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Civilian Harm, Wartime Informing, and Counterinsurgent Operations

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ABSTRACT

A rich body of theory in political economy suggests that civilian support is central to the success of counterinsurgent campaigns. Civilian collaboration can significantly improve military operations, enhance soldier efficiency, and avoid disruption of costly security infrastructure. Yet there have been few direct tests of the claim that harm to civilians, and who harms them, influences when and with whom noncombatants collaborate. We provide such a test, drawing on newly declassified military records and large-scale survey data. We demonstrate that civilians responded to harm suffered in insurgent-initiated attacks by providing intelligence to

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security forces in Afghanistan. Moreover, we show that these tips improved the success of subsequent counterinsurgent operations. These results clarify the conditions under which civilian casualties can shape the course of internal wars, with implications for future research on political violence.

Keywords: Violence; civilian casualties; collaboration; Afghanistan; counterinsurgency

Introduction

A core question for the civil war literature is how civilians react to the harms inflicted by combatants.[1] We study this question in the context of counterinsurgency, where a well-developed body of theory suggests that how armed actors treat civilians in wartime conditions civilians' sharing of information with the government (see, e.g., Berman *et al.*, 2011). Furthermore, the ebb and flow of information provision should shape the effectiveness of counterinsurgency operations since both sides leverage information in their combat activities (e.g., to find targets) (Berman *et al.*, 2018; Lyall and Wilson III, 2009).

Empirical studies provide evidence consistent with tenets of information-centric counterinsurgency theory, but reviews of this literature note that direct evidence of information theories of civil war is limited (Berman and Matanock, 2015; Valentino, 2014). Some work provides indirect evidence: insurgent-initiated violence in the Iraq War at the district level is lower in the week following insurgent attacks that injure or kill noncombatants in that district, and higher in weeks after Iraqi or American forces did so (Condra and Shapiro, 2012). This is consistent with civilians responding to harm from insurgents by withdrawing their support and sharing intelligence with security forces, but it is not direct evidence of the informational mechanism. Other studies from Iraq show evidence of one step in the theoretical chain — for example, that harm to civilians influences hotline tips (Shaver and Shapiro, 2021) — but do not evaluate downstream impact on counterinsurgent activity.[2] And many qualitative studies of counterinsurgency campaigns suggest that civilians conditioned information sharing on the way they were treated, and that this information affected counterinsurgency operations (Ahern, 2006;

[1]Scholars have argued that reaction shapes a range of important outcomes (Balcells and Stanton, 2021): collective action against insurgents (Kaplan, 2016; Schubiger, 2021), collaboration with government or insurgents (Kalyvas, 2006), patterns of wartime social order (Arjona, 2016), and political participation (Condra *et al.*, 2018).

[2]Similarly, Schutte (2017) studies how harm influences one battlefield outcome (improvised explosive device (IED) turn ins), but lacks an evaluation of civilian information sharing and relies on leaked data covering a shorter time period than we do.

Myoe, 2009; Tantalakis, 2019). But we might worry that these observations are driven by factors that affect both the level of information sharing, as well as counterinsurgency operational outcomes.

This paper builds on prior work by providing a quantitative assessment of how harm to civilians affects information sharing, and how shared information affects counterinsurgency effectiveness. We use declassified, incident-level data on insurgent attacks that caused civilian casualties,[3] civilian intelligence sharing with the government, and counterinsurgency operations between 2006 and 2014 in Afghanistan. To our knowledge, this is the first paper to use such granular data on civilian information sharing. This is due in no small part to the lack of available data on actual information sharing in such conflicts. As Lyall *et al.* (2015, p. 833) observe: "Information about insurgent groups is a central resource in civil wars: counterinsurgents seek it, insurgents safeguard it, and civilians often trade it. Despite its essential role in civil war dynamics, the act of informing is still poorly understood, due mostly to the classified nature of informant 'tips."' In our analysis, we attempt to isolate and leverage random variation in civilian harm by controlling for a wide range of factors in the conflict environment.

We find, first, that harm to civilians during insurgent-initiated events led to increased information flow to the government and its allies. The effect on informing of a one standard deviation increase in the number of insurgent-initiated civilian casualty incidents is small in standardized terms (a 0.03 standard deviation treatment effect),[4] but statistically robust and represents a fourfold increase from the mean number of tips, amounting to approximately one more tip every 2 weeks in an average sized district. Second, we find that increased flow directly affected counterinsurgency effectiveness, as measured through meaningful operational outcomes such as government missions to clear roadside bombs, neutralize weapons factories, conduct safe house raids, and detain suspected insurgents. Once again, the impacts were modest in standardized terms — ranging from a 0.02 standard deviation treatment effect of IED tips on roadside bombs found and cleared to a 0.06 standard deviation treatment effect of all tips on insurgents detained[5] — but large in terms of changes from the mean rate of such outcomes. We estimate one additional roadside bomb found and cleared for every 12 IED-related tips in an average-sized district. These effects are consistent with information being an important resource for counterinsurgents in this context.

Our central contribution is to provide evidence for the full causal chain in informational theory of counterinsurgency. These theories have shaped the academic study and military doctrine of counterinsurgency for the last 70 years,

[3]While limited data were collected by international forces on harm caused by foreign or government forces, we were unable to get them released for this study.

[4]See Table 2, column 1.

[5]See Table 4.

from Algeria (Galula, 1964) to Afghanistan (Department of the Army, 2007). Fundamentally, these theories posit that a government's military success in an irregular conflict crucially depends on information from the population, a claim for which we provide strong and reliable evidence. The scope conditions of the theory and the historical record provide reason to believe that the dynamics we document here should be present in other irregular asymmetric conflicts, which some studies classify as accounting for more than half of civil wars since 1945 (Balcells and Kalyvas, 2014; Kalyvas and Balcells, 2010). Understanding these lessons is crucial for informing future military strategies and operations, particularly in regions where insurgent threats persist.

Information Theory and Counterinsurgency

Information theory in counterinsurgency has been formalized in various ways. Berman *et al.* (2011) model a three-way interaction between citizens with political preferences over who controls the territory, insurgents seeking to impose costs on the government, and a government balancing its efforts between militarized counterinsurgency and public goods provision. Khanna and Zimmerman (2017) study a similar interaction but shift the order of play and have rebels fighting over territory vs. simply seeking to cause harm. Vanden Eynde (2018) focuses on the two-way interaction between rebels and civilians, examining how shocks to the normal economy shape the capacity of rebels to attack government forces and their incentives to deter information sharing through violence against civilians.

All these variants implicitly or explicitly make four claims:

- information sharing by civilians shapes battlefield outcomes;
- information sharing helps the receiving party (government or insurgent);
- civilians share operationally relevant information in equilibrium; and
- some civilians respond to harm by decreasing information sharing with the party that caused it and increasing information sharing with its opponent.

Historically, much of the academic and practitioner focus of information theory has been on how government harm to civilians is counterproductive to fighting insurgents (see, e.g., Kocher *et al.*, 2011). From at least the early 1970s, military officers writing on counterinsurgency have emphasized the centrality of information (Galula, 1964, 2006; Kilcullen, 2010; Kitson, 1971; Nagl, 2009). British General Sir Frank Kitson famously argued of the campaign in Malaya that "[i]f it is accepted that the problem of defeating [an insurgent] consists largely of finding him, it is easy to recognize the paramount importance of good information" (Kitson, 1971, p. 58). Control of the population and maintaining its support has also been linked explicitly to how the government treats civilians. Soon after assuming command of ISAF in Afghanistan in 2009, General Stanley McChrystal argued, "the greatest risk we can accept is to lose the support of the people here" and "this civilian casualty issue is much more important than I even realized. It is literally how we lose the war or in many ways how we win it."[6]

Qualitative evidence suggests that *insurgent*-caused harm to civilians could affect civilian attitudes and information sharing behavior for a variety of reasons. In general, civilians respond to various incentives and coercive pressures in wartime (Downes, 2006; Valentino *et al.*, 2004), including harm by insurgents (Berman *et al.*, 2018, p. 75–78). For example, scholars describe many motivations for civilian informing during the Irish 'Troubles': "They might pass on information reluctantly or willingly, and do so out of spite. . ., desperation, ideology, or for self-gain or self-preservation" (Dudai and Hearty, 2022, p. 161); and ". . .as the 'Troubles' continued, some informants in both the republican and loyalist organizations provided information, not for money or revenge, but simply because they began to realize that what the organizations were doing was wrong" (Kirk-Smith and Dingley, 2009). During the anticolonial war in Mozambique, Frelimo's strategy involved ". . .'avoidance of violence against people by the liberation forces'. . ." (Thaler, 2012, p. 549). Because insurgents are militarily weaker, by definition, they depend on "the tacit or explicit agreement of the population or, at worst, on its submissiveness" (Galula, 1964, p. 4). Indeed, we have suggestive evidence from many different civil wars that rebels *do* take great pains to avoid inadvertent harm to civilians to retain popular support and avoid citizen informing (Condra *et al.*, 2018, p. 3204).

The literature suggests several potential mechanisms by which insurgent-caused harm could increase informing. First, there is a simple cost-benefit analysis: some civilians do not like the insurgency, but informing is potentially costly given the risk of insurgent retaliation (Kalyvas, 2006). Cases of insurgent harm influence potential informants' cost calculations — for example, by creating a desire for revenge so the utility derived from informing offsets the expected costs. Second, insurgent-caused harm to civilians could shift civilian preferences and thus their informing behavior (e.g., by reducing political support for insurgents, to cite the logic above).[7] Third, in the context of Berman *et al.* (2011), insurgents produce violence up to the point at which any more harm to civilians results in some deciding to provide information to

[6]Gen. Stanley McChrystal, *60 Minutes* interview, 27 September 2009.
[7]See Shaver and Shapiro (2021) for discussion of multiple mechanisms.

the government (which the authors term 'the noncooperation constraint'), and so if insurgents cause more harm than would otherwise be predicted by the current level of conflict we should expect an increase in tips to the government. Note that across all of these mechanisms we should expect that incidents in which it is easier for civilians to assign blame for harm should lead to a greater reaction in terms of information sharing.

But does civilian-provided information actually help the receiving party? Accounts from various civil wars, including Afghanistan, clearly suggest that it does. A US Special Forces team operating out of FOB Asadabad in Kunar Province received a tip in May 2003 that a Taliban-affiliated bomb maker was hiding in a town nearby. Acting on that intelligence, the detachment raided the compound at night and killed the bomb maker (Morgan, 2021, p. 29). In 2016 the drone strike which killed Farouq al-Qatari, a senior al-Qaida operative, was enabled by intelligence collection (Morgan, 2021, p. 474). In Colombia, the FARC suffered because of information passed to the government side: "In the Middle Magdalena Valley, deserters like Berta were the corner-stone of the paramilitary strategy. Dozens of them helped the right-wing groups identify and, in some cases, kill rebel collaborators" (Dudley, 2006, p. 57). We find evidence of similar dynamics in other cases, such as El Salvador (Todd, 2010), Sri Lanka (Moore, 1993), and Chad (Azama, 2017).

Theory and anecdotal evidence from different conflicts thus *suggests* that insurgent-perpetrated harm on civilians plays a critical role in civil war. To more rigorously assess how civilian harm affects information flow to armed actors and how information affects counterinsurgent effectiveness, we turn to a micro-level and systematic analysis of these dynamics in Afghanistan.

Empirical Approach

This section reviews the military records used to track civilian harm and wartime informing and introduces our identification strategy.

Data

The declassified military records on insurgent activity, harm to civilians, and intelligence reports were compiled by both International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and Afghan forces (ANDSF). These records of significant activities (SIGACTS) cover 2003 through 2014, documenting more than 270,000 separate events, including: insurgent attacks on government forces, harm to civilians, and civilians' provision of local intelligence to security forces (Shaver and Wright, 2017). The data were collected systematically by security forces, not derived from media sources, which avoids concerns about reporting biases

Table 1: Summary statistics for violence data.

Variable	Mean	Std. dev.	Min.	Max.
All tips	0.00804	0.0284	0	2.667
Tips about threats to COIN forces	0.00529	0.0201	0	1.212
Tips about threats to civilians	0.000374	0.00289	0	0.500
Tips about insurgent activity	0.00304	0.0138	0	1.831
IED tips	0.00218	0.00969	0	0.539
Roadside bombs found/cleared	0.00371	0.0179	0	1
Weapon caches found/cleared	0.00121	0.00857	0	0.648
Insurgents captured and detained	0.00123	0.00622	0	0.532
Tactical safe house raids	0.000108	0.00183	0	0.288
Insurgent CIVCAS	0.000936	0.00505	0	0.500
Combat activity	0.0158	0.0630	0	3.014

Notes: Unit of observation is the district–week. Summary statistics are calculated for the sample studied in the main estimating equations. All variables are reported in per 1,000 population terms.

in data collected from newspapers and other media, both in Afghanistan and in other conflicts (Shaver *et al.*, 2022; Weidmann, 2016).[8] These data are the most complete account of security operations in Afghanistan currently in the public domain (see Supporting Information (SI)). Descriptive statistics for the data are reported in Table 1. There was approximately one tip every 2 weeks in an average-sized district (approximately 63,700 people).

The data include details on 97,006 intelligence collection events. These represent a combination of calls to anonymous hotlines, one-off tips from direct civilian-to-security force interactions and reporting by cultivated sources, but do not include intelligence derived from monitoring insurgent communications.[9] The data also contain records on 120,247 direct fire, 28,974 indirect fire, and 38,205 IED explosion events. To measure civilian harm by insurgents, we isolate all insurgent-initiated attacks that caused either a civilian injury or death that was observed by or occurred in the presence of government forces. We do not observe the number of civilian casualties occurring in these attacks.

[8]Weidmann (2016, p. 210–211) describes the military records used in our study as the "universe" of insurgent-initiated combat activity.

[9]Author interview with senior official responsible for data collection and management, May 24, 2017. Much of the tips collection in Afghanistan occurred through local engagement and contacts, rather than hotlines, as in the Iraq War (Shaver and Shapiro, 2021). This should assuage any concern that the Taliban were actively seeking to overwhelm call hotlines, as such channels were either less prevalent to begin with or were advertized much less widely, such that it would have made disinformation operations by the Taliban much harder to carry out at scale.

Following previous literature, we treat injuries and deaths as casualty events. Importantly, since these casualties occur in the context of violence between insurgents and government forces, they are collateral damage; they should not be considered incidents of discriminate violence targeted at civilians, which do not enter the data.

We analyze the effects of this collateral damage on informing because harm to civilians associated with insurgent action is central to the relevant theory. We supplement our main analysis with additional evidence from survey data, which demonstrates that estimating the model without data on coalition-initiated civilian casualties is highly unlikely to lead to erroneous conclusions about the reaction to casualties from insurgent-initiated events.

Estimation Strategy

How Does Insurgent Harm of Civilians Affect Information Sharing?

We estimate the effect of civilian harm in insurgent-initiated events on information sharing with security forces at the district level because this is the level at which ISAF, ANDSF, and Taliban tactical forces were organized during most of the campaign. We sum all collected intelligence reports, all insurgent attacks with civilian casualties, and all insurgent operations — including direct line-of-sight attacks, indirect mortar and rocket engagements, and IED detonations — by district-week and standardize per 1,000 district inhabitants.

Our base model is equation (1):

$$Y_{dt}^{a} = \beta_1 CIVCAS_{dt-1} + \sum_{j=1}^{4}[\zeta_j(DF_{dt-j}) + \eta_j(IDF_{dt-j}) + \theta_j(IED_{dt-j})] + \mu_d + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{dt} \tag{1}$$

where Y_{dt}^{a} is the number of intelligence reports shared with counterinsurgents in district d in week t where the superscript a indicates the type of tip ((1) all tips, (2) threats to COIN forces, (3) threats to civilians, (4) tips about insurgent activity)[10]; $CIVCAS_{dt}$ is the lagged sum of insurgent attacks resulting in civilian harm in a given district; $DF/IDF/IED_{dt-j}$ is the lagged sum of different insurgent attack types in previous week j (direct fire, indirect fire, and IED explosions); μ_d is a district fixed effect; λ_t denotes a week fixed effect; and ϵ_{dt} is the error term. In all models we cluster standard errors at the district level to allow for serial correlation within district in assessing statistical significance, and regressions are weighted by district population in thousands.[11]

[10] See data description in SI for more details on tip types.
[11] We report unweighted regressions for this estimating equation in Table SI-12.

Our specification is designed to account for factors that could cause an increase in both insurgent activity in a particular area in a particular time period, as well as the frequency of informing to the government. We begin with the assumption that, conditional on appropriate controls for trends in the conflict, collateral damage to civilians caused by insurgent attacks on military forces is "as if" randomly assigned. This approach is the benchmark specification in previous work (Condra and Shapiro, 2012; Shaver and Shapiro, 2021). In this setting, conditioning out district and week fixed effects, as well as short-run trends in overall violence, leaves us with residual variation in civilian abuse that is arguably random.[12]

Several other threats to inference are mitigated in the analysis. Importantly, there could be a cross-sectional correlation between insurgent-initiated attacks and informing induced by insurgents preferentially targeting pro-government areas.[13] Including district fixed effects accounts for such enduring political differences.[14]

Next, one might worry that a move from either side's forces into an area for the fighting season would create both more opportunities for civilian harm and more activity to inform on. But it is unlikely that such medium-term trends would drive results in an estimation strategy like ours, which relies on week-to-week variation in combat events combined with the randomness inherent in harm to civilians during such events. The week is a temporal unit smaller than that at which either side could reposition significant forces.[15] Our main specifications also control for multiple lags of combat incidents, which would account for very short-term flows of forces by either side.

Finally, one might be concerned that the regression results from Equation (1) could be biased because the models omit data on government-caused civilian casualties. Lack of such data could lead to biased estimates under two scenarios. First, we may worry that insurgent and government harm occur in offsetting cycles such that harm caused by insurgents is correlated with future (but not present) government harm. This would imply that insurgent and government harm are negatively correlated. If government

[12]Including, for example, the times insurgents violate the non-cooperation constraint in Berman *et al.* (2011).

[13]Hirose *et al.* (2017) provide evidence for such a correlation by showing that favorable sentiment towards international forces in January–February 2011 was positively correlated with insurgent-initiated attacks in the remainder of the 2011 fighting season in a sample of 204 villages in the 13 Pashtun-majority provinces of Afghanistan.

[14]To enable assessment of the results' stability to time-varying trends in political conditions and force levels, the SI shows all main results with province $\times$ year, province $\times$ quarter, and district $\times$ year fixed effects.

[15]Moving even a company sized unit (about 140 soldiers) for anything other than 48–72 h operation required substantial construction and logistics support and was not done for such short periods, let alone larger battalion sized elements (500–1,000 people) which were the size unit typically moved in and out of districts.

harm is also negatively correlated with tipping (as the informational theory hypothesizes), then our estimates of the impact of insurgent harm would be biased upward (larger magnitude), since government harm remains an omitted variable. Second, civilians might react to relative harm — which actors hurt them more — as opposed to absolute harm. This would lead to a similar type of bias in our estimates.

To address this concern, we augment our main results with survey data, which provide suggestive evidence that neither of these mechanisms drives the results. Specifically, we study the relationship between self-reported willingness to inform (the survey analogue of tipping) and perceived level of care that government or insurgent forces exercise to avoid harming civilians (the survey analogue of measured harm) in seven waves of the Afghanistan Nationwide Quarterly Assessment Research (ANQAR) survey from 2013 through 2014 (n = 86,524 respondents), which coincides with temporal coverage of the SIGACTs data. The survey included questions about insurgent *and* government attempts to avoid civilian harm as well as the willingness of respondents to report roadside bombs.[16]

Since we observe perceived harm by both actors, we can evaluate (a) whether we replicate the results from the observational data and (b) whether our estimates of the relationship are sensitive to omitting the survey-based measures of government harm. We do so with Equation (2):

$$\begin{aligned} \mathrm{Y_{idw}} &= \beta_1 \mathrm{InsufficientGovEffort_{idw}} + \beta_2 \mathrm{InsufficientInsEffort_{idw}} \\ &\quad + \gamma \mathrm{X_i} + \mu_\mathrm{d} + \eta_\mathrm{w} + \epsilon_\mathrm{idw} \end{aligned} \tag{2}$$

where Y_{idw} is whether or not an individual i is 'very likely' to report IED placement to security forces in district d and survey wave w; $\text{InsufficientGovEffort}_{idw}$ or $\text{InsufficientInsEffort}_{idw}$ is perception that the government or insurgents do not do enough to prevent civilian casualties; μ_d is a district fixed effect; η_w is a survey wave fixed effect; X_{idw} is a vector of individual-level demographic controls that vary across specifications; and ϵ_{idw} is the error term. In all models, we cluster standard errors at the district level, and regressions use district-specific survey weights.[17]

How Do Civilian Tips Affect Battlefield Outcomes?

Informational theory hypothesizes that civilian cooperation positively influences counterinsurgents' battlefield success. To quantitatively investigate whether variation in information flow is strategically valuable, we estimate the short-term conditional correlation between tipping and various counterinsurgent operations, controlling for trends in combat violence and insurgent harm

[16] See data description in SI for more details.

[17] We also report unweighted regressions for this estimating equation in Table SI-5.

using Equation (3):

$$Y_{dt}^{b} = \beta_1 Tips_{dt-1} + \sum_{j=1}^{4} [\zeta_j (DF_{dt-j}) + \eta_j (IDF_{dt-j}) + \theta_j (IED_{dt-j}) + \rho_j (CIVCAS_{dt-j})] + \mu_d + \lambda_t + \epsilon_{dt} \quad (3)$$

where b denotes the type of counterinsurgent outcome in Y_{dt}^{b}, which can be the number of (1) roadside bombs found and cleared, (2) weapons caches found, (3) safe house raids, or (4) insurgents captured and detained in district d in week t. $Tips_{dt}$ is the sum of all tips or the sum of tips specifically related to IED deployment in a given district-week. As in Equation (1), we control for previous levels of insurgent violence. Accounting for violence — including IED deployment — means that any change in the outcome variable associated with tips is not confounded by shifting intensity of combat activity. For example, one might be concerned that tips about IED deployment and neutralized IEDs may be mechanically correlated with the number of IEDs deployed. We can rule this out since our model partials out the variation in IEDs cleared that is correlated with shifts in IED deployment.[18] We also control for previous levels of insurgent-caused civilian casualty events. All models are weighted by district population and include district and time fixed effects.[19] We cluster standard errors at the district level.

Results and Discussion

Main Results

Insurgent Harm Increases Civilian Tips to Security Forces

We find that civilian harm by insurgents is associated with a significant increase in information sharing with state security forces. These results are robust across different kinds of tips and are substantively meaningful. Table 2 shows the estimated impact of civilian harm on wartime informing using Equation (1). The dependent variable in Column 1 is tips aggregated across all types. Columns 2–4 decompose tips by type: threats to counterinsurgents; threats to civilians; and insurgent activities.

Across specifications, there is a statistically significant association between (lagged) insurgent attacks that result in civilian casualties and the number of

[18] One alternative to this specification would be to study the clear-rate: the percentage of IEDs deployed that are neutralized before they detonate. The central concern we have with this approach is econometric: the clear-rate is undefined for district-weeks which experience no IED activity. This would create an unbalanced panel, breaking the panel difference-in-differences (unit and time fixed effects) approach we take here.

[19] We also report unweighted regressions for this estimating equation in Table SI-13.

Table 2: Effects of insurgent-initiated civilian casualties on civilians' wartime informing to security forces.

	(1) All tips	(2) Threats to COIN forces	(3) Threats to civilians	(4) Tips about insurgent activity
CIVCAS, pc (1 Week Lag)	0.183***	0.123***	0.00920***	0.0372**
	(0.0455)	(0.0285)	(0.00343)	(0.0172)
Summary Statistics				
Outcome Mean	0.00804	0.00529	0.000374	0.00304
Outcome SD	0.0284	0.0201	0.00289	0.0138
Parameters				
District FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Violence trends	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Model statistics				
Number of observations	171,936	171,936	171,936	171,936
Number of clusters	398	398	398	398

Notes: Outcome of interest is tips on specific threats, as noted in column headings. All models are weighted by district population and include district and week fixed effects. Standard errors clustered at the district level and are presented in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$.

tips that counterinsurgents receive from civilians. A one standard deviation increase in attacks resulting in civilian casualties (0.322 more civilian casualty events per week in an average sized district) is associated with a 12% increase in informant reports over the weekly mean level (Column 1). Importantly, most district-weeks in the estimation sample do not see civilian casualty events, but those that do experience a 5 s.d. treatment on average. The overall effect is largest for tips related to threats against counterinsurgents (2), but there are also statistically significant increases in tips on threats to civilians (3) and insurgent activities (4).[20]

We provide further evidence supporting the logic of the theory by testing the effects of tactic-specific collateral damage on information sharing.[21] One theoretical mechanism posited to connect civilian harm and information sharing is grievance. This rests on the ability to attribute blame for the harm inflicted. All else equal, the easier it is for civilians to attribute blame to insurgents (government), the more (less) likely they should be to share valuable information with counterinsurgents. To test this logic, we separately estimate the

[20] Results in Table 2 are insensitive to choice of lag: lags of 6 or 8 weeks do not alter results substantively or statistically.

[21] We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this exercise.

responsiveness of information sharing to (lagged) civilian casualties resulting only from IED-related attacks (Table SI-2), indirect fire attacks (Table SI-3), and direct fire attacks (Table SI-4), using the same model specifications from Table 2. We reason that there is the most uncertainty in how to attribute blame for casualties in the case of indirect fire attacks, since these are more likely than direct fire attacks to occur without civilians being able to see who fired the projectile at distance. Actions taken by assailants involved in direct fire attacks, by contrast, are much more observable by those in proximity and so there should be greater certainty about attribution of blame. IEDs should similarly be more easily linked to insurgents as those responsible. We see some evidence consistent with this logic: the main result in Table 2 is driven by civilian casualties from indirect fire attacks and IEDs. In fact, there is no discernible association in the data between lagged civilian casualties from indirect fire attacks and information sharing, which is consistent with harm from this type of attack being the most difficult for civilians to assign responsibility.

We turn next to analysis of the survey data. To provide evidence on the potential bias that missing information on government-caused civilian harm might introduce in the behavioral data, we examine how including or excluding each measure affects the estimated effect of the other measure in the survey data. Table 3 provides these results from estimating Equation (2).[22] We compare the estimated coefficients on perceived Insufficient Government Effort when we include the insurgent effort variable (column 3) and exclude the insurgent effort variable (column 4). They are statistically indistinguishable from one another. Similarly, the estimated coefficients on Insufficient Insurgent Effort are indistinguishable from one another in models where the perceived Government Insufficient Effort variable is included (column 3) and excluded (column 5). In summary, the estimated coefficients are statistically indistinguishable when we compare models with and without the data missing from our main specification (Coalition harm).

Civilian Tips Improve Battlefield Outcomes

We next report how information sharing affects operational outcomes. In Table 4 we show the effects on IEDs found and cleared (column 1), weapons caches found and cleared (2), insurgents captured (3), and tactical safe house raids (4). Insurgent-inflicted civilian casualties lead to a subsequent increase in each of these important outcomes. The effects are substantively meaningful. A one standard deviation increase in IED-related tips (0.617 more IED-related tips per week in an average-sized district), for example, is associated with a 10.7% increase in roadside bombs found and cleared over the weekly mean

[22] Table SI-5 provides results from unweighted regressions.

Table 3: Civilians' willingness to tip as function of perceived effort by armed actors to minimize harm to civilians.

	(1) Baseline	(2) Baseline w. political controls	(3) Baseline w. political and security controls	(4) Baseline w. political and security controls	(5) Baseline w. political and security controls
Insufficient govt. effort	−0.101***	−0.0943***	−0.0880***	−0.100***	
	(0.00897)	(0.00851)	(0.00800)	(0.00848)	
Insufficient Ins. effort	0.118***	0.114***	0.110***		0.114***
	(0.00734)	(0.00711)	(0.00681)		(0.00694)
Summary Statistics					
Outcome mean	0.448	0.448	0.448	0.448	0.448
Outcome SD	0.497	0.497	0.497	0.497	0.497
Parameters					
District FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Demographic controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Interacted model	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Govt. going wrong direction	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Police patrols weekly	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Village insecure	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Taliban gaining strength	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Model Statistics					
N	86,524	86,524	86,524	86,524	86,524
Clusters	346	346	346	346	346

Notes: Outcome of interest is respondent reporting being 'very likely' to report tip on IED if known (from ANQAR survey waves 20-26). 'Insufficient Gov./Ins. Effort' = 1 if respondent thinks government/insurgents do not do enough to prevent the killing and injuring of civilians; non-response to both questions are parameterized separately (coefficients omitted). All models include survey sample weights. All models include fixed effects for district, SES, ethnicity, gender, and ANQAR survey wave. Standard errors are clustered at the district level and are presented in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$.

level. Only 18% of district-weeks in the estimation sample see tips, but those which do experience a 3.4 s.d. change in tips on average. This effect size amounts to approximately 1 additional IED found per week for every 12 IED tips in an average-sized district.[23]

Supplemental Results

In SI, we provide a series of robustness checks for the main results to increase confidence in the causal claims. First, we evaluate whether there is

[23]Results in Table 4 are insensitive to choice of lag: lags of 6 or 8 weeks do not alter results substantively or statistically.

Table 4: Effects of wartime informing on counterinsurgent operational outcomes.

	(1) Roadside bombs found/ cleared	(2) Weapon caches found/ cleared	(3) Insurgents captured and detained	(4) Tactical safe house raids
IED Tips, pc (1 Week Lag)	0.0410***	0.0234***		
	(0.0101)	(0.00773)		
All Tips, pc (1 Week Lag)			0.0130***	0.00257***
			(0.00290)	(0.000540)
Summary Statistics				
Outcome mean	0.00371	0.00121	0.00123	0.000108
Outcome SD	0.0179	0.00857	0.00622	0.00183
Parameters				
District FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Time FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Violence trends	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Civ Cas trends	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Model Statistics				
Number of observations	171,936	171,936	171,936	171,936
Number of clusters	398	398	398	398

Notes: Outcome of interest is specific counterinsurgent outcomes, as noted in column headings. All models are weighted by district population and include district and week fixed effects. Standard errors clustered at the district level and are presented in parentheses. $^{***}p < 0.01$, $^{**}p < 0.05$, $^{*}p < 0.1$.

a substantial difference in estimated magnitudes across the full sample relative to the period characterized by the most intense annual fighting season (Tables SI-6, SI-7, SI-8, and SI-9). Results are largely unaffected. Second, to account for spurious results due to trends that could affect both insurgent activity and tips (such as the deployment of additional government or ISAF forces), we estimate the models with four lags of the dependent variable as added regressors (Tables SI-10 and SI-11). Third, we estimate unweighted regressions (Tables SI-12 and SI-13). Fourth, we provide further evidence that the informational mechanism drives the effects of tips on counterinsurgent outcomes. While the estimated coefficients on all (lagged) tips and (lagged) tips specifically on deployed IEDs are statistically significantly related to IEDs and weapons caches found as outcomes, the size of the effect of specific tips is substantially larger (Table SI-14).

Finally, a concern might be that what drives variation in information sharing is not variation in insurgent-inflicted harm to civilians, as we argue, but rather simply variation in insurgent presence in an area. There could be a mechanical relationship in which both information sharing and insurgent-initiated incidents increase with the growing presence of Taliban members in an area. Our main specifications include multiple lags of combat activity and Taliban activity, which should go some way to dispelling this concern. But we also show that the main results (linking harm and tips, and then information sharing to counterinsurgent outcomes) are robust to the inclusion of an additional set of fixed effects in our models to control for changes in presence of armed actors over longer periods. Specifically, we add to the district and week-of-year fixed effects already in the main specifications a series of interactive fixed effects: province $\times$ year, province $\times$ quarter-year, and district $\times$ year.[24] The direction of the results is unaffected and the magnitudes change little, though some coefficients are estimated less precisely in models that include district $\times$ year fixed effects.

Discussion

Our analysis yields two core results: (1) insurgent-initiated civilian casualty events increase the number of tips that civilians provide to government forces; and (2) this increase in information sharing leads to an increase in successful counterinsurgent operations by government forces. The magnitude of these effects is not large in standardized terms, but is consequential in terms of change relative to the weekly mean of our outcomes of interest. Most district-weeks do not see combat, but those in which combat occurs experience substantial changes in civilian casualties and tips, both of which lead to substantively consequential shifts in tips and counterinsurgent actions, respectively. We now turn to a discussion of broader implications and limitations of those results to crystallize what we learn from this analysis.

Information-centric theory of counterinsurgency predicts that harm inflicted on civilians by *both* government and insurgents should affect civilians' sharing of sensitive and tactically useful information to the government. Given data limitations, we could only analyze the effect of insurgent-initiated harm on informing and counterinsurgency.[25] While this empirical support of the theory is an important step forward in building knowledge about counterinsurgency dynamics, a complete test of the theory would also investigate whether civilian

[24] For models with tips as the outcome variable, results of these regressions are shown in Tables SI-15, SI-16, and SI-17. For counterinsurgent operations as the outcome variable, see Tables SI-18, SI-19, and SI-20.

[25] Despite authors' repeated efforts over several years, we have been unsuccessful in gaining access to systematically collected and precisely geo-located data on government-initiated civilian casualties in this war, which prevents such a test. ISAF collected such data through its Civilian Casualty Tracking Cell (later the Civilian Casualty Mitigation Team) beginning around September 2007 (Condra *et al.*, 2010), but even publicly released versions of the data (e.g., Bohannon, 2011) include only some years and are aggregated to the Regional Command-month level.

information sharing is decreasing in government-initiated harm to civilians. Our sample of civilian casualty events derives from the set of insurgent attacks that government forces recorded. Based on our knowledge of reporting practices, this represents the near universe of cases of such insurgent-initiated attacks on government forces, but it is still a subset of the full set. This issue is analogous to noncompliance, since we do not observe some 'treated' district–weeks, which should bias our estimates to zero. This means that the results likely represent a lower bound on the magnitude of the effects.

It is also worth considering what our approach estimates. If government or insurgent forces shift their outreach to populations on a week-to-week basis based on whether they expect an increase or decrease in tips, that would bias our estimates. For example, one possibility is that government forces would increase their outreach activities when they expect to be attacked, which would mean the estimates are an upwardly biased estimate of the pure effect of civilian harm. While we have not heard of such adjustments on the government side in years of work on this conflict, if that were the case, then the estimates here would still represent an interesting quantity: it would be the impact of harm plus strategic reactions to anticipated harm by government forces and their foreign allies.

More broadly, what we think are the government's and insurgents' responses to civilian harm should shape our interpretation of these results. Either armed actor's responses to civilian harm incidents could be large-scale (e.g., government-initiated infrastructure programs intended to increase civilian engagement or insurgents moving forces in or out of areas where the harm occurred) or much smaller in nature (e.g., reduction in insurgent operations). Given the time scale used in our estimation and real-world logistical constraints, neither broad-based nor large-scale changes to activities could occur in a manner that would meaningfully influence our estimate of interest. It is possible, however, that there were microscale adjustments by armed actors, including a strategic response by insurgents to alter their operational tempo. But we believe that such responses are likely to bias our estimates downward, as a reduction in insurgent operations reduces the pool of available information that can be shared.[26] Nevertheless, this means that we are not able to observe tipping and counterinsurgency outcomes *net* of all (unmeasured) strategic response by actors in this context, which could bias our estimates upward.[27] As such, the analysis does not return the unadulterated effect of civilian harm

[26]It is possible that insurgents operate more aggressively after a civilian casualty event, in an effort to lock down the flow of information. However, our reading of the Taliban's code of conduct, which explicitly prohibits indiscriminate aggressiveness towards civilians (see examples in Condra *et al.* 2018, p. 3206), as well as prior work documenting Taliban efforts to shift blame for all types of civilian harm to coalition forces, suggest they were unlikely to consistently use a coercive strategy after harming civilians.

[27]For example, government forces could increase their outreach activities whenever they expect more tips, which they could do prior to actual insurgent attacks.

on outcomes. But in bundling civilian harm with strategic reactions, we argue that it nonetheless provides estimates that are probably most relevant for testing informational theory and for assessing practical implications for policy.

In summary, despite some caveats, these results stand as clear evidence that harm inflicted on civilians in civil war has meaningful consequences. This bears directly on ongoing debates and decision-making in the US government on appropriate rules of engagement in military operations (Kelly *et al.*, 2025). The argument that rules of engagement designed to protect civilians in combat and minimize harm to them is detrimental to military success is not new.[28] But the analysis of evidence from this conflict joins that of others (Shaver and Shapiro, 2021) in demonstrating that besides the ethical and legal dimensions of these debates around military rules of engagement (Crawford, 2013), there are tactical implications, as well. Our evidence reinforces the argument others have made that protecting civilians is both morally incumbent and can be operationally beneficial (Felter and Shapiro, 2017).

Conclusion

In this research note, we present an empirical test of key elements of the information-sharing theories of civil war that have shaped the academic study and military doctrine of counterinsurgency for the last half century. These theories posit that governments' military success at the tactical level depends on civilians sharing critical information about insurgent identities, whereabouts, and activities. Civilians, in turn, punish combatants for harming them by sharing or withholding support and local intelligence. We provide clear evidence that in Afghanistan, civilian harm in insurgent-initiated events led to increased information sharing with the government, and that such information sharing was associated with subsequent counterinsurgent operational effectiveness. There is ample evidence in the historical record to at least suggest that these dynamics are likely to obtain in other irregular asymmetric civil wars.

The results deepen our understanding of the Afghanistan War and highlight avenues for future research. First, the results provide helpful context for the argument and supporting evidence that insurgents were *not* punished for the harm that they inflicted on civilians, either in terms of changing levels of public support for armed actors (Lyall *et al.*, 2013) or insurgent production of violence (Condra *et al.*, 2010). As the US Department of Defense argued in 2010, "insurgents are responsible for 80% of CIVCAS. However, insurgents can exploit and manipulate CIVCAS events to their advantage, while the U.S. and international forces are held accountable by the Afghan population

[28] For an example of this debate during the war in Afghanistan, see Bowman and Montagne (2009) and Thompson (2010).

for all incidents where there are CIVCAS."[29] While it probably is true that "[t]he Taliban rarely faced the widespread outcry triggered by American-inflicted civilian casualties" (Malkasian, 2021, p. 173), our results provide evidence that insurgent harm of civilians was counterproductive on average, insofar as it translated into greater information sharing and more effective counterinsurgency operations. Future research should continue investigating how the willingness of civilians to share information may be mediated by the type, intensity, and spatial proximity of combatant harm.

Second, the results demonstrate a very short-run effect of civilian harm on information sharing, and of that intelligence collection on counterinsurgency operations. This is consistent with accounts of the war that observed the insurgency's ability to quickly replace leaders.[30] But information-sharing might influence other, longer-run, wartime dynamics, including the resolve and capacity of insurgents to fight and the ability of rebels to bargain credibly with state rivals. If insurgents know that civilian harm affects information sharing, then engaging in civilian abuse is a particularly costly signal of insurgent resolve and capability, which should affect the nature of insurgent-government bargaining in asymmetric conflicts (Wood and Kathman, 2014).

Third, winning local support for counterinsurgent campaigns is a core motivation of military aid provision. It drives many recent empirically focused social science articles investigating the effects of aid as a tool to win 'hearts and minds' and thereby establish control over territory and population, as well as reduce insurgent violence (Berman *et al.*, 2011; Crost *et al.*, 2014; Lyall, 2019; Sexton, 2016; Sexton and Zürcher, forthcoming). The results provide evidence of information-centric theory at the microlevel in this case. Yet we still know relatively little about how civilian sympathies and insurgent strategy respond to these aid interventions. Moreover, the outcome of the war in Afghanistan reinforces that a macrolevel political–military strategy involves broader considerations. As critics of the campaign in Afghanistan have argued, consolidating military control is only a small part of what is required to create a legitimate government (Eikenberry, 2013). Information sharing may help government forces and their external supporters win battles; a broader strategy is required to win wars.

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[29] Quoted in Munoz (2012, p. 113–14).

[30] An intelligence analyst observed of Operation Haymaker: "Every militant killed in a leadership position was replaced within two or three weeks" (Morgan, 2021, p. 436–37).

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