

Countering Insurgency in the Muslim World

Rethinking U.S. Priorities and Capabilities

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Insurgencies of the kind the United States has struggled to counter in Iraq and Afghanistan, at staggering costs, will not end there. As events in Pakistan portend, the danger of such conflict spreading is the gravest national-security problem the United States now faces. Yet the U.S. government does not have the capabilities it needs to counter insurgencies heavily influenced by violent Islamist extremists. This is the central finding of a new RAND report, *War by Other Means—Building Complete and Balanced Capabilities for Counterinsurgency*, by David Gompert and John Gordon. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has relied chiefly on military occupation and combat operations as a solution. *War by Other Means* finds that large-scale use of U.S. military forces to counter insurgencies in the Muslim world is at best inadequate, at worst counterproductive, and on the whole, not feasible. Culminating a two-year study for the U.S. Department of Defense, the authors and their research team offer a fresh analysis of such insurgencies and call for a major shift in investment priorities to give the United States the capabilities it needs to counter them.

Radical Islamic Violence as a New Form of Insurgency

It is essential to recognize, as the Defense Department increasingly does, that the current pattern of violence in the Muslim world is a type of insurgency, albeit a new type that stems from increasing transnational mobility, connectivity, and consciousness caused by globalization. Like traditional insurgencies, this new type is essentially a contest for the allegiance of local populations. Consequently, to counter it, foreign military forces are no substitute for effective and legitimate local governance, including critical public services and indigenous security forces. Indeed, data from some 90 insurgencies since World War II reveal

Abstract

Iraq and Afghanistan have revealed serious shortfalls in the capabilities of the United States to counter insurgency in the Muslim world. Instead of relying predominantly on military occupation, the United States must become more able to bolster the ability of threatened states to win the contest for the support of their people. This report offers a plan to improve U.S. capabilities to build effective local government, train local security forces, and exploit information power. This will require intensified multilateral collaboration and a shift in U.S. investment priorities.

that insurgencies nearly always fail against governments that are representative, competent, and honest in the eyes of their citizens.

At the same time, unlike past insurgencies, the type now menacing the Muslim world—from North Africa to the Middle East to South and Southeast Asia—fuses national movements with the aims, themes, methods, and rage of global jihad (e.g., al Qaeda). When infected by religious extremism, local insurgencies become more violent, resistant to settlement, difficult to defeat, and likely to lash out and spread. The jihadist appeal to local insurgents is the message, resonant among Muslims, that their faith and their homelands are under attack by the West and that they should therefore join the larger cause. Because their main targets are what they believe to be apostate governments—Western “proxies”—jihadists pounce on local insurgencies as strategic opportunities. When these governments depend on Western military forces to survive, insurgencies can appeal not only to popular grievances but also to popular revulsion against foreign “infidel” forces. The insurgent belief that heroic

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defensive measures are needed can motivate suicide bombers, a virtually unstoppable weapon.

The Formula: Balanced Capabilities + Early Involvement

The imperative of effective and legitimate local government, coupled with the risks and limitations of U.S. military occupation of Muslim countries, points to a need for more complete and balanced U.S. counterinsurgency capabilities than those used in Iraq and Afghanistan. Recent progress in Iraq can be traced to the U.S. military's decision—four years into the insurgency—to shift to a counterinsurgency strategy. But it would be a profound mistake to conclude that all the United States needs to defeat Islamist insurgencies is to dispatch more military power. While future large-scale use of U.S. military force in the Muslim world cannot be excluded, it is not a sustainable prescription for success. Moreover, dependence on it can divert attention from the pressing need to correct critical nonmilitary deficiencies.

The earlier the danger of a particular insurgency is recognized, the less likely it is that U.S. military intervention will have to be considered. It takes time for a local insurgency to gather strength and become infected with jihad. Empirically, the chances of defusing a localized “proto-insurgency” are better than 9 in 10; yet the chances of defeating a full-blown global-local insurgency are less than even. Furthermore, history shows that large-scale foreign military interventions—France in Indochina and Algeria, the USSR in Afghanistan—are more likely to fail than succeed. This is because weak and/or illegitimate local governments are hard to save once insurgency erupts. Transforming such governments takes years, must begin early, and requires capabilities other than foreign combat forces. Thus, large-scale military intervention can be seen as the result of a failed counterinsurgency strategy and by no means ensures success. With the potential for insurgency present in much of the Muslim world, where shaky governments abound, it is vital for the U.S. government to improve its warning systems and its ability to take prompt nonmilitary action once warned.

Current U.S. Shortfalls Revolve Around Civil, Local Security, and Information Capabilities

War by Other Means finds that the United States would be more effective and less dependent on large-scale use of military power to counter insurgency in the Muslim world by correcting three major deficiencies:

- civil competence and capacity to build effective and legitimate local government
- capabilities to organize, train, equip, and advise local military and police forces
- information gathering, sharing, and exploitation.

Civil Counterinsurgency

Among the functions a capable local government must perform, three are especially critical in counterinsurgency: job training and placement of ex-combatants, efficient and fair justice systems (e.g., laws, courts, and prisons), and accessible mass lower education. When it comes to building these and other civil capacities abroad, the United States is alarmingly weak. To remedy this, core capabilities should be formed in relevant civil agencies of the U.S. federal government and deployed via the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) under the policy oversight of the State Department. This will take new organizational arrangements and personnel policies.

The aggregate gap in civil capabilities is huge, both in deployable professionals and in foreign aid funds at their disposal. An estimated 20 percent of U.S. troops in Afghanistan and Iraq—some 40,000—are currently performing civil functions. The large and successful Civilian Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS) program of the Vietnam War provides a benchmark for what is needed. To mount comparable efforts (per local inhabitant) in two mid-sized countries, while conducting smaller-scale preventive efforts in several others, the United States would need to triple its total current deployed USAID staff (of about 1,500) and double its annual foreign-development aid budget (of about \$25 billion).

These requirements could be halved if (1) the United States had a reliable warning system for insurgencies to permit resources to be targeted preventively and (2) U.S. allies and international organizations matched U.S. efforts.

Building and Supporting Local Security Forces

In addition to critical civilian services, a government must be able to provide for the security of its citizens if it is to earn their confidence and cooperation. Reliance on U.S. forces for local security should be at most a temporary fix or last resort. Yet Iraq and Afghanistan reveal that the United States is not currently able to prepare local forces of sufficient quality, in sufficient numbers, in a reasonable time to perform the bulk of counterinsurgency security operations. The U.S. Army, Marine Corps, and Special Operations Forces need to enhance their capabilities to organize, train, equip, and advise indigenous military forces. Indigenous police, however, should be trained by civilian professionals rather than military troops.

As this is being done, the U.S. military should focus on capabilities needed to support local forces in operations and perform missions that local forces cannot: border and coastal surveillance, technical intelligence-collection, air mobility and strike, and special operations against “high-value” enemies. If U.S. ground forces must be used because of a fail-

ure to build good local ones, they should be better schooled in counterinsurgency, more mobile, better networked, and less reliant on lethal force than at present. Investments are needed in enhanced information networks, scalable-effect weapons, and fast yet rugged land vehicles. U.S. Special Operations Command should have the responsibility to set standards, experiment with new capabilities, and operate with regular U.S. and local forces in actual counterinsurgency campaigns.

Exploiting Information

Cyber-savvy Islamist insurgents are excelling at what ought to be a U.S. advantage: information power. The United States must improve at three levels:

- *Networking*: accessing and sharing information
- *Cognition*: understanding situations accurately and using information effectively
- *Psychology*: knowing and influencing the local population.

In Iraq and Afghanistan, needed information moves too slowly among U.S. military, intelligence, civilian, and allied units. A fixation on information security denies access to local forces and excludes the most valuable source of all, the local population. *War by Other Means* prescribes a new architecture for information sharing in counterinsurgency—an Integrated Counterinsurgency Operating Network (ICON)—based on the principles of inclusion, integration, and user primacy (the opposites of the principles of denial, compartmentalization, and originator control that prevail today). To increase the population's sharing of information, ICON would foster and rely on universal cell-phone use, "wikis," and video monitoring. The requisite technologies to enable ICON and related information systems exist and their cost is declining, but rigid government-procurement practices retard their adoption.

In parallel, the use of information in decisionmaking should and can be enhanced by tailoring personnel policies to recruit, retain, train, promote, and assign people with superior abilities to reason under pressure. Finally, in the psychological domain, the United States should discard "pro-America" themes in favor of strengthening the image of local

government, while also highlighting growing evidence that jihadists, when in power, fail utterly to provide for the material needs of ordinary people.

Two Implementation Strategies

To acquire needed capabilities for civil counterinsurgency, building local security services, and exploiting information power, the United States must (1) expand collaboration with its partners and (2) reset its own investment priorities.

Multilateral Counterinsurgency

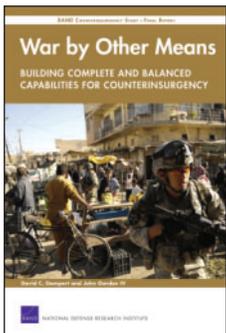
If current U.S. capabilities are combined with those of allies and international organizations, many deficiencies shrink, especially for building local government and security forces (e.g., police). Although non-U.S. capabilities are not readily deployable at present, intensified planning both within NATO and between NATO, the European Union, and UN agencies could increase and harmonize multilateral capabilities relatively quickly. It is essential that the United States and its European allies end the diplomatic impasse on NATO-EU cooperation.

Investment Strategy

Assuming that allied and multilateral potential is tapped, the additional annual cost of acquiring, maintaining, and using adequate U.S. counterinsurgency capabilities is roughly

- \$11–17 billion for adequate civilian personnel and foreign assistance funds
- \$2–3 billion for improved capability to train and equip local security services
- \$4–6 billion for ICON and associated information systems
- \$3–4 billion for specific military-force enhancements.

How much of the total requirement of \$20–30 billion would require additional federal spending? While *War by Other Means* does not answer that question definitively, it points out that many military capabilities now being justified as needed to counter Islamist insurgency—to prosecute the "global war on terror"—are less suitable for counterinsurgency than those this report recommends. In any case, U.S. priorities need to be altered to meet a national-security threat that shows no signs of abating. ■



This research brief describes work done for the RAND National Defense Research Institute documented in *War by Other Means—Building Complete and Balanced Capabilities for Counterinsurgency: RAND Counterinsurgency Study—Final Report*, by David C. Gompert and John Gordon IV, MG-595/2-OSD (available at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG595.2/>), 2008, 518 pp., \$42.50, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4309-2. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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