Forgotten Actors:

Exploring the Use of Pro-government Militias

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From events in Iraq, Sudan or the Democratic Republic of Congo we know that pro-government militias and informal armed groups have a significant impact on conflict. Yet research lags behind events. Anecdotal information and reports of conflicts may create a picture of these groups as largely a cultural and tribal phenomenon. Alternatively there is a qualitative literature that references these groups in terms of a Weberian understanding of the state and locates them either as largely an historical phenomenon (Thompson 1994) or as a characteristic of ‘new wars’ (Kaldor 2007). To this point there has been no systematic cross-country comparative analysis of these groups. We know about the structural conditions and antecedents to conflict (e.g. Hegre et al 2001; Gleditsch and Ruggeri 2010), but less about the mix of forces engaged in conflict. Beyond particular conflict zones, we know little about the frequency and location of these groups. We do not know how closely their formation and operation is tied to culture or indeed to conflict. We do not know how closely they are tied to state capacity and state failure. We do not know how ‘new’ they are. Above all, we do not know why governments choose to create or align themselves with these groups. In this paper, we address these questions theoretically and empirically. We argue that there are general incentives, as adapted to local conditions, that influence governments’ decisions to use these groups. Consequently, the occurrence of these groups is unlikely to be constrained by culture or limited to failing states.

Why do governments create or align themselves with armed and unofficial groups, when they have regular forces at their disposal? Why would governments outsource the use of violence when we would expect them to seek and preserve a monopoly of violence? For example, what influenced Israel’s 1982 decision to delegate an operation to the Lebanese Forces Militia of the Christian Phalange when it had capable regular forces available (Mitchell 2004)? The conventional theoretical approach for explaining the existence of pro-
government militias is to conceive of these groups in relation to the Weberian understanding of a state and to the drive to monopolise the means of violence (Bates 2008; Kaldor 2007; Thompson 1994). According to Thompson (1994), who analysed the activities of informal armed groups (pirates and mercenaries) abroad, they are a feature of a state on the path to asserting sovereignty. Or based on Bates (2008) and Kaldor (2007), such groups occur in a state on the verge of breakdown. Yet Israel in 1982 belonged in neither category.

In contrast, we suggest there are general incentives for states to delegate violence to informal armed groups. If our argument is correct, then pro-government militias are not simply a phenomenon of failed or failing states. They should be widely distributed, and, if not timeless, not new either. In this way the theoretically interesting choice to delegate violence poses the empirical question of whether the use of militias by governments is limited to weak states or those in danger of failure. In the first parts of the paper we discuss earlier research on informal armed groups on the side of the government and present our theoretical argument. We then describe the data and measures to investigate whether these groups are limited by state capacity, conflict or culture and report the results of the empirical analysis.

**Weberian States and New Wars**

Janice Thomson (1994) describes how states, over a period of centuries, asserted a monopoly of violence, focusing on the external use of informal armed groups by the state. Mercenaries and privateers offered governments a low cost force and lower accountability for the actions that these groups committed. Using such groups “the ruler could claim it was a private operation for which s/he could not be held responsible” (Thomson, 1994, 21). She acknowledges the role of plausible deniability but argues that gradually this practice was eradicated and “in the course of the nineteenth century nonstate violence was delegitimated
and eliminated” (Thomson 1994, 143). Therefore, according to Thomson, pro-government informal armed groups were a characteristic of states in the process of formalising and centralising violence. Her analysis is historical rather than contemporary, but from this perspective the present-day activities of pro-government militias are a research puzzle worthy of analysis.

Mary Kaldor (2007), while starting with a similar conception of the state in a sense comes to the opposite conclusion, namely that the use of non-state armed groups represents a new phenomenon, a feature that distinguishes new wars and “organized violence in the global era”, as the book is sub-titled. She argues that “the new wars involve a blurring of the distinctions between war ...organized crime (violence undertaken by privately organized groups for private purposes, usually financial gain) and large-scale violations of human rights (violence undertaken by states or politically organized groups against individuals)” (Kaldor 2007, 2). In defining new wars she argues that “while the privatization of violence is an important element ... the distinction between what is private and what is public, state and non-state, informal and formal ... cannot easily be applied” (Kaldor 2007, 2). According to Kaldor then, pro-government militias are a new phenomenon that developed as a result of a blurring between public and private violence. Central also to the conception of new wars is the diminishing capacity of the state: “new wars arise in the context of the erosion of the autonomy of the state and in some extreme cases the disintegration of the state” (Kaldor 2007, 5). Kaldor’s argument associates, at least indirectly, pro-government militias with failing states. The “disintegration of the state” weakens the distinction between the formal and the informal, the public and private use of violence, which is seen as a key characteristic of new wars. Therefore, the privatization of armed force is less a distinct choice by governments and more the result of declining state revenues and growing corruption (Kaldor 2007, 6). Elsewhere, however, she notes that paramilitary groups “are often established by
governments in order to distance themselves from the more extreme manifestations of violence ... probably the case for Arkan’s Tigers” (Kaldor 2007, 98). This final claim disconnects the existence of pro-government militias from the fragility of states. It suggests a rather different reason for the existence of such groups that is similar to Thompson’s point about plausible deniability.

Militias are central to recent work on state failure. With an analysis ‘anchored’ in Weber’s work, Robert Bates (2008, 5) examined the relationship between political disorder and militias in Africa. The term “militia”, as Bates uses it, includes both rebel groups and pro-government groups. Similar to Kaldor’s argument, he links the existence of these groups to the weakness of the state: “in the late 1980s and early 1990s, militias assembled, states failed, and Africa faced rising levels of disorder” (2008, 12). Support for the argument is provided with data showing militia formation in African countries increasing over the period 1970-1995 (Bates 2008, 23). He describes his militia variable as “any report of an armed militia in a given country” (2008, 148). Fearon calls for a “fuller discussion of the militia presence variable, its coding and distribution in time and space” (2009, 362-63) and how it is distinguished from political disorder and civil war. Bates chooses Africa as his empirical focus because political disorder and state failure are so prevalent on that continent (2008, 7). This work invites the question of whether the analysis only applies to Africa in general and political disorder in particular or whether militias are separable from political order. But Bates’ (2008) study is the first we know of to provide a more systematic empirical analysis of the incidence of militias.

A Weberian approach encourages the examination of these groups as an indicator of disorder or state weakness. We adopt a different approach. Our investigation of these groups is not restricted to situations of conflict and disorder, nor is it restricted to failing and failed states. We treat the relationship between these groups and conflict and state failure as an
empirical question and investigate the occurrence of pro-government militias irrespective of a specific condition of states and governments. In short, we investigate why governments might delegate authority to use violence to these groups.

**Why Delegate?**

In contrast to the Weberian accounts, we do not begin with the assumption that the administration of violence is a special category of policy that is inseparable from the state. Policy makers may decide to surrender their ‘natural monopoly’ in this area for efficiency gains. A ‘majority position’ in the organization of violence, through regular military and police forces, rather than a monopoly may have advantages, without bringing into question the viability of the state. This approach separates the formation of these groups from political disorder, civil war or state failure. We expect the incentives to delegate the authority to use violence to work across different cultural, geographical and political systems and at different levels of state capacity. We now discuss these incentives to delegate in more detail.

The familiar incentives to delegate identified by economists emphasize the benefits of not having to undertake the task oneself (Laffont and Martimort 2002, 28). In applying this approach to pro-government militias, we identify four ‘economic’ incentives that might lead a government to ally with or create such groups. First, the term *force multiplier* is sometimes used to describe how these groups add to the armed capability of a government, often at less expense than regular forces. Furthermore, if communication is difficult, for example if the terrain is difficult and marked by natural barriers, such as mountainous regions or archipelagos, there is an incentive to recruit local groups in distributing and projecting force. Second, there is what might be called
the *force divider* incentive. Alliance with a group might be perceived by the government as a better alternative than fighting it. The group might not contribute much offensively, but the government perceives the costs of paying the compensation required for an alliance as lower than the costs of confronting this group on the side of the opponent. Third, there is the *force substitute* incentive. Under certain conditions, notably in a post-revolutionary period, governments may not trust the agents that are organised in the regular forces. Under these conditions, (new) governments may perceive non-state actors as more trustworthy than the regular forces. Finally, we identify the *knowledge and skills* incentive. Non-state actors may supply the knowledge and local cultural skills needed for effective combat. This incentive might be expected to be particularly strong in culturally diverse and geographically challenging countries.

Iraq provides illustrative examples of these incentives at work. Kaldor says Iraq currently represents a new war with high civilian casualties as it is “fought by loose networks of state and nonstate actors” (2007, 158), pointing again at the disappearing distinction between formal and informal use of violence. But eighty years earlier the first international effort to put Iraq on the path to freedom and independence relied on strikingly similar tactics, where local groups were used as low cost force multipliers. With the defeat of the Ottoman Empire and the end of World War I, Britain accepted the Iraq mandate from the League of Nations. Then as now it had the obligation to prepare the country for freedom and independence. Whether displacing Saddam Hussein or the Ottoman Empire, British administration provoked insurgencies in Iraq and disquiet at home. To replace economically and politically expensive British and Indian troops on the ground, Secretary of State for War, Winston Churchill, was willing to rely on technology - and on recruiting local forces. Militias of “Iraq Levies” recruited from local groups were the answer to the cost problem (see Omissi 1990). The reliance
on local fighters, an Assyrian Christian militia, resulted in civilian casualties. During the Mandate, a cynical commentator of this time recognised the efficiencies to be had from the strategy of employing local armed groups, hinting also at the force divider incentive: “The maintenance of local forces enables the Government to enlist the more hot-blooded members of the community, who, if they cannot fight for the Government, will undoubtedly be found fighting against it” (quoted in Omissi 1990, 64).

Today, the American recruitment of Sunni Awakening militias as part of the ‘surge’ in Iraq is also driven by these multiplier, divider and local knowledge incentives. We expect that the force substitute incentive, which points to some major dislocation between a government and the regular security apparatus, is less prevalent than these other economic incentives in this case. An example for the force substitute incentive can be seen in Iran. As a result of the Iranian revolution of 1979, the new government developed parallel security forces, including its Revolutionary Guard and Basij militia. The regular forces were deemed to be less reliable as a result of their links with the earlier regime. An alternative approach for a revolutionary regime would be to embed monitors within the regular forces as the Bolsheviks did with their commissars.

To this mix of ‘economic’ incentives that influence a government’s decision to use militias, we add four political incentives. First, where governments face ethnic or secessionist rebellion, they may seek to recruit from among the rebellious populations not just to co-opt or to gain local knowledge, but in order to legitimise their force. To achieve this force legitimacy, governments might integrate members from different ethnic groups into their regular forces, although this is often a rather difficult strategy. Instead, it might be simpler for governments to ally with local groups. Such recruits serve to support government claims of public support for the cause of these local groups. Occupying powers and colonial powers are also likely to seek out such recruits
to give their political and military mission more legitimacy. For example, when Great Britain faced the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya in the 1950s, they formed a “home guard” consisting of local recruits to show that their actions had some local support. The conflict is described as follows: “an internecine war waged between rebels and so-called loyalists – Africans who took the side of the government and opposed Mau Mau. This was partly brought about by a deliberate policy of the British to cultivate African opposition, by arming vigilantes, styled as Home Guards, to protect villages from attack and assist the police and military operation against the Mau Mau fighters” (Anderson 2005, 4). The policy meant that repressing the rebels was not just the exercise of an external force.

The second political incentive rests on the assumption that a government’s use of violence carries potential political as well as economic costs. Governments and more recently individual government leaders are seen as being accountable for the welfare of their civilians. Where they fall short of international standards of protecting their citizens they face the prospect of sanction or in rare cases individual punishment, such as Sudan's President Omar al-Bashir, for example. In this context, there is a temptation by governments to evade accountability for violence. We call this mechanism the force deniability incentive. Delegating to non-state groups allows governments to shift responsibility away from regular forces (see Fiorina 1985 and his ‘shifting responsibility model’). In Thomson’s (1994) terms, governments to this day see these groups as offering ‘plausible deniability.’ This political incentive suggests that strongly autocratic regimes without domestic institutions of accountability will be less likely to use pro-government militias.¹ At the international level, however, these regimes may be

exposed to international mechanisms of accountability that are linked to economic, political or legal sanctions and should thus still be susceptible to a deniability incentive.

Third, there is a political cost to troop losses. Public support for conflict is likely to be tied to the casualties taken. Delegating to non-state groups lowers the political cost of conflict for the government. The membership of these non-state groups is a negotiation between the individual and the group and is not the government’s responsibility. Thus, there is a force loss incentive. Governments are less likely to be held accountable and responsible for the losses incurred by informal armed groups. We expect this incentive to be weaker for autocratic regimes and stronger for regimes dependent on wider public support.

Finally, there is the force disgrace incentive. The deployment of troops “engages national honor” (Fearon 1994, 581). Delegating to non-state actors lowers the engagement of national honour for government leaders. If a militia is defeated it does not bring the loss of honour associated with the defeat of regular forces. Fearon’s work suggests this incentive is stronger for democracies compared to non-democracies. Nevertheless, one could argue that other regimes will be sensitive to this incentive. Argentina’s military government suffered for the defeat in the Falklands, and arguably unlike a democracy it had little else on which to base its legitimacy than the delivery of violence.

These general economic and political incentives inform a government’s demand to ally with these groups or to encourage the formation of these groups. As pointed out already, some of these incentives are likely to be stronger under certain conditions. But governments respond to these incentives in the context of what is offered by the local political and social environment. The groups are a product of general incentives as
adapted to local conditions. Local conditions add diversity to the membership and organization basis of such groups. The supply of such groups is likely to be influenced by pre-existing cleavages, such as ethnicity or partisan differences which are independent from the government. Groups are likely to align with governments if this link promises to be beneficial to the armed group. Advantages of aligning with governments include material benefits, such as the supply of weapons or logistic benefits, and non-material benefits, such as government legitimacy for their privately motivated violence. Table 1 below summarises our arguments for a government’s incentive to create or align with a non-state armed group.

Table 1. Government incentives for using non-state armed groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic Incentives</th>
<th>Political Incentives</th>
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<tr>
<td>Force multiplier</td>
<td>Force legitimacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Force divider</td>
<td>Force deniability</td>
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<tr>
<td>Force substitute</td>
<td>Force loss</td>
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<tr>
<td>Knowledge &amp; skills</td>
<td>Force disgrace</td>
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From the arguments above we derive testable hypotheses that conceive the existence of these groups as a result of incentives to delegate, rather than being driven by certain levels of state incapacity or as a feature of new wars. Several of the incentives listed in Table 1 are likely to be observed when a government faces an armed struggle and is involved in a civil conflict within its own borders. During a civil war, governments are likely to use PGMs to bolster their formal security forces (force multiplier effect) while trying to avoid more people joining the rebel forces (force divider effect). While fighting an armed opposition, a government encounters a
heightened risk of military failure, which we expect to lead to a higher probability of PGMs being used in order to avoid the loss of regular forces and the disgrace that is attached to that (force loss and force disgrace effects). These mechanisms might also come into play when the government faces a less extreme case of opposition, for example during popular unrest in the form of demonstrations, strikes or riots. During such less violent and organised forms of opposition, governments might want to suppress such dissent but without being seen as acting too harshly against the protesters. In these instances the use of informal armed groups will allow governments to distance themselves from the actions of PGMs (force deniability effect), but also keep face in the case of failure to overcome popular dissent (force disgrace effect). Therefore, whenever a government is under internal threat, we assume that the economic and political incentives make the use of pro-government militias more likely, irrespective of the position of the state on the path to sovereignty or cultural or regional characteristics.

H1: Pro-government militias are more likely to be present during a civil war.

H2: Pro-government militias are more likely to be found during times of domestic dissent.

In countries with populations that are spread across large and difficult terrain the incentive for governments to make use of local knowledge (knowledge & skills incentive) to fight an insurgency or to provide general security is even greater than in smaller countries. We therefore expect:

H3: Pro-government militias are more likely to be found in countries characterised by difficult and divided terrain, large geographical areas and archipelagos.
Governments with ethnically divided or polarised populations are likely to be more sensitive to the force legitimacy incentive than governments with more homogeneous populations. For example, in countries where one ethnic group dominates political (and possibly military) power, it is more important for the government to also be aligned with other ethnic groups. Additionally, under such ethnically diverse, or unbalanced, conditions, the knowledge & skills incentive will be particularly strong, as local groups will be used to extract information from their particular constituencies.

H3: Pro-government militias are more likely to be found in ethnically diverse countries.

Newly established regimes might be more sensitive to the political incentives we have outlined above. Governments in such regimes are concerned about public support compared to well-established regimes. The incentives of force deniability and force loss are expected to increase the likelihood of observing pro-government militias under newly established regimes.

H4: Pro-government militias are more likely to be found in newly established regimes compared with well-established ones.

A similar argument can be applied to fully institutionalised versus mixed regimes. Fully institutionalised democracies are likely to be in a more difficult position to establish or align themselves with PGMs due to the entrenched mechanisms of public scrutiny and accountability. On the other end of the spectrum, authoritarian regimes that securely control all aspects of governance might be less in need of PGMs, partly because their force multiplier effect is unnecessary and partly because such regimes might be less worried about the force legitimacy and force deniability effect. We draw two hypotheses from these arguments.
H5: Pro-government militias are less likely to be found in fully institutionalised democracies than in authoritarian regimes.

H6: Pro-government militias are more likely to be found in mixed regimes than in authoritarian regimes.

Research Design, Data and Measures

For the empirical analysis we use a cross-national dataset for the period 1981-2007. The dataset includes all countries over 1 million population with the exception of Lebanon and Somalia. The dependent variable measured active pro-government militias in each country-year. For the analysis, we use logit models.

To generate cross-national time-series information on the presence of pro-government militia, we carried out data searches of electronic archives of world-wide news sources. As Kaldor (2007) pointed out, the distinction between what is private and public, state and non-state, is often blurry. This problem is not limited to the administration of violence. Scholars interested in other policy areas, notably economic and welfare policy, encounter similar problems. This issue indicates the need for research in this area and the application of a uniform definition. We define a pro-government militia as a group that is identified by the source as pro-government or sponsored by the government (national or sub-national); is identified as not part of the

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2 These countries were excluded to the lack of a clear government, to which militia groups could be assigned.

3 Labels used for such groups are “militias”, “paramilitary groups”, “irregular forces”, “death squads” or “vigilantes.

4 The literature on corporatism addresses this issue.
regular security forces, is armed and has some level of organisation. We expect that
one problem with the data is the likely under-representation of pro-government militias.
Since we track countries through more than two decades of reports, we reduce the
problem of bias due to news reports only mentioning groups when they are active.

As we rely on news sources to describe the link of a group to government, another
difficulty is the potential misspecification of a militia’s relationship to the
government by the source. Using multiple sources across time is likely to reduce this
problem. If the source is ambiguous about the relationship between the national
government and the group, or if different sources contradict each other in their
classification of the link between the government and the group, more information is
sought from country-specific sources and academic research.

As explanatory variables we include a dummy variable for fully institutionalised
democracy based on Polity IV, where the indicator is coded 1 for all country-years
when the original polity2 variable is greater than seven (Bueno de Mesquita 2004;
Davenport and Armstrong 2004). Mixed regimes are captured with a dummy variable
that codes the range between zero and 7 from the original polity2 variable as one, zero
otherwise. The newness of a regime is captured with the variable durable from Polity
IV. The measure for ethnic fractionalisation comes from the Ethnic Power Relations
dataset (Cederman, Min and Wimmer 2009) data. Civil war is taken from the

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5 Criterion 1: The group is identified as pro-government or sponsored by the government by the source, either
national or sub-national. Our focus is national governments, but if a group is allied with a sub-national
government and the national (e.g. federal) government is neutral or supportive towards this group, it is included.
We focus on domestic groups, meaning pro-government groups that are active within their own borders.
Criterion 2: The group is not the regular state security force as described in government information or other
sources on armed forces and police, although the group may operate with the regular state security forces, or
even be composed of members of the security forces organized clandestinely as an unofficial or informal group
(death squads). Criterion 3: The group is armed. They are equipped for violence, but do not have to commit
violence to be included. Criterion 4: The group has some evidence of organisation (for example an identifiable
leader, or name, or a geographical, ethnic, religious or political basis) to exclude a “flash” or spontaneous mob.
ACD/Uppsala dataset (Gleditsch et al 2001), and strikes, riots and demonstrations are based on Bank’s Cross-National Time-Series data. The logged proportion of mountainous areas is taken from Fearon and Laitin (2003) and logged real GDP per capita and logged population size are from the World Bank.

**Empirical Analysis**

The countries with the most PGMs over the 1981-2007 period were Indonesia (37 PGMs), Sudan (22 PGMs), Philippines (19 PGMs) and Sri Lanka (10 PGMs). All of these four countries suffer from regional or even secessionist conflicts, where ethnic or religious groups follow this geographical division. As we discussed above, under these conditions we would expect that the knowledge and skills incentive, as well as the force legitimacy and force deniability incentives to be particularly strong.

Figure 1 shows some the number of active groups per year, the number of countries with active PGMs per year, as well as the number of active civil wars. The spike of active PGMs around the turn of the century, as well as the subsequent decline, could be linked to the availability of sources. During the 1980s sources and reporting seems to have been more limited, while a certain time lag in reporting on these groups might partially account for their more recent decline in numbers. But the graph highlights that these groups exist also independently and outside of the condition of civil war.

Figure 1: Some time trends
Figure 2: PGM activity by level of democracy
Figure 2 shows the percentage of country-years for which we found PGM activity, separately for each level of democracy, using the Polity2 variable from the Polity dataset. Figure 2 highlights that regimes at the extremes of the spectrum, meaning both fully established autocracies and fully institutionalised democracies, are the least likely to have active pro-government militias. PGM activity was found most commonly in semi-democracies, i.e. regimes with some democratic elements in their political structures.
Table 2: Preliminary & incomplete regression results of PGM activity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Odds ratio</th>
<th>Robust Std. Err.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Democracy</td>
<td>0.370***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed regimes</td>
<td>1.659***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regime durability</td>
<td>0.992***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic fractionalisation</td>
<td>2.160***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civil war</td>
<td>9.985***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrations</td>
<td>1.082*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strikes</td>
<td>1.007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riots</td>
<td>1.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logged mountainous reg</td>
<td>1.028</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logged GDP per capita</td>
<td>1.205**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Logged population size</td>
<td>1.650***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

$\chi^2$ = 468.58***
Pseudo R$^2$ = 0.643
Correctly predicted cases = 93.80%
N = 3500

*** p<0.001, ** p<0.01
. ** p<0.05

Table 2 shows some very initial and incomplete results of a logistic regression. Robust standard errors clustered on countries are used. The results are generally consistent with the theoretical argument. Although not completely beyond temptation (from Figure 2 some 10 percent of full democracies had PGMs), full democracies are significantly less likely to use these groups. That a small number of full democracies do resort to these groups is contrary to what is implied by a Weberian approach. In contrast countries with large populations, a poorer standard of living, mixed regimes, new regimes, ethnically fractionalised regimes, and regimes facing threats are more likely to use these groups. A state failure argument might draw some support from these results, if state failure is operationalised as GDP per capita (Fearon and Laitin 2003), but with 30 percent plus of countries having these groups over this time period the frequency and distribution likely exceeds what is expected from this theoretical perspective.
References


Lars-Erik Cederman; Brian Min; Andreas Wimmer, 2009-05-01, "Ethnic Power Relations dataset", http://hdl.handle.net/1902.1/11796 UNF:5:k4xxXC2ASI204QZ4jqvUrQ== V1


