

A PRIMER ON POPULATION-CENTRIC COUNTERINSURGENCY

WHAT WORKED IN IRAQ, AND WHAT CAN WORK IN AFGHANISTAN



Photo by Sgt. Scott Whittington

An explanation of the strategy we employed successfully in Iraq written for non-experts. This paper offers a look at how counterinsurgency is conducted on the ground. It is offered to help civilians understand how it was done in Iraq and how it would be employed in Afghanistan.

The authors are fellows of [Warrior Legacy Institute](#)

Mark Seavey
John Wagner
Jim Hanson



A primer on population-centric counterinsurgency

What worked in Iraq, and what can work in Afghanistan

Counterinsurgency is hardly a new concept. Throughout history, nations have dealt with attempts to destabilize or overthrow them. The organs of power belong to the government, but if the insurgency has popular support, or strikes fear into the people, that power may be difficult to wield. The stronger a central government is, the easier it is to clamp down on opposing organic or foreign elements employing guerrilla tactics. The question becomes, will the government and its allies attempt to gain the help of the populace by force or by conversion?

If guerrillas are swimming like fish in the waters of the citizenry, a nation must convince its people that they do not want to shelter them. Historically, this has been achieved by force and fear, if achieved at all. Whether an empire is protecting its possessions or a nation is protecting its sovereignty, uprisings have often been dealt with swiftly and violently. Those supporting the insurgents are identified and killed; sometimes they aren't even supporters, just unfortunates who served as an example of the state's power. A popular uprising can become unpopular quickly if relatives and family members killed. Destroying the crops and livelihoods and razing the countryside leaves little for a guerrilla force trying to sustain itself. Brutality may not be pretty, but it can be extremely effective.

The United States now employs a more civilized approach to persuade citizens to deny aid and sanctuary to insurgents. The strategy of population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) involves separating insurgents from the populace and convincing the people and the more moderate insurgents that the government represents security and an increased quality of life.

These are not new concepts; American military theorist Col. John Boyd wrote up the exact definition of population-centric COIN in his monograph 'Patterns of Conflict' written in response to the escalating Vietnam war:

Action: *Undermine guerilla cause and destroy their cohesion by demonstrating integrity and competence of government to represent and serve needs of the people - rather than exploit and impoverish them for the benefit of a greedy elite.* Take political initiative to root out and visibly punish corruption. Select new leaders with recognized competence as well as popular appeal. Ensure that they deliver justice, eliminate grievances and connect government with grass roots.* Infiltrate guerilla movement as well as employ population for intelligence about guerilla plans, operations, and organization. Seal-off guerilla regions from outside world by diplomatic, psychological, and various other activities that strip-away potential allies as well as by disrupting or straddling communications that connect these regions with the outside world.*

This approach is more difficult and dangerous for security forces in the beginning, but pays dividends as the locals gain trust and begin to offer information about insurgent activities. It becomes possible to use targeted strikes and raids to harass and eliminate insurgents with minimal danger to civilians.

We have seen in Iraq an example of how this can succeed. Iraq was a complex mix of three insurgencies, the Shia militias, the Sunni Baathists and foreign Al-Qaeda elements. The groups had differing goals, allegiances and motivations, but shared a

desire to expel U.S. forces, and to gain influence over the nascent Iraqi central government. Additionally, a civil war was ongoing between Sunni and Shia insurgents; longtime religious and tribal feuds turned into active, targeted kidnappings and killings. Many factors contributed to the successes in Iraq including the Anbar Awakening, the marginalization of Moqtada al Sadr, the increasing proficiency of Iraqi security forces and a shift of United States strategy to population-centric COIN, along with the sufficient forces to do so. These factors are interconnected, and an approach focused on securing the civilian populace could have hastened them, had it been implemented earlier.

The Anbar Awakening was driven largely by a realization that the Al-Qaeda elements and Baathists were killing more Iraqis than Americans. The Sheiks came to determine that their responsibility to safeguard their people forced them to expel the foreign guerrillas and reign in those of their own who were perpetrating these outrages. A concerted effort over a number of years by U.S. forces had gained a level of trust that allowed an alliance of convenience between the tribes and the United States against the insurgents. This denied sanctuary to Al-Qaeda elements, and many former Baathist insurgents morphed into Sons of Iraq now responsible for security in their villages. Once the locals determined this was a viable and lasting situation a virtuous cycle began and they gave more intelligence on the remaining insurgents who were killed or captured. The U.S. and Iraqi forces jointly maintained security after each area was cleared. This was the key as US forces left their large bases and deployed out among the Iraqis to share their sacrifices.

As the Surge forces came into play the switch to pop-centric COIN had been made, but there were still many kinetic engagements as areas of insurgent control were entered and cleared. The difference was the U.S. forces stayed and set up alongside Iraqi security to ensure that the areas stayed safe. Local police were augmented and over time were able to become the primary guarantors of peace. In actions to clear areas controlled by Shia Militias, the Iraqi Army made some of its first major offensive operations and showed that the central government could impose its will and ensure the insurgents could not operate with impunity. The United States spent considerable time, effort and energy building, training and equipping the Iraqi forces and also that they were committed to staying long enough to quell the violence and not leave until the Iraqis could handle security themselves. When they showed they could defeat the militias in Sadr City, they achieved two things: a military victory and proof that the Shia-dominated government would fight against rogue Shia elements. This was essential to gaining the trust of Sunnis and Kurds. As more villages and cities were pacified, insurgents found fewer places to hide, and the vast majority of the country was secured.

This allowed the United States to negotiate a security agreement with the Iraqi government, pulling forces back and leaving Iraqis to provide their own security. That process is continuing, and while there are still outbursts of violence, the insurgencies are effectively defeated. Many challenges lie ahead for the country, but the strategies and tactics employed by U.S. and Iraqis, chiefly the pop-centric COIN, worked.

The question now becomes can these successes and strategies be transferred to Afghanistan. The answer: Yes, it can; quite effectively.

The basic tactics that compose a pop-centric COIN strategy remain applicable:

Safeguard the population;

Deny the insurgents safe haven;

Share sacrifices with the civilians to build rapport;

Demonstrate that the government brings security and prosperity;

The culture in Afghanistan is fiercely tribal. Each tribe must be treated as a separate country, more or less. Personal relationships take time and trust to build, but are the only way to convince the locals that the insurgents are not more powerful. Many local leaders have been killed when they cooperated with the coalition and then our forces left the area. They must be convinced that we are there to stay and will only leave once the Afghan security apparatus can keep them safe.

The scenario should play out like this:

U.S. and Afghan security forces arrive in the village and meet with tribal elders to illustrate that they are staying for the duration. Living arrangements are negotiated with an emphasis on living among the villagers. A defensible stronghold is established to be used in the event of a mass attack. The local leaders are asked what projects could improve the quality of life. Maximum interaction between the forces and the villagers is encouraged. Locals are recruited to work on civil improvement projects, and to also become part of the security apparatus. Meals, work and daily life become a shared existence; rapport is built. With that comes trust and the belief that security and prosperity come from this partnership. This grows to eclipse the fear of reprisals from the insurgents, and the idea that the government is a force for good takes hold. As the Afghan security forces increase in number and competence, they replace U.S. forces and are augmented by locals to ensure that the insurgents cannot gain a foothold as the United States draws back.

This is not a quick solution; it is a decidedly long war initiative. But it has the advantage of diminishing violence as it progresses. Initially, there will be kinetic engagements and casualties as insurgents are pushed out of areas where they have influence. The risks are much heavier at the beginning because the locals won't be as trusting or willing to help. Their support is won by showing them that the United States and the Afghan security forces value their safety. The tactics must cause as little collateral damage to the people as possible. That means accepting a greater danger to joint forces in the initial stages. But this is an investment to reap a reward: greater cooperation from the locals as they see who has their best interests at heart.

This strategy must be implemented in stages. As areas are pacified, the footprint increases. It must be done in conjunction with a major effort to recruit, train and deploy competent Afghan security forces – mostly Army and paramilitary police who can hold their own against insurgents. U.S. forces cannot garrison the entire country, but they can help clear areas, and then leave them in the hands of a combination of national and local security. Once a secure environment is created, the civilian surge must flow in. Infrastructure, health, agriculture and other quality-of-life projects must begin. These will be what seal the deal. This must involve the State Department, USAID and

NGOs, and especially agencies of the Afghan government who can safely operate in the now-secured areas. They will show that the national government is not a corrupt enterprise, but a structure to help the Afghan people. The people will then invest in the notion of a nation, creating an incentive to resist attempts by insurgents to re-infiltrate or recruit.

Many factors make this a difficult strategy to implement in a country with forbidding terrain, fractious tribal rivalries and a history of antipathy to outsiders. But if the goal is to foster a country that will not serve as a breeding ground and sanctuary for extremist violence, this is the most likely path. It will take resources, commitment and patience, and after seven years that is difficult to consider. But the alternative is to cede the battlefield and yield victory to the Taliban and Al-Qaeda – who will gain credibility, power and recruits within Afghanistan and worldwide. Which is more difficult to consider?

John Wagner- Served in Iraq with MNF-I

Mark Seavey- Served in Afghanistan with the US Army Infantry

Jim Hanson- Conducted Counterinsurgency operations in multiple Pacific Rim countries



Photo by Staff Sgt. Christopher Allison

