Why Civilians Support Actors that Harm Them in Civil War: Evidence from Syria and Iraq

By

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Syria Map
TURKEY
SYRIA
LEBANON
IRAQ
JORDAN
Mediterranean Sea
Aleppo
Idleb
Latakia
Tartus
Hama
Homs
Damascus
Palmyra
Ar Raqqah
Deir Az Zor
Al Hasaka
Al Qamishli
Abu Kamal
Beirut
Tripoli
Sweida
Daraa
Euphrates
Al Furat Dam
Al Jabur River
Al Baliikh River
Ugharit
Jabla
Banyas
Misyaf
Krak des Chevaliers
Safita
Qadmus
Furqlus
Tiyas
Al Qusair
Hisya
Al Qaryaten
Deir Attiyah
Yabrud
Ma'lula
Az Zabadani
Adra
Dumayr
Sabe' Biyar
At Ttanf
Buraq
Qasim
Az Zalaf
Irbid
Busra
Imtan
Al Mafraq
Jarash
Sidon (Saida)
Tyre (Sur)
Al Batrun
Ba'albak
An Nabek
Ma'lula
An Nasiriyah
Harim
Salkhad
Ebla
Jiss Ash Shughur
Ariha
Al Hiffah
Al Qurdaha
Maaret An Nu Man
Khan Shekhun
Suran
As Se'en
M'hardah
As Salamiyah
Ar Rastan
Al Mishirfah
Sabhat Al Jabul
Makana
As Safirah
Deir Hafir
Al Bab
Manbij
I'zaz
Abu Daghnan
Sharaqraq
Tal Abyad
Ras Al Ayn
Tall Tamir
Tall Birak
Jaghjagh River
Tall Kojak
Al Malykiyah
Smjar
Shadadah
Judaydat Khabur
As Sabkha
At Tabaqah
Ar Russafah
At Tibni
As Suar
Bussayrah
Al Mayadin
Dura Europus
Mari
36°
38°
40°
42°
34°

Chapter 1

Introduction: When Do Civilians Support Violent Actors?

1. The Question

This dissertation begins with a counterintuitive observation: sometimes, during civil war, civilians support organizations that harm them and their communities. In the 2000s, the Afghan Taliban's treatment of civilians included executions and public beatings. Although the group certainly enjoyed less good will over time, it still commanded support from over a quarter of Afghans in 2011(Tariq et al. 2011) and was sometimes forgiven for its violent behavior (Lyall et al 2013). In 2004, Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) enjoyed significant support throughout western Iraq despite its imposition of vicious legal codes that often included corporal punishment. Though AQI's support withered in 2006, its reincarnation, the Islamic State (IS), received civilian assistance again in 2014. The author's interviews with Syrian refugees revealed that rebel groups such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) have been responsible for myriad civilian deaths and abuses. And yet, the FSA continues to enjoy support from some many Syrians.

Insurgents are not the only combatants who manage to retain a meaningful level of popular support despite harming civilians. The Afghan government remains the most preferred governing body in Afghanistan despite the wide range of violent crimes committed by its police forces and the former militiamen who staff them (Akseer et al 2013). The Iraqi government's heavy-handed approach to counterinsurgency has included arbitrary detentions and collaboration with foreign actors that routinely abuse civilians. And yet, the government still enjoyed the support of just over 60% of Iraqis as of 2015 (National Democratic Institute

2015). The oddity here is not that the actors in question remain popular throughout the entire population—they do not. The curious observation is instead that combatants' violent behavior toward civilians erodes their popularity in some spaces and periods, but not others. That observation animates this dissertation.

Decades of rich enquiry in political science provide several explanations for why one observes support for violent groups among some people whom they harm. These arguments fall into three categories: materialist explanations wherein civilians are paid off, realist arguments that focus on threat assessment, and identity arguments that are driven by in-group affinity. Each theoretical cluster holds some potential for explaining support for violent actors, but also suffers a significant shortcoming. This dissertation offers an original argument that seeks to exploit the literature's diverse strengths while also addressing its oversights, thereby creating a new theory of civilian support in conflict environments.

The following chapters argue that civilian support for organizations that harm them hinges on two factors: how effective the relevant actor is as a protector and the extent to which the actor's violence is informative. Effectiveness is the extent to which the relevant belligerent has both the will and the capacity to protect civilians from other armed actors, including rebels, the state, and pro-state militias. Informativeness is the extent to which a belligerent's violent practices are consistently selective such that civilians develop accurate beliefs about how to avoid being targeted. Based on these two variables, combatant groups sort into one of four categories at any given time and place. The two most extreme possibilities — effective protectors that are informatively violent and ineffective protectors that are uninformatively violent—generate the simplest responses. Civilians support the combatants in the former and reject them in the latter. The two remaining cases have more ambiguous effects

on civilians' beliefs, which leads to more contingent responses. The following pages offer an overview of the literature upon which this dissertation builds. A summary of the new theory and its inner workings follows.

2. Concepts

The animating question of this dissertation is: under what conditions do civilians support combatant organizations that harm their communities? Civilian, support, and combatant organizations are thus critical terms. A combatant organization is any entity that uses force to pursue policy or territorial objectives during a war. By this definition, insurgent groups, militias, and the state are all combatant organizations in a conflict. Conversely, gangs and other groups that use violence to secure profit, but have no intention of winning a conflict or changing policy, are not combatant organizations. The definition does not preclude a combatant organization's involvement in profiteering, Many entities can become combatant organizations, but the analysis here focuses on those who seek to overthrow the present political leadership—rebels.

A civilian is any individual who is not a member of a combatant organization. A civilian does not necessarily dislike violence. Indeed, many civilians observe and endorse a combatant group's attacks against some perceived threat or its supporters. The defining quality of a civilian is that they do not practice violence. It is possible for a person who used to be part of a combatant group to leave it and become a civilian, just as it is possible for an individual to lose civilian status by taking up arms. Ideally, one would want to distinguish between standard civilians and civilians with combat experience because conflict exposure leads individuals to adopt more hawkish security views that could correlate with other

systematically different political views (Grossman, Manekin, and Miodownik 2015). However, this study includes so few civilians with combat experience that the distinction is irrelevant.

This dissertation adopts its understanding of support from Flanigan (2006). Flanigan presents a continuum from rejection to support that contains four nodes: lack of acceptance and active resistance, passive acceptance due to silencing or coercion, genuine acceptance and affinity, and active participation by the civilian (646). The final two nodes constitute support. That is, a civilian who supports an organization freely accepts its presence, appreciates that presence, or takes actions that enable the group. In the context of war, accepting a group's presence means preferring its control of the area where one lives to the control of competing actors. Without that preference, acceptance could not exist. Supportive actions include more than the common examples of giving material goods to the combatants. Empowering activities also include efforts to persuade others to support the group or defend its reputation, whether by extolling the fighters' virtues or minimizing their wrongdoings. All of these behaviors are empowering because they aim to further the rebels' presence and ability, though material support does so through providing sustenance while other activities often seek to preserve or earn support for the group.

While support ranges from appreciation to action, each end of the range holds different implications. A person who simply appreciates a group may not be willing to adopt the costs of behavioral support. In a context where active support includes low-cost vocal support among one's familiars, failure to move into action can also indicate that the individual feels positively about the group, but not strongly so. One can thus distill support into two categories: weak—acceptance and appreciation, and strong—the uptake of activities meant to

empower the group. These designations indicate how robust the civilian's support is. Stronger support is more likely to persist in the face of higher costs and other factors, while weaker support is more sensitive to cost.

3. Past Answers

Major arguments about why civilians support organizations that commit violence against them during civil war fall into three categories: materialist explanations, identity based explanations, and realist accounts. Each of these arguments fails to offer a full explanation. But each nonetheless offers insight into what a more comprehensive theory should address. The materialist answer to the question of why civilians support a violent actor is well known. One can see it in policies that emphasize hearts and minds. It contends that civilians support a violent actor so long as doing so leaves them materially better off than other options. There is some evidence in favor of the materialist position. Flanigan (2008) argues that Hezbollah and the Tamil Tigers successfully earn good will and dampen criticism by providing goods and services to communities in need. Beath and co-authors (2015) analyze the Afghan case. Their data reveal that material benefits have a positive effect on individuals' views of the government and its authority, but that the effect dissolves when financial support ends. The authors take this observation to mean that financial support has no effect on attitudes, but one could also conclude that the positive effect only exists when the support is ongoing, as it is in the cases of Hezbollah and the Tamil Tigers.

Evidence that support can be purchased, or at least rented, should not be confused with evidence of a relationship between poverty and support for violent organizations. While empirical evidence of a link between poverty and support for militants exists (Mousseu 2011),

it is also weak (Krueger and Malečková 2003; Shapiro and Fair 2009; Blair et al. 2013). The poverty argument consequently has less empirical backing than the materialist position. Moreover, the materialist argument is meant to hold across socioeconomic strata. It is not an argument about how the poor respond to incentives, but about how the receipt of benefits alters the way that individuals view the responsible actor.

The principle shortcoming of materialist accounts is that they tend to omit explicit discussion of violence. For example, neither Flanigan nor Beath and co-authors considers the possibility that the level of violence that a community suffers from an actor may influence the effectiveness of material distribution campaigns. This is a glaring omission because the giving of material benefits and responses to them do not exist in a vacuum anywhere, let alone in a war zone. Insofar as understanding why civilians support violent groups requires understanding reactions to violence, material analyses only cover part of the story.

Another shortcoming of materialist accounts is that they cannot explain why some civilians support a rebel group that faces a materially superior state. Many insurgent organizations, such as the popular resistance groups that have emerged in Syria, can only intermittently provide goods and services. All but the very weakest of states have wealth and a professionalized bureaucracy that put them in a better position to distribute goods than rebels. For example, rebels like the Free Syrian Army and Tamil Tigers can distribute bread and medicine, but those efforts are minuscule next to the state's ability to control access to water, electricity, and hospitals. Moreover, states that are under attack often respond by cutting off necessities such as water and electricity to areas that are believed to support rebels. Given the state's extreme advantage when it comes to the distribution of goods, it is strange to observe support for rebels among large subsets of the populations in Syria, Sri Lanka, Iraq, and other

countries. Materialist accounts cannot explain support for materially disadvantaged groups.

Oversights notwithstanding, materialist accounts address a crucial observation--conflict generates a climate of material scarcity and opportunity that may be important. As explosions deafen ears and shrapnel litters streets, access to food, water, and transportation can become difficult. Given that conflict tends to seize some areas more aggressively than others, transportation can become particularly important as civilians seek a way to find safety. One cannot dismiss the possibility that material goods and services influence civilians' attitudes toward violent organizations. Instead, one must consider how any possible effect is conditioned by other factors, including violence and identity.

Many scholars use identity to explain support for materially disadvantaged combatants. Kaufmann (1996) represents the general intuition of such appeals. As violence falls along identity lines, group members, whether because of elite appeals or because of the ethnicized pattern of violence, come to prefer being around each other to mixing with members of any out-group. This proposition and its implication that individuals may assess group members more leniently than outsiders have received empirical treatment. Lyall, Blair, and Imai (2013) find evidence that Pashtun Afghans are more forgiving of violence from the co-ethnic Taliban than they are of harm caused by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). This co-ethnic affinity helps explain why violent behavior from a group like the Taliban would have a muted effect on support among some segments of the affected population. Condra and Shapiro (2012) find evidence that Sunni insurgents who harmed civilians in mixed Iraqi neighborhoods suffered a backlash, while Sunni insurgents who were violent in more homogeneously Sunni communities escaped consequence. The lack of a response by the mostly Sunni localities supports Lyall and co-authors by suggesting that

individuals are uniquely tolerant of violence from those who share a salient identity.

The operative word here is salient. As Kalyvas (2008) notes, the salience, or political impact, of any social identity may change over the course of a war. Due to spatial variation in the severity of violence and in who commits violence, it is equally plausible that the salience of an identity may vary across the territory where war occurs. Despite the spate of constructivist research that emphasizes the changeability of social identity (Chandra 2012) and the variety of works that showcase how dynamic conflict environments can be (Kalyvas 2008; Findley and Rudloff 2012; Warren and Troy 2014), the study of identity and civilian attitudes during conflict often excludes consideration of how violence patterns vary across space and time, and what that means for identity's role in conflict. The findings concerning in-group bias in contexts of violence are too robust to discount identity altogether. A theory of civilian support for harmful groups must instead seek to identify the conditions under which identity is influential.

Realist studies provide another explanation for civilian support of violent actors that may help establish the limits of identity. In international relations, Walt (1990) maintains that states form alliances with one another in order to balance against threats. A similar focus on threat perception exists among alliance scholars within comparative politics. Staniland (2012) uses threat to explain the dissolution of the Sunni alliance in the early days of the Iraq War. He finds that Al-Qaeda in Iraq sparred with its Sunni allies over power and smuggling routes so aggressively that many of the early alliance members chose to fight against AQI despite their shared sectarian identity and the reality that AQI was the strongest bulwark against the United States. Staniland's work raises an intuitive but unexplored possibility: social identity matters for individuals' understandings of who their allies and friends are, but those

understandings can be updated and upended as violence patterns and the threat environment change. Asal, Brown, and Dalton (2012) find that ethno-political organizations that have a factional leadership structure and use violent tactics are more likely to split apart than groups that do not. Though Asal and co-authors focus on organizational split rather than the initiation of intra-group violence, their finding still indicates that shared identity's influence on political affinity is real, but limited. Realism and its emphasis on threat perception offer a promising avenue for exploring the conditions under which identity becomes salient.

While a few works on combatant and activist organizations have explored the limits of identity-based affinity, research on civilians is less instructive. The problem is not that interest in identity's varying salience does not exist, but that the research is elite-centric, which limits how much it can reveal about broad changes in identity. For example, Haddad (2011) and Phillips (2015) focus on sectarianism in explaining how economic and political forces--including violence, in the case of Haddad--can alter the salience and meaning of identity. But, both authors explain change by citing the ways in which the aforementioned forces shape elite incentives and strategies. This approach assumes that civilians lack agency and simply follow elite cues, which contradicts ample data demonstrating that civilians absorb information, update their beliefs, and make decisions based on updated beliefs (Steele 2009; Davenport, Moore, and Poe 2003). Even with the advent of studies that adopt civilian agency as an analytic principle (Mampilly 2011; Barter 2015), the elite bias within studies of identity in conflict remains.

There are two noteworthy exceptions to the elite bias in study of identity in conflict. Hale's (2008) analysis of separatist movements synthesizes realist calculation and the lens of identity. Hale argues that ethnicity does not motivate behavior, but is nonetheless politically

important because it leads individuals to interpret situations with reference to ethnic divides, thereby informing the beliefs on which they base action. In viewing ethnicity as a heuristic, Hale cites the criticality of identity without dismissing the calculative rationality of realism. Posen (1993) also brings identity and rationality together in the context of security. He argues that the widespread uncertainty that follows imperial collapse triggers a security dilemma, leading groups to band together as they seek safety and view members of the out-group as threats. Posen, like Hale, combines rationality with identity to give a sense of why identity would become salient in a context of insecurity, but neither theory can explain why an identity would experience a reduction in its cohesive strength, and thus in its political salience, even when insecurity remains high. Critically, both Hale and Posen take identity seriously while engaging in a realist, security-oriented analysis that features agentive civilians.

We thus arrive at an idea of what a new theory of identity in conflict needs. The theory must recognize that the effect of material benefits may interact with other factors, chiefly violence. The argument must acknowledge identity's ability to hold implications for one's personal safety and shape perception like the ethnic affinity literature, but remain sensitive to variation in the strength of identity's coagulant effect over time and space. The theory should understand that individuals absorb information, and change their minds upon receipt of new information. But, it should do so without assuming that all observers reach the same conclusion upon receipt of the same information. Finally, the theory, in recognizing that civilians are observant and can learn, should be open to the possibility that perceptions of how targets are selected may influence willingness to support the responsible belligerent.

4. The Universe of Cases

The universe of cases for this project includes any rebel organization that uses violence against civilians. While the intentions, behavior, structure, and skill of insurgent groups will vary from one case to another, the use of violence against civilians by rebel groups is nearly universal. This ubiquity likely exists because rebels seek to control territory, which requires imposing order and routing out enemy collaborators. Factors such as ideology and economic interests can then influence rebels' ideas about what order is, who their enemies are, and how to treat civilians who collaborate with rivals.

Potential cases abound. The Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, or FMLN, in El Salvador fought a twelve-year war during which it won over civilians despite the fact that it also killed civilians. In Palestine, Hamas was able to maintain support despite Palestinians' widespread knowledge that even the suspicion of collaboration with Israelis was enough to earn one's execution. Al-Qaeda in Iraq famously slaughtered civilians with minimal concern, but even it enjoyed a period of civilian support—though that period lasted longer in some parts of Iraq than others. Similarly, there was a time when Al-Shabab in Somalia had public backing despite its heinous behavior, which included indiscriminate attacks using shoddily constructed bombs.

Harm against civilians and variation in responses to it exist across contexts and ideologies, so the objective here is to provide and substantiate a theory that can apply broadly. The next chapter discusses the case and context that furnish the data for this undertaking: the Free Syrian Army in Syria. Chapter three then provides a theory of civilian responses to violence. The chapter begins with a qualitative discussion of the theory, followed by a formal model and several qualitative historical vignettes that hope to solidify the theory in the reader's mind. The fourth chapter discusses how interviews with Syrians for this project were

conducted, before the fifth chapter uses those personal accounts to demonstrate the theory's empirical value. The sixth chapter's analysis of Iraq demonstrates the theory's external validity and explains why Sunni civilians in Mosul were slower to reject AQI than civilians in Ramadi. The concluding chapter offers a number of reflections and attempts to peer into the futures of Syria and Iraq.

Chapter 2

The Context of Syria and Its Civil War

1. Introduction

The civil war in Syria has bobbed in and out of headlines ever since it evolved from peaceful protests in 2011. Many features of the conflict are consequently well-known. Half of Syria's pre-war population of 22 million has been displaced, with over six million internally displaced persons and five million refugees. The movement of refugees into Europe has earned particular attention, though far more Syrians have fled to Turkey and Jordan. Meanwhile, within Syria, most of the rebel groups that once seemed to stand a chance at overthrowing Bashar Al-Asad have been reduced to fighting for survival in corners of the country. The lone exception to this trend is the Kurdish forces in the north. This chapter allows the reader to place what they already know in context and also provides new information about Syria and the war therein. Further, the chapter explains why Syria offers an instructive context and the Free Syrian Army (FSA) constitutes a useful case for the study of civilian support. In pursuing these objectives, the chapter utilizes secondary sources as well as information from the author's interviews with Syrians. The key takeaway is that the Free Syrian Army, despite its reputation as the "good guy" among a series of combatants including the state, the Islamic State, and various Al-Qaeda affiliates, has also been violent toward civilians. But, that behavior has not eroded goodwill toward the Free Syrian Army.

2. The Basics of a State and Its Peoples

France created the state of Syria by uniting the provinces that came under French

control after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in World War I. The following decades in Syria saw multiple revolts, independence in 1946, several coups, a brief unification with Egypt (1958-1971), and a series of flirtatious-but-tempestuous relationships with western powers. The most consequential power struggle occurred in 1966, when Hafez Al-Asad and other members of the leftist and Arab nationalist Baʿath Party seized control of the state from other Baʿathists. The then thirty-six year old Asad was appointed minister of defense and showed little interest in higher office. In his youth, Syria's new defense chief had wanted to become a doctor but joined the military because that was the only opportunity available to poor Alawites at the time. As defense minister, Asad took orders from Salah Jadid, who was Syria's new leader. Asad's lack of ambition was such that when Jadid was captured during a fresh coup attempt at the end of 1966, Asad sent a battalion to his defense and aided in a subsequent purge of the military rather than use the commotion to assert himself.

Asad and Jadid's relationship soured in the aftermath of the Six Day War (1967), during which surprise air attacks from Israel devastated Syria and Egypt, then the United Arab Republic, and precipitated a highly one-sided conflict. The military was generally blamed for the failure, while Asad blamed civilian leaders' incompetence. Asad believed that Jadid's faith in popular warfare and unrestrained Palestinian militias was dangerous and blamed the militias' attacks on Israel for instigating the war (McHugo 2015). Jadid began trying to push Asad out of government, while Asad launched an aggressive defense by appointing his allies to various military positions. Asad then used his military influence to call tanks into Damascus early in 1969 and partnered with his brother in order to assert control of party newspapers and radio stations. Asad and his supporters violently removed Jadid's backers from their posts in Tartus and Lattakia. The head of intelligence, a Jadid loyalist,

committed suicide after an argument with the military. Though Asad's relationship with his brother would eventually falter as well, his decision to rely on family in asserting power established a tradition that would outlast his rule.

By the start of 1970, Asad had neutralized most of Jadid's supporters and enjoyed the loyalty of the military. But, Jadid remained officially in charge until November. As Syria's primary governing body, the National Congress, debated the country's latest military failure—an attempted intervention in a Jordan—Jadid and his supporters vocally attacked Asad and stripped him of his position as the leader of the military. Unfortunately for Jadid, Asad had already ordered the military to surround the building. The meeting ended and a new government with Hafez Al-Asad as president was announced days later. Asad arrested Jadid's supporters, though some were offered posts at embassies abroad. The United Arab Republic dissolved in 1971 and Syria became independent again. Jadid spent the remainder of his life in prison, save for a brief stint in a hospital before he died of a heart attack in 1993. Hafez Al-Asad would rule until his death in 2000.

Asad and his path to power provide an opportunity to discuss the role of social identities in Syria. Both Asad and Jadid, along with most other Syrians who reached prominent ranks in the military or government, were Alawite. When France took control of Syria in 1920, the country was over half Sunni Muslim, with sizable populations of Alawites (11%), various Christian denominations (14%), and Druze (3%) (Kerr 2015, 8). The Kurdish population at that time is unknown, but Kurds are now Syria's largest ethnic minority, being 7-10% of the population and mostly Sunni. Alawites are a sub-sect of Shiite Islam. Syria's Alawites were concentrated in Tartus and other cities near Syria's Mediterranean coast, and came to control the area when the French divided Syria into autonomous confessional regions

of Alawites, Sunnis, and Christians.

Before the Ottoman Empire collapsed, it discriminated against Alawites for a variety of potential reasons including Alawites' perceived doctrinal impurity, Alawites' alleged closeness to the rival (and Shiite) Safavid Empire, and the simple fact that Alawites were typically poor, agricultural communities as opposed to the more erudite Sunnis. Discrimination was such that the Ottomans refused to permit Alawites residence in major cities. Against this backdrop, Alawites seized the path to affluence that enlistment in the French Colonial Army offered. Alawites were particularly overrepresented in the special forces, which formed the bulk of Syria's post-independence army and fed the officer corps of the Baʿath Party. Alawites were thus central to the suppression of the various revolts that sought to shake off French rule. Despite the historically agricultural and impoverished group's newfound prominence, most of its members remained near the coast. Syria's various communities continued to live in their respective zones with little incident.

The Alawites' distribution across Syria began to change due to a shift in the ruling Baʿath Party. The Baʿath Party was founded in the 1940s by a Syrian Christian, Michel ʿAflaq, and a Syrian Sunni, Salah Al-Din Bitary. Hafez Al-Asad and many other future leaders of Syria joined the Baʿath Party while in grade school. The party centered itself on equality, socialism, and freedom from foreign control for all Arabs, regardless of religion. The Baʿath Party's socialist tint deepened thanks to the influence of several prominent Alawites who joined the party after Syria's independence from France and concerned themselves with rural Alawites' difficult living conditions. This local concern proved critical in the 1960s, as the United Arab Republic's defeat and economic woes led many Syrians to prioritize local

concerns over Arab nationalism (Devlin 1991). This frustration helped Jadid and Asad take over the state and the Baʿath Party in the 1966 coup. When Asad took over the state several years later, he also became the undisputed leader of the Baʿath Party. Such is the bond between party and state in Syria. Other parties exist, but may only do so with the permission of the Baʿath Party.

The urbanization of Alawites was a consequence of the Asad-Jadid takeover of the Baʿath Party. The Baʿthists commissioned dams that made arable land where there previously was none, and so Alawites spread from the coast. The development was not coincidental—the government hoped to guarantee Alawite support by offering Alawites new opportunities (Balanche 2015). The influx of Alawites to Lattakia, which previously had many Alawites already, but was mostly Sunni, was met with development projects to encourage further migration. Hafez Al-Asad magnified the trend when he took over, using the promise of new state jobs to attract Alawites to areas where he felt he had too few supporters. He transformed the coastal region from a place that hosted several large Alawite enclaves into an Alawite region. Alawites also moved into Homs and Damascus by the thousands—a fact not lost on present-day Sunni Syrians, many of whom were quick to remind the author that their countrymen swooped in from the countryside. The Damascene Alawite population grew from 4200 in 1945 to half a million in 2015, a factor of over 100 (*ibid*). Meanwhile the overall Damascus population grew by a factor of almost six during the same period (from roughly 300k to 1.7m). In percentage terms, the Alawites' population growth represents a change from just over 1% of the Damascus population in 1945, to over a quarter of the capital's population in 2015.[i]

Throughout this population shift, Alawite domination of the state became the norm. Almost all of the 80+ Syrians who were interviewed by the author noted that Alawites staffed government offices in their neighborhoods. In a context of high corruption where the state is a vehicle for rent seeking, this has meant that Sunnis often find themselves paying bribes to Alawites in order to complete mundane tasks such as obtaining or renewing identification cards. Rising to prominence in the military, police force, or state-run universities has likewise been difficult for Sunnis. None of this should be taken to mean that Alawites became exceptionally wealthy as a whole. Most still struggled like many Syrians, and the administrative government jobs that went to Alawites paid so poorly that bribes were no less a product of necessity than of greed (Darke 2014). But one cannot deny that the balance of power in Syria's government plainly favored Alawites under Hafez Al-Asad.

Asad also allowed the state to become a massive source of income for himself, his family, and his other allies. Government posts that allowed individuals to demand bribes and receive commission from corporate partnerships were a gift that Asad used to bind powerful families' fortunes to him. Asad never sought any wide scale attack against Syrians who were not Alawite. But his leadership made it clear that the state fell within Alawites' purview despite the presence of a handful of non-Alawite leaders. Over half of the officers who Asad chose for key roles were Alawite (McHugo 2015). Some Sunnis, such as defense minister Mustafa Tlas, reached high office, but they are believed to have been overseen by Alawites. Despite the fact that the state clearly gave preferential treatment to Alawites, Hafez Al-Asad nurtured an anti-sectarian image and was often photographed praying with Sunni clerics. Asad also avoided rhetoric that could be interpreted as hostile toward Sunnis, who were and still are the largest religious group in Syria.

Though Asad avoided attacks on particular communities and even executed a coup with little bloodshed, he was no pacifist. Asad advocated for violently crushing a Muslim Brotherhood rebellion against the secular Baʿath Party in 1964, before he came to power. Asad's penchant for force only became clearer once he obtained the power to make unilateral decisions. When the Muslim Brotherhood launched another uprising in Hama in 1982, Asad sent 12,000 soldiers to besiege the city for 27 days, killing tens of thousands of Syrians. The secret police, or *mukhabarat*, spread across Syria under Asad and were exempted from judicial oversight by the 1963 Emergency Law that he kept in place. The *mukhabarat* were thus free to demand bribes and do whatever else they saw fit—a privilege that they were quick to exploit. Everyday Syrians could thus disappear for criticizing the regime or simply by the whim of a member of the *mukhabarat*.

With respect to violence, one of the most critical products of Hafez Al-Asad's rule was the development of the *shabbiha*. These professional gangs emerged during the late 1970s when Syria's intervention in Lebanon's civil war gave the Asad family and its relatives the chance to increase their wealth by smuggling products between Lebanon and Syria. The criminal networks that facilitated such trade were known as *shabbiha*, which may come from an Arabic word for ghost or from the type of Mercedes that high-level smugglers often drove (Salih 2012). Though the *shabbiha*'s leaders became powerful in Lattakia and other coastal Syrian cities quickly, they did not become politically prominent elsewhere until Hafez Al-Asad tasked the *shabbiha* with supporting suppression in the 1980s. They were most notoriously involved in the 1982 Hama Massacre and would later reemerge during Syria's civil war. The *shabbiha*'s behavior, which included random kidnappings and rapes, led Hafez to instruct his son, Bashar Al-Asad, to reign them in during the 1990s. Bashar had one of his cousin's

bodyguard's arrested for random acts of violence, but the state ultimately failed to divorce itself from its enforcers.

Though Hafez Al-Asad was brutal, he seems to have been respected. His tenure saw education, electricity, and piped water become available across nearly all of Syria. Infant mortality fell and life expectancy increased. In 1964, most girls and half of boys were illiterate. By 1990, almost 90% of boys could read and so could 70% of girls as the population grew at an estimated 3% annually (McHugo 2014). The spread of education certainly helped the Baʿathist state spread its propaganda, but the increase in literacy is nonetheless substantial.

3. The Rise of Bashar Al-Asad

Syria's present war emerged under the watch of Bashar Al-Asad, who Hafez never meant to become head of state. Bashar's older brother Basel was meant to be president, but he died after crashing his sports car on the streets of Damascus. Bashar thus returned to Syria from London where he was studying to become an ophthalmologist. He enlisted in the military in 1994 and began preparing to become the ruler of Syria. Meanwhile, Hafez Al-Asad demoted members of his inner circle who hoped to challenge his son for Syria's top post. When the 34-year-old Bashar Al-Asad took power after his father's death in 2000, the constitution had to be changed to allow for such a young president. Many members of Syria's ruling class were suspicious of the inexperienced and uncharismatic president, but, as defense minister Tlas pointed out, all of the other potential leaders were elderly. They thus opted to leave Bashar in place and under their influence, rather than risk instability as the result of a renewed succession fight after the death of a septuagenarian leader (Zisser 2003). The son was in power, but not necessarily in control.

The younger Asad attempted a series of changes in Syria. His wife was Sunni, as were those of other prominent Alawites, and Asad encouraged greater unity in Syria. During his first speech as president, Asad stated that Syrians should be more pensive about and critical of "traditions and concepts which have become a true impediment in the way of any progress" (McHugo 2014). Western observers and many hopeful Syrians took the new president's statement as a promise to implement fundamental changes in Syria. In the same speech, Asad promised democratic reforms, but he also stated that western democracy could not work in Syria and opined that Syria had to "have our democratic experience which is special to us." (*ibid*) Some political liberalization did follow these vague pronouncements. The state released several hundred political prisoners and several new publications received state licenses. The early efforts at liberalization ended in 2001 under pressure from Tlas and the *mukhabarat*, who allegedly threatened that Asad would not remain in power if the reforms continued (*ibid*). Syrians tested the new leader's willingness to make serious changes, but found no success. A group of activist intellectuals released a document called the Statement of 1,000 in 2001. The thousand signatories demanded more press freedoms and democratization, but instead found themselves arrested, harassed, or otherwise maligned. As it stands, no one except for Bashar Al-Asad truly knows if he intended to realize his promises, or if he merely sought to begin his tenure on a high note.

More lasting reforms came with economic liberalization. Bashar, aided by his wife who had been a banker with J.P. Morgan in London, opened Syria to private banks for the first time in decades. The new president also tried to put more technocrats in influential positions, but the threat of resistance from experienced elites limited such efforts. Bashar instead followed the policy of his father, and allowed family members to take advantage of an opened

economy. His cousin Rami Makhlouf most famously used this opportunity to amass a $6 billion net worth through his telecommunications company. These newly enriched family members, including younger brother Maher (new leader of the presidential guard) and brother-in-law Assef Shawqat (new head of the military secret service), became part of the new ruling coalition that included Bashar and stalwarts from his father's regime.

Bashar has yet to reach the level of absolute control that his father enjoyed, but the careful placement of family members and friends into positions of power granted him greater latitude that he used to launch trade reforms and enhance the state's investment in the private sector. Bashar's liberalization policies succeeded in creating enterprises that bound wealthy Syrians' fates to him (Becker 2005). But, unlike his father, Bashar Al-Asad did not launch programs aimed at the poor. Hafez Al-Asad courted the support of poor Alawites through the expansion of government jobs and earned support more broadly by providing cheap loans to indentured farmers who were previously at the mercy of landowners. Such policies found no answer under Bashar. Unemployment grew as poor Syrians received support in the form of postsecondary education programs rather than jobs and graduated into a job market with few opportunities (*ibid*).

Bashar Al-Asad initially faced less popular resistance than his father, but violence still characterized his regime even before the uprisings of 2011. Internet usage was permitted, but monitored—a welcome change from the older Asad's policy of restricting fax machine ownership. Bashar Al-Asad's state still imprisoned or killed dissenters. Prisoners then found themselves beaten while in custody. Kurdish political agitators were particularly at risk, as indicated by a March 2008 incident where internal security officers opened fire on a crowd of Kurdish Syrians who were celebrating Kurdish New Year. Dozens of Kurds were later

imprisoned and beaten for six months after protesting against the assassination of a Kurdish political leader. Pre-2011's Asad had not yet reached the same body count as his father, but he was clearly willing to use violence. Many commentators theorize that the younger Asad, who ran a government staffed by individuals who were more experienced and possibly craftier than he, knew little of his security services' actions (Ajami 2012). The environment of impunity for friends of the regime also persisted under Bashar Al-Asad. For example, young women in Lattakia avoided certain cafes and tried not to look too attractive when outdoors, lest friends of the ruling family kidnap and rape them (interview with the author, S78). Syrians understood that members of Asad's clique would not be punished regardless of their wrongdoings.

Thus the stage for 2011 was set: a state with a penchant for violence, an environment of limited political freedom, and a contracting economy as liberalization policies funneled new wealth to friends of the state. To make matters worse, the toppling of Saddam Hussein and a 2007 Israeli strike on a Syrian nuclear facility gave the regime a reasonable fear that its end was near. Bashar vocally opposed the 2003 invasion of Iraq, which earned him few western friends as American defense secretary Donald Rumsfeld considered invading Syria (Borger at al 2003).[ii]

Decades of state policies that favored Alawites had created a strange, but seemingly stable, relationship between Sunnis and Alawites. Intermarriage occurred and urban neighborhoods often hosted both groups, but those neighborhoods were also split into Sunni and Alawite streets. Interviewed Sunnis took notice of the preferential treatment that Alawites received and reported a tacit pre-2011 understanding that one could not enter into conflict with an Alawite, as the judge and police would be on their side if matters escalated. But,

simultaneously, interviewees reported that some Alawites—80% of whom worked for the state (McHugo 2015)—used their government connections to help their Sunni neighbors receive state services faster or with a reduced bribe. Syria was not a sectarian pressure cooker, balloon, or any other metaphor meant to imply that its current state was predestined. Instead, Syria was a country of diverse peoples living jointly, but unequally, under a dictatorship that had once promised change, but now played favorites according to old rules with new faces.

4. 2011: Rebellion

In January 2011, Bashar Al-Asad and the rest of the world watched dictators fall in Tunisia and Egypt. Asad claimed that he was not concerned, as he was "strongly linked to the beliefs" of the Syrian people (Ajami 2012). Then, in early March, a group of boys aged 10-15 from Darʿaa in southern Syria wrote anti-regime graffiti on several public walls in the city. Two days later, the boys were snatched from their homes, detained, and tortured as security services attempted to find out who had encouraged them to draw the graffiti. In truth, the boys were simply scribbling slogans that they had seen on news reports about Tunisia and Egypt. Security services mocked the boys' guardians when they attempted to recover the minors. Residents of Darʿaa often quote the vitriolic statement that the head of security allegedly made to one boy's mother: "If your kids are disloyal to Bashar, the Army will fuck your women and we will raise children who are loyal to him." (Remnick 2013)[iii]

Residents of Darʿaa were horrified by ultimately verified rumors that the boys were being tortured, and by the harsh treatment that the captives' worried families received. Syrians were accustomed to an aggressive police state that was willing to imprison or

otherwise abuse its people, but the unfamiliar snatching of minors from their homes, coupled with acerbic treatment of their families and the climate of the Arab Spring, sparked protests throughout Darʿaa. Demonstrators called for removal of the mayor and the local head of Syria's intelligence services, along with the boys' release. Security forces initially responded with water canons, but they soon escalated to batons and, finally, bullets. The state released the boys a month after they were taken, but it also cut off Darʿaa's access to food and water. The Asad state was not interested in tolerating dissent. Meanwhile, protesters escalated from demanding the boys' release to calling for the resignation of Bashar Al-Asad.

In the spring and summer of 2011, Syrians beyond Darʿaa also began protesting in the streets. Protests were initially small. The first took place in Damascus on March 15 and consisted of a dozen or so men who dispersed before the regime could respond (Darke 2014). By July, peaceful protests in the city of Hama saw half a million protestors crowding the streets (BBC 2011b). Massive crowds of protesters in Homs kicked the police out of some parts of the city and blocked a hospital where police had been arresting injured protesters (BBC 2011a). Several factors explain why people living under dictatorship were suddenly willing to dissent openly. Syria had a history of corrupt, ineffective governance, weak economic growth, and discrimination against Sunnis. Many Syrians—Sunnis in particular—thus had legitimate grievances with the government. Sunnis made up the majority of protestors just as they made up the majority of Syrians, but early protests lacked any signs of sectarian acrimony. While the Syrian state gave citizens a reason to protest on its own, circumstances that changed how civilians viewed contestation were beyond Asad's control. NATO intervened in Libya in March 2011—the same month as the boys' arrest. Syrians had

thus watched a major international body topple an Arab dictator while Egypt's Hosni Mubarak resigned in April. Many Syrians consequently felt certain that they would also benefit from foreign pressure if they protested. 2011 was thus a unique period in Syria when the fall of dictators in other Arab countries created an impression of inevitable change. Another facilitating factor was the development of local committees that encouraged protests, told would-be demonstrators where to go, and helped to shape the slogans that protesters used.

Protesters' identities and demands varied. Secular, educated urbanites participated in and organized protests and shaped the demonstrations' media image. Tribes in rural areas mobilized due to economic frustration. Tribal leaders often recruited volunteer protesters early on, as did Islamists who saw an opportunity to gain power that they had long been denied. Unemployed Syrians—Syria has suffered an unemployment rate of 10-15% since the 90s—also demonstrated, though the unemployed were also lured into the *shabbiha* and state-sponsored counter demonstrations (Abboud 2016). Some demonstrators stopped short of calling for regime change, opting to instead call for the removal of local officials who were seen as especially corrupt or violent. Other protesters, who eventually made up the majority, unequivocally shouted for the fall of Bashar Al-Asad and his government. Participants often wrote signs in English in order to hasten the involvement of the United States and other foreign powers. Even as late as 2016, dozens of Syrians interviewed by the author still called upon the US to intervene. Many interviewees also stated that they were surprised by the scale of the force that the state used, hence the willingness of hundreds of thousands of people to protest.

Early regime concessions such as an offer to lift decades-old emergency rule and the

firing of the national security chief made no difference. In 2011, Bashar Al-Asad even granted citizenship to the fifth of Kurds who lost their citizenship as a result of Baʿathist Arabization efforts in 1962. Resistance continued. Protesters thought that they finally had a chance to change Syrian politics. They would not miss such an opportunity. Asad's placative measures also rang hollow because they were accompanied by throttled internet access meant to hinder communication, mass arrests, and a state media that insisted the protesters were sectarian terrorists. Protesters had reason to doubt Asad's willingness to make changes.

The Syrian state was just as overconfident as its restive critics, possibly because it enjoyed a massive intelligence and repressive apparatus that had avoided the large rebellions weathered by Hafez Al-Asad. Syria's leaders were surprised by the speed with which demonstrations spread across the country (Ajami 2012), though a number of Sunni communities remained indifferent. The state's extreme response suggests that the leadership believed that a quick, swift response could end protests. This miscalculation was probably aided by the fact that Syrian intelligence had known of American support for anti-Asad activists for several years by 2011 and viewed the protests as an American initiative that would wilt under pressure. Mutual overconfidence and flawed predictions created a perfect incubator for war in Syria. Protesters felt that momentum and the historical moment were on their side. The state underestimated demonstrators' anger and commitment.

The initially peaceful opposition became increasingly open to using violence as the regime's response worsened and American intervention remained absent. Two mechanisms can explain the shift. First, the identities of the protestors changed. More Islamists entered the fray, to the chagrin of women who bristled at being lectured on their attire and behavior during protests that meant to criticize the state. Second, the ideas of the protestors changed.

Calls for small changes morphed into calls for an entirely new government as the state's refusal to make fundamental changes became clear. Violence seemed like a reasonable tool that would not only facilitate civilians' safety, but that could also bring protestors closer to their goal of a new government. Islamists also capitalized on the frustration with western non-intervention and began bragging to civilians about the promises of their alternative path.

Many protesters found the second group of changes disheartening, which augmented the first mechanism as many demonstrators who believed in non-violent resistance in pursuit of secular democracy stopped participating in protests accompanied by armed young men. The Syrian National Council (SNC), which united local and exiled opposition groups of all political colors when it formed in October 2011, lost twenty affiliates in February 2012 over its refusal to work with any armed opposition. In five short months, the rapidly formed SNC lost any chance of leading a revolution.[iv] Other divisions also existed within the opposition. For example, while Arab Syrians pushed for various levels of reform, Kurdish protesters often chanted "Democracy for Syria. Federalism for Syrian Kurdistan." (Darke 2014) The Kurdish opposition remains formidable and seems to have always had limited interest in the rest of Syria.

Syria's security services and police were the first to violently respond to protests. Both shot into crowds, kidnapped demonstrators, and crashed into the homes of suspected demonstrators in order to detain them or, in some cases, their (female) family members. By 2012, the security services and police were no longer the only arms of the state that repressed the demonstrations in which thousands were killed or disappeared. The *shabbiha*, the aforementioned coterie of Alawites close to the regime who helped Hafez Al-Asad crush the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s, expanded as Bashar used them to combat protests.

Just as in Hama's 1982 uprising, the *shabbiha* became active during the upheavals that began in 2011. The term *shabbiha* was originally limited to the band of Alawite families who established fiefdoms and sold smuggled goods with the help of Hafez Al-Asad. As the protests grew, these friends of the regime used state funds to pay and arm young men who poured into restive neighborhoods and wreaked havoc. They hacked people to death with machetes, shot demonstrators, and forced women to walk nude in the streets. As the recruits' numbers grew, the term *shabbiha* came to refer to any group of armed, plain clothes persons who committed acts of violence on behalf of the regime outside of the strictures of the military or other official bodies. This included the original families as well as enterprising criminals and youths who have been eager to exploit the power and money that being a *shabbih* could offer. *Shabbiha* had the opportunity to traffic goods, steal, collect ransoms, and even take the homes of displaced Syrians. The monthly pay of *shabbiha* also ballooned to at least six times the average Syrian's monthly wage as the state's need for the groups that it renamed "village defenders" grew (Darke 2014). Many members sincerely believed that the civilians they attacked were terrorists and terrorist sympathizers, and saw themselves as defending Alawites who risked being targeted by the Free Syrian Army and other mostly Sunni rebels (*ibid*). Indeed, the state's claim that it had to attack protesters because they were extremists remains a common refrain among its supporters. Though the *shabbiha* have a reputation for being largely Alawite, Druze, Christian, and even some Aleppan Sunnis have joined the militia in order to defend the status quo (Abboud 2016). Some *shabbiha* were once military personnel, but they were civilians when they joined the *shabbiha*. One Sunni interviewee from Lattakia found the *shabbiha* to be both infuriating and amusing, quipping that boys who she knew and who were barely taller than she was suddenly saw fit to tell her to remain indoors. Such was the

intimacy of the war.

The Syrian military and foreign actors have also been involved in fighting as well as attacks against civilians in Syria. Many interviewees reported that the army would sometimes enter a neighborhood, sweep through it in order to remove any weapons, and then withdraw in order to allow the *shabbiha* to enter and massacre civilians. This approach was particularly damning because local resistance units stood a chance against the *shabbiha*, but were often powerless before the might of the Syrian military. The air force and its barrels full of explosives and shrapnel became a common specter throughout much of Syria. In areas near Lebanon, Hezbollah fighters have often augmented Syrian forces in an effort to ensure that Syria's woes do not place further strain on its neighbor. Iran's revolutionary guard has also been involved in funding, training, and sometimes fighting with Syrian soldiers. Indeed, one can find celebratory YouTube videos in which Iranian trainers congratulate soldiers for a strong showing in Arabic and Farsi.

Intergroup relations also began to change as protesters' rage at being attacked grew and the pro-regime media successfully linked protests to terrorism. Sixty-six of the Syrians interviewed for this project provided information about the pre-war sectarian make-up of their neighborhoods and villages. All were Sunni, and almost all of them agreed that pre-war interpersonal relations between Sunnis and Alawites were decent or even warm, though the state's preference for Alawites was well-known.

After 2011, relations worsened. Early protests consciously avoided any sectarian bent, with demonstrators often carrying signs that emphasized Syrians' oneness. In some areas, Alawites even protested with Sunnis, who made up the majority of protesters. Alawite participation waned as the regime deployed the *shabbiha* to attack civilians, which led Sunnis

to further mistrust all Alawites. The worsening of intergroup relations is also reflected research participants' residential preferences. While most of the Syrians interviewed for this project lived in mixed localities before the war, half of those individuals stated that they would not live near Alawites again. Even among those who were willing to resume living near Alawites, several felt that Alawites should be excluded from government because Alawites could not be trusted to renew attacks against Sunnis. The fact that residential preferences only changed among half of participants suggests that sectarian hostility did not engulf Syria as is often believed, but its growth is undeniable.

5. Late 2011- 2012: Rebellion into Civil War

By the spring of 2011, Syrians were tired of suffering at the hands of their own government. Raids by the Syrian army, curfews imposed by police, random shootings by untouchable snipers, arrests, and humiliation had become common across the country. The advent of the *shabbiha* adding everyday Alawites to their ranks meant that Sunnis in mixed neighborhoods felt that they could not trust their Alawite neighbors, which fed a general feeling of insecurity. Army incursions into protesters' neighborhoods and the state's insistence that demonstrators were terrorists left little room for reconciliation. By 2012, the conspicuous absence of a Libya-style intervention by foreign powers had combined with escalating violence to show Syrians opposed to Asad that they were responsible for their own defense.

Two processes began as a result of the violence against protesters. First, many Sunnis began to desert and defect from the military to great fanfare from western media outlets. Sunnis who left the military cited many reasons, including opposition to the abuse of Sunnis by an Alawite-led military and an increase in abusive behavior toward Sunni soldiers by

Alawite soldiers. The state lost a number of important generals when it opted to execute soldiers who refused to fire on civilians during an uprising in Idleb in June 2011. Note that this particular contentious episode began after security forces fired on funeral attendees who were mourning the deaths of civilians whom the regime killed weeks prior (Kassab and Shami 2016). Comparable stories abound, such as one man who defected after watching a member of security services drag a nude woman through the streets in retaliation for her allegedly calling Al-Jazeera (King 2012). Between 2011 and 2013, 70 high-ranking officers publicly left the military. Soldier defections and desertions were significant such that the period between 2011 and 2014 saw the army's 300,000 person force halved (Ohl, Albrecht, and Koehler 2015). Even conservative estimates place defection at 60,000 (Lister 2016). The generals among these defectors founded the Free Syrian Army. Colonel Riad al-Asʿad was the original leader of the group, having defected in July 2011. He and other leaders organized trainings, recruited fighters, lobbied for foreign support, and developed a media presence that made the FSA the face of Syria's resistance to western audiences. The state attempted to discourage leaving by torturing and murdering the family members of prominent defectors, but defections continued as more men declared loyalty to the Free Syrian Army. The defected generals earned support from Turkey and the Gulf in the latter months of 2011 and began launching missile attacks that killed state operatives (Bakri 2011). Syria's uprising had become a civil war.

A second process occurred at the same time as the military defections, if not slightly before. As Syrians grew angry with and fearful of the state and the *shabbiha* in particular, they began to form local protection units. Young men armed themselves with pistols, shotguns, and hunting rifles from home and marched with protesters in order to protect them. Those who

could afford to buy new weapons found plenty of them at the Lebanese, Iraqi, and Turkish border regions. The young men were not afraid to use their weapons, which also included knives and baseball bats, and would often clash with *shabbiha* during protests or at night as the units patrolled their neighborhoods. This observation underscores just how intimate the war in Syria became. While impersonal barrel bombs and sniper shootings were common, so was violence between one's neighbors and youths from one street over. Even as early as April 2011, news reports mentioned that young men had begun patrolling neighborhoods in order to check IDs (BBC 2011a). But these local protectors did not yet have a name.

The Free Syrian Army thus spread across Syria in three ways. In some areas, defected generals entered and took control of the protection units that already existed, turning them into vehicles for resistance. In other localities, these units declared themselves to be part of the FSA and sometimes followed its policies if and when such policies existed. Finally, in some cases, the FSA simply brought foot soldiers from other areas into a community that had no resistance of its own. Based on interviews, the former two dynamics seem to have been most common, which allowed the Free Syrian Army to maintain its image as an indigenous force. Indeed, as ISIS entered from Iraq, Jabhat Al-Nusra took whichever bodies it could get, and the Kurdish Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) restricted its interests to the north, the FSA was and still is understood as the only indigenous organization that has been active throughout Syria. The Free Syrian Army's decentralized structure and cooptation of an already massive protest movement allowed it to grow at a remarkable clip. In 2011, the FSA's membership controversially ranged from 1000 according to analysts, to 25,000 according to the group itself (Blomfield 2011). By 2015, a much less disputed estimate of 35,000 fighters had emerged (Alami 2015), though membership seems to have peaked in 2013 with 50,000

combatants (Sorenson 2016). Whatever the true figures may be, the Free Syrian Army's growth from nonexistent to tens of thousands of members in a span of less than five years is impressive.

As a result of the FSA's helter-skelter development, the group is a coalition of militias that often send one another reinforcements, share soldiers, and collaborate in other ways, but it is not an actual army. A nominal central body called the Joint Command exists, but it has yet to demonstrate any ability to direct or influence the Free Syrian Army's battalions. Some of the constituent units are led by experienced generals, while others are led by local strongmen. A unit may be named after the town where it began, the man who leads it, or may have no name at all. This jumbled makeup leaves the FSA with no group-wide ideology or identity platform, though it is an overwhelmingly Sunni Arab organization. The FSA instead encompasses a range of belief systems, as reflected in the fact that some units established *sharia* courts in areas they controlled, others left conflict resolution to tribal leaders, and yet other units left the questions of justice and conflict resolution unaddressed. Though the FSA is an indigenous organization, it benefits from foreign support. In fact, the Free Syrian Army's fractiousness has been facilitated by foreign backers such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which have preferred funding individual battalions that they could easily control over giving money to the FSA's attempt at a central command. Thousands of battalions made up the FSA by 2015 (Abboud 2016).

The Free Syrian Army officially supports democracy, as evidenced by its use of pro-democratic slogans and its published principles (see, "FSA Proclamation of Principles"). But, to belabor the point, the FSA is a coalition that developed without consistent standards for membership. One cannot ascribe any political orientation to the group beyond its anti-Asad

stance. Removing Syria's current president is the only uniting principle of the Free Syrian Army. As for civilians, even those who found value in the Islamic courts still preferred a secular state during interviews with the author.

The Free Syrian Army has been the rebel vanguard since its inception. Of all the opposition groups, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) has done the best job of wooing the west. Conversations about supporting Syrian rebels have generally revolved around the FSA. The group's decentralized structure has allowed it to spread across Syria, giving it a breadth that other rebels have not enjoyed and exposing various civilians to the FSA and its behavior. The Free Syrian Army thus serves as the primary case of this dissertation. Still, the other rebel organizations with which the Free Syrian Army has sometimes mixed and frequently competed merit mention.

One of the most famous among Syria's rebel groups is the Islamic State (IS), also known as Daesh from the Arabic acronym.[v] ISIS emerged from Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). AQI began in Iraq in 2004 under the leadership of the now deceased Jordanian Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi. AQI was extreme, even by Al-Qaeda's standards. Its decision to kill non-combatant Shi'as in order to spark sectarian war was so frowned upon that AQ's second in command, Ayman Al-Zawahiri, sent Al-Zarqawi a letter questioning his decisions in 2005 (BBC 2005). Later that year another AQ leader sent Al-Zarqawi a separate letter chastising him for the use of violence against popular Sunni leaders (Al-Libi 2005). AQI declared statehood, merged with other organizations, and changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI) around 2006. ISI then changed its name again in 2013, becoming the infamous Islamic State of Iraq and Syria as it expanded into the latter country (ISIS or ISIL, for Levant). ISIS' extreme policies never stopped frustrating central Al-Qaeda, but its decision to attack another

large Al-Qaeda affiliate, Jabhat Al-Nusra, in Syria led AQ to completely disown ISIS in February 2014 (Sly 2014). Against this backdrop, it is no surprise that ISIS, which is now simply the Islamic State (IS), and Jabhat Al-Nusra are bitterly opposed to one another.

The Islamic State supports an chauvinist Islamist ideology that believes Muslims have suffered indignity upon indignity, and must ascend to their rightful place as leaders of the world (*Dabiq* 2, 7). Since its inception, the Islamic State has aimed to establish a caliphate on the Arabian Peninsula from which it could rule Muslims and the rest of the world. The upheaval in Syria created an opportunity that IS could not ignore, so the group chose to expand from Iraq. Ideology had little to do with the group's early success in Syria. IS instead benefitted from a large number of foreign recruits and money, and the ability to tell Syrians that peaceful methods had not toppled the regime or kept them safe, and so force was necessary. Abboud (2016) has argued that the Free Syrian Army's violent treatment of civilians created an opening for the Islamist rebels in general, as they promised to overthrow the regime while maintaining a spirit of justice.

The Islamic State muscled its way into Syria, brought supporters in from abroad, and grew on a foundation of money, international recruitment, and civilian acquiescence and fear. The extent to which the Islamic State was popular—if it ever was—is unclear. IS was initially welcomed into Raqqa when it took the city in 2013, but the group seized the city in collaboration with the Free Syrian Army, Jabhat Al-Nusra, and other militias that had good reputations among civilians (Erlich 2014). IS likely benefitted from its association with more familiar, popular actors. That benefit had expired by the end of 2013, thanks to the Islamic State's now notoriously draconian policies and a ruthless push for independent territorial control that included attacks on Jabhat Al-Nusra and other former allies. Many Syrians

hoped that the rivalry between IS and Jabhat Al-Nusra would lead to the former's demise, and its tendency to recruit foreigners won it no fans (Morris 2013). The Islamic State was certainly tolerated in some areas, and even had fans among extremist sympathizers, but there is no evidence to suggest that it ever enjoyed a meaningful or lasting level of popularity. IS simply had money, chose good allies, and then turned on them before they could turn on it.

Various other Islamist groups have also been active in Syria, but IS and JN are the only ones that have managed to hold territory and offer meaningful resistance. Both groups have been brutal toward civilians. IS has been notorious in this regard, with its widespread executions, throwing alleged homosexuals from rooftops, and battalions of covered women who roam the streets, prepared to beat other women for noncompliance with the IS dress code. Jabhat Al-Nusra has also implemented draconian policies when possible, such as severing the hands of accused thieves. Extremism notwithstanding, Jabhat Al-Nusra and some Free Syrian Army units have a highly porous relationship that includes shared recruits and thus weapons (Sherlock 2012). The fact that the FSA shares members with an extremist Al-Qaeda affiliate while officially claiming to defend democracy points to the FSA's lack of ideological direction.

In the north, near Syria's border with Turkey, Kurdish fighters reign supreme. The Syrian Democratic Forces represents the coalition of these groups and purportedly aims to bring secular democracy to Syria. Other minorities, such as Assyrians, are also in the SDF. Though the coalition ostensibly opposes Bashar Al-Asad, most of its energy has gone toward combating IS, which it has removed from several cities including Raqqa, which was once considered an IS stronghold. The SDF has never been as brutal as its Islamist counterparts, but it has been accused of harassing and displacing non-Kurds in a bid to create an ethnically

pure territory that can later become the new Kurdish state. While Amnesty International has backed these claims, the U.N. Independent International Commission of Inquiry released a statement indicating that it searched for and found no evidence of such abuses (Antonopoulos 2015).

6. The Free Syrian Army's Relationship with Civilians

The Free Syrian Army has consistently lacked a unifying ideology, and has also failed to establish standardized training, rules of engagement, or impactful central authority. FSA units' behavior toward civilians consequently varies, as do the units' material fortunes and military abilities. Many interviewees commended the Free Syrian Army for its exemplary behavior and long list of good deeds. Members of the group often protected civilians from *shabbiha*, sometimes even erecting boundaries that made it difficult for the militias to enter. The units also provided material and non-material services, including free and speedy relocation from besieged areas, the distribution of food, conflict resolution, and trafficked goods such as medicines. A number of women lauded the Free Syrian Army for its treatment of women, maintaining that the soldiers were respectful and kept their distance—a stark contrast from the varied violations threatened by state-aligned forces and the Islamist opposition.

Word of such good deeds has made way to the US and other western countries, winning the Free Syrian Army a great deal of sympathy. Jordan and the United States jointly trained FSA members in 2012, hoping to turn the zones that the group controlled into stable zones of rebellion where the FSA could govern as other defectors and civilians flowed in (Luck 2013). Even after the Trump administration discontinued the CIA's collaboration with

the Free Syrian Army in 2017, the group continued to have access to American bureaucrats and politicians such that its representatives were able to lobby for continued support (Chalfant 2018).

But, FSA units were often poorly behaved and even violent. Many Syrians have complained of teenaged boys or men in their early twenties haughtily making demands of civilians, frequently commandeering property or restricting their freedom of movement. Corruption has sometimes interfered with efforts to distribute material goods, as food and even aid from foreign organizations have gone missing, likely finding their way onto lucrative clandestine markets or into the pantries of FSA members' families. FSA members have also been known to execute alleged regime collaborators without a trial, let alone any effort to find evidence of collusion. False accusations have often been made and corporal punishment for alleged collaboration that occurred years ago has been common. According to one young man from Homs, the state, while brutal, was the only organization in Syria that avoided killing civilians in areas under its control as of 2016 (interview with the author, S79). Despite the endorsement offered by some women, others interviewed accused FSA members of sexual harassment and violence, including the forced marriage of girls and women. Several civilians reported that FSA members used their position and the context of lawlessness to attack old rivals, often killing or imprisoning them. In cosmopolitan Aleppo, the Free Syrian Army burned a market to the ground for reasons that remain unclear, prompting one Syrian to remark "I don't like the dictatorship. But these people are showing themselves as worse." (Glass 2016)

In addition to varying with respect to behavior, FSA units have also varied in their military effectiveness. Some units were undeniably impressive, fashioning weapons out of

refuse, inflicting severe casualties upon *shabbiha* such that the militias stopped attacking, and even negotiating (admittedly short lived) truces with state officials. However poorly some of these units treated civilians, they were capable of providing protection for meaningful stretches of time. Meanwhile, other Free Syrian Army battalions hardly earned the title. Civilians in some areas reported that local units were too disorganized and/or small to offer any real defense.

In some areas, the type of opponent limited the local unit's military effectiveness more than the unit's skill. FSA units facing the *shabbiha* found themselves in a fight of militia versus militia and stood a real chance of winning in battle. But units up against the army, air force, Hezbollah, or security services faced opponents who were better armed and sometimes more numerous. Units in more strategically critical areas—such as those in Damascus or near airfields and military bases—may have faced more imbalanced battles than units in less significant areas, thus reducing their ability to be militarily effective. Regardless of the reasons for variation in effectiveness, differences certainly exist. Civilians thus have a wide array of experiences with the Free Syrian Army, ranging from the best case scenario of the respectful protector to the worst case of the exploitative blunderer. All units use violence, but the severity and direction of the violence varies.

Civilian attitudes toward the Free Syrian Army are also diverse. Some observers infer support for the group by noting that civilians seem to willingly provide the group with resources and sometimes even enlist (Tanir 2012). Meanwhile, other observers note civilians' frustration with rebels' disorganization and inefficacy (Al Shimale, al-Aswad, and Benoist 2018) as well as the group's more excessive uses of violence (Wagner 2012). One might expect a neat causal relationship whereby individuals who have observed violence directed at

civilians disavow the group, while as those who have not embrace it. No such simplicity exists. As later chapters will show, many civilians still embrace the Free Syrian Army despite their knowledge and sometimes observation of its civilian abuses. And they do so with good reason.

The richness and clarity of the aforementioned variation are a part of what make Syria fertile ground for a project on civilian opinions, and the Free Syrian Army a useful case for understanding why civilians support violent organizations. The conflict is recent such that variation in civilian opinions, militia behavior, militia effectiveness, and other factors are fresh in the minds of Syrians. Moreover, the war began and continues to unravel in a context of high connectivity through cellular phones and the Internet. Secondary sources to corroborate claims made during interviews are thus available. Syria's conflict has a clear identity element, given that the state is popular among minorities and the opposition is largely Sunni. Syria and the FSA thus furnish an opportunity to assess the role of identity and its interaction with other factors.

The Free Syrian Army is one of two indigenous groups in Syria, the other being the SDF. Focusing on the FSA thus allows the study to eschew concerns about the effects of foreign association on support. The organization's decentralized organization allowed it to spread across Syria and hold territory in many areas, which means that many Syrians have had exposure to it and can speak to their observations of it directly. A study of the FSA thus avoids the problem of hearsay as interviewees seek to recall events.

Of course, there are drawbacks associated with this context and case. Syria's war is ongoing, which complicates in-country research. Even if one can enter the country and secure interviews, getting reliable information from civilians who fear being spied on and suffering reprisal for criticizing groups that are near them is difficult. Granular information about the

conflict environment is thus gathered from refugees, which leaves the study vulnerable to recall bias. The Free Syrian Army's lack of a cohesive ideology precludes any meaningful statement about the role of ideology in civilians' responses to violence. Concerns such as recall bias would emerge with any case study. Fortunately, the other drawbacks can be compensated for in ways that will be addressed in the following chapters.

Now that the reader has a clear understanding of Syria's modern political history, we can return to the central question of this dissertation: why do civilians sometimes support organizations that harm them and/or their communities? The Free Syrian Army demonstrates just how counterintuitive such support can be. The FSA has no chance of governing the entire country. Even when the FSA did seem like a contender for the new government of Syria, it was not the only Sunni militia around, had no consistent ideological hook that it could use to endear itself to Syrians, and was inconsistent in its treatment of civilians. How does such an organization retain support even as late as 2016, by which time its demise was in progress?

The next chapter provides a qualitative discussion of the theoretical answer and its focus on two under-appreciated variables: the rebels' defensive ability and the extent to which the violence they use against civilians provides information about how to ensure one's safety. A formal model and discussion of some prominent cases follows. At that point, the analysis uses interview data from civilians who interacted with the Free Syrian Army to explain how an organization that hurts civilians can remain popular.

[i] The 1945 population estimate is based on Seltzer 1952, which placed the 1946 population at just under 304,000 persons. The 2015 estimate is based on a 2009 estimate from the Syrian Bureau of Statistics, which placed the Damascus population at approximately 1.7 million.

[ii] Syria's opposition to the invasion of Iraq should not be mistaken for support for Saddam Hussein, as Syria was often accused of allowing militants to flow into Iraq through its borders.

[iii] Some versions of the story claim that the parents were instead told "Forget your children. If you want children, make more children. If you don't know how, bring us your women and we will make them for you." (Malek 2017, 167)

[iv] The SNC now holds Syria's seat in the Arab League, but continues to reject violence and is peripheral to Syrian politics.

[v] Some observers of Middle Eastern politics prefer to call the Islamic State Daesh. IS detests the nickname, so using it is a way to express disapproval. This dissertation's decision not to use the name Daesh reflects a desire to use names that are familiar to the reader.

Chapter 3

The Theory: When Harm Doesn't Hurt Support

1. Qualitative Description

Two factors are dominant in shaping whether or not civilians support organizations that harm them and their communities: the perpetrator's effectiveness as a defender and the extent to which the perpetrator's violence is informative for the affected population. The effect of these two variables stems from the strong influence that they have on civilian safety. A civilian who wishes to remain safe needs to consider how likely the organization with which they have the most contact is to attack them and how capable it is of defending against attacks by others. Both variables inform civilians' beliefs about the implications of living under the group in the future. Defensive ability and informative violence are thus paramount because they control civilians' safety, and ensuring personal safety is generally the top priority of any civilian living under civil war.

Understanding the theory requires a clear comprehension of what defensive effectiveness and informative violence mean. Defensive effectiveness refers to the extent to which an actor is able and willing to thwart attacks against civilians by its competitors. An organization that can defend civilians against most attacks is highly effective, while one that usually fails or makes no effort at protection is ineffective. One could think of defensive effectiveness as the probability that the relevant actor will successfully halt an attempted attack.

Violence is informative when the criteria for target selection are clear, consistent, and selective such that the violence can accurately inform civilians' beliefs about how to avoid

being harmed. Informative violence is rooted in selective violence, or harm that is meted out against individuals based on specific behavioral criteria (Kalyvas 2006). Kalyvas argues that selective violence not only prevents civilians from turning against the perpetrator, but encourages cooperation from enterprising individuals hoping to remove their enemies. Other studies have also found that civilians respond to selective and indiscriminate violence differently (Moore and Shellman 2006; Benmelech, Berrebi, and Klor 2015). This evidence is consistent with the argument that civilians are rational and calculative, as the variation in responses indicates observation and information-based decision-making among civilians. But these studies err in jointly assuming that civilians can always observe selectivity and base decisions on it. In reality, the criteria for selective violence can be too broad, unclear, or inconsistent to give civilians any reason to overlook the violence. For the civilian , the violence may not seem selective even though the combatant intends for it to be so.

Many organizations, such as Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Shining Path, are selectively violent because they attack civilians on the basis of behavior. The problem is that the list of proscribed behaviors is so long that one can struggle to avoid transgression. In the case of AQI, punishable offenses have included women selling phallic vegetables such as cucumber and individuals having cousins who allegedly collaborated with enemies. Broad criteria constitute just one factor that may prevent selective violence from seeming selective to civilians. Selective violence may also appear to be wanton if the criteria by which targets are chosen are unclear or unstable. In this case, the information provided by violence would not be consistent enough to inform an understanding of how to avoid harm. Returning to the AQI example, leader Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi angered many in Al-Qaeda between 2004 and 2006 when he expanded the criteria for target selection. Whereas the group had previously targeted

foreign agents and Shiʿa militias, Al-Zarqawi began attacking individual Shiʿas, popular Sunni leaders whose beliefs were inconsistent with his, and Sunni civilians who were not sufficiently pious. Though Al-Zarqawi had defined reasons for targeting all of AQI's victims, the criteria were so quixotic and unclear to outsiders that Ayman Al-Zawahiri sought to reduce Al-Zarqawi's autonomy lest he erode AQI's popularity (Al-Libi 2005). The violence was selective, but it was not selective in a way that was comprehensible to civilians or that could tell them how to avoid becoming targets.

The concept of selective violence thus captures how combatants distribute violence, but not how civilians understand it. The limitation is critical for studies of civilian belief and behavior because civilians learn from their environments in order to draw conclusions about their safety. Civilians then base their actions on those conclusions. Selectivity is critical for assessing safety and it is reasonable to expect civilians to assess selectivity by observing violence. But, the concept of selective violence gives no indication of how instructive violence actually is. The utility of informative violence is that it addresses both the selectiveness of violence and civilians' capacity to observe and draw conclusions from violence.

Informative violence is comparable to a guidebook. Just as one can read the pages of a guide in order to better assemble furniture, one can sometimes read violence in order to understand how targets are selected and how to avoid becoming one. Violence is only informative if its criteria are clear, consistent, and specific. Otherwise, the violence is uninformative. Thus, all indiscriminate violence is uninformative because it gives the civilian no indication of how to avoid harm without fleeing, but not all uninformative violence is indiscriminate. Violence may be uninformative not because of failure to discriminate, but because the discrimination is too inconsistent or unclear to tell civilians how to avoid harm.

The informational role of violence is key.

2. Assumptions and Scope Conditions

The argument presented in this dissertation makes three assumptions in order to treat civilians as calculative beings who observe information about violence rather than fleeing as soon as it emerges. First, civilians are forward-looking. In contexts where violent death is a viable possibility, the future becomes an unknown quantity with serious implications for one's wellbeing. It is thus reasonable for anyone in a conflict environment to be concerned about the future and seek out information that they can use to develop beliefs about it. Indeed, research suggests that future concerns are instrumental in shaping civilians' decisions about whether or not to flee a conflict zone (Moore and Shellman 2006). One can thus expect civilians to factor beliefs about the future into their decisions about whom to support. The assumption of a forward-looking civilian explains why civilians pay attention to the hypothesized variables and also explains why the civilian may not embrace or reject an organization at the first sign of good or bad behavior. A lag may occur as the civilian attempts to verify their initial impression before taking the costly decision to support or reject an actor.

Second, this study assumes that civilians experience familiarity bias. Familiarity bias is the tendency to favor that which is known over that which is not (Fox and Levav 2000). The familiarity assumption helps explain why civilians stay in a violent area instead of fleeing to locations that could be safer, but that are not known to them. Familiarity bias also offers a hard test for the theory presented in this chapter, as it suggests that turning against a known organization that one once liked should be rare because such an event requires circumstances that overpower the individual preference for the known. Analysis that reveals changes in

defensive ability or informative violence to be capable of overpowering familiarity bias would thus indicate the variables' robustness.

The third assumption is that all groups harm civilians. Rebel groups seek to control territory. The processes of asserting and maintaining territorial dominion require controlling the flow of information, bodies, and goods in order to minimize collaboration with enemies, procure supplies and food for fighters, and establish social control. Each of these tasks requires violence, ranging from the punishment and execution of alleged traitors, to the forceful appropriation of civilian property. As forthcoming historical examples will demonstrate, even organizations that have a reputation for admirable restraint still practice violence against civilians in order to further their own interests.

The central variables, informativeness and effectiveness, vary over time and space, even for a single organization. For example, the Free Syrian Army was a highly effective defender that contained members' violent impulses in much of the Hama countryside, but was considerably less effective and more unwieldy in Damascus. Such variation can occur for a variety of reasons, including discipline, leadership changes, leader personalities, looting potential, and the strategic importance of the area under question. There are so many viable and overlapping explanations for variation in the independent variables that seeking to identify and focus on a dominant one would be unhelpful. This study thus focuses on the consequences of information and effectiveness. It offers some possible explanations for the variation in those variables, but avoids committing to one in particular. Further, the study focuses on civilian reactions to rebel organizations. There is no reason why the theory laid out in this chapter would be inherently unable to explain support for states that harm civilians during civil war. But, the major theoretical and empirical cases of interest are rebel

organizations, which also form the bulk of the literature on civilian reactions to violence. The language in this chapter thus focuses on insurgent groups for the sake of consistency and not because the theory does not apply to civilian reactions to states.

This dissertation does not aim to explain civilians' attitudes toward a combatant organization that consistently harms them explicitly because of their membership in an identity group. For example, Al-Qaeda in Iraq was violent toward many different peoples, but it targeted Shiʿa Iraqis *qua* Shiʿas rather than for their political leanings or noncompliance. There is no need to explore a Shiʿa's refusal to support AQI because individuals tend not to endorse actors that are opposed to their existence. Such endorsement can occur, but analyzing its origin is better suited to the rich literature on self-hatred in psychology (David 2013, Cross and Sullivan 2016). Moreover, if one knows that one will be targeted by a given actor for reasons that one cannot change, then questions of defensive effectiveness and informative violence cannot enter the equation. One knows that one cannot be safe in the presence of the relevant group and deliberation becomes unnecessary.

But, it seems that most civilians in conflict zones do not live in areas that are controlled by actors who wish to exterminate them because of some unchangeable quality. Whether the case is the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, or Syria, civilians will generally come into contact with organizations that threaten them for behavioral, attitudinal, or ideological transgressions. This may be because at-risk civilians flee areas dominated by chauvinist groups (Davenport, Moore, and Poe 2003). In any case, civilians generally face militant groups that threaten them for reasons other than identity. That more common case constitutes the focus of this study.

The question under investigation focuses on the responses and attitudes of civilians in the country that has been effected by civil war. The attitudes of foreign populations, states,

NGOs, and other foreign actors are not subjects of inquiry. Foreign persons and institutions benefit from distance from violence. They may also have interests that diverge from those of civilians in the conflict area, and foreign actors' information will likely differ as well due to the distortion that comes with efforts to represent dynamic and confusing contexts after the fact.

The argument made here offers informativeness and defensive effectiveness as the primary factors shaping civilian support, but not as the sole determinants thereof. Both variables must be considered alongside the threats present in the area, any material goods that the group under analysis offers, and the cost of supporting it. A simple model demonstrates how these variables interact and generates hypotheses. Critically, the model demonstrates that identity, while impactful, is unlikely to be a decisive factor in explaining civilian support. Readers who prefer empirical insights may skip to Section 4, which provides contemporary examples of groups that represent each of the ideal types that animate this dissertation.

3. The Model and Hypotheses

Civilians pursue security for themselves and their families, but security and its absence are linked to a number of different factors. As the model elaborates the interaction between defensive effectiveness, informativeness, goods, threat environment, and the cost of support, it also provides a detailed understanding of the mechanism behind the theory. Each of the variables independently and interactively influences the civilian's ability to live, whether by holding implications for the frequency of violent attacks or by shaping access to needs such as food, water, and medicine. Civilians thus support an organization when its attributes and the threat environment interact such that the group has a net positive effect on their survival prospects.

3.a Model Setup

The following utility function represents the payoff that a civilian receives for supporting a given organization.

$$\text{Civilian Utility (Support)} = DT+G-V(1-I)$$

Explication of the model begins with the discussion of each variable and its significance and ends with a discussion of more general implications. The first variable, *D*, is defensive effectiveness. It represents the probability that the group in question will thwart any attack that occurs. It is possible for a group to be completely ineffective, meaning that it cannot defend against any attack. But, it is not possible for an entity to be invulnerable. Even powerful actors like the US and the UK sometimes find themselves attacked. Possible values for *D* thus range from 0 to 1, exclusive.

$$D = [0,1)$$

The second variable, *T*, represents threats. It is the probability that the civilian's area will be attacked by threats that are geographically based outside of the civilian's community, such as rival militias and state forces. It is possible for an area to be wholly safe from attack if enemies are far away or extremely weak. One can also know that one's area will be attacked with certainty if incursions are frequent or if the aggressing faction has made its intentions clear. Possible values thus range from 0 to 1, inclusive.

$$T = [0,1]$$

DT represents the joint probability that an area is attacked by an outside threat and that the group under study is able to defend civilians against that attack. This probability yields an intuitive result within the civilian's utility function: the value of protection is

influenced by the probability of an attack. Defense, no matter how effective, becomes less valuable as outside threats become less severe. Protection simply has no value in the absence of something to fear.

G denotes that value of any services or material goods that the group under study provides to civilians. Food and medicine are common examples of goods that combatants provide to civilians, while dispute resolution is a common service. The value range for *G* is normalized to 0 to 1, inclusive. One can think of the extremes as no goods whatsoever (0) and a plethora of highly valued goods (1).

$$G = [0,1]$$

V is the level of violence that a locally active insurgent group practices. The variable encompasses all forms of force that are directed at civilians, including policing, the extraction of rent, and various forms of abuse. Note that *V* is not bound by normative criteria, as it encompasses generally acceptable forms of violence such as punishing murderers as well as unacceptable acts such as theft by strong-arm. Values closer to 0 represent lower levels of violence while values closer to 1 represent higher levels of violence. This range facilitates a frequentist interpretation whereby closeness to 0 indicates that the group practices violence closer to 0% of days, By definition, every rebel group practices violence sometimes, but it is possible for a rebel group to practice infrequent violence. For example, a rebel group that operates in an area that it plainly controls, enjoys external material support, and has a disciplined rank and file may practice violence rarely due to the lack of a need to defend against attacks or extract rent from civilians.

$$V = (0,1)$$

Lower violence levels from combatants yield higher utilities for the civilians who

support them. But the reality is that an organization that fails to use violence against civilians will struggle to survive as it fails to deter collaboration with enemies and limit lawlessness that foments resentment and thus resistance. Further, many organizations have utilized high levels of violence against civilians in war zones and nonetheless remained popular. Modifying the *V* term with (1-I) allows the model to address why this occurs. *I* denotes the frequency with which the violence that rebels practice is informative. Values tending toward 0 connote a body of violence that is primarily uninformative, and provides civilians with no reliable beliefs about whom the group will target or why. Values that are closer to 1 represent a higher frequency of violence that is limited by clear, communicated criteria that inform civilians' usable beliefs about precisely who is at risk. One can also think of higher *I* values corresponding to groups that are more disciplined and controlled, while lower values emerge from the behavior of unconstrained, unpredictable, and/or undisciplined groups. While some groups are entirely unrestrained in their use of violence, perfect restraint across an organization of many armed persons is not possible.

$$I = [0,1)$$

An understanding of *V* and *I* allows for a fuller comprehension of the utility function's final term, $V(1-I)$. This joint probability denotes the chances that any given act of violence occurs and is informative. Higher products denote higher levels of uninformative violence, while lower products signify greater levels of informative violence. The term $V(1-I)$ represents the portion of the civilian's payoff that comes from civilian-directed violence and offers two primary insights. First, civilians do not respond to all violence the same way. The more informative the violence is, the less of a negative effect it has on the civilian's utility. More literally put, as *I* grows, it pushes *V* toward 0. Thus, the level of violence that an actor commits

does not independently shape civilian reactions. Instead, the type of violence is influential. An actor could be extremely violent (V=.99), but in a highly informative manner (I=.99), and find that its behavior has no negative effect on civilians' utility. This quality of the model exists because a civilian's primary objective is to secure their personal safety, which leads them to discount violence that does not affect them and that they expect to continue not affecting them.

The second insight offered by this final term is that uninformative violence is more damaging than informative violence is helpful. In the best case scenario when I is set arbitrarily close to 1, the best possible outcome is that the violence leaves the value of defense and goods unscathed. Meanwhile, lower values of I actually reduce the value that comes from other variables. One could take this observation to mean that informative violence allows civilians to grant the insurgent group credit for its positive attributes, while uninformative violence detracts from any more positive qualities that the group may have. One could also take the relatively strong effect of uninformative violence to mean that a group that protects civilians while also harming them reduces the value that a civilian can assign to the group's protective behavior. It may be difficult to find the value in protection from outside threats if the protection comes with the weight of dangers within one's community.

The utility of supporting an organization is compared to the cost of support, C. The cost of support encapsulates risks such as being harmed for being a partisan of the group, which is a serious concern if one supports an organization while living in an area that it does not completely control. Even where harm to one's person is unlikely, other forms of cost emerge, including taxation, labor, and donations. Cost is normalized to 0 to 1, inclusive, as support is never costless, but can be extremely high if punishment for support is both extreme

and likely.

$$C = (0,1]$$

Support for an organization that harms civilians occurs when the utility of that support exceeds its cost, when DT+G-V(1-I) > C. Comparative statics clarify some of the theory's insights. All else equal, the probability of support increases as *I* rises. Mechanically, this relationship exists because greater values of *I* reduce the value of the term V(1-I). As the value of V(1-I) falls, so does its negative effect on the total utility. The higher the utility, the greater the chance that it will exceed any given cost. This relationship underscores the proposition that civilians do not punish all forms of violence. If the violence is largely informative, then it has no effect on their utility because the value of *V* tends toward 0. If the violence is largely uninformative, then the negative effect of *V* takes away from the overall utility, thereby reducing the probability that the utility will exceed any given cost.

The probability of support also falls as the cost of support rises. All else equal, as *D* rises, support becomes more likely. Uninformative violence thus reduces the probability of support while defensive effectiveness increases the probability of support. Increases in *G* and *T* are also associated with increases in the probability of support, *ceteris paribus*. Material goods thus make civilians more likely to support an organization, as does the threat of attacks from elsewhere. Neither insight is surprising, as civilians draw benefit from both material welfare and from being protected from incursions. But, as the following analysis will demonstrate, the effect of material benefits in particular can be overshadowed by other factors.

3.b Contexts and Hypotheses

Variation in the two primary variables, defensive effectiveness and informative

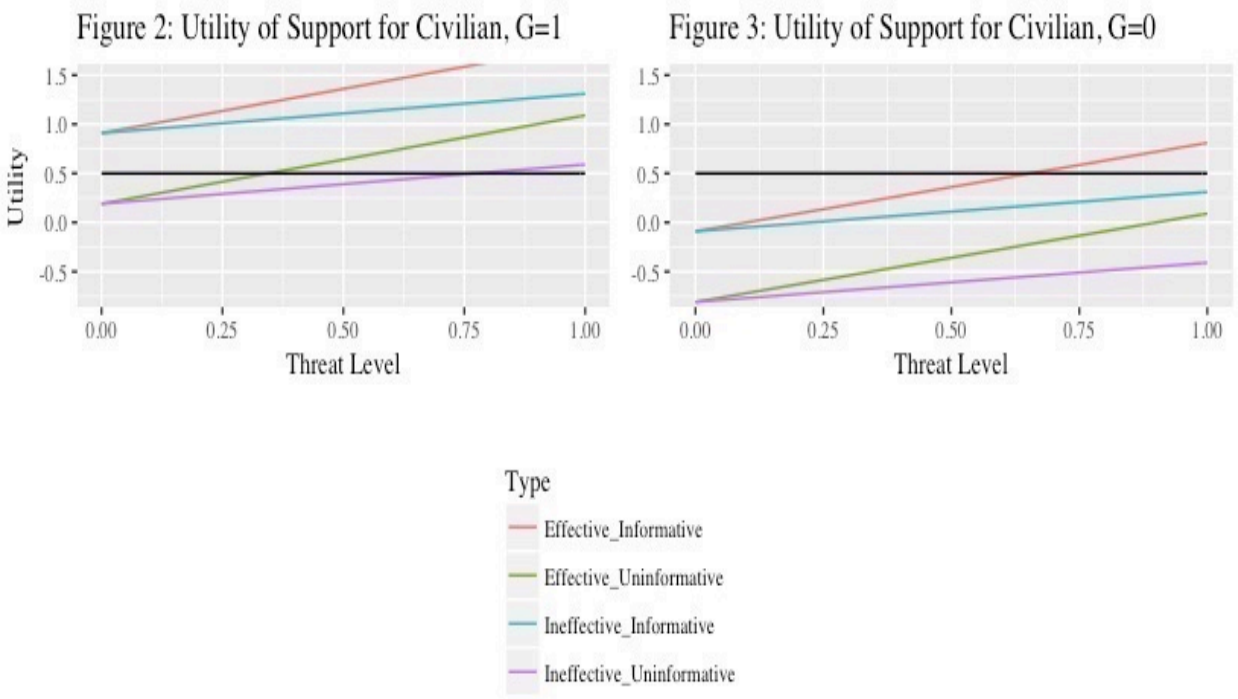
violence, creates four possible ideal types as seen in Figure 1. In reality, the space between these contexts is a gradient rather than a hard line. The following paragraphs detail the expectations and relationships that emerge within each context, thereby clarifying the interaction between all of the relevant variables. The values used in the equations are set at extremes in order to clearly demonstrate the argument's logic, but more moderate values change none of the presented relationships.

Figure 1: Summary of Possible variation.

High Defensive Effectiveness, Informative Violence	Low Defensive Effectiveness, Informative Violence
High Defensive Effectiveness, Uninformative Violence	Low Defensive Effectiveness, Uninformative Violence

Figures 2 and 3 demonstrate the intuition behind the theory laid out in this chapter. Each line represents the utility that the civilian receives for supporting one of the ideal types of militant organizations. High defensive effectiveness is defined as $D=.9$, meaning that the militant in question wards off 90% of outside attacks. Low defensive effectiveness is set at .4, meaning that the group only thwarts 40% of outside attacks. For this demonstration, V is set at .9 across all lines, meaning that the rebel group practices violence against civilians 90% of the time. This seemingly high value is realistic. Indeed, the centrality of violence to governance, which is what rebels hope to achieve, has been made clear by the dominance of the Weberian definition of a state. The .9 figure captures violence that comes from controlling

the population, weeding out collaborators, executing revenge killings, arresting and punishing thieves, and so forth. Lulls in violence do occur, but as the following empirical chapter makes clear, rebels commit a wide variety violent acts of varying morality against civilians. Different *V* values do not change the relationships between the four possible contexts.



The value of *I* varies across contexts. In order to clarify the intuition of the model, an informatively effective actor receives an *I* value of .9, meaning that the vast majority of violence that it practices is informative. Meanwhile, an uninformatively violent actor receives an *I* value of .1, meaning that hardly any of the violence that it practices against civilians is informative. These extreme values carry the benefit of making the model clearer, but it is also worth noting that such high and low values are not unfathomable. As the next section details,

many organizations such as AQI and the Shining Path have been overwhelmingly uninformatively violent while others, such as the FMLN, have exhibited an impressive capacity for restraint and communication.

Figure 2 shows the utility function of support, where the value of goods offered by the militant organization is 1—goods' highest possible value. Readers who wish to see the exact formulae can look to the appendix, but the trends represented by the lines are most important here. The red line is the utility function of a civilian who supports an effective, informatively violent militant. The teal line is the utility function for a civilian who supports an ineffective, informatively violent group. The green line is for an effective, uninformatively violent group. The purple line is then for an ineffective and uninformatively violent group. The cost of support, C(support), is set at .5 in order to facilitate threshold analysis.

The most obvious general trend is that the red and teal lines remain well above the cost threshold, the green line cuts through it, and the purple line requires the highest threat value in order to exceed cost. Support is thus most likely when the militant in question is an effective defender who is informatively violent, and least likely when it is ineffective and uninformatively violent. In comparing the two variables that animate this theory, it is worth noting that an ineffective protector who is informatively violent (teal utility) fairs better than an effective protector that is uninformatively violent (green utility). The relationship holds even at the maximum threat level of T=1, where attacks by outside actors occur 100% of the time. One may thus gather that while both factors matter, the negative impact of uninformative violence is stronger than the positive effect of defensive ability. A civilian rewards rebels' predictable violence more than they reward capable protection. The insight is reasonable when one considers that a civilian will spend more time sharing space with a

locally dominant militant than they will with its competitors, thus rendering its behavior toward them particularly significant. Uninformative violence is a risky undertaking for a rebel group. Also notice that the effective protectors (teal and green) have greater slopes than the ineffective protectors, thus underscoring how the value of protection grows considerably with the severity of outside threats.

Consider the utility functions individually. Where the cost of support is a moderate .5, an effective protector who practices informative violence and offers perfect goods is guaranteed support. Its defensive abilities will likely prevent civilians from having to pay the costs of support, while its ability to provide goods would further compensate for any cost. With a slope equal to .9, each incremental increase in threat level provides a substantial boost to the utility of supporting this best-case militant. An actor that provides goods, protection, and clear directions for how to maintain one's safety simply has a great deal to offer a civilian.

An ineffective protector who is informatively violent (teal line) is less beneficial to the civilian, but still supported. Since the *D* value is lower in this scenario than in the previous context, the slope is necessarily lower, at .4. The incremental premium generated by offering protection from outside threats is reduced where that protection is less effective. While the joint effect of threat and high-quality goods is usually enough to lift this actor into popularity, support becomes more sensitive to cost in this scenario. In particular, a very low threat level combined with a very high cost would deter civilian support that would remain if the value of *I* were higher. Rebels in places where being attacked by outside threats is unlikely (*T* is low) and the cost of supporting a rebel is high (heavy punishments for treason) would likely struggle to find backers.

An effective protector whose violence is uninformative (green line) finds itself buoyed

by goods provision, but is vulnerable. The utility of supporting such an actor can only exceed the cost of .5 for threat values above .34. Even with the benefit of perfect goods, the effective but uninformatively violent protector still relies on external threats to push civilians to sympathize with it. The green line is also much more sensitive to cost than those above it. A cost of .7, which denotes a state or other actor capable of punishing civilians for support, has no effect on the first two contexts. But the higher cost increases the threat threshold necessary for support to .56. A 20% increase in the cost of supporting an effective and unpredictable actor necessitates a 64% increase in external threats if the actor is to retain support. The change showcases the vulnerability that uninformative violence introduces to an actor that seeks support. Such an actor is only worth backing and suffering under if it offers protection from something horrific. The green line further showcases the limits of goods provision as a method for securing popular support. Even where goods are perfect, their ability to ensure support falters when the militant in question is an ineffective protector, and weakens further when an actor is also wantonly violent.

The bottom utility function represents the payoff for a civilian who supports a defensively ineffective organization that practices uninformative violence. The line's position reflects that, where the cost of support is moderate, support of an ineffective protector whose violence is uninformative is unlikely. The utility of such support only exceeds .5 when goods are perfect and threat is very high at .78. It is hard to fathom that an organization that fails to discriminate or communicate effectively about its violent behavior while also offering feckless protection would provide quality material benefits, which suggests that the utility for supporting it would never reach such heights. Further, the maximum value of this function is .59. Thus, when threat is set at its maximum and the outside actor in question is thus able to

inflict a high cost for supporting the rebels, support utility can only reach .59. A situation in which an actor such as a state poses a major threat but does not impose a heavy cost on supporting its enemies is unlikely to materialize. Support for a group that is ineffective and uninformative is thus implausible. All of the conditions that might make it possible are unlikely to emerge.

Comparing Figure 2 to Figure 3 reveals how robust the above trends are to the utility of goods, which are set to 0 in Figure 3. The cost of support remains at .5. A goods valuation of 0 is not unrealistic given that rebel groups do not always receive funding that can pay for public goods, may choose not to use funding that they have to distribute material benefits, and can suffer under blockades that make it impossible for goods such as food and fuel to be acquired. The loss of goods does not change the ordering of the utility functions: effective protectors who practice informative violence remain the most beneficial to the civilian, with ineffective informative actors in second, effective uninformative groups in third, and ineffective uninformative groups last. Effective protection and the informativeness of violence remain critical in shaping the civilian's assessment of the group.

But, some changes do emerge when the value of goods disintegrates. The worse the context is, the more the lack of goods weighs down the utility of support. Instead of guaranteed support, the effective, informative actor that provides no goods receives support if and only if the threat level exceeds .65. Even the most capable and most discriminating militant group fails to receive support without providing goods, unless attacks from outside organizations happen frequently. More generally, one can take this result to mean that an absence of goods leads the civilian to place greater emphasis on the severity of threats they face when deciding whether or not to support a rebel group that promises safety.

Without the ability to provide goods, an ineffective protector that is informatively violent yields a maximum utility of .31. With cost at .5, this organization could no longer receive the civilian's support. A lower cost of support or moderate level of goods provision would return the group to viability. A conditional civilian response to ineffective, but informatively violent rebels thus emerges. The civilian is likely to support the group if goods and outside threats are high. And, if goods provision and/or outside threats are low, support can only occur if backing the group is not costly. Support that emerges in this sub-context is weak because it is sensitive to the cost of support—the utility of support is so low that cost can easily exceed it. By contrast, the support that develops under other circumstances, such as those with high goods provision, is strong because it yields a high utility that is less likely to fall below cost, and is thus more robust. This bifurcation of support matches the weak/strong dichotomy presented in the introduction. Weak support (appreciation and acceptance) is a relatively low-cost option that matches a fairly low utility. Meanwhile, strong support (activities meant to empower the group) incurs a higher cost that can be tolerated because of the high utility that the civilian derives from support.

The utility of supporting a defensively capable, but wantonly violent actor becomes overwhelmingly negative in the absence of goods. Simply increasing the benefit of goods to .1 brings more of the function into positive ranges, but the value of backing such a group remains low for the civilian. Comparing this mostly negative utility function to the primarily positive function yielded by supporting incapable, informatively violent groups underscores the large effect of unclear violence on the civilian's experience. The contrast further suggests that the risk of external attack is more tolerable than the risk posed by an unpredictable actor to which one has daily exposure. Without goods, one finds it difficult to support a group

whose behavior complicates any effort to know whom it will harm. There is simply no incentive to tolerate that risk. Finally, an ineffective protector who practices uninformative violence yields a consistently negative utility for the civilian, which makes support for the militant impossible. There is no reason to support a group that does not serve one's security or material interests and actively harms the former.

The swelling effect of goods across the contexts yields an important conclusion about the interaction between violence and goods: the less an organization can support a civilian's safety, the more it relies on goods to generate support. And, the more the group aids security, the less it needs material goods to earn support, especially if threat is considerable. One cannot dismiss the role that material goods play in generating support for a militant, but the analyst can overstate the role of material benefits by failing to consider the conditionality of their effect. Four hypotheses emerge.

> H1: If an actor is informatively violent AND an effective protector, then civilians will support it despite its violent behavior given that a threat is present.
>
> H2: If an actor is an ineffective protector but informatively violent, then:
> a: civilians support the actor strongly if goods and outside threats are high.
> b: civilians support the actor weakly if goods and/or outside threats are low.
>
> H3: If an actor is an effective protector and employs violence uninformatively, then civilians will support the actor if and only if nearby belligerents pose an imminent threat.
>
> H4: If an actor is both uninformatively violent AND an ineffective protector, then civilians will reject it.

4. Empirical Examples

This chapter has thus far focused on theory in an intentionally abstract faction.

Historical examples of each of the ideal types and their fortunes when it comes to civilian support illuminate the relationships and mechanisms at play.

4.a Defensively effective with informative violence: the FMLN in El Salvador

Throughout the 1980s, El Salvador was dragged through a civil war between the state and a coalition of leftist militias called the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, or FMLN as a Spanish acronym. The FMLN's two primary factions—the People's Revolutionary Army (ERP) and the Farabundo Martí Liberation People's Forces (FPL)—were noteworthy for their careful treatment of civilians. For example, the FPL rejected forced recruitment of civilians as a matter of policy, while the ERP only used such tactics rarely (Hoover Green 2017). Though the FMLN was cautious in its use of violence, it was not squeamish. The organization exiled government collaborators from their communities and killed those who refused to leave. Observations such as these have led scholars and the Truth Commission to take note of the FMLN's highly informative use of violence (Wood 2009)—targets for violence were chosen for clear reasons, with state collusion being chief among them.

In addition to practicing informative violence, the FMLN was an effective combatant. It developed its own landmines and fortified neighborhoods well enough to keep state forces at bay (Moroni, Bracamonte, and Spencer 1995). Given state forces' penchant for forceful conscription and sexual violence, such protection was critical. Further evidence of the FMLN's military effectiveness lies in its consistent ability to reorganize its forces in order to counter changes in state strategy and hold territory (Wood 2003). Instead of suffering defeat like most insurgent groups, the FMLN managed a negotiated settlement in El Salvador before

becoming a political party whose candidate became president of the country in 2009. Civilians rewarded the FMLN with impressive support long before they voted its leadership into office. Civilians furnished the group with critical intelligence (Wickham-Crowley 1992), formed the backbone of its supply distribution network, and sometimes even became part-time combatants (Wood 2003).

Potential explanations for the civilians' response focus on the appeal of the FMLN's leftist ideology, which has a history of success throughout Latin America. The class dimension of the FMLN may indicate class identity as an explanation for support, but some poor Salvadorans rejected the FMLN, while also refusing to back the state. Moreover, the FMLN gained a great deal of support via its friendly relationship with Catholic priests in its early days (*ibid)*, which further calls into question the number of supporters who emerged due to ideology. Class identity and ideological appeal probably readied the ground for the FMLN, but neither provides a clear causal line to support for the group, nor does either factor consistently appear in FMLN supporters' accounts of why they backed the group (Hoover Green 2017; Wood 2003). The FMLN required rather than gave material support, so material incentives were irrelevant.

The argument presented in this chapter maintains that civilians supported the FMLN because of the combination of protection and predictability that it created in a context of high threat. This argument would explain why the organization consistently gained support despite the facts that it sometimes harmed civilians, was not ideologically cohesive across its constituent groups, and provided meagre material benefit. The proposal also provides a potential explanation for why the FMLN was not supported by all civilians who were poor and sympathetic toward the left—the group may not have been equally effective or

discriminatory across all of the spaces in which it operated. Variation in the behavior of a single group, and civilians responses to it, will form the backbone of the analytic method in this work's coming chapters. The power of a violence-based theory of support is that it explains why civilian attitudes toward a single organization vary across time and space.

4.b Defensively ineffective and informatively violent: Hamas

Hamas emerged as the First Intifada shook the Occupied Territories in the late 1980s. The organization's charter established Islam as the ideological core through which its objectives were filtered. The charter also made it clear that the group endeavored toward Muslim control of Palestine and the destruction of Israel, though its commitment to the latter has come into question (Harel 2018). Though the Israeli-Palestinian conflict lacks the reciprocal threat necessary for civil war, civilians in Palestine—and in Gaza in particular—believe themselves to be under siege (Byman 2011) while Hamas openly attempts to provide protection and order. The Palestinian context is thus appropriate for understanding civilian responses to violent organizations in combat environments,

Hamas' involvement in both Intifadas and its demi-governance of the Gaza Strip give it a level of notoriety that outstrips its ability to defend civilians. The late 1990s saw Hamas struggle to survive as Israeli officials imprisoned and killed its members and the suicide bombings that brought it prominence became rarer. Even once Hamas regained its ability to launch attacks against Israeli targets in the early 2000s, Israeli demolition of civilians' homes and widespread arrests continued. In 2008, a series of Israeli airstrikes and raids in the Gaza Strip, which Hamas controls, killed hundreds of Palestinians. The group is powerless against incursions and blockades. Hamas is sometimes a capable terrorist organization, but it is rarely

an able protector.

Hamas has generally maintained clear and consistent criteria for harming Palestinian civilians, though it has been indiscriminate when targeting Israelis. The group killed dozens of Palestinians who were accused of collaboration with Israel during the early months of the First Intifada. The murder of collaborators was so well-known that Israeli intelligence kept informants in line by threatening to reveal them to Hamas (Byman 2011). Rival factions and their supporters have also been fair targets, as Hamas has battled other Palestinian Islamist groups and Fatah. The punishments that Hamas doles out to transgressors can be brutal, like in 2014 when the group imprisoned and tortured dozens of Gazan civilians for collaborating with Israel (Amnesty International 2015). But, the violence against Palestinians is also executed by clear criteria that remained consistent across the group's existence.

In addition to showing an ability to discriminate in the use of violence, Hamas has proven itself able to distribute goods. The group has famously spent millions of dollars on the upkeep of Hamas prisoners' and suicide bombers' family members, but it also maintains a multitude of health clinics, schools, and training camps. Throughout the 90s, Hamas provided direct aid to civilians, including cash, sacks of flour, and sometimes even fare for a taxi (Levitt 2004). Recent improvements in surveillance technology may compromise the group's ability to distribute goods moving forward, but it has a healthy record of giving civilians tangible benefits—especially civilians who manifest some affiliation with Hamas.

The theory in this chapter expects for an ineffective protector that practices informative violence to be supported if it provides material goods and external threats are high. The prior paragraphs have established that Hamas provides goods, while the regular possibility of incursion or air attacks provides an external threat. And, as the theory predicts,

Hamas has enjoyed popular support in the Gaza Strip. In 2006, Hamas received over half of Palestinian parliamentary seats with 77% turnout (BBC News 2006).

4.c Effective defender and uninformatively violent: Al-Qaeda in Iraq

Early 2000s' Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) exemplifies combatant organizations that are effective protectors, but that practice violence that does not facilitate civilian learning. After the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, many Iraqis were terrified of the US and mistrustful of its intentions. American heavy-handedness and rumors thereabout made matters worse. For example, in 2003 American soldiers mounted bulldozers blaring jazz music in order to raze the date farms of dozens of farmers who the soldiers accused of withholding information about militants (Cockburn 2003). Violent debacles such as the abuses in Abu Ghraib also led Iraqis to believe that the United States constituted an undeniable threat. In an interview with the author, former spokesman of the Sunni Muslim Scholars Association, Dr. Mohammad Bashar Al-Faydi, noted that sectarian fears were no match for fear of the US. He maintained that he and other Sunnis feared the Shiite Badr Organization for its aggressive targeting of Sunnis, but ignored it because they felt that the US was a more pressing concern. In a country flush with the sound of gunfire, America boomed the loudest. Two other, less politically involved Iraqis echoed his sentiments.

Al-Qaeda offered Sunnis protection from the US. Its operatives collaborated with tribal leaders throughout 2004 and 2005 to reduce American influence in western Iraq. Car bombs, IEDs, and snipers made much of western Iraq an incredibly dangerous place to be a soldier. Well-publicized attacks in countries like Spain bolstered AQI's claim to be part of a massive movement to combat western aggression led by the United States. AQI's labor paid

off. By 2006, the group had ensured that there were swathes of Ramadi and western villages where the US had no military presence (Russell 2010). AQI had established itself as a capable protector.

Unfortunately for Iraqi civilians, Al-Qaeda in Iraq did not limit its crushing talent for violence to foreign adversaries. Territories it ruled fell under strict, mercurial rules that were sometimes hard to follow. For example, a couple from western Iraq gave the author a detailed description of how AQI sought to restrict women's movements. The group initially forced women to cover under pain of fines. Soon thereafter, AQI escalated to banning women from selling or handling any phallic foods, including cucumbers or bananas, in public. AQI also handed out draconian punishments, such as forcing a man to shoot his own son for the latter's suspected collaboration with American forces. Low-level members of Al-Qaeda also stole from civilians, forcing senior members to release a statement promising to punish them (CTC, #NMEC-2007-637813). AQI was too disorganized to control the terms on which violence was meted out, and those terms often created a threshold so low that transgression was inevitable. It was thus impossible for civilians to know how to avoid harm. AQI's treatment of civilians was so bad that central Al-Qaeda sent a letter to, Al-Zarqawi, the leader of AQI leadership, insisting that the group moderate its behavior lest Sunnis turn against it (CTC, "`Atiyah's Letter to Zarqawi").

Early in the war, when the United States presented a massive threat, Al-Qaeda was rewarded for its protection services. Civilians provided AQI with intelligence more readily than they did the US (Cohen and Shapiro 2012). The group also watched its ranks swell as coalitions with tribes developed and enabled it to expand its reach and authority: marriages between AQI members and tribal leaders' daughters were even sometimes orchestrated in

order to cement mutually beneficial relationships. So long as the threat from the outside was significant, AQI's defensive effectiveness earned it support despite its wanton violence.

But, the situation changed in 2006. Tribes that had once cooperated with AQI turned against it. After a meeting in which 25 of 31 western tribes proclaimed their willingness to attack AQI, one leader complained that AQI had been "killing people for no reason" while another lambasted AQI as a group of killers (Ansary and Adeeb, 2006). Standard accounting for the change claims that American incentives and a surge of US forces brought about the turn of the tribes against AQI in 2006. The theory laid out here points to another explanation: the change in the immediacy of the American threat. Once the US military had been pushed away from much of western Iraq and could not offer a routine source of violence, AQI became the only threat left. The US also began to emphasize civilian safety in 2006, which reduced the threat that it posed during operations. AQI had been violent all along, but in 2006 it suddenly became violent all by itself. In the absence of a threat, its defensive power had no value. That left civilians with nothing but AQI's wanton violence, which meant they had no reason to support it, and thus turned against it, which pushed tribal leaders to do the same. Thus the fall of Al-Qaeda in Iraq began.

4.d Ineffective and uninformative: Al-Shabab in Somalia

Al-Shabab emerged in 2006 after breaking away from the Islamic Courts Union (ICU), an entity that sought to create a caliphate in crumbling Somalia. Thanks to an America-backed incursion by the mostly Christian Ethiopia, Al-Shabab was initially popular with the public. In 2009, the group even launched a diasporic funding campaign that raised $40,000. Its numbers grew from approximately 400 in 2006 to a minimum of 7,000 in 2009

(Agbiboa 2014). These heady days were cut short by a brutal reality: despite its ability to launch flashy attacks in Somalia and Kenya, Al-Shabab was an ineffective insurgent organization. Between 2011 and 2013, Al-Shabab was kicked out of Mogadishu and other locations in southern Somalia. The group maintains a presence in some areas, but retreats whenever the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) approaches (Bryden 2014). Al-Shabab's provision of goods has been as weak as its military performance. In 2011, the group rejected western aid to civilians who were starving under its watch. Al-Shabab also conspicuously failed to use funds that it gathered from its control of ports to provide food or other goods to civilians (BBC 2017).

In addition to being ineffective, Al-Shabab has been consistently brutal. Children often have often fled their homes under threat of being forced into the group's Islamic schools and/or conscripted (HRW 2018). Al-Shabab killed hundreds in an October 2017 attack on Mogadishu, and is responsible for over half of civilian deaths that occurred between January 2016 and October 2017 (UNSOM 2017). The remainder of civilian deaths were caused by clan militias, state forces, and AMISOM. Al-Shabab thus harms more civilians than three other major combatants combined. The group stones alleged women adulterers and amputates the limbs of supposed thieves. Al-Shabab is as defensively ineffective as it is uninformatively violent toward civilians.

As a result, Al-Shabab has seen its support dwindle. Instead of enlisting in its ranks, civilians now seek to avoid it. The group struggles to raise funds and is even unpopular among salafis in Somalia, while clans that once cooperated with it now seek to siphon off the remainder of its resources (Bryden 2014). In 2016, Al-Shabab's efforts to collect taxes in the port town of Harardhere sparked a violent response from armed civilians, who ambushed the

group's foot soldiers and destroyed its armored vehicle with help from local police (Al-Jazeera 2016). Al-Shabab's troubles have bled into its combatant ranks, with dozens of mid and high-level defections in the first half of 2018 (Laing 2018). Support for Al-Shabab is so low that its ability to mete out violence seems to have been compromised.

In the early days, when it seemed possible that Al-Shabab would offer protection and it was too new for civilians to have information about how it would practice violence, the militia was supported. But, as civilians gathered further observations about the group's defensive fecklessness and its brutality, that support evaporated. The lack of support for Al-Shabab is consistent with the theory offered in this dissertation, but the fact that support was initially high underscores the importance of learning. Civilians may not know about how defensively capable an organization is when they first encounter it, and they may not have established beliefs about the group's behavior toward them. The need to learn can create a lag between the manifestation of the variables of interest and the predicted outcome.

5. Endogeneity Concerns

This argument raises an endogeneity concern. If combatant organizations are rational and strategic, then they know that informative violence and capable protection yield popular support. Thus, a group's desire for support may lead it to practice informative violence and emphasize its defensive capacity, thereby generating support. The combatant organizations that behave in a manner generating support may simply be the ones that consider popular support a priority. If this were the case, endogeneity would be a concern due to the presence of an external variable—desire for support— that would induce a correlation between the theorized independent variables as well as support.

While the possibility of endogeneity due to an organization's desire for support is theoretically important, it is not practically significant. Basic limitations militate against efforts to restrain or empower a group even where the desire to do so exists. Informative violence requires clear communicative channels throughout an organization such that all members know the rules, discipline to follow the rules, and punitive chains that ensure compliance. Even established states struggle to meet these requirements. Consider the example of the United States military, which weathered repeated abuse scandals through the 2000s due to the excesses of its personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan. If an affluent country with an experienced and trained force struggles to restrain violence toward civilians, then rebel groups likely struggle as well.

Defensive capability requires material supplies, training, and communication systems, along with intelligence about one's opponent. Each of these attributes demands financial resources and/or skills that rebel groups may struggle to access as states seek to suffocate them. Even the Islamic State, which boasted an elaborate governance structure and funding, is wilting under pressure from reinvigorated forces in Iraq and airstrikes in Syria (Johnston et al 2016). The most telling observation against endogeneity may be the fact that many groups are not informatively violent and/or defensively capable, despite the reality that the latter is necessary for survival and the former would encourage civilian cooperation at a lower cost than coercion.

Civilians provide a second potential source of endogeneity. If a civilian has an ex-ante reason for supporting an organization, such as ethnic affinity or a personal relationship to its members, then that support could influence the civilian's appraisal of the group in question. Having heard positive stories about the group from displaced persons from other areas could

have the same effect. In particular, the civilian might overestimate the group's defensive abilities, over-value the goods that it provides, and/or overestimate the informativeness of the violence it practices by creating excuses for targets. The model suggests that this endogeneity concern is real, but that the effects of support on the independent variables would have to be unrealistically large in order for reverse causation to become a concern.

Consider a context wherein an actor is informatively violent and an ineffective protector, thus having a low probability of gaining support in a violent area. This context is of particular concern because it is only one variable shift away from being a highly effective and informatively violent combatant, which is more likely to earn support. Let us assume that the rebel group actually deflects 10% (D=.1) of attacks, which occur 80% (T=.8) of the time. These figures are realistic in contexts where the combatant is a rebel group and it faces a powerful state or foreign actor, as has been the case in Syria and Iraq. Goods are valued at .3 and uninformative violence occurs at a rate of .1. Plugged into the utility function DT+G-V, these values create a utility of .28. Now, let us assume that the civilian is especially fond of the organization such that they greatly overestimate its defensive effectiveness, doubling it to .2. The utility jumps by 33% to .36.

The change is numerically significant, but it is not practically worrisome for two reasons. First, this setup requires the civilian's bias to double the militant's effectiveness in order to achieve a .08 jump in utility. It seems excessive to believe that a civilian's perception would double the success of a highly ineffective actor. More moderate approaches to bias lead to much smaller jumps. For example, assuming that affinity leads the civilian to overestimate the group's effectiveness by 50% generates a much more modest utility bump to .32. Bias makes a difference, but its effects on civilian assessments would have to be unrealistically

large in order for the utility function to suffer large distortions.

Even if such extremely biased assessments are possible, a second limit on their effects emerges: time. A civilian may be able to massively over or underestimate important aspects of a group. But maintaining those biases over time would be difficult in an active conflict environment that constantly presents new information. A generous assessment of a group's defensive ability would be difficult to maintain in the face of regular attacks that kill its foot soldiers. Likewise, minimizing the rebels' uninformative violence would become more difficult with repeated observations of violence that was inconsistent with the group's supposed criteria for target selection. Not only are biases that are large enough to induce endogeneity so large as to be improbable, but one could reasonably expect them to crumble under the weight of time. The human tendency to ignore or discount disconfirming information is real, but that habit is difficult to maintain in contexts where the undesired observation influences whether or not one survives.

Empirical assessment of the theory and its supporting propositions requires information about conflict environment and civilians' beliefs. Critically, the information on civilian beliefs must range across different localities in order to leverage variation in rebel behavior, goods, and threat environment. Observations taken across time could provide similar variation, but would come with the disadvantage of comparing civilians who have been exposed to conflict for different periods, and are thus at different stages in the process of absorbing and drawing conclusions from information. The following chapter addresses the dissertation's empirical approach and the data that emerged.

Chapter 3, Appendix 1: The Formal Model

Utility (Support) = DT+G-V(1-I)

Variable Ranges

D = Pr(successful defense by group seeking support) = [0,1)
T = Pr(other groups attack) = [0,1]
V = Pr(rebel violence against civilians) = (0,1)
C = Cost of support = (0,1]
G = Value of goods = [0,1]
I = Pr(violence against civilians is informative)

Figure 2 Functions, G = 1

Effective, Informative: .9T+1-.9(1-.9) = .9T+.91

Ineffective, Informative: .4T+1-.9(1-.9) = .4T+.91

Effective, Uninformative: .9T+1-.9(1-.1)= .9T+.19

Ineffective, Uninformative: .4T+1-.9(1-.1)= .4T+.19

Figure 3 Functions, G = 0

Effective, Informative: .9T+0-.9(1-.9) = .9T-.09

Ineffective, Informative: .4T+0-.9(1-.9) = .4T-.09

Effective, Uninformative: .9T+0-.9(1-.1)= .9T-.81

Ineffective, Uninformative: .4T+0-.9(1-.1)= .4T-.81

Chapter 4

Methods and Data

1. Testing the Theory

Case studies will be the core of this dissertation. A case study allows for a detailed, contextualized exploration and thorough assessment of the relationship between violence and civilian attitudes. The theory relies heavily on contextual information such as the spatial arrangement of combatants and their behavior, which makes the case study and its capacity for rich detail the most attractive option. But, the case study also presents several potential problems. The practicalities of trying to learn about a conflict environment offer additional difficulties. Individuals may not remember what happened in conflicts that happened long ago, or time may mold memories to the contours of the individual's biases. Desirability bias may discourage civilians from honest discussion of political opinions, while an understandable aversion to revisiting hurtful memories in order to support a stranger's academic pursuit can also hinder conversation.

The context, cases, and data type that the researcher uses should address these concerns around bias. Here, context refers to the conflict that one chooses to study. More recent conflicts address various inaccuracies that can emerge from civilians' biases. A recent conflict does not eliminate concerns around memory, but the advent of the Internet means that events have been documented by traditional outlets such as researchers, NGOs, and newspapers, as well as more contemporary and accessible outlets such as social media networks, YouTube, and Wikis. The plethora of documentation allows the researcher to triangulate any information from civilians using sources created by a variety of actors with

diverse relationships to the conflict—ranging from journalists, to tech-savvy civilians, to combatants reporting on their progress. A war in which identity and/or ideology appear to be relevant creates an opportunity to test the theory's proposed limitations on the conditions under which each is causally significant.

Each combatant organization within a conflict represents a potential case, since attitudes toward it are under study. When it comes to the rebel group under study, the organization should be active in multiple locations in a country and throughout at least half of the conflict. Spatial and temporal spread are significant because they allow the researcher to identify and assess the influence of variation in theoretically significant factors such the organization's behavior and the proximity and behavior of its competitors. Moreover, many organizations have decentralized leadership or poor central control such that their behavior inevitably change over time and space. A group that claims ideological legitimacy or asserts itself as an advocate for an identity group is also a useful case, as the researcher can then explore the role of identity and ideology.

Finally, with context and case requirements established, the researcher must consider which data type will best allow them to assess the theory given in this chapter. The outcome of interest is civilian opinion, which makes surveys an intuitive way to assess the theory and its hypotheses. But, the survey would have to ask individuals sensitive questions about their personal experiences with violence and their opinions of various violent actors. A survey administered to a recently traumatized civilian population would struggle to garner any answers at all, let alone honest answers, because the need to ask each person the same questions in the same order would preclude building a rapport that facilitates open communication on sensitive topics.

Semi-structured interviews achieve the same goal as a survey without the limits. They allow the researcher to learn about the individual opinions and experiences around which the theory revolves. But, semi-structured interviews also allow the researcher to read the interviewee, assess the mood of the interaction, and move through the interview in a way that is more likely to elicit detailed, honest answers than an inflexible survey. A clear drawback of investing so much energy into individual interviews is that it precludes gathering enough interviews for causal statistical analysis. The data can offer and demonstrate the viability of an argument, but they cannot support any claim of absolute explanatory superiority.

By the given criteria, Syria's ongoing civil war and the Free Syrian Army constitute an informative context and case. Having begun in 2011 and continued until the present, the Syrian Civil War is recent enough for individuals affected by it to remember important details about violence and perpetrators. Moreover, the war began and has continued during the era of the Internet and smartphones. Information about Syria's war is consequently available through news reports, native researchers, and affected individuals' social media accounts. Syria's war occurs along many fault lines and fundamentally rests on different understandings of what government Syria should have and whom it should benefit, which creates opportunities to analyze identity and ideology.

Syria hosts an array of armed actors that could serve as the focus of a case study. The state combats the Free Syrian Army, the Islamic State, Jabhat Al-Nusra (of Al-Qaeda provenance), Kurdish groups, and a plethora of small resistance groups. Among these groups, the Free Syrian Army offers a variety of methodological advantages. It is active throughout most of Syria and has been since 2012, which means that most Syrians have interacted with it and developed opinions of it. The group's longevity and spread also allow the researcher to

assess theoretically significant variables that change over time and space. Though the FSA is not explicitly pro-Sunni or anti-Alawite, it emerged from the mostly Sunni anti-regime protests, its membership is primarily Sunni, it focuses on the protection of Sunni neighborhoods, and many civilians consider it a pro-Sunni organization. Observing variation in civilian attitudes toward the group thus provides an opportunity to study the contingent role of identity.

While the Free Syrian Army is known as a single organization, it is more aptly a coalition of anti-regime battalions. The group formed gradually in 2012, as Sunni generals in the Syrian military left their positions and began organizing an armed resistance. In some localities, generals entered and formed entirely new resistance units in communities from which they came. In many others, FSA leaders simply appropriated, imposed order on, and coordinated collaboration between resistance bands that had already formed in response to the Assad government's repression of protests and aggressive pursuit of alleged protest sympathizers. The FSA thus offers an advantage that is unique in the context of Syria: it allows the analysis of civilian attitudes toward a group that is seen as indigenous, which means the study can eschew concerns about the effects of foreign association on support. In truth, the Free Syrian Army has received foreign support from the US, Jordan, and several other countries, but civilians nonetheless view the FSA as local.

2. Data

2a. The Process

Data collection for this project began in the summer of 2014 when the author interviewed Syrians and Iraqis in Beirut in order to learn about conflict dynamics in both

countries. The empirical analysis uses data from semi-structured interviews that the author conducted in Arabic with displaced Syrians in Amman and several Jordanian cities that bordered Syria between December 2015 and August 2016. Several additional interviews were completed in Berlin in 2017. The processes for finding participants in Jordan were simple. One method relied on the support of a Syrian fixer who arranged interviews indirectly. The author gave the fixer directions on what kinds of individuals needed to be interviewed on a given day. For example, some days were devoted to interviewing individuals from Hama in order to diversify the sample. The fixer then contacted individuals in various border communities in order to ask if they could host us for the day. Upon arrival near the border, the author discussed the research project and objectives with the local contact, who then found interviewees.

This process reduced the effect of three problems. The first problem concerns potential participants' willingness to sit for an interview. Persons who have recently fled war in a dictatorship and begun a new life in a monarchy with a penchant for deportations resist discussing politics with a stranger. Second, even once a conversation begins, the interviewee may become uncomfortable when faced with difficult questions about violence and cease participation. Discomfort can then lead to dishonesty or withheld information. Working with two Syrians meant that two individuals who had much more in common with interviewees than the researcher could help put individuals at ease, which made them more likely to begin and continue speaking honestly. Third, every political environment and conflict breeds a unique lexicon. For example, the word pork takes on a meaning in the US Congress that it does not have elsewhere. Collaborating with a Syrian fixer and local contact, who were present for the border interviews, allowed the researcher to understand unique terminology

that interviewees used and to conduct better interviews.

While collaboration with an interlocutor solved some problems, it introduced others. Humans tend to connect with individuals who share their views on salient issues. The interlocutor was a supporter of the Free Syrian Army, which meant that his local contacts tended to share that view, as did the interviewees with whom they connected us. The sample is consequently skewed toward FSA supporters. Fortunately, the pro-FSA bias is not a problem for this study. This dissertation does not estimate how many Syrians support the FSA, though the organization's prominence indicates broad popularity. It instead seeks to understand why those who support a group despite its harmful behavior do so. The abundance of supporters thus generates fertile ground for analysis, rather than bias for which the study must compensate. Approximately eighty interviews were conducted, but many were of limited use because the participant had no direct exposure to the Free Syrian Army or provided too little information. Fieldwork yielded a total of forty-seven usable interviews. Forty out of forty-seven usable interviews were conducted near the border with Jordan.

The remaining interviews were conducted by the author, alone, in the office of a news organization staffed by Syrian researchers in Amman. Or, in two cases, in Berlin. The office interviewees were professionals with university degrees, while the border interviewees frequently had no postsecondary education. The Amman interviewees were also younger than the border interviewees, being in their late 20s rather than their late 30s or older, and were generally from financially better off households.

In order to be included in the sample, individual Syrians had to be adults who left Syria after 2011. Participants were also required to have had direct exposure to the Free Syrian Army. These criteria reduced the chances of a respondent providing information about

the FSA's behavior and their opinions of it on the basis of hearsay rather than lived experience. Over eighty individuals were interviewed, but each interview required that participants provide their opinions of an influential political actor after recounting personal experiences with violence at the request of a foreign stranger. Participants were generally open and frank, but earning that response required that the interviewer build a rapport with interviewees and carefully decide if and when they were comfortable enough to answer the question, "Among the groups currently active in Syria currently, which do you think should govern?" honestly. Sometimes, interviewees were so uneasy that their comfort had to take precedence over the research question, and they were not asked about their political views directly.

The interview total is too small for causal analysis. Fortunately, the following chapter's goal is more modest than that. It centers on a simple observation: despite being from the same sect and having had comparable experiences with the FSA, individuals' opinions of the organization diverge. The coming empirical chapter aims to explain that divergence by documenting how civilians viewed the FSA's behavior and then identifying consistent differences between those who disagree and similarities between those who are of like mind. The objective is thus to identify a relationship between support and the hypothesized variables that is consistent enough to be highly suggestive, even if data limitations preclude claiming causality.

2b. The Dependent Variable

In order to avoid slippage between the concept under study and its measurement, the reader should know precisely how an interviewee was coded as supportive. Support is a

continuum that ranges from weak (purely attitudinal) to strong (attitudinal and behavioral). Individuals could be labeled supporters through one of two ways that are equally represented in the data: explicit or implicit endorsement. Explicit endorsement means that the individual unambiguously expressed their preference that the Free Syrian Army serve as the national postwar government or have a prominent role within the national government. Nineteen individuals explicitly supported the FSA.

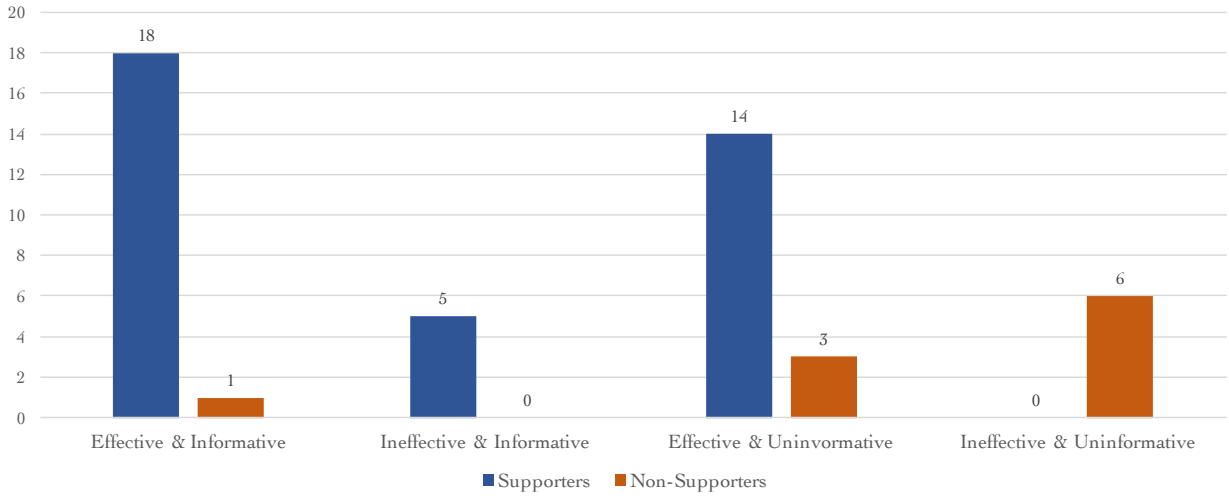
The second path into the supporter category is via implicit endorsement. Implicit endorsers are individuals who dodged the question of political support altogether or who were so plainly uncomfortable during the interview that the researcher chose not to ask. Though these individuals' explicit views were unattainable, they expressed their support of the FSA in one key way: they exhibited the same rhetorical attributes as explicit endorsers. In particular, they de-emphasized, denied, or excused FSA violence like explicit supporters, while also focusing on the FSA's positive actions, just as explicit supporters did. Implicit supporters' behavior was consistent with that of explicit supporters such that one can confidently gather that they also supported the FSA despite the lack of explicit endorsement. Eighteen individuals implicitly supported the FSA.

Explicit rejectors are individuals who plainly stated that they found the FSA unfit to govern. They tended to also describe the FSA and its behaviors in a negative, excoriating manner. As was the case with supporters, that expressive tendency makes it possible to identify individuals who had rejected the FSA, but preferred not to say so or could not be asked. The data include nine explicit rejectors and one implicit rejector. Three individuals changed their minds about the FSA over time. They are coded as supporters for the period before the change, and as non-supporters for the period after.

The dataset's skewness toward FSA supporters means that it can explain support more persuasively than it can rejection. But, support of a violent organization is the more counterintuitive outcome and the observation that inspired this dissertation, which makes the data's unevenness tolerable. Further, one-fifth of respondents rejected the Free Syrian Army even though the sample was biased toward supporters because of the local contacts' preferences. A truly unbiased sample would likely reveal even greater variation.

Figure 4 summarizes the responses given by individuals who provided a usable interview. Defensively effective and informative FSA units received almost universal support, while ineffective and uninformative units received universal disapproval. Results for effective and uninformative units were mixed as a result of variation in threat environments. Support for ineffective and informative units was less varied than the theory would expect, but the next chapter demonstrates that the support represented in the bar varied with respect to strength.

Figure 4: Summary of Participants' Stances on the Free Syrian Army, By Context



2c. The Independent Variables

There are four independent variables of interest: threats present in an area, defensive effectiveness, the value of goods offered by the militant, and the informativeness of violence practiced by the local FSA unit. Threat level is assessed by asking civilians a series of questions about the who the combatant organizations in their area were, the frequency with which they attacked, and the severity of the attacks. Knowing precisely who posed the most pressing threat is important because most areas suffered from at least one of two entities: the state military and the *shabbiha*. The FSA could sometimes defend against the latter, but stood no chance against the former. This information thus provides a first swipe at the second variable, defensive effectiveness, as it signals a higher or lower probability that the group was able to protect civilians. Civilians were then directly asked about the quality of protection that the FSA offered and how it responded to its enemies in order to give a more detailed understanding of its defensive effectiveness. Measuring goods on offer is simple. Participants were asked if the FSA distributed any useful goods or services. Examples that often emerged included food, medicine, and transportation.

Informativeness was assessed by asking civilians about how the FSA behaved toward civilians and whom it targeted. Where civilians had clear and consistent understandings of why civilians were targeted, the group is considered to have practiced informative violence. Where civilians were less able to name criteria or explicitly cited the violence as random, unpredictable, or highly dependent on idiosyncratic factors such as which local FSA leader was in charge, the unit is said to have practiced uninformative violence. It is crucial to remember the soon-to-be validated assumption that civilians pay close attention to and draw conclusions from violence patterns. It is unlikely that anyone would not know who was

targeted or why.

Lest the reader be confused, it is important to remember the difference between (un)informative violence and threat. The former refers to the behavior of the Free Syrian Army in areas where it maintained an active and ongoing presence that included daily interaction with the populace. Threat refers to the danger presented by actors who operated outside of the zone in question and executed attacks upon it. While the data are limited, they provide a base that can be used to demonstrate the viability of the theory. In the next chapter, a qualitative analysis of the data and secondary sources aims to demonstrate the significance of the type of violence employed by the FSA and the threat environment in which it operated.

Chapter 5

Evidence from Syrians' Personal Accounts

Syria had been a violent space for decades by 2011. The state's feared secret police (*mukhabbarat*) established offices in residential areas so that Syrians knew that they were being watched and could disappear if they stepped out of line (Malek 2017). Dissident arrests were common and violence suffered at the hands of powerful families went without anything even approaching censure for the assailant. And yet, Syrians lived with the knowledge that so long as they followed the rules and avoided criticizing the regime, they would probably be as fine one could be when living under dictatorship. Civil war changed all that. The standard bargain by which one avoided harm fell away as the state's response to protests cast an ever wider net of violence, and as the proliferation of militias and gangs created more potential sources of violence.

Civil war creates an environment where death and other physical harm could come from myriad sources: rebels, the state, starvation, thieves, or even other desperate civilians. Civilians seek out ways to avoid harm and bind themselves to the entity that they believe will help them achieve that goal. So, this is a story about survival and not necessarily affinity. Support for any group can signify genuine affection for it, but does not need to. Civilian accounts of the Free Syrian Army's behavior and their responses to it offer a way to understand the mechanism that links defensive effectiveness and informative violence to popular support. The following pages argue that civilians observe and make decisions based on the local FSA unit's defensive ability and practice of violence, and these variables' interaction with the threat environment and the value of goods distributed by the unit.

1. High Defensive Ability, Informatively Violent

The empirical strategy employed here maintains that there is no meaningful difference between individuals who supported the Free Syrian Army explicitly and those who did so implicitly. The analysis of a couplet composed of one explicit supporter and one implicit supporter indicates that they are similar enough to be grouped together. Fawaz was a middle-aged man from Imheen—a conservative and mostly Sunni town far south of Homs. He provided a narrative that is shared by a number of other FSA supporters. Protests in Imheen began in the spring of 2011. The Syrian military and its favored militia, the *shabbiha*, began attacking civilians and protestors with a viciousness that surprised Fawaz. Knives, machetes, and guns became common sights in streets that were once quiet. Civilians were initially unsure of how to respond, but one day in 2012, the *shabbiha* entered the town without warning and arrested dozens of civilians—including a number of women. The residents of Imheen felt certain that the *shabbiha* and the state's soldiers would rape and possibly murder the arrested women, and were outraged. Young men from the town began to carry family-owned firearms, usually rifles and sometimes pistols, and accompany protesters. The local young men's organization began after the earliest Free Syrian Army units had already formed in July 2011, so they adopted its name. Thus, the FSA in Imheen was born.

Fawaz praised the local FSA unit's members for putting themselves at risk in order to protect other residents from the *shabbiha*. He explained that the militia posed the most consistent daily threat and practiced the most brutal violence, including beatings, kidnappings, and rape. The local FSA unit did not work independently, but collaborated with a family council that had traditionally resolved disputes in the area. So, as the FSA protected

civilians and deterred pro-state militias, the council handled the administrative work of courts and other institutions that disappeared from Imheen as the state discontinued services to the area. Fawaz's emphasis on the FSA's protection of civilians and dismissal of the idea that it could be expected to face the regime demonstrate that he understood it as an effective protector. Further, Imheen suffered direct attacks from the *shabbiha* more than it saw the Syrian military, so protection from the former was more relevant in civilians' assessments of the FSA's protective ability. The *shabbiha*'s incursions happened several times each week, so there is no doubt that Imheen existed in an environment of high threat.

Fawaz rejected the possibility that the FSA could harm civilians. When asked, he interrupted the question mid-delivery and stressed that the FSA members were *"min al-sha'b"* or, "of the people." He shook his head furtively throughout additional questions that probed at uncouth behavior from the FSA. Fawaz clearly believed that the Free Syrian Army was discriminatory in its use of violence, which is precisely the belief that develops in a context of informative violence. Imheen's FSA directed its violence toward individuals from outside of Imheen so consistently that Fawaz, as a resident, understood himself to be safe. The violence was thus informative to him--it was consistent such that he developed a reasonable belief about his own safety. But, when asked about the future leadership of Syria, Fawaz would only say that the leader should be Syrian and Sunni. The FSA is the only Arab group in Syria that is indigenous and overwhelmingly Sunni and Fawaz clearly had a positive view of the group, but he opted not to explicitly endorse it.

Still, Fawaz's positive representation of Imheen's FSA as homegrown, protectively capable, and cautious in its use of violence was mirrored by another man from the town who endorsed the group explicitly. Mohammad stressed that the young men in the FSA were "sons

of the land," or "*abna' al-balad*" from Imheen and the surrounding villages. In addition to protecting civilians from the militia, Mohammad commended the FSA for maintaining Imheen's stability by refusing entry to internally displaced persons once the town's population had swollen past 8000 people. The presence of so many unfamiliar people introduced scarcity and uncertainty that made many residents of Imheen uneasy, so Mohammad considered the restriction to be an important aspect of maintaining security, however disastrous it may have been for other Syrian civilians who were seeking refugee. Like Fawaz, Mohammad understood the FSA's criteria for targets to be clear: those affiliated with the regime and outsiders who threatened to destabilize the neighborhood.

Mohammad owned a confectionary shop and was privy to the goings-on of other storeowners in the area. He reported that, rather than outright steal, the FSA in Imheen took necessary food and supplies from local shops, recorded the items that had been taken and their value, and later compensated storeowners for the commandeered goods. Mohammad noted that the FSA never distributed goods to residents of Imheen because there was no need. His affection for the group was thus free of material concern. Mohammad justified his support for the Free Syrian Army by saying that the group "that has the right to govern is that which has real relationships on the ground." He immediately clarified that the only group with that qualification was the Free Syrian Army. Mohammad gave no indication of what form the new government should take. He only stated that the new government should be led by the FSA.

Despite the Free Syrian Army's obviously impactful presence in Imheen, the rebels never completely controlled the town. Most civilians fled Imheen as it became the locus of clashes between an encroaching Islamic State and the Asad regime. Both ISIS and the state were vastly better-armed than the Free Syrian Army. The FSA's fecklessness before these

other groups and its eventual failure to defend civilians against them inspired no judgement from Mohammad or Fawaz. Moreover, both men cheered the group's ability to keep the *shabbiha* at bay, dismissed the possibility of harm against civilians, and emphasized the young men's connection to Imheen as an obvious explanation for their pure intentions and good behavior. The only difference between their discussions of the FSA is that Mohammad explicitly endorsed it, while Fawaz did not. For that reason, their joint designation as supporters is reasonable.

One could question the persuasiveness of these accounts. The Imheen FSA's consistent direction of its violence toward outsiders made its practice informative to residents. But the FSA's decision to concentrate on outsiders also meant that violence against civilians in Imheen was simply low overall. It is thus possible that the cause of support in Imheen was the combination of protection and low violence, rather than protection and informative violence. Additional vignettes from persons who lived in areas that experienced more violence against civilians suggest that informative, rather than low, violence is the salient variable.

Faruq left the Hama countryside in October 2012, just over a year into Syria's turmoil. The local defense units that developed in response to the Asad government's crackdown on protests were not initially a part of the Free Syrian Army. But defected generals returned to the area, took control of the defense units, and declared them part of the resistance early in 2012. The change seems to have been welcomed. Faruq discussed the FSA's protection capacity in terms that are now familiar. The Free Syrian Army protected civilians from *shabbiha,* though, in Hama, the rebels did not keep out internally displaced Syrians. The FSA also provided some material benefits by distributing food, and, when necessary, medicine and medical supplies, among members of the community.

The provenance of those goods reveals the civilian-directed violence committed by the FSA in rural Hama. Rather than commandeer from shops and repay the owners like the FSA in Imheen, this area's unit forcibly stole whatever it needed. Faruq initially denied that the theft could be called stealing because the young men were hungry and gave food and supplies to other people in need. Marwa, a woman who was also from rural Hama and who arranged the interview, stated her view thusly: "If you're about to die from hunger, and you see something in front of you that you can eat, will you not take it?" Faruq nodded vehemently. She and Faruq then stressed that, as the FSA developed, it stopped the random theft and violence.

Unfortunately for some, the FSA put an end to the random violence by explicitly targeting relatively wealthy people and taking whatever they had, be it food, a car, or clothes. In an effort to clarify just how reserved the FSA's violence was, Faruq stated that the rebels only stole from "those who had a lot and the government." Other interviewees also mentioned that some FSA units developed a habit of stealing from alleged regime supporters, though one dissenter accused the FSA of manufacturing such claims in order to justify theft. The targets of theft were given a clear choice, often at gunpoint: give the requested item(s) to the Free Syrian Army, or suffer and lose them anyway. Punishments for resistance included physical beatings and, if the FSA operative saw fit or had a prior disagreement with the targeted individual, death.

Faruq and Marwa were aware of this violence, as were the other displaced Syrians who overheard the interview in Faruq's tent and chimed in throughout it. It was they who stressed that the FSA stole from wealthy individuals and others whom the FSA believed were partnered with the Asad government. These same individuals then joined Marwa and Faruq

in proclaiming their desire for postwar national elections that the FSA was sure to win. Voices in the tent rose as everyone celebrated the idea of a Free Syrian Army victory and the fall of Bashar Al-Asad. Several of the observers scoffed and laughed at interview questions about the FSA's violent behavior. To them, the FSA was the protagonist in a fight far larger than itself and could not be blamed for a few peccadillos.

Rural Hama's FSA units were not unique in their application of frequent, but visibly discriminatory violence. Haifa, a woman from a town called Al-Nashabiya in the Damascus countryside, spoke so eagerly that it angered her decidedly reticent husband. Haifa then set up the next interview for the research team and followed us to it so that she could continue to discuss the conflict in detail. Young men in Al-Nashabiya began arming themselves in response to the Asad government's brutal reaction to protests. As the pro-state *shabbiha* launched regular incursions into the town, the youngsters--many of whom were still in high school--armed themselves, marched with protesters, and stood guard outside of their own homes and those of others. The FSA eventually entered Al-Nashabiya, appropriated these local rebel units, and made them collaborate with other nearby units. The Al-Nashabiya defense forces were thus augmented and made a part of the Free Syrian Army without losing their connection to the local population. Haifa reported that Sunnis in the town responded by giving their protectors weapons, food, money, water, and whatever else they could spare. Yet again, the FSA provided protection, but not goods. Material support to the FSA flowed through the mosque. Haifa recalled that each Friday in mosque, the sheikhs would update everyone on recent local events in the conflict and announce the contributions that the FSA needed. Meanwhile, the town's Alawites feared that the unit would spell disaster for them and fled.

The Alawite residents' concerns about violence at the hands of the FSA were valid. Many Sunnis began to assume that all Alawites were supporters of and spies for the regime, which made Alawites fair targets for violence from the Free Syrian Army. Like Marwa and Faruq, Haifa nonetheless rejected the idea that the FSA was violent. Firstly, she echoed others in noting that the FSA only stole from wealthy families and Alawites. She elaborated that the regime had stolen from Sunni Syrians via constant discrimination and Alawite employees' incessant bribery requirements. The theft, however forceful, was thus a redistributive policy in her view. Second, Haifa maintained that the use of force by the FSA was not violence because the group focused on attacking Asad's supporters and sympathizers.

In truth, the FSA's violence did not stop at forceful theft. The group also tried and imprisoned accused Asad supporters for indeterminate periods. But as a nod to the group's non-violent tendencies, Haifa specified that supporters were jailed, rather than killed. She also underscored her point by comparing the FSA to the more radical Jabhat Al-Nusra, which she said was well-intentioned, but enforced overly strict rules and punishments such as the severing of hands. Like Marwa and Faruq, Haifa knew that the FSA's use of force against civilians was frequent, but she also knew that the violence was executed on the basis of observable, consistent, and specific rules. Anyone who was not wealthy, a regime supporter, or an Alawite was safe. Haifa thus felt secure under the group's dominion despite the harm that it frequently imposed upon civilians. Haifa clearly supported the FSA, but she declined to do so explicitly. She readily lauded the FSA for its gentle demeanor with civilians and willingness to provide protection. And, when she was asked if there was anything that Americans should know, Haifa responded that US citizens should understand just how wonderful the FSA was and lamented its negative image.

Marwa's brother, Eissa, was also a supporter of the FSA. He rejected labeling the group's forceful behavior as violent and touted its virtues. Eissa also emphasized the role of the FSA's courts as he explained why the organization was good for rural Hama despite the behavior of some of its soldiers. He recalled that the primary issue with FSA rebels in his town was not murder, but theft and bullish treatment of everyday civilians. As he put it, "There were some young men who wanted to show off and prove themselves to the world and control everyone. But the guys themselves responded and kicked those individuals out. Then the (*sharia*) court began to respond to this problem." Other participants clarified that such bullish behavior included slapping individuals who did not comply with curfews and threatening anyone who preferred not to surrender property that a Free Syrian Army member desired. After discussing violence, Eissa shifted the conversation to the FSA's willingness to provide individuals with material support. He initially claimed that the group did so without receiving any material assistance from civilians, but later admitted that civilians frequently gave the rebels cash, food, and clothing. Like others, Eissa was careful to specify that the FSA's civilian attacks focused on the wealthy and regime sympathizers, and applauded the group for providing protection against *shabbiha* units that entered the area from a nearby Alawite village.

Violence against civilians was much higher in rural Hama and Al-Nashabiya than it was in Imheen. And yet, the group's support did not suffer. In the case of Marwa and Faruq, heightened violence did not spark rejection of the group because the criteria for targeting were consistent and narrow such they felt safe despite the havoc. One can see that reasoning in the fact that Marwa and Faruq used the criteria that the FSA used in selecting its targets in their explanations of why the group was not, in fact, violent. When asked who should lead the

country, both Faruq and Marwa called for elections that they felt certain the FSA would win. But, each interlocutor failed to state the obvious: not only were the criteria by which rural Hama's FSA chose its targets clear and consistent, but those criteria were unlikely to include them. They were not wealthy and did not have any sympathy for the Asad government. From their point of view, the violence was thus informative: they understood whom would be targeted and knew how to avoid being placed on it because the criteria were stable, clear, and narrow. They consequently overlooked the harm being done. This is the effect of informative violence—it allows an organization to practice violence at a high level without suffering a loss in popularity.

One can see the mechanism at work in the discussion of someone who changed their opinion of the FSA as its criteria broadened. Hadi, a thirty-something radio employee who came from urban Hama, rejected the use of the term "violence" to describe the behavior of city's FSA unit in its early days. As he put it, "Killing soldiers and the people who enable them isn't violence." Hadi went on to say that a group that utilized force could not be considered violent so long as it discriminated in whom it harmed. He then cited this distinction when he lauded the early FSA in urban Hama, but chastised it for later becoming haughty and practicing violence more randomly. Despite the Free Syrian Army's initial concern for civilians' safety, the group began refusing civilians' requests that it leave residential areas in order to avoid attracting government attention. The FSA then imposed curfews and beat violators. Some young rebels even attempted to use their position in the FSA to forcibly marry young women and attacked fathers and brothers who rejected the unions. Hadi blamed a nascent religious extremism for this change in the group's behavior and cited extremism when explaining his eventual disdain toward the group. The overall level of violence practiced by

the FSA did not change. The unit had always vigorously prosecuted its war against the Asad government and anyone who was thought to support it. Instead, the criteria widened and became unstable such that Hadi's safety—and that of many others who were previously safe under the FSA's control—was jeopardized. And thus, Hadi's support for the group withered.

Nasir and Hilal, two young men from rural Hama experienced a similar progression. Both arrived in Idleb in 2014 and were excited to be in an area where the FSA was powerful. They appreciated that the group's ranks were purely Syrian even though it took money from abroad. Without prompting, Hilal noted that the FSA was exceptionally kind toward civilians. Nasir was more moved by the FSA's willingness to help civilians flee from besieged areas and provide free transport to safer localities. That relocation service had allowed both men to seek refuge in Idleb, where the FSA's dominance, alongside that of other rebel groups, meant that tank incursions and *shabbiha* raids were less of a concern. Many other interviewees, including Faruq and Marwa, noted the critical role that the FSA's relocation of civilians played in furthering civilian security.

Nasir and Hilal excused the complete mayhem that characterized Idleb under the FSA's control. There were no courts or other efforts at state institutions that could settle disputes, punish thieves, or resume governance. In excusing the lack of services, Hilal asked "What should they do? Protect people or protect things?" But both Hilal and Nasir admitted that their affection for the FSA withered as its rebels' behavior changed. Hilal lamented that the group devolved into a series of gangs (*ʿiṣabat*), each specializing in the exploitation of civilians to the benefit of its leader. Theft by strong-arming in broad daylight became common. The free relocation suddenly came with an option to pay for expedited three-day service, or not pay and expect a potentially deadly month of waiting and bouncing between locations.

Syrians were accustomed to paying bribes for simple services such as securing a birth certificate, but the experience of needing to pay for help from a group that claimed to fight for Syrians' benefit was especially offensive to Hilal, Nasir, and many other Syrians they knew.

The uptick in the FSA's predatory behavior complicated civilians' efforts to know who would be targeted—violence lost its informative capacity. The introduction of a financial barrier to relocation hindered one's ability to consider the group a protector, as one of its most critical safety services became less accessible while planes dropped barrel bombs and unpredictable firefights erupted between the FSA and various other rebel groups in Idleb. Hilal and Nasir left Idleb after just over a year of living there. Neither was willing to live under the Free Syrian Army again despite the positive view of it that each once held.

Though the individuals who benefitted from a defensively effective and informatively violent FSA were almost unanimous in their support for the group, the content of that support varied. Marwa began with a vague pronouncement that the FSA should govern the country, but supported the idea of elections that the FSA would surely win once Faruq proposed it. They also agreed that the postwar government should have a series of local councils with limited power in order to prevent the emergence of powerful governors against whom early protestors demonstrated. Some explicit supporters rejected the idea of the Free Syrian Army developing an entire government on its own. An elderly man from Homs and his son insisted that the FSA had proven its ability as a protective force. As such, they argued that it would become the new national military, rather than the national government. A third man from Homs felt similarly. He insisted that the leader of the country had to be a civilian, like in other democracies, but felt equally strongly that the FSA should become the new military because it was already the only organization that truly worked for the protection of Syrians. Support is

not a narrow category that houses individuals who desire the exact same outcome, but a collection of viewpoints that coalesce around a positive view of the FSA and a desire to see it maintain an influential position in Syrian politics.

Support for the FSA is also not the same as unlimited confidence in it. Despite the emphasis that many supporters placed on the FSA's local origins, they were generally eager to see American involvement in the conflict. The openness was revealed by the question posed at the end of each interview: "What message would you like to deliver to Americans?" Mohammad, the confectionary shopkeep, called on the US to overturn the Asad government and end terrorism in the country, including terrorism from ISIS, which many Sunni Syrians see as a conspiratorial extension of the Asad government. Marwa considered Syria's present hardship to be the product of American meddling in the region and insisted that the US resolve the problem that it caused. Haifa also called on the American government to remove Bashar Al-Asad. While these individuals wanted the Free Syrian Army to rule Syria, they fully recognized the limits of its capabilities, hence the desire to outsource the tremendous task of overthrowing the government to a more powerful entity.

One interviewee came from an area where the Free Syrian Army was defensively capable and informatively violent, but nonetheless rejected the FSA. Even the fact that the rebels distributed food in her Homs neighborhood, Khaldiya, did not sway her. Her reasoning was crystal clear: she was a pacifist. She rejected the notion that any party that had been involved in violence could govern the country and saw no way that a violent actor could gain the support of most Syrians. This particular participant also wanted Alawites to freely participate in any postwar government, so having leadership that was acceptable to everyone was critical to her. This participant was uniquely principled, but it is important to note that,

for some, strong beliefs can preclude attitudinal change in response to contextual factors.

2. Ineffective Defense, Informatively Violent

The Free Syrian Army was not always an effective protector. Some units operated in areas that were targeted by the military rather than the *shabbiha*. More unfortunate FSA units thus found themselves facing tanks, semi-automatic weapons, and soldiers in riot gear instead of the knives and pistols that typified the *shabbiha*. Other units were too disorganized, unskilled, or small to offer meaningful defense. But many of the defensively ineffective units still managed to consistently discriminate in their use of violence such that civilians had a stable understanding of who would be harmed. Here, support still emerged, but less reliably than it did in the previous context. Support was most likely in environments where both outside threats and FSA-proffered material goods were substantial.

Ibrahim, a middle-aged Sunni man from Jab Al-Jandali in eastern Homs, was ambivalent toward the FSA. Like other residents of the neighborhood, he reported that young men began arming themselves in response to the kidnapping of protestors, women in particular. The neighborhood group became a part of the Free Syrian Army, but was too small to offer much of a resistance. The effectiveness of Jab Al-Jandali's FSA unit was further limited by the neighborhood's proximity to Zahra, a mostly Alawite community from which pro-regime *shabbiha* could launch attacks and to which they could swiftly retreat. Ibrahim stated that the FSA could do nothing more than use its weapons to create relatively safe pathways that allowed civilians to flee from Homs. Jab Al-Jandali was one of the areas where the Syrian army and *shabbiha* collaborated. First, the army swept the neighborhood and disarmed everyone before withdrawing. The *shabbiha* would then enter with knives and kill anyone they could find. While the FSA could not offer much protection, the escape option

that it created was a critical safety service in a context where the entire neighborhood was being razed to the ground.

Ibrahim provided a sparse discussion of the FSA's treatment of civilians. It abused no one, except Alawites, who left Jab Al-Jandali for fear of attack. Two other residents of Jab Al-Jandali confirmed the local FSA's good behavior during separate interviews. Ibrahim also noted that there were no goods provided to civilians by the FSA, as it had little to give. Thus, the unit's defensive capacity was low, its violence was informative, and its provision of material goods was nonexistent. Ibrahim and his family were eventually displaced to Sfeina, a politically inactive village of approximately thirty homes, by Ibrahim's recollection. Sfeina had no FSA presence and was routinely patrolled by *shabbiha* who would kidnap anyone suspected of having ties to the Free Syrian Army or any other rebel group. The lack of public services and work in Sfeina forced Ibrahim and his family to move to Jordan.

Ibrahim's feelings toward the Free Syrian Army were tepid. When asked which group should lead Syria, he shrugged before responding that he had no faith in any of the active organizations. When explicitly asked about the FSA governing a post-war Syria, he equivocated, stating that the future leader could be from the FSA, or from any other group. He went on to say that he didn't care whether or not the future leadership had any relationship to the FSA, but that the leader could not be Alawite, nor could any Alawites participate in government. Ibrahim suffered no direct harm from the local FSA, so the organization gave him no reason to reject it. But, the group also provided very little benefit to his security, so he simply accepted it instead of providing more active support. In light of such limited utility, it is unsurprising that Ibrahim's support for the FSA is weak. Ibrahim did not leap at the chance to defend the group nor did he praise its successes or minimize its

shortcomings. He accepted and felt positively toward the group, but was unwilling to do much for it.

Salman, another middle-aged man from Jab Al-Jandali, responded similarly. He stressed that the early protests were popular among both Sunnis and Alawites because the demonstrations were against corruption. The security forces immediately gave what he believed to be a moderate response by arresting and/or killing "only" two or three individuals per protest. After approximately six months, when protests had grown larger and began demanding more fundamental political changes, the *shabbiha* initiated attacks. Salman reported that violence became much worse, with more random killings and women being snatched into cars from the sidewalk. Jab Al-Jandali also struggled with snipers who could pick off rebels and civilians without ever being seen. By the summer of 2014, Jab Al-Jandali was back under state control. The FSA and its living supporters were allowed to leave on buses.

Salman reported that Jab Al-Jandali's FSA could only carry "light weapons" (*aslihа khafifa*) and mostly stood guard outside houses, only sometimes defending protesters. He lamented that the group lacked the force necessary to surround the neighborhood with barricades like units in other areas did. The *shabbiha* were consequently free to sweep the area at will. Finally, after months of militia attacks, the Syrian army entered Jab Al-Jandali, which compelled Sunnis to leave altogether and snuffed out the fledgling local resistance. Salman stated that the FSA unit was careful to defend rather than exploit civilians and avoided heavy handedness, but that it was in no position to provide goods or consistent protection. Like Ibrahim, Salman expressed limited interest in the FSA as a governor. He rejected the idea that any armed organization, including the FSA, should be allowed to assert itself as the new

government. Salman stated that he would be willing to support a civilian from the FSA, but did not feel that the organization and its members had any right to leadership. He instead noted that the FSA was just part of a broader resistance, and that any civilian from the resistance could lead.

Despite having different memories around the details of events, Ibrahim and Salman shared their general impressions of the FSA and responses to it. Ibrahim remembered the FSA for its attempts to shepherd civilians to safety, while Salman recalled its efforts to shield houses. Ibrahim emphasized the *shabbiha* as the most significant ongoing threat, while Salman acknowledged the *shabbiha* before citing the entry of the army as the event that made Sunnis flee and spelled the end of the local FSA. These differences in perception about precisely what the local FSA did and what violence it faced reflect different individual exposures to the conflict, but they do not change the men's overall impression of the FSA or their reactions to it. One can thus feel confident that variation in civilians' memories and experiences do not obscure or bias the trends that emerge from the interviews.

The interviews here also provide an opportunity to discuss the role of reputation. A potential critique of this study notes that stories about the FSA traveled around Syria. That information could lead civilians to support the group on the basis of hearsay rather than experience. The theory chapter addressed the reputation concern by showing how unrealistically large and robust the bias would have to be in order to meaningfully change the utility of support. This chapter provides some anecdotal evidence against the reputation concern. By the time of the interview in 2016, Ibrahim and Salman had heard of the FSA's successes in other areas through media and other refugees. And yet, both men saw the group as militarily weak and refused to endorse it as the future leader of Syria. This prizing of

personal experience over other forms of information suggests that observations acquired through personal experience are more impactful than information acquired by other means.

Ibrahim and Salman came from environments where threat was high, where the FSA was an ineffective protector that practiced informative violence, and where the FSA provided no goods. Given the severity of the threats that both men faced, their responses to the FSA are more lukewarm than the theory would expect. But this response is likely the effect of lacking material benefits from the FSA that could have buoyed their feelings toward the group. The lack of explicit harm from the FSA prevented Salman and Ibrahim from turning against the FSA altogether, but the dearth of benefits from it precluded the development of support.

Some civilians came from areas where conditions were similar to Jab Al-Jindali, but the FSA was able to provide valuable material benefits. In such contexts, civilians held a much more positive view of the organization. Sara came from Maʿarbe, a mostly Sunni village in Darʿaa Province. As happened elsewhere, protests in the village sparked a violent response from the regime, which in turn led young men to begin arming themselves in an effort to protect protesters. Unfortunately for Maʿarbe's fledgling FSA, the Asad government quickly shifted from raiding homes to missile strikes on the area. The Free Syrian Army was defenseless against such escalation and could only help civilians flee.

The local FSA was nonetheless able to use violence against civilians. But, Sara was quick to note, the FSA was open about whom it would attack and why. Anyone suspected of collaborating with the regime was a target, including individuals who were accused of moving away from Maʿarbe in order to work with the regime. Sara was unbothered by the potential

for unfair harm being inflicted upon individuals who moved away for mundane reasons. Criminals were also held accountable by the FSA, whether through imprisonment or by other means. Though the local FSA was unable to muster enough violence to provide significant protection from outside threats, it was disciplined enough to restrain and signal about the violence that it directed toward civilians. The group also provided civilians with material goods. Sara reported that the FSA distributed food among residents of Maʿarbe, which was a critical service when Darʿaa was under a siege that disrupted normal shipments of food to markets. She remembered two individuals who attempted to direct extra food toward their families, but felt that the distribution was otherwise fair and benefitted everyone.

In Maʿarbe, the FSA practiced informative violence and distributed material goods in a context of significant outside threats, but provided unreliable protection. The primary factor that separates Maʿarbe from Jib Al-Jandali is the provision of goods. Sara's response to the FSA thus falls between the willing embrace of the supporters in the first section and the aloofness of the two men from Jib Al-Jandali. Unlike Salman and Ibrahim, Sara refused to place any restrictions on the FSA as a potential future leader. She stopped short of explicitly endorsing the group, but placed it among the potential leaders for the country without specifying who the others were. Sara still viewed the FSA positively and endorsed it as a potential leader for Syria, but her support for it was weaker than that of the first group of research participants, as the support was not exclusive to the FSA.

Leila, a young mother from a town called ʿAdra in the east of rural Damascus Province, lost her sister and husband to airstrikes. The town's FSA erected a barricade, but the barrier offered no protection from missiles. Further, the state placed a blockade on the

area, potentially hoping to let inhabitants languish until death or submission rather than absorb the cost of an offensive. Though the FSA offered little protection, Leila extolled the group for its good behavior and reserved approach to violence. She pointed out that, while the group punished those who collaborated with the state, it made an exception for those who collaborated with the state in order to get food. The FSA's barricade stood approximately 50 meters away from a regime barricade. Men could not go between the barricades without getting shot on sight, but women could. The FSA thus allowed women to travel back and forth between the two barricades so that women could pay bribes to soldiers, who surreptitiously brought food and medicine into the area for a fee. FSA members also distributed their own goods when they were able to procure them.

Leila was clearly a fan of the FSA. Without prompting, she noted that the unit was an assemblage of well-behaved young men. Even though the FSA was composed primarily of men from neighboring areas, entered ʿAdra without residents' permission, and was followed by the state, which began to wreak a havoc that the FSA could not curtail, Leila still considered the group to be local and lamented the negative image that she felt it had in some circles. In particular, Leila lauded the Free Syrian Army for its treatment of women. While other actors, including the state and Jeish al-Islam, frequently harassed women or worse, the FSA members in ʿAdra did not. For Leila, the FSA's shortcomings and the reality that it placed her hometown in danger were countered by its careful discrimination in the use of violence, its facilitation of material benefits, and the blunt truth that the regime likely would have found its way to ʿAdra with or without a rebel unit to follow.

Leila's interview exposes the possibility that gender matters for understanding political

support. Indeed, the ambivalent pair in this subsection is male (Salman and Ibrahim), while the supportive pair is female (Leila and Sara). The difference is potentially significant because women's concerns during conflict may differ from those of men. Even though men are vulnerable to kidnapping and sexual violence, fear thereof may not weigh on their minds as heavily as it does for women. Many women accused the Asad government and its allies of targeting women in particular, while the few men who addressed sexual violence during interviews framed it as an issue that left them concerned for the safety of their female relatives. If women interviewees were more concerned about particular forms of violence than men, then they may have assigned more weight to the FSA's behavior toward civilians than men did. A general implication of this gendered difference is that women may be more likely to support organizations that are defensively ineffective but informatively violent than men, all else equal. The field sample lacks the gender diversity necessary to vet this possibility, but it merits explicit recognition.

3. Effective Defense, Uninformatively Violent

Support for an actor that is able to provide reliable protection, but that practices uninformative violence only emerges if external threats exceed the danger posed by the organization itself. In such a context, the defense provided by the rebels represents a value great enough to offset the pain of their violence. One would thus expect this type of actor to lose civilian support if outside threats waned or if its violence became more random and severe than that of outside actors.

Hassan left the town of Deir Baʿalbe in rural Homs in early 2013. While residents of Deir Baʿalbe suffered mass killings by the *shabbiha* and Syrian security services in the spring

of 2012, the Free Syrian Army managed to take control of the town in the summer of 2012. The local unit established barriers that they used to control the flow of people. As happened elsewhere in Homs, the local FSA eventually withered once the Syrian army crashed into town. But Hassan reported that, up until that point, the FSA provided enough protection for individuals to feel safe when moving about town. Secondary sources support Hassan's description of Deir Baʿalbe in 2012. YouTube even hosts videos of FSA fighters in Deir Baʿalbe shooting at regime soldiers from behind barricades that the rebels built (Ahlahomsi 2012). Deir Baʿalbe suffered a number of especially heinous massacres by the Asad regime's allies before the FSA took control. In one incident, security services left over a dozen mangled bodies strewn about the streets near a school that it made into a detention center (Solomon 2012). Hassan noted that the *shabbiha* often attempted to forcibly remove people from their homes and take the residences for themselves, so the FSA's protection was greatly appreciated.

Hassan initially claimed that the FSA was wonderful with civilians, but further questioning revealed violent behavior that Hassan called disagreements ("*ikhtilafat*"). The FSA initially angered many civilians by stockpiling high-powered weapons such as semi-automatic rifles and missile launchers, hoarding them, and then giving firearms to civilians who had the right connections.[i] These chosen few then had free reign to use their weapons as they pleased, as the FSA did not have a court or seek to punish its friends. Deir Baʿalbe's FSA unit also stole from civilians, but Hassan responded to efforts to gain more detail by calling the forceful theft "simple" ("*baseet*"). Residents of nearby neighborhoods reported that the theft took the form of rebels breaking into homes and stealing anything of value at gunpoint.

But, given the severity of violence in Deir Baʿalbe and nearby neighborhoods, the FSA's transgressions seemed minor to many. Hassan finally reiterated the frequent incursions and violations committed by the *shabbiha* before stating that the FSA should govern because it was the only organization that understood the conflict and cared about Syrians.

Emir was another supporter of the Free Syrian Army. He left the city of Al-Qusayr in July 2013 as the Syrian military partnered with Hezbollah and crushed the city's previously successful Free Syrian Army. Emir reported that the local FSA was an amalgamation of rebels from Al-Qusayr and neighboring areas. He initially complimented the group for its ability to defend protestors from the *shabbiha*, who had better weapons. He then complimented the FSA's general demeanor and attributed its good behavior to the rebels' local provenance. But, as with Hassan, Emir's initial response glossed over the FSA's abuses. Emir moderated his initial celebration of the Free Syrian Army by stating that the group had some "problems" for which wayward individuals or imposters were responsible. Media reports indicate that the problems caused by the FSA in Al-Qusayr were considerable. As the FSA sought to route out supporters of Hezbollah and Bashar Al-Asad, it also burned crops and homes that belonged to Shiʿa residents of Al-Qusayr (Blandford 2013). FSA rebels forcibly removed Lebanese residents and Syrians who were deemed suspicious from the city and surrounding areas when possible (Hamieh 2012).

Hassan and Emir came from areas that faced immediate threats from enemy forces who sought to infiltrate their areas. Individuals who lived in localities marked by an unpredictable FSA and more limited threats found it difficult to support the group—even if they viewed it positively. ʿAla was a state employee in the town of Sanamin in Darʿaa

Province before the rebellion began. He thus had ample exposure to state corruption at the local level and was sympathetic toward the protests, their call for reform, and the Free Syrian Army when it began protecting demonstrators from the state's violent response. In fact, Sanamin's FSA unit was more successful than others when it came to protection. The group benefitted from a truce with the state and was left to govern as it saw fit. The *shabbiha* also kept their distance. Outside threats such as incursions and cluster bombs thus became a less pressing concern in Sanamin in 2012 because the primary attackers made themselves physically distant from the town.

Unfortunately for ʿAla and other residents of Sanamin, the FSA was not a gracious governor. The unit began demanding money from civilians to pay for its protection services, which shocked civilians who saw the FSA as a group that simply wanted to defend them, and who did not see the demand as a form of legitimate taxation. FSA members invaded the homes of residents who did not comply with demands for cash and sought further compensation through bribes. The group did not discriminate in whom it targeted—it took from whomever was near. The FSA eventually established its own court in Sanamin, but ʿAla reported that the court was not just. It doled out punishments in order to settle old scores. Meanwhile, individuals who were found to be collaborating with enemy armed entities were let off as part of arrangements between the FSA and other groups. Not only did the FSA exploit civilians, but it used violence to do so and worsened matters by establishing an unjust court.

ʿAla was melancholy when asked for his thoughts on the FSA. He initially rejected the labeling of the FSA's behavior as exploitative and posed that any group learning to govern

would make mistakes. He then shook his head, stating that the FSA "was the most honorable [of the rebel groups], but the best died early." ʿAla went on to say that no group in Syria was qualified to lead the country, including the FSA. ʿAla's efforts to dismiss the FSA's violent behavior and explain it away by blaming it on the untimely deaths of the best rebels suggest that he wanted to support the group. And yet, he did not. Not only had ʿAla watched other civilians suffer unfairly and randomly at the Free Syrian Army's hand, but he drew little value from the group's defensive ability in the absence of a larger threat. ʿAla was thus unable to support the FSA even though he sympathized with it.

ʿAla was one of several Syrians who were quick to overlook, minimize, or excuse the Free Syrian Army's shortcomings, but who did not support it. Faruq came from Beit Sahm, a village in Damascus Province. The trajectory of events in Beit Sahm was comparable to that of Sanamin: protests began, the state cracked down, civilians armed themselves and became part of the FSA, and then a truce allowed temporary reprieve during which the FSA governed. Faruq stressed that the FSA was a primarily defensive rather than offensive organization and was capable of providing safety when the state's security services crashed into town. But, he also volunteered that some "bad people" (*al-ʂayi'een*) came to possess weapons, an observation that he prefaced by noting that every society contained good and bad people. Further questioning revealed that these bad people were FSA members. Faruq estimated that 70% of the rebels behaved well. He argued that ignorance about proper governance accounted for the misbehavior that he observed. The FSA also established an Islamic court and distributed food, though Faruq noted that the court was not always fair and that some rebels used food as a carrot to control others or stole food in order to sell it.

What did the FSA do that was so bad? Faruq hesitated to say, only volunteering that the group "didn't treat [civilians] right. The FSA's members were somewhat overzealous." (*"Ma taʿmalu mazbout. Kanu mashaddideen shway."*) He felt that the FSA's behavior became noticeably worse when it began benefitting from foreign support, though he offered no theory as to why foreign backing would have that effect. At that point, Faruq said, the revolution faltered. Efforts to gather more detail about what the FSA did elicited vague comments about how the group did its best, times were hard, and the young men lacked education and were not cultured enough for governance.

Secondary sources make it clear that FSA violence in and around Damascus was significant. Even in the early years of protests, Damascene shopkeepers began removing images of Bashar Al-Asad from their establishments lest association with the regime and wealth encourage others to kidnap them. The fear of being targeted was strong such that the price of a Mercedes fell 25% while other, plainer cars became more expensive (Darke 2015). A hint of regime sympathy or affluence, two concepts that were sometimes treated as one by FSA members, could get one kidnapped and beaten. Faruq may have taken issue with this behavior, or he may have been referring to the porous relationship that developed between the Free Syrian Army and more extreme groups in and around Damascus. One group that sometimes shared members with the Free Syrian Army was Jeish Al-Islam, which imposed harsh religious edicts throughout the Damascus suburbs.

Though Faruq preferred not to criticize the Free Syrian Army, his attitude toward the FSA's future in Syria was clear. Immediately after stating that the FSA's rebels were not sufficiently cultured or educated, he stated that any future leader had to have both qualities. When asked about a member of the FSA becoming the new leader, Faruq countered by saying

that there were others—including the current vice president of Syria, Farouk Al-Sharaa—who were better qualified. Faruq did not openly reject the FSA, but his willingness to offer others as alternatives and refusal to humor the FSA as a future leader clearly indicate that he did not support the group even though he had some affection for it.

Faruq was not alone in his belief that the FSA's decency dissolved as the early rebels were killed. Haydar came from a wealthy family in Insha'at in Homs, just minutes away from many of the other Homs interviewees. He was away at school in Aleppo when the demonstrations began, but went home with the belief that doing so would make him safer. By the summer of 2011, protests in Homs had grown large and hostile as young men armed themselves to defend against the *shabbiha.* Haydar explained that the Free Syrian Army was well-behaved in those early days. The FSA's men were polite, reliable protectors who seemed to sincerely prioritize local protection and political change above all else. Haydar also noted that the FSA's presence allowed protests to grow because community members knew that the FSA could defend them from the *shabbiha*. But, Insha'at experienced a lull in combat activity in late 2011 and early 2012 as the regime withdraw in order to focus on other areas. FSA rebels, now free of the need to constantly fend off the regime and its *shabbiha*, began to rob stores and houses with impunity. The local FSA still distributed food in the area, but Haydar was unswayed by the provision of goods. He even claimed that the state, as of 2016, was less likely to kill a civilian in an area it controlled than the FSA.

The local FSA saw no reason to punish its members for misbehavior. Its leaders felt that the effort to overthrow Bashar Al-Asad was ongoing and more pressing. A 2013 incident showcases the FSA's general attitude toward misbehavior in Homs, which was then considered the epicenter of anti-Asad efforts. In May of that year, a commander named Abu

Sakkar was filmed as he cut the heart from a regime soldier's body and bit into it during a Homs battle. He looked into the camera and threatened to eat the heart of anyone who supported Asad. In response to criticism of the gory celebration, a Free Syrian Army spokesman stated that Abu Sakkar ran his own unit with money that he raised on his own, and that the FSA was in no position to expel him. Defeating the regime was a more pressing concern than disciplining badly needed fighters (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2016, 86).

The rebels' refusal to control their personnel, extremist sympathies, and tendency toward haughty attitudes left them prone to revenge killings and beatings that Haydar could not abide. He stated that the FSA could not and should not govern Syria. In explaining his opinion, Hayder emphasized that he was opposed to violence and that any violent organization could potentially return Syria to dictatorship. Another Homs resident, Bashir, echoed Hayder's concerns about the FSA's wanton violence. He reported that the FSA in his neighborhood, Khaldiya, kept the *shabbiha* at bay and maintained control of the area for a year. But during that period, the rebels came to see themselves as omnipotent. They began attacking civilians with little cause, imposing random curfews with little notification, and ransacking homes under pretense of searching for Alawites. Bashir rejected the idea that the FSA could or should govern for two reasons. First, the FSA lacked the qualifications to govern. Second and more importantly in his view, Syrian families had members spread across so many different groups that garnering adequate public support for one would have been impossible.

In localities where outside threats were not immediately present, effective protection and goods distribution were not enough to counter the negative effect of uninformative violence. Civilians in such places consequently turned against the FSA even when they were

sympathetic toward the rebels and clearly wanted to support them. This observation speaks to the intuition revealed in the model: protective ability loses its value in the absence of a threat. The fact that support did not materialize despite the FSA's distribution of goods in contexts of scarcity also substantiates the claim that civilians prioritize safety above other concerns.

The similarities between several of the non-supporters here and the supporters that began this chapter are also instructive. Both groups tended to dismiss, minimize, and excuse the FSA's bad behavior while emphasizing its positive attributes or early promise. The supporters of the more exploitative FSA even dodged acknowledging their negative experiences with the group. The common behavior indicates a shared affinity toward the Free Syrian Army. But that shared view did not generate common support across the two groups. Even in cases where civilians plainly wanted to support the FSA, the realities of violence prevented them from doing so strongly.

4. Ineffective Defense, Uninformatively Violent

Several of the people interviewed for this project had the misfortune of living under the worst case scenario: areas where the local Free Syrian Army unit was an ineffective defender and practiced uninformative violence. In such places, the Free Syrian Army failed at defending civilians from outside attacks more frequently than it succeeded. The FSA also had an unpredictable pattern of violence toward civilians that left everyday people uncertain of how to avoid harm. The FSA's implications for civilian security were thus exclusively negative, which made it impossible for civilians to support the group.

Ayman was open about his frustration with politics before the interview even began. He emerged from his tent yelling about UNHCR's uselessness when he saw the research team

approaching and was no less irritated when he found out that the team wanted to talk about war rather than his refugee status. Ayman left the town of Al-Ruwayda in Idleb Province in 2013. He dismissed the idea that the FSA protected anyone. Idleb Province was an area of early success for the FSA, so it entered Al-Ruwayda as part of a larger offensive. Al-Ruwayda had previously avoided the state's ire because it had no protests, but that changed when the government followed the FSA into the town. Jabhat Al-Nusra also entered the fray. The once quiet town thus became the site of a three-way battle that the FSA was losing. The Free Syrian Army could barely hold its own, let alone defend civilians.

Ayman was unremitting in his disdain toward the FSA and its treatment of civilians. He reported that the group distributed some food, but only to individuals who it determined supported the revolution. Members of the group stole from civilians, beating anyone who resisted giving rebels what they wanted. Curfew violation or failure to morally support the revolution to the nearest rebel's satisfaction were also cause for a slap, beating, or imprisonment. The FSA established a court in the area, but the court opted not to prosecute thieves who belonged to the FSA. Some civilians thus took to shooting rebels who tried to steal from them, which sparked reprisals from the FSA. It was difficult to know which transgressions would inspire punishment or who would be targeted for theft. The FSA was an unwieldy threat. When asked about his political views, Ayman responded that both the Free Syrian Army and Bashar Al-Asad's government were tyrannical. He rejected both as leaders and added that the future leader of Syria had to be a God-fearing Sunni.

Khadija left Qudsaya, a city in Damascus Province, at the end of 2012. Her marriage to a military official and job in the courts left her with significant personal exposure to corruption. She noted that simple missteps such as failure to offer payment at controlled

traffic crossings could expose motorists to threats from traffic police, but rejected calling such payments bribes. Qudsaya was mixed between Sunnis, Alawites, and Christians, but Sunnis formed the majority of protesters once demonstrations began. Once state violence ensued, young men armed themselves and women stayed home to prepare meals for the men and reduce their own risk of sexual violence. Khadija estimated that most of Qudsaya's demonstrators had been women up until that point.

Qudsaya's coterie of armed young men began calling themselves the Free Syrian Army in 2012. Problems began immediately. Khadija overlooked the theft that happened under the FSA's watch because she felt that the perpetrators had always been thieves, which absolved the organization of responsibility. Murder was a more pressing concern. FSA members often used their position to kill old rivals, or shot civilians during heated arguments. The FSA sometimes punished wrongdoers, but chose not to when the perpetrator was powerful or strategically valuable. The FSA attempted to distribute food, but provisions were often stolen by entrepreneurial members who then sold the goods to civilians who could afford exorbitant prices. Khadija noted that fear of the FSA emerged within months of the group's development. One never knew whom it would target—both old and new transgressions, small and large, could place one into the FSA's crosshairs.

Qudsaya's FSA provided no valuable protection in Khadija's eyes. Internally displaced persons streamed into the city, which created an influx of unfamiliar persons in a context of scarcity and uncertainty. Airstrikes and heavy artillery warped the city with pockmarks and massive piles of rubble that hid bodies. Against this background, it is no surprise that Khadijah was against the Free Syrian Army or any of its members rising to a leadership role in Syria. She openly disliked all of the political actors currently in Syria and stated that she

had no faith in any of them.

Khadija's description of Qudsaya is consistent with depictions from media reports. In 2016, when rebels withdrew from Qudsaya as part of a truce with the government, news outlets flocked to the suburb to see what it was like. In one story, a resident called the FSA a gang while another opined that it started firefights through incendiary acts such as kidnapping soldiers (Kenyon 2016). In a different interview, a Qudsaya man referred to the Asad government as the lesser of two evils given how extreme and violent the Free Syrian Army's rebels had become (Evans 2016).

Aysha shared Khadija's experience and opinion of Syria's political landscape. Aysha came from a village called Al-Qaryatein in Homs province. Al-Qaryatein's protests infuriated the regime and left the village at the mercy of rockets. Aysha thus refrained from blaming the FSA for state violence that the community suffered. The Free Syrian Army in Al-Qaryatein behaved in a manner that is now familiar. Theft by strong-arm was common, as was the beating of anyone who was seen as resisting liberation. Aysha even questioned whether or not the area's rebels were truly FSA, quipping that "Every young man with a gun called himself the Free Syrian Army." By her account, locals who had always been violent jumped at the opportunity to become part of an armed group, so their malice was simply augmented by membership in an organization that specialized in violence. Al-Qaryatein did not suffer the *shabbiha* or any other pro-state militia, but instead suffered airstrikes against which the FSA could not hope to defend. The group never distributed goods.

Aysha was a researcher and contrasted her experience with the FSA to the cases she had seen elsewhere. She acknowledged that the FSA had been more effective in other parts of Syria. Though Aysha called those groups the "real FSA" and felt positively about them, she

rejected the idea that any part of the FSA could hold a leadership role in the Syrian government. She responded to the question of support with a shoulder shrug, stating "I don't know what to say…there is no one who can represent the entire country." Aysha then elaborated that she would never support anyone who had been a member of an armed group as a leader in a new Syrian government.

Aysha and Khadija's accounts betray a clear tone of hopelessness. Both women lost hope not only in the FSA, but in all of the political actors in Syria. Hadi, who changed his opinion of the FSA as he watched its behavior change, went even further. He believed that no one truly supported any of the rebel organizations in Syria, but simply wanted the fall of Bashar Al-Asad. He predicted that the fall of the regime would lead to further collapse as partisans of various groups turned against their former favorites. Many individuals from areas where civilians lacked protection from the state and were preyed upon by the rebels rejected the FSA and lost faith in politics altogether.

Published accounts of the Free Syrian Army's behavior suggest that these stories of bullish behavior and theft are far from unique. Glass (2016) tells the story of FSA violence in Aleppo, a city from which none of the interviewees came. The rebels set a central market aflame lest the regime control it, looted a school in order to furnish the home of a commander, kidnapped residents and demanded ransom as a way to raise funds, and then blamed Aleppans' allegedly delayed support of the revolution for the FSA's violence. The elders of the impoverished neighborhood of Bani Zayd ultimately sent a letter to the local Free Syrian Army, stating

> "We cheered the Free Army. But what is happening today is a crime against the inhabitants of our neighborhood. For there are no offices for government

> security or the *shabiha* [*sic*]…However, the groups that have taken position in the neighborhood cannot defend it…We, the elders of Bani Zayd neighborhood, are responsible for making this statement and demand that battalions of the Free Army which have entered the neighborhood leave it and join battles on hot fronts." (118-119)

The area's Free Syrian Army showed no interest in the elders' request and apparently saw no connection between its behavior and the anti-FSA protests that began in Aleppo even though residents still wanted the fall of the regime. Abboud (2018) reports that during the later years of the war, some FSA units developed in order to pursue the paydays that war could offer, and saw fighting as a business venture. But one can only steal so much. By the end of 2015, the Aleppo FSA's battlefield struggles and fighters' inabilities to make ends meet had led to desertions (Lucente and Shimale 2015). The number of desertions is unknown, but it was enough for commanders to fear that their capacity would soon shrink.

5. Concluding Observations and Insights

Given that the FSA developed as a coalition of armed units and not as a centralized fighting force, the observation of differences in behavior between different areas is unsurprising. But the variation is nonetheless consequential. The presence of fervent support for the FSA and the widespread willingness to overlook its shortcomings suggest that more consistent restraint would have endeared the group to many more Syrians. The Free Syrian Army's promise to bring democracy and fairness to Syrian politics may have even resonated with some members of Syria's religious minority groups if some FSA units had not so blatantly targeted Alawites.

One could thus ask why the Free Syrian Army, an organization that rose from civilians and is thought to be especially close to them, has failed to create good behavior across all of its

units. Two especially persuasive reasons exist. The first involves the FSA's organization. As a coalition, the FSA began without a central command. Even the central command that presently exists has been strictly nominal. Individual units have instead followed the orders of local commanders who have not always bothered to pay attention to the FSA's central leadership. The lack of strong central command left the Free Syrian Army without an authority that could create and impose rules upon the rest of the organization. The absence of a real center also meant that there was no one to direct inexperienced rebels to pay attention to civilians' reactions to violence, nor was there any mechanism to distribute information about the negative consequences of uninhibited violence. Thus, units that behaved better may have simply benefitted from more capable, detail-oriented leaders than more unrestrained units.

Leaders' idiosyncratic preferences may have also driven the variation in units' behavior. Any combatant organization will experience disagreement between leaders about matters such as how to treat civilians, which targets are most important, and how money should be raised. The absence of a central body to settle such disputes leaves commanders to implement their own rules and objectives, thus creating units that vary according to local leaders' desires. Units may have behaved differently because they had different objectives, with some focusing on protecting civilians, others focusing on expanding territorial control, and yet others balancing either of the aforementioned goals with rent-seeking. Whatever the causes of the variation in the units' behavior, the differences have been consequential for civilians' attitudes toward the Free Syrian Army.

While the variation in the behavior of different FSA units was to be expected, it is stranger to observe change in a single unit's behavior over time, as described by Hadi, Nasir,

and Hilal. Fieldwork did not yield enough data to define the causes of units' behavioral change over time, but there are viable explanations. From a structural perspective, it is possible that units became more aggressive over time because the conflict became more intense. The state initially withdrew from or only gave limited attention to some areas in order to focus on others. As Asad and his allies launched a full initiative to retake and cement control over restive localities, targeted FSA units would have faced a greater need for money and supplies. To make matters worse, the FSA also faced competition from other rebel groups, such as Jabhat Al-Nusra and ISIS, that sought to infiltrate the areas that it controlled and persuade civilians to support them. The FSA would have thus had an incentive to control the movement of civilians in an effort to keep rival groups from infiltrating areas that it controlled. Insofar as these threats became more pressing over time, they could explain why so many FSA units' behavior changed.

Interviewees also provided their own theories. Hadi offered a psychological argument for the change. He felt that individuals in positions of power inevitably become greedy for material benefits and for more control. He also theorized that the prospect of financial support from the Gulf countries that favored Islamists provided groups with an incentive to become more Islamist and forceful. This mechanism would have then become more intense as it became clearer that western funds would not flow as freely as many early agitators expected. Other anecdotal accounts (Darke 2014) as well as peer-reviewed research (Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014) support the idea that foreign funding fueled bad behavior, either because the multitude of foreign backers left rebels with no material reason to constrain themselves, or because Islamist rebels simply had a deeper pool of resources from which to draw (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE) than the more moderate rebels (Turkey and the noncommittal US).

This advantage would have allowed more radical units to survive longer, leaving them exposed to other processes that can intensify rebel abuse.

ʿAla and others hypothesized that the most devoted rebels were the ones who became active before the resistance gained momentum, and the leaders left were more interested in looting than they were in civilian welfare. A change in membership was thus responsible for the change in behavior, where it did occur. Participants in this study were not the only ones who suspected that the spoils of war attracted violent men over time. One Aleppan interviewed for a now published work lamented that the FSA was initially beneficial to everyone, but that "as time dragged on, opportunists joined for their own criminal reasons. For profit. Those rich people who'd chosen to stay became kidnapping targets." (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami 2016, 96) There is probably some truth to this argument, though one would still need to explain why some units were better at constraining or weeding out opportunistic new members than others—or, conversely, why some units attracted them more than others.

One could ask what happened to the peaceful protesters whose revolution barreled away from them as violence radiated across the country. Many early activists who rejected violence left Syria, but those who stayed and continued attempting to support change faced a dilemma: did they or did they not support the Free Syrian Army? Many individuals remained active members of the Syrian National Council and continued to decry the FSA's use of violence, lest it taint the new Syria before the first liberated day even arrives. Yet other peace-loving activists turned a blind eye to the FSA's wrongdoings. As one observer who had seen the FSA's abuse of prisoners put it, "if there were two or three violations in FSA prisons, there were hundreds in regime prisons. So should we damage the revolution's reputation and help

Assad? We couldn't see violations and not report them - so we stopped looking." (*Ibid*, 97) The pacifist leaning that characterized the early demonstrations has largely disappeared from the Syrian political scene.

This chapter furnishes three primary insights for scholars. First, the observations offered here are consistent with agency-oriented representations of civilians in conflict. Not only do civilians pay attention to how violent an actor is, but they take note of whom it targets. Indeed, both factors received explicit mention during individuals' discussions of their views of the FSA. One can further see that civilians compare violent organizations to each other, hence the critiques of Jabhat Al-Nusra and the specificity with which many individuals cited pro-state militias as especially violent relative to the military. In addition to highlighting the criticality of agentive understandings of civilians, the situational awareness that civilians display suggests that accounts of support that focus on material benefits, identity, or ideology omit a critical factor: violence.

Secondly, the accounts reveal a noteworthy weakness in materialist explanations for civilian support. Many, if not all, of the FSA supporters who informed this chapter were made materially worse off by its presence. In localities where the FSA robbed the wealthy in order to provide for others, it did so because regime blockades that punished supporters made food, water, and medicine scarce—a fact not lost on civilians. In at least four separate cases, civilian knowledge of the relationship between the FSA's presence and their material hardship was made clear when civilians asked their local FSA units to withdraw from the area so that the regime's onslaught would lighten. For example, a supporter from the Hama countryside reported that she and her neighbors asked the local FSA unit to withdraw, but the organization refused. As the siege deepened, the price of bread surged from 15 lira to 250. A

bag of rice that was once 250 lira fetched 20,000. Frequently, paying such exorbitant prices was not an option because there was no food to purchase. No level of redistributive theft or borrowing could prevent the rampant inflation and dwindling supplies that characterized and eventually displaced the populations of localities where the FSA was popular. Support for the FSA came at a loss, but was still able to persist.

Weakness notwithstanding, one cannot dismiss materialist arguments altogether. Many Syrians observed the international intervention in Libya, heard president Barack Obama's chastisement of Bashar Al-Asad, and concluded that American help would come eventually. They may have seen the hardship associated with FSA support as a temporary misfortune to be countered by the benefits of a new, more open government. Belief in a high probability of enjoying beneficial future changes could easily lead one to discount present scarcity. If this argument holds, then materialist accounts are inaccurate due to inadequate consideration of time rather than analytic misdirection. Another possibility is that the extreme violence practiced by the Asad government fed a belief that abandoning the FSA would not provide better material wellbeing. Many civilians may have mistrusted the state's promise to care for those who supported it. Civilians' beliefs about the state's willingness to provide material benefits may have led them to discount its obvious material superiority. Assessing these claims would require more fieldwork. At this point, the materialist view is embattled, but not impeached.

The final implication for academics concerns identity. Most of the Free Syrian Army's personnel and supporters have been Sunni, while the Asad government benefits from the support of minorities, including Alawites. This bifurcation often engenders a belief that the conflict is sectarian in nature. But, interviews with Sunni supporters reveal that they have

diverse views of sectarian relations and the FSA. Even this sample, which is biased toward FSA supporters, is still 20% non-supporters. The sample is too small to dismiss causal relationships between identity and political attitudes altogether. But the presence of in-group variation and fact that several individuals changed their minds about the FSA over time suggest that security concerns outweigh identity even in contexts where identity has some relation to conflict.

Policymakers should also note the shaky relationship between identity and political support. Sectarianism is not as popular among political observers as it was in the early 2000s when prominent analysts and leaders such as Joe Biden opined that sectarian divides were significant such that Shiʿa and Sunni communities were best separated into different countries. The analysis in this chapter suggests that the decline in sectarianism's buzzword status is well-advised. Sectarian divisions are real, but they are not consistent enough to form the basis of policy.

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[i] These weapons seem to have been obtained by the Free Syrian Army thanks to CIA support (Schmitt and MacFarquhar 2012).

Chapter 6

Explaining the Limits of the Sunni Awakening in Iraq

None of the mechanisms discussed in the previous chapters are unique to Syria. Iraq offers another opportunity to explore the consequences of uninformative violence, defensive ability, and threat for civilian support. Starting in 2003, this chapter tells the story of why Sunnis turned against Al-Qaeda in Iraq despite the facts that they lacked material incentives and lived in a country that was enduring foreign occupation. The analysis centers on two cities: the Anbar Province capital, Ramadi ,and the Nineva Province capital, Mosul. Ramadi experienced a swift and aggressive turn against AQI that spread to Baghdad and even received its own name—the Sunni Awakening. Meanwhile in Mosul, AQI found little resistance from Sunni Arabs as efforts by Americans and Iraqis to nurture an Awakening in Mosul floundered. Even when Mosul's Sunnis finally began to work against against AQI, they did so at a smaller scale than Sunnis in Ramadi and more than a year after the Awakening had already begun.

What explains the difference between Ramadi and Mosul? The argument here is that the Awakening was ill-received in Mosul because Sunnis in Mosul faced a unique combination of threats that led them to value the protection that AQI offered more than Sunnis in Ramadi. As a result, when a change American counterinsurgency strategy reduced the threat posed by coalition forces, Sunnis in Ramadi lost their reason to work with AQI while Sunnis in Mosul still found use in the protection that the extremists offered.

Ideally, one would support these claims by using data that showcased Iraqis' views of the American forces, AQI, and other actors in Iraq. But the vagaries of fieldwork precluded

collection of such a trove of information. Instead, the following section uses several interviews conducted with Iraqis in order to demonstrate that the argument's central logic is viable. The interviews show that civilians feared the US-led coalition forces and that they saw AQI and other combatant organizations as potential, but risky, sources of protection. The chapter then uses secondary sources to provide a detailed discussion of the Sunni Awakening and leverage it as an observable implication of civilians' attitudes toward AQI.

1. Interviews

Several interviews with Iraqis revealed that they had much to fear between 2003 and 2008. The interviews were conducted by the author in Beirut (summer 2014) and Jordan (winter 2016). The conversations are clearly too few to offer definitive evidence of the proposed mechanisms. But they nonetheless help to substantiate some of the potentially controversial claims made in this dissertation. Among these claims is that many Iraqis saw the US military as a threat from which they wanted protection. One of the more interesting accounts came from Dr. Sadoon Al-Zubaydi, a British-educated literature professor who worked as Saddam Hussein's interpreter. Dr. Al-Zubaydi generally refuses to identify as Shiʿa or Sunni, but he acknowledges coming from a Sunni family. Dr. Al-Zubaydi's professional background did not leave him hostile toward the American invasion. If anything, he seemed to regret the decades that he spent working under Saddam Hussein. At the time of the interviews, Dr. Al-Zubaydi was unhappily stuck in Jordan and unable to get a visa to leave for bureaucratic reasons. When I expressed sympathy about his inability to visit his children or pursue opportunities abroad, he shrugged and said "I deserve this. I knew what Saddam was doing. I didn't know for certain, but I knew something was up. And I never said

anything. So I deserve this." The professor was no fan of his former employer.

Dr. Al-Zubaydi was measured but honest in his appraisal of the American troops' behavior during the early days of the Iraq War in Baghdad. He stated that the soldiers behaved well in the beginning and cautiously kept their distance from civilians. Some soldiers even played with children in the streets. But, he also noted that mistakes were made. Such mistakes included soldiers shooting civilian motorists for not stopping their cars soon enough at checkpoints, or for stepping out of the car before being told to. These specific incidents occurred in 2003—before the insurgency began. Dr. Al-Zubaydi noted that he viewed these actions as errors, but that most Iraqis understood them as evidence of an malicious occupier. The emergence of insurgents in 2004 made matters worse. Soldiers became harsh and heavy-handed, pointing guns at civilians for infractions such as stepping too close to them or armored vehicles. Fear of the US military grew alongside the insurgency as civilians came to be seen as potential threats.

But, the US was not the most feared combatant in Baghdad, according to Dr. Al-Zubaydi. That title fell to the highly sectarian Mahdi Army (MA), which was founded in 2003 by the Shi'a cleric Muqtada Al-Sadr in order to combat the invasion. The former interpreter grimly quipped that Baghdad's Sunni families congratulated each other when they found out that their sons had been taken by the US rather than the Mahdi Army. With the latter, the return of one's child—even if bloodied—was rare. The lone exception was in the case of kidnappings, where Mahdi Army soldiers returned brutalized victims in exchange for ransom. To make matters worse, the Mahdi Army had many connections to the police, which left its victims without any official recourse.

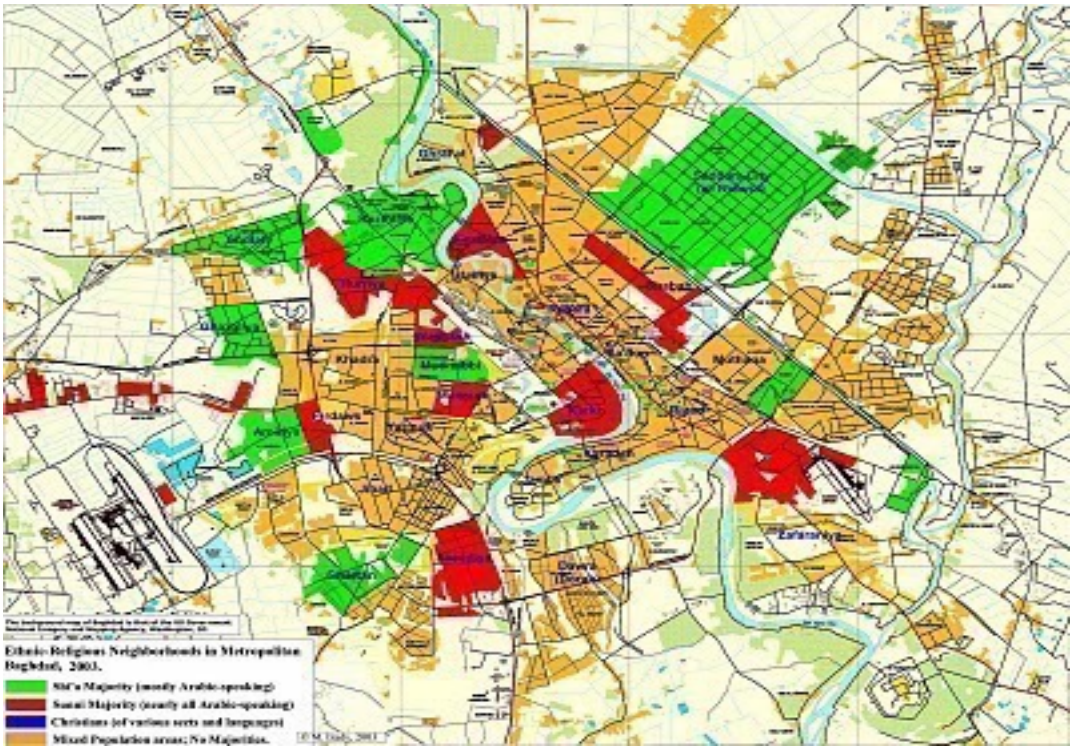
Dr. Al-Zubaydi reported that he and others initially placed their hope in the US Army

as a protector from the MA, but as both organizations sank into their fight with each other and Al-Qaeda, each became more suspicious of and harsh toward civilians. AQI was not as strong as the Mahdi Army in Baghdad, but AQI's use of IEDs and patrols allowed the organization to deter its enemies from western parts of the city. As a result, Sunnis who could not leave the city altogether relocated to areas that were under AQI's control. For evidence of this shift, one can look to the residential segregation that developed in Baghdad between 2003 and the first months of 2007. Maps 2 and 3 (Izady 2017) show the shift of Baghdad's Sunni population between 2003 and early 2007. During that period, Baghdad's once mixed neighborhoods dissolved as Sunnis (represented by red) moved to neighborhoods in the west and Shiʿa Iraqis (represented by green) dominated the east. In some areas, these divisions were underscored by metal and brick walls that reached as high as 30 feet (Bright 2007.)

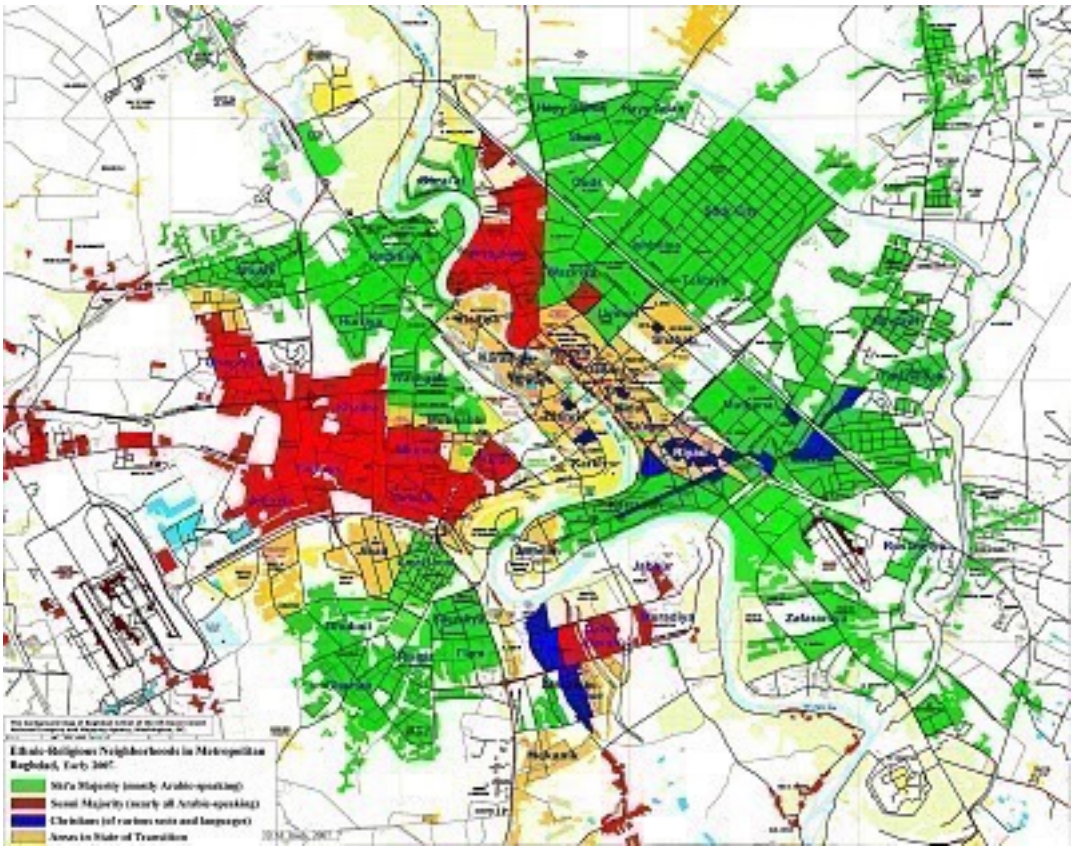
What the maps do not show is that the areas to which Sunnis fled with particular haste in 2005 and 2006 were controlled by Al-Qaeda. By 2007, the handful of mixed and Shiʿa-majority neighborhoods that remained just southwest of the Tigris River represented a chunk of western Baghdad that AQI was unable to capture. Insofar as a choice was made, Sunnis in Baghdad clearly chose to live under AQI. This does not mean that every person who moved west believed in AQI's proposed caliphate or even trusted the organization. The relocation instead suggests that many Sunnis in Baghdad were willing to accept Al-Qaeda's presence as a means to improve their safety in a context of limited options. Such is the grisly calculus of a war zone. Baghdad was not unique. Many military sources lamented the local support that AQI enjoyed in Ramadi and Mosul throughout the first three years of the insurgency (Harden 2005; Hamilton 2009). To say that AQI was loved would be an overstatement. But AQI enjoyed a level of acquiescence and cooperation that the US did not.

Maps 2 & 3: Ethno-Sectarian Segregation in Baghdad

2003



2007



Dr. Mohammad Bashar Al-Faydi, a Sunni religious scholar and activist, held a less mixed view of the US, but broadly agreed with the dynamics above. He argued that the American military destroyed mosques and killed many innocents from the early days of the occupation, but admitted that many attacks ascribed to the US military were actually the work of the Mahdi Army. Dr. Al-Faydi also stressed that Shiʿas, who feared the US, saw the MA as a protective organization. They did not believe their former neighbors' stories about the group's behavior until several years of war had passed and the Mahdi Army began victimizing Shiʿa Iraqis as well. Sunnis found themselves squeezed between the barrels of two guns.

These accounts point to dynamics that are consistent with the theory. Sunnis in Baghdad faced a series of threats from the US Army and the Mahdi Army. They thus sought protection in the form of AQI. Of course, AQI was an incredibly violent organization. AQI sometimes even murdered the children of its detractors, rather than the detractors themselves (The Telegraph 2008). Al-Qaeda in Iraq's offer of protection did not make it a normatively acceptable organization. AQI was instead an effective and uninformatively violent protector that allowed Sunnis to flee from areas where they believed harm was certain, and to instead reside in areas where harm was possible or even likely.

This dynamic, whereby Sunnis feared the US military, the Mahdi Army, and the Iraqi government that it had infiltrated, and consequently tolerated AQI in a desperate attempt to achieve security was not lost on the US Armed Forces. Military leaders knew that Sunni resentment toward and mistrust of the occupying forces allowed AQI to establish a foothold in Baghdad (Sills 2009). More critical voices cited American mismanagement and violent behavior as fuel for AQI (Aylwin-Foster 2005). Indeed, knowledge of this fact underlay the

dominant counterinsurgency strategy of the mid 2000s, whereby securing the population became paramount and surgical strikes launched from Forward Operating Bases became less of a priority (Metz 2007, Kuehl 2009).

The contextualized effects of violence were not unique to Sunnis or Baghdad. Hussein and his mother, both Shiʿa, left Karbala after it became too violent for them to remain there. Their family possessed tremendous wealth that afforded them two villas, a flat, and private schooling, but that was not enough to purchase the family's safety inside Iraq. Hussein recalled that Shiʿa civilians whom he knew initially supported the Mahdi Army both because it promised protection and because it was led by a familiar personality, Muqtada Al-Sadr. He described the support as moral (*maʿanawi*) rather than material (*maddi*). Hussein went on to say that while the Mahdi Army committed horrific acts of violence elsewhere in 2004, he personally saw no problems from the organization until 2005. At that point, as the Mahdi Army competed with the US more fiercely, it began to demand more resources from wealthy families such as Hussein's. Noncompliance resulted in beatings, theft, and the kidnapping of his aunt. Meanwhile, less wealthy Shiʿas in Karbala were forcefully conscripted into the Mahdi Army as it pushed for greater control of Iraq's petroleum. Hussein recalled that this was the point at which support for the Mahdi Army began to wane.

If the theory can provide credible suggestions as to why feared combatants in Iraq were able to receive support, then it should also shed light on why those groups lost support. In particular, the theory should be able to explain why Sunnis turned against AQI in Ramadi before they did elsewhere and why such a turn was delayed in Mosul. According to the theory, the salient variables are AQI's defensive ability, the other threats in the area, AQI's

provision of goods, and the violence that AQI practiced against civilians. Most of these variables were constant across the two cities, but Ramadi and Mosul experienced wildly different threat environments that left civilians in considerably different strategic contexts. The particularly severe matrix of threats in Mosul explains why it did not fall into the Sunni Awakening.

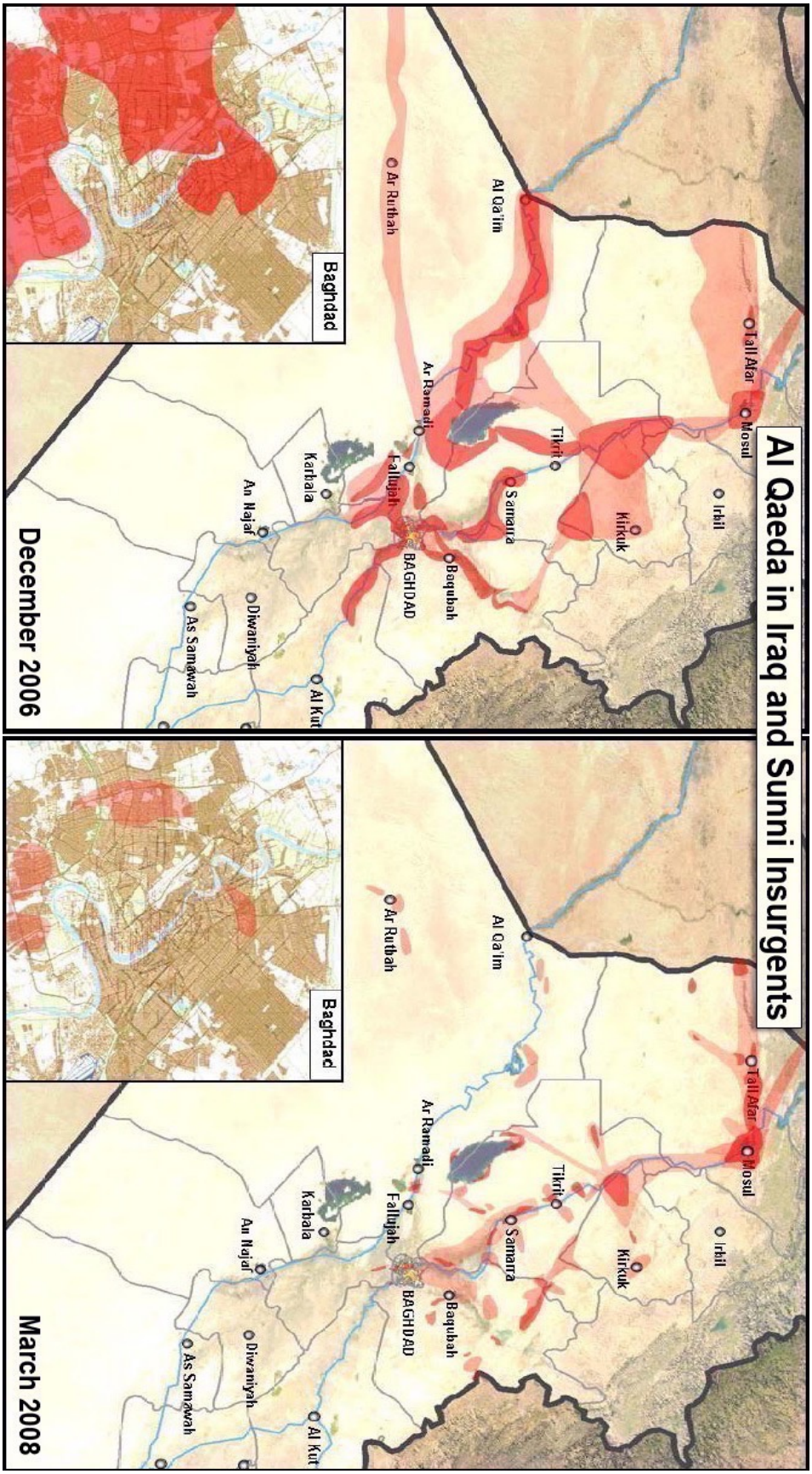
2. The Sunni Awakening

The standard telling of the Sunni Awakening goes as follows. In 2006, Sunni tribal and religious leaders throughout Iraq finally grew weary of Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Unable to face a clearly superior enemy on their own, the leaders and their followers sought American assistance, which came in the form of a surge of troops under the leadership of General David Petraeus in 2007. Violence in Iraq fell as bands of men known as the Sons of Iraq collaborated with the US and Iraqi militaries in order to remove AQI from western Iraq and Baghdad before sweeping through the rest of the country. Sunnis then began taking previously unappealing or unattainable positions in the military and police as Iraq's government finally seemed to make significant progress toward self-sufficiency.

There are at several empirical problems with this story. First, many Sunnis in Baghdad and Anbar Province rejected AQI before 2006. Second, and relatedly, some of those individuals had sought and been denied support from the US earlier, while others resisted American assistance for as long as they could (Kuehl 2009). Yet a third inaccuracy animates this chapter. The Sunni Awakening occurred with remarkable unevenness across Iraq. Map 4 (Vox 2008) compares the geographic presence of AQI in September of 2006 to its status in March of 2008. In Ramadi and the rest of Anbar Province, AQI shrank as Americans and

Iraqis pummeled it. But, the map also indicates that AQI's presence in Mosul hardly changed at all even as the group's members were killed, imprisoned, and forced to flee throughout western Iraq. There are several potential explanations for why AQI was able to last longer in Mosul than it was in Ramadi. Mosul is near the border with Syria and rests on a corridor that militants used to bring supplies from Syria. Some analysts thus argue that Mosul was resistant because it was easy to resupply with materiel and bodies (Hamilton 2008). It is also possible that Mosul, being much further from Baghdad than Ramadi, was simply a low priority for the US and Iraqi governments, so they left the removal of its AQI presence for last.

This chapter offers a third explanation for AQI's resilience in Mosul: the city's slow adoption of the Awakening, which was a result of the threat of Kurdish militias in Mosul. The following pages argue that Mosul's turn against AQI was not as rapid or as large as that in Ramadi. Further, I argue that the difference in the growth of the Awakening in the two cities can be explained by the differences in the threats that faced Sunnis in each city. While Ramadi faced Al-Qaeda and the US military, Mosul Sunnis encountered risk from AQI, the US, and Kurdish militias that preyed on Sunni Arabs and were allied with the US. The presence of more threats in Mosul made AQI's protection more valuable to Sunnis in Mosul than it was to Sunnis in Ramadi. Sunnis in Mosul were thus less willing to turn against AQI. In support of these claims, the following section offers secondary data that demonstrate the two cities' disparate reactions to AQI and connects it to their different threat environments.


Al Qaeda in Iraq and Sunni Insurgents
December 2006
March 2008
Baghdad
Baghdad
Tall Afar
Mosul
Irbil
Kirkuk
Al Qa'im
Ar Rutbah
Ar Ramadi
Tikrit
Samarra
Fallujah
Karbala
An Najaf
BAGHDAD
Baqubah
Diwaniyah
As Samawah
Al Kut

3. Ramadi and Mosul

Rumblings of a turn against Al-Qaeda in Iraq surfaced in western media outlets in late 2005 and early 2006. Leaders from large Anbar tribes such as the Dulaymi and the Karabilah announced that they had formed units of locals who swept the streets in search of AQI operatives (BBC 2006b). By the fall of 2006, 25 of Anbar's 31 tribes had publicly met and agreed to collaborate in removing AQI from Ramadi (Al-Ansary and Adeeb 2006). The initially uncoordinated bands of armed locals grew to encompass thousands, or possibly tens of thousands, of men who held rifles and benefitted from the support of their communities. In 2007, tribal leaders established relationships with the Iraqi government and American officials whom they had rejected only years prior. The Awakening eventually spread through the rest of Iraq, emanating from Anbar and its capital.[i]

While Ramadi became the epicenter of indigenous resistance, Mosul remained as hospitable to AQI as ever. AQI still controlled the same western half of Mosul that it had taken in 2004, still benefitted from the cooperation of Mosul's massive Shammar tribe, and continued to count on civilians not to give information to Iraqi or American forces. In fact, Sunnis in Mosul did not begin to provide intelligence on AQI to the US until the summer of 2007 (Hamilton 2008). A muted version of the anti-AQI sentiment that shifted politics in Ramadi in 2006 emerged over a year later in Mosul, but had small effects. Even as late as the spring of 2008, the US was still meeting with leaders from the Shammar and other tribes in ongoing efforts to dissuade them from cooperating with AQI and encourage collaboration with the US (Dagher 2008).

One might turn to money to explain why the tribes of Ramadi and surrounding areas began to fight AQI after years of cooperating with or ignoring it. But, as was previously

noted, the change happened before the US government and its massive resources got involved. Even in the summer of 2005, some Sunnis in Ramadi had begun skirmishes with AQI units as they bristled under the group's tyranny (Ridolfo 2005). Further, American efforts to buy friends in Iraq had failed before. The US military attempted to pay tribes to turn against Saddam Hussein in 2003, but its dollars inspired little interest (Cheney 2003). Even if money could explain the change in Ramadi, it could not explain the lack of change in Mosul because there is no evidence of differential financial treatment between the two. American coaching and money certainly helped Ramadi's tribal militias to grow and hold territory as 2006 gave way to 2007, but American resources were not behind Anbar's turn against AQI.

Based on the theory offered in Chapter 3, one might look to a litany of other variables in order to explain the different outcomes in Ramadi and Mosul. Goods are one potential candidate, but did not vary meaningfully between the two locations. Unlike in Syria, there was no powerful state to enact sieges and restrict the flow of food and medicine in Iraq. Both Ramadi and Mosul managed to maintain active, if anemic, markets throughout the conflict. Extreme violence and markets simply overlapped in Iraq. At one point in Ramadi, AQI murdered an alleged spy and left his headless body in a shopping district. Shoppers pointedly pretended not to see it, as AQI had ordered that the warning remain there for five days (Carroll 2005). There is no evidence that AQI consistently distributed goods or provided valuable services. The availability of functioning markets may have limited demand for goods from AQI. When it came to getting by, civilians were largely left to fend for themselves.

Overall violence from AQI was high in Ramadi as well as Mosul, and much of that violence was uninformative. Abu Mus'ab Al-Zarqawi, the leader of AQI, famously vexed Al-

Qaeda's global leadership by assassinating prominent Sunnis, bombing public squares, and engaging in other forms of wholly indiscriminate violence all over Iraq. As in Ramadi, AQI left decapitated bodies around Mosul, sometimes marking them with notes that accused the victims of vague wrongdoings such as "sin and corruption" (Fainaru 2005). Baseless allegations or suspicion of adultery, theft, or collusion were enough to get one maimed, beaten, stoned, or shot. AQI was performative in its use of unpredictable violence in both Mosul and Ramadi. One knew that it would hurt someone, but not whom or why.

Defensive ability is another factor. If AQI were a better protector in Mosul than it was in Ramadi, then it would have made sense for residents of Mosul to be more hesitant in turning against it. The complications of measuring defensive ability remotely lead to tentative observations. AQI held territory in both cities. Insofar as territorial control approximates military ability, AQI's defensive performance was the same in Mosul and Ramadi. AQI's eventual loss of territory in Ramadi was a result of changes in its competitors' behavior rather than a change in its abilities. Another way to assess defensive ability is to compare data on fights between the US and Al-Qaeda in the two cities, and thus see where AQI most actively faced a feared entity. Data from the Empirical Studies of Conflict Project indicate that Ramadi saw much more fighting between US forces and AQI than Mosul (Berman et al 2012). For example, in 2005 Ramadi saw nearly 300 more direct fire engagements between the US and insurgents than Mosul (499 vs 795). Ramadi also had more improvised explosive devices (IEDs) than Mosul. A principle problem with these figures is that their interpretation is unclear. AQI may have had more firefights and used more IEDs in Ramadi because it was a more aggressive protector working harder to keep enemies away. Or, the variation may exist simply because AQI was having a harder time holding its territory in Ramadi, and was less

capable than AQI units in Mosul.

A more fundamental issue with the ESOC dataset is its dubious reliability. When AQI attacked Mosul in late 2004 and seized half of the city, all but 200 of Mosul's 5000-person police force deserted (Hamilton 2008). As a result, the US and its coalition relied on Kurdish militias to maintain relative security in the parts of Mosul that AQI did not take. The Army and Marines were thus not as present in Mosul as they were in Ramadi and could not document much of the violence that occurred in Mosul between 2004 and 2006. ESOC data for Mosul probably underestimate critical figures such as the frequency of firefights and spread of IEDs. Actual figures representing defensive behavior by AQI in Ramadi and Mosul may not, in fact, be so different. Indeed, Coalition Forces in Mosul operated from forward operating bases and only entered Mosul to fight while soldiers and Marines in Ramadi resided in the city. As it stands, there are tentative reasons to believe that civilians in both Ramadi and Mosul would have viewed AQI as a protector. There are also reasons to believe that the group's activities against threats may have been equal across the two cities. But there is nothing to indicate that AQI's defensive image in Ramadi would have differed from its image in Mosul enough to explain why the Awakening was so lethargic in Mosul.

4. Threat

Goods provision, AQI's overall violence toward civilians, the uninformative quality of that violence, and AQI's defensive ability cannot explain why Ramadi experienced the Awakening and Mosul did not. AQI's abuse certainly provided fertile ground for its own demise, but that demise came more swiftly in Ramadi than in Mosul. Given Iraq's fractious identity politics, one might also ask if demographic factors explain the difference. The answer,

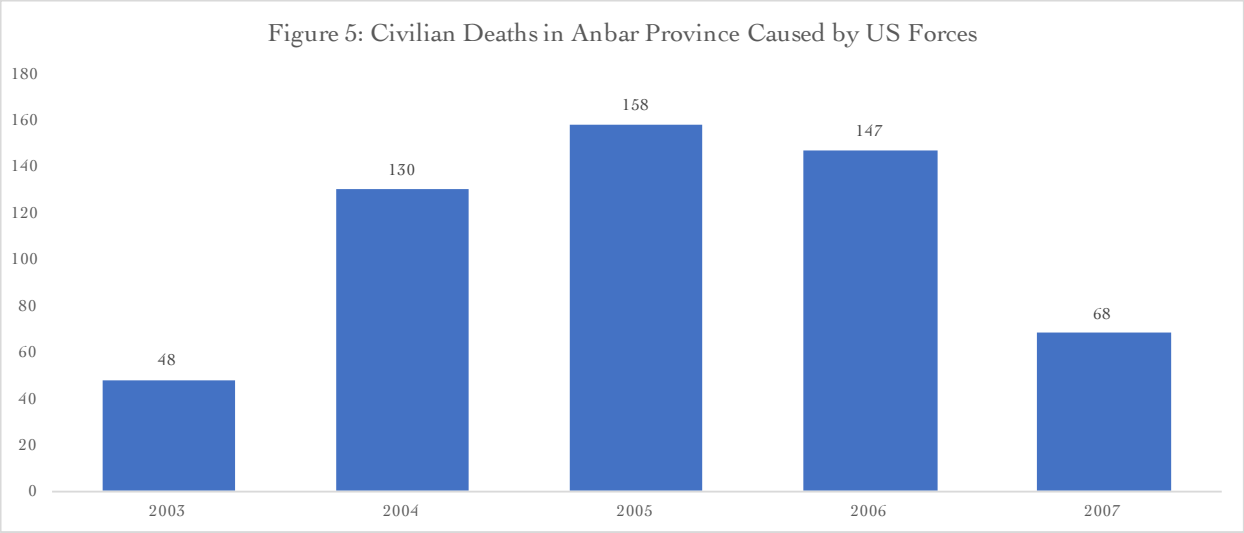
as it often is in social science, is a resounding yes…to some extent. Though both cities are located in the Sunni Triangle, which consists of Ramadi, Mosul, and Samarra, Ramadi is overwhelmingly homogenous while Mosul sits next to Kurdistan. The advent of Kurdish militias and their push for control of Mosul compounded the threat of US occupation, thereby creating a threat environment in Mosul that was harder to tame than that of Ramadi.

Though the US military's ultimate goal of stabilization and democratic transition was not nearly as damning as AQI's intended theocracy, the threat that the US posed was real and grew throughout 2004. As the distinction between civilian and insurgent became more difficult to define, more lives were lost. Village weddings and other celebrations were bombed for being suspiciously far from urban centers (McCarthy 2004). Clerics suspected of insurgent sympathies were forcefully removed from mosques (Wong 2004), which is consistent with Dr. Al-Zubaydi's description of events elsewhere in Iraq. Iraqi clerics who supported Washington watched as members of their flock began to dislike and mistrust the US and search for alternative political actors (Rohde 2003). The shooting of looters and other unarmed persons did not help. By 2005 Al-Qaeda had emerged and was primarily populated by locals in Ramadi (Harnden 2005).[ii] American military instillations—including battalions of soldiers living in Saddam Hussein's Ramadi palace—established it as a threat that sought to take over the area. To make matters worse, US military officials in both Ramadi and Mosul were in denial about how much civilians feared them and how appealing the offer of protection from AQI was (Filkins 2003).

Innovation in the US military began a shift in counterinsurgency (COIN) tactics during the spring of 2004. Some units began experimenting with nonlethal counterinsurgency methods such as building relationships with local leaders and negotiating deals by which the

leaders would discourage cooperation with AQI (Eisenstadt 2007). These early efforts delivered some successes in the form of civilians sharing information, including intelligence about where IEDs were located and where weapons were manufactured. Soldiers and leaders within the Army and Marines began writing about these results in impassioned articles that highlighted the tactical value of civilian safety (Chiarelli and Michaelis 2005; Greer 2005). Such innovation received vindication through the publication of the *Army Field Manual 3-24: Counterinsurgency* in December of 2006. The new COIN manual and the appointment of David Petraeus as commander of Multinational Force-Iraq cemented civilian safety as a priority for the US.

The gradual change and eventually large shift in American strategy were met with similar changes in civilian deaths. The Iraq Body Count (IBC) is a British consortium of journalists, researchers, and other political observers who use interviews and media stories to keep a record of confirmed civilian deaths in Iraq. The IBC data are very narrow in scope and come with all the problems of data based on media accounts, including urban bias and a probable undercounting due to underreporting. But such biases are unlikely to have shifted over the period of interest, which means that the data can reflect overall trends. The data in Figure 5 reflect violent civilian deaths that were directly caused by US forces. It is clear that civilian deaths in Anbar jumped in 2004 and 2005, as the insurgency grew and the US attempted a muddled counterinsurgency approach. Then in 2006, as some units experimented with more civilian-oriented approaches, deaths fell slightly. And in 2007, when changes were systematically implemented, civilian deaths caused by the US plummeted. However imprecise the exact counts may be, their trend is consistent with the story of how American COIN doctrine evolved.



The causal chain proposed here suggests that the change in American COIN doctrine led to a drop in civilian deaths caused by the US and its allies, which precipitated a change in the perceived threat environment among Sunnis in Ramadi and allowed them to stop relying on AQI for protection. We now arrive at the final stage in the chain: the reductions in civilian deaths at American hands coincide with the intensity of the reversal against AQI. Sporadic anti-AQI brawls occurred in 2005, official announcements of intentions to work with Americans in 2006 as fledgling relationships were established, and then a widespread shift in 2007 as the new relationships gained steam, aided by new leadership and revised training. Some critics may challenge the proposition that the drop in civilian deaths led to a change in the extent to which civilians viewed the US as a threat. One should note that the civilian turn against AQI did not require providing intelligence and tactical support for American troops—which is precisely what Iraqis in Anbar began to do in increasing numbers from 2006 onward (Montgomery and McWilliams 2009). The fact that Iraqis began turning to Americans in

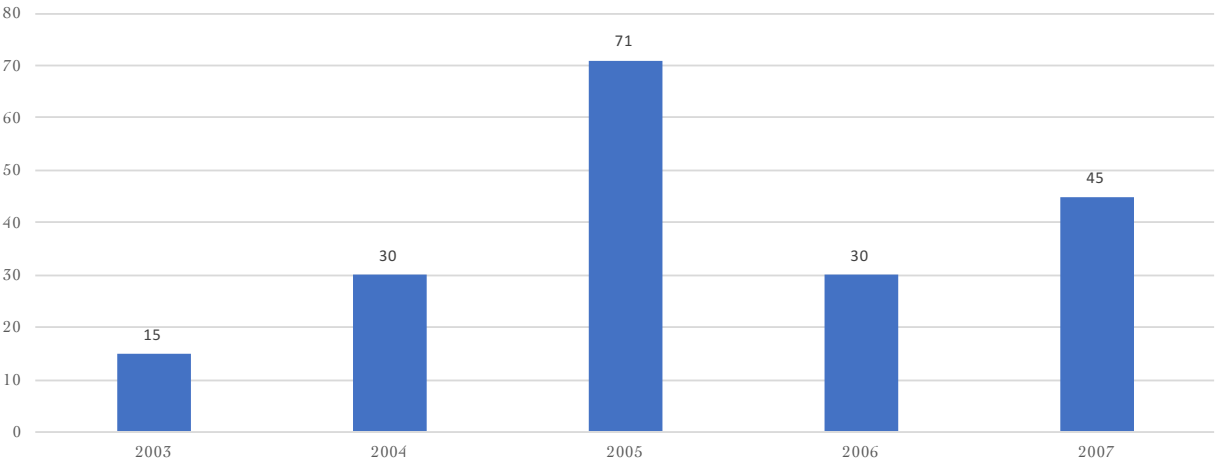
ways that they previously had not even as AQI's behavior remained constant suggests that Iraqis' opinions of the Army and Marines had changed. Outside of the drop in civilian harm, it is difficult to imagine what could have caused such a shift. ESOC figures and media accounts of Ramadi indicate that 2006 and 2007 saw more fights between AQI and the American-led Multinational Security Force-Iraq than ever before, so the fall in deaths cannot be attributed to generally lower violence levels (Filkins 2006). Instead, the reduction of the threat posed by the US military created an environment where AQI's draconian protection lost its value. And, because AQI was so violent and provided no goods, it had no utility to offer in the absence of a threat against which it was the only shield.

The figures for Ninewa Province, of which Mosul is the capital, follow a slightly different path than that of Anbar. Civilian deaths peak in 2005, but plummet in 2006 before an uptick in 2007. The inconsistent decline could be the product of some sort of bias, but it could also betray the limited benefits of the new COIN approach in Mosul. Ramadi benefitted from a cycle wherein soldiers were less violent toward civilians, which improved how they were seen and encouraged civilians to provide information, which allowed soldiers to better discriminate in their violence, which further helped their image, and so forth. Mosul and the surrounding area may not have benefitted from the same level of good will despite the improved strategy due to the intimate relationship between the United States and Kurdish militias.

As was mentioned previously, Kurdish militias containing thousands of troops took over half of Mosul at the end of 2004 when most of the city's police force deserted rather than face AQI. These militias, called *peshmerga*, were partisans of Kurdish political parties based in the Kurds' autonomous region. Both parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and

the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—used the fall of the Hussein regime to establish new offices in Mosul. One office was in a former Baʿath Party headquarters. That repurposing was especially symbolic given that the *peshmerga,* which numbered an estimated 70,000, emerged in the 1990s in order to protect Kurdistan from Saddam Hussein's military advances (Metz 2007).

Figure 6: Civilian Deaths in Ninewa Caused by US Forces



The *peshmerga* ostensibly entered Mosul so that they could help the US secure the city, but the militias also developed a bulky presence around the offices of the KDP and the PUK. Arabs had long-suspected Kurds of wanting to annex Mosul and other northern Iraqi cities (Milton-Edwards and Brammer 2017). The *peshmerga's* entry and establishment of checkpoints throughout central Mosul and around the city's borders underscored that concern. The US knew of the tension in Mosul and even briefly disarmed the *peshmerga* in 2003. But the military was desperate for a capable partner in the fight against AQI and was caught off guard by the strength of the growing insurgency in and around Ramadi, Baghdad, and the southern city of Basra. Thus, Kurdish forces and their civilian associates were left to adopt a prominent role in Mosul from 2004 on, dominating the policing and administration of

the city.

Unfortunately for Sunni Arabs in Mosul, the *peshmerga* were not benevolent. The Kurdish units were unabashed in their desire to defend Kurdish lives to the exclusion of all others (Cambanis 2004). Arabs complained of being harassed by Kurdish soldiers as they attempted to cross checkpoints (Robertson 2003). The *peshmerga* units often warned Arabs to flee their homes before using the freshly empty residences as domiciles for themselves or as rewards for the families of deceased soldiers (Rosen 2005). The *peshmerga*'s security sweeps were massive and brutal. From 2003 on, Kurdish militias developed a habit of arresting and imprisoning large groups of Arabs in Mosul. In one incident during the first half of 2006, Kurdish forces detained at least 300 mostly Arab residents of Mosul on suspicion of terrorism, detained them, and tortured them (Human Rights Watch 2007). Even after dubious convictions, inmates were often held even after they had served their sentences.

American forces had already thrown their lot in with the Kurds, but the US deepened its involvement by entrusting Kurdish-run jails with any suspects that the US captured in Mosul. The association between the US and Kurds was unshakeable. Many Arabs blamed the US for bringing Kurdish forces into Mosul, thereby exposing Sunni Arabs to a previously unknown level of insecurity (Robertson 2003, Dagher 2008a). Once the Iraqi military was reestablished, even it and its mostly Arab soldiers began having skirmishes with the *peshmerga* as they refused to relinquish control of their posts. Incidents included firefights that required American intervention and a threat to assassinate the newly elected Arab governor of Ninewa Province in 2009 (Dagher 2008b, 2009). Kurdish militias in Mosul were blatantly hostile toward Arabs in and around the city, even if the Arab in question was powerful.

The *peshmerga*'s behavior and relationship to the US prevented the newly civilian-

centered COIN strategy from reducing the overall threat environment in Mosul where Sunnis were concerned. Even though the US was being less violent toward civilians, the Kurdish militias were as aggressive as ever. The units patrolled more frequently in 2007 as the political parties they represented encouraged Kurds to resettle throughout Ninewah province in the hopes that Kurdistan could more easily annex the territory later (Wong 2007). There are no data that even attempt to count the civilian deaths that were caused by *peshmerga* in Mosul, but the fact that the parties behind the militias fortified their armed wings as they maneuvered for greater power makes it unlikely that Kurdish violence against Sunni Arabs dropped (*ibid*). Even if the threat level did drop for Arabs, the *peshmerga*'s historically abusive behavior and refusal to cede control to the Iraqi military would have signaled to Iraqis that changes were temporary.

The Kurdish presence meant that a reduction in American harm simply could not improve the overall threat environment for Sunni Arabs in Mosul. Without a reduction in the threats posed by the *peshmerga*, Sunnis had no reason to devalue the protection that AQI provided. Indeed, the AQI presence seems to have been the only factor that limited the *peshmerga*'s expansion into the western half of the city where Arabs lived. So long as AQI's protection still held value due to the ongoing severity of the threat environment, the utility of cooperating with it—and, for that matter, the disutility of cooperating with the Kurd-friendly US—remained relatively high. This dynamic is one explanation for why Mosul did not have an Awakening the way that Ramadi did.

The core of the argument here is that the threat posed by the Kurdish forces led civilians to tolerate AQI's violent behavior because of the protection it provided. The lack of a Sunni turn against AQI despite the Awakening's blooming throughout Anbar and in Baghdad

is the primary observation in support of this causal argument. One can also look to another supporting observation: many Mosul Sunnis and even one of its major tribes finally began to cooperate with the US in 2008, when violence from AQI reached unprecedented levels as the group struggled to defend its increasingly challenged presence. The city never developed a robust response like Ramadi, but the emergence of some cooperation is worth explaining.

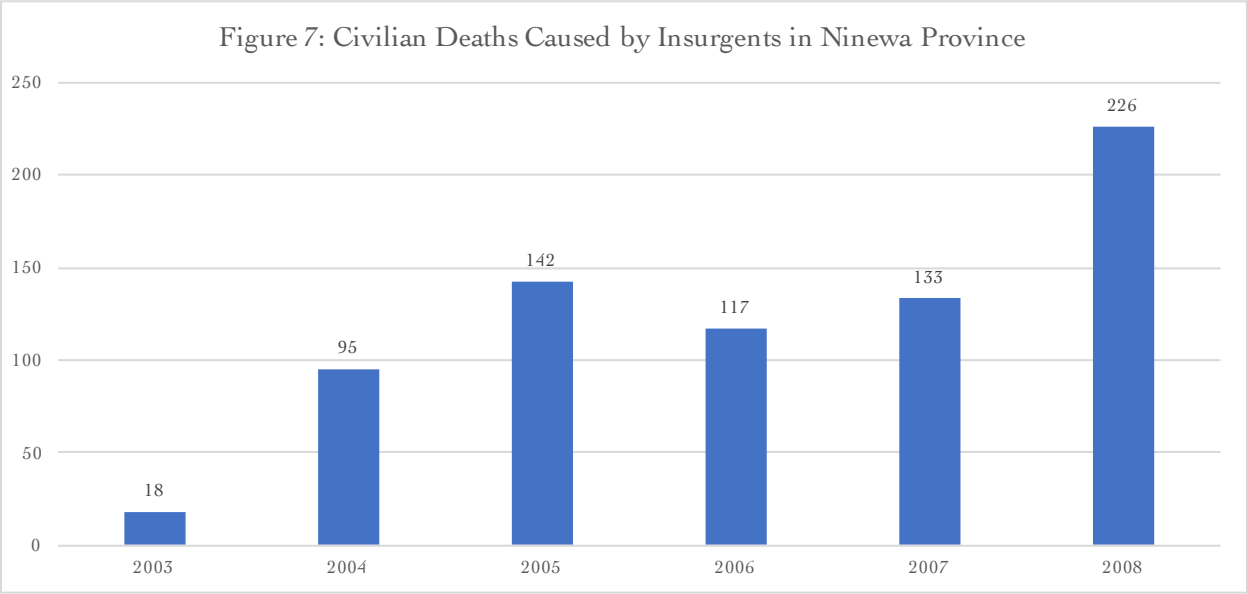


Figure 7 shows IBC data on civilian deaths caused by insurgents, who were dominated by AQI, in Ninewa Province from 2003 to 2008. The 2008 figure is clearly significantly higher than all of the others. Meanwhile, insurgents were killing fewer civilians in Ramadi due to the expanding influence of tribal and state security forces. The 2008 spike in deaths in Mosul is consistent with contemporaneous reports about conflict dynamics in Iraq. As Al-Qaeda struggled under pressure from Sunni tribes in the west and reinvigorated Iraqi military forces in the south, many of its fighters relocated to Mosul. The remnants of AQI battled fiercely in Mosul, making it the only part of Iraq where violence had not fallen by the winter of 2008 (Arraf 2008). The heightened activity in Mosul may have led AQI to become even more

violent toward the populace as it concentrated on controlling the area. Such an increase would have reduced the utility of supporting AQI and led some Sunnis in Mosul to finally begin cooperating with the US years after such cooperation had been in full force in Ramadi.

Another viable explanation for why the Awakening in Mosul had such a muted and delayed presence deserves attention. Some observers would point out that the American presence in Mosul was at times much smaller than in Ramadi and that American leaders feared that the presence of Sunni militias in the city could further incite interethnic strife. Thus, efforts to spark an Awakening in Mosul were hesitant and scattered. But, the reader should remember that evidence of the shift against AQI began before the US got involved. The US cannot take credit for the start of the Awakening in Ramadi anymore than it can be blamed for a weak Awakening in Mosul. Still, the change in COIN strategy that occurred in the mid-2000s seems to have accelerated the Awakening in areas where the US and AQI were the primary combatants.

5. AQI and the FSA

Noteworthy differences between Al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Free Syrian Army exist. For all its flaws, the FSA possesses infinitely more normative appeal than AQI by most accounts. AQI was probably more violent than the FSA and, given its predilection for public beheadings and the display of mangled bodies, embraced a gaudy performative violence that the FSA usually did not. AQI also had more foreign leaders and combatants than the FSA, which created a fruitful rhetorical tool for Iraqi tribal leaders when they sought to reframe the organization as a foreign machination against Iraqis. While the Free Syrian Army primarily sought to change Syrian government, AQI arrived with a slew of radical proposals, aiming to

upend everything from the modern state to tribal systems. The two insurgent groups also operated in very different contexts. Al-Qaeda in Iraq had a massive foreign incursion to use as a foil and had no well-informed state with which to compete. Meanwhile, the Free Syrian Army has been in a multi-party civil war where the primary combatant is a large and capable government flanked by militias and Russia.

And yet, the central expectations of the theory still hold. Both groups found their violent behavior toward civilians overlooked in contexts where the level of threat rendered their protection valuable, and punished where those threats waned. The speed of the turn against AQI in Ramadi demonstrates how a group that provides no goods and practices uninformative violence relies heavily on its perceived ability to ward off outside threats for support. In both cases, Sunnis' willingness to turn against Sunni organizations amidst sectarian conflict casts doubt on identity as a sufficient condition for political allegiance. But, concerns about an Alawite takeover in Syria and the Kurdish threat in Iraq also influenced threat perceptions in a way that warns against the dismissal of identity as politically salient.

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[i] Though few would claim that the Awakening began anywhere other than Anbar Province, some analysts claim that the Awakening began in the border city of Al-Qaim before accelerating in Ramadi (Knarr 2015).

[ii] AQI's haughty behavior and desire to violate Iraqi sovereignty in order to create a caliphate eventually led Iraqis to emphasize AQI's foreign linkages, but this framing would come with the Awakening.

Chapter 7
Conclusions and Next Steps

Though the empirical analysis in this dissertation focuses on Iraq and Syria, the theory that the analysis supports has much broader implications. One of the central principles of the dissertation is that civilians are rational agents. Civilians absorb information, develop beliefs, base decisions on those beliefs, and change their impressions with the conflict environment. Beliefs are undoubtedly sticky, but the need to survive tends to force updating eventually, even if it happens grudgingly. Political science's growing interest in civilian agency is thus a fruitful path for research. Whether the topic at hand is forced migration (Davenport, Moore, and Poe 2003), the pressures that shape rebel behavior (Mampilly 2011), or support (Fair and Shapiro 2009, Jaeger et al 2014), it is clear that civilians control their viewpoints and behavior. This observation also suggests that scholars who emphasize the role of elites when analyzing civilian attitudes during conflict (Haddad 2011, Phillips 2015) would benefit from considering why civilians respond to elites instead of assuming that elite appeals are automatically persuasive. The nature of the relationship between agentive civilians and the rebels who seek to control them remains unclear. Mampilly (*ibid*) is a welcome exception, as he notes that rebels in need of civilian support have an incentive to limit violent behavior.

1. What Rebels Want

The outset of this dissertation provided potential reasons as to why rebels want civilian support. Rebels often need civilians to provide them with material goods, intelligence about patrolling state forces, places to hide, and counterintelligence in the form of refusal to provide state operatives with information about rebels' whereabouts. Each of these reasons is

potentially valid, but none of them actually tells us what rebels want from civilians, or how rebels' desires vis-a-vis civilians may change. Moreover, the evidence of widespread civilian abuse indicates that rebels do not always behave as though they require civilian support. Two questions thus emerge.

First, under what conditions do rebels truly want civilian support? Present scholarship suggests that rebels lose interest in civilian support when they receive foreign funding, which reduces the need for civilian backing. In support of this view, Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood (2014) find that rebels with foreign funding abuse civilians more than those who lack foreign support. The authors believe that this relationship exists because foreign-backed rebels are held accountable by foreign interests who want victory, rather than civilians who want safety. The piece also notes that rebels backed by democracies with active human rights lobbies are less violent, but that this effect disappears where alternative backers with lower standards are available. The fact that rebels that are presented with less conditional money not only take it, but then behave more violently toward the population implies a highly transactional relationship between rebels and civilians. Rebels are good to civilians when they need civilian resources, and behave badly otherwise.

The problem with this structural account is that it explains when rebels lack an incentive to behave well, but does not explain why rebels would actually choose to harm noncombatants. Simply understanding when a rebel has the option to harm does not explain why they would choose to do so. Ideology could answer this question. As Sanín and Wood (2014) have argued, some groups have ideologies that encourage widespread abuse of civilians. For example, Al Qaeda's belief in the necessity of a pure, Salafist caliphate leads it to believe that actions such as severing thieves' hands and beating women who cover

insufficiently in public are necessary parts of governance. As Kalyvas (2003) notes, the violence against civilians may simply reflect local or individual grievances and have nothing to do with the larger conflict. In this case, the rebels' indifference toward civilian support would leave them free to pursue grudges as they saw fit. Future research would benefit from considering both the conditions that allow rebels to abuse civilians, and the factors that actually push rebels to do so. In the case of the Free Syrian Army, local vendettas, greed, and the idiosyncrasies of local leaders seem to explain why some units were especially violent.

Of course, the benefit of civilian support is that it gives rebels information and material goods without rebels having to invest in high levels of coercion or bribery. Even where foreign support exists, there is still value in civilians' willingness to inform on collaborators and refusal to work with the state. The case may thus be that rebels always want support. The second question thus emerges. If rebels always draw utility from civilian support, then why does one still observe behavior that can erode the base? The probable answer lies in an implication of this dissertation: combat organizations are not as unitary as analysts would like to think.

Abuse may occur in areas where it suits the objectives or whims of the local commander. Battalion commanders have significant latitude to create their own policies and norms, and this freedom likely grows during periods of active conflict when chaos complicates supervision by the center. And no level of central control consistently extends all the way to the daily mechanics of conflict, such as street patrols and interrogations, where many civilian abuses occur. Just as international relations scholars have faced, and sometimes sidestepped, critiques of the state as a unitary actor, comparative politics scholars may have to develop more nuanced understandings of combat organizations. Failure to do so could lead to analyses

that aim to understand an entire entity, but actually only understand the faction in control during a certain period, or the bit of the organization that is active in the researched area. One potential analytic route would be to segregate the organization by some salient factor, such as spheres of influence, in order to better define the entity under analysis.

The unitary critique is not limited to rebel groups. State militaries are also likely less cohesive than one would think. Even where central authority exists, it will still struggle to impose order and constrain behavior throughout an organization that focuses on utilizing violence in a variety of uncertain contexts. Kalyvas (2003) underscores this problem by pointing out that leader's local motives are often separate from and uncontrolled by supuralocal imperatives. High-level leaders struggle to observe and control local events, which leaves on-the-ground leaders free to pursue their own objectives, be they ideological, materialistic, or petty.

Behavioral and policy variation within the military can be a good thing. For example, the ability to innovate allowed the United States to gradually develop a new strategy in Iraq that succeeded in forging useful new relationships.[i] But, this argument also suggests that wanton violence within a military, such as the US Army platoon that murdered civilians during staged combat engagements in Afghanistan's Maywand Province, may not be the product of misbehaved individuals. The problem may instead lie in the units themselves. The punishment of guilty parties may thus be a less effective tactic than the removal of unit leaders, assuming that the reduction of harmful behavior is the goal.

A final possibility is that rebels' sincere desire for civilian support is not enough to generate good behavior. In line with Kalyvas' thinking, local leaders may have grudges and incentives that are unique to their context, which can lead them to use violence against

civilians despite its potentially dampening effect on support. Rebels also tend to understand security more hawkishly than civilians and even state combatants. Current research shows that rebels who attain national leadership are more likely to initiate conflict (Horowitz and Stam 2014) and to pursue nuclear weapons (Fuhrmann and Horowitz 2015) than other leaders. The hawkishness and faith in the power of war that leads rebels to use violence with particular frequency at the national level may also lead them to discount the effects of violence against civilians at the local level. The complaints of civilians can seem very small when one views oneself as altering the path of the nation's future.

2. The Conundrum of Iraq

The Iraqi government eventually eroded the relationships that it developed with Sunnis when the two were fighting Al-Qaeda in Iraq. With a significant reduction of US involvement in Iraq in 2010 and withdrawal in 2011, the central government was left to its own devices under Nouri Al-Maliki. Al-Maliki mistrusted the militiamen who defeated AQI, so the state began arresting and imprisoning hundreds of Iraqi police officers and soldiers who had been affiliated with the Awakening (Williams and Adnan 2010). The state also arrested young Sunni men throughout western Iraq on questionable charges, or no charges at all. Al-Maliki's government then cooperated with militias that also arrested and/or killed Sunnis who were affiliated with the Sons of Iraq or who were suspected of sympathizing with the movement (Boghani 2014). Against this backdrop, AQI, having changed its name to the Islamic State of Iraq, was able to find new sympathy in Iraq. By 2014, several of the tribes that had once cooperated with the US now ran alongside the Islamic State even though they hoped to eventually be rid of the extremists as well (Spencer and Malouf 2014). As the state

made itself a threat, it erased the gains that it had earned. The Islamic State has since been contained in Iraq thanks to American airpower, the Iraqi military, Iranian militias, and meagre tribal assistance.

The use of Iranian militias alarmed many foreign observers, who took the militias' presence as a sign of growing Iranian influence in Iraq (England 2018). Shiʿa Iraqis, who come from the same sect as most Iranians and make up the majority of Iraqis, have been no happier about Iran's involvement. Iran critic and Shiʿa cleric Moqtada Al-Sadr led the party that won the most votes in Iraq's 2018 parliamentary elections. Meanwhile, mostly Shiʿa protesters in Basra set the Iranian consulate aflame during a thousands-strong protest against the Iraqi government's failure to improve living conditions. Iraq's parliament just settled on a new prime minister in October 2018, nearly five months after elections in May. The future of Iraq remains to be seen, but the general public's disdain toward Iraq's political parties and the violent actors that seek to overturn them are in plain view. If the Iraqi state continues discriminating against Sunnis while also failing to improve citizens' quality of life overall, then it will continue to struggle against non-state agitators, including militias and tribes, who can use the state's ineffectiveness to fuel support for themselves.

3. The Trajectory of Syria's Revolution

After seven years, half a million deaths, and half a population displaced, Syria's war is far from the battle of liberation that many protestors and optimistic foreigners expected in 2011. In 2014, the Free Syrian Army held large swathes of western Syria, along with parts of major cities such as Idleb and Aleppo (Linge and Barber 2014). At that time, the Islamic State

dominated western headlines as it clutched Raqqa and spread its might further, while Kurdish forces operated to little fanfare in the north. The Syrian state still controlled half of Syria, but the Free Syrian Army and other groups seemed to have a legitimate chance at overtaking the country. The regime even struggled to claw back territory that it had lost during a strategic withdrawal made necessary by the unanticipated scale of desertions and defections.

Tides had turned by October 2018. Now, American missiles and Kurdish forces have defanged IS, shifting much of the territory that it once held into Kurdish control. Russian missiles and Syrian forces augmented by Iran have crushed the opposition throughout the country's southern regions—including in Darʿaa, where the arrests that sparked the first demonstrations occurred. The Free Syrian Army is now largely clustered in and around Idleb, space it shares with more extreme Islamist rebels. The FSA still has supporters and former fighters in other countries such Jordan and Germany, so its annihilation cannot be assumed. But the revolution that once animated the imaginations of Syrians and non-Syrians alike is unlikely to appear in the real world. Instead, the world waits nervously in anticipation of carnage as the state retakes Idleb in the coming weeks.

The end of the war, though welcomed, could mark Syria's transition into a fresh set of problems. Many interviewees from Homs alleged that combatants from the *shabbiha* had taken over their homes. Elderly neighbors often reported this, as the elderly have sometimes been able to remain in their homes without incident. Internally displaced persons have also moved into abandoned homes, having nowhere else to go. As Syrians attempt to return home and eke out normal lives, many will find strangers with nowhere else to go in their houses and apartments. Disputes over ownership will then fall within the purview of a state that favors the squatter, in the case of *shabbiha*. Where civilians face civilians, two disadvantaged parties

must vie for a home.

The need to rebuild destroyed domiciles coincides with a need to rebuild infrastructure. Highways, power plants, bridges, hospitals, and schools have been frequent targets for all parties in Syria's war. The World Bank estimates that a third of housing and half of education and medical facilities in Syria had been damaged or destroyed as of 2017 (The World Bank 2017). Rebuilding will be a massive and likely slow project that will require a massive capital infusion. Capital that international institutions and foreign governments, excluding Russia, will hesitate to give to a dictatorship that just finished a brutal campaign and that remains under international sanctions.

The social consequences of war will also emerge. Half of Sunni Syrians interviewed by the author stated that they would never live near an Alawite again, even if they used to. Even those who were willing to live near Alawites again often expressed mistrust toward them. Further, several interviewees anticipated that a desire for revenge would generate violence even after the war's end. As a counter to these concerns, older interviewees often proposed that civilians were simply tired of violence and would accept stability in whatever form it came. While some research has found that interethnic conflict does indeed lead to volatile intergroup relations (Rydgren and Sofi 2011), other work suggests that nonviolent interaction after large-scale communal violence is possible (Dyrstad 2012). Which outcome will emerge in Syria remains unclear.

A final postwar concern addresses how the state will treat its civilians. Bashar Al-Asad and other members of the ruling coalition seem to have been caught off guard by the scale of protests. The state may try to guarantee that it is not surprised again and augment its surveillance and repressive apparatus with Russian assistance. The potential for this outcome

is heightened by the ready excuse provided by lingering Islamism and the fact that Kurdish rebels remain formidable in the north. Despite the shadow of state surveillance and repression, recent journalist accounts from Syria suggest that some civilians are still willing to openly criticize the government, as are some pro-government media outlets (Qiblawi, Otto, and Pleitgen 2018). Markets and malls have reopened. Civilians sit in parks once again. There is no evidence that Syrians are prepared to return to voicelessness, nor is there any indication that the state aims to liberalize. An uneasy equilibrium appears to be emerging between a weathered state and an exhausted populace.

The drawn out evisceration of Syria since 2011 and the reality of abuse by the Free Syrian Army raise an obvious question. Did the US choose the right Syria policy? The CIA began funneling weapons and other support to the FSA through Turkey in 2012. The Agency also established training camps in Jordan in 2014. Congress approved support for the FSA under both Barack Obama and Donald Trump, allowing the transfer of anti-aircraft missiles and other sophisticated weapons to the group (Hudson 2014, Pecquet 2016), though support has weakened under Trump. While these policies were implemented, politicians argued about whether the American support of the rebels should be more muscular, or if the Asad government's demise was truly desirable. Despite providing some weapons and training support, the US refrained from providing safe zones or any support that could have helped the FSA against Syria's capable air force. The US helped the Free Syrian Army enough to survive, but not enough to win. Should the US have behaved differently?

More aggressive support for the Free Syrian Army was almost certainly wise to avoid. There is no reason to believe that pushing the group toward victory would have been doable or desirable. The strength of the Asad state, aided by Iran and Russia, reduced the probability

that anything short of invasion would have allowed the FSA to win. Further, there is no guarantee that an early Free Syrian Army victory would have benefitted most Syrians. One cannot deny the malice of the Asad government, but it is difficult to see how the Free Syrian Army would have been better. The FSA has an official stance against harming civilians, but has clearly failed to implement that policy—especially where Alawites are concerned. Further, the Free Syrian Army has always been but one of many rebel groups in Syria. It seems likely that the FSA would have faced a fight against other rebels immediately following the fall of the Asad regime, thereby creating an evolution rather than a cessation of the civil war.

One could argue that the American decision to provide the Free Syrian Army with enough support to fight, but not enough to win, was a mistake. The reasoning here is that the FSA's presence fed an ongoing conflict, which generated hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths. The implication is that American refusal to provide the FSA with support would have saved lives by allowing a relatively swift massacre of protesters à la Bahrain to occur in place of civil war. There are at least two complications with the idea that ignoring the FSA would have prevented the conflict's escalation into civil war. First, the Islamic State, Jabhat Al-Nusra, and Kurdish militias have been just as active as the FSA. These groups could have provided the regime with enough resistance to spark a scorched earth campaign. Second, Turkey, Qatar, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia have supported Free Syrian Army units throughout Syria. American abstention would not have stopped other countries from paying for violence. Thus, American refusal to back the FSA would have only saved lives if other rebel groups in Syria had failed to grow and support from other states remained meagre, thereby allowing a much more decisive crackdown by the government. Each condition could have possibly emerged—especially with the help of robust foreign policy to discourage foreign

financial involvement—but there is no guarantee that non-intervention would have been a better policy.

And yet, non-intervention still would have been a better policy than supporting the Free Syrian Army. The above paragraphs explain why more robust support for the FSA was treacherous, and the pursuit of regime change via the half-hearted support that the US actually gave was also ineffective. But supporting the Free Syrian Army in pursuit of more modest policy goals also would have also delivered lackluster results. Consider the following thought exercise, which moves through how supporting the FSA in order to reach policy goals more modest than regime change could have happened.

Washington could have used moderate arming of rebels to impose costs on the Asad government until it agreed to make changes. The objective would have been to encourage the creation of local democratic processes and the Free Syrian Army would have been a lever to force that change. The process could have worked as follows. First, the US would have had to support the Free Syrian Army as it did, while also making itself the conduit of support to the FSA. Being the gatekeeper to the FSA's funding would have been critical. Such control would have allowed the US to erase or drastically reduce the FSA's capacity for attacks, thereby bolstering Washington's ability to credibly promise an end to hostilities if certain conditions were met.

Second, after having secured itself as the Free Syrian Army's lifeline, the US could have proposed a deal to the Asad regime: allow liberalization at the local level in exchange for American abandonment of any regime change policy. The deal is based on the assumption that the Asad regime feared an American push toward regime change more than it feared local-level changes. Several observations are consistent with this assumption, including Asad's

decision to fire the governor of Daraa in response to protests, his decision to lift emergency law, the state's decision to oppose the American invasion of Iraq despite its mistrust of Saddam Hussein, and the decision to deepen relations with Russia in a bid to make American military intervention more risky. Asad seems to have been open to local change, but determined to remain in power. The US could have exploited those preferences and fear of American aggression by promising to leave Asad in place. Local democratic changes could have taken a number of forms. Civilians could have elected governors directly, they could have elected a panel of individuals, one of whom Asad would have then appointed, or referenda on governors could have taken place. After making this proposal, the US would have then continued supporting the FSA robustly until the Asad regime relented. Critically, Washington would have had to truly abandon regime change. The US also would have been pushing for structural change and not for the FSA's victory.

Even with the benefit of hindsight, this proposed strategy is problematic. It would have required Damascus to believe Washington's commitment to abandon regime change in exchange for compliance. In particular, the plan would have required Damascus to believe Washington's promise to withdraw from Syrian politics despite America's history of intervention throughout the region. That would have been a considerable leap of faith, though the Russian appetite for America's absence could have pushed Moscow to favor the deal and nudge Syria toward agreement. Another problem is that the proposed deal offers a reward for reform, but can only offer more fighting as a punishment for noncompliance. Escalation would be costly and destroy the credibility of any promise to avoid regime change. The outlined approach thus relies on an attrition strategy and assumes that the US would have been willing to support rebels for longer than the regime would have been willing to fight them. In contrast

to non-intervention, this strategy lacks any condition under which it could have reduced bloodshed. It instead relies on bloodshed to exhaust the regime into concessions that allow for structural change.

Using the FSA as a lever to push for reform also would have introduced the threat of continued, low-level violence after the deal was made. While the US certainly could have stopped the flow of money to the FSA after a deal, it could not have made weapons and cash that were already there disappear. Non-intervention could have worked and saved lives if it had been accompanied by a hearty dose of diplomacy. Intervention also could have worked to create lasting change, provided even heartier diplomacy and a lengthy commitment. The latter condition is particularly difficult to satisfy because American elections can quickly change foreign policy. Refusal to get militarily involved in Syria was the best of a set of unappealing options.

With the past relitigated, let us move to the future. America's wealth and history of global activism often lead individuals to wonder what the US can do now that past decisions, however retrospectively unhelpful, have been made. The answer is unsatisfying: not much. American encouragement of regime change in favor of the Free Syrian Army is unwise. There is nothing to indicate that the Free Syrian Army could govern. Several interview accounts suggest that the FSA's behavior became worse when it was left to govern, as its untrained members were able to focus their extractive impulses on civilians. There is also no historical reason to believe that the US is currently able to support successful regime change. Whether the intended direction of regime change was from authoritarianism to democracy (Iraq, Afghanistan), or from more democratic arrangements to authoritarianism (Iran, Chile), American-led efforts to shape new polities have generally been disastrous. The support of

indigenous opposition forces and more overt involvement are equally unappealing, as neither has proven effective to date. Even if a viable alternative to the Free Syrian Army existed, no evidence suggests that the US could help them become the government of a new, revitalized Syria.

The point here is not that Syria is hopeless. The point is instead that repairing Syria sits beyond the limits of what American foreign policy can achieve right now. An obvious response to this conjecture is to castigate American inaction, which is tantamount to leaving innocents to languish unnecessarily. Such a critique misidentifies the alternative to inaction by implicitly comparing inaction to a successful American intervention. A more realistic comparison is between non-intervention, which leads to crackdown before a return to the status quo, and military intervention, which introduces prolonged instability and violence. Even the hypothetical limited intervention proposed above still required significant violence and had a barely traversable path to success. The persistent American belief that the US and its military can create better governments in foreign countries suggests that Washington does not see the limits of its power. Serious reflection about the kinds of power the US has and how they may be marshaled could reveal an optimal strategy for the US in Syria and other countries, but the status quo of regime change and supporting indigenous opposition are not that optimal strategy.

One thing that the US can do for Syrians is accelerate the vetting of and open its doors to Syrian refugees who want to come to the United States. Just over 15,000 Syrians came to the US in 2016, followed by 3,000 in 2017, and 62 individuals as of October 2018 (Amos 2018, Kann 2018). The 98% reduction in Syrians being allowed into the US has nothing to do with a drop in demand, as there is a backlog for resettlement in the US. Resettlement in the

US is not a cure-all for Syrians. Many Syrians have no desire to relocate to the US. Arriving in the US without language skills and with limited job prospects is difficult and may leave some Syrians worse off as they struggle to make ends meet. The US could thus complement its refugee efforts with enhanced funding and logistical support for displaced populations in countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.

4. Conclusion

The most striking quality of the insight in this dissertation is its simplicity. The evidence, however preliminary, indicates that civilians struggling to survive make decisions that improve their chances of survival. For most people, collaborating with or supporting a particular belligerent is not a symptom of identity politics, a response to past humiliations, or an impassioned embrace of some fresh new ideology. Civilians work with whomever they believe will help them avoid being killed. The surprising aspect of this observation is that the level of violence that an insurgent group practices is not what signals the danger posed by the group. Where all actors in the area are violent, the fact of practicing violence is not informative. The scale of violence can be meaningful, but can just as easily lose meaning where high violence levels are thought to be necessary in order to ward off enemies and maintain security. Civilians instead look to how rebels practice violence, seeking to develop beliefs about how they can avoid being the target of an actor that will undoubtedly harm someone. This is the macabre calculation of a conflict environment.

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[i] The American relationships with tribes weakened as time passed. But, that seems to have been a product of the

Iraqi government's discriminatory practices and the American decision to back the government, rather than a strategic folly by the military.

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