Lessons from America’s post-9/11 Wars*  

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Abstract

A large literature has emerged in political science that studies the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This paper summarizes the lessons learned from this literature, both theoretical and practical. To put this emerging knowledge base into perspective we first review findings along two dimensions of conflict: factors influencing whether states or regions enter into conflict in the first place, the extensive margin; variables affecting the intensity of fighting once war has started, the intensive margin. We then summarize the uniquely rich qualitative and quantitative data on these wars (both publicly available and what likely exists but has not been released) and outline potential avenues for future research. We close by discussing the external validity issues entailed in learning about contemporary wars and insurgencies from research focused on Afghanistan and Iraq wars.

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Introduction

One consequence of America’s post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere has been a profusion of new scholarship on civil war and insurgency. There have been at least 264 studies on these conflicts published in academic journals or presented at major political science conferences since 2002. To put this emerging knowledge base into perspective it is useful to think about it along two dimensions. First, what have we learned about factors that influence whether states or regions enter into conflict at all, i.e. the extensive margin? Second, which insights have we gained into factors affecting the intensity of conflict once it has started, i.e. the intensive margin?

This distinction between the extensive and intensive margins is familiar to economics but has not previously made explicit in conflict studies. We believe this distinction is valuable, because certain changes can influence the two margins in very different ways. In economics the classic example is the effect of macroeconomic cycles on wages: average wages are only weakly procyclical, because increased demand in expansions draws lower wage workers into the labor force. Thus the impact of increased demand on the extensive margin is positive, more entry into the labor force, but the positive impact of expansions on the intensive margin is weaker than one would expect, because the increased supply of workers lowers wages. The distinction between intensive and extensive margins it is potentially quite important for conflict studies as well. Many core theoretical insights in conflict studies come from considering bargaining models of conflict (Walter, 2009). In such models, factors that increase the power of one side in ways that generate little uncertainty (e.g. a highly salient political event that rallies supporters to one side or an economic shock that everyone agrees will increase rebels’ potential combat power) may actually make bargaining failures less likely. Thus a factor that would be expected to increase the intensity of conflict given that a bargaining failure has occurred could make such a failure less likely in the first place.\(^1\)

With respect to the extensive margin we will highlight what has been learned from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in terms of political motivations for conflict and sources of political bias, one potential source of bargaining failure (Jackson and Morelli,

\(^1\)In the closest work to this idea Chassang and Padró i Miquel (2009) provide a bargaining model under which shocks that lower opportunity costs of conflict can lead to higher risks of civil war onset, but do not always do so. They also highlight that opportunity cost arguments cannot explain why civil war predominantly breaks out in low-income countries.
On the intensive margin, we will discuss two theoretical perspectives, which place the locus of variation on either the opportunity costs of participating or the information flow to various sides.

While a great deal has been learned about both margins, the full academic potential of studying these wars has not yet been realized. In particular, researchers have only now begun to tap the rich body of survey data collected during these conflicts and they have barely scratched the surface of what is possible through interviews and archival work.

To put this work in perspective and lay out potential future directions this paper reviews what has been learned over the last 14 years in four parts. Section 1 provides some basic statistics on the academic journal articles and conference papers written on these wars. Section 2 summarizes what has been learned about the production of political violence from research on the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Section 3 assesses the potential for future research driven by unprecedented data in three areas: inputs and outcomes of violence, and contextual information. In each area we argue these wars have created unprecedented opportunities for both quantitative and qualitative work.

Section 4 closes by discussing what is unique about these conflicts and the implications for external validity of all these studies. Our core argument on this score is that while both conflicts are unique in the capacity of the counterinsurgent forces, they are vastly different on most other dimensions: urban versus rural locus of conflict, extent of sectarian violence, financing opportunities for insurgents, physical terrain, literacy of the population, etc.). Those differences imply that common patterns likely have relatively strong external validity for thinking about civil wars and insurgencies with a highly asymmetric balance of power between the sides.

2 Trends in scholarship

America’s post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan were the subject of 264 papers that were published in academic journals or presented at major political science conferences.² 139

²We combined multiple search strategies to compile this list of studies in order to make it as complete as possible. First, we searched the JSTOR data base of academic journal articles. Second, we searched the table of contents of various IR journals and the programs of major political science conferences. Third, we went through the references in 30 recent publications to look for citations of additional studies. We acknowledge
of these studies (53%) focused on events in Iraq, 80 (30%) investigated Afghanistan, and 45 (17%) analyzed both countries. Overall, the number of studies peaked at 30 papers presented or published in 2007 and 2010 before it declined to 22 in 2014. In the years following the invasion of Iraq, the vast majority of scholarly articles focused on the interstate war and insurgency in Iraq. In the second half of the 2000s, scholarly interest gradually turned toward the conflict in Afghanistan. Since 2010, a roughly equal number of articles has been devoted to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and an increasing number of studies conduct cross-national research on both conflicts. Figure 1 displays these trends. It shows that the number of studies on Iraq peaked at 22 in 2007. More studies on Afghanistan were presented or published in 2010 than in any other year. Thus, the surges in the number of U.S. combat troops in Iraq in 2007 and in Afghanistan in 2010 coincided with ‘surges’ in the number of studies presented or published in these years. This temporal coincidence illustrates how scholarly interest varied as a function of exogenous political events, and it shows that empirical studies yielded timely evidence and findings.

The single most researched topic across these 264 studies was counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and in Iraq. 88 papers (33%) primarily focused on this topic. The focus on counterinsurgency was particularly pronounced among the studies on Afghanistan, half of which investigated efforts by the U.S., NATO, and the Afghan government to fight the Taliban. Surprisingly, the second most frequent subject of inquiry was public opinion. 71 papers (27%) of the papers investigated the effect of the two conflicts on public attitudes, political participation, and voting behavior. Strikingly, the vast majority of these studies (51) focused exclusively on the U.S., whereas merely four studies investigated public opinion in Iraq and six others presented results on attitudes from surveys in Afghanistan. 46 studies (17%) investigated the origins and dynamics of
Figure 1: Trend in studies on conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq (2002-2014)

Note: This figure shows the number of empirical papers that were published in academic journals or presented at major political science conferences between 2002 and 2014 and written in English. The upper left panel displays the trend for studies on either conflict or both. The upper right panel displays the trend in studies on the conflict in Iraq, the lower left panel shows the corresponding trend for Afghanistan, and the lower right panel shows the trend in studies on both conflicts.
civil conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq. 33 other papers (13%) examined the U.S.-led invasions of these two countries, with the overwhelming majority (23) focusing solely on Iraq. The remaining 26 papers (10%) analyzed the ramifications of these conflicts on geopolitics, transnational terrorism, and on political institutions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Overall, this distribution shows a strong focus in the literature on the implications of the two wars for Western countries. For instance, the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan were studied by just more than half as many studies as the counterinsurgency effort of the U.S. and its local and international allies. Five times more studies investigated public opinion in the U.S. than in Iraq and Afghanistan combined, even though various theories on the production of insurgent and counterinsurgent violence stress the importance of local civilian attitudes in war zones.

Qualitative case studies were the prevalent method used across the 264 academic papers. 119 (45%) of these papers reported results from econometric analyses while the other 145 papers entailed descriptive and causal inference through qualitative case studies. This pattern suggests, first, that political scientists have made many contributions to the historiography of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, with at least eleven studies making extensive use of archival materials. Second, the wealth of micro-level empirical data on these two conflicts has not been fully tapped yet, leaving many opportunities for future empirical research.

3 The production of political violence in Afghanistan and Iraq

The tremendous imbalance in forces between the two sides sets America’s counterinsurgency efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq apart from most other civil conflicts. The U.S. military had the capability of striking any part of the territory controlled by insurgents. Despite its vastly superior force-projection capability the U.S. and its allies struggled to effectively fight the insurgencies. This puzzling fact raises the question which factor was the binding constraint on the production of political violence by the two warring factions. This section explains that the intrastate conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq were information-centric conflicts, as opposed to force-centric conflicts. Thus,
the binding constraint on the production of violence consisted in the information available to the counterinsurgency and its enemy rather than in the mobilization of fighting capacity. This insight reveals important scope conditions on lessons learned from the U.S. counterinsurgencies in these two conflicts. Findings from these conflicts may not generalize to most other intrastate conflicts, where the counterinsurgency lacks comparable force projection abilities (e.g., in today’s civil conflicts in Iraq and Syria). In contrast, the British counterinsurgency effort in Malaya and counterinsurgencies in Colombia and the Philippines also had superior force-projection capabilities, and thus these conflicts arguably constitute other examples of information-centric conflicts.

Findings on the onset of interstate war between Iraq and the U.S. and its allies in 2003 are not subject to the same limitations to their external validity. The lesson that interstate disputes can escalate into war in the event of bargaining failure and biased decision-making is not unique to this war, and it can be generalized across salient interstate disputes.

3.1 Extensive margin: does conflict break out or not?

There is a good deal that we can learn from the onset of interstate wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the subsequent start of insurgencies and communal strife on when and where conflict will break out. Research on the extensive margin of armed conflict has a long tradition. Bargaining failure due to asymmetric information and commitment problems are the prevalent rationalist explanations of the onset of violent conflict (Fearon, 1995). Security dilemma generate particularly salient commitment problems (Jervis, 1978; Posen, 1993). If an opportunity arises and bargaining fails, ethnic conflict may originate in greed or grievance (Fearon and Laitin, 2003; Collier and Hoeffler, 2004). Evidence from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq lends qualified support to rationalist bargaining theory, but it also points at biased decision-making on both sides in ways that are unforeseen by conventional rationalist bargaining models of war.

3.1.1 Political motivation theories

Political motivation theories posit that the key constraint on the production of violence is an elite decision based on the bargaining outcome that each side expects. The ability of each side to engage in collective action to produce political violence is
taken as given. Thus, the production function devolves to an entry decision, albeit one that may be informed by expectations about later productive capacity. The rationalist bargaining model of war contends that violence occurs when the parties fail to reach a peaceful settlement due to asymmetric information or commitment problems (Fearon, 1995; Powell, 2002). Interviews with al-Qaeda members conducted by the terrorist organization itself and captured by the U.S. lend support to this model, because they hint at information asymmetries prior to the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan: al-Qaeda misperceived the likelihood that 9/11 would trigger a U.S. intervention in Afghanistan and overestimated its ability to attain a military victory in case of a U.S. invasion (Liebl, 2012). Recent studies suggest that the invasion of Iraq in 2003 resulted from a bargaining failure, albeit not one expected by extant rationalist bargaining theory (Lake, 2011; Coe, 2012). First, pre-war bargaining was not a two-player game between the U.S. and Iraq, as most rationalist bargaining models assume. Instead, Saddam Hussein was unwilling to signal clearly that he had given up his WMD program in ways that would have reduced the risk of war with the US, because sending such a signal might have emboldened potential challengers at home and in Iraq’s regional neighborhood (Lake, 2011; Woods, 2006). In addition, secret documents retrieved from Saddam Hussein’s presidential palace indicate that the Iraqi president erroneously believed that France and Russia would prevent a U.S. invasion (Woods, 2006). Second, studies on the onset of the Iraq war challenge the way war costs are represented in rationalist bargaining models. Coe (2012) argues that for the U.S. the cost of continuing to contain Iraq exceeded the anticipated cost of going to war; he thus concludes that costly peace constitutes an alternative rationalist explanation of war even in the absence of uncertainty and commitment problems. Lake (2011) proposes that bargaining models should be revised to incorporate the anticipated cost of maintaining post-war peace; the Iraq case challenges the assumption that the war is over once a settlement is reached. The U.S. government grossly underestimated the cost of stabilizing Iraq after defeating Saddam Hussein’s regime, and thus the anticipated cost of post-war peace did not greatly impact the U.S. decision to go to war.

Political motivation theories do not only help understand the origins of the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, but they also shed light on the subsequent onset of sectarian violence between Shiites and Sunnis in Iraq. A long-standing argument holds that commitment problems and uncertainty about the other side’s intentions and capabilities translate into bargaining failure when ethnic groups are caught in a security dilemma under conditions of domestic anarchy (Posen, 1993). According to
this argument, the state’s inability or unwillingness to control violence among communal groups is a precondition for the onset of ethnic conflict (Posen, 1993; Petersen, 2002; Wilkinson, 2004). Several studies conclude that interethnic violence in Iraq was the result of a security dilemma in ethnically mixed areas, where Coalition and Iraqi government forces failed to maintain law and order (Agnew et al., 2008; Weidmann and Salehyan, 2013). Enterline and Greig (2007) use computer simulations to show that the risk of civil strife would have been much lower if the U.S. had deployed a larger force when it invaded Iraq. Staniland (2010, p.1640) explains that the failure by Iraqi government and Coalition forces to impose order, which gave rise to the security dilemma, was politically motivated: American and Iraqi leaders constrained their counterinsurgency forces, because they hoped to reach a political settlement. Moreover, close ties between the Iraqi government and Shiite militias provided the latter with political cover and allowed them to engage in violence with relative impunity (Ibid.; see also Thurber, 2014). Sectarian Iraqi politicians also undermined Coalition efforts to build a professional Iraqi police force (Radin, 2014), thus contributing to the ethnic security dilemma. Other studies examine variation in the perception of security dilemma. Interviews in Baghdad tentatively suggest that some neighborhoods proved resilient to efforts by ethnic militias to gain a foothold in their area (Carpenter, 2012). Refugees and IDPs made particularly easy targets for attackers and were particularly prone to being recruited into ethnic militias (Lischer, 2008).

While the ethnic security dilemma argument has been a prominent explanation of the origin of sectarian violence in Iraq, there is little empirical support for the argument that ethnic groups’ security dilemma were at the root of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan. Sullivan (2007, p.100) and Jones (2008) conclude that ethnicity was not the channel through which the Taliban mobilized. Beath, Christia and Enikolopov (2012) test an observable implication of rationalist bargaining models for the impact of development aid projects on violence in Afghanistan. They do not find empirical support for the hypothesis that development aid might shift the balance of power between factions and thus generate commitment problems that lead to bargaining failure and conflict.

Political motivation theories better explain the onset of sectarian violence in Iraq - i.e., the extensive margin - than its subsequent decline. Agnew et al. (2008) and Weidmann and Salehyan (2013) argue that ‘ethnic cleansing’ of ethnically mixed areas (especially those in Baghdad) eventually mitigated the security dilemma and caused...
a drop in interethnic violence. Biddle, Friedman and Shapiro (2012) challenge the argument that the completion of ‘ethnic cleansing’ was the main reason for the decline in violence in Iraq in 2007. They show that throughout 2005 and 2006, much of the violence in Iraq occurred in Anbar province, which was almost entirely Sunni; they also contend that ‘ethnic cleansing’ in Baghdad displaced but did not reduce violence, as Shiite militias attempted to conquer formerly Sunni neighborhoods. In conclusion, political motivation theories provide persuasive explanations of the onset of the 2003 war in Iraq and of the sectarian violence in Iraq, but they cannot account for the end of the civil war in Iraq and the dynamics of violence production in Afghanistan.

3.1.2 Bias

Bargaining models that rely on a unitary actor assumption fail to capture that domestic actors on both sides drove the U.S. and Iraq to war (Lake, 2011)\(^6\). Several studies find biases in decision-making and war planning within the U.S. administration (Gordon and Trainor, 2006; Cobb, 2007; Bensahel et al., 2008) and in the ‘selling of the Iraq war’ to the U.S. public (Kaufmann, 2004; Western, 2005; Thrall, 2007). In addition, Iraqi government documents and interviews conducted by U.S. forces with senior officials after 2003 provide detailed insights into the biased decision-making process inside Saddam Hussein’s regime Woods (2006). These findings suggest that neither the U.S. nor the Iraqi government acted entirely rationally. Both engaged in self-delusions, biased decision-making, and failures to update prior beliefs in ways that are inconsistent with the rationality assumption that underlies bargaining theory Lake (2011); Bensahel et al. (2008); Woods (2006). Lake (2011) and Rapport (2012) show that misperceptions on both sides were rooted in cognitive biases in decision-making and not in private information, as rationalist bargaining models would expect. The ‘marketplace of ideas’, which serves the purpose of weeding out biased policy arguments in foreign policy debates in mature democracies, did not fulfill its purpose in the aftermath of 9/11 (Kaufmann, 2004; Kellett Cramer, 2007). These findings challenge the assumption in most bargaining models that the warring factions are unitary rational actors, but they are consistent with models that incorporate political bias.

\(^6\)For a bargaining model that relaxes this assumption see, e.g., (Jackson and Morelli, 2007).
3.2 Intensive margin of violence production: how violent does the conflict become once it has broken out?

Evidence from the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq has been used to empirically test theoretical models on the intensive margin of violence production. Most recent theories stress labor and information as the primary binding constraints on the production of violence in civil war. Kalyvas (2007) presents an influential model according to which selective violence occurs in the midst of a civil war when and where warring factions’ incentives to pursue violence and local civilians’ incentive to give actionable intelligence to the factions align. This model explains local-level variation in violence production in terms of warring factions’ level of control. In contrast, Weinstein (2007) explains variation in the violent behavior of rebels by groups’ initial resource endowment: groups with social endowments (such as shared ideology) recruit well-disciplined rebels, maintain cooperative relationships with civilians, and engage in selective violence, whereas factions with economic endowments such as natural resource extraction allow looting to motivate their fighters and pursue indiscriminate violence since the exploited population does not provide them with information on defectors. Both of these theories emphasize the role of information available to the warring factions, but Weinstein (2007) primarily stresses the need to recruit fighters as the primary constraint on factions’ production of violence. Miguel, Satyanath and Sergenti (2004) show that GDP growth is significantly negatively related to the incidence of civil conflict in Sub-Saharan Africa, and they note that this finding is consistent with the argument that economic growth and wage increases render it more difficult to recruit fighters (labor as the binding constraint) and the argument that national income growth increases the capability of counterinsurgent forces (state capacity as binding constraint). Dube and Vargas (2013) find that in Colombia an exogenous increase in income from labor-intensive agricultural production reduce conflict, because it increases the opportunity cost of participating in the rebellion, whereas a similar increase in income from non-labor intensive oil extraction fuels the intensity of conflict, because it makes participation in a rent-seeking rebellion more attractive.

7Since incidence of civil war is a function of the intensive and the extensive margin of violence production, this research design cannot disentangle heterogeneous effects of GDP growth on the onset and subsequent course of civil conflict.
3.2.1 Opportunity cost theories

Opportunity cost models posit that labor is the binding constraint on the production of violence (Grossman, 1991). Economic and political opportunity cost theories emphasize different factors that drive the inframarginal individual’s decision to participate. Studies that apply opportunity cost theories to explain insurgent violence in Afghanistan and Iraq produce mixed results. Iyengar, Monten and Hanson (2011) show that greater availability of outside options in the non-violent labor market, which raise the opportunity cost of participating in violence production, reduces insurgent recruiting and causes substitution away from labor-intense forms of insurgent violence to more capital-intense attacks. They use variation in reconstruction aid financed by the Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP) in Iraq to evaluate the impact of labor-generating reconstruction programs on the production of violence by insurgent organizations. In their study on the impact of the National Solidarity Programme (NSP) in Afghanistan, Beath, Christia and Enikolopov (2012) also find that the largest development program in the country improved economic welfare and reduced violence in regions with relatively low initial violence. At the same time, this aid program improved attitudes toward the Afghan government, even though opportunity cost models would not predict such an effect. This result leads Beath, Christia and Enikolopov (2012) to conclude that their findings are more consistent with the informational model of counterinsurgency than with an opportunity cost approach. Evidence of a negative effect of business revitalization initiatives in Iraq on violence is consistent with both the opportunity cost model and an informational theory of counterinsurgency (Shaver, 2013). While economic opportunity cost models would expect a positive correlation between unemployment and political violence, Berman et al. (2011) find a negative relationship between district-level unemployment rates and attacks against government and allied forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. Bahney et al. (2010) and Bahney et al. (2013) raise further doubts about opportunity costs as the driving force behind participation in the insurgency in Iraq. They show that AQI paid its operatives salaries that were low by Iraqi standards and that did not include a risk premium. These two studies tentatively conclude that that AQI may have used low wages to screen out uncommitted individuals who may pose a security risk to the group, given there was an abundance of willing fighters. If so, labor was not the binding constraint on the production of insurgent violence in Iraq.

A second strand of opportunity cost models suggests that insurgents are motivated
by ‘greed’ and seek to capture the government for the sake of personal economic gain (Collier and Hoeffler, 1999, 2004). This approach predicts that the value of the prize that can be captured by controlling the government shapes individuals’ decisions to participate in rebellion rather than engage in productive activity. In line with this expectation, Suhrke (2007, p.1301) notes that state-building in Afghanistan increased the prize of capturing the central government and may thus have increased the contest for control of the central government, which might explain the failed coup by the demoted Minister of Defense Fahim in 2003. At the same time, Jones (2008) finds little support for ‘greed’-based explanations of the rise of the Taliban in Afghanistan. Instead, he contends that the increase in drug trade was a result of the insurgency, and not its cause. While the ‘greed’ model implies that a large increase in the amount of contested resources caused by an influx of aid would increase violence production, Beath, Christia and Enikolopov (2012) find the opposite effect.

The inframarginal individual’s decision to join the insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq may not be motivated by economic opportunity cost, but it may be motivated by immaterial benefits derived from participation in the insurgency. Thus, Sullivan (2007) finds that religious ideology was a driving force for recruitment by the Taliban during the 1990s.

### 3.2.2 Informational theories

Informational theories on the production of violence take exception with the claim that rebels seek to produce violence at capacity. Instead, they suggest that rebel activity is also a function of the government’s varying repressive capacity (Tsedung, 1937; U.S. Army and Marine Corps, 2006; Kalyvas, 2007; Fearon, 2008). Where rebels face competent governments who can act effectively on information shared by the civilian population, rebels may endogenously choose to produce at lower levels. In this case, their labor constraint will not bind. Instead, the binding constraint is the information on the insurgency that is available to counterinsurgent forces.

Which factors explain variation in the provision of information by civilians to the counterinsurgency forces? Research on the insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq suggests that counterinsurgency tactics, civilian casualties, unemployment, aid programs, and information technology coverage all provide part of the answer to this question. A paired comparison of two U.S. Army divisions in Iraq in 2003 and 2004 shows that
higher levels of counterinsurgency force mechanization inhibit direct contact with the civilian population and thus hamper the force’s ability to acquire reliable information about the enemy (Lyall and Wilson, 2009). This finding validates a key component of the COIN strategy of the U.S. Army and Marine Corps (U.S. Army and Marine Corps, 2006), and it echoes insights from the U.S. military surge in Iraq in 2007. The deployment of 30,000 additional U.S. troops and the simultaneous shift in counterinsurgency tactics have been credited with sustaining the Anbar Awakening, i.e. the realignment of Sunni forces in Anbar province from their erstwhile AQI allies to the U.S.-led coalition (Biddle, Friedman and Shapiro, 2012). Thus, the U.S. military surge afforded the necessary protection to Sunni “Sons of Iraq” units and civilians and thus led the latter to provide valuable information to the counterinsurgency forces, which in turn fought more successfully against the insurgency (Ibid.).

If protecting civilians by stationing civilians in forward operating bases in residential areas has a positive impact on the provision of information to counterinsurgency forces, civilian casualties and indiscriminate targeting by counterinsurgency forces may have the opposite effect. An analysis of weekly time-series data on civilian casualties and insurgent violence in Iraq between 2004 and 2009 indicates that coalition killings of civilians increased the number of insurgent attacks, while insurgent killings of civilians had the opposite effect (Condra and Shapiro, 2012). These relationships were strongest in ethnically mixed areas and in highly urban districts. This finding corroborates the argument that civilians punish warring factions for inflicting collateral damage: when non-combatants are victimized, the side responsible for the killings receives less information from civilians, who share more information with the other side. Since counterinsurgent forces depend on tips from the civilian population, such variation in information flows introduces variation in counterinsurgency effectiveness, which in turn impacts the production of violence by the insurgency. Thus, ‘search and cordon’ missions aimed at flushing out the Taliban in Helmand province in 2006 alienated the local population and thus adversely affected long-term stabilization efforts (Pritchard and Smith, 2010). Civilians’ pre-existing bias in favor of one side that is perceived as the in-group may lead them to react more strongly to civilian casualties inflicted by the out-group and to discount killings of non-combatants by the in-group. Thus, a survey experiment conducted in five Pashtun-dominated provinces in the center of the Taliban insurgency shows that victimization by ISAF reduced support for ISAF and increased

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8Thus, concern about political backlash from abuse by Taliban operatives partly explains why their leaders established a code of conduct and a military justice system (Giustozzi, 2014).
support for the Taliban, while Taliban-inflicted harm to civilians did not translate into
greater support for ISAF and only marginally decreased Taliban support (Lyall, Blair
and Imai, 2013). In contrast, results from two surveys administered in four Northern
Afghan districts show that civilian exposure to Taliban and counterinsurgent violence
led to more polarized views of the warring parties within local communities, while
such exposure to violence did not change the communities’ average perception of the
two sides Weidmann and Zürcher (2013). Since exposure to violence did not reduce
trust inside the local community (Ibid.), it is unclear whether the polarization of views
induced civilians to tell on each other or not.

While the opportunity cost model expects a negative relationship between household
income and participation in the insurgency, the informational model suggests a
positive correlation between these variables. If counterinsurgents buy information from
civilians, a drop in household incomes implies that a marginal dollar spent on intel-
ligence yields more success at combating the insurgency, thus leading to a decline in
violence (Berman et al., 2011). Analyses of district-level unemployment and violence
in Afghanistan and Iraq provide empirical support for this argument (Ibid.).

Counter-insurgent forces often use aid in an effort to buy the allegiance of civilians
and access to their valuable information about the insurgency. Empirical evidence from
Afghanistan and Iraq suggests that this strategy succeeded in “winning hearts and
minds”. The Afghan NSP improved civilians’ economic welfare and attitudes toward
the government, and it temporarily reduced violence in areas with a low level of initial
violence (Beath, Christia and Enikolopov, 2012). In Iraq, small aid projects financed
through the CERP accounted for a significant decline in the number of violent attacks
against Iraqi government and Coalition forces (Berman et al., 2011). In addition,
Shaver and Tenorio (2014) find that increased electricity supply in Iraq had a negative
effect on insurgent violence. The authors ascribe this effect to an increase in the supply
of actionable intelligence by the local population, which may have been due to the fact
that the provision of electricity increased support for the government and trust in the
latter’s commitment to delivering public goods.

Finally, variation in access to information technology shape the dynamics of the
provision of information to the counterinsurgency forces. Two studies on Iraq support
this argument. The spread of cell phone coverage in Iraq had an impact on district-level
trends in violence by increasing information flows from the population to the military
after the construction of new cell phone towers (Shapiro and Weidmann, 2015). More-
over, high levels of access to negative U.S. news coverage of the Iraq war emboldened the insurgency (Iyengar and Monten, 2008). One possible explanation is that civilians who were not strongly committed to either side reduced their support of the counterinsurgency in response to negative U.S. news reports, which signaled a lack of U.S. resolve to defeating the insurgency (Ibid.).

4 Future research potential

The Iraq and Afghanistan wars have led to the generation of unprecedented qualitative and quantitative micro-level data. The literature reviewed above has not yet fully made use of these data, leaving many opportunities for promising future research. In this section, we review some of the most substantial data on outcomes, inputs, and context of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

4.1 Outcomes

Micro-level data is available on three sets of outcomes of the conflicts: political violence, control over territory, and public opinion in the conflict theater.

4.1.1 Event data on violence

The quantity, quality, and detail of micro-level data on violent events in Afghanistan and Iraq surpasses comparable information on any other recent armed conflict. The MNF-I SIGACTS III data specifies the precise location and time of incidents of insurgent violence against coalition, Iraqi Security Forces, civilians, Iraqi infrastructure and government organizations. Unclassified data drawn from the MNF-I SIGACTS III Database provide the location, date, and time of attack incidents between February 2004 and February 2009. The substantive scope of the SIGACTS data can be illustrated with a list of studies that investigated various subsets of this data: Benigni and Furrer (2012) analyzed IED attacks, Weidmann and Salehyan (2013) examined sectarian violence in Baghdad, Condra and Shapiro (2012) studied civilian casualties, and Berman et al. (2011) and Shaver and Tenorio (2014) researched insurgent attacks.

On the perception of U.S. resolve by Iraq’s Sunni population in general see Malkasian (2006).
against Coalition and Iraqi government forces. Shaver and Bollfrass (2014) present SIGACT data that was updated until 2011 and extended by the inclusion of the specific nature of the target (outpost, convoy, etc.). While the SIGACTS data is based on reports by the U.S.-led coalition, Iraq Body Count provides data on civilian deaths from violence based on a variety of sources including media reports and figures provided by hospitals, morgues, NGOs and government authorities. For each incident Iraq Body Count records the location, the perpetrator (Coalition Forces or insurgents), a description of the method of attack, and the target of the attack (civilians, political leaders, police, or Iraqi police and military forces). This data was used, e.g., by Iyengar, Monten and Hanson (2011) and (Condra and Shapiro, 2012). Aggregate monthly data from a third source, the website www.icasualties.org, was used in the study on patterns in escalations in insurgent and terrorist activity by Johnson et al. (2011). In contrast to the other sources, www.icasualties.org does not report how the data was compiled. Finally, Fitzsimmons (2013) introduces a new data set on violent incidents involving private security companies operating in Iraq between 2005 and 2007; the data is based on reports by media, government authorities, and NGOs.

SIGACTs were also recorded in Afghanistan, and unclassified data was available up to the December 2011 (Management Systems International, 2012, p. 20). Since SIGACTs are recorded by Western forces, the probability any given act of antigovernment violence is recorded is necessarily correlated with the presence of such troops. This is a potential limitation of these data for measuring total violence (Management Systems International, 2012, p. 20), though not for measuring attacks against ISAF troops. Since 2008, the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) has released monthly data on the number of civilian casualties and the number of events that caused civilian casualties in Afghanistan. This data is disaggregated by responsible party (ISAF or insurgents), by region, and by weaponry (see Bohannon 2011, 2014). ISAF also published its methodology for collecting and reporting civilian casualty data up the chain of command (see Bohannon 2011). While these data have not been publicly released, they were being collected into 2015 and could in principle support research down the line. Starting in 2007, the UN Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA) has provided monthly data on civilian casualties inflicted by pro- and anti-government forces, respectively. www.icasualties.org provides monthly data on casualties by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Subsets of the UNAMA and icasualties data were used in the study on social cohesion in Northern Afghanistan, e.g., by Weidmann and Salehyan (2013). In addition to these monthly data sets, Benini
and Moulton (2004) present weekly data on casualties inflicted by Operation Enduring Freedom between September 2001 and June 2002. While the ISAF and UNAMA data set was compiled by government and international organization staff, the data introduced in Benini and Moulton (2004) was gathered through interviews conducted by an NGO in 2002 in all communities that had been subject to air strikes or ground operations during Operation Enduring Freedom. The data source for the icasualties data is unclear. The Afghanistan Rights Monitor published event data on civilian casualties in 2011, which was gathered by a network of 40 informants and verified by additional sources (Bohannon, 2011). More recently, the Uppsala Conflict Data Program presented the beta version of event data on fatal organized violence in Afghanistan, which includes state-based armed conflict incidents, non-state conflict events, and one-sided violence (Sundberg and Melander, 2013).

4.1.2 Subjective assessments of control

UNAMA prepares residual risk accessibility classifications for each Afghan province in order to assess the danger of humanitarian relief in each part of the country. Even though these assessments are confidential, some of them have been published by news media and in academic studies (Trofimov, 2010; Higashi, 2015, p. 68). The ISAF regional commands also conducted regular district-level assessments of control, though their criteria varied over time and across commands, making them less-than-ideal for academic work even if they were released.\textsuperscript{10}

4.1.3 Public opinion

In Afghanistan, ISAF has conducted more than two dozen waves of the Afghanistan Nationwide Quarterly Assessment Research (ANQAR) survey starting in 2008. This survey is administered to a sample of more than 8,000 Afghans in all thirty-four provinces. One limitation of this survey is the high refusal rate: for instance, almost 50 percent of the respondents refused to participate in the 14th wave of the survey administered in late 2011 (Blair, Imai and Lyall, 2014, p. 1045). In addition, ISAF conducted almost two dozen waves of the quarterly Foghorn survey focused on public sentiment and perceptions of government services as well as the quarterly Anvil survey on media

\textsuperscript{10}Author fieldwork, Afghanistan, 2009 and 2010. See also Connable (2012) on the challenges of systematic assessment and numerous examples of criteria being changed and/or based on suspect methodologies.
consumption and exposure to different messages from parties to the conflict. Starting in 2011, ISAF also conducted the quarterly BINAA nationwide household survey of approximately 13,000 households across 80 key terrain districts. In addition to a high non-response rate, the BINAA surveys may also suffer from inadequate sampling strategies (Management Systems International, 2012, p. 21). Between 2004 and 2014, the Asia Foundation conducted nine rounds of a survey with more than 6,000 respondents across all provinces (see, e.g., Warren 2014). Recently, the Measuring Impact of Stabilization Initiatives (MISTI) project funded by USAID started a semiannual survey to track stabilization trends and measure program impacts in Afghanistan. The first two rounds included 35,000 and 38,000 respondents, respectively. In Iraq, the Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) and the Multinational Division-Baghdad (MND-B) also conducted series of surveys over several years, including one which collected political sentiments from a sample of more than 6,000 respondents per month from September 2004 through 2010.

4.1.4 Information flow to warring factions

Counterinsurgency forces in Iraq and Afghanistan paid informants that provided actionable intelligence (see, e.g., Associated Press 2004). While systematic data on the amount of the rewards has not been released, it should have been recorded according to instructions governing the program (Center for Army Lessons Learned, 2009, chapter 6). Weekly data on the number of tips received by counterinsurgency forces in most Iraqi provinces has been declassified for a twelve-months period in 2007 and 2008. Using this data, Shaver and Shapiro 2015 find support for the information-centric model of the intensive margin in counterinsurgency warfare.

4.2 Inputs

Aid, force deployments, and strategies are among the inputs on which detailed data is available from Afghanistan and Iraq.
4.2.1 Aid and non-lethal actions

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Gulf Region Division has made detailed data on reconstruction efforts in Iraq publicly available. Several studies on the war in Iraq examined U.S. reconstruction funds allocated through the Commander’s Emergency Response Program (CERP) (Berman et al., 2011; Iyengar, Monten and Hanson, 2011; Shaver and Tenorio, 2014). CERP was designed to give military commanders resources for small-scale infrastructure and social service projects that respond to local communities’ needs and improve security. Data is available on the location, project type, amount spent, date, and duration of each project. In addition, the U.S. Army Contracting Business Intelligence System contains data on contractual obligations with Iraqi vendors under the Iraqi First program, a local business revitalization initiative, between 2007 and 2011 (Shaver, 2013).

Over the past decade, more actors have delivered aid in Afghanistan than in Iraq. The single largest development program in Afghanistan has been the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), which was devised in 2002 as a means to deliver services to rural areas (such as infrastructure and education) and build village-level representative institutions (Beath, Christia and Enikolopov, 2012). It has been implemented in 32,000 villages at a cost of over USD 1 billion. The second phase of this program encompassed a randomized experiment to assess the program’s impact. The Afghanistan Country Stability Picture (ACSP) seeks to provide a comprehensive data set on reconstruction and development projects in Afghanistan. It contains information on the date, cost, location, and type of some 85,000 projects conducted between 2002 and 2008 (Davids, Rietjens and Soeters, 2010). ACSP contains information provided by a large number of civilian and military aid providers.

4.2.2 Force deployments

The Institute for the Study of War compiled monthly data on the order of battle of all U.S. forces in Iraq from June 2006 to November 2011 and for U.S. forces in Afghanistan from February 2009 to date (Morgan, 2013). This data describes the composition and placement of forces down to battalion level. Lee Lindsay (2014) compiled two data sets that catalog the locations and concentrations of U.S. and coalition forces in Iraq from February 2004 through October 2008 and the locations of maneuver companies
in Afghanistan between January 2005 and December 2012. These two data sets draw on various primary and secondary sources including the Institute for the Study of War. Between January 2007 and August 2013, ISAF published periodic Placemat reports, which contain approximate numbers of ISAF forces provided by each force-contributing country, on Provincial Reconstruction Teams, and on the countries responsible for ISAF Regional Commands. Since February 2009, the Placemat also indicates the approximate size and location of Afghan National Army units.\(^{11}\)

The size and location of insurgency forces is much less well documented in declassified data. AQI payroll data reported by Bahney et al. (2013) allows some inferences on the strength of different AQI units in Iraq. In addition, the Harmony Program at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point released numerous documents captured from AQI, which offer insights into the organization and strength of this group. This information includes, for instance, nearly 700 records of foreign nationals that entered Iraq between August 2006 and August 2007 in order to fight with al-Qaeda (Felter and Fishman, 2007, 2008). These records were captured by coalition forces in October 2007, and they contain - with varying degrees of detail - the country of origin, hometown, age, occupation, name of the fighter’s recruiter, and route into Iraq. Moreover, the U.S.-led coalition recorded data on weapons caches it discovered in Iraq between 2004 and 2011 (Shaver and Tenorio, 2014).

4.2.3 Strategies

Data on the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq reveals substantial variation over time, between contingents, and across space in the counterinsurgency strategies employed by government forces and their allies. Numerous accounts show that the surge in Iraq coincided with major changes in counter-insurgency strategy (see, e.g., (Burton and Nagl, 2008; Biddle, Friedman and Shapiro, 2012; Jensen, 2014)). In the absence of declassified country-wide micro-level data on counterinsurgent strategies, three studies conduct comparative case studies to reconstruct strategies at the local level. Lyall and Wilson (2009) conduct a paired comparison of counterinsurgency efforts by two U.S. Army divisions in Iraq in 2003 and 2004, Larsdotter (2008) compares British and German

\(^{11}\)This data is accessible on the website of NATO’s Resolute Support mission at http://www.rs.nato.int/isaf-placemat-archives.html. For a recent review of national-level time series data on counterinsurgency forces in Afghanistan see Livingston and O’Hanlon (2013). Tago (2009) presents data of monthly change in the composition of the set of countries that participated in the U.S. coalition in Iraq.
counterinsurgency strategies in Northern Afghanistan, and Grandia Mantas (2013) compares British and Dutch counterinsurgency strategy in Helmand and Uruzgan in Southern Afghanistan. Other studies analyze single cases: Briggs (2014) examines the counterinsurgency strategy of U.S. Naval Special Warfare detachments Naw Bahar district in Zabul province in Afghanistan while Dimitriu and de Graaf (2010) investigate Dutch counterinsurgency strategy in Afghanistan’s Uruzgan province. Wither (2009) presents a case study of British counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq, and Brocades Zaalberg and ten Cate (2012) analyze Dutch counterinsurgency strategy in Iraq. In one of the few efforts to systematically analyze variation in counterinsurgency strategy across a large number of contingents engaged in counterinsurgency warfare, Saideman and Auerswald (2012) present data on the restrictions placed upon each ISAF contingent by the troop contributing country.

Insurgent strategy is less well documented in unclassified documents than counterinsurgent strategy. Perhaps the most comprehensive source of evidence on insurgent strategy in Iraq is the Harmony Program at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, which has published operational reports, budgets, and ‘lessons learned’ reports of AQI (see, e.g., Fishman (2009)). Captured al-Qaeda documents from Afghanistan also allow some inferences on insurgent strategy (Liebl, 2012).

4.3 Contextual information

This subsection focuses on three sets of contextual information that are highly relevant for the study of conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq: data on ethnicity and demographics, economic data, and information on internally displaced persons and refugees.

4.3.1 Ethnicity and demographics

The Gulf 2000 Project at Columbia University compiled data on Iraq’s ethnic distribution at the neighborhood level prior to the U.S. invasion in 2003 and during the conflict.\footnote{This data is available at \url{http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/maps.shtml}.} This data was used, e.g., by Weidmann and Salehyan (2013). In addition, the Iraqi Central Statistical Office and the World Food Program compiled district-level data on community characteristics, which were used by Berman et al. (2011).
4.3.2 Economy

To assess access to electricity, which serves as an indicator of relative quality and stability of everyday life in Iraqi cities, Agnew et al. (2008) use nighttime light satellite imagery from the Defense Meteorological Satellite Program. Shaver and Tenorio (2014) present daily province-level data on electric energy production in Iraq compiled by the US State Department on the basis of reports by the Iraqi Ministry of Energy. Moreover, Shaver and Tenorio (2014) present plant-level data on the daily production of crude and gas in Iraq that was gathered by the Iraqi government. Cell phone coverage is another measure of economic development, for which sub-national time series data is available from Iraq and Afghanistan (see Shapiro and Weidmann 2015).

4.3.3 Internal displacement and refugee flows

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has gathered 17 rounds of province-level data on the number and location of internally displaced persons in Iraq between March 2014 and March 2015. Disaggregated information on Syrian refugees in Iraq is available online at the Syria Regional Refugee Response portal set up by the UNHCR (http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=103#).

4.3.4 Interviews

Interviews offer a massive potential for learning about the inputs, outcomes, and context of violence in Afghanistan and Iraq. This potential has not been fully tapped by existing research. Field historians of the U.S. Marine Corps recorded more than 250 briefings and meetings as well as 1,300 interviews with members of the U.S. armed forces, civil servants, and civil society members during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003 and 2004 (Lowrey, 2005). These interviews contain valuable insights on the strategy during the interstate war and during the first phase of the insurgency.13 Carpenter (2012) relied on semi-structured interviews about sectarian violence in different neighborhoods of Baghdad, while Karam (2007) conducted unstructured interviews during multiple stays with family based in Baghdad at the height of the insurgency.

A few studies relied on interviews to make inferences about the conflict in Afghanistan.

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5 What is unique about these conflicts?

Of course care must be taken in extending findings from the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq to other settings. Assessing the external validity of various papers and scope conditions for theoretical claims inspired by these conflicts requires carefully parsing what makes them unique. This is a common challenge with any observational or experimental study and one way to address it is to ask which conditions made it possible for the observed causal relationships to obtain (Cartwright and Hardie, 2012).

Several factors were relatively unusual in America’s post-9/11 wars. The most obvious is the level of asymmetry between the combat power of the two sides. It is a common trope that most civil wars involve a dramatic discrepancy in military power, at least in their early stages, but the scale of the discrepancies in Afghanistan and Iraq were unusually large. Because of the U.S. and international forces fighting on the government’s side in both places the counterinsurgents had access to mobility (helicopters and heavily armored road vehicles), intelligence, logistics, and precision indirect fires (artillery and air power) at the cutting edge of the possible.

The availability of these counterinsurgency capabilities implies that insurgents’ ability to produce violence was unusually sensitive to information leakage (Shapiro and Weidmann, 2015, p. 5). Once the geo-temporal coordinates of an insurgent fighter or arms cache was known it could be targeted on short notice at any time of day or night and such targeting could happen on very limited intelligence. While scholars have long noted the fact that insurgents are inherently vulnerable once the government has information about them (Kalyvas, 2007), advances in communications, tactical procedures,
and organization (drones, special operations task forces, etc.: see, e.g., McChrystal 2013; Woods 2015) greatly magnified that vulnerability compared to earlier conflicts.

That vulnerability has two theoretical implications. First, the sensitivity of violence production to information flow effectively ameliorated or eliminated the collective action problem for civilians wishing to aid the government. In an environment where simply calling in a tip through an anonymous hot line could lead to highly effective action against insurgents angering even one civilian was potentially detrimental to insurgents (Shapiro and Weidmann, 2015). Information cascade or tipping models, which rely on mass participation to overcome collective action problems among opponents of the regime, may thus be less relevant in this context (see e.g. Lohmann, 1994; Kuran, 1995).

Second, the primacy of information would lower the relevance of labor constraints in insurgents’ production function. If the ability of insurgents was constrained not by their total capacity to produce, but by a strategic decision predicated on the level/type of violence the population would tolerate, then labor may have been much less important. There is substantial evidence that even the most extreme insurgents in Iraq were concerned with violating community norms.

The second unusual factor in both Afghanistan and Iraq was the presence of tens of thousands of foreign soldiers, which dramatically altered the nature of bargaining between local elites. In both countries certain bargains were off the table because of the veto power of foreign governments with troops in the conflict theater. The Karzai government could not, for example, have met Taliban preferences about the place of women in society even if it had wanted to, because doing so would have been anathema to European powers and the United States. Moreover, the presence of foreign troops

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14 The appendix of Berman et al. (2011) considers the case of capacity constrained insurgents and how they differ from information constrained ones.

15 In Iraq multiple captured and declassified insurgent documents discuss how excessive violence can be politically counterproductive and note constraints on violence. A February 2006 letter from al-Qa’ida in Iraq leaders to a commander in Ramadi directed him to “[s]top the killing of people unless they are spying, military, or police officers. We have to find a secure method because if we continue using the same method, people will start fighting us in the streets.” (Harmony Program, document IZ-060316-02). The letter is unsigned but was found with a situation report to that member, which notes limitations on the killing of Sunni police and asks permission to kill eight individuals. See https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/al-qaida-in-iraq-situation-report-english-translation-2. Similarly, the September 2009 iteration of the Afghan Taliban “Book of Rules” includes the dictate that “The utmost steps must be taken to avoid civilian human loss in Martyrdom operations.” See translation at http://www.nefafoundation.org/miscellaneous/nefatalibancodeconduct.pdf.
introduced unusual temporal dynamics, which affected the local governments’ valuation of negotiated settlements with the insurgents. For the Afghan and Iraqi governments the massive foreign-backed training programs for their militaries implied that they could reasonably ponder whether it made sense to make deals in the present when they could be assured of foreign support to fight a bit longer and almost certainly have a better balance of power if they decided to agree to a settlement in the future.

Of course while both conflicts are unusual in terms of the high capacity of the counterinsurgent forces, they are vastly different on most other dimensions. Iraq is a highly urbanized society while Afghanistan is mostly rural. In Afghanistan most of the conflict occurred in rural areas, in Iraq it took place in the cities. In Afghanistan there is little history of sectarian violence, while in Iraq the Sunni/Shia divide has long been a critical cleavage. In Afghanistan, the overthrow of the Taleban in 2001 was predated by more than two decades of civil conflict, whereas the most recent insurgency in Iraq prior to the U.S. invasion had occurred dates back to the early 1990s. In Afghanistan the opium economy provided massive financing opportunities for insurgents, which had no equivalent in Iraq. The countries further differed in terms of physical terrain (Afghanistan is highly mountainous while Iraq is flat), literacy of the population (Afghanistan has one of the lowest literacy rates in the world while Iraq’s population is largely literate), and so on. Those differences mean that common patterns observed in both conflicts likely have relatively strong external validity for thinking about civil wars and insurgencies with a highly asymmetric balance of power between the sides.

6 Conclusion

A sizable scholarly literature has emerged studying America’s post-9/11 wars. More than 264 articles on the wars and their impact on politics in troop-contributing countries have been published since 2002. While a plurality of these studies (33%) focused on the efficacy of counterinsurgency policies, the second most frequent subject of inquiry was public opinion. Seventy-one papers (27%) investigated the effect of the two conflicts on public attitudes, political participation, and voting behavior, many of them taking advantage of plausibly exogenous variation in combat casualties to test hypotheses about the politics of war in democratic societies. Only ten of these studies investigated public opinion in Afghanistan or Iraq, despite the massive survey efforts
in both countries. The remainder of the studies investigated diverse topics including: the origins and dynamics of civil conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq; decision making behind the U.S.-led invasions of these countries; and the ramifications of these conflicts on geopolitics, transnational terrorism, and political institutions in Afghanistan and Iraq. So far the literature has focused on the implications of the two wars for Western countries, a situation that is quite surprising given that most theories on how civil war stress the importance of local civilian or elite attitudes, which shape the supply of information and labor to warring factions.

Much of what has been learned can be divided into two areas: factors influencing whether states or sub-national actors enter into conflict at all, the extensive margin; variables affecting the intensity of conflict once it has started, the intensive margin. On the extensive margin, much of the literature supports arguments stemming from theories of war onset that give a prominent place to political motivations for conflict, which fall outside of mainline rationalist bargaining models (though are consistent with those incorporating political bias).

Much more has been learned about the intensive margin, as should be expected given that there are only two cases of onset to study but potentially millions of daily observations of local conditions in these two conflicts. In particular, much of the research on these conflicts supports theoretical perspectives in which insurgent production of violence is constrained by the willingness of civilians to share information with counterinsurgents, and not by the insurgents’ ability to muster recruits or amass financial resources. This finding is at odds which much of the literature on other conflicts, which finds evidence for opportunity-cost mechanisms by which negative economic conditions lead to increased violence. We argue that the difference makes sense as Afghanistan and Iraq are relative outliers in terms of the counterinsurgents’ massive firepower and mobility advantages over insurgents, which were due to U.S. and allied assistance. Thus we should not expect results from these conflicts to travel to more symmetric settings—such as portions of Syria as of this writing—but given the large differences between the two societies common findings should have relatively strong external validity in civil wars and insurgencies with a highly asymmetric balance of combat power.

Overall, though, while a great deal has been learned about both margins, the full academic potential of studying these wars has not yet been realized. In particular, researchers have only now begun to tap the rich body of survey data collected during
these conflicts as the firms which conducted the surveys become more interested in sharing their data. And researchers have barely scratched the surface of what is possible through interviews and archival work, both with populations in Western countries who fought in these conflicts as well as with people in Afghanistan and Iraq. While recent events in parts of Afghanistan and Iraq suggest that such research will be extremely difficult in the near term, over the longer run there is a tremendous amount that could be learned by combining the rich data described above with the kind of nuanced locality-specific histories of the conflict that can only be captured through interview and archival work. We hope this review will provide a useful resource to scholars interested in conducting that work.
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