From Mimicry to Perfidy

The laws of war make scant attempt to regulate *ruses de guerre*. For instance, Article 37.2 of Protocol I to the Geneva Conventions explicitly states:

Ruses of war are not prohibited. Such ruses are acts which are intended to mislead an adversary or to induce him to act recklessly but which infringe no rule of international law applicable in armed conflict and which are not perfidious because they do not invite the confidence of an adversary with respect to protection under that law. The following are examples of such ruses: the use of camouflage, decoys, mock operations and misinformation.

More specific examples of potentially lethal but legally permitted deceptive signaling in wartime are false retreats to lure enemies into an ambush where they will be killed or captured, artifices that make one’s forces seem larger or smaller than they are, removing or shrewdly repositioning signposts, and issuing false orders to enemy troops using intercepted enemy codes and passwords. A nonjudgmental attitude toward such wartime deceits is presumably a concession to reality as virtually all theorists of war and civil war including Sun-Tzu (2006, 42) (“War is founded on deception”), Ibn Khaldun (2005, 253) (“Trickery is one of the most useful things employed in warfare”), Machiavelli (1996, 299) (“he who overcomes the enemy with fraud is praised as much as the one who overcomes it with force”), Hobbes (1968, 188) (“Force, and Fraud, are in war the two Cardinal virtues”), and so forth contend that war inevitably involves deception. The character Ulysses in Euripides’s play *Philoctetes* (1953, 167) already explained the reason succinctly in 409BC:

NEOPTOLEMUS: Don't you believe it wrong to tell a lie, sir?
ULYSSES: No, if success and safety depend upon it.¹

So why, given an ancient and ongoing tolerance for wartime deception, have the laws of war traditionally singled out “perfidy” as a war crime (Vattel, 576-581) even though as a practical matter, it remains a common form of wartime trickery? Classic and intuitively repugnant examples of perfidy include transporting belligerents in ambulances to conduct surprise attacks, pretending to be wounded to draw the enemy into shooting range, and holding up a white flag with the aim of lowering the adversary’s guard. The two intriguingly different instances of perfidy on which I will be concentrating in this paper are dressing as a noncombatant and wearing the uniform of the enemy during combat. To say that perfidious deception is especially blameworthy because it betrays the faith which belligerents place in the enemy’s routine conformity to the laws of war or that “Perfidious betrayals inflict systemic harm on the law of war as a guarantee of minimally humane interaction” (Watts, 106) is only a beginning. So how can we explain the moral intuition behind the exceptional criminalization of perfidy among otherwise tolerated *ruses de guerre*? To offer a provisional and partial answer to this question, I propose to use “identity mimicry” as the morally neutral category to which the rankly immoral forms of perfidy of my concern belong and, on this basis, to explore the contours of perfidious and non-perfidious impersonation in a single recent conflict, the Iraqi civil war of 2006-2008. The purpose of an in-depth look at a single concrete case is general and theoretical, namely, to identify some typical and uniquely iniquitous consequences of perfidy that arguably justify its exceptional classification as a legally impermissible (although factually irrepressible) ruse of war. Nothing hinges, for this inquiry, on one nation’s exceptional refusal to ratify recent international
protocols or on the debatable applicability of the laws of war to counterterrorism or counterinsurgency campaigns.

The Context

That “Baghdad sank into sectarian violence in 2006” is well known, “with Shia death squads storming into Sunni neighborhoods to kill civilians and Sunni suicide bombers retaliating with car bomb attacks on crowded Shia street markets.” (Steele 2008, 193) Two terrifying years of sustained bloodletting followed. Then, in 2008, inter-communal conflict gradually subsided. The lull between the storms lasted for half a decade without, however, ceasing to roil and torment daily life. Reported civilian casualty rates in 2009 and 2010 were about one-sixth what they had been in 2006-2008. This steep decline in violence from the earlier period “when some 60 to 100 bodies were being found beside the roads every morning, the victims of Sunni-Shia sectarian slaughter” (Cockburn 2008) led some commentators to speak prematurely of the end of the Iraqi civil war. But after the American withdrawal in December 2011 and eight years of one-sided Shiite ascendancy within Iraqi state institutions under Nuri al-Maliki, the flimsy truce collapsed spectacularly in 2013 (Khedery 2014). Shocking sectarian violence, in a different guise, once again engulfed the country. By the summer of 2014, the monthly civilian death toll soared back into the thousands. By the spring and summer of 2015, the Iraqi state had effectively ceased to exist (Gardner 2015).

While attempting a rough overview of the highly variegated forms of deceptive signaling employed by the warring parties in 2006-2008 Iraq, I will focus, for the reasons mentioned, on identity mimicry. The subject is intrinsically fascinating, as I hope to show, but it will also allow us to isolate those forms of wartime imposture that, on consequentialist grounds, deserve special moral opprobrium.

Much of the historical material on which this essay is based comes from journalist-recorded episodes of strategic mimicry that apparently took place during the inter-communal violence of 2006-2008. From scholarly and governmental, as well as journalistic reports, we can infer with some confidence that an eruption of Iraqi sectarian violence between the February 2006 Samarra shrine bombing and the March 2008 “Charge of the Knights” attack by Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki’s Shiite-led government on the Shiite militias of Basra was accompanied by elevated rates of strategic mimicry, defensive as well as aggressive. In 2006-2008, a veritable avalanche of newspaper articles testified that “imposters are rife throughout Iraq” (Wong and von Zielbauer 2006). After 2008, these write-ups gradually tapered off. Not all of the earlier accounts of impersonation may have been trustworthy, to be sure. Nevertheless, the copiously documented mimicry spike of 2006-2008 provides the take-off point for the analysis that follows. My emphasis will be on the way even brief episodes of defensive and aggressive mimicry can permanently change the strategic calculations and behavior of both models and dupes. Such middle-range consequences of false identity signaling in a context rife with treacherous killing provide a promising key for understanding the traditional classification of perfidy, unlike other forms of wartime deceit, as a war crime. I conclude with a brief look at the causes and consequences of perfidy’s double, namely the tactic of policemen who pretend to be members of sectarian death-squads pretending to be policemen in order to shift responsibility for their own heinous crimes.
From Camouflage to Identity Mimicry

Hiding runs a wide gamut. The simplest form of concealment is grimly illustrated by the Shia man who, while an ISIS death squad slaughtered his family, “hid for eight hours in the middle of a stack of straw from Iraq’s early summer harvest, not daring to look out.” (Spencer 2014). Such purely defensive lying-low obviously has nothing perfidious about it, being aimed not at treacherously killing but solely at avoiding being killed. One level up things become more complicated, however. There we encounter anti-predatory and predatory camouflage whereby both hunted and hunters modify their personal appearance to blend invisibly into the background hoping to avoid detection by predators and prey. Let us first consider anti-predatory and therefore non-perfidious camouflage.

In 2006-2008 Iraq, vigilantes, insurgents, and paramilitary groups on the one hand, and potential targets of ethnic cleansing and sectarian revenge on the other, shared an incentive to travel incognito. In a typical first-hand account, an Iraqi doctor, fearful of being kidnapped, reported that, when walking to the Ministry of Health in 2005, “he wore dirty clothes and kept his hair uncombed, to avoid attracting attention” (Rosen 2009c). In 2004, similarly, female students at Baghdad University explained their decision to adopt the headscarf in a similar way: “The whole point of wearing the scarves now was to be anonymous and unimportant, to avoid being singled out and followed, or kidnapped, or shot. It was more than a matter of blending in. It was a matter of disappearing into the landscape.” (Spinner 2004).

Unable to resemble inoffensive pedestrians, professional guards wearing Kevlar and bristling with firepower extemporized their own form of camouflage. Hired to protect politicians and diplomats from assassination, foreign security contractors not only varied travel routes and schedules daily, they also changed cars, “switching from ‘high-profile’ vehicles (like F-350s) to ‘low-profile’ vehicles (old sedans).” (Rosen 2007) This vehicular downgrad helped them resemble inoffensive motorists and thus avoid coming into the crosshairs of hostile snipers. As this example suggests, needless to say, such defensive camouflage can also abet conduct that is considerably more aggressive.

Potential targets naturally do their best to resemble non-targets. But endeavoring to slip unnoticed into the interminable traffic or a milling crowd needs to be distinguished from pretending to belong to a police or military unit or to a well-defined sectarian group not one’s own. For ordinary unarmed Iraqis, falsifying one’s sectarian identity was an equally natural defensive response to savage sectarian cleansing and revenge killings. Here is one account of the fatal effect of too easily legible sectarian identity signs in an area south of Baghdad known as the Triangle of Death: “There, some of the most brutal Sunni extremists made their stand. These were monsters who threw up fake checkpoints to catch Shiites, judging them culpable because of a tape in the car or the name on an identification card. They tortured them, beheaded and mutilated their bodies.” (Rubin 2009). Such blood-curdling prospects created a strong incentive for Shiites to keep forged papers and tape recordings typical for Sunnis in their glove compartments.

The chances of successful mimicry naturally decreased when debutant mimics began to be cross-examined skeptically at a traffic stop about their fake documents or trompe l’oreille music. Deceptive signaling, also during civil wars, is likely to succeed or fail depending on the accuracy of the lie-detectors in place. How fool-proof these systems turn out to be hinges not only on the motivations of those assigned to discriminate mimics from models, of course, but also on their capacities which are always limited to some extent.

Trying to specify the conditions that make detection avoidance easier or more difficult helps illustrate a subtle dynamic that is well-worth bringing into focus before we plunge further into the Iraqi story. Potential human prey wishing to escape prowling human predators may at first seek anonymity, as mentioned, trying to keep their heads down or “playing dead” to avoid attracting attention. Once face-to-face inquiry is initiated, however, they will be compelled to graduate from
rudimentary camouflage (seeking to avoid notice) to a more demanding kind of mimicry (pretending falsely to be a member of a specific non-prey group) under the pressure of ramped-up detection efforts. Staying guardedly silent in response to a direct question—such as “Are you a Shi’i or a Sunni?”—would be more than futile; it would be a dead giveaway. Formulated more abstractly, impostors must devise new and more sophisticated strategies of deception when efforts to unmask impostors are seriously ramped up.

The way in which persistent grilling can compel escalation from merely withholding information to conveying a deliberate untruth was already suggestively discussed by Francis Bacon in his 1625 essay on “the hiding and veiling of a man’s self,” dealing with some of the common payoffs and pitfalls of deceptive signaling. Bacon distinguished between two kinds of passing, namely, “dissimulation, in the negative; when a man lets fall signs and arguments, that he is not, that he is” and “simulation, in the affirmative; when a man industriously and expressly feigns and pretends to be, that he is not.” [Bacon, 77] Two examples of pretending to be what you are not would be a Sunni posing as a Shiite to avoid the wrath of Shiite death squads and members of a death squad pretending to be policemen to persuade credulous victims to open their front doors. A nice example of pretending not to be what you are is T. E. Lawrence wearing indigenous attire to avoid being singled out among ordinary fighters as a high-value target by Turkish snipers when leading the 1916-1918 Arab revolt against the Turks (Wilson 1990, 334–335).

True, Bacon’s distinction between simulation and dissimulation may seem overly refined, since you cannot pretend to be other than you are without pretending not to be what you are and vice versa. But the emphasis is different in the two cases and closely tracks the distinction between identity-mimics who try to pass for specific models and mere camoufleurs who seek to melt invisibly into the background. Camouflage works by allowing the potential target to fly beneath the radar and escape the dupe’s attention. Identity mimicry, by contrast, assumes that the mimic has come to the dupe’s attention and therefore has to succeed in feigning a specific identity or membership in a social group not his or her own. Both camouflage and identity mimicry, as Bacon’s account suggests, far from being restricted to situations of violent conflict, are ubiquitous in social life. This is true, to cite Bacon again, because both strategies not only “lay asleep opposition” but also abet “surprise,” increasing the possibility of success and survival in hostile environments. Feigning and concealment are widely practiced, in fact, because “where a man’s intentions are published, it is an alarum, to call up all that are against them.” (Bacon, 78.)

The contest between hunters and hunted is a case in point. The human species, alongside others, evolved to pounce unexpectedly and to cope with predators who pounce unexpectedly. Two strategic purposes of deceptive signaling are to facilitate and to confound surprise attacks or, formulated differently, to let sleeping (guard and attack) dogs lie. But appearing unremarkable to elude predators or catch prey off guard will not suffice under the glare of interrogation lights. Developed to neutralize wily arts of deception, cross-examination can quickly dislodge the would-be secret-keeper from his incognito posture and propel him into a tortuous labyrinth of mendacity. This, Bacon continues, is because persistent inquisitors “will so beset a man” who simply wants to hide his identity or intentions “with questions, and draw him on, and pick it out of him, that, without an absurd silence, he must show an inclination one way; or if he do not, they will gather as much by his silence, as by his speech.” As a result, “no man can be secret, except he give himself a little scope of dissimulation; which is, as it were, but the skirts or train of secrecy.” (Bacon 1985, 77-78.) To reformulate Bacon’s distinction: aggressors and defenders may resort to mimicry (pretending to be someone they are not) when the much simpler tactic of blending invisibly into the environment (camouflage) proves inadequate due to the out-of-the-ordinary inquisitiveness of the now wide-awake former dupes targeted by deceptive signaling.
Props

This brings us back to impersonation in civil-war Iraq. The first task of a false-identity signaler, before acquiring fabricated documentation, is to conceal or dispose of genuine but incriminating documentation. Here is a recent report about how a Yazidi Kurd who “spent years working for the U.S. Army in his area” prepared his escape from the ISIS onslaught: “Karim had time to do just one thing: burn all the documents that connected him to America—photos of him posing with Army officers, a CD from the medical charity—in case he was stopped on the road by militants or his house was searched. He watched the record of his experience during the period of the Americans in Iraq turn to ash, and felt nothing except the urge to get to safety.” (Packer 2014). Scrapping real papers is, going back to Bacon, “dissimulation, in the negative; when a man lets fall signs and arguments, that he is not, that he is” while presenting false papers to an inspector is “simulation, in the affirmative; when a man industriously and expressly feigns and pretends to be, that he is not.” (Bacon, 77.)

During the 2006-2008 phase of the Iraqi civil war, Iraqi targets of sectarian kidnapping and murder had a very strong incentive to try their luck at simulation in the affirmative: “Ali Abdel Hussein al-Asadi, 41, an employee with Iraq's Commission on Public Integrity, said his father, a Shiite, was kidnapped from his Sadiyah home in July by men who claimed to be from the Islamic Army, a Sunni insurgent group.” So how did this Shiite abducted by Sunnis manage to survive? “Asadi said his father had to tell his kidnappers he was a Sunni to avoid execution” (Partlow and Tyson 2007). And just as Shiites interrogated in Sunni areas extemporaneously claimed to be Sunnis, so Sunnis finding themselves endangered in Shia areas ad-libbed Shia identities. For members of both sects, revealed membership in whatever group being hounded and hunted at the moment could invite on-the-spot execution. Whether homemade or purchased, false papers offered a possible reprieve. Here is how a Shiite factory worker reported on his successful escape from the clutches of a Sunni death squad:

One man who was released told the A.P. that the kidnappers had sorted the hostages by ethnicity, and that he had been let go because he had forged papers saying he was a Sunni. "One of the gunmen told us to stand in one line, and then asked the Sunnis to get out of the line," said the man, who is a Shiite. "That's what I did. They asked me to prove that I am a Sunni, so I showed the forged ID [with an identifiably Sunni name], and three others did the same. They released us.” (Burns and O’Neil 2006)

In fact, the 2006-2008 Iraqi conflict spawned a thriving market for forged identity cards. That provides at least some indirect evidence that strategic mimicry was widely practiced at the time.

The cool-mindedness of defensive mimics who successfully managed to affect normality while handing over false papers to ruthless killers without awakening suspicions is remarkable in itself. To help maintain one’s sangfroid and thereby increase the credibility of forged documents, amateur drama lessons were apparently advisable. As sectarian violence was just beginning to rage in the still residentially integrated neighborhoods of Baghdad, friendly Sunnis and Shiites gave each other what could be called mimicry instruction: “Relatives and neighbours meet to share knowledge on the 12 imams revered by Shias Muslims, test each other on the dates of Shia festivals or advise on where best to buy fake IDs with Shia names, in case they are challenged at gunpoint” (Ali and Poole 2006). Such reciprocal cooperation between models and mimics with the aim of duping groups of predators despised by both is genuinely remarkable and presumably quite rare.

Another report at the time confirmed the kinds of precautions Sunnis in Baghdad were absorbing to avoid being murdered on the road by Shiite zealots simply because of the names printed on their documents and other sectarian markers:
It was fear of such a fate that led Omar, a van driver who takes food produce to markets around the city, to decide last month only to travel if he had two ID cards on him. Omar is one of the most recognisable of Sunni names, so for $25 (£13) he paid a friend with contacts in the printing industry to have another printed for him with his name as Haider, a typical Shia name. He also carries in his car a round piece of clay, which Shia Muslims place on their foreheads when they pray. A green cloth, the traditional symbol of the Shia, is kept in the glove compartment for him to place over his car's gear stick when he enters Shia neighbourhoods. ‘I am fortunate because my cousin's wife is Shia so she helps me and my family learn how to act like a Shia,’ he said. ‘I make all of us learn what she says. My children can now name all the imams and the year they were born and died. My oldest son even has a Shia religious ringtone on his mobile phone he switches to when he has to go to Shia areas.'” (Ali and Poole 2006)

Arresting here, besides the futuristic arcaism of religious ringtones, is the Shiism-in-three-simple-lessons training provided by “my cousin’s wife” or, more generally, by close relatives and friends. Notice also the role played by lifesaving pseudonyms displayed alongside a variety of physical stage props, adopted and kept within easy reach under the tutoring of some family member or friend possessing insider familiarity with Shiite practices. Such helpful counseling suggests the importance of a legacy of exogamy and cross-denominational companionship from the Saddam era in preparing for successful defensive mimicry during the initial phases of savage inter-communal violence. Sunnis counted on Shiite friends and relatives for crash courses in detection-resistant Shiite identity signals, and vice versa.

In 2006-2008, in any case, forged documents were only one item in the impostures’ mimicry kit. Sunnis wishing to pass for Shiites were able to consult a website listing a variety of how-to-mimic and where-to-shop-for-props suggestions:

1. Practise imitating another personality and have an ID with another name (you can get these forged IDs from Muraidy market in Sadr city), especially if your name was Omar or Othman and if your family name was Dulaimy or Janabi, or if your birthplace was in one of the Sunni-majority cities
2. Memorise the names of the 12 imams
3. Learn to pray in the Shia way and carry turba [Shia holy clay] in your pocket
4. Keep a turba in your house where it can be seen, and put up if necessary a black or a green banner on the roof
5. Keep a poster in your house of Imam Hussein. You can buy them in Mutanabi Street in Baghdad
6. Keep a copy of the Sajadi newspaper [a Shia paper that has Shia prayers] and read some of the prayers, some of them are touchingly beautiful
7. Keep a latmiya [Shia song] on your mobile phone
8. Learn how to curse Yazid and Maawia and Bani Omaya [early Sunni caliphs hated by the Shias] and in the way the Shias do
9. Wear or keep black clothes in your house, especially in ceremonies that demand it
10. Learn about the different Shia ceremonies (the death of the imams, their birth and the joy of Zahraa)
11. Pray in a husseiniya or a Shia mosque. Remember that Shia and Sunnis are not enemies, but there are misled, ignorant people and victims of evil plans who want to spread the breath of hostility in Iraq. (Hider and al-Hamdani 2006)
We can retro-engineer this list to inventory the identity markers, visible signs customarily associated with unobservable group membership, used by Shiite death squads to cull Sunnis from the crowd. The inability to name all twelve imams, for example, could be a death sentence for captured Sunnis. The urgency of obtaining forged papers to replace authentic ones was reinforced by daily news bulletins: “One morning 14 bodies were found, all with ID cards in their front pockets identifying them as ‘Omar,’ a Sunni name . . . And Sunni militias were retaliating, stopping buses and demanding the jinsiya, or ID cards, of passengers and executing those with Shia names.” (Rosen 2006). As a consequence, both sides associated credible identity signals, genuine or bogus, with the difference between skin-of-one’s-teeth survival and sudden death.

**Harmful Consequences of Defensive or Non-Perfidious Mimicry**

In the fog of war, combatants commonly mistake hostiles for friendlies and friendlies for hostiles. Such a naturally bewildering environment does not presuppose deceptive signaling; but it makes deceptive signaling more likely to succeed. This is true of civil wars as well, even though combatants in such conflicts presumably know more about each other than do soldiers in international wars. When the civil war broke out in earnest in 2006, Iraqis who had lived for decades in relatively insulated face-to-face communities were suddenly tossed into a vortex of mass displacement. Ousted from their traditional localisms and forced to move across unfamiliar terrain, many ordinary Iraqis were suddenly compelled to interact on a daily basis with total strangers. This exceptional environment made widespread identity mimicry practicable for the first time. Reducing the value of lifelong acquaintance as a basis for interpersonal trust, the displacement crisis also coincided with the emergence of both Sunni and Shia death squads engaged in tit-for-tat sectarian atrocities. Just as residential displacement made identity-mimicry feasible, the likelihood of being murdered made identity-mimicry worth trying.

How levels of strategic mimicry vary inversely with levels of interpersonal familiarity is nicely illustrated by a temporary exception to the general trend toward residential segregation in the initial phase of Iraq’s civil war. In Baghdad, the neighborhood of Bab al-Sheik was “spared the sectarian killing that has gutted other neighborhoods, and Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds and Christians live together here with unusual ease.” A multi-sectarian holdout, the area was so safe, even at the height of inter-communal violence in 2007, that American journalists could saunter down the streets without guards. Violence was minimal in the neighborhood “largely because of its ancient, shared past, bound by trust and generations of intermarriage.” One inhabitant, named Waleed, explained how intimacy among insiders, who knew everything there was to know about each others’ families, provided an effective shield against violent intrusions by outsiders. Waleed’s son was killed when he moved temporarily to another neighborhood where his “powers of discernment” were diminished by lack of face-to-face familiarity: “‘We didn't know each other's backgrounds,’ said Waleed, sitting with Monther in a barbershop in Bab al-Sheik, rain spitting on the street outside. Neither man wanted to be identified by their last names out of concern for their safety. ‘Here, he can't lie to me,’ he said, jabbing a finger in Monther's direction. ‘He can't say, “I'm this, I'm that,” because I know it's not true.’” (Tavernise and Hilmi 2007).

You could falsely claim that “I’m this, I’m that” only to interlocutors who were never your neighbors and who are not personally acquainted with your family background. Hence, widespread resort to mimicry is unlikely to occur in stable, tribal, kinship-based societies, unless a violent uprooting has recently taken place. This was precisely the case in Iraq.

Explaining the decline of reported incidents of defensive mimicry after 2008 can help us identify the conditions that made mimicry possible and desirable in 2006-2008. One reason for the eventual fall-off in reported cases of mimicry might possibly be learning by the previously cozened
population. After repeated exposure to strategic deception, infuriated dupes may have improved their capacity to spot forged documents and see through clever disguises. Reducing the gullibility of the intended targets of deceptive signaling, would also reduce the incentive for endangered parties to assay identity mimicry, whatever level of danger they face. This sort of explanation is what James Fearon (2016) has in mind when arguing that “if detection efforts are moderately accurate, then the equilibrium amount of mimicry may be quite low even in a high stakes case like genocide.”

In the Iraqi case, however, the gradual stabilization of residential segregation probably played a more important role than improved detection efforts in reducing the possibility and desirability of identity mimicry. As Nir Rosen (2009a) reported at the time, by 2008 there were “fewer people dying because there were fewer to kill; the cleansing had nearly been completed, with Sunnis and Shias separated in walled enclaves run by warlords who had consolidated control.” As members of each sect began to retreat for protection into relatively homogeneous sectarian enclaves, interpersonal familiarity began to reassert itself, reducing both the need and the opportunity for Sunnis and Shiites to pretend to be Shiites and Sunnis.

Ironically, vestigial Saddam-era friendships between Sunnis and Shiites also accelerated the move toward residential segregation as some Sunni and Shiite friends voluntarily traded houses with each other so that each of their families could live in safer, all-Sunni or all-Shiite areas. While such residential segregation reduced the incentive to falsify one’s sectarian identity, it also reduced the day-to-day contact between groups that had earlier facilitated the protection of friends and family members across sectarian lines. And it presumably made it much harder for members of hunted groups to learn from their friends and family members across the sectarian line how to credibly feign identities not their own.

It is nevertheless correct to say that successful mimicry of sectarian rivals by members of a hostile denomination both initially depends upon and ultimately erodes naïve credulity. False-identity signaling, for purely defensive purposes, not only causes an intensification of uncovering efforts, replacing naiveté with wariness. It can also inject a paranoid jumpiness into the machinery of detection. It can turn sensible vigilance into pathological suspiciousness. It can make identity auditors doubt the authenticity of genuine identity signals, wrongfully suspecting models of being their own mimics in disguise. The medium-term consequences can be dramatic.

Hamudi Naji, a mafia-like Mahdi Army commander responsible for murderous attacks on Sunnis, made precisely this mistake. He was furious with a certain Captain Mushtaq, an Iraqi Army officer, for having obstructed Naji’s sectarian murder campaign. Therefore,

Naji arranged for Mahdi Army men and some Iraqi national police to go to Mushtaq’s house, but they went to his neighbor’s house by mistake. The posse insisted that the neighbor’s ID card was fake, and they put him in the trunk of their car. Naji called Mushtaq’s phone and was surprised when Mushtaq answered. “Who are you?” he asked. “Mushtaq,” the captain replied. “So who is the lamb we have here?” Naji asked, using slang for a victim about to be killed. The neighbor was released, terribly beaten. Mushtaq sent some of his family to the south and his wife and children to Egypt (Rosen 2009a).

Having been fooled once too often by forged IDs, the hyper-suspicious Naji insisted erroneously “that the neighbor’s ID card was fake.” So how are innocent models likely to react when abused and threatened in this way by paranoid former dupes infuriated by the deceptive practices of the models’ mimics?

This is an important question, downplayed by analyses focused solely on the duet between mimic and dupe. The key to both mimicry’s significance as a social practice and to the identity of those forms of mimicry that qualify as perfidy resides not only in the nontrivial harm that mimics
intentionally or unintentionally cause to be inflicted on their models but also in the harm-mitigation
strategies typically adopted by the unjustly burdened models in turn. An especially dismaying
example of the way the anger of dupes can be redirected toward models is the CIA’s decision to
disguise its information-gathering mission in Abbottabad as an effort to vaccinate children. When the
mimicry was discovered, “angry villagers, especially in the lawless tribal areas on the Afghan border,
chased off legitimate vaccinators, accusing them of being spies” (McNeil 2012).

So how are models likely to react to such misdirected suspicion or retaliation? In the Iraqi
civil war, a brief period of defensive mimicry, 2006-2008, gave both Sunni and Shiite models a strong
motivation to manufacture identity signals that would be harder to imitate in the future. Models
harried by hyper-suspicious attempts at unmasking impostors have a good reason not only to cluster
in homogeneous enclaves, but also to develop new identity signals that are more difficult to imitate.
That is why purely defensive identity mimicry, while not perfidious in any traditional sense, can have
significant negative consequences even when, after flaring up briefly, it falls back to low levels in
response to moderately improved rates of detection. Temporary strategies adopted by models to
devise theft-proof identity markers when mimicry rates are temporarily high can crystallize into
bigoted habits of the heart.

Defensive mimicry by Sunnis was bound to make Shiite death squads suspect even genuine
Shiites of being Sunnis in disguise. Afflicted by such externalities of strategic mimicry, the model
will not sit idly. Even as both Sunnis and Shiites retreated into residentially segregated areas,
members of each group needed to let their own sect’s militiamen know that they were genuine
coreligionists rather than impostors. They needed to communicate their unobservable membership
status in a more eye-catching and convincing way than was necessary in the age of peaceful inter-
communal coexistence. This is arguably how an interim uptick in defensive mimicry, which
contracted to low levels “in equilibrium,” nevertheless left behind a substantial hardening of sectarian
identity in Iraq. This is of no small consequence since a radical intensification of sub-allegiances
fostered the fateful dismantling of non-denominational Iraqi identity that now has led to the collapse
of Iraq as a unified state.

Perfidy in Uniform

Levels of defensive mimicry, on which we have been focused so far, are highly responsive to
the accuracy of detection efforts. This can also be true of some forms of aggressive mimicry,
especially when it involves “sleeper cells” who must live undetected alongside their targets for a
relatively extended period before striking. But it is much less true of the most common form of
aggressive mimicry in wartime, where a predator gets a momentary jump on its prey by resembling
for a few seconds either a non-threatening party or a member of the prey’s own group. This is a
classic instance of perfidy. In the run-up to waylaying its prey, an aggressive mimic may have to
deceive the unsuspecting victim only for an operationally decisive blink-of-an-eye. If the target can be
fooled for the instant it takes to open his front door or let down his guard, the fatal shots will have
been fired. Wearing a lookalike uniform to gain a split-second advantage in a terrorist ambush is very
different from sustaining a false identity for months at a time to garner useful intelligence, Donnie-
Brasco style, inside a hostile organization.

Posted sentinels who occasionally slack off from boredom or exhaustion can be savagely
punished when caught, as they were for example in the Roman legions, but periods of relaxation and
distraction will inevitably occur, and that is what gives the aggressive mimics their inning, even
against a potential dupe who has the greatest possible incentive to avoid being deceived. According to
Fearon (2016), “The equilibrium rate of mimicry is determined not by the mimic’s preferences, but by how much the targets care about catching them.” But the capacity of the targeted dupes is just as important as their motivation. However much “they care,” sentinels whose reflexes are inevitably dulled by routine cannot be expected, 100 percent of the time, to distinguish mimics from models faster than mimics can take advantage of a momentary ruse. In Iraq, moreover, as in Afghanistan, some aggressive mimics will not be greatly deterred by the potential costs of failing to pass. This is true when being killed by alert sentinels qualifies the attacker as a glorious martyr in any case.

Uniforms simulate uniformity. They hide real differences behind a veneer of sameness. In the age of mass armies, they make it easier for soldiers to distinguish hostile from friendly forces. Reliance on such a childishly simple signal of otherwise unobservable group membership, however, creates an irresistible opportunity for mimics. Indeed, treacherous killing by combatants wearing deceptive clothing (civilian dress, the uniform of the enemy, or the distinctive attire of a neutral party such as the Red Cross) remains the most consequential form of wartime perfidy.

Sometimes combatants gain an advantage by imitating noncombatants. As American troops poured into Iraq in 2003, for example, “Saddam's Fedayeen and their allies had been dressing in civilian clothes to get close to U.S. troops, sometimes even faking surrender, only to open fire at short range.” (Baker 2003). Another report tells of “two separate ambushes where Iraqis, some in civilian clothes, pretended to surrender, only to open fire when the Marines approached.” (Dillon 2003).

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According to Lt. Col. Erez Wiener, Israel Defense Forces (IDF) division operations chief for the West Bank region, “Of the 2,200 arrests Israelis made in the West Bank last year, about 1,500 were conducted by special operation forces (SOF), including 366 by a special Arab impersonation unit, he explained. These specially selected and trained personnel have demonstrated the ability to completely blend into the opposing population for intelligence and operational purposes.”

According to “the principle of distinction,” noncombatants receive greater protections than combatants under the laws of war. By focusing on the indirect effect of identity mimicry on the well-being of model, therefore, we can easily understand why dressing as a noncombatant is one thing and disguising oneself in the uniform of the enemy is another. Both may qualify as perfidy, but the reasons must necessarily be different.

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Article 39.2 of the 1977 Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions, as mentioned above, states that “It is prohibited to make use of the flags or military emblems, insignia or uniforms of adverse Parties while engaging in attacks or to shield, favour, protect or impede military operations.” An earlier attempt to discourage dressing to resemble the enemy in combat appears in the 1863 Lieber Code: “Troops who fight in the uniform of their enemies, without any plain, striking, and uniform mark of distinction of their own, can expect no quarter.” Article 23 of the Hague Convention IV (1907) declares more vaguely that it is forbidden to make “improper use” of “the military insignia and military uniforms of the enemy.”

The deceptive wearing of uniforms, as opposed to civilian attire, to catch the enemy off guard was quite common in 2006-2008 Iraq. One reason is that uniforms evoke (merited and unmerited) trust in a way that ordinary clothing does not. Here is a characteristic report:
Gunmen dressed in Iraqi Army uniforms kidnapped an Iraqi banker and his son from their house in Baghdad, after shooting five of the family’s bodyguards execution-style in the backyard, the police said Friday. . . . As many as 14 gunmen, all in uniform and some in masks, climbed over the outer wall of the house, knocked on the back door and explained to the family that a mortar had been shot from the area and that they needed to search the house, a friend of the family said. They began to search the house and then led Mr. Kubba [the banker] away with his son. The family assumed the men were Iraqi soldiers. “They looked so convincing,” said the friend, who had visited the men’s wives on Friday night. He spoke on condition of anonymity because the family had not authorized him to discuss the case. Hassan Kubba’s wife “took it fully that they were friendly forces,” the friend said. When the gunmen killed the five guards, lining them up against the outer wall of the house and shooting each in the head, the family realized that they were not who they said they were. Phone calls to the army and the police confirmed their fears (Tavernise 2006).

Combatants presumably began to wear cloned copies of their enemy’s uniforms as a ruse to facilitate surprise as soon as uniforms, recognizable at a distance, came into standard use. The practice would never have been singled out for special prohibition by the laws of war if it had not been disturbingly widespread. This deadly hoax, in fact, remains the most common form of wartime perfidy today. For instance, in Iraq itself: “Sunni Muslim militants, mostly disguised in army and police uniforms, struck at polling centers around Baghdad and northern Iraq as militants tried to disrupt Iraq’s fourth national election since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003” (Rasheed and Raheem 2014). Similarly, reports of insurgents trying “to disguise themselves in coalition military uniforms” are filed almost daily from Afghanistan (Steff and Salahuddin 2014). Similarly, in Israel, “Eight Palestinian militants emerged from a tunnel some 300 yards inside Israel on Saturday morning, armed with automatic weapons and wearing Israeli military uniforms” (Barnard and Rudoren 2014). And in Tunisia, with rapacious rather than homicidal intent, “Militants wearing police uniforms on 16 February set up a false checkpoint in Ouled Manai, a village in the north of Jendouba, where they robbed and extorted passing vehicles.” Examples could easily be multiplied.

Dressing in the enemy’s uniform, although arguably outlawed on paper, is a customary military ploy. At key moments during World War II, German commandos donned Danish, Dutch, Belgian, Russian, American, British uniforms as *ruses de guerre* to gain a momentary advantage during a surprise attack (J. S. Lucas 1985). Late in the war, American OSS agents returned the favor, dressing as German officers in the run-up to the Allied advance into Axis territory (Persico 1979). Indeed, “State practice shows that governments have been willing to deploy Special Forces in civilian attire or enemy uniforms where a major advantage is anticipated, and where the gain is greater than the risk to the deployed personnel.” (Parks 2003, 546). A good example is recorded in the famous post-World War II trial of a German officer, Otto Skorzeny, for leading a German Panzer Brigade into combat dress in American military uniforms. (New York Times 1947).

Fake uniforms were also worn by all sides in Iraq’s civil war. Journalists reporting from Iraq in 2006-2008 began to stress the sartorial deceit apparently deployed by a range of Iraqi death squads. Police and army uniforms are easily falsified signs. Thus, “kidnappers wearing Iraqi police uniforms conducted a mass abduction at Iraq’s ministry of higher education in Baghdad,” and “Iraqis wearing police commando uniforms kidnapped a group of British contractors at the ministry of finance in Baghdad in late May 2007.” (Katulis 2007). Military, as well as police uniforms, were reportedly used in lethal masquerades: “at least 100 gunmen in Iraqi Army uniforms kidnapped several senior Oil Ministry officials from their homes in a fortified government compound.” (Cave 2007). Similarly, “Men described by witnesses as Sunni insurgents dressed as Iraqi Army troops stormed a Sunni village on the southeastern outskirts of Baghdad at dawn on Thursday, killing at least 11 people
during a three-hour firefight before American and Iraqi soldiers drove them off . . . . The attackers wore Iraqi Army fatigues . . . along with Awakening Council uniforms stolen during previous raids” (Buckley 2007). Similarly:

Gunmen wearing Iraqi army uniforms shot and killed 15 men Saturday in a Kurdish Shiite village northeast of Baghdad . . . The attack against the villagers occurred early Saturday when gunmen wearing army uniforms entered the village of Hamid Shifi, about 60 miles northeast of Baghdad. They rousted families from their homes and opened fire on the men, killing 15 of them (Reid 2007).

The tactical value of stolen or purchased uniforms to gain a jump on prey was confirmed by reports from eye-witnesses, such as this one from a woman watching from her window: “From the back of an SUV…the men in army uniforms hauled out a blindfolded passenger, who appeared to be alive, and moved him to the trunk of the sedan. Then the men shed their army uniforms, tossed them into the vehicles and drove away” (Filkins 2008, 322).

Alongside their bogus uniforms, the killers often adopted tricked-out modes of transportation: “Victims of Baghdad's violence are often taken away by men in police uniforms, and sometimes in police vehicles, and later found dead” (Knickmeyer 2006). The gangland-style murder of a Sunni leader was described as follows: “at least 10 vehicles that appeared to belong to the Iraqi army stopped outside the western Baghdad house of Kadhim Sarheed Ali al-Dulami, a sheik of the Sunni al-Dulami tribe, before gunmen went inside the home and shot the men.” (CNN 2005). Stories in the press repeatedly claimed that sectarian death squads, posing as the Iraqi police, hijacked, borrowed, or shrewdly cloned police cars and vans. Teams of killers also lured and snared their victims with improvised roadblocks: “Sunni gunmen ambushed a convoy of minibuses Saturday night at an improvised checkpoint on the dangerous highway south of Baghdad, killing 10 Shiite passengers and kidnapping about 50” (AP 2006). Illustrating how defensive mimicry can serve, or morph into, aggressive mimicry, fake uniforms can help killers pass through genuine checkpoints undetected and thereby to gain access to otherwise barricaded facilities where they can slaughter their enemies. By 2006, “Baghdad and the surrounding region [were] in the grip of a ferocious sectarian conflict between rival Sunni and Shiite factions. Dozens of people [were] killed every day, many of them by gangs in police uniforms and vehicles” (AFP 2006).

Innocently seeking immunity from attack, as discussed above, defensive mimics can nevertheless foreseeably redirect predatory violence onto their models. Aggressive mimics may do the same, but they sometimes do so intentionally as a calculated stratagem, making their conduct straightforwardly perfidious. For instance, insurgents who seek a short-term tactical benefit by using police or military uniforms and vehicles while committing atrocities may also hope to foment popular distrust toward the genuine soldiers and policemen. This is a key point for understanding the uniquely heinous nature of perfidious identity mimicry. Public suspicion of all uniformed officials can provide a collateral benefit to insurgents alongside the tactical advantage of duping victims in the run-up to an attack.

When criminals and terrorists commonly wear fake uniforms, average citizens are caught in a bind. If they stop for police impostors at a checkpoint, they may be shot; but they may also be shot if they refuse to stop at a checkpoint for real policemen. This nuts-making uncertainty presents operational problems for the authorities as well. States cannot function normally when personally unfamiliar but officially outfitted police officers are suspected of being murderers in disguise as soon as they appear on the horizon.

The first solution that suggests itself, naturally, is redesigning uniforms to make them more difficult to replicate: “Bombers in Iraq have routinely disguised themselves in uniforms to bypass
security checks. The problem was so prevalent in 2006 that the US military redesigned Iraqi federal police uniforms after the old one was copied by anti-government fighters, death squads and common criminals“ (Aljazeera 2010). To counter impersonators, Iraqi officials too made their own repeated efforts to introduce imitation-proof uniforms: “new blue, black and gray design—in a digital camouflage pattern”—for the Iraqi national police force. “Iraqi police modeled new-look uniforms on Monday in a bid to stay a step ahead of the death squads they claim are masquerading as officers to carry out sectarian and political murders.” The Iraqi Interior Minister declared that these redesigned outfits would be “difficult for assassins to fake.” (AFP 2006). He “repeated promises made since early this year that police would soon be issued uniforms and vehicles that would be difficult to duplicate” (Knickmeyer 2006). He even stated outright that: "These new garments will not be counterfeited" (AFP 2006). Unfortunately, the counter-counterfeiting attempt did not prove especially successful: “A series of incidents in which terrorists posed as police spurred the Iraqi government months ago to say that it would reissue police uniforms to make them harder to copy, but it hasn't acted on the issue. Fake uniforms can easily be purchased on the street, officials said.” (Vanden and Sabah 2006) That genuine uniforms were also stolen and sold is not unlikely. In any case, new-modeled uniforms will make impersonation more difficult only if careful records are kept and regularly consulted: ‘Police Col. Abdul-Munim Jassim, proudly wearing his new uniform, told AFP why it would be difficult for assassins to fake. ‘The Americans take a photo of the policeman together with the number of the uniform. If found elsewhere, it will immediately be recognised as stolen.’” (AFP 2006). Such attempts to prevent routine duplication of official uniforms proved consistently futile, however.

Perfidy’s Aftermath

Even today American prosecutors in Guantánamo are charging suspects in attacks on American forces in Iraq, under the laws of war, with the war crime of “perfidy.” (C. Rosenberg 2014). In 2012, for instance, U.S. military prosecutors swore out an eight-page charge sheet for Ali Musa Daqduq, accusing him of perfidy among other war crimes:

Mr. Daqduq is accused of conspiring with several groups, including the Quds Force of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, to train Shiite militias to use roadside bombs and other insurgent tactics. The most serious charges stem from what prosecutors say was his role in helping organize a raid in January 2007 by insurgents who wore American-style uniforms and carried forged identity cards. They killed five American soldiers in Karbala, Iraq; one in the raid, and four others who were captured and whose bodies later dumped by a road (Savage 2012).15

To some, charging Iranian-backed Iraqi insurgents with this particular war crime seems hypocritical in light of the common claim that U.S. Special Forces regularly fight out of uniform.16 The debate about the consistency or inconsistency of U.S. military justice is less important here than the puzzle posed by the classification of “perfidy” as a war crime. The prohibition of perfidy in the laws of war may or may not have seriously reduced the willingness of combatants to resort to treacherous killing. But it is nevertheless noteworthy because of the particular revulsion it reserves for one particular form of wartime deception.

One reason why perfidy is singled out for special condemnation, even though ruses of war are generally considered legal under the laws of war, might conceivably be the sickening consequences for those who are duped by perfidious operations. The 1995 massacre at Srebrenica provides a terrifying example.
Bosnian Serb soldiers wearing stolen UN uniforms and driving stolen UN vehicles announced over megaphones that they were UN peacekeepers and that they were prepared to oversee the Bosnian Muslims’ surrender and guarantee they would not be harmed. Disoriented and exhausted, many Bosnian Muslims fell for the lie. It was only after they had surrendered that they discovered their fatal mistake. For in surrendering, they were going to their deaths. Those whom the Serbs got their hands on were killed by firing squad (Rhode n.d.).

Particular sensitivity to the fate of those duped by false uniforms is understandable in a case like this where unarmed civilians were treacherously killed by combatants disguised as peacekeepers. But what about conflict between armies where only soldiers, each side intent on killing the other, are involved? Why is this form of perfidy, in particular, involving the mimicry of soldiers rather than noncombatants, distinguished so sharply from other equally fatal forms of deceptive signaling, all of them clearly designed to elicit the confidence of the enemy with the intention of gaining a life-or-death advantage from the adversary’s gullibility?

As intimated at the outset, international lawyers elaborating on Article 37.2 tend to explain the especial treacherousness of perfidy, rather law-bookishly, by emphasizing that the confidence elicited and breached by the mimic has been enshrined in international humanitarian law. The attacker who treacherously feigns injury or surrender is wickedly exploiting the adversary’s willingness to give quarter in compliance with international law. A classical example comes from World War II, when some Japanese soldiers reportedly hoisted the white flag to entice Americans into the open where they would be easy targets for snipers. The predictable result was the American forces ceased giving quarter and started killing on sight Japanese raising white flags, just as the apparent Japanese practice of booby-trapping their own wounded soldiers, allegedly led American troops to shoot and kill wounded Japanese combatants. (Linderman 1999, 152; Straus 2003, 116).

For international lawyers, “perfidy” is exceptional wicked because it is a direct attack on international law itself. It violates the specially protected status granted by International Humanitarian Law (IHL) to certain combatants as well as most noncombatants. Political theory, with no professional investment in the binding power of international law, can reformulate the point less doctrinally by emphasizing the way aggressive mimicry predictably causes the dupe to respond to the mimic’s violence by attacking the mimic’s model. Intentionally or unintentionally, by awakening chronic distrust in the group whose members were taken off guard by mimicry, wartime impostors regularly expose their innocent models to lethal attack. This is a key point. The exceptional criminalization of perfidy, despite the general tolerance for lethal wartime deception, is based on the way aggressive mimicry where the mimics disguise themselves as noncombatants exposes the mimic’s innocent models to subsequent harm at the hands of the frustrated and infuriated dupe.

Defensive mimicry, too, as we have seen, unloads some injurious externalities onto the mimics’ models. Yet IHL does not regard either wearing the uniform of the enemy or dressing as a civilian in order to escape a prisoner-of-war camp as perfidy, even though it is a form of deception that is likely to burden civilians in the vicinity. Once the escapee has rejoined his unit and reported on the enemy’s position, moreover, such a successful ruse is bound to pose a lethal threat to the dupe as well. This doctrinal distinction between the lawful and the unlawful wearing of the enemy’s uniform, however shaky the line, closely tracks the political theorist’s contrast between defensive mimicry, which burdens the innocent models only unintentionally, and aggressive mimicry which, besides aiming to kill the dupe can also adopt the higher-order strategic objective of harming members of the dupe’s community by luring them into a self-defeating attack on innocent models.

Notice, too, that IHL does not consistently classify “playing dead” as a form of perfidy. The international lawyer would explain this by saying that dead bodies escape being targeted by the
enemy (and are therefore attractive models for living soldiers to imitate when under fire on a battlefield) not because of any respect for protected status granted by IHL, but only because they are seen as posing no threat. The political theorist would instead emphasize that while such mimicry may harm the dupe, by adding a survivor to the enemy’s forces, it will have no dire externalities for the model who, being dead, is beyond harm.

Perfidy is singled out among the ordinary *ruses de guerre* for particular opprobrium, from this perspective, not because bad faith is morally dishonorable or because *hosti etiam servanda fides* (faith must be kept even to the enemy), but because treacherous killing effectively sabotages the dupe’s cognitive capacities, destroying his ability to differentiate clearly between the harmless and the dangerous. The resultant fear of false negatives naturally raise the rate of false positives: “Once US troops realised that enemy soldiers might dress in civilian clothes and drive civilian vehicles, they had to treat all private cars and vans as potentially hostile. That does not justify their decision to shoot dead a group of unarmed women and children on Monday. But would the incident have taken place if an Iraqi officer had not lured the Americans to their death, two days earlier, by pretending to be a taxi driver?” (Rozenberg 2003). Fear of being fooled twice unleashes the dupe’s preemptive strikes upon the mimic’s guiltless models.

Most significant for the theory of wartime mimicry is the possibility that impostors intentionally engage in such identity-faking in order to induce the dupe to inflict grave harm upon the model being imitated with the expectation that such injury to the innocent, however unintentional, will create a self-defeating backlash grievously harmful to the dupe itself. When it involves soldiers mimicking civilians, for example, perfidy makes it psychologically difficult for dupes to respect the all-important *ius-in-bello* principle of distinction.

By luring the dupe into killing noncombatants for fear that they are combatants, insurgents who fight in civilian clothing can, among other things, undermine the sense of moral superiority natural to a regular army fighting against barbarian “terrorists,” defined as those who kill noncombatants in pursuit of political aims. This is already some kind of perverse moral victory. Considerations of this sort help explain why, in the laws of war written by states whose soldiers wear uniforms, not by guerrilla movements whose combatants often fight under cover, “It is prohibited to kill, injure or capture an adversary by resort to…The feigning of civilian, non-combatant status.” It is inevitable that soldiers threatened by death at the hands of enemy combatants dressed as noncombatants will be drawn into killing noncombatants whatever the laws of war demand. To say, in this context, that the dupe “has agency” is to say that his behavior can be readily manipulated in morally repugnant but perfectly predictable ways. The strict prohibition on deliberately targeting noncombatants may have originated as a strategy for commanding officers to direct their troops away from soft targets, such as undefended towns containing women and booty, and toward dangerous enemies with the motive and capacity to kill them. But it also has the militarily useful side effect of reducing the degree of civilian hostility to an invading army. If insurgents can prevent their enemy from respecting the combatant-noncombatant distinction, they can hold up the bodies of the mistakenly killed to rally domestic and international support for their cause.

If lifelong inhabitants of Baghdad could easily be misled once they debouched from their well-demarcated ancestral neighborhoods, one can imagine how difficult it must have been for American ingénues—parochial, unsophisticated and monolingual—who were thrust unprepared into the sectarian, ethnic and tribal honeycomb of Iraq, to distinguish friends from foes (Fallows 2006). Predators and prey with orange coloring can remain nearly invisible, in green-hued grassland and woodland settings, to prey and predators with achromatic vision who are unable to differentiate between green and orange. Americans in Iraq displayed the cultural equivalent of color blindness, call it cultural blindness, meaning that they were exceptionally vulnerable to mixing up apples and oranges. They were dressed to kill, but they could be easily played for fools. Intentionally or
unintentionally stoked paranoia about invisibly lurking enemies can drive young men into lashing out indiscriminately. Rather than simply duping the Americans, Iraqi insurgents who attacked Americans were able to excite in U.S. troops an indiscriminate fear of Iraqis in general. By dressing as civilians, the militants made it difficult for the Americans to tell which Iraqis were friends and which were foes. Vexed by this engineered fog of war, American forces compensated for their inability to distinguish the dangerous from the innocent by disproportionate force, dragnet arrests, and collective punishment. The effect of these indiscriminate tactics on the way average Iraqis viewed the foreign forces was not positive.

As these examples illustrate, combatants mimicking noncombatants are committing a kind of meta-war crime because their perfidious conduct predictably leads the enemy to commit follow-on war crimes. Perfidy is a matador’s cape, luring the enraged target into misdirected counter-lunges and self-defeating overkill. This can serve the strategic purposes of the mimics if the dupes’ failure to respect the combatant-noncombatant distinction causes them to lose the battle for hearts and minds. Combatants fighting in civilian dress can blacken the reputation of the dupe in the same way as firing rockets from civilian neighborhoods: both tactics can provoke the duped enemy into killing civilians. Maneuvering the blinded enemy into unintentionally killing noncombatants can demoralize the dupe’s supporters and energize its adversaries. In both cases, the mimic invites the infliction of harm on the model to ruin the reputation of the dupe among the civilian population and, ideally, to spark a popular uprising against the dupe, effectively rallying the model population to the mimic’s cause. Imitating the model to trick the dupe into hurting the model, thereby turning the model against the dupe, is a good example of how insurgents and terrorists can punch above their weight. Such perfidious mimicry, too, can have lasting effects even when the mimicry itself is short-lived. This is because memory of indiscriminate massacres is long lasting. The reputation of the dupe for barbarism, for ignoring the distinction between the innocent and the guilty, will linger long after attacks by combatants dressed as noncombatants have stopped.

As discussed above, an unintended if foreseeable consequence of defensive mimicry is the tendency of targeted dupes to suspect models of being mimics, a pattern that often occurs in nature. Rarer in nature but common in human conflict is the mimic’s deliberate use of mimicry to gain an advantage by luring the dupe into routinely abusing innocuous models as if they were dangerous mimics. That sounds quite complicated once again, but the thought is actually quite simple.

False flag operations illustrate an importantly different way in which mimics can entice dupes into punishing the mimics’ models. A well-known example of a false flag operation would be, if the charges are correct, the bombing by Russian security services of apartment blocks in Moscow and two other Russian cities in 1999, killing 293 people. By attributing the bombing to Chechen terrorists (the models), the government (the mimic) stirred up outrage in the Russian public (the dupe) and therefore artificially created a wave of support for a second Chechen war (Satter 2002; Tyler 2002). In such a case, it should be noted, the mimic is deliberately manipulating the dupe into harming the model, without having any intention of harming the dupe itself, even if that was the eventual result. In a false flag operation, group mimicry is undertaken solely to ruin the reputation of a rival group and mobilize opposition to it. Strategic mimicry of this sort, too, occurs in human society but presumably not in nature.

Uniforms Again

“There is practically universal agreement among publicists that it is improper for the soldiers of a belligerent to wear the uniforms of the enemy during actual combat” (Jobst 436). Although such a blanket claim can be disputed (Parks), there can be no doubt that wearing the uniform of the enemy during combat operations has traditionally been classified as a form of perfidy alongside dressing
deceptively as a noncombatant. But the reasons, as mentioned, have to be different, since enemy belligerents do not receive the same forms of protection as non-belligerents under the laws of war.


A related pattern was clearly articulated by Machiavelli in his famous chapter devoted to ruses of war, “above all things, a general ought to endeavor to divide the enemy’s strength by making him suspicious of his counselors and confidants” for “this must consequently weaken his army very much” (Machiavelli 1965, Book VI 173). Because the maniacal search for moles within one’s own organization can be seriously debilitating and even paralyzing, each side in a conflict has a strong incentive to make the other believe that insiders occupying strategic positions are actually outsiders in disguise. In other words, the study of wartime mimicry must be supplemented or extended by a study of mimicry’s simulacrum, namely ways of conning the enemy and third parties into a paranoid fear of hostile mimics where they do not in fact exist.

**Spoiler Mimicry**

The principal exit strategy devised by the American military in Iraq revolved around standing up an Iraqi military capable of fighting Islamic militants and holding the country together. A wrench was tossed into this strategy by green-on-blue killings, when a native policeman or soldier working with or being trained by American-led forces lethally attacks his putative foreign allies or trainers. Training can impart skill but not instill loyalty, especially not loyalty to a neutral, inclusive, non-sectarian state that did not exist outside the fantasies of the occupying power. As they were about to murder their trainers, the treacherous trainees presumably had to mimic at least briefly the behavior of blameless trainees. That some of them may even have belonged to sleeper cells who had originally joined the Iraqi military and police with nefarious purposes was suggested by the way a 2005 Pentagon report to Congress used the term *infiltration*:

Some insurgent infiltration of ISF [Iraqi Security Forces] undoubtedly occurs, both through the recruitment process and through bribery and intimidation. Although it is reasonable to believe that it would be more prevalent in Sunni-majority provinces, the precise extent of such infiltration cannot be known…Because the police are often recruited by local police chiefs with little Coalition oversight, infiltration tends to be somewhat higher in the police than in the military and paramilitary forces…The exact extent of insurgent infiltration is unknown at this time (The Pentagon 2005, 33 and 37).
One consequence of repeated green-on-blue shootings was that the American soldiers and off-duty policemen who trained the Iraqis were “constantly on guard against the possibility that their trainees might turn against them. Even in the police headquarters for all of western Baghdad, one of the safest police buildings in the capital, the training team will not remove their body armor or helmets. An armed soldier is assigned to protect each trainer.” (Paley 2006). This was not a favorable context for either training or being trained.

In southern Iraq, during this period, the British had more or less the same experience. Blame was routinely laid on coalition efforts to stand up an Iraqi army in double time to permit an accelerated withdrawal of foreign troops. This haste necessarily entailed sloppy vetting: “Thousands of Iraqis were recruited into the corrupt Iraqi police force, with the bare minimum of personal checking by the British military, because of the perceived urgency of training locals to handle security in the city. As a result, Iraqis with 100 per cent loyalty to extremist militia groups joined the police force and proceeded to use the information they gleaned from the inside to launch roadside bomb attacks on known British patrol routes.” (Evans 2009). Although the ratio of bad-faith mimics to good-faith recruits was presumably very low, the fear that occasional green-on-blue killings created was psychologically decisive. The long-term consequence of even low levels of perfidy in uniform was to poison relations between foreign and Iraqi troops indelibly.

The natural reaction to rare but repeated green-on-blue killings was for foreign trainers to take an arms'-length approach to all recruits. This is how identity mimicry helped derail America’s entire nation-building scheme: “Militia infiltration of Iraq’s security forces is so bad in some places that American soldiers sometimes do not know whether to trust their Iraqi counterparts. ‘We don’t trust ‘em,’ said 1st Lt. Steve Taylor, serving at a joint Iraqi-American security station in Sulakh. ‘There’s no way to know who’s good and who’s bad, so we have to assume they’re all bad, unfortunately.’” (Katulis 2007). The paranoid fear that every apparently good-faith collaborator is a would-be assassin in disguise, and the subsequent witch-hunt for impersonators and infiltrators, known to destroy the effectiveness of national-security organizations, goes a long way toward explaining the failure of the U.S. mission in Iraq. Strategic mimicry can corrode and potentially destroy the interpersonal trust necessary for mutually beneficial social cooperation. This is perhaps its most far-reaching effect. The treacherous killers were wearing not the uniforms of their victims but rather the uniforms of their victim’s putative allies. The immensely consequential erosion of trust between the trainers and the trained within the hoped-for alliance, which did not leave innocent Iraqi civilians unaffected, provides at least some clue to the classification of aggressive identity mimicry in uniform as perfidy.

In a recent green-on-blue attack in Afghanistan, an American general was among those killed. The Afghan Defense Ministry “described the attacker as ‘wearing Afghan National Army uniform,’ which has long been a standard description offered after Afghan troops attack their foreign counterparts.” The “standard description” here feels vaguely euphemistic, as if an unpleasant truth needed to be fogged-over: “Afghan and American commanders have said that they believed most of the insider attacks that had taken place were the work of ordinary soldiers who had grown alienated and angry over the continued presence of foreign troops here, and not carried out by Taliban fighters planted in Afghan units.” (M. Rosenberg and Kakaraug 2014). To announce that a green-on-blue killer was “wearing an Afghan National Army uniform” is nevertheless to put some verbal distance between ordinary Afghan soldiers and bad apples who go on homicidal anti-American rampages. Obfuscating the resentment of American troops among ordinary soldiers is apparently a shared interest of the Afghan and U.S. governments. The observation that How questionable claims of mimicry can deflect blame from real to imaginary perpetrators brings us to our next theme.
Perfidy’s Mirage

Even when they are not acting as mimics themselves, violent aggressors can use mimicry to escape retaliation. For instance, murderers can posthumously alter the appearance of the murder victim to make the death seem accidental or the killing appear justified. In Basra, during this very period, after killing a woman for sectarian reasons, the murderers would “dress her in indecent clothes so as to justify their horrible crimes” (Mahmoud and Lanchin 2007).²²

More relevant to our theme is the way aggressors can propagate false allegations of mimicry to establish plausible deniability. Here we encounter a predatory strategy which, once again, seems to have no analogy in the animal world: mimicry’s doppelgänger. For example, if Shia policemen kidnap and murder a Sunni politician, they can muddy the waters by suggesting publicly that shadowy militiamen wearing stolen police uniforms committed the crime. This mimicry of mimicry became increasingly common toward the end of the 2006-2008 Iraqi civil war. Mimicry of the first order, militiamen passing as policemen, lent plausibility to mimicry of the second order, policemen passing as militiamen passing as policemen. And indeed the former would have been a senseless tactic had the latter not already been a widely acknowledged ploy. During that period, a series of Iraqi Interior Ministers “repeatedly suggested that killings by gunmen in police uniforms were being carried out by impostors.” (Knickmeyer 2006)²³. Local police commanders, too, began alleging that such “attacks are carried out by impostors who buy, steal or counterfeit police uniforms, which are freely available in many Baghdad markets.” (AFP 2006). Fending off questions about massacres committed by men dressed in military uniforms, an Interior Ministry official explained: “Surely, they are outlaw insurgents. As for the military uniform, they can be bought from many shops in Baghdad,” adding that “we have several police and army vehicles stolen, and they can be used in the raids.” (CNN 2005). Disingenuous claims of mimicry are an easy way to shift responsibility for one’s own criminal behavior onto others who, because wholly imaginary, will not come forward to escape punishment by proving the inaccuracy of the charges.

Obscured by such politically expedient reports of mimicry was the massive infiltration of the Iraqi national police force by Shia militia. Numerous contemporary accounts testify that “the security forces themselves have been heavily infiltrated” (The Guardian 2006). In particular, the Ministry of Interior was “well-known for its infiltration by Shia militias from the Mahdi army and other groups” (Tran 2007). American authorities may have been poor students of Iraqi culture, but they were not duped in this case: “U.S. military reports on the Iraqi police often read like a who's who of the two main militias in Iraq: the Mahdi Army, also known as Jaish al-Mahdi or JAM, and the Badr Organization, also known as the Badr Brigade or Badr Corps.” (Paley 2006). Summarizing these developments, an acute observer of the Iraqi government at the time remarked: “Its militias are not infiltrators, they are an integral element of the elected parties” (Stewart 2005).²⁴

Three short years after Saddam’s fall, and across large swathes of Iraq, “Shia militias had become the Iraqi police and the Iraqi army” (Rosen 2006). After the British evacuated Basra, for instance, “the Iraqi security forces” were “largely run by the Shia militias” (Cockburn 2007). In essence, “the death squads became official. The Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army, the two big Shiite militias, just joined the police forces of the Shiite-led government” (Filkins 2008, 321). As if mocking the Bush Administration’s project of promoting democracy, this Shia takeover of the army and police was ratified at the ballot box: “After the elections in January 2005, the Shiite hard-liners who had taken power stuffed the ministries with their own gunmen, gave them uniforms and identification cards, and turned them loose” (Filkins 2008, 316). They created what could reasonably be called death-squad democracy.

The Shia electoral majority guaranteed that killers inside the police would have “political protection” in the Shia-dominated political system (Katulis 2007). When the occasional patriotic
policeman tried to rein in the Mahdi Army, “the group could pull strings in the parliament and government” to warn him off (Parker 2007). In November 2006, “an Iraqi commander and four staff officers responsible for the Hurriya district were arrested on suspicion of murder, extortion and links with the Mahdi Army. The judge released them after seven days when no evidence was presented. The day they were released, an Iraqi lieutenant colonel who had filed a statement against the five was killed at a checkpoint” (Parker 2007). Although the checkpoint here was the government’s, it served not to protect a non-denominational Iraqi state from sectarian lawbreakers, but to protect the powerful Mahdi Army from brave attempts by nonsectarian Iraqi officials to enforce the law.

As stories about police impersonators proliferated, Shia death squads, rather than imitating policemen by wearing stolen or cloned uniforms, simply joined the police force en masse and wore the uniforms that their new jobs required. Having become policemen, they were able to commit their atrocities on the job as well as after hours. By 2005, American-trained police units, filled with Shia militiamen, had started “swooping down into Sunni neighborhoods and killing civilians and kidnapping them.” (Filkins 2008, 120).

For their part, Iraq’s Sunnis were “pushed to the side, dismissed from the security forces” and, as a consequence, “Iraq’s new security forces . . . were filled with young Shia.” (Rosen 2006). No mimicry was involved in this case, only infiltration in the sense of reoccupation of spaces vacated by former regime-loyalists. As this process continued, Shias “gained firm control of government ministries and local police” (Rosen 2009a). The police that operated as Shia public-sector murder gangs also turned a blind eye to atrocities committed by Shia bands that continued to operate privately. Thus, the Shia militiamen who had not joined the police force had no reason to dress like policemen. This was all the more true because a police uniform was no longer likely to gull politically important Sunnis into lowering their guard.

Just as Iraq’s Sunnis knew the score, so American government reports about the period are exceptionally clear-eyed, if not cynical. Here are two typical passages from a gruesome State Department study of the sectarian takeover of Iraqi state institutions released during this period:

Unauthorized government agent involvement in extrajudicial killings throughout the country was widely reported. Some police units acted as "death squads"...There were allegations that in May MOI [Ministry of Interior] First Division National Police officers committed extrajudicial killings of civilians in Baghdad while operating outside their duty area…Particularly in the central and southern parts of the country, Shi’a militias--the JAM [Jaish al-Mahdi] and the Badr Organization of the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI)--used their positions in the ISF [Iraqi Security Forces] to pursue sectarian agendas…on May 4, ISF members reportedly arrested and shot 14 civilians in the Jihad neighborhood. According to local residents, on May 3, personnel wearing MOI police uniforms reportedly arrested and killed 16 individuals in the Hay al-Amel neighborhood…On April 28, individuals wearing Iraqi army uniforms reportedly arrested 31 men in the Adhamiya neighborhood; five were found dead the next day in the Kesra District (US DOS 2007).

In this passage, be it noted, Iraqi police or army uniforms were being worn not by impostors but by newly recruited but “bona fide” members of the Iraqi army and police. The terrifying consequence of sectarian state-capture comes across even more clearly in a second harrowing passage:

In February several high officials in the Ministry of Health (MOH), including Deputy Minister, Hakim al-Zamili, who were loyalists of Moqtada al-Sadr's JAM, were arrested and charged with organizing the killing of hundreds of Sunnis in Baghdad's hospitals, including patients, family members, and medical staff. Investigations found that under al-Zamili’s direction, about
150 members of the MOH's protection service used ministry identification to move freely around Baghdad and using ambulances to ferry weapons, carried out hundreds of sectarian killings and kidnappings from 2005 to early 2007. They reportedly abducted and killed many Sunni patients at three major Baghdad hospitals, Al Yarmouk, Ibn al-Nafees, and Al Nur, as well as relatives who came to visit them or went to hospital morgues to recover their family member's bodies (US DOS 2007).

Although the use of ambulances for transporting weapons is a classical case of perfidy, no one was ever punished for the crime. The Shia government whose sectarian agenda he served released al-Zamili over American objections. He was eventually elected to parliament. Aggressive identity mimicry was rampant in 2006-2008 Iraq. But strategic resort to false allegations of perfidy also occurred. So why did police officials, in this case, continue to insist that sectarian murders were being committed by impostors when all parties involved understood that the incorporation of murderous Shia militias into the police was a key feature on the sectarian takeover of the state underway in Baghdad? The answer has to do with the dilemma faced by the American-led occupation force. If we are to believe State Department and Pentagon reports, the U.S. administration believed that an inclusive government, sharing political power, patronage, and oil revenue fairly among Iraq’s three groups, was the only viable pathway to the kind of political stability that would allow a peaceful withdrawal of foreign troops. American hostility to a sectarian Shia takeover of the Iraqi government was evident, for example, in the approach taken to standing up the Iraqi national army. As a spokesman for the 25th Infantry Division told reporters: ‘When the soldiers join the IA [Iraqi Army], they are taught in training and in day-to-day regimen of being a soldier that sectarian lines are not for the army. They are an army of one, if you will, for one nation.’” (Lasseter 2007).

Unfortunately, the expectation of non-sectarian and multiethnic military and police forces serving a unified but multi-communal nation proved as unrealistic as the hope that Iraq’s Shia would welcome the re-arming and re-grouping of Iraq’s temporarily debilitated Sunnis. Unable to orchestrate the creation of an inclusive Iraqi state but desperate to create some sort of stable government in Baghdad capable of ruling the country after an American withdrawal, the U.S. ultimately accepted or even abetted a kind of system-level mimicry. It agreed, as a price of doing business, to treat a largely sectarian government as if it were a non-sectarian national government. The claim that police impostors, not the police themselves, were perpetrating savage atrocities, was known to be fraudulent by American authorities on the ground. But American observers, many of whom were personally without illusions, nevertheless pretended to be dupes in order to misleadingly describe America’s dismantling of the Iraqi nation as an act of nation-building to a dimly informed audience back home.

This, of course, was not the end of the story. By 2007, in response to the Shia takeover of the Baghdad government, violent Sunni jihadists, known as AQI (Al Qaeda in Iraq), had arrived with a vengeance in the Sunni Triangle. American observers were particularly worried about a marriage of convenience, based on a shared hatred of the Shias, between foreign jihadists and local Sunni tribesmen affiliated with former Baathists. This development was seen to be a direct threat to the United States. General David Petraeus therefore elaborated a plan for peeling the Sunni tribal groups in Anbar province away from their co-sectarian foreign jihadists. He invited them to fight against the non-Iraqi jihadists, with whom they had plenty of differences in any case, in exchange for American money, equipment and support. The result of long-brewing American frustration with the lack of inclusiveness exhibited by the Maliki government, the Anbar gambit was an official attempt to bring the Sunnis back into the Iraqi state. Petraeus essentially made the same offer to the insurgent Sunni paramilitaries in Iraq as the U.S. had originally offered to the Kurdish Peshmerga. This was “the Awakening.” It meant that a “new breed of Sunni warlords” was “being paid by the US to fight al-Qaida in Iraq” (Abdul-Ahad 2007).
Maliki was not supportive. From his Shia perspective it was suicidal to deputize Sunni bandits not to mention futile to spend millions “turning poachers into gamekeepers.” (Cockburn 2007). The Shia-dominated government saw the Awakening as a Sunni ploy to dupe the Americans into providing weapons and training to a future Sunni resistance. They interpreted “incorporation” of the Sunni tribes not as a step toward nation building, but as a Trojan Horse operation. It was an invitation to a masquerade. The Sunnis would impersonate loyal members of the Iraqi nation so long as it took to rearm themselves to confront the Shias and fight to re-seize control of the Iraqi state. Shia fear of aggressive mimicry by Sunnis was made quite explicit: “Gen. David H. Petraeus and other top commanders have hailed the initiative to enlist Iraqi tribes and former insurgents in the battle against extremist groups, but leaders of Iraq's Shiite-dominated government have feared that the local fighters known as ‘volunteers’—more than 80 percent of whom are Sunni—could eventually mount an armed opposition, Iraqi and U.S. officials said.” (Partlow and Tyson 2007).

Thus, “The Sunni tribesmen collaborating with American forces are not accepted by the central government in Baghdad, dominated by Shiites: The Iraqi government so far has balked at permanently hiring large numbers of the volunteers. Indeed, last month [October 2007], the Shiite political alliance of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki called on the U.S. military to halt its recruitment of Sunnis” (Partlow and Tyson 2007). Maliki feared that the Awakening was merely a front for anti-Shia insurgents who, once foreign forces had withdrawn, would use American training and weaponry to confront their Shia enemies. The reasonableness of this fear was confirmed by some Sunnis themselves:

A senior Sunni sheikh, whose tribe is joining the new alliance with the Americans against al-Qaida, told me in Beirut that it was a simple equation for him. "It's just a way to get arms, and to be a legalized security force to be able to stand against Shia militias and to prevent the Iraqi army and police from entering their areas," he said. "The Americans lost hope with an Iraqi government that is both sectarian and dominated by militias, so they are paying for locals to fight al-Qaida. It will create a series of warlords. "It's like someone who brought cats to fight rats, found himself with too many cats and brought dogs to fight the cats. Now they need elephants" (Abdul-Ahad 2007).

The same Sunni tribal chief concluded: “After we finish with al-Qaida here, we will turn toward our main enemy, the Shia militias” (Abdul-Ahad 2007). And here is Seymour Hersh’s report of a conversation, along similar lines, with an informed observer named Nasr:

“The American policy of supporting the Sunnis in western Iraq is making the Shia leadership very nervous,” Nasr said. “The White House makes it seem as if the Shia were afraid only of Al Qaeda—but they are afraid of the Sunni tribesmen we are arming. The Shia attitude is ‘So what if you’re getting rid of Al Qaeda?’ The problem of Sunni resistance is still there. The Americans believe they can distinguish between good and bad insurgents, but the Shia don’t share that distinction. For the Shia, they are all one adversary” (Hersh 2007).

Petraeus not only wanted the good insurgents to help defeat the bad insurgents. He seems to have viewed the American deal with the alienated Sunni tribesmen, quite naively, as a step toward a multi-denominational Iraqi state with a multi-denominational army. After overthrowing Saddam, the Americans adopted a cooptation strategy toward the emerging Shia fighting groups, in the hopes of converting them from lawbreakers into law enforcers. Behind this cooptation strategy lay the idea that it was better to have the Shia militias inside shooting out, rather than outside shooting in. The coalition forces had acquiesced in the Shia takeover of the army and the police in part because, as an
American diplomat said, “a complete purging of the ministry’s most criminally violent employees is impossible” and because purging them from the police would not calm the situation since, if peremptorily expelled, “they’re going to go straight to the militias, or set up their own criminal gangs” (Wong and von Zielbauer 2006). The militias were officially (that is, not really) “dissolved” in June 2004. But it was clear by then that the military occupier lacked the power to enforce such a demob order. As a result, the Americans acquiesced in the incorporation of the Shia militias into Iraq’s national security bureaucracy faute de mieux: “Armed groups across Iraq reacted to the 2004 measure by enlisting in the army and police and maintaining large contingents of stand-alone militia groups, making them significantly more powerful” It was “a plan to discipline the militias by putting them in uniform.” (Lasseter 2007). But because it favored the Shia so one-sidedly, it ended up unleashing the militias’ fury on their sectarian foe and thereby exciting a Sunni counter-reaction.

The Awakening was not only an opportunistic measure adopted to counter AQI. It was also an attempt to redress the imbalance created when armed Shia groups colonized Iraqi state structures. By accepting Petraeus’s invitation to the masquerade, paradoxically, the Sunni insurgents were able to rearm and regroup under the terms of Petraeus’s bargain. But the deal also had a downside, well described by Rosen:

In September 2008 Maliki – in a concession to the Americans – issued an order calling for the integration of 20 per cent of the eligible Awakening men into the ministries of defence and interior. The following month the government of Iraq began to assume responsibility (financial and otherwise) over the Awakening groups. But as of today less than five per cent have joined the Iraqi Security Forces. At the same time, senior Awakening leaders and many of their men have been arrested, while others have been relieved of their duties (and their pay) and told to go home. It is a quiet and slow process, but one that continues to emasculate one of the last groups that rivaled the authority of the Iraqi state. There is nothing the Awakening groups can do. As guerrillas and insurgents they were only effective when they operated covertly, underground, blending in among a Sunni population that has now mostly been dispersed. Now the former resistance fighters-turned-paid guards are publicly known, and their names, addresses and biometric data are in the hands of American and Iraqi forces. They cannot return to an underground that has been cleared, and they still face the wrath of radical Sunnis who view them as traitors (Rosen 2009b).

By agreeing, however opportunistically, to join forces with the Americans, the “Sunni Awakening” insurgents lost a valuable asset, namely their anonymity and ability to elude identification. Once their names and addresses were known, their days of flying under the radar were over: “The remaining Awakening men have burnt their bridges with their more radical former allies and are now hunted by them; the Iraqi Security Forces have improved their intelligence and strike capability and have little problem tracking those men they want to arrest” (Rosen 2009b).

Having suffered the consequences of turning against AQI in 2007-2008, the Sunni tribesmen made a different choice in 2013-2014. Taking advantage of the Syrian conflict next door, the power vacuum produced by the American withdrawal, and a renewed Saudi policy of funding proxies to combat the influence of Iran in the Arab world (Kirkpatrick 2014), the previously demoralized Sunni tribesmen joined forces with radical Islamic militants in a shocking irredentist surge (al-Salhy and Arango June 2014). Interestingly, the same blurring of lines that characterized the relation between Sunni tribesmen and AQI before the Awakening seems to characterize the current relation between IS (Islamic State) insurgents and the Sunni tribesmen. Reporting on the 80 Sunni Arab tribes plus another militant insurgent group (the Naqshbandis) consisting of former members of the Ba'ath party with strong roots in the community who have joined IS/ISIS in the fight against Shiite power, one
commentator even mentions the "tendency of Iraqi Baath loyalists to operate through fronts." (Hassan 2014). That possibility, too, confirms the ubiquity of mimicry in Iraq’s ongoing civil war.

Conclusion

Mimicry is common in wars, perhaps especially in civil wars. Members of groups that are commonly victims of lethal attack naturally strive to resemble members of groups less likely to be attacked. And although prohibited from doing so by international law, belligerents continue to engage in perfidy, wearing enemy uniforms or civilian attire in order to kill treacherously in surprise attacks. The tactical advantages gained by such aggressive mimicry are apparently too great to resist. This is just as true of Iraq as elsewhere. But many of the reported mimicry incidents of 2006-2008 also call for a more specific account. Contextual factors, specific to Iraq during this period, undoubtedly played a role.

As murder gangs began to terrorize the country, reports of defensive mimicry flooded the press. While sectarian death squads provided the motive for identity mimicry, internal displacement created the opportunity. Reports of defensive mimicry tapered off less because detection efforts were improved than because residential segregation along sectarian lines reduced both the opportunities and the motives for impersonation. The hardened shells that grew up around sectarian groups was a natural defensive response to inter-communal savagery. As communities became more homogeneous, moreover, members of minority sects began to stick out like sore thumbs, making identity mimicry more difficult and therefore further accelerating the move toward residential segregation.

A more interesting hypothesis, harder to verify but plausible on its face, is that a brief period of successful defensive mimicry provoked acute suspiciousness on the part of identity monitors which, in turn, resulted in genuine members of a sect being abused as if they were impostors. In response, these victims of mimicry’s externalities naturally had an incentive to develop identity signals that, if not imitation-proof, were at least harder to imitate. That such a sharpening of sectarian identity, an immune response triggered by defensive mimicry, played a role in the intensification of sub-allegiances that has virtually destroyed Iraqi national identity seems credible enough although probably impossible to prove.

The story of aggressive mimicry in Iraq’s ongoing sectarian conflict is different, although here again predictable side-effects, inflicting grave harm on third-parties, are surely a part of the story. Aggressive mimicry in wartime can survive ramped-up detection efforts because mimicry detection will never reach 100% in the few moments it takes to spring an ambush. Hence, aspiring embuscadiers can reasonably expect some payoff from impersonating innocents or feigning membership in the target group when carrying out an attack. Uninterrupted reports of attackers wearing lookalike uniforms and driving cloned vehicles provide strong evidence that the impersonation of enemy forces is too effective tactically to be foregone for remote and inconclusive law-of-war considerations. The fact that civilians are often denied access to the most “lucrative” targets suffices to explain why attackers choose military and police uniforms over civilian attire when attacking military and police facilities.

Treacherous killing in civilian attire merits classification as a war crime in large measure because it invites and provokes subsequent morally unjustifiable attacks, by the party initially duped, upon the innocent civilians being mimicked. Treacherous killing in the uniform of the enemy being attacked, on the other hand, must be justified in another way, since enemy soldiers do not deserve the same protections as noncombatants. Green-on-blue attacks by uniformed Iraqi and Afghan trainees suggest that we search in this case for a rationale having to do with the erosion of trust within military
forces (or coalitions). But my analysis thus far leaves this an open question. The destruction of public confidence in military and police force by aggressive identity mimics wearing police or military uniforms should also be taken into account, although, once again, how exactly it applies in standard cases remains unclear.

It is important, finally, that the mimic-model-dupe triad, when applied to the ongoing Iraqi civil war, is not only a political theorist’s illuminating construct, but also a partisan politician’s obscurantist chimera. The very idea of aggressive identity mimicry, as we have seen, can be invoked to destroy public accountability for atrocities. The basic reality of the 2006-2008 period was the complicity between the Shiites in the Iraqi government, army, and police and the Shiite militias and death squads. As the Shia parties captured the Iraqi state, Shia militias not only used and were used by, but actually became, the Iraqi army and the police. It is not quite accurate to conceive of this overlap as “infiltration,” because there never was a genuinely non-sectarian army and police, loyal to a non-sectarian central government, into which sectarian forces could be infiltrated. As a result, reports filed in the Western press, stating that militiamen who had “dressed in Iraqi police or army uniforms” while committing bloody massacres, were misleading even if literally accurate. Sometimes the killers were policemen pretending to be militiamen pretending to be policemen.

Calculated feigning can be calculatingly feigned. This faking of faking, or imitation squared, functioned as a readily available strategy for deflecting blame and fostering the illusion that the Shiites, taking over all the organs of the Iraqi state under the noses of the Americans, were themselves nonpartisan and uninterested in monopolizing power. This was a useful illusion for Maliki’s government to feed the U.S. occupiers. It was a kind of system-level mimicry. The Shia power sought to convince the American paymasters that it was at least trying to become an inclusive Iraqi state. The aggressive mimicry or perfidious killing to which the Iraqi civil war gave rise was real enough. But its simulacrum was also taken up and deployed to hide the dark complicity of the Baghdad government with coreligionist murder gangs. By 2008, if not before, the Iraqi state “belonged to the Shias.” (Rosen 2009a). After the Shiites had consolidated their take-over of the Iraqi state, they no longer had much need to resort to false allegations of identity mimicry, which may be why we observe a slight decrease in press reports of aggressive mimicry, too, after Maliki’s March 2008 attack on the Shiite militias in Basra. Rates of aggressive mimicry by Sunni insurgents, by contrast, did not decline. What declined was the pretense by the Maliki government that Shiite militias, when committing atrocities, were impersonating agents of the state. Especially after the American withdrawal in 2009, the Shia- led government in Baghdad was able to discard this particularly macabre disguise.
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Notes

1 To be fair, this accepting attitude toward wartime deception contrasts with a hortatory tradition, going back to antiquity, according to which gallant souls scorn killing treacherously, wishing to prevail by valor and force not by craft and cunning. For instance, “no true man of spirit deigns to kill his man by stealth” (Euripides, Rhesus, line 510). (Lattimore and Grene 1958, 27).

2 “The levels of violence are now comparable to the dark days of 2008, though back then the death toll was falling rather than rising. They are not as bad as 2006 and 2007 when the country came close to civil war” (Harding 2014). The most recent wave of savage conflict erupted only when Iraq’s battered Sunni tribes—taking advantage of the Syrian conflict next door, the power vacuum produced by the American withdrawal, and a renewed Saudi policy of funding proxies to combat the influence of Iran in the Arab world—managed to regroup and joined forces with radical Islamic militants in a shocking irredentist surge (Kirkpatrick 2014; al-Salhi and Arangojune 2014) that culminated in the still poorly understood takeover of huge swaths of northwest Iraq by ISIS (Anonymous 2015).

3 In the month of June 2014, “Iraq’s violent insurgency has claimed some 2,400 lives—more than half of them civilians—a ‘staggering number,’ declared the top United Nations envoy there” (UN News Centre, July 1, 2014, accessible at http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48177#.U7k35_mSwud); “The blitz across Iraq has pushed the death toll there to levels unseen since the worst sectarian bloodletting in 2006 during the U.S. occupation” (R. Lucas 2014).

4 Notice also that the informants quoted above were afraid to have their names printed, a reticence suggesting the continued importance of anonymity as a protective shield when your neighborhood, however peaceful internally, is being circled by ravenous wolves.

5 See also Scientific American (2013); and Kelly and Rostrup (2002).

6 Clandestine ISIS agents slipping into Kurdish-controlled territory, posing as refugees from the ISIS onslaught, and plotting a surprise attack could presumably be detected by Kurdish identity-monitors and future missions thereby deterred: “Some Kurds have become deeply suspicious of their Arab neighbours overnight. The region has given refuge to tens of thousands of Arabs displaced by violence in the rest of the country since the start of the year. "We opened the doors to the Arabs but yesterday we discovered that in some houses they have weapons," said Ziad Taha Aziz, 44, who sells shoe polish and brushes at a stall in the market. ‘Some of them are good, and some of them are bad. We need to arrest them all and see whether there are traitors among them. We think there are sleeper cells’” (Reuters 2014).

7 Cf. the infamous December 30, 2009 suicide attack at a forward operating base, Camp Chapman, near Khost, Afghanistan. Seven American agents responsible for picking drone targets inside Pakistan were killed along with a senior Jordanian intelligence officer. The suicide bomber, in a pre-recorded video, claimed to be undertaking the attack in retaliation for the targeted killing campaign being overseen at the base. He had apparently spent months lowering the guard of the U.S. agents by providing intelligence on the whereabouts of low-level operatives who were duly killed by drones. The sloppy screening that, on the day of the attack, allowed the infiltrator to come lethally close to so many top agents was allegedly a gesture of courtesy stimulated by his promise to deliver actionable intelligence on the whereabouts of al Qaeda’s no. 2, Ayman al-Zawahiri. Although the Agency’s most skilled drone targeters had a powerful incentive to distinguish accurately between friend and foe, not even their well-honed deception detectors could function infallibly 100 percent of the time.

8 Brigadier General Emanuel Shaked, commander of operation Aviv Neurim (conducted on April 9-10, 1973), described it to an interviewer as follows: “The task of killing the three senior members of the PLO was entrusted to the Sayeret Matkal attack. They walked singly and in pairs at a distance of ten meters one from the other as if there was no relationship between them. . . Four of the warriors were disguised as women. Ehud Barak’s wig was black. Amiram Levine (destined to become Commanding General of the Northern Command and Deputy Head of the Mossad) boasted a red hairpiece. Loni Rafaeli and Danny Bar looked like blond women. In accordance with the dictates of fashion, Barak wore widening pants and within his large breasts, artificial of course, he hid explosive blocks. Barak walked in front with "her" partner, Muki Betzer, who wore a civilian suit. To the Lebanese passerby the two looked like a man and a woman, normal citizens. In fact, a pair of Lebanese Gendarmieres, who strode towards them on the sidewalk, gave them a close look, and Betzer, who strengthened his lovers hug, dared even to rub shoulders with the Lebanese uniform bearer, who was forced to give in and to step down to the road with his partner. The Lebanese did not know that in front of them was a deadly couple, leading the force forward. The attack on three separate Palestine Liberation Organization targets was successful” (cited in Parks, 558).

9 http://defensetech.org/2005/03/08/israeli-impersonators-key-to-terror-fight/

10 Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I), 8 June 1977.
Mr. Daqduq’s eventual release by the Maliki government was generally taken as a sign that, after the US withdrawal, Iran had greater influence over Baghdad than did Washington (Gordon 2012).

“The distinction between combatants and non-combatants is also threatened by the practice of US special forces, which constitute an increasingly important part of the US military yet have – with the apparent support of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld – taken to wearing civilian clothing.” (Byers 2006). Suspicions that British concern for tu quoque arguments has also diminished since the post-WW2 trials are confirmed by the report that, in 2005, two British “undercover officers dressed as Iraqis” were arrested by Iraqi police and were “then freed as a British armored vehicle blasted through the wall of their jail after an angry crowd began rioting outside.” (Tavernise 2005)

“The essential element of perfidy is, accordingly, that the confidence induced (and broken) must relate to the protected status under the rules of international humanitarian law.” (Moir 2009, 516).

Article 37 of the 1977 Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions

This pattern illuminates Gambetta’s (2005) idea of mimic-versus-model-via-dupe.

See Heather Hamill’s study of Northern Ireland (2016).

These killings have been common in Afghanistan as well as Iraq (Ahmed 2013; M. Rosenberg 2012). Here is a report about the murder of five British soldiers at the hands of an Afghan policeman with whom they had been working closely: “The attack occurred at midday on Tuesday in Helmand Province as the soldiers relaxed in the still-warm autumn sun on the roof of the joint checkpoint overlooking a shared British-Afghan compound. They were so much at ease that they had shed their body armor and helmets, never thinking that they would be attacked by one of the men they lived and worked with, said a local provincial official. Afterward, the attacker fled, setting off a manhunt.” (Rubin, Burns, and Shah 2009).

Another example of secondhand or vicarious mimicry comes from Colombia where “soldiers “are rewarded with cash or holidays for killing guerrillas but, essentially, any corpse will do in this dirty war…In October 2008, 11 young men were enticed away from their homes in Soacha, a poor suburb of Bogotá, and offered work. A few weeks later, they were found in a grave in Ocaña, near the border of Venezuela, dressed in Farc uniforms and presented as dead guerrillas.” (Power 2011).

Citing both Bolani and Jabr.

That little has changed in the interim, despite well-publicized gestures toward formal “inclusiveness,” is suggested by a well-informed commentator’s claim that in 2014 Iraq: “Lawless Shia militias, answerable only to their leaders, supplant the army and police.” (Matthews 2014).

Iraq’s Shia-led government made sure that the American charges failed to stick. Association with a murderous Shia militia functioned as a get-out-of-jail-free card: “After a two-day trial, marred by accusations of witness intimidation, the charges were dropped and Mr. Zamili was freed after spending more than a year in American custody. (Santora and Gordon 2010). He was elected to the Iraqi parliament in 2010 and became a member of the security committee in 2011. 

It is worth noticing that, “while some analysts believe that AQI drafts Baathist insurgents to carry out its attacks, other intelligence experts think it is the other way around” (Tilghman 2007).

One reason why it took so long to initiate the integration strategy in such areas was apparently its incompatibility with “democratization,” namely, the ideological and historically illiterate belief that a modern democracy had no place for tribal (i.e., unelected) leaders.

No one claims that the Peshmerga “infiltrated” the security forces in the north. Saying that Shiite militias “infiltrated” the police and the military in the South would be equally misleading: “As with Shiite militias in Baghdad, the line between militia members and Iraqi security troops in Kirkuk” was “so thin that it at times doesn’t exist” (Lasseter 2007).

“Coalition Provisional Authority Order Number 91: Regulation of Armed Forces and Militias within Iraq” (June 2, 2004).

See Cockburn (2007)