the link between defector militias and incumbents' encouragement of ethnic defection in civil wars. To achieve that, the article uses two case studies: The Iraqi Ba'th regime in its war against Kurdish separatists in northern Iraq; and the Sudanese governments during the first civil war in Sudan, during the years 1955-1972. The study of these two cases has relied on an extensive archival research, including the Ba'th Regional Command Collection (BRCC) and the Northern Iraq Dataset (NIDS), archived at the Hoover Institution; the Iraqi Secret Police Files (ISPF) at the University of Colorado, Boulder; and the South Sudan National Archives (SSNA) in the South Sudanese capital of Juba, containing military intelligence and secret police reports from the first civil war. The first part of the paper sets the theoretical foundations, presenting the paper's contribution to the study of ethnic defection and pro-government militias in civil wars. The second part moves to explore the cases, tracing the logic and evolution of the use of militias as part of these governments' aspiration to incite ethnic defection.

Rethinking Ethnic Defection and Pro-Government Militia Recruitment

Ethnic defection, according to Stathis Kalyvas' pioneering work, is "a process whereby individuals join organizations explicitly opposed to the national aspirations of the ethnic group with which they identify and end up fighting against their coethnics."⁵ Defectors to the government ranks do not shed their ethnic identity and adopt a new one in its place. In fact, as Huseyn Aliyev suggests, defectors may often justify this act as one of "ethnic responsibility," defending "ethnic values" against the insurgents who have diverged from them.⁶

Such process often takes place in ethnic conflicts. Ethnic defection has clear advantages for incumbents in civil wars. First, ethnic defection has a symbolic value for incumbents. For most governments, winning civil wars is rarely achieved solely by coercion. Most incumbents aspire to secure a certain level of legitimacy and acceptance from at least some segments of the rebel constituency, or winning "hearts and minds."⁷ Ethnic defection, especially of relatively large scale, can prove crucial to governments suffering a crisis of legitimacy. Persuading a large number of individuals or groups of rebels (for instance tribes or clans) to move to the government side enables the latter to signal to the rebel constituency that supporting the state is not an act of treason, since other members of their group support the government. The mere presence of government agents, even before they participate in battles, demonstrates to the insurgents the incumbent's ability to penetrate their societies. As Kalyvas notes, "the very presence of local agents signals the organization's willingness and potential capacity to be selective... In this sense, the importance of

⁵ Kalyvas, "Ethnic Defection," 1045.

⁶ Aliyev, "The Logic."

⁷ Paul Dixon, "'Hearts and Minds'? British Counter-Insurgency from Malaya to Iraq," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 32, no. 3 (2009): 353–81; Eli Berman, Jacob N Shapiro, and Joseph H Felter, "Can Hearts and Minds Be Bought? The Economics of Counterinsurgency in Iraq," *Journal of Political Economy* 119, no. 4 (2011): 766–819; Douglas Porch, *Counterinsurgency: Exposing the Myths of the New Way of War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

local agents is based less on what they actually do and more on their very existence.”⁸ And to reiterate the arguments made by Aliyev and Paul Staniland,⁹ this becomes especially pertinent when the rebel constituencies are already experiencing rifts because of disagreements about the path that the conflict has taken. Ethnic defection can also affect the public opinion of the incumbent’s constituency, demonstrating to them not only that the conflict is a legitimate one and has the support of the other group, but that victory is also attainable.

Several works have sought to theorize the causes of ethnic defection. Many of them have tended to focus on the supply-side, namely the defectors’ motivations to “flip” and turn their weapons against their coethnics.¹⁰ Others have explored the implications of militias on the state’s monopoly over the legitimate use of violence.¹¹ But some works have gone on to study incumbents’ strategies in instigating ethnic defection. Identifying governments’ demand for defectors, Kalyvas has stressed that “this type of demand presupposes the existence of an organization capable of implementing such a complex operation.”¹² Kalyvas’ argument has laid the grounds for exploring the link between militias and ethnic defection. Some have assigned a more passive role militias in this process. Paul Staniland, for example, has seen the emergence of irregular forces as an outcome of defection – a way for incumbents to organize defectors and benefit from the act of defection. As Staniland suggests, “The importance of the state in these

⁸ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 190.

⁹ Staniland, “Between a Rock;” Aliyev “The Logic.”

¹⁰ Ariel I. Ahrām and Charles King, “The Warlord as Arbitrageur,” *Theory and Society* 41, no. 2 (2012): 169–86; Corinna. Jentsch, Stathis N. Kalyvas, and Livia Isabella Schubiger, “Militias in Civil Wars,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 755–69; Ben Oppenheim, Abbey Steele, Juan F. Vargas and Michael Weintraub, “True Believers, Deserters, and Traitors: Who Leaves Insurgent Groups and Why,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 794–823; Clionadh Raleigh, “Pragmatic and Promiscuous,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 60, no. 2 (2016): 283–310.

¹¹ Ariel I. Ahrām, *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011); Robert H. Holden, *Armies Without Nations: Public Violence and State Formation in Central America, 1821-1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Herbert Wulf, “The Privatization of Violence: A Challenge to State-Building and the Monopoly on Force,” *Brown Journal of World Affairs* 18, no. 1 (2011): 137–49.

¹² Kalyvas, “Ethnic Defection,” 1063.

defections has been in making itself ‘permeable’ through protection of defectors. However, the triggers for defection have not been state policies. The role of high politics and ideology in driving defection in these conflicts was minimal.”¹³ The presumption here is that militias are primarily an outcome of ethnic defection, allowing incumbents to regulate defection and make the most of this situation by employing defectors without taking the risk of incorporating them into the regular forces. Staniland demonstrates persuasively that without “fratricidal flipping,” namely intense factional fighting within a rebel movement, incumbents will struggle to induce defection.

Nonetheless, incumbents are rarely passive observants. Proactive COIN strategists are always on the lookout for opportunities to divide and undermine the insurgents. For these governments, organizing and forming militias composed of defectors to fight their coethnics has been a useful tool for enhancing the process of ethnic defection, ideally making it irreversible. In this respect, then, departing from the tendency of recent years to focus on the supply-level in the study, namely the interests and motivations of defectors to take this step, this article brings back the incumbents to the study of ethnic defection. Other works have, in fact, begun identifying militias as tools of dividing society. In their study of US-led COIN operations in Iraq, Sambanis et al. criticize the coalition and the Iraqi government’s reliance on the predominantly Sunni Sons of Iraq (*abna’ al-Iraq*) to fight al-Qa‘eda insurgents. Such strategy, they argue, which revolves around the ethno-religious identity of the counterinsurgents, is likely to enhance parochialism and hostility between different groups in Iraq, at the expense of peace and state-building.¹⁴ This critique is indeed valid if we assume that the incumbent wishes to foster social cohesion, as the coalition forces and the Iraqi government were committed to, at least in theory.

¹³ Staniland, “Between a Rock,” 17.

¹⁴ Nicholas Sambanis, Jonah Schulhofer-Wohl and Moses Shayo, “Challenge in Counterinsurgency,” *Science* 336, no. 6083 (2018): 807–8.

In practice, however, governments embroiled in ethnic conflicts often see it as in their best interest to fragment the rebel constituency (if not society as a whole). Identity, Jeremy Weinstein reminds us, is a resource, or “social endowment.”¹⁵ It can foster trust and enable mobilization. But it is also complex and fluid. Individuals and groups have multiple identities and sharing one identity (e.g. ethnic, tribal, religious) does not necessarily guarantee individual’s or community’s loyalty to a broader kinship group. Violence and conflict themselves further shape identities, pushing groups and individuals to reconsider their position, affiliations and loyalty.¹⁶ This fluidity makes it possible for parties to conflict, be they incumbents or insurgents, to manipulate identity and exploit potential communal divisions, both among the in-group and the out-group. In his enquiry into defection-prevention mechanisms in civil wars, Theodore McLauchlin highlights that, while some incumbents prevent defection through systems of personal incentives and punishments, others prefer group-based recruitment. In such systems, recruitment will rely on a particular identity group, ethnic or religious, perceived to be more loyal to the regime. But even in such cases, the elites do not address “essential groups with fixed and exogenous characteristics;” group-based recruitment contributes to the construction of ethnic identification among members of the in-group.¹⁷

In this context of identity manipulation in warfare, militia recruitment plays a crucial role. This function of militias as enabling and encouraging ethnic defection has in fact been identified

¹⁵ Jeremy M. Weinstein, *Inside Rebellion: The Politics of Insurgent Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 48.

¹⁶ Ibid; Elisabeth Jean Wood, “The Social Processes of Civil War: The Wartime Transformation of Social Networks,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 11, no. 1 (2008): 547; Theodore McLauchlin, “Loyalty Strategies and Military Defection in Rebellion,” *Comparative Politics* 42, no. 3 (2010): 333–50; Kristin M. Bakke, Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, and Lee J.M. Seymour, “A Plague of Initials: Fragmentation, Cohesion, and Infighting in Civil Wars,” *Perspectives on Politics*, 2012.

¹⁷ McLauchlin, “Loyalty Strategies,” 338. If we go back to Sambanis et al.’s analysis, the post-2005 government in Iraq certainly sought to consolidate the strength of its group (Shi’a Arab) at the expense of other groups. David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (London/New York: Hurst/Oxford University Press, 2011).

in recent works. Sabine Carey and Neil Mitchell, for example, have noted in a recent study that “Including former rebels in pro-government militias can bolster the legitimacy of the government’s campaign against the insurgents. Militias allow governments to demonstrate local or ethnic support for their cause.”¹⁸ Elsewhere, they suggest that “Demonstrating local support and commitment to defeating the rebels” by forming bottom-up local militias in the areas of insurgency, gives a government’s counterinsurgency campaign more legitimacy. Governments may be tempted to create artificial bottom-up groups.”¹⁹ Jason Lyall has concluded that Russian recruitment policies shifted the civil war from a Russian-Chechen conflict into an “intra-Chechen struggle,” in which “Chechens are mostly pitted against fellow Chechens.”²⁰ In their study of the Sons of Iraq, Govinda Clayton and Andrew Thomson describe paramilitarism as “a political tool, in which the local populations increase their support for the government by participating in their own defense.”²¹ Militia recruitment in Iraq, they show, drove a wedge between the population and the insurgents and eroded popular support for al-Qa’eda. Yelena Biberman has observed in her study of pro-government militias in Turkey and India that “Counterinsurgency is a function not merely of the state’s battlefield needs, but also of the social conditions in which counterinsurgency takes place.”²² And Jesse Driscoll has demonstrated how the Tajik government manipulated the atomization of the rebel constituency to co-opt warlords in the final stages of the Tajikistani civil war in 1997.²³

Notwithstanding their immense contribution to studying militias as a factor in ethnic defection, these studies do not provide solid evidence for these arguments or insights into the

¹⁸ Carey and Mitchell, “Pro-Government Militias,” 4-5.

¹⁹ Carey and Mitchell, “Progovernment Militias,” 142.

²⁰ Lyall, “Are Coethnics More Effective,” 18.

²¹ Clayton and Thomson “The Enemy,” 922.

²² Biberman, “Self-Defense Militias,” 759.

²³ Driscoll, “Commitment Problems.”

mechanisms that come into play in the process of ethnic defection induced by militia recruitment, chiefly because this aspect of has not been their main focus. And it is here that this article seeks to make a contribution, by providing detailed evidence for incumbents' perception of militia recruitment as a tool for ethnic defection and the link between the two.

To be clear, the argument here is not that incumbents recruit militias solely for socio-political considerations, such as ethnic defection. Governments may have a plethora of motivations to recruit irregulars, either from their in-group or from among the rebel constituency. Some works have pointed out incumbents' militia recruitment as means of a rapid compensation for manpower shortages, especially following political purges.²⁴ Others have highlighted the advantages of defectors in intelligence gathering. Local recruits may be more familiar with local geography and populations, making it easy for the government forces not only to track down rebels, but also avoid killing non-involved members of the rebel constituency, which may risk alienating them.²⁵ An even more prevalent hypothesis has related to cost-efficiency. Employing local irregulars, who sometimes volunteer merely in return for weapons, has been pointed out to reduce the costs of maintaining supply lines and lessen expenditures on salaries.²⁶ Governments have also been said to use militias to distance themselves from war crimes and avoid international sanctions.²⁷

²⁴ Kristine Eck, "Repression by Proxy: How Military Purges and Insurgency Impact the Delegation of Coercion," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 924–46; Sabine C. Carey, Michael P. Colaresi, and Neil J. Mitchell, "Risk Mitigation, Regime Security, and Militias: Beyond Coup-Proofing," *International Studies Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2016): 59–72.

²⁵ Ceren Belge, "Civilian Victimization and the Politics of Information in the Kurdish Conflict in Turkey," *World Politics* 68, no. 2 (2016): 275–306; James D. Fearon and David D. Laitin, "Ethnicity, Insurgency and Civil War," *American Political Science Review* 97, no. 1 (2003): 75–90.

²⁶ Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*; Norman Cigar, *Tribal Militias: An Effective Tool to Counter Al-Qaida and Its Affiliates?* (Carlisle: Strategic Studies Institute, 2014); Carey et al., "Risk Mitigation, Regime Security."

²⁷ Ariel I. Ahram, "The Role of State-Sponsored Militias in Genocide," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 3 (2014): 488–503; Corinna Jentsch et al., "Do States Delegate Shameful Violence to Militias? Patterns of Sexual Violence in Recent Armed Conflicts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 877–98; Dara Kay Cohen and Ragnhild Nordås, "Do States Delegate Shameful Violence to Militias? Patterns of Sexual Violence in Recent Armed Conflicts," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 877–98.

Militias have undoubtedly fulfilled these functions in various civil wars. Governments have deployed defector militias in the field in numerous civil wars and the latter have been involved constantly in fighting against their coethnics. Lyall demonstrates that Chechen defector militias' sweep operations were more successful in countering Chechen insurgency than Russian or mixed Russian-Chechen army units.²⁸ Goran Peic, in his study of pro-government militias, concludes that governments employing militias, either defector or in-group have higher chances of overcoming the guerrillas.²⁹ Staniland contends that governments would overall tend to be selective in their choice of defectors, since "Truly shattered factions or groups of individuals will lack the firepower, manpower, and organization to offer anything of value to the government or to hold off their rivals long enough to change sides."³⁰

Still, these functions of militias do not contradict the argument that governments may also see socio-political advantages in recruiting them, including that of ethnic defection, along with their battlefield needs. Moreover, taking into account the role of militias in facilitating ethnic defection can explain why governments continue pursuing the policy of recruitment and sustain defector militias even when such forces fail to deliver their intended outcomes or prove detrimental to counterinsurgency efforts. Such instances are, in fact, rather common. Many accounts have demonstrated that militias, and particularly defector militias, are often incompetent, ineffective and even outright damaging to governments' COIN efforts. Kalyvas has observed that pro-government militias tend to become predatory and use their position to extort local populations. Such predation risks alienating the victims and push them to support the insurgents.³¹ Side-

²⁸ Lyall, "Are Coethnic More Effective."

²⁹ Goran Peic, "Civilian Defense Forces, State Capacity, and Government Victory in Counterinsurgency Wars," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 37, no. 2 (2014): 162–84.

³⁰ Staniland "Between a Rock," 21.

³¹ Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence*, 108.

switching, or at least clandestine exchanges between some of the defectors and the insurgents, have also been common among defector militias.³² In Chechnya, in one documented example, the Russian authorities were so suspicious of defectors that they avoided incorporating them to regular forces and limited them to exclusive militias.³³ And there are many other examples for the militias' poor performance, rapacious nature and disloyalty.³⁴ In extreme cases, these militias have been involved in gruesome acts of violence, including genocide and ethnic cleansing.³⁵

Incumbents, to be sure, are rarely unaware of these problems when they emerge. Evidently, many governments have set in place means to “prevent militias from challenging the state and committing human rights abuses that can undermine local support.”³⁶ In Chechnya, for example, the authorities used brutal violence against defectors and their families to deter others from re-defecting to the ranks of the insurgents.³⁷ One may suggest that by introducing such pre-emptive measures, government believe they could tame militias. Nonetheless, the need for such measures undermines at least one of the core hypotheses about the outsourcing of violence, namely its cost-effectiveness. Monitoring defector militias requires “unusually high levels of assessment, vetting, and oversight of the newly defected.”³⁸ For governments facing manpower shortages, diverting resources to administrating militias is counterintuitive if we focus purely on the perspective of battlefield needs. However, the idea that governments also view militias as tools of facilitating

³² Bakke et al., “A Plague of Initials;” Austin Long, Stephanie Pezard, Bryce Loidolt and Todd C. Helmus, “Locals Rule: Historical Lessons for Creating Local Defense Forces for Afghanistan and Beyond” (Santa Monica: RAND, 2012).

³³ Emil Aslan Souleimanov, Huseyn Aliyev, and Jean François Ratelle, “Defected and Loyal? A Case Study of Counter-Defection Mechanisms inside Chechen Paramilitaries,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 4 (2018): 619.

³⁴ Carey et al., “Risk Mitigation, Regime Security;” Vanda Felbab-Brown, “Hurray for Militias? Not So Fast: Lessons from the Afghan Local Police Experience,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 2 (2016): 221-258.

³⁵ Neil J. Mitchell, Sabine C. Carey, and Christopher K. Butler, “The Impact of Pro-Government Militias on Human Rights Violations,” *International Interactions* 40, no. 5 (2014): 812–36; Ahram, “The Role of.”

³⁶ Seth G. Jones, “The Strategic Logic of Militias” (Santa Monica: RAND, 2012), 3.

³⁷ Souleimanov and Aliyev, “Asymmetry of Values;” Lyall, “Are Coethnics More Effective.”

³⁸ Long “Locals Rule,” 178.

defector militias addresses the seeming dissonance. Even if militias eventually fail to serve their tactical purposes, they deliver in other fronts, including the strategic, socio-political one.

In relation to the latter argument, it is tempting to assume that, as militias continue to increase in size and numbers at times of conflict, dismantling militias may become too costly or difficult for governments preoccupied with fighting. The survival of militias, in other words, can be seen as the result of path dependence. Indeed, in some conflicts, militias have evolved into powerful actors,³⁹ at least in their territories, making the state “‘locked-in’ to modes of violence devolution.”⁴⁰ However, path dependence-based explanations overlook important aspects of militia recruitment. First, governments and their security forces regularly reflect and debate on the necessity and employment of irregulars. Regular forces in the field in particular may be suspicious of militias and closely aware of their faults and weaknesses. This was certainly the case in Iraq and Sudan. As the paper’s empirical section demonstrates, the authorities in Baghdad and Khartoum, and their forces in the field, constantly questioned and weighed in the benefits of using irregulars against the background of their operations. Second, and related to the previous point, governments, even when weakened by decades of conflict, still possess some capacity to suppress rivals. Indeed, the Iraqi Ba’thist and Sudanese authorities, even at time of weakness, were able to demobilize or even dismantle irregular units when deemed necessary. Defector militias are rarely coherent systems, but are composed of different groups and factions from within the rebel constituency. The trait that makes militias effective in encouraging ethnic defection, namely their communal composition, also renders them potentially susceptible to demobilization.

³⁹ Huseyn Aliyev, “Strong Militias, Weak States and Armed Violence: Towards a Theory of ‘State-Parallel’ Paramilitaries,” *Security Dialogue* 47, no. 6 (2016): 498–516.

⁴⁰ Ariel I. Ahram, “Pro-Government Militias and the Repertoires of Illicit State Violence,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 39, no. 3 (2016): 219.

Alternatively, one may suggest that militia recruitment is a way of “buying out” local elites to allow the state and its security forces to operate in the region. Such arguments, for example, have been brought up to explain incumbents’ tolerance of corruption and illicit activities, such as smuggling, in the periphery as a way of buying out “peace spoilers.”⁴¹ Following this logic, forming and funding militias, chiefly ones that draw from, and are organized around, parochial identities (e.g. tribes) is a way for governments to funnel money and other goods to group elites and leadership, bribing them to support the state. Such bribery, for instance, could make the said communities less antagonistic toward the operations of state forces in the region. Nevertheless, the evidence from the cases explored in this article, backed by other studies of irregular forces in conflict, challenge this idea. As noted above, militia recruitment is a high stakes policy, which can result in a backlash at times of fighting. Other forms of buying communal and rebel leaders’ support, which present a far lesser risk to the government are often available – especially in the form of allowing (or ignoring) illicit activities.⁴² Thus, if path dependence is insufficient in explaining the endurance of militias, the idea of militias as a way to “launder” bribery to local leaders cannot explain their formation.

Militias, in fact, have great advantages for incumbents seeking to encourage ethnic defection. Governments, of course, have other means of dividing rebel constituencies. Incumbents have co-opted potential opposition groups and communities through granting their leaders positions in the government, control over sources of income, and power within their communities. In both Iraq and Sudan, for example, the governments had traditionally incorporated tribal and

⁴¹ Philippe Le Billon, “Corrupting Peace? Peacebuilding and Post-Conflict Corruption,” *International Peacekeeping* 15, no. 3 (2008): 355. Le Billon’s analysis refers primarily to international aid organizations, but in cases of prolonged conflicts, these actors often fill in the role incumbents in conflict-affected areas.

⁴² Ibid; Edward Aspinall, “Combatants to Contractors: The Political Economy of Peace in Aceh,” *Indonesia* 87 (2009): 1–34.

religious leaders into the government system.⁴³ Laleh Khalili, for example, shows how governments have used the granting of work permits to laborers from rebel constituencies to work in low-paid manual labor to create competition and undermine solidarity among communities.⁴⁴ Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes have traditionally utilized networks of collaborators not only for gathering intelligence, but also, and some would argue even mainly, to spread fear, break up solidarity even at the family level, and destroy the social fabric, with the aim of pre-empting any opposition.⁴⁵

Militia-recruitment, then, is part of a repertoire of violence used by incumbents against insurgents.⁴⁶ This tactic, nonetheless, has a far greater potential to create a more enduring ethnic defection. Particularly in societies where blood feuds and vendettas are social norms, the recruitment of some groups into the militias may generate a vicious cycle of internecine conflict that would make group reintegration less likely. Emil Aslan and Huseyn Aliyev argue that the recruitment of former Chechen rebels as defector militias in the Russian-Chechen War created irrevocable enmity between the defectors and the insurgents, leading to blood feuds that rendered reconciliation a remote possibility. As they point out, the recruitment of defector militias “left the Chechen insurgency weakened, distanced from the local population and, as a result, devoid of uniform popular support.”⁴⁷ Unlike the reliance on anonymous informers, militia recruitment is

⁴³ Falah A. Jabar, “Shaykhs and Ideologues: Detribalization and Retribalization in Iraq, 1968-1998,” *Middle East Report* 215, no. 215 (2000): 28–31; Mahmud El Zain, “Tribe and Religion in the Sudan,” *Review of African Political Economy* 23, no. 70 (1996): 523–29.

⁴⁴ Laleh Khalili, *Time in the Shadows: Confinement in Counterinsurgencies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

⁴⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harvest, 1973), 421–37; Vladimir Shlapentokh, *A Normal Totalitarian Society: How the Soviet Union Functioned and How It Collapsed* (London: M.E. Sharp, 2001); Barbara Miller, *Narratives of Guilt and Compliance in Unified Germany: Stasi Informers and Their Impact on Society* (London: Routledge, 1999).

⁴⁶ Francisco Gutiérrez-Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood, “What Should We Mean by Pattern of Political Violence? Repertoire, Targeting, Frequency, and Technique,” *Perspectives on Politics* 15, no. 1 (2017): 20–41.

⁴⁷ Souleimanov and Aliyev, “Asymmetry of Values” 701.

out in the open. Recruits cannot hide their identity. Their visibility as agents of the government, along with their proximity to the insurgents, make them vulnerable to attacks – a threat exacerbated by government withdrawal from insurgents-controlled areas. This, in turn, leaves the defectors and their leaders becoming dependent on the incumbents in the long-term, and as such, bulwarks against attempts to expel state security forces.

Using militias to intensify ethnic defection naturally means that incumbents are conscious of existing or potential socio-political cleavages among rebel constituencies. Going back to previous works on ethnic defection, it is true that in most contexts, in-group tensions, competition and fratricidal flipping exist regardless of government intervention. Defectors have their own interests in joining government ranks, often linked with internal fighting among rebel constituencies. For defectors, the act of switching sides may mean more weapons and money, which can be used against their internal rivals. But governments engaged in protracted civil wars have multiple incentives to intensify these. And militias are an ideal way to perpetuate defection and divisions. A strong evidence for the link between militia recruitment and governments' desire to instigate ethnic defection is the militias' composition: In many cases, these militias have been organized around a particular kinship group, and mainly sect, tribe or clan, commanded by a senior member of the unit (for instance a tribal leader or one of his sons). The division is rarely clear cut, and members of the same tribe, for instance, may support both the incumbent and the insurgents. Nonetheless, the fact that militias are constructed in this way indicates the incumbents' understanding of social structure and how they can be manipulated to divide the rebel constituency, signal the benefits of defection to other potential supporters and possibly guarantee the defectors' dependence on the incumbents.

Research Design and Case Selection

Studying Ba‘thist Iraq’s campaign against Kurdish insurgents (1968-1991) and the Sudanese counterinsurgency during the first civil war in Southern Sudan (1955-1972),⁴⁸ provides a unique opportunity for a historical sociological analysis of the link between ethnic defection and militia recruitment. Ethnic defection was a common feature of both conflicts. And in both, militias grew rapidly throughout the years of fighting, from small ad hoc factions into semi-organized forces counting thousands, and even tens of thousands of recruits. These militias drew on specific kinship groups, particularly tribes and clans, but also ethnic and religious affiliation, which reflected existing cleavages. And in both cases, there is clear evidence for the government’s familiarity of societal cleavages among the rebel constituencies. On the other hand, along with the striking similarities in recruitment patterns, there are notable variations between the two cases. Most notably, Ba‘thist Iraq was dominated by a single-party authoritarian regime, whereas Sudan was ruled by a number of governments, ranging from military dictatorships to democratically-elected governments. Geography, the history of conflict, role of foreign intervention and geopolitical environments are only but a few other variations between the two cases. Thus, the existence of shared patterns among otherwise rather different cases helps to demonstrate the validity of the conclusions to a relatively broad set of actors.

The case selection has also had a more practical consideration – the access vast archival resources. As Kalyvas notes, in civil wars, “the collection of reliable and systematic data at the mass level is extremely difficult, if not impossible.”⁴⁹ Especially as this article seeks to better

⁴⁸ The article stops in the first civil war for the reason of lack of access to primary resources. The practice of militia recruitment, though, remained prevalent in the second civil war. Luka B. Deng, “Confronting Civil War: A Comparative Study of Household Livelihood Strategies in Southern Sudan” (University of Sussex, 2003).

⁴⁹ Stathis N. Kalyvas, “The Ontology of ‘Political Violence’: Action and Identity in Civil Wars,” *Perspectives on Politics* 1, no. 3 (2003): 476.

illustrate the mechanisms of a phenomenon which has yet to be fully investigated, the function of militia recruitment in encouraging ethnic defection, the existence of fine-grained data is crucial. In Iraq, the Ba‘th regime’s defeats in 1991 and in 2003 made the BRCC, NIDS and ISPF available after they had been captured by coalition and Kurdish forces, digitized and transferred to Stanford and Colorado University.⁵⁰ The SSNA, in turn, was salvaged by Southern rebels in the aftermath of the 1972 Addis Ababa agreement, when the Sudanese army evacuated most of its strongholds in the south.

The case approach certainly has limitations. The detailed analysis of both cases makes it difficult to demonstrate assertively the weaknesses or irrelevance of other factors, in a manner that a quantitative analysis of a large number of cases would have allowed. On the other hand, such research design contributes to consolidating the significance of governments’ militia recruitment policies to inciting ethnic defection against other potential factors.

The structure of the analytical sections traces the process through which militias have served to enable ethnic defection, based on the hypothesis presented in the previous pages. Each sub-section focuses on a single case study. This is with the aim of allowing readers interested in both countries to benefit from the range of primary sources presented in the paper, but also to allow readers to carry out independent comparison. Each part begins with an analysis of the COIN operations and the circumstances leading to the formation of defector militias. The following part demonstrates how battlefield and tactical considerations in themselves cannot explain the endurance of such systems. This is because in both cases, militias have proved to be less than capable of meeting the expectations of the incumbents and commanders in the field. The final part

⁵⁰ For the history of the Ba‘th see Joseph Sassoon and Michael Brill, “The North Iraq Dataset (NIDS) Files: Northern Iraq under Bathist Rule, 1968-91,” *Journal of Contemporary Iraq & the Arab World* 14, no. 1–2 (2020): 105–26.

of each of the sub-sections shows how the need to instigate ethnic defection drove both governments to develop, maintain and expand the system of defector militias.

The Ba‘th Government and the National Defense Battalions in Iraqi Kurdistan

The Ba‘th Party came to power in 1968 in a military coup, espousing Arab nationalism infused by socialist ideas.⁵¹ Upon grabbing power, President Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr and his deputy and Iraq’s actual strongman, Saddam Hussein, began advancing their ideology in the country. Although claiming to advance equality, Arabs, predominantly Sunni, remained the fundamental basis of support for the regime. The Ba‘thist coup came amid a war raging between Baghdad and Kurdish separatists in the north. The Kurdish insurgency, which broke out in 1961, was a result of long-term Kurdish grievances about their marginalization by the Arab majority.⁵²

Under the leadership of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and its splinter group, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the *peshmerga* guerrillas proved a formidable force. However, the insurgents operated among an ethnically and religiously diverse constituency. The Kurdish population has been divided into tribes, clans and Sufi religious orders. Along with the Kurds, who are predominantly Sunni Muslim, there have lived various ethno-religious communities in the claimed by the Kurdish insurgents. These have included Arabs, Turkomans, Assyrians, as well as Kurdish-speaking Yazidis. A Kurdish-speaking community with a distinct monotheistic religion, Yazidis have lived among the Muslim Kurdish majority for centuries, and Kurdish tribal federations have often included Yazidi branches. Kurdish nationalists have

⁵¹ For a useful background reading on Iraq under the Ba‘th regime see Joseph Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein’s Ba‘th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

⁵² David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004), 302–42.

maintained that the Yazidis, who number hundreds of thousands according to most estimations, are ethnically Kurds, and many Yazidis have been active in the Kurdish nationalist movement. On the other hand, many Yazidis have seen themselves as of distinct ethnicity.⁵³ These tribes and communities have cohabited this region for centuries, with long periods of coexistence, along with episodes of violence and discord. This diversity served Iraqi governments in dividing the population in the North.⁵⁴

The background to militia formation

Kurdish tribal forces had been employed against Kurdish rebels already by the governments that preceded the Ba‘th regime. Iraq’s first republican ruler, General ‘Abd al-Karim Qassem, founded the *fursan* (knights) system, which recruited fighters on an ad hoc basis through their tribal leaders. At its peak, the *fursan* counted a few thousands.⁵⁵ The Ba‘th regime used the *fursan* as a basis for a new system of militia recruitment. It organized the recruits into semi-regular forces, with uniforms and government-provided weapons. The authorities recorded the recruits and provided them with personal identification documents. These militias were renamed as *jahafel al-difa‘ al-watani* and later *afwaj al-difa‘ al-watani* (National Defense Battalions, henceforth NDB), or on occasion *al-afwaj al-khafifa* (light battalions). Along the NDB, the regime also created the *mafarez al-khassa* (Special Squads), which were to be attached to *al-jaysh al-sh‘abi* (Popular Army), the Ba‘th Party’s paramilitary organization.⁵⁶ According to an order circulated by the Ba‘th

⁵³ The Yazidi’s sense of distinct ethnic identity was exacerbated following the Islamic State’s genocide of the Yazidis in 2014. Majid Hassan Ali, “The Identity Controversy of Religious Minorities in Iraq: The Crystallization of the Yazidi Identity after 2003,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2019, doi:10.1080/13530194.2019.1577129.

⁵⁴ Martin Van Bruinessen, “Kurds, States and Tribes,” in *Tribes and Power: Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Middle East*, ed. Falah A. Jabar and Hosham Dawod (London: Saqi, 2002), 165–83.

⁵⁵ Van Bruinessen, “Kurds, States and Tribes;” McDowall, *A Modern History*, 312.

⁵⁶ Sassoon, *Saddam Hussein’s Ba‘th Party*, 146–47.

Regional Command, the militia's main mission was the "re-integration of the north peacefully" and fighting the "saboteurs," as the regime referred to the insurgents.⁵⁷ Each of these militias was under the command of a *mustashar* (lit. advisor) from the same tribe.

Militia performances

Intelligence reports and correspondence between Baghdad and its branches provide abundant evidence for the authorities' dissatisfaction with the militias. From the start, these forces were portrayed as disloyal, ill-disciplined, and inefficient in defeating the insurgents. One report from May 1968, issued by the intelligence services of President 'Abd al-Rahman 'Arif, tells of a meeting between fursan leaders and Mulla Mustafa Barzani, the KDP's leader, in which they conspired to assassinate government agents.⁵⁸ Correspondence between Ba'athist intelligence officers reveals that they were aware of such reports about the dubious nature of the militias dating already to 1966.⁵⁹ This knowledge did not deter the new regime from sustaining this system, but complaints continued flowing to Baghdad. Reports told of militia recruits handing in their government-given weapons to the peshmerga.⁶⁰ Others provided the insurgents their identity cards, enabling them to travel safely in the region.⁶¹ On occasions, mustashars sheltered insurgents. During the Iran-Iraq War, as militia recruits were exempted from being sent to the front, many Kurdish army deserters sought shelter in the NDB, which mustashars provided them for a bribe.⁶² Other reports, dating as early as 1969, told of militia recruits using their weapons to extort civilians. Such incidents

⁵⁷ NIDS 2077/0183619, August 9, 1968. Unless stated otherwise, all translations from Arabic have been made by the author.

⁵⁸ NIDS 28/0496095-6, May 22, 1968.

⁵⁹ NIDS 28/0778005, n.d. 1970.

⁶⁰ NIDS 2344/0596690, n.d. 1981; NIDS 2316/0547115, n.d. 1984; NIDS 660/1705265-170308, n.d. 1985.

⁶¹ NIDS 2316/0547115; NIDS3004/2394267, September 22, 1985; NIDS 263/1230132, September 22, 1987.

⁶² BRCC 3798/0000-0392, n.d. 1985; NIDS 20/0745803, n.d. 1984; NIDS 45/0828752, August 24, 1988.

occurred across the Kurdish governorates but were also reported in Mosul, where militiamen pillaged Arab communities loyal to the regime.⁶³ In 1970, the local General Security branch in Mosul dismembered a fursan unit, whose leader, a “well-known disobedient traitor,” had strong ties to the insurgents.⁶⁴ Information on this leader had been gathered at least since 1969.⁶⁵ The latter incident reveals that, even when relatively weak in its first years in power, the Ba‘th regime was still able to demobilize a local militia when deemed necessary.

Grievances also concerned the militias’ performance in the field. A senior military intelligence officer in Diyala, for instance, described the functioning of recently formed Special Squads in the area as “less than satisfactory.” This performance, according to the officer, resulted in a “remarkable surge in the number of saboteurs in the regions of Kalar and Kifri.”⁶⁶ An intelligence report from 1984 on Battalion 38 informed Baghdad that “the battalion does not take part in the offensive against the saboteurs. It engages... only in simple defense tasks in its tribal areas.”⁶⁷ And an assessment of another Special Squad from 1981 concluded that they are “unfit to fight the rebels.”⁶⁸ Reports indicate that Baghdad did not see the auxiliaries as of much use in the battlefield. NDBs were mostly relegated to safeguarding stores and warehouses to enable military units to be sent to the Iranian front.⁶⁹ And even with such tasks, the authorities needed to have the Popular Army watching the militias.⁷⁰ They were poorly-armed, lacking “the necessary supplies [to fight the insurgents],” as one report assessed.⁷¹ Gradually, the role of militias concentrated in

⁶³ NIDS 28/0778091, n.d. 1969; NIDS 20/0745803; NIDS 38/0798777, c. August 1986; NIDS 38/0798309, n.d. 1986.

⁶⁴ NIDS 28/0778097, March 12, 1970.

⁶⁵ NIDS 28/0778115, November 27, 1969.

⁶⁶ NIDS 2344/0596668, July 27, 1981.

⁶⁷ NIDS 2316/0547115.

⁶⁸ NIDS 3003/2390582, c. September 1981.

⁶⁹ NIDS 20/0745818, November 18, 1984.

⁷⁰ NIDS 2316/0547115.

⁷¹ NIDS 2344/0596668.

raiding villages suspected of sheltering insurgents. And so, militias were reduced to participating in the most brutal encounters with Kurdish civilian population.⁷²

Use of militias for encouraging ethnic defection

Notwithstanding the militias' shortcomings, the Ba'ath regime continued to recruit them until its last days of controlling the Kurdish governorates, in 1991.⁷³ Even in 2002, long after losing the Kurdish provinces, the regime sustained a small number of battalions in the outskirts of the *de facto* autonomous Kurdistan region.⁷⁴ Explaining Baghdad's eagerness to sustain this system for so long and under these circumstances only by relating to the regime's battlefield needs would fail to explain the phenomenon. Linking the militias to the regime's desire to divide the rebel constituency in the north and encourage ethnic defection adds another important factor to the analysis. An indication for that is the militias' structure. From their inception, the Kurdish militias were based on tribal affiliation with mustashars being notable members of the tribe.⁷⁵ Instructions from Baghdad about the formation of NDB stated that a battalion should include about 500 people, "all belonging to the mustashar's tribe" and from the same governorate.⁷⁶ A communique about the appointment of an *agha* (Kurdish tribal leader) as a mustashar hinged the appointment on his capability of "[securing] communication with a number of the saboteurs which he has a tribal influence upon."⁷⁷ The General Directorate of National Security in Erbil guided local intelligence operators that tribal affiliation was more important than military hierarchy or discipline. Recruits

⁷² Human Rights Watch, "Genocide in Iraq: The Anfal Campaign against the Kurds" (New York: HRW, 1993).

⁷³ NIDS 700/1761222, n.d. 1990; NIDS 179/1120694, c. February 1991.

⁷⁴ Ibrahim Al-Marashi, *Iraq's Armed Forces: An Analytical History* (London: Routledge, 2008), 192.

⁷⁵ NIDS 38/0799035, n.d. 1986.

⁷⁶ NIDS 38/0799045. June 23, 1986.

⁷⁷ NIDS 35/0795917, January 27, 1987.

were supposed to be loyal to their mustashar “much more than their commitment to military laws and officers.”⁷⁸

In earlier periods, recruitment through tribes and aghas could have been potentially explained by the absence of state machine, which meant that the authorities had to rely on individuals who knew the population. But a centralized state such as Ba‘thist Iraq had the means for controlling the population. As indicated above, militia recruits were usually recorded. Moreover, the regime made an effort to detribalize, at least at the social level, state institutions.⁷⁹ But in the case of defector militias, tribalism openly remained the default mode of organization, which enabled the regime to strengthen ethnic defection among the rebels – Kurds and others. Local intelligence offices meticulously documented tribal feuds.⁸⁰ A high-ranking intelligence officer explained the need to form a Special Squad in the Khalifan district of Erbil in that, regardless of the quality of the fighters, the creation of the squad would at least instigate clashes between their tribe and a tribe that fought along with the rebels.⁸¹

Not only tribalism but also religion and identity served as the basis for militia formation. The authorities also strove to create militias from among the Yazidis, Turkomans and Assyrians. When Kurdish insurgency resurged in the late 1970s, Baghdad ordered the party’s Northern Bureau to recruit all “capable” Turkoman to NDBs.⁸² At least a few of them, such as the 92nd Battalion, were exclusively Turkoman, led by Turkoman mustashars.⁸³ The Yazidis, because of their historical ties to the Kurds, were particularly targeted. The authorities made considerable efforts to distinguish the Yazidis from the Sunni majority. Whereas Baghdad agreed in the short-

⁷⁸ NIDS 38/0799035.

⁷⁹ Jabar, “Shaykhs and Ideologues.”

⁸⁰ NIDS 56/0868848, November 8 1980; NIDS 19/0740764, August 21, 1981.

⁸¹ NIDS 3003/2390582

⁸² BRCC 3512/0002-0117, February 14, 1978.

⁸³ NIDS 1/0657056, November 5, 1988.

lived peace agreement of 1970 to register Kurds as of Kurdish nationality, Yazidis were frequently recorded as Arabs of a Yazidi sect (*ta'ifa*).⁸⁴ As “Arabs,” Yazidis could not join the NDB and were instead sent to the regular army or the Popular Army. However, many Yazidis resisted conscription, and the government decided to allow some Yazidis to join the NDB. Those recruited to the NDB were registered as Kurds, rather than Arabs.⁸⁵ But even in these cases, recruits were often enlisted into exclusively Yazidi units. *Al-saraya al-Yazidiyya* (the Yazidi Companies), were attached to the Special Squads, or the “companies of the Yazidi sect,” as one classified report described them.⁸⁶ The recruitment was carried out by the Directorate of Military Intelligence in Sinjar, where many Yazidis live, but orders to form a Yazidi company also came from Saddam Hussein’s office.⁸⁷

The bureaucracy of militia formation was geared toward consolidating distinct identities. In pre-Ba‘th days, records of fursan recruits contained information only on their tribal affiliation.⁸⁸ In contrast, Ba‘th records included details on their ethnicity (or nationality, *qawm*) and their religious or sectarian background.⁸⁹ Other official documents, such as party membership documents or recruitment to regular security forces did not contain such information. Yazidi and Assyrian militia recruits were recorded as ethnically Kurds of Yazidi or Christian religion.⁹⁰ Elsewhere, nevertheless, they were still treated as Arabs. Evidently, the regime explicitly portrayed militias as a means of indoctrinating the recruits. Assessments of the militias stated that standardized uniforms and identity cards could boost the morale of the recruits and sense of

⁸⁴ ISPF 2177/00050114, May 20, 1990.

⁸⁵ NIDS 2121/0249289-351, n.d. 1984-1986.

⁸⁶ ISPF 2192/00050092, February 8, 1987; ISPF 2333/00030010, August 11, 1986.

⁸⁷ NIDS 700/1761223, n.d. 1990.

⁸⁸ NIDS 2313/0541770, n.d. 1967.

⁸⁹ NIDS NIDS 2121/0249289-351; NIDS 198/1143444, November 21, 1990.

⁹⁰ ISPF 0090000-23, n.d. 1986b.

belonging.⁹¹ Training camps for the militias were built far from the centers of towns and cities, to distance recruits from the rest of the population.⁹² Instructions from Baghdad to the local authorities suggested placing barriers and guards before the homes of mustashars, “to make them feel so that they could brag.”⁹³ The same instructions ordered to have recruits going through “indoctrination and attend meetings with political guidance officers [commissars].”⁹⁴ The recruitment of the Yazidis was described as a way of “driving the Yazidis toward protecting the revolution and the party.”⁹⁵ Other directives on NDB highlighted their potential of strengthening the loyalty of “segment among them [Yazidis] who are undecided about their devotion to the party and state.”⁹⁶

This strategy yielded results. When the Ba‘th Party came to power in 1968, these were fursan leaders who warned the new leadership of granting autonomy to the Kurds.⁹⁷ They did so out of fear of being targeted by the Kurdish nationalists. This fear was not unfounded. When the government signed a peace agreement with the KDP in 1970, the Kurdish nationalists turned their wrath against the defectors, burning down their properties and driving them out of their villages. In 1971, a group of aghas petitioned the government, lamenting that their years of loyalty to Baghdad “created enmity between us and Mulla Mustafa [Barzani] and his followers. We swear that we made a mistake by becoming enemies of the Mulla.”⁹⁸ In the following years, peshmerga forces raided villages whose members joined the NDBs, and skirmishes between the parties. These

⁹¹ NIDS 2192/0351884, c. March 1969; NIDS 38/0798106, January 27, 1987.

⁹² NIDS 20/0745803.

⁹³ NIDS 38/0798890, February 6, 1986.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ BRCC 3780/0001-0084, n.d. 1984.

⁹⁶ BRCC 3857/0001-0546, July 28, 1986.

⁹⁷ NIDS 2077/0183619.

⁹⁸ NIDS 28/0777679, July 17, 1971.

developments, of course, did not go unnoticed by the authorities.⁹⁹ It was only in the 1990s after Baghdad had been forced to withdraw from the Kurdish provinces following the First Gulf War, and when the KDP and the PUK formed the de facto autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government, which was successful in demobilizing the militias and reconciling with their leaders.¹⁰⁰

The First Sudanese Civil War and Tribal Militias in Southern Sudan

The background to the civil war in Sudan was the Arabization and Islamization policy which the Arab-Muslim elite in Khartoum implemented in the aftermath of independence in 1956. This policy triggered a fear of marginalization among the majority black communities in the South. Sporadic mutinies that had begun in Southern towns and garrisons evolved by the early 1960s into a full-scale civil war.¹⁰¹ Throughout the civil war, Sudan was ruled by a sequence of governments, some democratically-elected, while others were military regimes that rose to power through coups. Still, all governments until 1972 pursued the war against the Southern insurgents.¹⁰² The Southern population is highly heterogeneous, composed approximately 65 different ethnic groups and tribal federations. The largest groups have been the Dinka and Nuer, concentrated in Bahr al-Ghazal and the Upper Nile. Other large groups include the Azande, Shilluk, Luo, and Toposa people, among others. As in Iraq, Southern communities have known periods of coexistence along with episodes of hostility, competition over resources and fratricidal fighting.¹⁰³ The British colonialists had

⁹⁹ NIDS 256/1219189, February 27, 1977; NIDS 38/0798106, January 27, 1987; NIDS 50/0845809, n.d. 1989; NIDS 19/0740764.

¹⁰⁰ Christiane Bird, *A Thousand Sights, a Thousand Revolts: Journeys in Kurdistan* (New York: Random House, 2007), 81.

¹⁰¹ Douglas H. Johnson, *The Root Causes of the Sudanese Civil War* (Oxford: James Currey, 2003), 22–39.

¹⁰² Scopas Poggo, *The First Sudanese Civil War: Africans, Arabs, and Israelis in the Southern Sudan, 1955–1972* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁰³ Douglas H. Johnson, “Tribal Boundaries and Border Wars: Nuer-Dinka Relations in the Sobat and Zaraf Valleys, c. 1860-1976,” *The Journal of African History* 23, no. 2 (1982): 183–203.

already used these existing cleavages to fracture the Southern population,¹⁰⁴ and this practice survived in the Sudanese state's COIN strategy.

The background to militia formation

Defector militias from different ethnic groups and tribes in Southern Sudan were an endemic feature of the civil war. The Southern insurgents emerged as loosely-organized and poorly armed groups of deserters from the Sudanese army. Nonetheless, from the start, they proved to be fierce fighters. With their knowledge of the local terrain, they inflicted heavy losses upon the Sudanese security forces.¹⁰⁵ As sporadic clashes escalated into a civil war in the early 1960s, the Southern insurgents coalesced into a guerrilla group named *Anyanya* (snake venom in the Madi language). The Sudanese authorities, in contrast, referred to the insurgents as *khawarij* (outlaws).¹⁰⁶

It was under these circumstances that the Sudanese authorities began to form local militias. Their justification for the recruitment of militias, as one police chief in Equatoria explained to his subordinates, was the need for local tribal leaders, or *salatin* (sultans), to join the war efforts against the *khawarij*.¹⁰⁷ Soon after, the Security Committee in Equatoria issued a decree to arm those chiefs that are “loyal to the government,” so they could “protect themselves and their property.”¹⁰⁸ Military and police officers claimed that tribal leaders demanded militias to protect their cattle and property from the insurgents.¹⁰⁹ Another intelligence assessment of the militias,

¹⁰⁴ Mark Duffield, “Getting Savages to Fight Barbarians: Development, Security and the Colonial Present,” *Conflict, Security & Development* 5, no. 2 (2005): 141–59.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, *The Root Causes*.

¹⁰⁶ Øystein H. Rolandsen, “The Making of the Anya-Nya Insurgency in the Southern Sudan, 1961-64,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 5, no. 2 (2011): 211–32.

¹⁰⁷ SSNA/Equatoria District (ED), 18/ED.36.B.1, February 13, 1964.

¹⁰⁸ SSNA/ED, 18/ED.36.B.1, August 4, 1964.

¹⁰⁹ SSNA/Torit District (TD), TD 72/UNP.36.B.3.3, August 21, 1967; SSNA/Upper Nile Province (UNP), 134/UNP.36.B.3.1, n.d. 1967; SSNA/Lou Nuer District (LND), 16/MD.36.D.1, January 20, 1971.

issued by the central security committee in Equatoria's Maridi district, explained that militias were needed because of their knowledge of the local terrain and populations.¹¹⁰

As in Iraq, then, tribal militias in Sudan began as an ad hoc system, recruited mainly from among the Toposa tribes in Equatoria. But the practice quickly spread to Bahr al-Ghazal and Upper Nile. Gradually, recruitment took a more formal, standardized form. The democratically-elected government in Khartoum, led by the *Umma* Party, tried to organize militias into semi-formal units, called *al-haras al-watani* (National Guard). By the mid-1960s, National Guards became active across the South, with the recommendation of security inspectors and through collaboration with leading members of the different groups.¹¹¹ These units were not as methodical as their Iraqi counterparts. The policy was implemented sporadically, by military commanders in the field and local civil servants that hailed from the target group.¹¹² This difference notwithstanding, the formation of the militias indicates an attempt by the central government to control violence.

Militia performance

The militias' performants proved less than satisfactory. The recruits exhibited similar problems as other militias. A report from 1965 by the intelligence committee in Maridi complained that during the first stages of their operations, only one sultan managed to push back the rebels and collect taxes.¹¹³ In 1967, police inspectors in the Malakal district of the Upper Nile criticized the sultans and their forces for their failures in the battlefield.¹¹⁴ The National Guard used their newly-earned

¹¹⁰ SSNA/Moru and Maridi District (MMD), MMD 18/MD.SCR.36.B.1, March 6, 1968.

¹¹¹ SSNA/UNP, 134/UNP.36.B.3.3, August 2, 1965; SSNA/MMD, 20/MD.36.D.1, September 12, 1966; SSNA/Pibor District (PD), PD 20/MD.36.D.1, October 13, 1966.

¹¹² Edward Thomas, *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation* (London: Zed Books, 2015), 72.

¹¹³ SSNA/MMD, 20/MD.36.D.1, p. 1.

¹¹⁴ SSNA/MMD, 18/MD.SCR.36.B.1, June 12, 1967.

power and weapons to extort villagers, even of their communities, and take their cattle. This blatant abuse of power fueled resentment among the villagers toward the authorities.¹¹⁵ Often, the sultans and their fighters kept close contacts with the insurgents and provided them with the government-provided equipment, either for money or out of solidarity.¹¹⁶ One report recommended that the military and police should keep the National Guards' weapons.¹¹⁷

Hence, the Sudanese security forces and the central government in Khartoum were aware of the problems with the militias. In fact, before the civil war, the government viewed inter-tribal violence as a source of instability that could undermine its state-building project. Following Sudan's independence, security forces actually intervened to stop tribal and ethnic clashes.¹¹⁸ At the earliest stages of the insurgency, the government still prevented the Toposa from receiving arms from Ethiopia, so that they will not be used for tribal feuds.¹¹⁹ Even after they had turned to mobilize the Toposa against the insurgents, the police kept checkpoints to control Toposa moves. But when Toposa participation in raids became regular, the checkpoint was removed, as it "has ceased to serve its purpose."¹²⁰ The military and police remained openly distrustful toward the sultans. When it was offered in 1967 to replace soldiers with militia forces in Maridi, to release the former for other duties, the army rejected the suggestion. In the discussion, the army's representative explained that "in spite of [our]... appreciation of what they do, we do not entirely trust them."¹²¹ The Chief of Police in Upper Nile advised against arming the sultans in the province. "Only after they prove themselves by action," he suggested, "should we arm their

¹¹⁵ Deng A. Ruay, *The Politics of Two Sudans: The North and the South* (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 1999), 132.

¹¹⁶ SSNA/MMD, 20/MD.36.D.1, August 2, 1965; SSNA/PD, 20/PD.36.B.1, January 8, 1969.

¹¹⁷ SSNA/PD, 22/PD.36.B.1, August 1, 1969.

¹¹⁸ SSNA/MMD, 18/MD.SCR.36.B.1, March 31, 1957.

¹¹⁹ SSNA/ED, 18/ED.36.B.1, August 13, 1962.

¹²⁰ SSNA/ED, 18/ED.36.B.1, July 27, 1965.

¹²¹ SSNA/MMD, 18/MD.SCR.36.B.1, September 6, 1968.

followers.”¹²² Consequently, the militias were assigned mainly to local tasks, such as policing their villages, manning checkpoints, and enforcing the authority of government-appointed tribal leaders.¹²³

Following these reports, the Sudanese government began to reconsider the employment of the militias. The Minister of Interior, ‘Abd al-Rahman Naqd Allah, openly warned the security services in 1968 not to arm the militias at the same level as the regular security forces.¹²⁴ Shortly after his election as Prime Minister in 1966, Sadiq al-Mahdi, a hard-liner on Southern independence, declared his intention to abolish the militias. The National Guards, he explained, were formed to support the efforts of the Sudanese army against the insurgents. However, “many of them are disorganized, and their recruitment has taken a political nature.”¹²⁵ His promise did not materialize. The militias remained active in Southern Sudan until the 1972 peace agreement between Sudan’s military leader, Ga‘far Nimeiri, and the Anyanya’s leader Joseph Lagu.

Use of militias for encouraging ethnic defection

Despite their dismissal of the militias, the Sudanese authorities seemed to have realized their value for fragmenting the rebels and their constituencies. Similar to their Ba‘thist counterparts, the Sudanese intelligence services followed and documented inter-tribal rivalries and feuds carefully. Their studies and reports were circulated among the army and police at the time when the militias were formed and began to operate.¹²⁶ This information strengthened among the government the

¹²² SSNA/UNP 134/UNP.36.B.3.3, August 19, 1966: 2.

¹²³ SSNA/MMD, 18/MD.SCR.36.B.1, 1964-1969; SSNA/ED, 18/ED.36.B.1, September 1, 1966; SSNA/UNP, 134/UNP.36.B.3.3, 1965-1968; SSNA/Juba District (JD), 28/JD.36.F, n.d. 1970.

¹²⁴ SSNA/UNP 134/UNP.36.B.3.3, March 31, 1968.

¹²⁵ SSNA/UNP 141/UNP.36.B.1.3, November 14, 1966.

¹²⁶ Example for studies can be found in SSNA/UNP 140/UNP.SCR.36.M.1, May 17, 1965; SSNA/MD, 19/MD.36.C.1, April 23, 1966.

belief that amplifying ethnic divisions can undermine the rebellion. An intelligence report from the Upper Nile informed Khartoum that feuds between Dinka, Shilluk, and Nuer led to the “disintegration of their unity and their paralysis.”¹²⁷ It concluded with a recommendation to “consolidate the military operations and actions of the administrators, sultans, *nazirs* (chiefs of nomadic tribes) and ‘*umdas* (town leaders), and especially the *Reth* [king] of the Shilluk.”¹²⁸

As a default, recruitment to the National Guards and other irregulars was based on ethnic or tribal divides, drawing from ethnic groups such as the Toposa, Murle and Shilluk, among others. The logic behind creating militias from these groups was their tensions with other groups, seeming to incline toward the rebels. For instance, the above-mentioned decree that ordered to arm loyalist tribal leaders instructed the secret police in Equatoria to arm the Toposa tribes through their chiefs. This is because the Toposa lived in Eastern Equatoria, in proximity to Dinka and Boya communities. The latter communities were perceived as supporters of the insurgency and had many members of their groups joining the rebel ranks. They also had a history of local conflicts with the Toposa, mainly around issues of cattle raids.¹²⁹ And so, the Toposa chiefs were directly instructed to attack their neighbors.¹³⁰

The design and bureaucracy of the militias clearly served to strengthen ethnic divisions and in-group identities. Thus, although police officers recommended the formation of a unified headquarters for the National Guards, the government refused to do so.¹³¹ This policy guaranteed that the militia leaders will not form a united front. Militia recruits received identification cards that stated not only their professional details but also their ethnic/tribal background – especially in

¹²⁷ SSNA/UNP 134/UNP.36.B.3.3, August 19, 1966: 2.

¹²⁸ Ibid: 3.

¹²⁹ SSNA/ED, 18/ED.36.B.1, August 4, 1964.

¹³⁰ SSNA/ED, 17/ED.36.B.1, July 27, 1965.

¹³¹ SSNA/MMD, 20/MD.36.D.1, September 12, 1966.

regions where militias of different groups were in operation.¹³² Official discussions on the nature of the militias explicitly assessed their formation based on the ethnic group's alleged collective loyalty. In one case, during a meeting of Maridi's security committee, the chair described the Moru people as "fanatic in their hatred of the Northerners, very stubborn, insistent on staying in the bush and extremely treacherous." Hence, security forces were now training the Jur, Zande and Baka tribes, who are "peaceful and loyal," to fight the Moru.¹³³ The Toposa in Equatoria and the Burun in the Upper Nile were organized into militias with the explicit purpose of attacking their Dinka neighbors.¹³⁴ In the Fangak district of the Upper Nile, the government forces equipped Shilluk militias to raid Nuer communities.¹³⁵ Government and security officials openly discussed the utility of militias in dividing the Southern population. Stressing the importance of maintaining National Guard units, the head of the security committee in Maridi noted that "first and foremost, they can lift the spirit of the peaceful Southern citizens, while demoralizing the khawarij, who believe that their only enemy is the Northerners, but now see that people from their own race (*jins*) are fighting against them."¹³⁶

Khartoum's efforts achieved short-term success in that the insurgents now targeted the sultans and their communities. The Anyanya raided villages that supplied the militias with manpower and shelter, burning them down and killing local chiefs and residents.¹³⁷ The insurgents denounced communities such as the Toposa and the Murle as traitors to the Southern cause, in spite the fact that some among these groups also joined the rebels.¹³⁸ The militias responded to

¹³² SSNA/MMD, MMD 20/MD.36.D.1, August 31, 1965.

¹³³ SSNA/MMD, 18/MD.SCR.36.B.1, August 2, 1965: 3-4.

¹³⁴ SSNA/ED, 18/ED/36.B.1, August 28, 1965, 2; SSNA/UNP, 131/UNP.36.B, May 23, 1965.

¹³⁵ SSNA/UNP 134/UNP.36.B.3.3, August 19, 1966: 2.

¹³⁶ SSNA/MMD, 18/MD.SCR.36.B.1, August 2, 1965: 4.

¹³⁷ SSNA/MMD, 20/MD.36.D.2, March 12, 1964; SSNA/UNP, 131/UNP.36.B, n.d. April, 1965;

¹³⁸ Thomas, *South Sudan: A Slow Liberation*, 177.

these attacks by targeting the tribes that sided with the insurgents. In one case, a National Guard composed of Murle people killed the Annuak king after receiving government arms.¹³⁹ The available documents do not make a direct connection between militia recruitment and loyalty to Khartoum. One report, nevertheless, stated that granting weapons and vehicles to tribal chiefs caused excitement among the people, enhancing not only the chiefs' but also the government's prestige.¹⁴⁰ The first civil war came to its end with the signing of the Addis Ababa Agreement in 1972 between Nimeiri, and the leader of Southern insurgency, Joseph Lagu.

As Nimeiri was now keen to maintain stability in the South, Khartoum ceased its support of the local defector militias, leaving them to the mercy of the Anyanya fighters who took leadership positions in the autonomous region. This demonstrates the ability of governments, even more vulnerable, as Nimeiri's government was at the time of the Addis Ababa peace, to control and demobilize militias. The divisive logic of ethnic militias, however, did not vanish. And when fighting was renewed in 1983, with the beginning of the so-called Second Civil War, the Sudanese incumbents resumed to communally-targeted militia recruitment.¹⁴¹

Conclusion

This article demonstrates that the recruitment of defector militias has been a calculated strategy to encourage mass ethnic defection of groups to the government ranks. Fratricidal infighting and cleavages within rebel constituencies may indeed “occur independent of state policy.”¹⁴² But the existence and activism of militias deepen and entrench the divides in rebel constituencies. They

¹³⁹ Ibid: 172.

¹⁴⁰ SSNA/MMD, 20/MD.36.D.1, n.d. May 1968.

¹⁴¹ Daniel S. Blocq, “The Grassroots Nature of Counterinsurgent Tribal Militia Formation: The Case of the Fertit in Southern Sudan, 1985–1989,” *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 8, no. 4 (2014): 710–24.

¹⁴² Staniland, “Between a Rock,” 21.

enable the governments to manipulate group identities, agitate communal tensions, and consequently weaken and delegitimize the insurgency and ensure the dependence of defectors on the survival of the state.

To achieve this goal, governments structure the militias in ways that encourage and facilitate defection. In Iraq, the Ba‘th regime turned the ad hoc fursan system into a relatively hierarchical framework that encompassed tens of thousands of recruits, organized into militias based on tribal, ethnic, and religious affiliation. These tens of thousands of designated fighters ended up serving mainly in menial tasks, as informants, or in targeting civilians suspected of sheltering the rebels. The Ba‘thist authorities, while dismissive of the added value of such militias, often highlighted the potential of such militias to divide the northern population, intensify in-fighting, and create dependence upon the regime by at least some sectors of society in Kurdistan. In Sudan, a less developed but still active system of militias pitted different ethnic groups and tribes against each other. Here too, the authorities and regular forces were contemptuous of the militias and their capacities. On the other hand, the militias’ potential contribution to crumbling the cohesion of the Southern rebel constituency was often pinpointed by those concerned with sustaining the system. The realization of these advantages of defector militias may have appeared ex post facto, through the prolonged use of militias. COIN, after all, is a process of trial and error. But the cases of Iraq and Sudan demonstrate that even when it had become evident that the defector militias’ contribution to military efforts is modest at best, if not adverse, the incumbents continued to employ these forces, and even expand them. In addition to the desire to defeat the insurgency, this strategy reflected the incumbents’ understanding of their society, politics, the role of in-group identities, and the benefit of atomizing the population. Inciting divisions in the cases of Iraq and

Sudan was not an unwanted by-product. It was at least a desired outcome, if not a leading consideration.

As noted in the discussion on methodology, this paper has sought to develop a hypothesis on a mostly overlooked aspect of ethnic defection – and this is the role militias play in this process. The paper used the two cases to validate the importance of social and political considerations in forming and sustaining militias. If we accept that social and political considerations may also guide incumbents in their decision to establish and maintain defector militias, this study could offer several avenues for further research. First, this probe underlines identity as a variable in incumbents' decision to form and sustain defector militias. As the analysis of both cases pointed out, the Iraqi and Sudanese regimes saw identity (Muslim Arab in both cases) as an essential resource for securing loyalty and mobilizing support. A question which can be examined, then, is whether regimes preoccupied with identity politics and ethnocentrism may be more prone to use defector militias in civil wars – for fragmenting rebel constituencies, and more generally. Moving to the rebel constituencies themselves, we may ask whether heterogenous, ethno-religiously diverse societies are more susceptible to manipulation through recruitment.

Other potential inquiries apply to the implications of the use of defector militias on One immediate question that comes out of this study pertains to the success of this strategy. The above analysis of the cases suggests that such militias did create, or intensified, inter-communal tensions. Insurgents turned toward fighting defectors, driving the leaders of the defectors to become more dependent on the incumbents for their survival. But to what extent? What implications do defector militias have on social cohesion among rebel constituencies in the long-term? And how do they affect conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction? Militias, of all kinds, are likely to remain a recurring feature of future conflicts.