

Taming the Unruly

The Integration of informal Northern Afghan Militias into the Afghan Local Police*

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Abstract: Though states frequently attempt to formalise and regulate militias, there has been very little research whether or not such a formalisation can, indeed, improve the performance of militias in terms of greater security provision and reduction of abuses against the population. Using original quantitative and qualitative data from North-East Afghanistan, we show that the integration of unregulated anti-Taliban militias into the Afghan Local Police (ALP) in late 2011 and early 2012 has, indeed, led to an improved performance of these militias in the eyes of the population: fear of militias dropped, while their perceived positive security impact increased when compared to their assessment prior to the establishment of ALP.

Keywords: Militias, Afghanistan, mixed-method research, counterinsurgency

Schlagworte: Milizen, Afghanistan, Methodenmix, Aufstandsbekämpfung

1. Introduction: Militias a Curse or a Cure?

Public and academic debate on militias is highly controversial and tends to ask in general terms whether militias do more good than harm or vice versa (e.g. Sanford 2003; Schwarz 2007; Abbas/Gerspacher 2015; Human Rights Watch 2011; Jones 2012; Ahram 2011). In spite of the frequently negative assessment of militias, in many fragile states of the world militias continue to be a fact of life that is supported by states, local communities or political parties fighting insurgents, criminal cartels, or ostensibly protecting against crime or engaging in conflict with ethnic or political rivals.

According to Seth Jones, the main fear associated with militias is that, instead of providing security, they in fact contribute to instability by undermining state authority, committing human rights abuses and that, as a result of lacking control, they are militarily ineffective – or “unreliable and unwieldy” (2012: 4-12). However, through a comparative analysis of 130 insurgencies since World War II, Jones finds that these negative assessments of militias are “gross over-generalizations” (ibid: 1). Instead, Jones concludes, “the emphasis [...] should be on the quality of regulation, not on whether a militia is inherently desirable or undesirable” (ibid: 34).

One possible way to exert greater state control over militias is to integrate them into formalised para-military structures. Even though states frequently attempt such a regulation,¹ there has been surprisingly little research on whether such formalisation can indeed improve the performance of militias in terms of greater security provision and the reduction of abuses against the population. A notable exception is the work of Mitchell, Carey and Butler (Mitchell et al. 2014) who in a cross-country large-n study found that the presence of *informal* militias is associated with a significant increase in torture, disappearances and killings. In contrast, the presence of *formalised* militias has no statistically significant impact on such human rights abuses.

In our article we pose a similar question but examine it in-country. Using quantitative and qualitative data from 25 districts of North-East Afghanistan (cf. Koehler et al. 2015) we investigate whether the integration of informal anti-Taliban militias, called *arbakees*², into the formal structures of the Afghan Local Police (ALP) improved the (perceived) performance of these militias. We will thereby concentrate on two dimensions: abuses against the population and military performance.

Our central hypothesis is that – in line with state expectations – the formalisation of militias will improve their performance along the two above mentioned dimensions. We will investigate militia formalisation by comparing two waves (baseline and follow-up data) analysing how respondents perceived militias before and after the introduction of ALP. We will do this while differentiating between different levels of exposure to militias: (a) whether a respondent lives in a village with militias, (b) whether he lives in a district, but not in a village with militias, and, lastly, (c) whether he lives in a village and district without militias.

We proceed as follows: First, we provide an overview of our research in North-East Afghanistan. Second, we briefly recount the development of the insurgency and the emergence of anti-Taliban militias in the research region, detailing the key differences between informal arbakee and the formalised ALP. In the following we will use “militia” as a generic term referring to both formal and informal militias, i.e. ALP and arbakee. Third, we proceed to present empirical results from four Logistic Regression models to compare the presence of arbakees and ALP along the two dimensions of militia performance (fear of militias due to abuses against population and (perceived) security provision). In the final section we present our conclusions.

2. Research Background

The research was conducted by Jan Koehler and Kristóf Gosztonyi in 25 districts of North-East Afghanistan and covers

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1 Examples of the formalisation of militias include e.g. the *comités de autodefensa* set up to fight the Shining Path in Peru or the US-driven formalisation of the Anbar Awakening as the Sons of Iraq movement.

2 Originally the term *arbakee* refers to famed tribal militias in Eastern Afghanistan (in fact one of the authors of this article also briefly participated in such a militia in his home town in Khost). In order to gain legitimacy by adopting the name of these respected local self-defence forces, anti-Taliban militias in other parts of Afghanistan also came to be referred to as arbakees.

253 village communities.³ It included a quantitative survey of more than 5,000 respondents per wave, complemented by the compilation of demographic, political, governance-related and historical information on surveyed villages, village clusters and districts, as well as the conduct of extensive qualitative interviews. We gathered baseline data in 2010/11 amidst intense fighting in parts of the research region at the height of the US Surge policy. At this time, arbakees were present in nine of the 25 districts of the survey – all nine “arbakee-districts” were affected by an intense insurgency. We conducted the follow-up in late 2012 under significantly improved security conditions as a result of counter-insurgency operations. By this time, ALP had become the dominant form of militia in seven of the previously mentioned nine militia districts of our survey.

3. From Informal arbakees to ALP

After a few peaceful years following the collapse of the Taliban regime in 2001, the insurgency made a comeback by the year 2009 in two provinces of North-East Afghanistan: Kunduz and Baghlan. Both provinces are strategically important and have significant Pashtun populations. The Taliban, being a largely Pashtun movement, infiltrated these provinces by using ethnic networks. The Taliban offensive of 2009 was further facilitated by a power and security vacuum in the North-East. By this time the militias of the anti-Soviet Jihad and the subsequent civil war were largely disarmed and demobilised, while the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) had not yet been effectively built up and was not capable of offering serious resistance to the onslaught. Moreover, Germany, the main foreign troop contributor in the North-East, was not yet willing or able to engage in serious combat with determined insurgents (Koehler 2014: 70).

The confluence of these factors resulted by mid-2009 in a near collapse of government control in Kunduz and Baghlan. At this point in time, neither the Central Government in Kabul, nor international military forces (most importantly the US) could offer relief. Facing impending collapse, provincial-level Afghan elites turned to dormant Jihadi networks to fight the Taliban (e.g. Goodhand/Hakimi 2014: 25-37; Human Rights Watch 2011: 27; Gosztonyi/Koehler 2010: 74-75, 121-123). The degree to which this process was approved or even directed by Kabul is unclear. The task of arming and re-activating former Jihadi groups to fight the Taliban fell to the provincial branches of the National Directorate of Security (NDS) and Afghan National Police (ANP). Typically, they relied on networks of mostly non-Pashtun Jihadi commanders to mobilise their fighters. On occasion, however, former insurgents were also admitted as arbakees. The arbakees, together with the thinly spread ANSF and an increasingly assertive German ISAF contingent, succeeded in holding out against the insurgents until the arrival of the first US surge troops in early 2010. By mid-2010, international and national pro-government forces were on the offensive and by 2012 managed to significantly push back the insurgents and pacify the region. Subsequently, as the

withdrawal of international troops progressed, security once again began to deteriorate. In particular, 2015 saw a dramatic escalation of violence in large parts of the North-East, reaching or even surpassing the intensity of violence in 2010. This deterioration, however, took place after our second survey and is thus not considered in the current analysis.

3.1. Arbakee

The arbakee fighting force that emerged to resist the insurgents was a typical militia force. It was local, with fighters pledging allegiance to their commanders who in turn belonged to parties and networks going back to the anti-Soviet Jihad and the subsequent civil war. Their district and provincial state principals had often only tentative control over the groups of fighters they had helped to set up. Given the *ad hoc* setup, tentative formalisation and lack of regular salary, arbakees soon came to be known for abuses, taxation of the population and in-fighting (Gosztonyi/Koehler 2010: 74-75; Human Rights Watch 2011: 27-42).⁴

3.2. ALP

The emergence of militias was eyed with mistrust by President Hamid Karzai and large parts of the Kabul elite (Goodhand/Hakimi 2014: 14), while other elite factions and the US military establishment reportedly supported it (Jones 2012: 31). The formalisation of arbakees as ALP and their subordination to the Ministry of Interior Affairs (MoIA) was a compromise between these opposing views on how to ensure local security. The ALP was conceived of as a local “self-defence force” ensuring the security of communities where they had been set up and from where its members were recruited. In contrast to arbakees, members of the ALP are vetted by local elders as well as Afghan government agencies. Approved ALP members received arms, uniforms, training, and salary, and were integrated into MoI-structures, with ALP commanders reporting to the district chiefs of ANP. In spite of the implementation of ALP, arbakees did not completely disappear. In many districts, ALP and arbakees continued to coexist side by side and in one district, Khanabad, the ALP-programme was never implemented.

The establishment of ALP did not eliminate all human rights abuses and infighting between militias, and there is an ongoing debate whether there is any difference between the performance of arbakees and ALP. A number of authors and institutions are highly critical of ALP (e.g. AIHRC 2012: 20-36, Human Rights Watch 2011: 3-4), while a few reports found that “many authorities and communities ... considered the deployment of ALP to be a more desirable alternative for provision of security than armed groups” [i.e. arbakees] (UNAMA 2014: 50).

4 In early 2011 one of the authors was involved in facilitating a meeting between an influential former commander and community leader from Aliabad and German military officers in Kunduz on militia related abuses and insecurity. The community leader lobbied for the formalisation of the militias under the command and authority of the district chief of police. When the German officers highlighted their distrust in the performance of the police in that district, the community leader acknowledged the problems. He replied, however, that, despite of the existing problems, under a formalised arrangement communities would at least have a clearly designated person responsible for the militias to whom they could turn to with their complaints and suggestions.

3 We thank the DFG-funded SFB700 C9 for supporting this project; the survey was conducted by Afghan Human Rights Research and Advocacy Organisation (AHRRAO) under supervision of the authors.

3.3. Operationalising the research question

We formulate the following hypothesis to test whether the introduction of the ALP programme has indeed led to improved performance by ALP as compared to arbakees:

H1: The integration of informal arbakees into ALP has improved the performance of these militias by (a) reducing fear of ALP as compared to arbakees, and (b) by increasing the perceived positive security contribution of ALP as compared to arbakees.

However, as both arbakees and ALP are mainly local, village-level armed groups, their impact on perceptions (fear and perceived security contribution) will vary depending on the level of exposure to militias. The greater the exposure of a respondent to militias, the more he might suffer from their unruly behaviour, but the more he will also benefit from their protection against insurgents. Hence we formulate our second hypothesis to account for exposure:

H2: Respondents with more exposure to militias (those living in militia villages) will be more afraid of militias, but will value their security contribution at the district level more strongly than respondents with less exposure (those who live in non-militia villages located in militia districts or in non-militia districts).

4. Data and Empirical Analysis

4.1. Dependent variables

We use Logistic Regression analysis with standard errors clustered at the village level to estimate the effect of exposure to militias on the perception of fear of, and contribution to security by militias. Our primary consideration in deciding the models' specifications are driven by theory. We report our most preferred model specifications in *Tables 1* and *2*.

Our key *dependent variables* (DVs) "fear" of militias and "perceived contribution to district security" by militias, are two survey questions that ask respondents to indicate their degree of fear of, and evaluate the extent to which militias (ALP and arbakees) have contributed to security/insecurity of their district on a 3 Likert-type scale. The first is a proxy for the human rights record of militias, while the latter is a proxy for military effectiveness as perceived by rural Afghans. We collapse the three category variables into two categories to construct the binary DVs suitable for Logistic Regression.⁵

Two questions arise with regard to these DVs. First, whether respondents truthfully respond to these potentially sensitive questions, and second, whether they are good proxies for human rights abuses and military effectiveness. Regarding the first, so far we have no reason to doubt respondents' willingness to answer questions regarding their fear of different armed actors and their assessment of the security contribution of these same actors. As an example, the baseline carried out in a context of intense fighting in some parts of the survey region shows high levels of

fear regarding a large number of armed actors with fear being generally higher in frontline districts than in stable ones. In contrast, fear significantly dropped during the 2012 follow-up survey in a context of substantially improved security. Moreover, even if responses were partially biased towards giving "expected" answers, it is likely that this bias would be similar in both waves and would thus still provide valid information on trends over time.

Regarding the second question, whether popular perceptions are an adequate proxy for the human rights record and military effectiveness of militias, one has to consider the counter-insurgency (COIN) context of the establishment of these militias. In this context, "winning the hearts and minds" of the population is a key objective. Admittedly, popular perceptions do not capture the full dimension of the issue areas "human rights" and "military effectiveness". For example, "fear of militias" will likely not capture the targeted killing of Taliban informers or the torture or execution of captured insurgent fighters by militias; but it gives an accurate assessment of militia abuses against the population such as summary retaliations, violent intimidation and financial or sexual extortion. In a COIN context, these are all highly relevant and counterproductive crimes committed against the civilian population. Thus, militias that evoke little fear and are perceived as contributing positively to security are, from a COIN perspective, successful.

4.2. Independent variables

Arbakee and ALP in village: Our key *independent variables* (IVs) used to estimate the effect of militia exposure on our DVs are the dummy coded "arbakee in village" (1 for arbakee in village and 0 otherwise) and "ALP in village" (1 for ALP in village and 0 otherwise). This reflects our assumption that the presence of militias at the local level is a key determinant of perceptions of fear of, and perceived security contribution by the two different forms of militias.

In order to test *Hypothesis 1*, we estimate the effect of local arbakee presence on the two DVs using baseline data from 2010/11 around the time when arbakees were active in nine out of 25 districts of our survey. We then estimate the effect of local ALP presence on the two DVs using the follow-up data from 2012 when ALP was introduced in seven out of the nine arbakee districts.

Since *Hypothesis 2* is specifically interested in village-level exposure to militias, we introduce dummy coded variables for ALP/arbakee presence on the village level into our models in interaction with militia district dummies, "arbakee district" and "ALP district" (1 for districts with arbakees, 2 for districts with ALP and 0 otherwise).⁶

For the analysis of ALP performance with the follow-up data, we introduce two additional IVs: *ANSF in village* (1 for presence, 0 otherwise) and *ALP and arbakee in village* (1 for presence, 0 otherwise).

⁵ The main purpose of the analysis is to assess whether formalization leads to mitigating the negative effects associated with militias, which is more relevant to the lowest or highest outcomes of the variables rather than the middle category. Despite the loss of some information, we collapse the "somewhat afraid" category to "not afraid" in the "fear of militias" DV. We also collapse the middle neutral category of "contribution to district security" into "positive contribution". Results from a multinomial regression where all categories are included indicate very similar results for most of the variables across the four models with no significant difference in relation to key independent variables.

⁶ The interaction terms introduced in the models allow us to a) conduct the analysis using the full sample of 25 districts, including those districts that have no militia activity and hence capture the variation associated with respondents living in both militia and non-militia districts; b) test *Hypothesis 2* by taking into consideration the two-level clustering of militia presence effect on the DVs at the village as well as district levels. The interaction between arbakee/ALP districts and villages result in the generation of three valid categories of: 1) non-militia villages in militia districts; 2) militia villages in militia districts and; 3) non-militia villages in non-militia districts.

Table 1: Average Marginal Effects (Arbakees)

VARIABLES	Model 1	Model 2
	DV: Fear of Arbakees	DV: Contribution to district security by Arbakees
<i>Interaction between Arbakee village & Arbakee district dummies^a</i>		
Non-Arbakee villages in Arbakee districts	0.115** (0.0418)	-0.262*** (0.0422)
Arbakee villages in Arbakee districts	0.110* (0.0526)	-0.253*** (0.0555)
Pashtun Dummy (Self-identification as Pashtun)	0.0808* (0.0325)	-0.0996** (0.0348)
Tajik Dummy (Self-identification as Tajik)	0.0245 (0.0288)	-0.0362 (0.0268)
<i>Fear of Taliban^b</i>		
Somewhat afraid (of Taliban)	0.120** (0.0433)	0.0418 (0.0297)
Very afraid (of Taliban)	0.308*** (0.0368)	0.0911** (0.0283)
<i>Fear of Arbakees^c</i>		
Somewhat afraid (of Arbakees)		-0.288*** (0.0373)
Very afraid (of Arbakees)		-0.601*** (0.0404)
District Security Rating (very secure)	0.102** (0.0319)	0.0168 (0.0297)
<i>Contribution to district security by Arbakees^d</i>		
Neither negative, nor positive contribution	-0.369*** (0.0416)	
Positive contribution	-0.534*** (0.0382)	
<i>Governance Zones^e</i>		
Commander Rule	-0.167** (0.0511)	0.0713 (0.0483)
Remote Self-governance	0.0253 (0.0490)	-0.0655 (0.0588)
Contested Governance	-0.0123 (0.0432)	0.0283 (0.0390)
Taliban Governance	-0.245*** (0.0736)	-0.0197 (0.0434)
Observations	1964	1964

Note: Analysis with 2010/2011 survey data; Logistic Regression; **Average Marginal Effects**; robust clustered errors at the village level in parentheses; ***, **, * represents significance at the 1, 5, 10 percent level

^a Interaction variable which combines two dummies: Arbakee district (1 if district has arbakees & otherwise) and Arbakee village (1 if a village has Arbakee and 0 otherwise); base category is a combination 0-0 i.e. "non-Arbakee villages in non-Arbakee districts"

^b Reference category is "not afraid"

^c Reference category is "not afraid"

^d Reference category is "negative contribution"

^e Reference category is "governance by government"

Fear of, and perceived district security contribution of militias: We use "perceived district security contribution by militias" as a control in estimating the "fear of militias" as a DV and *vice versa*, "fear" as a control for estimating our "perceived district security contribution by militias" as a DV. We assume a strong mutual relationship between these two variables: Somebody who is afraid of a certain type of militia is unlikely to believe that they nevertheless contribute positively to security; in reverse, somebody who feels protected by a militia group, is less likely to be very afraid of them. In the Afghan context this assumption is not self-evident. Earlier research showed for example that fear of local commanders does not always mean that people also consider them detrimental to local security; this relationship seems to depend on the local security context (Koehler et al. 2011: 36-37).

Ethnicity: In particular, we consider Pashtun and Tajik ethnicities. As mentioned in the historical overview, the Taliban movement tends to be dominated by Pashtuns, while the militias show a heavy Tajik bias. We thus assume that Pashtuns would evaluate the performance of militias more negatively along both DVs than Tajiks. Moreover, we expect that this effect will be less

pronounced with regard to the more disciplined ALP than for arbakees.

Fear of Taliban: Further we expect that persons who fear the Taliban would be less afraid of militias as they see them as their protectors and thus would also view their contribution to security more positively.

District security rating: Security improved significantly between the baseline and the follow-up. Our main control for this changed security environment is the subjective assessment of district security by respondents.

Governance zones: Our previous research shows that the governance context is not uniform and homogenous in the research region. Rather, it is a patchwork of different governance-providing institutions and actors, showing great geographic variance and change over time. We approach this diversity of governance forms through the concept of "governance zones", which we define as geographic areas with distinct modes of governance. For the North-East we identified five different governance zones, each defined by the varying presence of statehood, social control, and use of force by powerful actors (Koehler/Gosztonyi 2014).

In addition to accounting for differences in the provision of governance that are likely to have an impact on the performance of militias, the inclusion of governance zones into the statistical analysis is also important for a further reason: together with "district security rating", governance zones are our main controls for changes in the security, political and governance context between baseline and follow-up. While during the

baseline we noted significant zones of Taliban control, during the follow-up such areas largely disappeared, while zones of "contested governance", "commander rule" and "governance by government" expanded.

5. Results⁷

5.1. Arbakee performance before formalisation (baseline survey in 2010/11)

In this section we investigate the performance of arbakees some 1.5 years after their initial emergence in 2009. *Models 1* and *2* in *table 1* illustrate results related to our DVs, "fear of arbakees" and "perceived contribution to district security by arbakees". The results show that militias evoke significantly more fear in districts and villages where arbakees have been introduced

⁷ Note that we only report results from post-hoc analysis. We present average marginal effects because we view these as most easily understood and substantively meaningful in making sense of the regression outputs.

than in “non-arbakee districts”. However, within these “arbakee districts” we see no meaningful difference in the opinions of respondents living in villages with or without arbakees.

Continuing with the same three-way comparison, we get a similarly negative result for the perceived contribution of arbakees to district security. As compared to districts without arbakees, “non-arbakee villages in arbakee districts” and “arbakee villages” (in arbakee districts) are on average associated with 26 and 25 percentage points (*pps*) decrease in the probability of perceiving the arbakees as “positively contributing” to district security. Thus once again we see no significant difference in the effect of arbakee exposure between the two types of communities.

As expected, ethnicity plays a role in assessing arbakees. Likely due to an ethnic Tajik bias of arbakees, Pashtuns tend to fear arbakees more and are more likely to negatively assess their performance than non-Pashtuns. Fear of the Taliban appears to be a key driver of respondent assessments of arbakees: respondents who are afraid of the Taliban are likely to be also afraid of arbakees (a strong and statistically highly significant result), but they also tend to assess the security contribution of arbakees more positively. A further statistically significant finding shows a strong link between our two DVs: respondents who are afraid of arbakees are very likely to also negatively assess their contribution to district security, while those who perceive them as contributing positively to district security will likely not be afraid of them. Lastly, the more secure a respondent perceives his district to be, the more he is also likely to fear arbakees.

5.2. ALP performance after formalisation (2012)

Our follow-up survey in 2012 allows us to investigate the effect of the introduction of ALP. Our key DVs are fear of ALP and contribution to security by ALP. We proceed with the same three-way comparison as previously applied for arbakees. Respondents in “ALP villages” and respondents in “non-ALP villages” but in ALP districts are on average only 5 and 6 pps more likely to be “very afraid” of ALP than respondents in villages in non-ALP districts. This is a more than 50% drop in fear as compared to arbakees in 2010/11.

Table 2 Average Marginal Effects (ALP)

VARIABLES	Model 3 DV: Fear of ALP	Model 4 DV: Contribution to district security by ALP
<i>Interaction between ALP village & ALP district dummies^a</i>		
Non-ALP villages in ALP districts	0.0593*** (0.0163)	-0.00808 (0.0485)
ALP villages in ALP districts	0.0492* (0.0213)	0.139** (0.0457)
Arbakee in village	0.0413 (0.0264)	0.00781 (0.0882)
Arbakee & ALP in village	0.000720 (0.0259)	0.102 (0.0881)
ANSF in village	-0.0305 (0.0187)	0.0612 (0.0821)
<i>Fear of Taliban^b</i>		
Somewhat afraid (of Taliban)	0.0577*** (0.0123)	0.212*** (0.0345)
Very afraid (of Taliban)	0.204*** (0.0171)	0.218*** (0.0259)
<i>Fear of ALP^c</i>		
Somewhat afraid (of ALP)		-0.135*** (0.0399)
Very afraid (of ALP)		-0.317*** (0.0396)
District Security Rating (very secure)	0.00150 (0.0145)	-0.0611 (0.0328)
Tajik Dummy (Self-identification as Tajik)	0.0414** (0.0129)	0.0306 (0.0288)
Pashtun Dummy (Self-identification as Pashtun)	0.0617** (0.0202)	0.114** (0.0382)
<i>Contribution to district security by ALP^d</i>		
Neither negative, nor positive contribution	-0.0970*** (0.0212)	
Positive Contribution	-0.140*** (0.0183)	
Commander Rule	0.00130 (0.0121)	-0.0717* (0.0363)
Remote self-governance	-0.0191 (0.0157)	-0.0717 (0.0444)
Contested governance	0.00998 (0.0297)	-0.0730 (0.0774)
Taliban governance	-0.0736*** (0.00725)	-0.415** (0.150)
Observations	3539	3539

Note: Analysis with 2012 survey data; Logistic Regression; **Average Marginal Effects**; robust clustered errors at the village level in parentheses; ***, **, * represents significance at the 1, 5 and 10 percent level

^a Interaction variable which combines two dummies: ALP district (1 if district has ALP & otherwise) and ALP village (1 if a village has ALP and 0 otherwise); base category is a combination 0-0 i.e. “non-ALP villages in non-ALP districts”

^b Reference category is “not afraid”

^c Reference category is “not afraid”

^d Reference category is “negative contribution”

^e Reference category is “governance by government”

We note a similar positive change regarding perceived contribution to district security by ALP as compared to arbakees. As compared to villages in “non-ALP districts”, respondents in “ALP villages” (in ALP districts) are 14 pps more likely to see the ALP as contributing positively to district security, while we note no statistically significant result for “non-ALP villages in ALP districts”. Thus, in

2012 ALP fares better on both DVs, fear and contribution to district security, compared to arbakees in 2010/11. Moreover, within ALP districts, villages with ALP fare better than non-ALP villages on both DVs. This difference is very weak for fear (merely 1 pp), but quite strong for perceived district security contribution (14 pps).

Further significant results pertain to ethnicity: Pashtuns, on average, are more likely to be afraid of ALP (we saw similar results for arbakees), but are also more likely to perceive ALP as contributing positively to district security (this was *less* likely for arbakees in 2010/11). Tajiks are also somewhat more likely to be afraid of ALP (we had no significant results for arbakees in 2010/11). This effect might be the result of a conscious policy to also integrate Pashtuns into the ALP. Fear of Taliban is less strongly associated with an increase in the probability of fear of ALP than was the case for arbakees. In contrast, fear of Taliban is strongly associated with an increase in the probability of seeing ALP as positively contributing to district security (this effect was markedly weaker for arbakees). Lastly, we see a link between our two DVs: respondents who are afraid of ALP are also less likely to assess their contribution to district security as positive, while respondents who assess the contribution of ALP to district security as positive are less likely to be afraid of them. This correlation between our two DVs resembles what we observed for arbakees, but it is significantly less pronounced.

6. Conclusions

In this article we set out to investigate whether the formalisation and regulation of informal arbakee militias has led to a better performance by these militias (*Hypothesis 1*), and whether direct exposure to militias (militias in village) leads to more fear, but also a higher perceived security contribution by militias for the district (*Hypothesis 2*). Regarding *Hypothesis 1*, we clearly see a better performance by ALP than arbakees in villages with and without militias: respondents are less likely to be very afraid of ALP than of arbakees and more likely to see them as contributing positively to district security than arbakees (who are seen as contributing negatively to district security). In contrast, our results only partly confirm *Hypothesis 2*: within militia districts, villages with or without militias show only negligible differences regarding their fear of militias. However, while we note *no* security dividend associated with living in a village with arbakees, we noted a marked and statistically highly significant positive impact of ALP on security perceptions in their “home” villages.

It is, however, not only our main IVs that are associated with changes in our DVs, but also some of our control variables. Respondents who perceive their district as secure are much more likely to strongly fear arbakees. It seems that once the pressing need for security provision is lower (a secure district), arbakees are perceived as a dangerous nuisance. We find no comparable result for ALP suggesting a more disciplined, less abusive force from the perspective of the local population.

ALP also appears to be ethnically somewhat less polarising. While Pashtuns tend to fear both arbakee and ALP, they see the ALP as positively contributing to district security, whereas they evaluate arbakees as negatively contributing to district security.

The less polarising nature of ALP is also evident when we consider “contribution to district security” as an IV. If respondents feel that arbakees contribute positively to security, they are much less likely to be afraid of them and vice versa, if they feel that arbakees contribute negatively to district security, they are also more likely to be afraid of them. To some extent, people are either on the right side or wrong side of arbakees. This relationship is there for ALP as well but is weaker as compared to arbakees.

While arbakees strongly polarise, they seem to be doing a poorer job at protecting people against the Taliban. Respondents, who are very afraid of the Taliban, are only 9 pps more likely to perceive arbakees as contributing positively to district security. In contrast, respondents who are afraid of the Taliban are 26 pps more likely to perceive the ALP’s contribution to district security as positive.

Our statistical results show the ALP to be – despite documented abuses (see e.g. Human Rights Watch 2011: 3-4, UNAMA 2014: 9) – from the perspective of the population a significantly more benevolent and more effective militia force than the informal arbakees. The key question then is, whether the noted improvements are the result of formalisation or whether they were caused by other factors such as changes in the security and governance situation between baseline and follow-up. Statistically two variables control for the changed security and governance situation between the two surveys, “district security rating” and “governance zones” leaving formalisation as the likely remaining reason for observed changes.

This interpretation is further supported by our qualitative data. In particular the training and integration of militias into official chains of command emerges as a key factor in this change for the better. In a series of interviews we conducted with district and provincial police and government officials as part of our survey, district chiefs of police in militia districts confirmed good coordination with ALP, but complained about arbakees who allegedly followed unofficial and informal chains of command and over whom they only had little or no control.⁸

The effective integration into an official command structure does not only instil greater discipline through establishing clear chains of command; crucially it also allows for a more strategic deployment of and more concerted military action by militias under the command of the district chief of police.⁹ This more strategic approach also led to a more ethnically balanced recruitment to the ALP as compared to arbakees. The resulting stronger inclusion of Pashtuns is very likely the reason why Pashtuns tend to evaluate ALP performance better than that of arbakees.

Interviewed village representatives also tended to view formalisation as leading to a better behaviour of militias: “In the past, [those who are now] ALP had committed many illegal acts; but now they have been trained and do not commit any crimes. In general, people are afraid of those who act illegally in society”.¹⁰ Lastly, the simple fact that ALP members receive salary

8 Interviews with the Deputy Chief of Police and the acting District Manager of Khanabad on 26 September 2012; interview with Provincial Deputy Chief of Police of Kunduz on 21 February 2013.

9 Discussion with a US officer involved in setting up ALP in Wardak Province on 21 May 2015.

10 Interview with Head of Cluster Shura Sufi Ameer Mohammad Khan on 16 October 2012; This finding is in line with the already quoted UNAMA report (2014: 50).

appears to have contributed to a steep drop in illegal taxation by militias in 2012 in districts where arbakees had previously levied such taxes (e.g. in Dashti Archi, Imam Sahib and Aliabad). In conclusion, with regard to the arbakee-ALP debate in Afghanistan, our results support a relative minority of voices who see the ALP as an improvement on arbakees (see e.g. UNAMA 2014: 9-10, 50).

But what do these results tell us about the general social scientific debate on informal and formal militias? So far research has shown (see Mitchell et al. 2014) that in a cross-country comparison informal militias show a strong association with human rights abuses whereas no such relationship exists in the case of official militias. Even though an important hint, these results do not conclusively respond to our question regarding the impact of regulation. First, this research only considers human rights abuses, while the two other negative outcomes frequently associated with militias – lacking effectiveness and undermining state legitimacy – are not addressed. Moreover, Mitchell et al. do not provide us with an unequivocal answer whether regulating and formalising pre-existing informal militias can indeed improve their performance.

Our empirical analysis coupled with extensive qualitative research support the hypothesis that formalisation can improve the performance of unruly, previously unregulated informal militias along a number of parameters often seen as problematic with regard to militias. Our analysis also shows that formalisation does not just affect one area of militia performance, e.g. abuses against the population. Instead, we observe consistent positive change over a number of areas relevant for assessing the performance of militias. Formalised militias thus evoke less fear, are perceived as contributing more positively to security, are less polarising and are less threatening for non-co-ethnics.



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