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Governence, Identity, and Counterinsurgency Strategy

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This policy brief is drawn from the author's dissertation, "Governance, Identity, and Counterinsurgency Strategy."

The premise of most Western thinking on counterinsurgency is that success depends on establishing a perception of legitimacy among local populations. The path to legitimacy is often seen as the improvement of governance in the form of effective and efficient administration of government and public services. However, good governance is not the only possible basis for claims to legitimacy. This study considers whether, in insurgencies where ethno-religious identities are politically salient, claims to legitimacy may rest more on the identity of *who* governs, rather than on *how* whoever governs governs. Specifically, it poses and tests the hypothesis that in the presence of major ethno-religious cleavages, good governance will contribute less to counterinsurgent success than will efforts toward reaching political agreements that directly address those cleavages.

The study reviews and synthesizes scholarship and policy regarding insurgencies and counterinsurgencies, the politics of ethnic identity, governance, and legitimacy. Building on this synthesis, it presents an analytic framework for examining these issues. It then applies that framework to brief analyses of counterinsurgent experiences in Malaya, Algeria, South Vietnam, and then to analyses of two detailed local case studies of American counterinsurgency operations in Iraq: Ramadi from 2004-2005; and Tal Afar from 2005-2006. These Iraq case studies are based on primary research, including interviews with participants and eyewitnesses.

Lessons from History on Governance, Identity and Counterinsurgency

A review of existing scholarship on governance, identity, and counterinsurgency establishes a few important premises.

- Prevailing policy and strategy for counterinsurgency in the United States reflect assumptions about the bases of political legitimacy that are rooted in Western political philosophy and Cold War history.
- In particular, conception of counterinsurgency as a competition between insurgents and counterinsurgents over who can best provide public goods and services is based on narrow, materialistic views of social welfare, justice, and legitimate authority that are not universally held.

- A substantial body of scholarship establishes that conflicts where ethnic and religious identities are politically salient have different dynamics than other conflicts.

The study's brief examinations of Western counterinsurgencies in Malaya, Algeria, and South Vietnam suggest the following insights regarding the study's hypothesis:

- British and American experiences in Malaya and Vietnam provide some evidence to support the conventional wisdom that providing good governance is an effective strategy for counterinsurgents. In each case, improvements in the quality of governance provided by the incumbent governments corresponded to improvements in the progress of counterinsurgency.
- The case of French counterinsurgency in Algeria provides some qualified support for the hypothesis that the politics of ethnic identity can subvert the effectiveness of governance-based strategies. There, effective military operations against the insurgents failed to overcome the popular view of illegitimate political rule of Europeans over indigenous Arabs and Berbers.
- However, all three cases suggest that the efficacy of governance-based strategies is less clear than is usually assumed, and, more generally, that the "lessons" from these touchstone experiences of modern counterinsurgency are inadequate guides to the questions raised in this study.

From a methodological stand-point, a key lesson of these cases is the need to examine the dynamics of legitimacy in counterinsurgency at more local levels, a task taken up in the Iraq case studies.

Iraq Case Studies

The study's examination of American counterinsurgency in Iraq focuses on the experiences of two Army units during the period 2004-2006, one in Ramadi and one in Tal Afar. While examination of more case studies is a high priority for future research, these particular cases were selected in order to allow for comparison between two instances with salient identity politics, in similar time frames, and with similar insurgent threats, but with quite different counterinsurgency outcomes.

In Ramadi, identity politics clearly trumped quality of governance in shaping the course of events. The grievances that fuelled the insurgency had far more to do with a deep sense of disenfranchisement within Iraq's Sunni community and the related fear of sectarian persecution than it did with any failure in the government's performance. As a result, the evidence from this case points toward major limits to how much popular loyalty and legitimacy could be won through the improvement of governance. Other factors – namely security, itself, and identity-based concepts of legitimate rule (both tribal and sectarian) – appeared more decisive during the time of the case study. Moreover, the tribal "Awakening" movement that took hold in Ramadi the following year strongly supports this interpretation of events. The Awakening seems to have been rooted in two key changes in Ramadi and its surrounding Anbar province. First was the exhaustion of the population with violence and terror at the hands of Islamic extremists in their midst. Second, though, was a new willingness of the Coalition to recognize the legitimacy of local tribal rule in spite of the sectarian tension that rule introduced between local and national sovereignty.

Tal Afar's story is quite different, but suggests a similar conclusion. While the quality of governance mattered to the way both the population and the counterinsurgents conceived of legitimacy, improvements in governance in Tal Afar were more a consequence than a cause of successful counterinsurgency. Without both the U.S. Army's dense presence in the city and its intensive focus on brokering compromises among the city's largely sectarian tribal conflicts, improvements in governance likely would never have taken root. Governance and political compromise between sectarian groups clearly reinforced each other there, but interviews with participants in the counterinsurgency in Tal Afar suggest that improvements in governance were of secondary importance in reducing violence in the city.

Conclusions and Implications

The analysis presented in the study suggests three conclusions about the nature of counterinsurgency.

1. Identity politics shape counterinsurgency outcomes.

In all three of the cases analyzed where ethno-religious cleavages were clearly salient to the conflicts – Algeria and both Iraq cases – the outcomes of counterinsurgency operations were directly related to the counterinsurgents' attentiveness to the politics of ethno-religious identity. Also in Algeria and Iraq, competition between insurgents and counterinsurgents over the quality of governance was a clearly less important factor in determining the conflict outcomes than the disposition of political agreements related to ethno-religious cleavages. This is not to say that providing good governance was irrelevant – it still is shown in the case studies to be a contributor to counterinsurgent success, and its absence an impediment to success. Counterinsurgents should certainly not ignore the quality of governance in the places they are fighting. But neither should they invest all their hope of establishing legitimacy through activities focused on increasing the effectiveness and efficiencies of government and public services.

2. Identity politics are local.

Despite the importance of group loyalties and preferences, national-level observations of identity-group politics in the midst of counterinsurgency are inadequate guides to explaining and affecting local behavior. Local legitimacy and loyalty develop with a significant degree of independence from national identity group dynamics and institutions. One U.S. officer summed it up this way: "Ninety percent of the population does not look at the situation from a strategic standpoint. They think of it as 'how does this affect me on my block.' They're not just neutral, waiting to be influenced – they're leaning. But they will be strongly influenced by what happens on their own blocks."

3. Population security is still the most important factor in shaping counterinsurgency outcomes.

Recognizing the importance of ethno-religious identity politics should do nothing to take away from the fundamental primacy of population security in counterinsurgency strategy. Almost all of the counterinsurgents interviewed for this research emphasized the criticality of establishing people's confidence in their own physical security as a prerequisite for accomplishing anything else in a counterinsurgency environment.

While this study's results are far from the final word on its subject, they do suggest several important implications for policy makers and counterinsurgent leaders.

1. Counterinsurgency strategy must account for the role of traditional social hierarchies and forms of legitimacy.

The intermediation of relationships between people and their government by tribes or clerics or other non-governmental group leaders is a strategically important factor in counterinsurgency. Iraq is a clear illustration that these traditional hierarchies can be relevant even in societies that appear in many respects to be quite "modern" or developed according to the Western model. This creates an imperative for counterinsurgents, at a minimum, to understand what power hierarchies exist among the people where they are fighting, and to explicitly examine the role of group loyalty and identity politics in their assessments of their operational environment. In instances where these factors appear salient, they must become integral to strategy development as well.

2. Counterinsurgents should always be prepared to employ the full range of tools addressing security, governance and identity.

Notwithstanding this study's emphasis on the potentially high importance of addressing ethno-religious cleavages, the dynamics of identity politics and group loyalties are likely to be so fluid, opaque, and variable across localities that counterinsurgents cannot afford to neglect any element of their legitimacy-building tool kit. They should be prepared to build political stability on foundations of both identity and quality of governance simultaneously.

3. Local, specialized knowledge trumps doctrine and theory.

Because the dynamics of insurgency and counterinsurgency are so sensitive to variations in local conditions and events, strategies should be based to the maximum extent possible on local, specialized knowledge and relationships.

4. Do not economize on force size.

No matter how sophisticated the counterinsurgency strategy, it is unlikely to succeed without the allocation of enough security forces to create a visible and widespread presence where the insurgency is active.

In sum, these conclusions and implications do not overturn any of the traditional tenets of counterinsurgency, but instead should help to sharpen some of them. Based on this research the conventional wisdom that successful counterinsurgency depends on establishing legitimacy, which in turn demands coordinated political and military programs, remains valid. To the extent that "winning hearts and minds" is used to describe this principle, that phrase remains applicable.

What this research adds to our understanding of counterinsurgency is an appreciation for identity-based sources of legitimacy which can rival and even eclipse the legitimacy that flows from good governance. Accordingly, the political component of a counterinsurgency strategy must be political not only in the sense of being focused on government and how government exercises power. It must also be sensitive to the distribution of that power across key identity groups.

About the author

Michael Fitzsimmons is an analyst in the Strategy, Forces, and Resources Division at the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), where his work focuses principally on defense strategy and force planning. He has also worked extensively on issues related to Operation Iraqi Freedom, and spent several months as an advisor to operational and strategic headquarters staffs in Iraq during 2007-2008. His research and commentary have appeared in Survival, the Journal of Strategic Studies, Joint Force Quarterly, and Defense and Security Analysis. Prior to joining IDA, Dr. Fitzsimmons worked as a management consultant at Bain & Company in the United States, Russia, and the United Kingdom. He completed his Ph.D. in Policy Studies at the University of Maryland in 2009. He is also a graduate of UCLA and has advanced degrees in international affairs and business administration from Columbia University.