

# “Bad Company – Militias as Indigenous Forces in Counterinsurgency Campaigns”

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# **“Bad Company – Militias as Indigenous Forces in Counterinsurgency Campaigns”**

## 1. Introduction

From ancient Carthage to colonial Banda Aceh to contemporary Kabul, counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns have been frequently conducted in foreign lands, with a small force facing off against a numerically superior enemy and a predominantly hostile population. While their political context and military technology may have changed over the centuries, the challenges to the counterinsurgent have remained remarkably similar (Hughes 2016). To combat these issues, counterinsurgents have used indigenous Forces (IF) as a vital component of out-of-territory COIN campaigns.

While using IF may have a long-standing tradition among military practitioners, results have varied widely. Although several problems with the use of IF have been identified, the academic research suffers both from a lack of structure, and a peculiar blindness towards the influence of armed groups’ own strategic behavior on their performance as IF, and on the strategic levels of COIN. This gap in the literature becomes even more glaring considering that some of the most prominent conflicts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century are COIN campaigns, including Iraq and Afghanistan (cf. Gentile 2012).

In order to investigate what makes an IF deployment successful, this study addresses this gap, and examines how the strategies of different militias impact on their utility as IF in COIN campaigns.

Based on the study of warlords’ COIN performance conducted in Ikas (2015), strategic profiles of two subtypes of militias used as IF are constructed and contrasted with the purported benefits of using IF within COIN. Anecdotal evidence of these subtypes and their utility in COIN is offered to illustrate this theoretical comparison.

The conclusions find that the strategic goal of traditional militias, while offering substantial tactical and operational benefits, collide with the fundamental strategy behind COIN. On the other hand, self-defense militias are found to be materially weak, but strategically compatible, guarantors of local security. These findings are then used to generate a set of policy recommendations on how militias may best be integrated into COIN campaigns

The study begins by introducing its methods and operationalizing key terms used in the analysis. Following this, the existing literature on COIN, IF and violent non-state actors is reviewed and fit into a strategic model. Building on the literature, behavioral patterns of two distinct militia subtypes are constructed and cast into the same three-leveled strategic framework. These profiles are tested against the theoretical predictions from the IF literature to examine their respective benefits in COIN campaigns. The study offers several policy recommendations on when and how to integrate different types of IF, before it concludes with some summary remarks.

## 2. Methodology & Key terms

This study's research goal is to provide an explorative theoretical framework on militias as IF, therefore its core method is a literature review of the most authoritative academic literature on the subject. This theoretical framework combines the research on IF, militias and VNSA into a comprehensive model of the strategic behavior of militias, which is then used to determine their suitability as IF. Although limitations of space do not allow for in-depth case studies, anecdotal empirical examples will be used to illustrate the argument.

In order to accentuate the nuances in militias' behavior and make them relatable to the study of COIN, the literature on IF and militias will be reviewed in terms of the three levels of military strategy and a group's overall aim: the "ultimate political objective" (Duyvesteyn & Fumerton 2010: 28) or *goal* a group pursues, and the overarching *strategy*, understood as the development of "security objectives and guidance" and the deployment of "resources" (DOD 2016: 227) of war, through which this goal is achieved. On the second, *operational* level a string of military engagements "are planned, conducted and sustained to achieve strategic objectives" (DOD 2016: 176). Finally, the *tactical* level covers "the conduct of battle" (Van Creveld 1991: 96) where specific maneuvers are "executed to achieve military objectives" (DOD 2016: 234).

For the purposes of this study, 'insurgency' refers to the strategy of an armed group "to gain political-military control of a population and its territory" (Duyvesteyn & Fumerton 2010: 28) through the tactical and operational use of guerrilla warfare and the provision of "rival governance" (Duyvesteyn & Fumerton 2010: 33).

Following Geraint Hughes and Christian Tripodi (2009), this study focuses on COIN campaigns outside of the counterinsurgent's home territory. This caveat is necessary to distinguish between the 'indigenous forces' and the foreign 'counterinsurgent', the latter of which refers exclusively to an external state actor actively participating in a conflict against insurgents.

Finally, 'indigenous forces' in this study refers exclusively to armed formations that have been *coopted* or sponsored by the counterinsurgent, but not *created*, as the latter are unlikely to exhibit the same degree of local connectedness. Groups that have been founded by the counterinsurgent before or during the conflict, such as the British 'Presidency Armies' in colonial India, are thereby excluded from the analysis.

### 3. Counterinsurgency – Strategy, Operations & Tactics

'Counterinsurgency' is a subtype of asymmetrical war that has as its 'ultimate political goal' the military and political marginalization of an insurgency (Kilcullen 2009: 110-113). Modern COIN *strategies* include the "population-centric (...) 'hearts and minds' (Kilcullen 2009: 111) approach, which aims to "seize control of the (local) population in order to isolate and overpower the insurgents" (Plakoudas 2015: 133), as well as the more coercive "enemy-centric approach [prioritizing] the extermination of the insurgents" (Plakoudas 2015: 132).

In contrast, the more prominent population-centric 'hearts and minds' strategy of modern COIN examined here emphasizes the establishment of "[l]ocal government effectiveness, presence, and local partnerships" (Kilcullen 2009: 113) and has "at its heart (...) nation-building" (Gentile 2012: 378; cf. Kitzen 2012: 94). Most importantly, it relies on the "use of *selective* violence" (Souleimanov & Aliyev 2016: 409, emphasis added). Thus, through the centuries the strategy of COIN has been modified from colonial subjugation to external state-building, for which local legitimacy and IF play a pivotal part (Gentile 2012).

*Operationally*, modern COIN campaigns follow the established pattern of "clear-hold-build" (Ucko 2013: 54), with counterinsurgents advancing like "ink spots spreading across blotting paper" (ibid.). Counterinsurgent forces "first clear areas from insurgent control, then hold them securely to prevent insurgents from returning, which in turn allows for the build phase, in which civilians and military forces engage in development (...) to assist the local population" (ibid.). Within that pattern, counterinsurgents need to plan and undertake

operations to gather and evaluate intelligence, fortify their positions, pursue and kill the insurgents, and build up local capacities and institutions to win over the population (Kilcullen 2009: 112-113).

On a *tactical* level, “strike operations” (Department of the Army 2007: 89), where “[s]mall, highly mobile combat forces (...) locate and fix the insurgents” (ibid.), are mixed with sweeps of villages and cities, patrols among the population, and the safeguarding of military and civilian targets of interest (Department of the Army 2007; Ucko 2013). There are myriads of alterations and specifics to each of these tactical maneuvers, but at the core they are all “connected with operational and strategic military objectives” (Plakoudas 2015: 139).

#### 4. Indigenous Forces – The State of Research

The benefits of employing IF in counterinsurgency campaigns, as explored by the IF literature, can be summarized under three major headings:

Concerning their *military capabilities*, Robert Cassidy, Yoav Gortzak, and Hughes all note the additional “manpower” (Gortzak 2009: 307) and an increase in the ability to “eliminate insurgent leadership, cadre and combatants” (Cassidy 2006: 48; Hughes 2016). Since conducting a COIN campaign is “labour-intensive (...) the recruitment of auxiliaries is often essential to enable an overstretched army and police to focus on (...) insurgents” (Hughes & Tripodi 2009: 11). Furthermore, lightly-armed, mobile units of IF can “match the enemy’s special skills in irregular warfare” (Cassidy 2007: 45) better than traditional military forces (cf. Andres et al 2006: 135).

Hughes adds that IF offer “a more discriminate and precise means of locating and neutralizing small guerrilla groups than [with] conventional combat tactics” (Hughes 2016: 203). In his quantitative study on sweep operations conducted by the Russian military in Chechnya, Jason Lyall finds that Chechen units were more effective, in terms of preventing new insurgent attacks after sweeps, than their Russian counterparts (Lyall 2010). Lyall also notes that ‘coethnics’ “shift the interaction (...) from a one-time event to a (threatened) repeated one” (Lyall 2010: 16), and could therefore issue more credible threats to the population.

This *local knowledge* is also acknowledged as being vital in supplying information on important actors, geographical specifics and local customs to the counterinsurgents (Cassidy

2006; Hughes 2016). In contrast to the counterinsurgent, IF possess “better knowledge of the physical and human terrain (...) especially if they’re employed in their own territory or neighbourhoods” (Hughes 2016: 203). Through the use of “trackers, interpreters, agents and informants” (Hughes & Tripodi 2009: 6) this knowledge is transformed into actionable intelligence. Consequently, the “identification problem” (Kalyvas 2006: 89) of spotting insurgents within the population that arises in any irregular war can be tackled more effectively (Clayton & Thomson 2014: 922; Hughes & Tripodi 2009: 7). Western forces in Afghanistan made extensive use of IF “[b]ased (...) on the belief that Afghans would be better than Americans at distinguishing enemies from noncombatants” (Andres et al 2006: 150).

Finally, the inclusion of IF can enhance the *legitimacy and ‘soft power’* of the counterinsurgent. According to Emil Souleimanov and Huseyn Aliyev, IF can help to shift the “socio-cultural (...) asymmetry of values” (Souleimanov & Aliyev 2015: 679) between counterinsurgents and the population by grounding their presence within the local context, bettering their chances of establishing popularly accepted state structures (cf. Andres et al 2006: 156). IF therefore act as “a symbol of the legitimacy of the (...) counterinsurgency efforts” (Scheipers 2015: 126).

By recruiting former insurgents into IF units, Geraint Hughes and Christian Tripodi stress, counterinsurgents can also “provide a possible route for conflict termination and reconciliation” (Hughes & Tripodi 2009: 3) while weakening the insurgency (Hughes & Tripodi 2009: 4-5). Thus, rather than being a mere tactical military instrument, including IF can “increase the strategic utility of armed force” (Andres et al 2006: 155).

Similarly, Govinda Clayton and Andrew Thomson argue that including more social groups on the counterinsurgent’s side “shifts the primary targets of insurgent violence (...) from the incumbent state forces and onto local civilians” (Clayton & Thomson 2014: 923). This forces insurgents to actively fight the same population they themselves depend on and, crucially, “creat[es] opportunities for insurgents to engage in indiscriminate violence (...) against communities which join” (Peic 2014: 167) the COIN side. Indiscriminate violence, on the other hand, can lead to a strengthening of resistance by the population, an erosion of the perceived legitimacy of the insurgents, and a stronger incentive to ally with the counterinsurgent (Clayton & Thomson 2014; Kalyvas 2006: 151-159).

The literature also mentions some fundamental problems of using IF, such as their dubious military effectiveness. Speaking of the armed groups employed by states in contemporary civil wars, John Mueller speaks of “hooligans (...) small bands of criminals and

violent opportunists (...) [who] lack organization, discipline, broad popular support, or ideological commitment” (Mueller 2003: 508-510; cf. Van Creveld 1991: 225). Far from being an effective fighting force, these “drunken thugs have been successful mainly because they are the biggest bullies on the block” (ibid.) and are inherently unfit for engaging actual insurgents. Mueller presents the paramilitary forces sponsored by the states of former Yugoslav states as a prime example (ibid.). Similarly, Andres et al cite pundits’ disdain over the subpar “tactical qualities of the [indigenous] screening forces” (Andres et al 2006: 144) and their waning morale (ibid.).

As Anthony Vinci adds, the general inclination towards “attack[ing] civilians rather than military targets” (Vinci 2007: 324) characteristic of such irregular formations applies to a variety of VNSA, including tribal and self-defense militias (Berkeley 2001: 15; Schubert 2015). Recalling the conflict in Liberia, Berkeley notes that “militias rarely confronted each other head-on; instead they preyed on civilians” (Berkeley 2001: 54). Similarly, Schubert confirms that eventually, militias focused on civilian targets “in virtually every case” (Schubert 2015: 312).

Another issue is that an “information asymmetry” (Byman 2006: 89) in favor of local agents makes counterinsurgents highly dependent on their IF. Local actors might use this to deliberately misinform counterinsurgents by wrongly denouncing their rivals as insurgents to further their own personal agendas, as routinely happened during feuds of Afghan warlords (Kalyvas 2006: 14; Hughes 2016: 206).

Relying on the support of IF also effectively prevents counterinsurgents from sanctioning local actors (Kitzen 2012: 108). Through the subsequent “moral hazard” (Byman 2006: 81) dilemma, empowered local allies may act especially recklessly and without the counterinsurgent’s consent because they feel emboldened by the extensive support they receive, exacerbating the conflict situation even further in the process.

Furthermore, as both Hughes and Tripodi and Kalyvas note, “the use of surrogates from one particular social group (...) can exacerbate internal tensions and encourage civil war” (Hughes & Tripodi 2009: 25), by “driv[ing] a wedge within the native population” (Kalyvas 2006: 171).

Vanda Felbab-Brown reports detrimental effects of Afghan Local Police units sponsored by Western counterinsurgents, as they “have a strong tendency to escape control by their overseers and engage in problematic and abusive behavior (...) [thus becoming] a new driver of conflict themselves” (Felbab-Brown 2016: 259). The boost in support such actors receive

can also create powerful incentives for them to actively prolong the conflict in order to secure their elevated position, as warlords tend to do (Vinci 2007; Hughes & Tripodi 2009: 13-14).

## 5. Indigenous Forces in Counterinsurgency – A Strategic Model

Following Ikas (2015), the findings of the IF literature can now be related to the three strategic levels of COIN:

On a *tactical* level, IF bolster counterinsurgents' capacity to execute their maneuvers and to "eliminate [the] insurgent leadership, cadre and combatants" (Cassidy 2006: 48) threefold: First, by "providing a significant increase in the quantity of troops on the ground" (ibid.) the tactical raids, sweeps and patrols executed by the counterinsurgents' forces are facilitated (Peic 2014; cf. Hughes 2016). Second, IF's comparatively loose organizational structure allows mobile, "light indigenous troops" (Andres et al 2006: 127) to "match the enemy's special skills in irregular warfare" (Cassidy 2007: 45; cf. Gentile 2012: 381; Scheipers 2015: 126). This enables IF to pursue insurgents in locations where counterinsurgent troops could not due to physical or cultural limitations, such as through pathless terrain or sites considered taboo for outsiders (cf. Souleimanov & Aliyev 2015, 2016). Third, through their superior knowledge of the language and 'human terrain' on the ground, including organizational structures and tactics of the insurgents, IF can provide tactical input on the battlefield itself as well as on physical or cultural obstacles (Cassidy 2007: 45; Hughes & Tripodi 2009: 6-7).

That being said, the military ineptitude of IF puts into question these ostensible advantages, as they desert when faced with dogged resistance (Mueller 2003), engage in predatory behavior (Felbab-Brown 2015) or cooperate with insurgents, warning them of impending raids (Kitzen 2012: 108; Souleimanov & Aliyev 2016: 406-408).

*Operationally*, the actionable intelligence gained by IF benefits 'clear-hold-build' twofold: First, IF provide an overview of geographical, social and cultural specifics of a particular theatre of operations beyond immediate battlefields, thus helping to identify insurgent strongholds, pathways and feasible targets for the operational planning process (Lyll 2010; Souleimanov & Aliyev 2015, 2016). Second, by boosting counterinsurgents' physical presence in the community the potential for retaliatory attacks against captured sites

and friendly collaborators is reduced, while cooperation with insurgents can be punished more effectively (Byman 2006: 91-92; cf. Kalyvas 2006: 173-181).

However, the unreliability of IF can also impact the COIN on an operational level, as vital mission intelligence is passed on to the insurgency and faulty intelligence passed on to the counterinsurgents, deliberately or accidentally. Especially where the vetting process for recruits is rushed along to quickly increase their numbers, a distinct threat of large-scale subversion by insurgents also materializes (Felbab-Brown 2016: 268; cf. Roggio & Lundquist 2016). In addition, the quality and quantity of the intelligence passed on decreases the farther away from an indigenous unit's home territory an operation takes place (Schuberth 2015: 299; Kitzen 2012: 108-109).

Finally, employing IF also directly contributes to the *strategy* of the COIN in four ways: First, by including actors perceived as more legitimately by the population, the COIN campaign and the institutions it establishes engender additional support (Gentile 2012: 383; Scheipers 2015: 126). Second, sponsoring IF units opens up a venue for the demobilization and reintegration of former insurgents, thereby further weakening the insurgency while strengthening the numbers and legitimacy of the COIN (Byman 2006: 98; Hughes & Tripodi 2009). Third, IF themselves can act as a building block for the security and government structures the COIN seeks to establish (Felbab-Brown 2016: 262-63; Scheipers 2015). Fourth, by including more societal groups on the COIN side, insurgents are forced to fight the population they have to win over in order to survive which also “distance[s] the civilian population *politically* from the rebel[s]” (Peic 2014: 167, emphasis added; Clayton & Thomson 2014).

The envisioned legitimacy for the COIN campaign is undermined, however, if the IF alienate the population through abuses of power, which can result in even less acceptance for the counterinsurgents' narrative and a revitalization of the insurgency (Felbab-Brown 2016; Jones 2012: 8-10; Kalyvas 2006: 108). Furthermore, using IF as a demobilization and reintegration program risks legalizing predatory entities as official government representatives, and allowing insurgents to infiltrate the COIN (Felbab-Brown 2016: 265-66; Souleimanov & Aliyev 2016).

## 6. Militias as Violent Non-State Actors

Ranging from comprehensive typologies focused on distinguishing subtypes (Shultz et al 2004; Schuberth 2015) to in-depth characterizations of specific actors, such as terrorists, insurgents and warlords (Duyvesteyn & Fumerton 2010; Marten 2009), the literature is rich with classifications of VNSA and empirical applications (Peic 2014; Thurber 2014).

The typology of Moritz Schuberth (2015) distinguishes itself by constructing important scope conditions for a subset of VNSA relevant for this study, namely “community-based armed groups (CBAGs)” (Schuberth 2015: 296). CBAGs are characterized by an “eponymous embeddedness [sic] within the community in which they emerge” (Schuberth 2015: 299). Juxtaposing politically motivated insurgents and terrorists who actively engage in a struggle against the state, CBAGs’ “aims are parochial in nature and limited to the ambitions of local strongmen” (Schuberth 2015: 298). Instead of operating ubiquitously as terrorists or insurgents do, these “boundaries of the community (...) limit the reach of CBAGs” (Schuberth 2015: 299).

CBAGs fulfill clear functions within their communities and are classified based on a “predominant dimension – either security, political, or economic (...) [which] correspond with (...) different ideal types” (Schuberth 2015: 300-301): Vigilante groups, ethnic or popular militias, and criminal gangs.

While Schubert’s argument lacks parsimony and a clear link to IF, his basic three-tiered classification system will serve as a point of departure for this study. Since further definitional demarcation is necessary to achieve analytical clarity on this topic, this study will specifically focus on two of Schuberth’s categories, which are also the most prevalent types of militias: traditional and self-defense militias.

In order to define specific militias along multiple “continuum[s]” (Alden et al 2011: 25) of constitutive characteristics, the study by Chris Alden et al proposes a four-layered analytical framework: Using a militia’s *motivations*, the *strategies and tactics* it uses, its organizational *structure* and their relations to other actors in their environment, they construct profiles of different empirical militias (ibid.). However, Alden et al (2011), limit themselves to single case studies, while missing the opportunity to establish general subtypes of militias. In contrast, the subtypes of militias constructed here aim to create abstract analytical

categories, focused on militias' strategic, operational and tactical behavior rather than their organizational structures.

Combining insights from Alden et al (2011) with elements from Hughes (2016) and Schuberth (2015) the short, if generic, definition of a 'militia' advanced here is 'a community-based armed group organized around a specific foundational goal, operating locally outside the state's military without explicit political ambitions'. Similar to Schuberth (2015), the three foundational goals identified here, physical security, socio-cultural autonomy and economic gain, are also connected to specific ideal types: self-defense militias, traditional militias and warlord militias. As they have already been examined in Ikas (2015), warlord militias will not be covered separately in this study.

### 6.1. Parochialism & Patronage – Traditional Militias

Based broadly on the few academic accounts on them, a traditional militia can be defined as 'a community-based armed group based on traditional authority and extensive patronage, which recruits along predefined clan, tribal or ethnic networks'. Traditional militias use "their control over important resources in accordance with tribal law (...) to maintain local order with a fair amount of popular legitimacy" (Marten 2009: 165), thereby distinguishing themselves from the purely coercion and patronage-based rule of warlords (cf. Vinci 2007). On the other hand, traditional militias' strategic *goal* of conserving the "sovereignty of [their] cultural-political identity" (Christian 2011: 3), which goes beyond physical security, and their broad "control over culture, language, protective forces [and] resources (ibid.) also distinguish them from temporary self-defense militias focused on immediate security provision (Shultz & Dew 2006: 52-53; Schuberth 2015). The structures underlying traditional militias, however, are far from unitary, as "authority is continuously in negotiation" (Christian 2011: 40) between different subgroups, and decision-making is constrained by traditional norms (cf. Guistozzi 2009: 12-14; Marten 2009: 165). Moreover, traditional militias also usually fulfill a range of other socio-cultural, legal, and economic functions, as evidenced by the extensive patronage networks established by the numerous Shia militias of Iraq (Thurber 2014; Christian 2011: 14).

With regards to traditional militias' *tactics*, Richard Shultz and Andrea Dew stress the importance of "traditional concepts of warfare" (Shultz & Dew 2006: 261), with Patrick

Christian corroborating that the “use of the social ordering for defense of the tribe and its territories has evolved (...) [into] systems of low-intensity warfare” (Christian 2011: 17). Although this means that the prominence of specific tactics necessarily varies between specific traditional militias, they generally involve “relatively small [units] (...) assembled for unconventional operations, most notably ambushes and hit-and-run strikes” (Shultz & Dew 2006: 263). During these maneuvers, they can extract intelligence and resources by “capitaliz[ing] on the support, or at minimum acquiescence, of local populations” (Shultz & Dew 2006: 265). Shultz and Dew also note, however, that during the course of prolonged war “the strict customary codes that govern the use of force (...) are often modified and even superseded” (Shultz & Dew 2006: 268), leading traditional militias to adapt much more brutal tactics such as the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), public executions, and the deliberate targeting of civilians (ibid.). In the case of Iraq, this gradual escalation of the severity of violence beyond traditional laws of war has been widely observed (Shultz & Dew 2006: 199; Hughes 2010: 164-167).

Extensive kinship networks are also essential to traditional militias’ *operational* capabilities through

“[t]ribal information exchange systems (...) which tribes use to collect and disseminate enemy information, situational awareness regarding other tribes, and the presence of foreigners and the friendly order of battle, as well as an estimate of the situation and mission orders” (Christian 2011: 18)

Their operations will aim to counter any armed challenger threatening their community militarily or politically, both by defending their own territory and by violently pushing for “political participation, economic power, social expansion and cultural hegemony” (Christian 2011: 33; Shultz & Dew 2006: 92). Christian refers to this aggressive pursuit of hegemony as “[t]he tribal motivation behind the tribal action” (Christian 2011: 33), although Shultz and Dew stress that an active pursuit of larger hegemony requires a “political entrepreneur who mobilizes clan segments in order to pursue political objectives” (Shultz & Dew 2006: 92), leading the group more towards traditional-based insurgency, as exemplified by the Houthis insurgency in Yemen.

Apart from strictly military operations, traditional militias may also engage in various economic activities to secure their socio-cultural unit. As Christian Tripodi points out, traditional militias’ “violence [is] not simply an expression of tribal identity (...) but more often than not a recognizably rational (...) reaction to basic political or socio-economic

predicaments” (Tripodi 2011: 594; cf. Thurber 2014). That being said, traditional militias rely first and foremost on the solidarity of their kin, extended by virtue of their established socio-cultural networks (Christian 2011: 14).

Finally, the overall *strategy* pursued by traditional militias to secure the sovereignty of their socio-cultural unit is twofold: Internally, cohesion between disparate subunits is being strengthened through the hostilities themselves, using “enemies to reinforce identity boundaries and dissociate (...) an opposing out-group” (Christian 2011: 13; 17). Externally, any attempt at centralizing politico-military, socio-economic or cultural power at the hands of rival entities, be they government forces, insurgents, or other militias, is resisted. As Shultz and Dew put it, the primacy tribal militias award to their kin “prevents a larger national unity, since the clan regards the interest of its members as paramount above all others” (Shultz & Dew 2006: 53; cf. Thurber 2014: 916). Even where attempts at reconciliation by the central authorities are offered, the “‘ingroup-outgroup’ process of identity definition that the tribe employs with neighbouring tribes” (Christian 2011: 47) means that this intrinsic “motivation cannot be [fully] suppressed outside of genocide, [although] the action(s) can be moderated” (Christian 2011: 33).

Two important caveats concerning traditional militias and the academic literature on them must be made. First, as the phenomenon of “interethnic defection” (Kalyvas 2004: 107) in civil war demonstrates, the supposedly rigid categories of belonging at the bottom of traditional militias may change during the course of a conflict (Kalyvas 2004; cf. De Vos 1995: 17-26). Due to their explicit grounding in the local cultural context “impos[ing] a logic on a very chaotic subject, [when] reality is fluid” (Giustozzi 2009: 24) runs the risk of forging unjust generalizations. Far from proposing to crudely ‘lump together’ tribal formations in Western Pakistan with ethnicity-based militias in Rwanda and armed clans in Chechnya, the analytical category of traditional militias aims to abstract from these specific cases to highlight the unique resources armed actors embedded in traditionally grown legitimacy possess. Recalling the acknowledged importance of legitimacy in COIN, these groups warrant more attention by researchers, to which this study contributes.

Second, in researching traditional societies and their militias, researchers must be wary of falling into the Orientalist patterns of argumentation some of the existing literature utilizes. By losing themselves in analytically dubious descriptions of “ferocious martial temperament[s]” (Shultz & Dew 2006: 43), and eternalized features of tribes that have

“evolved over thousands of generations in a Darwinian survival of the fittest” (Christian 2011: 17), scholars may inadvertently essentialize and reduce these complex actors to outdated clichés. This includes romanticized notions of “freedom-loving warrior culture[s]” (Tripodi 2011: 595) and the prominent analytical concept of immortal ‘tribal hatred’, which leads to the “objectification of the other, and to historicist constructions that obscure as they reveal their perspective” (Harrow 2005: 34). By constructing a specific model of warfare grounded in “tribal warfare concepts [of] – valor, courage, manly behavior, and military prowess” (Shultz & Dew 2006: 220), Keith Stanski claims, scholars implicitly “substantiate assumptions about the superiority of Western modes of warfare” (Stanski 2009: 80), leading to faulty assumptions about actors’ behavior and policy recommendations marred by stereotypes. Shultz and Dew making an active case for reviving the ‘Martial Races’ theories of Imperial ethnographers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which “[o]wing to its inherent racism (...) is wholly discredited today” (Scheipers 2015: 133), speaks volumes of the prevalence of this issue within the literature and its academic and ethical dangers (cf. Shultz & Dew 2006: 46-48).

## 6.2. Home is Where the War is – Self-Defense Militias

Based on the existing research, self-defense militias are defined as community-based armed “associations in which citizens have joined together for self-protection (...) against external threats” (Schuberth 2015: 303). Since the ‘foundational *goal*’ of self-defense militias is “providing security, rather than pursuing their political or economic interests” (ibid.), the broad definition advocated here explicitly includes anti- and pro-government (Koos 2014: 1042). While this is in contrast to some conceptualizations in the literature (cf. Clayton & Thomson 2014; Schuberth 2015), it is justified by this study’s focus on groups not created by a state party or counterinsurgent, as well as the group’s underlying function of protecting the community from any harm regardless of the perpetrator.

In contrast to most VNSA, these formations are “primarily grassroots phenomena” (Blocq 2014: 710) built upon “[s]mall-scale communal settings (...) and strong interpersonal relationships” (Koos 2014: 1045). Ultimately, self-defense militias have to appeal to a “broad-based (...) support base, [to receive] more resources (...) from the community” (Jentsch 2014: 40). If self-defense militias do contain elements of traditional legitimacy, it resembles warlords’ instrumentalization of it, insofar as they may mimic it to secure cohesion, but are

not actually a product of it or constrained by its rules (Giustozzi 2009: 12-14; cf. Ikas 2015: 4). Furthermore, because of their dependency on local contributions, self-defense militias must be “strongly embedded within preexisting local social structures (...) [which] helps not only to mobilize (...) but also to control their operations and sanction misbehavior” (Koos 2014: 1044).

This reliance on the local community, and the scarcity of resources and recruits (cf. Koos 2014: 1047; Jentzsch 2014: 26), shows in self-defense militias’ *tactics*, which are generally confined to “patrolling, intelligence gathering, policing tasks (...) defense in the case of an attack (...) nightly patrols, systems to alert people (...) [and] the identification of protected spaces to flee” (Jentzsch 2014: 26, 29). That being said, some self-defense militias, such as the ‘Arrow Boys’ of South Sudan, have also engaged their tormentors by “track[ing] them and, if possible, attack[ing] them (...) by surprise” (Koos 2014: 1048), by actively using their “profound knowledge of (...) the [local] area” (ibid.).

However, essentially self-defense militias “are not mobile fighting forces” (Clayton & Thomson 2014: 921), hence their *operational* focus rests on the defense of their respective community, which may range from a neighborhood to a village and several villages (Jentzsch 2014: 28; cf. Koos 2014: 1047). As a consequence, for the most part self-defense militias’ “activities are closely tied to their locality” (Kalyvas 2006: 107; cf. Clayton & Thomson 2014: 21).

As is the case with traditional militias, the self-defense militias’ strategy has an internal and external component. Internally, self-defense militias “create innovative institutions” (Jentzsch 2014: 9), and attempt to “empower (...) the people” (Jentzsch 2014: 258) by “creat[ing] a belief in agency, which enable[s] (...) large-scale mobilization” (Jentzsch 2014: 9). This is indispensable to raise the resources and manpower required to stand up to and defend against its militarily superior adversaries (Jentzsch 2014).

Externally, they have to balance two different strategies, deterrence and the search for patronage. On one hand, self-defense militias must above all appear able to defend themselves against both predation and attacks by any of the main warring parties or other VNSA (Schuberth 2015: 302-303). On the other hand, small, insufficiently armed bands of ragtag civilians, without access to the economic enterprises of warlords or the far-reaching networks of traditional militias, require an external patron of some kind in the long run (Jentzsch 2014: 23). Hence, self-defense militias have to search for support from other actors. Considering this will normally be the most affluent actor in a civil war, and self-defense militias’

conservative inclination “to protect what they have rather than demand social change” (Jentzsch 2014: 26), this patron will most likely be the government (ibid.).

## 7. Tactical Boon, Strategic Burden? Militias as Indigenous Forces

With the strategic profiles of the militias in place, their respective impact as IF and their interaction with the requirements of the different strategic levels of the COIN campaign can now be assessed.

In the case of traditional militias, their *tactics*, combining extensive local knowledge with unconventional maneuvers and formations, offer valuable skills for the COIN effort by allowing for the pursuit of insurgents in difficult physical and cultural terrains. Whether with their own units or together with counterinsurgent forces, traditional militias can thereby directly contribute to the COIN’s ability to locate and eliminate insurgents. In addition, the gathering of intelligence within the traditional militia’s socio-cultural unit will be highly facilitated by including them as IF. This connection to their respective community also makes them both adept at and willing to engage in defensive operations aimed at securing civilian or military sites in the settlements under their aegis.

Their unconventional tactics and loose organizational structure, however, may impair their ability to integrate fully into counterinsurgents’ conventional forces and their fixed chains-of-command. Furthermore, due to the brutal tactics they have been known to use, traditional militias may also have difficulties adhering to counterinsurgents’ rules of engagement (cf. Hughes & Tripodi 2009: 18).

*Operationally*, traditional militias’ extensive information networks, accessible wherever significant concentrations of their socio-cultural unit reside, can offer actionable intelligence to the COIN planning process beyond the immediate tactical context. Apart from geographical layouts, cultural and language specifics, and potential insurgent targets, this also includes insights on regional power dynamics between similar parochial actors.

These networks also facilitate counterinsurgents’ control of the population and their ability to monitor potential insurgent collaborators effectively, especially within the community of the traditional militia. This increased local presence further facilitates the defense of liberated areas and encouraging friendly cooperation with the COIN by reducing the potential for insurgent reprisals. The effectiveness of clan-based militias used by the

Russian COIN in Chechnya at preventing renewed insurgent violence in the villages they've been deployed in has been widely acknowledged (Lyall 2010; Souleimanov & Aliyev 2015, 2016).

Because of their focus on the well-being of their own constituency, however, traditional militias may be reluctant to contribute to operations in territory where their community has no significant population or which interfere with their constituency's parochial or economic interests. Traditional militias may also have little incentive, or permission, to protect those parts of the community who are not part of their in-group. When their presence threatened Shia militias' business interests in the Iraqi city of Basra, for example, they turned against the British counterinsurgents, forcing them to retreat from the city (Hughes 2010: 162-163).

The *strategic* utility of including traditional militias depends highly on the local socio-cultural context, and more specifically on the degree of heterogeneity within a specific theatre.

Ideally, including traditional militias grants a COIN campaign a large deal of local legitimacy by complementing the military authority of the foreign counterinsurgent with the traditional one of the time-honored institutions they're built on. This perceived continuity also facilitates the creation of stable local institutions, as the preexisting traditional governance structures, however minimal they may be, can be bolstered with counterinsurgent resources and expertise and transitioned into formal institutions. Turning again to Iraq, following the 'de-Ba'athification' of the Iraqi state, the Shia militias and commanders favored by the US counterinsurgents were coopted, along with their extensive patronage and kinship networks, building the backbone of the new state structures (Hughes 2010).

Traditional militias may also act as an effective channel for the demobilization of insurgents. Functioning social networks and receptive traditional institutions facilitate the reintegration of former insurgents into civilian life, minimizing the chances of renewed defection. Besides weakening insurgents' military capabilities, this process also undermines their own narrative of local legitimacy. For former Chechen insurgents "kinship ties (...) have assured membership in the newly formed armed units" (Souleimanov & Aliyev 2016: 399-400).

Traditional militias as IF also contribute to the severing of ties between the local population and the insurgents, by forcing the latter to fight a locally legitimate actor with an established socio-cultural pedigree. Due to their comprehensive influence on individuals' lives, the existence of traditional institutions also offers an "alternative social ordering (...)

[to] the insurgent structure” (Christian 2011: 14) to the agenda of insurgents, especially the insurgency, too, defines itself through the traditional cohesion of a particular socio-cultural unit. If traditional militias promise the same protection of socio-cultural autonomy, concerned individuals may thus be swayed from joining the insurgency.

However, since truly homogeneous societies are virtually nonexistent (cf. De Vos 1995: 16), the use of traditional militias can easily “generate a widespread (...) security predicament for the whole country” (Felbab-Brown 2016: 271) by altering established balances of power. Hence, using traditional militias as IF will likely create a parochial struggle between different socio-cultural units, within the larger societal struggle between two politico-military units which the COIN is supposed to combat (cf. Hughes 2010).

These conjectures are supported by the research on tribal militias coopted into the Afghan Local Police (ALP) conducted by Felbab-Brown (2016). During her extensive survey of different ALP units, she found that in “heterogeneous, polarized, and fractured communities, the establishment of ALP units often exacerbates security dilemmas among the communities” (Felbab-Brown 2016: 270).

The added legitimacy within one socio-cultural unit may come at a far-reaching loss of it within a rival unit. Institutionalizing traditional patronage networks extended to members of one specific socio-cultural unit will likely be rejected by other such groups. Demobilization and reintegration of former insurgents might not occur at all, if demobilized fighters from different socio-cultural units risk abuses by returning. Finally, members of different socio-cultural groups previously unsympathetic to their cause may join the insurgency to escape the harassment by an emboldened traditional militia into the protection of the insurgents. In Iraq, Sunni tribes flocked in scores to the al Qaida-led insurgency, and its successor the Islamic State (IS), out of resentment and fear of the abovementioned cooptation of Shia militias who abused the local Sunni population (Cockburn 2015: 12).

Even without the threat of internecine violence, traditional militias and their focus on preserving local autonomy will inevitably clash with the degree of centralization necessary to construct state institutions. By strengthening these formations materially and granting them more formal legitimacy, the unavoidable process of transferring some of this authority in the later stages of state-building to the central government will be exacerbated. More critically, the vital step of rudimentary “nation-building” (Gentile 2012: 378), which includes a clear cultural component, is likely to be opposed by traditional militias, potentially igniting a new

insurgency. Speaking of the “hill-tribes” (Kilcullen 2009: 75) of Afghanistan, David Kilcullen notes that

“when threatened by the encroachment of enemies or state authorities on their independence (...) [they] stay and fight, banding together to resist intrusion and reestablish their independence from external control (...) through violent resistance” (Kilcullen 2009: 75-76)

All of this points to a central strategic dilemma in using traditional militias, namely that their foundational dimension is aimed at conserving the sovereignty of their socio-cultural unit above all else. Their clientelistic, parochial character is likely to create strategic problems for the COIN campaign. By further dividing the population it seeks to control, counterinsurgents may also be perceived as biased meddlers in traditional affairs, thereby alienating whole groups of people from the institutions they have to create.

Regarding self-defense militias, the *tactical* level of the COIN can profit chiefly from their defensive capabilities and intelligence gathering. For tasks relating to the direct supervision and protection of civilian and military targets, such as general police work, reconnaissance and intelligence work, establishing and patrolling perimeters and repelling insurgent attacks, self-defense militias can draw from their own repertoire of tactics and their intimate connection with locals. In addition to these extra ‘boots on the ground’, self-defense militias’ intimate social connections also allow counterinsurgents to overcome intelligence and culture-based obstacles during their operations.

When it comes to more offensive maneuvers aimed at tracking and eliminating insurgents, however, self-defense militias’ eponymous orientation and subpar skills disqualifies them from fulfilling active combat roles. In addition, their explicit local focus is likely to affect their willingness to engage enemies in operations far removed from their native villages.

Self-defense militias’ utility to the COIN campaign is also limited on an *operational* level. On one hand, they increase counterinsurgents’ physical presence in insurgency-affected settlements and, in combination with their access to broad social networks, can significantly improve counterinsurgents’ ability to gather intelligence and plan their operations. Furthermore, counterinsurgents’ ability to apply selective violence against insurgent collaborators and protect informants against reprisals is strengthened. Overall, self-defense

militias can contribute to an improved security environment, which facilitates the final stages of counterinsurgents' 'clear-hold-build' approach.

On the other hand, self-defense militias may be infiltrated by insurgent collaborators even if the vetting process is performed diligently, leading to critical intelligence leaks and attacks on counterinsurgent personnel. The notorious "green-on-blue attacks" (Roggio & Lundquist 2016) of Taliban collaborators posing as ALP on Western counterinsurgents demonstrate how an insufficient screening process for militias can compromise military personnel and operations.

Moreover, strict geographical limitations also limit their operational value, as the intelligence they gather and the military prowess they demonstrate are likely to decrease the further the counterinsurgents' operational planning takes place.

Finally, the use of self-defense militias as IF also impacts the *strategic* level of COIN. As a true 'grassroots' actor tasked exclusively with the provision of security, a public good every inhabitant of a town surrounded by war requires, self-defense militias possess a high level of local legitimacy. Thus, by employing them as IF, counterinsurgents can build a strong feeling of local ownership into the COIN effort and create a more legitimate narrative. Furthermore, as self-defense militias and their families are part of the larger community and subject to their social control, they are less likely to engage in predatory behavior towards civilians, which further boosts their legitimacy.

This legitimacy, consisting chiefly of apolitical locals concerned only with ensuring the safety of their families, also means that insurgents who are forced to attack them forfeit a large share of their own legitimacy within the general population. While this is also true for traditional militias, self-defense militias' essentially bipartisan character as well as their local embeddedness should further exacerbate this effect.

The social networks on which self-defense militias are built on also facilitates the demobilization of insurgent fighters back into their respective communities, and their reintegration into a productive security function. In a similar manner, self-defense militias also enable the creation of sustainable local governance structures by using the "innovative institutions" (Jentzsch 2014: 266) they establish as a building block for counterinsurgents' state-building efforts, providing both security and economic opportunities to the population. In Sierra Leone, self-defense militias were not only integral in the demobilization efforts after the country's civil war, but "were officially recognized and united into the *Civilian Defense Forces*" (ibid.), thereby supplying the first step towards postwar security governance.

Self-defense militias' internal and external security strategies fundamentally align with the requirements of COIN campaigns. Internally, their continued local prominence within the COIN campaign leaves the responsibility for their safety in their own hands, as opposed to the foreign counterinsurgent force, thereby satisfying members' desire for security, and to provide for "the safety of [their] family members and (...) houses" (Koos 2014: 1044), a key desire of South Sudanese 'Arrow Boys' (ibid.).

Externally, their search for a patron to support their resistance against the overpowering armed groups surrounding them coincides with the designs of the economically powerful counterinsurgent. However, self-defense militias still face a dilemma when accepting the counterinsurgent's patronage: While a counterinsurgent's long-term interest in a partnership is far from certain, insurgents may react with violent reprisals against self-defense militias who cooperated with the former after the COIN campaign ends. Members of the local 'Harkis' units in Algeria, for example, were subjected to harsh reprisals by the new Algerian government and all but abandoned by the French (Randazzo 2011: 29-33). On the other hand, a short-term boost in much-needed resources and expertise may be a safer bet for barely equipped self-defense militias than trying to protect themselves from their initial enemies, plus a spurned counterinsurgent, on their own.

All of these strategic considerations, however, depend on the assumption that the self-defense militia in question has not "gone bad" (Schuberth 2015) that is, has not devolved into either a criminal actor or an instrument in local feuds. From the large-scale predation of the 'Bakassi Boys' in Nigeria (Koos 2014: 1043) to the atrocities committed by the South Sudanese 'Arrow Boys' in neighboring countries (UN 2016: 21-22), self-defense militias generally "have a tendency to (...) 'turn bad'" (Schuberth 2015: 303; Koos 2014: 1048). The literature on IF and self-defense militias therefore rightfully stresses that additional control mechanisms are indispensable to keep these inclinations in check (Jentzsch 2014; Hughes & Tripodi 2009; Gortzak 2009).

As has been shown, both militias suffer from their own distinct drawbacks. Traditional militias, while possessing well-tested tactical-operational capabilities and deep-running loyalties within their socio-cultural unit, can cause significant problems for the COIN on the strategic level. Compared to the capable, if ill-disciplined, forces traditional militias offer to counterinsurgents, the inexperienced ad hoc forces of self-defense militias are unlikely to turn the military tide of a conflict, even with substantial support from the counterinsurgent.

However, self-defense militias' intrinsic goal of improving local security for their whole community, as opposed to traditional militias' focus on their respective sub-groups, makes them natural allies to the COIN campaign. Their shared goals and compatible strategies can greatly facilitate cooperation on all levels of strategy, if the counterinsurgent recognizes self-defense militias' local priorities.

Furthermore, unlike their traditional counterparts who can count on the power of traditions to bolster theirs, self-defense militias' legitimacy is "delivery-based" (Giustozzi 2009: 14), i.e. depends entirely on their ability to protect their community. This weakness, makes them all the more susceptible to counterinsurgents' control, as self-defense militias depend on their continued support to continue resisting the insurgents, who are likely to be even more hostile towards them once they pick sides. If the withdrawal of support from the counterinsurgent means not only the likely disbanding of the militia, but also violent reprisals from surrounding armed groups, acts of rebellion against the counterinsurgent outlined by the IF literature are unlikely (cf. Byman 2006).

It should be noted that warlord militias, as examined in Ikas (2015), suffer from a disparity between tactical-operational usefulness and strategic harmfulness similar to traditional militias. Just as with traditional militias, the main drawback of using warlord militias as IF is that "the strategy and policy goal of the COIN campaign (...) negates the very essence of a warlord's own strategy and economic goal" (Ikas 2015: 7). Although a full comparison is beyond the scope of this study, it appears that it is this lack of popular legitimacy that ultimately makes warlord militias, out of all militias, the least useful to counterinsurgents.

## 8. Making Strategic Ends Meet – Policy Recommendations

Each subtype of militia presents individual challenges to the counterinsurgent who employs them as IF. Based on the requirements of the overall COIN campaign, however, these can be addressed, if not solved, on the respective levels of strategy.

Fundamentally, self-defense militias suffer more from tactical and operational problems of limited resources and organizational reach than from fundamental strategic issues. At the same time, extensive knowledge of, legitimacy within and control over their community make

self-defense militias, while perhaps not formidable fighters, still invaluable local allies to the COIN effort. This strategic profile generally translates into primarily defensive qualities which counterinsurgents should capitalize on (cf. Andres et al 2006: 142).

To strengthen their defensive capabilities, while also safeguarding against potential predatory behavior towards other communities, counterinsurgents should therefore focus on supplying self-defense militias primarily armaments designed for defending, instead of attacking settlements. Dante Randazzo cites small arms such as “shotguns (...) [with a] short range, [which are] better suited for defense (...) [and] pistols (...) [with] limited utility in offensive operations because of limited range, caliber, and rate of fire” (Randazzo 2011: 18). Locally fixed gunner nests, armored vehicles and security installations such as watchtowers and barricades can be safely added to this list of adequate equipment.

The counterinsurgent should also implement a mixed unit regime or mentoring program, with a small contingent of counterinsurgent forces permanently assigned to a particular self-defense militia. Not only does this expedite their training, it also boosts the subpar tactical leadership skills of the militia’s members in case of an insurgent attack and minimizes the chances for predation. An instructive example can be found in the ‘Combined Action Platoons’ (CAPs) established by the United States (US) in Vietnam, which “paired up a 14-man squad of U.S. Marines with a platoon of 38 locally recruited civilians” (Peic 2014: 166), which, the US defeat notwithstanding, is “considered to have been highly effective in combating the Vietcong insurgency” (ibid.). Similar programs have also been established during the British COIN campaign in Malaya and Oman (Jones 2012: 35).

Counterinsurgents should also account for this defensive strength in their operational planning when using self-defense militias. As such, they should be used primarily in defensive functions associated with the second and third phase of ‘clear-hold-build’.

On a strategic level, counterinsurgents have to strike a balance between supplying the self-defense militia and keeping it dependent on locals’ support to ensure the militia’s behavior is still attuned to locals’ needs and subject to their control. While limiting the support given to the militia is both militarily and politically problematic, counterinsurgents should use local institutions of governance *surrounding* the actual militia to channel their aid to the self-defense militia. Institutions like the “Sunni Awakening councils” (Clayton & Thomson 2014: 924) in Iraq or the “village *jirga*” (Jones 2012: 30) in Afghanistan should be used as vital intermediaries, and should be built on as broad a support base as possible. Leaving executive decision power in the hands of these more or less popular-based

institutions can prevent the accumulation of too much local power in the hands of the militia and their transition into criminality (cf. Schuberth 2015). Impersonal institutions also greatly increase counterinsurgents' ability to sanction individual members of the militia and their leaders without risking a breakdown of local structures (cf. Ikaas 2015).

Traditional militias, on the other hand, require more strategic than tactical or operational adjustments. Geared and trained more towards offensive rather than purely defensive actions, their military resources and capabilities can be a great asset for counterinsurgents, if they can moderate the militias' drive for socio-cultural autonomy and their aggressive pursuit of it.

Counterinsurgents must find a balance between traditional militias' time-tested tactics, that have proven to be particularly effective in their irregular conduct of war, and the formal rules of engagement of its own forces. While the added unique ability to "match the enemy's special skills in irregular warfare" (Cassidy 2007: 45) is undoubtedly one of the major benefits of using traditional militias, establishing formal hierarchies and mixing counterinsurgent with indigenous forces greatly increases units' cooperation and communication skills, and thereby their combat efficacy (Andres et al 2006: 141; Gentile 2012). More pressingly, formalizing traditional militias' organization and conduct and pairing them with counterinsurgent forces may strengthen military discipline within their ranks and help safeguard the rights of noncombatants, especially of those from their socio-cultural out-groups.

Counterinsurgents should make sure they retain operational command over traditional militias' activities to prevent them from using their new-found support to advance their own parochial goals. Even though this is likely to be met with resistance, (cf. Shultz & Dew 2006: 49), traditional militias may otherwise aggressively pursue their own strategic goals rather than those of the COIN campaign. For similar reasons, counterinsurgents should also abstain from deploying traditional militias into territories that lie beyond their original sphere of influence to avoid emboldening them further or provoking rival actors.

The biggest challenge however, lies on the strategic level, where counterinsurgents need to overcome traditional militias' own strategies of protecting their autonomy. Two approaches are generally conceivable:

First, counterinsurgents can sponsor, or set up, additional militias from different socio-cultural units, thereby creating a counterweight to a particularly assertive traditional militia

and reaffirming other socio-cultural groups' rights vis-à-vis a dominant one. Alternatively, by diluting its membership boundaries and tradition-based institutions while keeping the purely administrative ones, the traditional militia may be slowly transformed into a 'disinterested' self-defense militia. Both of these possible strategic adaptations by counterinsurgents have obvious flaws. Militarizing even more socio-cultural groups and increasing their demands for autonomy, or weakening militias' social cohesion and eroding their ability to draw from their established networks can both produce adverse results, effectively reducing local security instead of increasing it. This reflects both the inherent difficulties of overcoming traditional militias' own strategy as well as the gravity of its foundational dimension.

## 9. Conclusion

While necessarily limited in its depth, this explorative survey has shown that significant differences exist between militias' strategic profiles, and that these differences have significant consequences for their effectiveness as IF on the respective strategy levels of the COIN campaign. Traditional militias, while useful for conducting irregular warfare against mobile insurgents and pacifying specific segments of the native population, are socially divisive entities and as such entail a host of strategic issues for counterinsurgents wishing to employ them. On the other hand, self-defense militias' inherent military weakness requires counterinsurgents to confine their use to defensive operations, but their broad local support can be translated into strengthening newly built institutions that are central to the success of the COIN. The strategic model used in this study, while methodologically 'weaker' than studies sporting more elaborate frameworks or case studies, has nonetheless proven adept at showing how breaking militias' behavior down into the three levels of strategy can provide a more nuanced picture of their potential as IF.

For the academic community, this study emphasizes the need to engage the topic of VNSA with due attention to detail instead of clinging to simplistic notions of actors that fail to account for the empirical variety of the actors dominating the 'new wars' of today. Even the typology offered here may very well be criticized as being overly generalizing and deterministic, as it necessarily fails to neatly capture every empirical militia in its abstract categories. Pinning down a particular group on a single fundamental motivation can prove difficult in practice, as hybrid groups make such clear-cut analytical categories hard to apply. For example, can the 'Arbakai' militias in Afghanistan, that are established for self-defense,

but built with specific reference to traditions and tribal allegiance (Felbab-Brown 2016), be easily categorized as self-defense militias without neglecting an important part of their organizational ‘essence’?

Future research on militias should investigate how these hybrid groups come into being and how their conflicting goals are reflected in their behavior: why does this evolution take place? Does it have to be exclusively economically motivated, as Schubert (2015) seems to suggest, or can formerly economically motivated militias also ‘turn good’, i.e. orient themselves more towards addressing public grievances? And how can counterinsurgents take advantage of a refocus of a militia’s strategic goals? In the recently blooming intersection of research on VNSA, COIN, and IF, these and other questions can guide scholars in their future inquiries into the nature of militias and their potential to contribute to restoring peace in embattled societies.

The policy recommendations, while aimed at countering some of the militias’ weaknesses, further accentuate the fundamental short- and long-term issues surrounding the use of IF by counterinsurgents. Even if their tendencies to ‘go bad’ can be countered through innovative control mechanisms, and their military weakness compensated through extensive support; IF remain at best a costly asset, a risky bet, and bad company.

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