Keeping Armed Actors Out: The Protective Effect of Shuras in Afghanistan

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Abstract

Though civilians have traditionally been perceived as powerless at the hands of armed groups in civil war, recent research credits civilians with a greater degree of agency than previously perceived, revealing that effective institutions may be able to lessen the likelihood of violence in their locality through strategies such as resolving disputes between community members before they involve armed actors. However, systematic tests have been restricted in their scope and level of analysis due to the limited availability of data that captures the effectiveness of community-level institutions, so the applications of existing findings remain unclear. In this article, I replicate findings that effective local institutions lessen the likelihood of violence, even in a “hard” test of the hypothesis. Drawing upon survey data from Afghanistan, I demonstrate that more effective shuras and jirgas are associated with communities that perceive themselves and their families as safer, even in areas marred by armed group violence.

Keywords: Afghanistan, survey, violence, legitimacy, governance

“The best way to ensure your own security is to stop supporting Taliban activity,” Asadullah Khalid told almost two hundred district elders gathered for a special meeting in the village of Pasab. “Don’t let them in” (quoted in Thomson 2007).

Civilians have historically been perceived as having little to no power or autonomy in civil war and becoming either collaborators or victims at the hands of armed groups. However, recent research has pointed toward ways in which civilians are able to decrease the likelihood of armed group violence in their communities. In addition to previously recognized strategies such as fleeing or collaborating with an armed actor, new research has argued that civilians have a third option—carving out spaces of peace and autonomy in the midst of armed conflict. The benefit of autonomy is that communities are more likely to avoid complications with enemy groups who use violence against real or perceived defectors.

A blossoming literature has begun to explore the characteristics that contribute to communities’ abilities to seek out autonomy in civil war (Kaplan 2013, 2017; Arjona 2016; Barter 2014; Masullo 2015). Local institutional efficacy (Arjona 2016; Kaplan 2017) and communities’ organizational capacities (Kaplan 2013, 2017; Masullo 2015) have been shown to influence rebel behavior toward civilians, both in terms of governance provision and levels of violence. Barter (2014) has shown a number of ways in which civilians can improve their security during war and the remarkable role that community leaders play in negotiating that security with armed actors. A separate but related line of literature has explored the concept of “peace communities,” highlighting civilians’ responses to violence (e.g., Hancock and Mitchell 2007). This work similarly focuses upon local collective strategy to stay out of conflicts, but these studies have been limited to qualitative research. This small but impactful body of work...
The research on civilian strategies in war has started to break down long-held perceptions of civilians being helpless in the midst of violent conflict; however, it is still in its infancy, and the scope of its findings is unclear (Avant et al. 2019). To this end, I test the argument presented by Kaplan (2017) that communities with effective dispute-solving institutions may be able to lessen the likelihood of violence in their locality through certain strategies, such as resolving disputes between community members before armed actors become involved. Kaplan tests his claims in Colombia through extensive interviews and, with data at the municipal level, demonstrating that higher densities of dispute-resolution councils (called junta councils) within a given municipality are associated with lower levels of violence. This article builds on Kaplan’s argument in three crucial ways. First, I test his claims in a new context—Afghanistan, which should provide a “hard” test of Kaplan’s main hypothesis given the intensity of the conflict and the brutality of some of the armed actors involved (Kaplan 2017). To this end, I test the argument presented by Kaplan (2017) that communities with effective dispute-solving institutions may be able to lessen the likelihood of violence in their locality through certain strategies, such as resolving disputes between community members before armed actors become involved. Kaplan tests his claims in Colombia through extensive interviews and, with data at the municipal level, demonstrating that higher densities of dispute-resolution councils (called junta councils) within a given municipality are associated with lower levels of violence. This article builds on Kaplan’s argument in three crucial ways. First, I test his claims in a new context—Afghanistan, which should provide a “hard” test of Kaplan’s main hypothesis given the intensity of the conflict and the brutality of some of the armed actors involved (Kaplan 2017, 270). Second, I test the hypothesis at a more local level—instead of testing the theory at the municipal level, I test the hypothesis at the community level. Third, I capture qualitative differences in community institutions instead of just quantitative ones; instead of measuring community institutions by their presence alone, I create a more detailed measure that captures whether or not these communities exhibit the necessary qualities to keep civilians from involving armed groups in village disputes, testing the theory in a more direct way. To this end, I create an index using a survey of individual-level perceptions of community dispute-resolution councils in Afghanistan and conduct the analysis at a more microlevel than has been done previously.

Civil wars are not fought in a social vacuum, but are instead fought in diverse social landscapes—the institutions of which shape the ways in which armed actors interact with civilians. Violence by armed actors against civilians is often rooted in divisions within communities (Kalyvas 2006). Indeed, armed actors are often prompted to commit violence in villages because civilians themselves draw the armed actors into their disputes (Balcells 2017). Village disputes over land, livestock, or debts often result in civilians denouncing neighbors and accusing them of giving information to one of the armed actors, spurring action by the opposing armed actor to punish them. These disputes give armed actors an excuse to become involved in village affairs, which results in violence against civilians as well as an opportunity for armed actors to exploit divisions in order to gain information. Effective community-level institutions can provide conflict resolution processes for community members to minimize the instances in which civilians look to armed actors to solve a community dispute. Thus, the more effective a community dispute-resolution institution is, the less likely armed actors are to become involved in local affairs and the less likely civilians are to suffer from violence at the hands of armed groups.

While this article focuses on dispute resolution, there are potentially other ways in which legitimate community leaders may lessen the violence experienced by the communities they lead. Legitimate leaders may be more successful than leaders that lack legitimacy in generating a culture of peace and convincing civilians to refrain from becoming involved in the armed conflict. In this sense, legitimate leaders may wield their influence to persuade their constituents to not support armed group activity or join the armed group. Legitimate leaders may also be more successful in organizing communities to nonviolently protest against armed group incursion in community affairs or even in organizing self-defense forces or armed resistance. Kaplan (2017) focuses on six different strategies in his book, but due to space constraints, I will focus on the single strategy that applies most directly to the Afghanistan context.
I do not perceive these mechanisms as replacements for the mechanism focused upon in this article, but rather as complementary strategies that may be used at the leaders’ discretion. While I do not test the effect of either explicitly in this article, I suspect that leaders’ abilities to establish a culture of peace within their communities work in conjunction with leaders’ abilities to solve community disputes. However, I argue that there is no reason to believe that leaders’ abilities to mobilize communities against the Taliban are driving the relationship between legitimacy and violence in Afghanistan. While communities have had success in establishing zones of peace in other conflicts (Kaplan 2017; Hancock and Mitchell 2007), attempts to challenge the Taliban directly, both in terms of establishing community autonomy as well as armed confrontation, have for the most part been unsuccessful in lessening violence against civilians (Suleman and Williams 2003). This is the case even when communities have been highly organized and when community leaders have been viewed as legitimate by their constituents (Suleman and Williams 2003). While these alternative mechanisms merit additional exploration in future research—particularly, investigation of why the latter does not appear to hold up in Afghanistan—they are outside the scope of this article, which instead focuses on dispute-solving mechanisms as a way to lessen armed group involvement in communities.

There is, of course, a degree of endogeneity to the relationship between legitimate leaders and violence. Scholars have asked how violence shapes social cohesion and trust in institutions (Wood 2003, 2008), and while some have found that exposure to violence decreases trust in state institutions (De Juan and Pierskalla 2016), others have found that exposure to violence during war improves the social cohesion of communities (Gilligan, Pasquale, and Samii 2014). These findings offer potentially diverging expectations regarding the endogeneity of the relationship to be tested in this article. On the one hand, if (De Juan and Pierskalla’s 2016) findings apply to the context at hand, areas that experience more violence may be characterized by communities who have less faith in local institutions, which raises concerns of reverse causality. However, in the case of Afghanistan, since shuras/jirgas have historically operated outside of the state, Gilligan, Pasquale, and Samii’s (2014) findings may be more relevant in this context. Gilligan, Pasquale, and Samii (2014) find evidence of a social purging mechanism, in which fewer social persons (in this context, less committed shura/jirga members) disproportionately flee conflict zones. Gilligan, Pasquale, and Samii (2014) also find evidence of a collective coping mechanism, in which communities who face violence band together to endure threats. In this context, I would anticipate that communities who have faced more violence from armed groups develop a need to be better at solving their own internal disputes, as they realize the danger of escalating communal conflicts and causing additional violence to occur in the communities. This would mean that the endogeneity may bias the results in a way that underestimates the positive effects dispute-solving institutions have on preventing armed actors from becoming involved in community conflicts.

The Case of Afghanistan

In addition to being a “hard” test of the hypothesis at hand, Afghanistan presents a fascinating and critically important case in which to examine questions regarding the effectiveness of community institutions and their implications for violence. Normatively, it is important to understand the protective power that community-level institutions may provide to civilians, as the country has been ravaged by conflict for decades.

The historical weakness of Afghanistan’s national and subnational governments has left plenty of room for traditional or customary forms of local governance to flourish and persist. For centuries, local sources of authority have held significant amounts of political autonomy and have assigned the state or central government a marginal role (e.g., Rubin 1995). Individuals at the community level have wielded much more power when it comes to decision-making, representation, and the settling of disputes than the distant central government and its dysfunctional institutions. While some argue that decades of conflict have largely destroyed these local institutions, others provide evidence that customary governance has both survived and adapted to decades of war (e.g., Murtazashvili 2016).

Customary governance in most villages is comprised of three distinct institutions: village councils.
(shuras/jirgas), community representatives (maliks), and religious authorities (mullahs) (Murtazashvili 2016, 65). Shuras/jirgas (henceforth referred to as shuras) lie at the center of village governance and serve the primary function of deliberation. During these meetings, typically older, respected men come together to make decisions that have implications for the community, including decisions regarding justice, social issues, labor, war, and land (Barth 1959; Miahkhel 1995). Further, they serve as an institutionalized setting in which oppositional blocs within the community can meet (Barth 1959, 115). In the following analysis, I focus in particular on shuras.

Kaplan (2017) contends that local institutions need to have three characteristics to be effective at curbing violence from armed actors. First, they should have decision-making experience. Second, they should be broad and legitimate organizations. And third, they should be apolitical. While shuras have historically operated outside of central control, fulfilling the last requirement, they vary on the first two components, creating useful variation to test the theory at hand. Decision-making, especially in the context of disagreements among community members, is an essential part of shuras’ duties. Regarding legitimacy, shuras have historically been viewed as more legitimate than the state (Wardak and Hamidzada 2012); however, there still exists great variation in shuras’ respective legitimacy, and failures in making decisions that resolve village conflicts represent the primary way in which the Taliban becomes involved in village affairs. Indeed, (Snow 2013) explains that, often, if the shura is unable to come to a resolution, the shura moves from the elder’s compound to the mosque, at which time the Taliban is requested to determine an appropriate resolution to the conflict. Shuras also vary in the degree to which their communities view them as legitimate based on a number of factors, such as their perceived fairness or availability.

As is evident from the discussion above, Afghanistan presents fertile ground upon which to analyze the theory. Further, Afghanistan represents a useful case to explore because it is unique in its combination of being both a guerrilla conflict and having high-quality microlevel data available to analyze. While exploring a single case presents some limitations in regard to external validity, the study builds on extant research conducted in other regions and also allows for a research design that controls for a whole host of factors that scholars have connected to levels of violence and the degree to which rebels put civilians in the line of fire, such as political or religious ideologies and armed groups’ degrees of dependency upon civilians.

Methodology

The measures of the main variables of interest are drawn from the Survey of the Afghan People (SAP) the Asia Foundation, 2016, which is the longest-running nationwide survey of the attitudes and opinions of Afghan adults and has been conducted by the Asia Foundation every year since 2004. Each year, between six thousand and thirteen thousand individuals are interviewed by using a multistage, systematic sampling approach. The sample used in the following analysis was weighted using a probability-of-selection weight that accounts for provincial population as well as urban/rural proportions. The survey is not without its issues due to its linkage to Western actors as well as limitations stemming from conducting a survey in a conflict area, including missing data due to security concerns, cultural barriers, and underenumeration of women and girls. However, the Asia Foundation has been in Afghanistan since 1954 and is fairly transparent about the survey’s limitations.

The dependent variable is an ordinal measure that asks individuals the following: “How often do you fear for your own personal safety or security or for that of your family these days? Often, sometimes, rarely, or never?” These responses are represented by a 0–3 scale—the higher the score, the more often individuals fear for their safety. While not a direct measure of the number of violent events at the village level (impossible given the

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6 Terminology varies based on region of Afghanistan. Jirga is a Pashto word, while the word shura comes from Arabic, both meaning “council.”

7 For a detailed discussion of each of these institutions, see Murtazashvili (2016). Murtazashvili (2016, 66) notes that these organizations appear to play a similar role in communities across Afghanistan, regardless of ethnicity, area, or religion. However, the substantive norms implemented by these institutions varies, with Pashtuns typically using Pashtunwali to govern and non-Pashtun areas using sharia or other customary norms.

8 Questions necessary for the analysis only overlap in the years 2007–2011, defining the temporal scope of the analysis. However, alternative measures used in robustness checks in the appendix extend outside of that temporal scope and provide additional support for the hypothesis.

9 Data from Kabul is excluded in main models, but is included in Table A3 in the appendix. For more information on both the sampling technique and weights, please visit the survey’s website, https://asiafoundation.org/where-we-work/afghanistan/survey/.
The independent variable is an index created by adding up responses from multiple questions on the survey that triangulate the perceived success of shuras at solving community disputes. This index is comprised of individuals’ answers to whether the village jirga/shura (1) is accessible, (2) is fair and trusted, (3) follows the local norms and values, (4) is effective at delivering justice, and (5) resolves cases timely and promptly. An index is valuable because institutional efficacy is a complex concept, and there are multiple dimensions to institutions, any one of which could cause an individual to seek the resolution of their dispute elsewhere. For instance, even if a shura is accessible, an individual may not perceive it as fair, or, even if the shura resolves cases in a timely manner, the shura may not have the capacity to follow through and enforce the decision. Thus, an index captures the efficacy of the institution better than any one measure.

Some measures of shura effectiveness may evoke concerns of endogeneity, raising questions of whether individuals have confidence in their community leaders because of their abilities to keep armed groups from harming members of the community. I argue that a measure of success in solving community disputes should not be associated with leaders’ interactions with armed groups. To address concerns of this reverse causality, I also include a control in the model that measures the number of violent events in the district the year prior.

I include a number of other controls in my models, as well.11 I control for the yearly intensity of conflict by including an indicator of the average amount of district level violence across the country each year (measured using the Geo-referenced Event Data from Uniform Collateral Data Portal). Some years are more violent than others, which will be reflected at the local level. I control for humanitarian aid projects, as they could be associated with both effective local organizations (chosen to be partners in implementing projects) as well as targets of violence due to looting opportunities or challenges to an armed group’s authority (Wood and Sullivan 2015).12 I control for household income because certain areas may be more susceptible to Taliban influence based on level of poverty.13 Marginalized communities may be more willing to welcome the Taliban into their villages due to the potential social services offered by the group. I control for whether the individual is Pashtun,14 an indication that the individual shares an ethnic identity with the Taliban, rendering them potentially more likely to allow for the Taliban to become involved in village affairs.15 Finally, remoteness could be associated with both more robust community-level institutions as well as higher levels of violence. Since the most detailed location given on the survey is district, it is difficult to gauge how remote any given individual is within a district. Thus, I proxy remoteness with access to electricity by using a survey question that asks individuals to “rate the supply of electricity as very good, quite good, quite bad, or very bad in their area.”16 Table A1 in the appendix shows the descriptive statistics for all variables.17

I measure this through a binary indicator of whether there was reconstruction, building, or water projects implemented by foreign aid in the area according to the Asia Foundation SAP.18 From survey question, “average monthly household income,” categorical: 0 = less than 2000 Afs; 1 = 2001–3000 Afs; 2 = 3001–5000 Afs; 3 = 5001–10,000 fs; 4 = 10,000–15,000 Afs; 5 = 15,000–40,000 Afs. Income varies greatly by region, but the modal income for the observations included in the analysis was 5001–10,000 Afs.19 Ethnicity is self-reported on the survey. However, some Pashtun tribes adamantly reject Taliban rule despite being part of the Taliban’s in-group (Giustozzi 2012). And on the other hand, the Taliban has recruited significant numbers of Uzbeks and Turkman, so identity is not always an accurate predictor of affinity (Giustozzi and Reuter 2011).

I use alternative measures of remoteness in the appendix, including connection to the national grid and walking distance to the nearest hospital. Other variations exist at the district level that impact the outcome variable, but these factors (for example, the presence of NATO troops in each area or the degree of insurgent presence) lack the data to control for their variation directly. To address this variation, I include in the appendix a model with dummy variables for each district, which account for individual characteristics of districts that may or may not bias the likelihood of violent activity, which addresses important differences across districts that are not accounted for in the other controls.
The Protective Effect of Shuras in Afghanistan

The scope of the theory is limited to areas in which armed actors have strategic incentives to commit violence—otherwise, any relationship between institutional efficacy and violence against civilians could be spurious, since communities would face less pressure from armed groups in the first place (Kaplan 2017, 114). I have only included in the model districts in which there were multiple actors contesting for control in a given year, according to the Uniform Collateral Data Portal (UCDP) Geo-Referenced Event Data (Sundberg and Melander 2013). I use an ordered logit due to the ordinal nature of the dependent variable.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 below shows the results of the regression analysis. Model 1 is a bivariate model to demonstrate the relationship without controls, and Model 2 controls for the additional factors discussed above. The models deliver positive support for the hypothesis that more effective community institutions result in individuals feeling safer in their locality. The coefficient representing the relationship between institutional efficacy and individuals’ perceptions of safety is negative and statistically significant with 99 percent confidence, meaning that the more legitimate an individual’s shura is, the less often they fear for the safety and security of themselves and their family.

The controls provide some additional insight into factors contributing to an individual’s security. Being Pashto is associated with individuals feeling less safe, which may be due to the tendency for Pashtos to be more open to the Taliban becoming integrated into their communities. Even if the Taliban is not targeting these communities purposefully, their presence increases community insecurity.

Aid projects and higher quality of electricity increase individuals’ perceptions of security. The relationship between aid and violence is complicated, so it is difficult to discern the cause of this relationship without more context (e.g., Sexton 2016; Beath, Christia, and Enikolopov 2011). However, the relationship may not be causal, and aid projects’ positive associations with security may be due to the tendency for aid projects to be implemented in safer areas, not a causal effect. Higher quality electricity may proxy urban areas, which are less affected by insurgents, and thus individuals likely felt safer.

Higher income is associated with individuals feeling less safe, which is surprising given that the literature has established that poverty is associated with conflict. However this may be due to wealthy individuals being disproportionately targeted by armed groups.

To understand the substantive significance of the relationship between legitimate shuras and individuals’ perceptions of security, I generate the predicted probabilities of how often individuals fear for their safety based on the effectiveness of their respective community’s shura. Individuals who have a shura that is highly effective (15

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Model 1</th>
<th>Model 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Institutional efficacy</td>
<td>−0.042***</td>
<td>−0.050***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>0.008***</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Electricity</td>
<td>−0.044***</td>
<td>(0.001)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pashto</td>
<td>0.235***</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign aid</td>
<td>−0.025***</td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average violence</td>
<td>0.021***</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Previous violence</td>
<td>0.006***</td>
<td>(0.000)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant cut 1</td>
<td>−1.593***</td>
<td>−1.520***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant cut 2</td>
<td>−0.699***</td>
<td>−0.532***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant cut 3</td>
<td>1.116***</td>
<td>1.262***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.002)</td>
<td>(0.004)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>19,276</td>
<td>14,548</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: (1) Standard errors in parentheses. (2) Statistical significance levels: ***p < 0.01, **p < 0.05, *p < 0.1.
on the index), they are 73 percent more likely to respond that they never fear for the safety of themselves or their families, as compared to individuals with a shura that is not at all effective (0 on the index). Importantly, this is only in areas with more than one armed actor fighting over territory, so these are not areas in which there is no threat of violence. These changes in individuals’ perceptions of safety are substantial and point toward an important protective power of effective shuras. However, it is important to acknowledge that, although the relationship between institutional efficacy and violence remains while controlling for a number of alternative explanations, the data used in the analysis is observational and thus cannot provide causal evidence.

Conclusion

The conclusions drawn from this analysis lend additional support to a relatively new, and controversial, theory that civilians are not helpless in civil war (Avant et al. 2019). Civilians have options, one of which is to remain as autonomous from armed actors as possible in order to increase their security. To this end, the more successful communities are at resolving disputes before they escalate to the point of community members involving armed actors, the less likely the community is to suffer from violence at the hands of armed actors. These findings are meaningful because they focus the attention on civilians as decisive actors in war—actors who possess agency and who are defined by characteristics that vary in critical ways. In the past, civilians were theorized about and treated as victims instead of influential agents, and these new findings come with implications for both counterinsurgents and humanitarian actors.

While this article seeks to understand how community-level institutions can lessen the violence faced by civilians during war, it is certainly not a call for the Afghan government or external actors to establish more shuras or to provide aid to all shuras indiscriminately. While the international community has recognized the value of shuras, efforts to boost the number and strength of shuras has done more harm than good, which complicates local governance issues. Further, this article has demonstrated that this perceived legitimacy has important implications for the protection these bodies are able to provide to civilians. Thus, those seeking to strengthen local institutions in Afghanistan and other conflict-affected countries should conduct research that allows them to understand the nuances of legitimacy and effectiveness and should partner with local organizations that have deeper insight into the complex social terrain that these institutions operate upon.

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Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the Journal of Global Security Studies data archive.

References


