

Choosing the Lesser Evil: Tribal Alignment Formation in Civil Wars

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Abstract : This research aims to understand the factors that affect the ways in which tribes perceive and respond to violent conflicts in fragile states, given that tribes are essential stakeholders in many conflict-ridden fragile states, whether Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya, Somalia, Nigeria, or Yemen. It explores the primary questions of why some tribes align with extremist groups while others align with states during civil wars and why some tribes switch alignments. It argues that tribes form and switch alignments based on their perception of threats to their traditional tribal structure (internal dynamics) and clientelist relationships (external dynamics). Put differently; threat perceptions lead them to choose either the state or extremist groups that will more likely secure their traditional structure and patronage networks. This study focuses on Iraqi tribes as a case study. It builds a theory of tribal alignment formation based on ethnographic fieldwork in the Middle East, with a particular focus on Iraqi Sunni tribes living in the Kurdish region of Iraq and Jordan. As a result of the interviews with tribal leaders and members, local journalists, researchers, and politicians, it concludes that complex (re)alignments of tribes can determine the course and outcome of the conflicts, either mitigating or escalating violence. This study contributes to the larger body of conflict management and peacebuilding literature by introducing tribes as non-state actors and exploring their interactions with other actors in civil wars.

Keywords : civil wars, tribes, alignment formation, side-switching, Iraq

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