

Is There an ‘Emboldenment’ Effect? Evidence from the Insurgency in Iraq

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Does wartime debate in democracies during counterinsurgency campaigns embolden insurgent adversaries? Despite the historical frequency of this claim, there is little direct evidence assessing this ‘emboldenment’ hypothesis. This paper develops a novel test of this argument during the U.S. counterinsurgency campaign following the invasion of Iraq in 2003. We find that following spikes in U.S. domestic debate over the Iraq war, there is no evidence that insurgent attacks on military or civilian targets increased in regions of Iraq with greater access to U.S. news compared to regions with less access. Overall, these results offer no support for the emboldenment claim.

Keywords: Democracy; insurgency; resolve.

Introduction

For democracies at war, both the start and conduct of a conflict can trigger intense public debate and dissent. Many claim that public criticism of a democratic government’s policies during wartime – and particularly during counterinsurgency campaigns – encourages adversaries and reduces the likelihood of achieving military victory.¹ In the Philippines, where the United States successfully suppressed an insurrection from 1899 to 1902, Theodore Roosevelt referred to critics of harsh U.S. military tactics – including the use of indiscriminate violence against civilians – as encouraging Filipinos to challenge U.S. authority.² In the Vietnam war, some argue that domestic opposition contributed to the United

¹ For a historical overview of this claim in past U.S. wars, see Geoffrey Stone, *Perilous Times: Free Speech in Wartime from the Sedition Act of 1798 to the War on Terrorism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company 2005).

² Richard E. Welch, ‘American Atrocities in the Philippines: The Indictment and the Response’, *The Pacific Historical Review* 43/2 (1974), 233-253.

States' 'failure to demonstrate resolve' and created the belief among the North Vietnamese that they could outlast a militarily superior force, extending the war and contributing to the U.S. defeat.³ In response, antiwar opponents frequently claim that this line of argument represents an attempt to brand critics as unpatriotic and shield government decision makers from legitimate public criticism.

During the insurgency conflict in Iraq following the U.S. invasion in 2003, the Bush administration and its supporters similarly suggested that public criticism of its war policies strengthened the insurgency by undercutting perceptions of U.S. resolve. In September 2004, for example, President George W. Bush asserted that statements by Democratic Party leaders critical of the war sent a 'mixed message' that 'can embolden an enemy'.⁴ Similarly, Vice President Cheney stated in September 2006 that 'the kind of debate that we've had in the United States, suggestions, for example, that we should withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq...validates the strategy of the terrorists'.⁵ Following President Donald Trump's public support for withdrawing U.S. military forces from Syria in January 2019, Senator Lindsey Graham again invoked the logic of emboldenment, arguing that 'the statements made by President Trump...set in motion enthusiasm by the enemy we're fighting. You make people we're trying to help wonder about us. And as they get bolder, the people we're trying to help are going to get more uncertain. I saw this in Iraq. And I'm now seeing it in Syria'.⁶

Does wartime public debate in democracies embolden insurgent adversaries? The 'emboldenment' perspective might be separated into two sets of arguments about why public debate

³ Dale C. Walton, *The Myth of Inevitable U.S. Defeat in Vietnam* (New York: Taylor and Francis 2002), 40.

⁴ Peter Beinart, 'Speech Impediment', *The New Republic*, 11 October 2004, 6.

⁵ Michael Abramowitz, 'War's Critics Abetting Terrorists, Cheney Says', *Washington Post*, 11 September 2006, A12.

⁶ Zachary Cohen, 'Lindsey Graham Says Trump's Syria Statement Emboldened ISIS', *CNN Wire*, 16 January 2019.

over war policy in a democracy might increase insurgent violence during a counterinsurgency conflict. First, a cost sensitivity argument posits that greater domestic debate and dissent signals that the counterinsurgent state is sensitive to the costs of the conflict. By providing greater evidence that the resolve of the counterinsurgent state is linked to the costs imposed by insurgent groups, public dissension in democracies increases the incentive for insurgent groups to generate higher levels of violence in order to induce the withdrawal of the foreign state. Second, a population protection claim suggests that the perception of lower resolve strengthens insurgencies by reducing support for foreign counterinsurgent forces in the wider population. Individuals, and particularly those uncommitted to either side in a civil conflict, are less likely to collaborate with foreign counterinsurgent forces by providing information or withholding support for insurgents if they believe those forces are unlikely to protect them from future retribution by insurgent groups.

Despite extensive scholarly attention to the performance of democracies in both international and intrastate conflicts, to date there is little direct evidence assessing the relationship between democratic public debate and the behavior of insurgent groups.⁷ We study the emboldenment claim by exploiting a unique feature of the media landscape that emerged in Iraq following the U.S. invasion in 2003. Following the invasion, some regions of Iraq had greater direct access to news about U.S. politics – including U.S. domestic debates over the Iraq war – than others through the uneven geographic spread of satellite television dishes. These satellite dishes had become an important source of news in the Middle East, but had been banned under the Saddam Hussein regime. We provide a novel test of the emboldenment hypothesis by comparing whether an increase in U.S. domestic debate

⁷ For qualitative evidence on the impact of perceptions of counterinsurgent resolve on insurgent violence and recruitment in Iraq and Vietnam, see Carter Malkasian, ‘Signaling Resolve, Democratization, and the First Battle of Fallujah’, *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29/3 (2006), 423-52; and Jeffrey Race, *War Comes to Long An: Revolutionary Conflict in a Vietnamese Province* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1972).

over military withdrawal from Iraq had a greater impact on insurgent violence in areas of Iraq with higher access to U.S. news via satellite television than in areas with less access. This difference-in-difference approach isolates the potential effect of information about U.S. domestic debate from the many other possible factors contributing to variation in insurgent violence. We find that in the months immediately following spikes in U.S. media reporting related to debate over U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq, there is no evidence that the level of insurgent attacks targeting U.S. military forces increased in Iraqi districts with greater exposure to U.S. news relative to districts with less exposure. We also find no evidence that greater withdrawal-related reporting in the U.S. media led to a relative increase in attacks on Iraqi civilian in districts with higher exposure to U.S. news. Overall, these results offer no empirical support for the claim that greater wartime public debate in democracies encourages insurgent groups to initiate a higher level of violence than they otherwise would have.

This evidence contributes to a growing debate on democracy and war.⁸ Many scholars argue that democracies have an advantage in selecting and winning wars due to a robust marketplace of ideas, in which opposition parties, the public, and an independent media all participate. These elements of democratic politics produce higher quality information about the expected costs of war and the likelihood of victory, act as a check on the veracity of claims made by policy-makers, and strengthen accountability over those in power. The emboldenment view suggests that public debate may be a disadvantage for democracies in counterinsurgency conflicts, as democracies are less able to conceal

⁸ On the advantages of democracies in war-selection and war-fighting, see Dan Reiter and Allan C. Stam, *Democracies at War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2002); and David Lake, 'Powerful Pacifists: Democratic States and War', *American Political Science Review* 86/1 (1992), 24-37. For critiques of this view, see Alexander B. Downes, 'How Smart and Tough are Democracies? Reassessing Theories of Democratic Victory in War', *International Security* 33/4 (2009), 9-51; and Michael C. Desch, 'Democracy and Victory: Why Regime Type Hardly Matters', *International Security* 27/2 (2002), 5-47.

weakening resolve.⁹ Evidence from the Iraq conflict does not support the argument that democracies' information-based advantages generate an adverse unintended consequence in the context of counterinsurgency. Although we do not assess whether democracies are on balance more likely than other regime types to succeed or fail in counterinsurgency conflicts, the specific harms associated with democratic wartime debate posited by emboldenment claims appear to be overstated.

This paper is organized as follows: Section 1 presents the theoretical basis for an insurgent response to new information revealed through wartime public debate in democracies. Section 2 describes the data and the empirical strategy used to identify the potential effect of emboldening information. Section 3 presents the results, and addresses possible concerns with this empirical strategy. Section 4 discusses the implications of this evidence for international relations theory and policy, and the avenues for future research raised by these findings.

Theoretical Basis for an Emboldenment Effect

⁹ On democracies and military victory in counterinsurgency, see Anna Getmansky, 'You Can't Win If You Don't Fight: The Role of Regime Type in Counterinsurgency Outbreaks and Outcomes,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 57/4 (2013), 709-734; Jason Lyall, 'Do Democracies Make Inferior Counterinsurgents? Reassessing Democracy's Impact on War Outcomes and Duration', *International Organization* 64/1 (2010), 167-92; and Gil Merom, *How Democracies Lose Small Wars: State, Society and the Failures of France in Algeria, Israel in Lebanon, and the United States in Vietnam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2003). On the role of resolve in international politics, see Roseanne W. McManus, *Statements of Resolve: Achieving Coercive Credibility in International Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017); Joshua D. Kertzer, *Resolve in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2016); and Thomas Schelling, *Arms and Influence* (New Haven: Yale University Press 1996). On the inability of democracies to conceal their level of resolve, see Branislav L. Slantchev, 'Feigning Weakness', *International Organization* 64/3 (2010), 357-388.

Insurgent conflicts are characterized by a competition between pro- and anti-government forces over control of the population and the state. In these types of conflicts, resolve refers to the commitment of the counterinsurgent to bear the costs of defeating the insurgency.¹⁰ The Bush administration attached high importance to maintaining the appearance of resolve, frequently portraying the conflict in Iraq as a contest of wills between the United States and the Iraqi insurgency.¹¹ Variation in the perceived level of resolve of foreign forces in a counterinsurgency campaign might influence the level of violence initiated by insurgent groups via two causal mechanisms.

First, the perception of declining resolve might increase the level of violence initiated by insurgents by providing new information about the counterinsurgent's sensitivity to the costs of the conflict. Insurgents may look for information that increasing the costs of engagement for an external actor affects its level of support. The appearance of a weakened or reduced commitment in response to a higher level of insurgent violence may support the belief that the counterinsurgent's commitment is related to the costs incurred from insurgent actions. As a result, insurgents have a greater incentive to increase violence in the short-term, so as to further precipitate the withdrawal of foreign forces. In response to new information about the counterinsurgents' greater sensitivity to the costs of the conflict, insurgent groups may seek to impose greater direct costs by shifting attacks to target counterinsurgent forces. Alternatively, insurgent groups may opt to impose indirect costs on counterinsurgents by increasing violence targeting non-combatants, forcing counterinsurgents to expend more effort protecting civilians, and increasing the perception among domestic audiences in the counterinsurgent state that military victory is less likely.

¹⁰ Malkasian, 'Signaling Resolve, Democratization, and the First Battle of Fallujah'.

¹¹ See, for example, George W. Bush, 'President Bush Reaffirms Resolve to War on Terror, Iraq and Afghanistan,' White House Press Release, 19 March 2004.

Second, the perception of declining resolve might reduce support among the wider population for counterinsurgent forces and the incumbent government. Classic counterinsurgency theory identifies the population as the ‘center of gravity’ in counterinsurgency warfare, and suggests that a key task is creating the belief among the population that pro-government forces can offer more security than anti-government forces.¹² A credible commitment to population protection both demonstrates that individuals will be safer remaining loyal to the government and signals to potential collaborators that they will not face violent reprisal if they support the government or share information about insurgent activity. Individuals in local communities may be less likely to collaborate with foreign counterinsurgency forces if they believe those forces will not be present to protect their security in the future. In particular, the perception that the withdrawal of foreign forces is more likely may tip ‘fence-sitters’ in the population – individuals who are neither highly committed to the government or insurgent side – away from supporting foreign counterinsurgency forces if it places this future protection in doubt. Reduced public cooperation may decrease the effectiveness of counterinsurgent forces in identifying and disrupting insurgent networks, while enabling insurgent groups to operate more freely and effectively.

This decline in support among the wider population may take several forms. As many scholars have argued, the ability to gather intelligence from the local population about insurgent activity is often a critical factor in determining the success of counterinsurgency campaigns, particularly in terms of acquiring the information needed to identify combatants from non-combatants.¹³ This is particularly

¹² John A. Nagl, *Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya to Vietnam: Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife* (New York: Praeger 2002); David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger 1964).

¹³ Jacob N. Shapiro and Nils B. Weidmann, ‘Is the Phone Mightier than the Sword? Cellphones and Insurgent Violence in Iraq’, *International Organization* 69/2 (2015), 247-74; Eli Berman, Jacob N. Shapiro, and Joseph H.

true for foreign counterinsurgency forces, who suffer from an initial disadvantage in their level of, or ability to gather, knowledge about the local environment. Civilians may be less willing to provide this information if they are less certain that foreign counterinsurgency forces will be present or capable of assuring their protection in the future. The perception of declining foreign resolve may also increase insurgent recruitment, as individuals seek to bandwagon with what appears to be the winning side. Finally, insurgent groups rely on the population for passive support in the form of assistance such as safe houses, transportation, weapons storage, and financial resources. Civilians may be less likely to withhold these passive forms of support from insurgents if they are uncertain that they will be protected from insurgent retribution in the future.

One issue raised the population protection argument is whether low resolve signals can be easily reversed. The costs of emboldening information may not be high if it can be easily mitigated by subsequent statements and actions. In the context of counterinsurgency, however, uncertainty in the form of conflicting signals may have the same effect as low resolve in inducing civilians to side with the insurgency. If there is greater uncertainty about the likelihood that foreign forces will remain, unallied individual or groups may opt for the local insurgent forces, who are likely to remain even after foreign forces have left. Thus, insurgents might gain popular support by offering more predictability, even if the population does not share their objectives.

Data and Empirical Strategy

Felter, 'Can Hearts and Minds Be Bought? The Economics of Counterinsurgency in Iraq', *Journal of Political Economy* 119/4 (2011), 766-819; Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, 'Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars', *International Organization* 63/1 (2009), 67-106; Stathis Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006); and James Fearon and David Laitin, 'Ethnicity, Insurgency, and Civil War', *American Political Science Review* 97/1 (2004), 75- 90.

To identify the effect of U.S. wartime debate on insurgent behavior in Iraq, we combine variation in media coverage of domestic U.S. debates over Iraq policy with regional variation in exposure to news about U.S. politics in Iraq. Specifically, we exploit differences in household satellite television ownership across the 104 districts of Iraq and the fact that satellite television provided more direct and immediate information about U.S. and international news, and therefore domestic U.S. policy debates, than other media sources such as local television or print newspapers. Our intuition is that if the emboldenment claim were correct, areas in Iraq with greater exposure to news about U.S. politics – including U.S. debate over military withdrawal from Iraq – will more be more responsive to ‘emboldening’ media coverage than areas with less exposure. Using a difference-in-difference research design, we estimate the effect of monthly spikes in U.S. media reporting related to U.S. military withdrawal on insurgent violence in the subsequent month, in districts with higher versus lower levels of satellite television penetration. Our analysis focuses on the period from the beginning of the insurgency in mid-2003 to the end of 2004, when regional variation in satellite television access was greatest (Figure 1).

We use satellite television because it was an important source of news in post-Saddam Iraq, as well as the wider Arab region, and therefore a useful proxy for exposure to information about U.S. political debate. A number of scholars have explored the rise of independent satellite television in the Middle East as an alternative media source to state-run news outlets, and its impact on Arab politics, identity, and public opinion.¹⁴ A key feature of satellite television in the region is that it is ‘free to air’

¹⁴ See, for example, Naomi Sakr, ‘From Satellite to Screen: How Arab TV Is Shaped in Space’, in Lisa Parks and James Schwoch, eds., *Down To Earth: Satellite Technologies, Industries, and Cultures* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press 2012); Shibley Telhami, *Reflections of Hearts and Minds: Media, Opinion, and Identity in the Arab World* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press 2006); Marc Lynch, *Voices of the New Arab Public: Iraq, Al-Jazeera, and Middle East Politics Today* (New York: Columbia

rather than subscription-based, meaning that a large number of channels are available for free to any household with a television and a satellite dish. Prior to the U.S. invasion in 2003, Iraqis were banned from owning satellite television dishes and had access only to state-run news stations. After the collapse of the Baathist regime, the sale of satellite dishes spread rapidly but unevenly throughout the country (Figure 1).¹⁵ According to a poll conducted by the U.S. State Department shortly after the invasion in 2003, while approximately 93% Iraqis reported owning a television, only about 33% reported access to a satellite dish at home, a friend's residence, or at work.¹⁶ In 2004, average national household ownership was approximately 37%, ranging from 3% in Al-Na'maniya in the province of

University Press 2006); S. Abdallah Schleifer, 'The Impact of Arab Satellite Television on the Prospects for Democracy in the Arab World', *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, 16 May 2005; and Fouad Ajami, 'What the Muslim World is Watching', *New York Times*, 18 November 2001.

¹⁵ On the spread of satellite television in Iraq following the U.S. invasion, see Deborah Amos, 'Confusion, Contradiction, and Irony: The Iraqi Media in 2010', *Shorenstein Center Discussion Paper D-58* (June 2010); Paul Cochrane, 'The "Lebanonization" of the Iraqi Media: An Overview of Iraq's Television Landscape', in *Media on the Front Lines: Arab Satellite TV in Iraq* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press 2006), 9-19; Gaiutra Bahadur, 'Critics Say Satellite TV Beams Western "Poison" Into Iraq', *Knight Ridder*, 12 May 2005; and Donna Abu-Nasr, 'Iraqis Snatching up Satellite Dishes', *Associated Press*, 27 June 2003. On increasing consumer demand and changes in the commercial satellite market in the region in this period, see Mark Holmes, 'The Middle East Remains Hotbed of Opportunity for Satellite Players', *Satellite Today*, 1 September 2008; Peter B. de Selding, 'Two-Firm Race for Mideast Satellite Television Market', *Space News*, 18 March 2008; and Monroe E. Price, 'Satellite Transponders and Free Expression', *Cardozo Arts & Entertainment Law Journal* 27/1 (2009) 1-35.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of State, 'Iraq Television Viewership Poll', 16 October 2003, accessed at <http://www.stanhopecentre.org/iraqmediapoll.shtml>.

Wassit to 78% in Baiji in the province of Salah al-Din.¹⁷ By 2006, average national ownership was approximately 88.3%, with little regional variation.¹⁸

This empirical strategy relies on several assumptions. First, a key assumption is that geographic variation in satellite television access differentiates regions based on their exposure to information about U.S. politics and policy. Several developments in the Iraqi media environment following the U.S. invasion support the claim that satellite television provided greater exposure to U.S. news, and therefore information about U.S. domestic debates over the Iraq war, than was available through other local media sources. Popular Arabic satellite television channels such as Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya provided more direct and detailed reporting on U.S. news and events than was provided by local Iraqi media.¹⁹ These Arabic-language news stations featured regular news reports, interviews, commentary,

¹⁷ United Nations Development Program, *Iraq Living Conditions Survey 2004* (Baghdad: Central Organization for Statistics and Information Technology, Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation 2005).

¹⁸ World Bank, *Iraq Household Socio-Economic Survey, Volume I: Objectives, Methodology, and Highlights* (Washington, DC, World Bank 2007), 28.

¹⁹ In addition, in February 2004 the United States created its own regional satellite television station, Al Hurra, to serve as an Arabic language news channel that would counterbalance what U.S. officials viewed as biased news coverage provided by other regional satellite news stations. Al Hurra's coverage was heavily tilted toward U.S. news content, including interviews with and speeches by U.S. officials in the United States and Iraq translated into Arabic. Although Al Hurra was tarnished by its association with the United States, media survey research has found that it was a widely watched channel. According to a 2007 survey, for example, Al Hurra's daily audience share ranked behind only Al Arabiya among satellite news channels in Iraq. See Dunia Andary, 'International Broadcasting in Iraq', *InterMedia Media Market Report 3457/08* (September 2007), 19; and Anne Marie Baylouny, 'Alhurra, the Free One: Assessing U.S. Satellite Television in the Middle East', *Strategic Insights* 4/11 (2005).

and debates on U.S. political developments, and frequently carried live coverage of speeches and interviews related to Iraq given by U.S. civilian and military officials. According to Schleifer, ‘Both Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya responded to widespread concern and anger in the Arab world with America’s deepening involvement in the region—in particular the invasion and occupation of Iraq and what has appeared as continued U.S. support for the Israeli occupation of the Palestinian territories—by increasing coverage of American political life.’²⁰ These included regular programming dedicated to covering U.S. politics, including weekly shows such as *From Washington* and *US Presidential Race*, which featured interviews with Bush administration officials and other prominent U.S. political figures.²¹ According to Telhami, ‘Today’s satellite Arab stations, especially Al Jazeera, give more direct voice to American officials than ever in the Arab world. Most of these stations give live coverage with verbatim translations of major news conferences by top American officials and military commanders related to Middle Eastern matters.’²² Watanabe reports that ‘Al Jazeera in particular has proved to be an important venue for the Arab world to hear firsthand interviews of Western officials... Since the war began, the channel has broadcast the military briefings of Iraqi, U.S. and British officials, along with the full speeches of Bush, Rumsfeld, and Secretary of State Colin L. Powell.’²³ For example, both Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya carried live coverage of congressional hearings in which U.S. General David Petraeus and U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, Ryan Crocker, provided testimony on the progress of the new surge strategy in September 2007, followed by live reports from correspondents in Washington and talk shows with both U.S. and regional experts to comment on the

²⁰ Schleifer, ‘The Impact of Arab Satellite Television on the Prospects for Democracy in the Arab World’.

²¹ Schleifer, ‘The Impact of Arab Satellite Television on the Prospects for Democracy in the Arab World’.

²² Shibley Telhami, ‘Hearing on the Broadcasting Board of Governors: Finding the Right Media for the Message in the Middle East,’ U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, 29 April 2004.

²³ Teresa Watanabe, ‘War with Iraq: Arab TV Shows A Different Conflict’, *Los Angeles Times*, 5 April 2003.

event.²⁴ One indicator of the dominance of U.S. media content in this newly available form of media was the opposition of Iraqi religious groups and leaders to the spread of household satellite television ownership in Iraq, which they believed increased the availability of Western and un-Islamic material. As Bahadur reports, ‘An ad for the satellite channel MBC’s new lineup – which includes “Inside Edition,” “Jeopardy!” and “60 Minutes” – declares: “So you can watch what THEY watch”’ (emphasis in original).²⁵

A second assumption underlying this research design is that Iraqi insurgent groups in this period of the conflict were decentralized and did not primarily receive direction or information through a national network structure. This assumption is consistent with the available research and reporting on the Iraqi insurgency.²⁶ The insurgency that emerged following the U.S. invasion was highly

²⁴ BBC Worldwide Monitoring, ‘Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya Carry Petraeus-Crocker Congressional Testimony,’ 11 September 2007; BBC Worldwide Monitoring, ‘Round-Up of Al-Jazeera, Al-Arabiya Coverage of US President’s Speech on Iraq,’ 14 September 2007.

²⁵ Bahadur, ‘Critics Say Satellite TV Beams Western “Poison” Into Iraq’. There is also evidence that insurgent groups in Iraq paid close attention to media coverage of U.S. policy debates. Kimmage and Ridolfo, for example, report that ‘Iraqi insurgent media...demonstrate an acute awareness of policy discussions and political battles in the United States and Europe’ and that ‘insurgents have regularly quoted and commented on battles between the White House and the U.S. Congress over Iraq policy, often in real time.’ Daniel Kimmage and Kathleen Ridolfo, ‘Iraq’s Networked Insurgents’, *Foreign Policy* (November/December 2007), 90.

²⁶ On the decentralized character of the Iraqi insurgency, see Shapiro and Weidmann, ‘Is the Phone Mightier than the Sword’; Benjamin Bahney, Howard J. Shatz, Carroll Ganier, Renny McPherson, and Barbara Sude, *An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of al-Qa’ida in Iraq* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation 2011); Ahmed S. Hashim, ‘Iraq’s Sunni Insurgency’, *The Adelphi Papers* 48/402 (2008); Brian Fishman, ‘Dysfunction and Decline: Lessons Learned from Inside Al Qa’ida in Iraq’, *Combatting Terrorism Center at West Point* (2009); Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al*

fractionalized both between and within the Sunni and Shia communities. This resulted in insurgent groups that were local, decentralized, and with loose or non-existent inter-group ties. The Sunni insurgency was made up of several groups, including groups led by former Baath party officials, intelligence operatives, and ex-military officers; Islamist and religious extremists groups; nationalists who objected to a foreign occupation; tribal-based groups; and a network affiliated with Al Qaeda. Divisions further emerged within these categories. For example, the Baath party-based insurgency split into several factions, including the Fida'iyyin Saddam, al-Awda, and Jaish Muhammad. There were also a wide range of Islamist factions such as Ansar al-Islam, Ansar al-Sunna, the Islamic Army in Iraq, and the 1920 Revolution Brigades. According to Bahney et al., the Sunni insurgency prior to 2006 had 'no discernable leadership.'²⁷

Data Sources

Qa'ida (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation 2008); International Crisis Group, 'In Their Own Words: Reading the Iraqi Insurgency', *Middle East Report No. 50*, 15 February 2006; and Michael Eisenstadt and Jeffrey White, 'Assessing Iraq's Sunni Arab Insurgency', *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy* (December 2005).

²⁷ Bahney, Shatz, Ganier, McPherson, and Sude, *An Economic Analysis of the Financial Records of al-Qa'ida in Iraq*, 12. Even if this were not the case, this research design would still test the causal effect of emboldening information via the population security mechanism, which turns on the response of Iraqi civilians. There is substantial evidence that many Iraqi civilians relied on international satellite television as an important source of news, based on both opinion polling and consumer market research. See Andary, 'International Broadcasting in Iraq'; Schleifer, 'The Impact of Arab Satellite Television on the Prospects for Democracy in the Arab World'; and U.S. Department of State, 'Iraq Television Viewership Poll'.

The data used in this analysis were compiled from a variety of sources, all linked at the district-month level.²⁸ To measure insurgent attacks on U.S military forces, we use the Multi-National Forces Iraq (MNF-I) SIGACT III dataset, which compiles insurgent attacks on military targets recorded by ‘Significant Activity’ reports filed by U.S. military units in Iraq beginning in February 2004.²⁹ To measure insurgent violence targeting Iraqi civilians, we aggregate attacks compiled by the *Iraq Body Count* (IBC) organization, which maintains a database of attacks on Iraqi civilians.³⁰ Each incident in the IBC dataset is documented by at least two independent media sources. These data exclude attacks that resulted in civilian fatalities that could not be linked to a specific incident, such as reports of large numbers of unidentified bodies at morgues in urban centers such as Baghdad, Kirkuk, and Mosul. To ensure these violence measures are comparable across districts of varying size, we scale insurgent attacks by district population.

To quantify the intensity of U.S. public debate over military withdrawal from Iraq, we construct an automated count of potentially ‘emboldening’ news articles reported in major U.S. news outlets.³¹

²⁸ We thank the Empirical Studies of Conflict project at Princeton University for their generous provision of data.

²⁹ Berman, Felter, and Shapiro, ‘Can Hearts and Minds Be Bought’.

³⁰ Luke N. Condra and Jacob N. Shapiro, ‘Who Takes the Blame? The Strategic Effects of Collateral Damage’, *American Journal of Political Science* 56/1 (2012), 167-87; and Madelyn Hsiao-Rei Hicks et al., ‘The Weapons That Kill Civilians – Deaths of Children and Noncombatants in Iraq, 2003-2008’, *New England Journal of Medicine* 360/16 (2009) 1585-8.

³¹ A full description of the search terms used to construct this measure is available in Appendix A. For similar approaches to measuring news media content, see Matthew Gentzkow and Jesse M. Shapiro, ‘What Drives Media Slant? Evidence From U.S. Daily Newspapers’, *Econometrica* 78/1 (2010) 35-7; and B. Dan Wood, ‘Presidential Saber Rattling and the Economy’, *American Journal of Political Science* 53/3 (2009), 695-709.

Using the *LexisNexis* database of U.S. Newspapers and Wires, we searched on a monthly basis for every article that referenced U.S. military withdrawal (or a commonly used synonym) in connection with Iraq from May 2003 to December 2004.³² This search string resulted an average of 118.85 articles per month. To construct our media variable, we define a ‘high media month’ as those months with an article count one standard deviation above the mean.³³ This choice corresponds to clear spikes in U.S. media discussion of military withdrawal from Iraq.³⁴ We also created dichotomous variables indicating one month prior to and one month following a high media month.

Quantifying potentially emboldening news articles is difficult and this approach raises several possible concerns. One issue is how narrowly to define the search criteria. Possible sources of bias

³² To confirm that U.S. news coverage corresponds with the content of Arabic satellite television news, we use the same key words to construct an additional media measure using an archive of a sample of transcripts of Arabic satellite station news broadcasts collected and translated by the BBC Worldwide Monitoring service (although because these archival sources represent a limited sample, we do not use this measure in our main analysis). To identify the sources for this measure, we use a media market survey of Iraq reported in Andary to identify Arabic satellite television news stations with a high daily audience share (Andary, ‘International Broadcasting in Iraq’). Appendix Figure B1 confirms that this measure is correlated with our measure of U.S. media coverage, with similar spikes in April and October of 2004. Appendix Table B4 replicates Figure 2 using the BBC Worldwide Monitoring measure, which confirms the absence of an effect.

³³ One concern with this approach is whether insurgent groups and Iraqi civilians pay more attention to the relative change in the level of withdrawal-related U.S. debate, rather than the absolute level of debate. A ‘high media’ month may carry little additional information about U.S. resolve if it immediately follows a previous high media month. We confirm that the main findings are also robust to a first differencing approach to the U.S. news measure, which tracks the change in the number of withdrawal-related articles from the previous month. See Appendix B.

³⁴ See Appendix Figure B1.

involve defining the search criteria so broadly as to include news articles that contains no discussion of U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq, and therefore should have been excluded, or so narrowly as to exclude relevant news articles. By requiring that the search terms appear close to one another in the text of the article, this search string is relatively narrow and errs on the side of avoiding the inclusion of irrelevant new articles. A second problem might be that this search string does not capture the context in which these specific terms were mentioned. A news article is included if it contained a report of an anti-withdrawal statement made by a U.S. official, for example Vice President Cheney's statement in December 2005 that 'I realize some have advocated a sudden withdrawal of our forces. This would be unwise in the extreme - a victory for terrorists, bad for the Iraqi people and bad for the United States'.³⁵ However, these references – such as Cheney's statement, which came in response to an increase in pro-withdrawal statements by Democratic party leaders – most likely still track with the wider U.S. political debate over Iraq policy, and therefore likely increase the perception of withdrawal as a salient political issue.

District-level measures of satellite television access were drawn from the 2004 Iraq Living Conditions Survey (ILCS), conducted by the United Nations Development Program.³⁶ This national survey asked whether a respondent's household assets included a satellite television dish. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics about Iraqi districts with 'low' and 'high' satellite television access in this period (defined as those districts in which over half of households report owning a satellite dish

³⁵Tom Raum, 'Cheney Says Terrorists Win if U.S. Loses Nerve in Iraq', *The Associated Press*, 6 December 2005.

³⁶ United Nations Development Program, *Iraq Living Conditions Survey 2004*.

among household assets).³⁷ There appear to be differences between low and high satellite television access districts. High satellite regions tend to have more insurgent attacks per month, larger Sunni populations, and slightly higher household incomes. From column (3) in Table 1, it is apparent that the nine districts that comprise Baghdad are outliers on a host of characteristics, including the frequency of insurgent attacks and population density. To rule out the possibility that our results are driven by these outlier districts, we present our results when both including and excluding Baghdad districts from the analysis.

Results

Our empirical strategy is based on the intuition that if the emboldenment claim were correct, an increase in U.S. domestic debate over Iraq war policy should have a greater impact on insurgent violence in those areas of Iraq with greater exposure to news about U.S. politics and policy.

Specifically, we assess whether an increase in media reporting related to U.S. military withdrawal in one month led to an increase in insurgent violence in Iraqi districts with high satellite television access compared to low satellite access districts in the following month. This empirical strategy leverages the fact that satellite television provided greater access to news about U.S. policy debates in this period than other forms of local Iraqi media. We therefore estimate the linear equation:

$$\begin{aligned}
 V_{it} = & \alpha + \beta_1(\text{high satellite access}_i * \text{high media month}_{t-1}) + \beta_2(\text{high satellite access}_i * \text{high media month}_t) \\
 & + \beta_3(\text{high satellite access}_i * \text{high media month}_{t+1}) + \beta_4 \text{high satellite access}_i \\
 & + \beta_5 \text{high media month}_{t-1} + \beta_6 \text{high media month}_t + \beta_7 \text{high media month}_{t+1} + \lambda_i + \delta_t + \varepsilon_{it}
 \end{aligned}$$

³⁷ The absence of an effect holds when replacing the high satellite television access indicator with a continuous measure of satellite television access in the interaction terms, suggesting that the results in Figure 2 are not dependent on a particular cut-off for defining a high satellite access district. See Appendix B.

where V denotes the level of insurgent attacks, λ_i denotes a district fixed effect, δ_t denotes a time fixed effect, and ε_{it} denotes an error term. The interaction terms denote the interaction of an indicator variable for high satellite television access and indicators for a high media month, the month before a high media month, and the month after a high media month. The estimate of interest is captured by the interaction term for high satellite access and the month following a high media month. We estimate the effect of this interaction term on two measures of insurgent violence: attacks targeting U.S. military forces, and attacks targeting Iraqi civilians. The inclusion of the other interaction terms controls for the possibility that prior insurgent violence is driving U.S. withdrawal-related media coverage. The inclusion of district fixed effects controls for any time-invariant district-level factors, while the month fixed effects control for any temporal changes common to all districts.³⁸

Figure 2 plots the coefficient and 95% confidence interval for the main interaction term, when including all districts in Iraq, when dividing the sample by majority sectarian group, and when excluding districts in Baghdad. There is no evidence that an increase in withdrawal-related U.S. media reporting led to an increase in insurgent violence in high satellite access districts compared to low satellite access districts. When including all districts in Iraq, high media months had no significant differential effect on insurgent attacks targeting U.S. military forces in high and low satellite access

³⁸ These results are robust to several other plausible alternative data choices and model specifications, including when including district-level covariates that might plausibly affect insurgent violence rather than district fixed effects; when including a continuous rather than binary measure of satellite television access in the interaction term; when using a direct of sample of Arabic satellite station news broadcasts; when first-differencing the media measure to capture the relative rather than absolute changes in the level of withdrawal-related reporting; and when controlling for the presence of U.S. military forces in a district. See Appendix B. The results also hold when matching low and high satellite districts on key covariates. See Appendix C.

districts in the following month (Panel A). Similarly, there appears to be no significant effect on insurgent attacks targeting Iraqi civilians (Panel B).

Model 2 in Panels A and B of Figure 2 replicates model 1, but excludes the nine Baghdad districts. Because Baghdad is an outlier in terms of insurgent violence, including these districts may conceal an effect otherwise evident in the majority of Iraqi districts. In addition, Baghdad is the only city in Iraq that contains multiple districts. Due to their close proximity, information may diffuse or spill over more quickly between high and low satellite areas of Baghdad, masking an effect present when comparing more geographically disparate communities. When excluding these districts, the estimated effects on insurgent attacks on military and civilian targets are similar.

Figure 2 also disaggregates Iraqi districts by sectarian composition. On average, Sunni-majority districts experienced greater insurgent violence in this period than other districts (see Appendix B). Yet, when restricting the analysis to Sunni-majority districts, there is no evidence that greater U.S. debate over military withdrawal is associated with an increase in insurgent attacks targeting U.S. military forces. For military attacks, the estimated coefficient is larger among Sunni-majority districts than in the full sample, but does not reach statistical significance. For insurgent attacks on civilians in Sunni-majority districts, there is evidence that insurgent groups targeted civilians less in Sunni districts with greater satellite television access following spikes in U.S. debate over military withdrawal. However, this decrease is substantively small. For the median population Sunni-majority district, this estimate implies a decrease of approximately 0.3 civilian attacks per district per month. This negative effect is somewhat larger when excluding the six Sunni-majority districts in Baghdad. When restricting the analysis to Shia-majority districts, the results are similar. Among these districts, there is no evidence that insurgent attacks targeting U.S. forces increased more in high satellite access districts following spikes in U.S. withdrawal-related media reporting, and the negative effect on civilian attacks is significant but substantively small. These results are not affected by excluding the three Shia-majority districts in Baghdad.

This empirical analysis raises several potential concerns.³⁹ First, a monthly lag structure may not capture the effect of potentially emboldening information if insurgent groups respond over a shorter or longer timeframe. The models in Figure 2 estimate the impact of new information about the level of U.S. resolve generated in one month on insurgent behavior in the next month. Insurgent groups may adjust to new information more quickly, seeking to maximize the impact of violent activity. A shorter timeframe may also be more plausible if insurgent groups engage in a timing substitution response rather than changing the overall level of violence.⁴⁰ Insurgent groups may have a greater capacity to shift the timing of attacks rather than increase the overall amount of attacks they can produce, condensing the violence they would have committed over several weeks into a shorter time horizon. To address the possibility that emboldening media content increased insurgent violence over a

³⁹ An additional concern is that this study's design does not have sufficient statistical power to conclude that there is evidence for a null effect, and instead may have failed to detect a positive effect. To address this concern, we determined the minimum effect size this sample would have sufficient power to detect, for our preferred specifications and assuming 80% power on a standard two tailed t-test (Appendix B). For military attacks, these specifications have sufficient power to estimate a 28 and 22 percent change in the mean difference between high and low satellite access districts, when including and excluding districts in Baghdad, respectively. For civilian attacks, we would require effect sizes of a 29 and 25 percent change in the mean difference between high and low satellite access districts for meaningful detection, when including and excluding Baghdad. The specifications including Baghdad have more limited power to detect an effect, likely due to the greater variance in monthly violence introduced by the districts in Baghdad. This study therefore has sufficient power to detect effect sizes of a similar magnitude to those previously reported in the literature using data from the civil conflict in Iraq (e.g., Shapiro and Weidmann, 'Is the Phone Mightier than the Sword').

⁴⁰ This substitution effect across both the time and type of illegal action has been observed in research on crime. See, for example, Radha Iyengar, 'I'd Rather Be Hanged for a Sheep than a Lamb: The Unintended Consequences of California's Three Strikes Law', *NBER Working Paper No. 13784* (February 2008).

shorter timeframe, Figure 3 replicates the main analysis using a weekly panel, and plots the coefficients for the interaction of satellite access with 1 – 4 week lags following a high media week, for each of the two dependent variables. Consistent with the main results, the coefficient plots demonstrate that the difference in insurgent violence between high and low satellite access districts did not increase in any of the four weeks following a high media week (and in fact may have decreased for civilian attacks in the fourth week). Alternatively, insurgent groups may adjust to new information over a longer time horizon. Figure 4 extends the main analysis over a four month window, again showing no evidence of a positive effect. There does not appear to be a plausible time lag structure in which emboldening information led to an increase in insurgent violence in this period of the Iraq conflict.

Second, if a national coordinating body or network determined the level and type of violence carried out by local insurgent groups, or if insurgent groups shared information about U.S. policy across districts with low and high satellite access, this research design would not be a valid test of the emboldenment hypothesis. There are four reasons supporting our interpretation that this pattern of null results is unlikely to be explained by either central coordination or information spill-over between districts. First, as already described, there is strong evidence that the Iraqi insurgency in the early stage of the conflict was highly fractionalized and decentralized. According to Hashim, the ‘presence of a plethora of insurgent groups in Iraq has had adverse implications for the articulation of a unified ideology and set of goals.’⁴¹ The assumption that insurgent access to information was also decentralized appears reasonable given what is known about the insurgency in this period. Second, even if there was some information sharing or diffusion among insurgent groups across high and low satellite access districts, this is unlikely to explain the absence of a response among Iraqi civilians. According to the logic of the population security mechanism, non-combatants and potential ‘fence-

⁴¹ Hashim, ‘Iraq’s Sunni Insurgency’, 24.

sitters' in the Iraqi civilian population also incorporate information about the perceived level of U.S. resolve into decisions about whether to passively support, collaborate with, or join local insurgent groups. Third, the most likely region for spillover among districts is Baghdad, where there are multiple, highly populated districts in close proximity. We show in Figure 2 that the null results persist even when excluding these Baghdad districts from the sample. Fourth, this research design would still capture the effect of differential exposure to U.S. news if this information diffusion dynamic was not immediate (e.g., if it took longer than one month for information to spread among insurgent groups).

Finally, if there was an omitted variable positively correlated with household satellite dish ownership but negatively correlated with insurgent violence, then this empirical strategy might fail to identify a potential causal relationship. There are three reasons why these results are unlikely to be biased by other local characteristics associated with high satellite access. First, the effect of these district-level characteristics should be captured by the difference-in-difference design, which accounts for the fact that high satellite regions are already different. Second, there is no difference in results when including district fixed effects, when controlling for variables associated with insurgent violence such as sectarian composition, household income, unemployment, population density, and local infrastructure (see Appendix B), or when using a matching procedure to minimize the differences between low and high satellite access districts on a set of key covariates (see Appendix C). Third, any alternative explanation must be correlated not only with satellite television access, but with the timing of any differential change in insurgent violence in low and high satellite districts. Constant district-level differences such as a higher Sunni population or the presence of an economically valuable resource such as oil might explain why certain districts are more or less violent, but not why differences in levels of violence between districts would change specifically following new media reporting about U.S. policy debates.

Conclusion

Overall, the results from this analysis provide no evidence supporting the emboldenment claim.

Following an increase in U.S. public debate over military withdrawal from Iraq, insurgent groups did not appear to capitalize on information about greater U.S. cost sensitivity by seeking to impose higher costs in the form of attacks on U.S. military targets. Greater U.S. debate over Iraq war policy also did not lead to an increase in insurgent attacks on Iraqi civilians. However, interpreting this pattern of evidence as a causal test of the emboldenment claim depends on the assumptions that satellite television news content carried more information about U.S. politics and policy debates than other locally available news sources, and that there was no central coordination of Iraqi insurgent groups in this period.

In directly assessing the impact of wartime democratic debate on insurgent violence, this evidence raises a number of avenues for future research. First, these findings raise the question of why greater U.S. public discourse related to the war did not have an impact on insurgent strategy. The emboldenment hypothesis suggests that insurgent groups are strategic actors that incorporate new information about the policies and actions of the incumbent government and its external supporters into decisions about the level and type of violence they initiate, seeking to get the largest ‘bang per buck’ from violent activity. The lack of an effect in the Iraq case suggests that insurgent groups may look to other informational cues to assess the counterinsurgent’s level of resolve, such as the visibility or actions of military forces on the ground, or that this information is not salient to their decision-making. An additional alternative explanation for the lack of an emboldenment effect may be that greater domestic opposition in the democratic counterinsurgent state has an offsetting negative effect on insurgent mobilization. If individuals are motivated to join an insurgency by a nationalist desire to defeat or eject an occupying military force, the belief that foreign military withdrawal is more likely might weaken the urgency or appeal of the insurgency’s goals, and thus reduce insurgent recruitment and support. Future studies could build on the approach in this paper by qualitatively reconstructing the decision-making of either a state or non-state actor to trace how their leadership perceived, weighed,

and incorporated new information about antiwar opposition within a democratic adversary, or by studying how public beliefs about the resolve of a democratic counterinsurgent state affect the difficult calculations civilians make in choosing whether to cooperate or not cooperate with insurgent groups.

Second, future research might investigate the impact of low resolve signals on other audiences in a counterinsurgency conflict. An unconditional commitment by an external force may have an unintended moral hazard effect of reducing the incentive for the incumbent government to take greater responsibility for its own security.⁴² Domestic antiwar opposition might carry the benefit of reducing the moral hazard effect of unconditional support for the incumbent government, even if scholars find evidence of an emboldenment effect on insurgent audiences. Wartime debate and dissent in democracies – whether in the form of popular protest, elite opposition, media scrutiny, or other forms of democratic deliberation – may therefore create a more complex set of strategic considerations for the key actors in a counterinsurgency conflict than described by the emboldenment argument alone.

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⁴² Barbara Elias, ‘The Big Problem of Small Allies: New Data and Theory on Defiant Local Counterinsurgency Partners in Afghanistan and Iraq’, *Security Studies* 27/2 (2018), 233-262.

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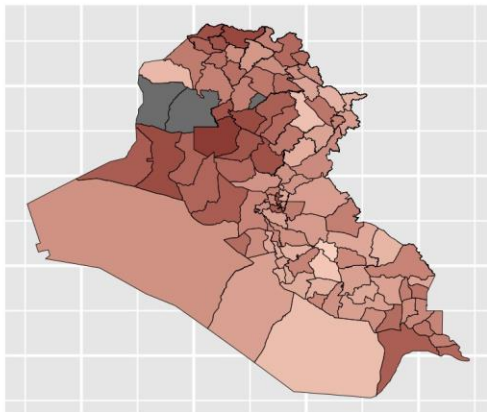
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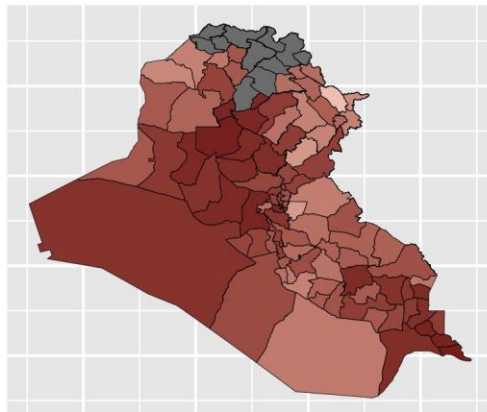
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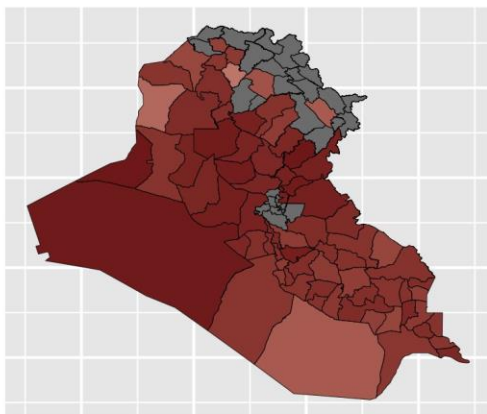
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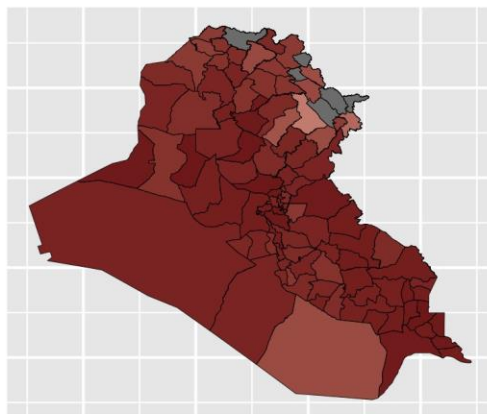


Figure 1. Average Household Satellite Television Access in Iraq by District

Notes: Figure reports the percentage of households that report owning a satellite television dish by district. Data are drawn from the 2004 UNDP Iraq Living Conditions Survey, the 2005 World Food Program Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis in Iraq Survey, the 2007 World Bank Iraq Household Socio-Economic Survey, and the 2007 World Food Program Comprehensive Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis in Iraq Survey.

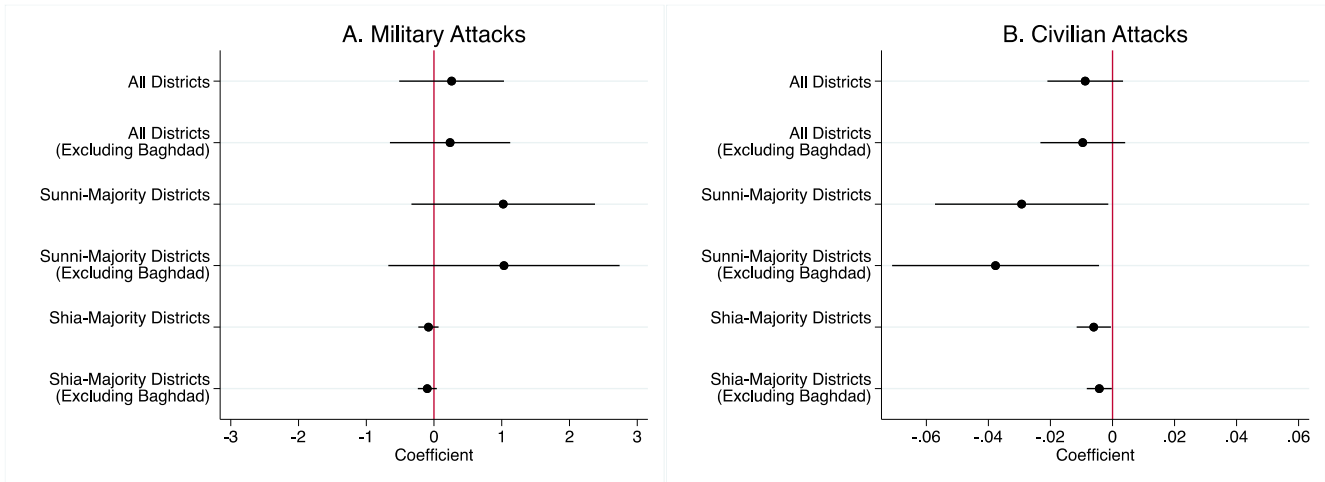


Figure 2. Effect of U.S. Withdrawal-Related Media Reporting on Insurgent Violence in Iraq

Notes: Figure plots coefficients and 95% confidence intervals for the interaction of an indicator for high satellite television access and an indicator for the month following a ‘high media’ month, when including an interaction for satellite access and one month prior to a high media month (and base terms), an interaction for satellite television access and a high media month (and base terms), and district and month fixed effects. Dependent variables are the number of insurgent attacks targeting U.S. military forces (Panel A) or Iraqi civilians (Panel B) per 10,000 residents per district-month. Standard errors clustered at the district level. Full regression results reported in Appendix B.

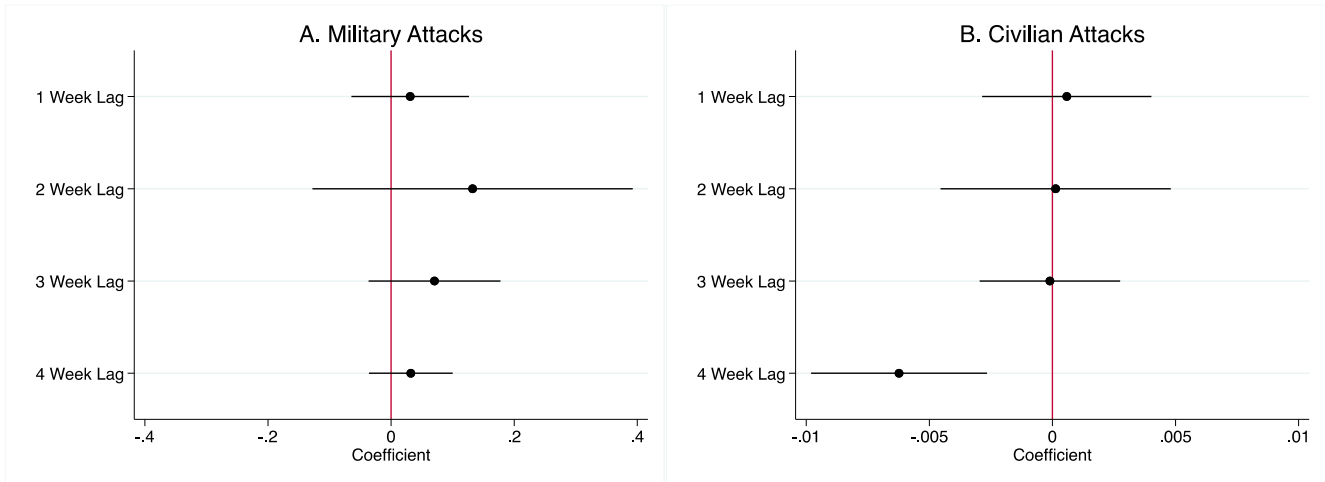


Figure 3. Effect of U.S. Withdrawal-Related Media Reporting on Insurgent Violence in Iraq: 1 – 4 Week Time Lags

Notes: Figure plots coefficients and 95% confidence intervals for the interaction of an indicator for high satellite television access and an indicator for the week following a 'high media' period over alternative weekly lags, when including both district and week fixed effects. Dependent variables are the number of insurgent attacks targeting U.S. military forces (Panel A) or Iraqi civilians (Panel B) per 10,000 residents per district-week. Standard errors clustered at the district level.

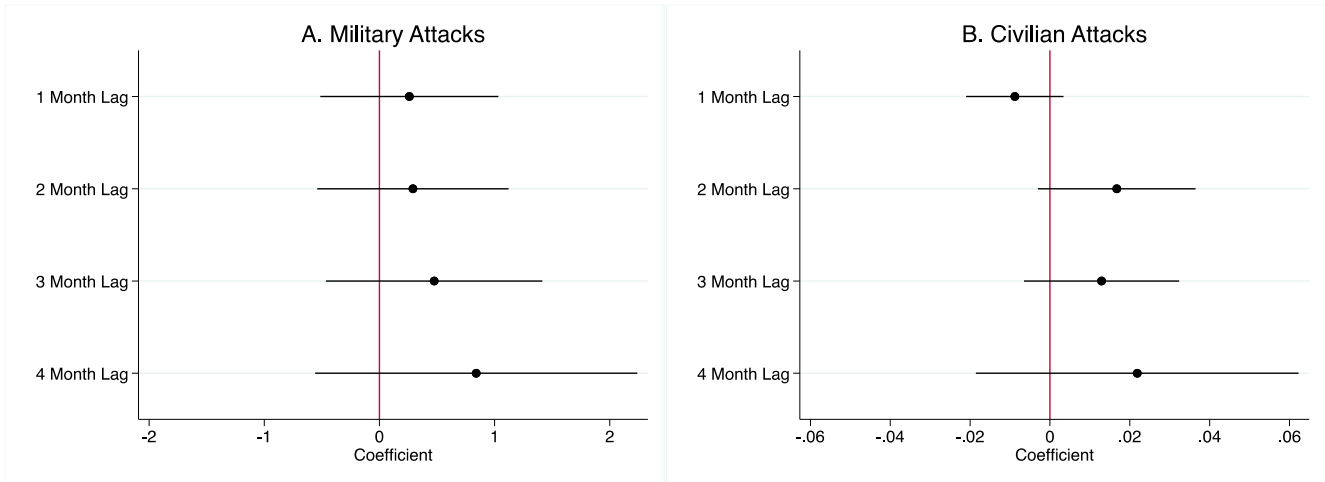


Figure 4. Effect of U.S. Withdrawal-Related Media Reporting on Insurgent Violence in Iraq: 1 – 4 Month Time Lags

Notes: Figure plots coefficients and 95% confidence intervals for the interaction of an indicator for high satellite television access and an indicator for the month following a ‘high media’ period over alternative monthly lags, when including both district and month fixed effects. Dependent variables are the number of insurgent attacks targeting U.S. military forces (Panel A) or Iraqi civilians (Panel B) per 10,000 residents per district-month. Standard errors clustered at the district level.

Table 1. Characteristics of Iraqi Districts by Satellite Television Access

	(1) Low Satellite Access	(2) High Satellite Access	(3) Baghdad Districts
Satellite Dish Access	.31 (.11)	.60 (.07)	.42 (.12)
Military Attacks	.53 (1.51)	1.77 (5.49)	2.21 (3.30)
Civilian Attacks	.0086 (.0367)	.0220 (.0594)	.0281 (.0639)
Population	241,720 (268,746)	293,498 (382,173)	675,294 (568,740)
Fraction Sunni	.16 (.27)	.52 (.41)	.51 (.17)
Mean Household Income	127,388 (19,564)	142,241 (32,022)	135,837 (15,824)
Unemployment	.10 (.05)	.09 (.05)	.11 (.05)
Underweight	.18 (.07)	.13 (.05)	.09 (.04)
Stable Supply of Electricity	.15 (.21)	.28 (.30)	.04 (.02)
Stable, Safe Water Supply	.77 (.23)	.74 (.29)	.58 (.37)
Household Damage	.24 (.21)	.22 (.23)	.11 (.04)

Notes: Measures of insurgent violence report the average number of insurgent attacks per 10,000 residents per district-month. High satellite access districts are those in which over half of households report owning a satellite dish among household assets. Income and wage data reported in Iraqi dinars. Data drawn from the Princeton ESOC Project, the 2004 UNDP Iraq Living Conditions Survey, and the 2005 World Food Program Food Security and Vulnerability Analysis in Iraq Survey. Standard deviation reported in parentheses.