SEEING THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN: PROBLEMATIZATION OF "OUR" COUNTERINSURGENCY (COIN) EFFORTS IN AFGHANISTAN

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“Human beings are members of a whole, in creation of one essence and soul.
If one member is afflicted with pain, other members uneasy will remain.
If you have no sympathy for human pain, the name of human you cannot retain.”

Sa’adi Shirazi (13th century Islamic poet)
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Is Afghanistan a success story or a defeat for the coalition forces (CF)? At the tactical level, it is definitely a success story as the troops on the ground have not lost a single campaign since 2001. However, what about the outcome at the political-strategic level? When examining the current state of Afghanistan, it is easy to see that the CF could not translate its victory at the tactical level into a victory at the strategic-political level. This paper, based in part on the author’s own experiences serving in the international coalition forces in Afghanistan, will thus emphasize the widening gap between the tactical level and strategic-political level in contemporary conflicts, specifically the counterinsurgency (COIN) in Afghanistan, and will problematize the “whats” and “whys” of this paradox.

Afghanistan has brought to the fore the distinction between “planning” and “design.” While both activities seek to formulate ways to bring about preferable futures, they are cognitively different. This paper concludes that at the initial phase coalition forces were too busy solving problems in Afghanistan with the traditional cognitive and material tools. Therefore, they did not have the foresight to define the exact problem and develop solutions that are compatible with the Afghan way. Afghanistan has proved that in hybrid settings general planning is not enough to adapt to an unorthodox situation. In Afghanistan, one needs new designs, preferably asymmetric ones, which zoom closer into the nature of an unfamiliar conflict and conceive of effective solutions.
**INTRODUCTION**

Traditional wisdom defines an *insurgency* as an important part of unconventional war or a form of irregular conflict aiming to overthrow a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict. Stated another way, an insurgency is an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control. According to the U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide (2009), counterinsurgency (COIN) “may be defined as ‘comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes.’”

For anyone seeking to understand to what extent these definitions fit into the realities on the ground in the contemporary global security environment, Afghanistan emerges as the first test case, as in the last decade we have witnessed a global mobilization to fight against the insurgency there. Since 2001, more than 500,000 coalition soldiers from 50 different countries have served in Afghanistan as part of the COIN operation. More than 16 rotation periods have been experienced and almost 800 billion USD spent, 3,400 coalition soldiers from 50 different countries have served in Afghanistan as part of the COIN operation. We have fought hard and accomplished some good. Tactically, we have not lost a battle. We defeat the Taliban in every engagement. But are we closer to our goals than we were a decade ago? This question may appear rudimentary at first; however, it is such questions that are often overlooked when analyzing such modern-day conflicts.

This paper, which was conceptualized during the German-Turkish Roundtable on International Affairs 2015, supported by Robert Bosch Stiftung and jointly organized by Istanbul Policy Center and Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, will therefore present the majority of Afghans still hope for a more prosperous, democratic, and stable Afghanistan in the future. The high turnout rate of the 2014 presidential elections, despite the Taliban’s attempts to disrupt the process, is proof of this argument. Further, nearly two-thirds of the voters in this election were under the age of 25. Simply speaking, Afghanistan has not fallen into total chaos at the moment. But we should admit that this success story was badly managed at the strategic-political level in the sense that things did not go as we assumed at the initial phase, and every actor involved shares responsibility for this mismanagement. In this sense, the Afghanistan experience reflects the paradox in the contemporary COIN theaters: That is, although Afghanistan is a total victory in the military sense at the tactical level, coalition countries could not translate this military victory into a success story at the strategic-political level. Indeed, in a presentation I attended in Oxford’s Changing Character of War (CCW) Program, a British lieutenant colonel emphasized the fact that since 2001 the CF in Afghanistan engaged in around 220 tactical and operational (battalion and brigade level) campaigns and did not lose any one of them. Similarly, Ret. Major Jim Gant, a U.S. Special Forces Team commander who served in Iraq and Afghanistan several times, emphasizes the tactical success in Afghanistan, however, not without also alluding to the fundamental question underlying the tactical/strategic paradox:

The US has been in Afghanistan for more than a decade. We have fought hard and accomplished some good. Tactically, we have not lost a battle. We defeat the Taliban in every engagement. But are we closer to our goals than we were a decade ago?

This question may appear rudimentary at first; however, it is such questions that are often overlooked when analyzing such modern-day conflicts.

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3. Ibid.
‘whats’ and ‘whys’ of the tactical-strategic paradox in light of the war in Afghanistan. In its first part, this paper addresses the necessity of taking into account the perspectives, expectations, and strategies of the local population, and delineates the importance of modern armies in adapting to local circumstances. In the second part, this paper will arrive at some conclusions regarding the relationship between the strategic and the tactical level.

As a soldier-scholar trying to understand the changing character of conflict in the 21st century, this widening and deepening disconnect between the strategic-political level and tactical level is in fact my observation from the field, which then turned into my academic area of interest. As a former member of the Turkish Armed Forces, I served in many volatile regions of the globe to fight against extremism and terrorism at the tactical level. My 12-year career in the Turkish Special Forces (SF) led me to serve in many Tribalized Rural Muslim Environments (TRMEs). In fact, the phenomenon of TRMEs is relevant to my early life since I was born and raised in a remote village in central Anatolia, which is a sort of tribalized and rural Muslim environment. During my service, I participated in many joint operations and exercises, and then fulfilled liaison and training missions in the hostile regions of rural Iraq (1999, 2003, 2005), Kazakhstan (2004), Kyrgyzstan (2004), and Afghanistan (2005) against Salafi extremism. From these experiences, as well as academic research, I have come to conclude that without problematizing the paradox splitting the strategic and local level, and reflecting on the whats and whys of this paradox, it is impossible to derive lessons useful for tackling future challenges. Thus, herein are my points for problematization of “our” COIN efforts in Afghanistan.
1. LOOKING AT COIN THROUGH THE EYES OF THE LOCAL POPULATION: THE NEED TO GET PLUGGED IN TO LOCAL CIRCUMSTANCES

1.1. CF as the “Cow to be Milked” in Rural Afghanistan

Taking into account the needs of the local population is one of the most challenging dilemmas faced by the CF in rural Afghanistan. In any prolonged fight conducted by wealthy armies such as the CF against insurgencies in a socio-economically deprived and highly isolated environment such as rural Afghanistan, there emerges a very simple question: Who is benefitting from the continuation of the insurgency? While conventional COIN strategies focus on the political landscape of the environment and place the political fight at the epicenter of the insurgency, this inclination to overemphasize the political phenomena obscures the financial struggle of the locals. Any soldier of a wealthy army in an impoverished environment is not only a highly valuable target for insurgents but also a highly valuable asset in economic terms for the locals. Reformulating the question stated above, it is better asked who is benefitting the most economically from the continuation of the insurgency.

Take as an example a brigade level unit with two thousand soldiers who are locked in a container-like and cloistered base in Afghanistan. Assuming that the lines of logistic support are perfect, the soldiers of this brigade still want to spend money, since shopping is a social phenomenon that comforts people in times of stress. If each soldier spends on average 200 USD per month on eating local foods, buying souvenirs, and for other needs during his/her deployment, this in total yields a cash flow of 400,000 USD per month to the local markets. Add sub-contractors who conduct small business for the brigade and assume that they earn 100,000 USD monthly. Then, add the payments of the intelligence community of that brigade for the valuable tips they provide to the informers and corroborators and assume that they earn 30,000 USD monthly. Add the gifts given to the local community leaders in the brigade’s area of responsibility to make them happy and comfortable and assume that they cost 20,000 USD monthly. Additionally, add the equipment and gear given to the locals to be used during operations or trainings, the ending point of which is the local black market, and assume that they cost 10,000 USD monthly.

Presumably, as the biggest economic enterprise in that particular area, the total contribution of this brigade to the local economy is nearly 550,000 USD monthly. The brigade, the official mission of which is to bring security to its area of responsibility, is likely to be seen as a factory that spreads wealth and employment and boosts the local economy. In a society like rural Afghanistan, which still predominantly operates on the first level of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs and has been trying to utilize every means it has to survive, a single dollar would provide a good cause for the people to fight.

Thus, since the entrance of foreign soldiers in Afghanistan in 2001, who has benefited from this spread of wealth? If the answer is always the same sub-contractors, the same interpreters, the same traders, and the same market owners, then this is a big problem. On the one hand, any clever soldier in this kind of environment is inclined to maintain interactions with already recommended or familiar individuals for security reasons: The routine procedure is to work with the most trusted locals recommended by the predecessors. At first glance, this is the best solution since security is the top priority. Nonetheless, day by day, month by month, year by year, unintentionally this procedure leads to the formation of a thick “corruption circle” around the soldiers. For them, this is not perceived as corruption since this security measure is designed to save lives. However, when we look at the other side of the COIN from the perspective of the locals, this is iniquitous corruption, allowing the selected ones to benefit from the spread of wealth coming from the CF factory’s cow, the brigade.

At the local level, a good amount of violence may be attributed to the fight between the happy minority, who have benefited from the economic and political privileges of being the trusted ones of the CF, and the desperate majority, who want nothing more than an equal share of the corruption flowing from the CF. Consequently, every passing year thickens the corruption circles surrounding the bases of the CF forces; and after passing a certain threshold, it is impossible to decide who is exploiting whom and for what purposes. Who is the real enemy and the ally in the insurgency, the “happy minority” who enjoys the privileges of milking the CF exuberantly or the “frustrated majority” who cannot access the CF to milk it? If adding one more person to the CF means another “drop” in the pool of corruption, then what should be done is to economize...
the number of personnel in the theater and maximize their efficiency.

In TRMEs, being illiterate does not necessarily mean being an idiot. The locals in TRMEs who have seen many rotations of COIN forces have learned their strengths and weaknesses, and more importantly their organizational vulnerabilities in military, financial, socio-cultural, and political terms. That is why the “happy minority” who enjoy milking the international efforts in TRMEs is primarily motivated by pragmatic considerations and is very good at exploiting the coordination deficiencies of the CF. The structure of the local labor market serves as a good indicator of how meticulously the locals exploit the job opportunities bestowed by different international institutions/organizations in that particular area. A driver of a non-governmental organization may, for instance, be employed as an interpreter overnight by special forces units, which pay more. Or, a local who has been trained as a police officer by the CF forces in Afghanistan may find a profitable position in a private security company.

Another important example of how the TRMEs milk the ever-pregnant cow of the COIN forces can be seen in the local intelligence market. The desperate need of COIN forces to acquire local intelligence and the bountiful budget of the intelligence gathering business creates a profitable market for the happy minority. As a soldier, I witnessed that the local intelligence market constitutes one of the best functioning markets promoting the local economy. Its opaque nature and inherent rule of compartmentalization promotes the participation of locals. Being a well-paid informer of the COIN forces provides a good second job for many locals. Over time, the “invisible hands” of the market regulate the prices of each type of intelligence tip, and everybody in the market gets to know the exact prices. Some in the market may even sell tips both to the COIN forces and to insurgents to maximize their profit. In Iraq, I saw how insurgents and locals cooperated in the intelligence business with the aim of milking the COIN forces. It was an interesting experience to see how a local insurgent cell could finance itself from the COIN forces by selling tips on their activities. To give an example, local insurgents bought tips for 100 USD each, and then the insurgents sold intelligence leading to a weapons cache filled with five AK-47s to the COIN forces via double informers who earned 1,000 USD.

1.2. Dealing with Local Politics

The decision makers and citizens of countries sending troops to Afghanistan are absorbed by the general debates concerning the political, financial, and security-related risks directly associated with their soldiers’ involvement to COIN operations in Afghanistan. Although on-the-ground tactical operations are no doubt central to the coalition’s efforts, success in COIN depends a great deal on the handling of local politics in TRMEs and its portrayal in the international media and by decision makers.

At the strategic level, there are three players in an insurgency: insurgents and counter-insurgents as the active players and the local populace as the passive player. Insurgency may simply be defined as a prolonged political rivalry between these two active players for the decisive victory of achieving the political support of the local population. By and large, news on any insurgency is given to the international audience through the media at the strategic level, simplifying the incidents in the insurgency as a play with three players. For instance, the Western audience reads news about the insurgency in Afghanistan beginning with the headlines, of which these three players are generally the objects or the subjects. Many still think that insurgency is a sort of armed competition between good guys and bad guys for the support of the neutral majority. They also are inclined to categorize each individual as a “friend” or “foe.” This inclination to oversimplify the incidents into a game with three players and the habit of getting rid of strategic details may lead to unintended consequences: the primary of which is the underestimation of all other dynamics in the game. These “other dynamics” of a particular incident in any insurgency have to be analyzed by tactical level leaders such as platoon and company commanders. Only tactical level leaders, who are cross-culturally competent and have plugged into the local environment, can analyze “the details” and decode “the local ciphers” of any specific incident. Every success of the COIN in that particular area is directly linked to this process of decoding.

Assume that an attack with Improvised Explosive Devices (IED) in which three CF soldiers were killed has recently been carried out in the X province of Y district in rural Afghanistan. The Western audience reads or watches this attack with the media promoting these titles: “Three CF Soldiers Killed in Taliban IED Attack in Afghanistan,” “Insurgents Kill Three CF Soldiers in Afghanistan,” or “IED Attack Claims Lives of Three CF Soldiers in Afghanistan.” This attack, which could be summarized with or reduced to a sentence, such as the headlines above, at the strategic level may in fact mean days of investigation and hundreds of pages of analysis for an astute and competent tactical leader who aims to decode the local ciphers through a systemic approach. For instance, an IED attack cannot
be carried out without the efforts of leaders, financiers, suppliers, recruiters, trainers, and foot soldiers of the insurgency in the given district. An accurate analysis of the attack should start with the correct interpretation of the aspirations and motivations of each of these constituents of the attack. It is highly unlikely to assert that all these actors in the IED attack act solely for ideological reasons. In light of the wealthy COIN forces as the “cow to be milked” in impoverished insurgency environments, the involvement of some of the attackers would be primarily due to economic reasons. The anger of an ex-contractor of the COIN forces whose contract has recently been declined would be a much more prevalent motivation for him to attack than support for the concept of global jihad. Or, the personal grievance of an individual whose relatives have recently been killed in a drone strike and labeled as “collateral damage” could be a more powerful motive for him to join this band. Likewise, this attack may be carried out with the full consent and support of a tribe as a move against the rival tribe in a feud. This attack could be planned by a local warlord to get his local opponent entangled in a larger conflict with the CF. The location of this attack could be chosen by the elders of the village, which aim to concentrate the CF forces’ focus on the rival village. Put simply, economic, socio-political, and psychological motives or interests of individuals or groups such as tribes, villages, local political factions, and warlords may blend with ideological motives in carrying out this IED attack. In a nutshell, there could be different aspirations and motivations in this IED attack, but Westerners who read or watch this in the news will assume this was an act by insurgents solely carried out for ideological reasons. I would suggest that in roughly all attacks I encountered that the different motives and aspirations of individuals and groups intermingled with ideological motives. During my service in an operational theater in Southeast Turkey in 2010, for instance, I captured an ex-contractor whose water-carrying contract had been declined and was placing an IED in the road to our battalion. We captured a villager whose livestock had been killed accidentally by our forces and was working as an informer reporting the movements of our troops. I witnessed the exploitation of our forces by tribal leaders who sought more power against their rival tribes. I observed to what extent the economic struggle between the “happy minority” who exuberantly milk the COIN forces and “the frustrated majority” who seek an equal share in the corruption flowing from the COIN forces shaped the fundamental dynamics of the insurgency. I witnessed the misuse of our troops in a water dispute between two villages. I witnessed how a fight between rival tribes over pastures shaped local politics in that particular area. We encountered how the marriage of a husband and wife from different tribes led to local inter-tribal feuds and predominantly shifted the political stances of the players in the insurgency. Put differently, one may witness many times that water or land disputes, honor killings, a marriage, a young lady, an economic transaction between two individuals, a decline of the contract, an inter-tribal rivalry, a leader’s struggle within a tribe, a rivalry between different religious sects, a rivalry between different local political groups, and personal grievances shape local politics and, consequently, the nature of the insurgency in that particular area.

All Afghan politics in rural areas is local, and in many incidents at the local level, COIN forces are the subject of the game rather than the object. One would then witness many times that it was local politics that drove the insurgency. It was actors of local politics that shaped the environment and aptly made use of the fight between the insurgents and COIN forces. Therefore, an accurate analysis of who is exploiting whom and for what purposes carries the utmost importance when addressing an incident, especially to an international audience who bases its judgments of this conflict on this analysis. In many theaters I have served so far such as Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Northern Iraq, and Southeast Turkey, the rivalry has been among actors in local politics, and the COIN forces or other outsiders were merely pioneers navigating through the local game of chess. The real fight, thus, has been among local actors and not between the insurgents and the COIN forces as we read and watch in the media. Nonetheless, I have great concerns whether the CF currently serving in Afghanistan, for instance, have astute, cross-culturally competent, and well-trained tactical level leaders who can easily understand how local politics shape the nature and future of the insurgency.

1.3. Interpreters: Cordial Friends or Opportunists?

In TRMEs, to fight an insurgency where you speak the language and to fight an insurgency where you do not speak the language are two totally different operations. The ability to interact directly with the locals has a tremendous impact on the trajectory of the insurgency. In an insurgency where the forces cannot speak the native language, forces have the sole option of using interpreters in order to be understood by the locals. CF may either use a non-resident interpreter or a local one. Local ones are highly preferred by tactical leaders since they specifically know the local environment and, therefore, may provide an understanding of the local complexity and serve as a means for cross-cultural communication. Local interpreters can provide the
names of key players in the local environment; they can guide forces on who to trust and who not to trust; and they even can be a great source of intelligence. Interpreters also serve as the point of contact with the commander among the locals. If the commander allows him — be sure that the majority of the commanders allow him to do so for security reasons — the interpreter is the one who arranges meetings, decides to whom the tactical leader will speak and when to speak, and most importantly, determines the nature of the conversation in meetings with the locals. That is, he could easily strain the tension of the meeting by creating a sort of uncompromising atmosphere, or he could make the sides relaxed and unaware of the differences in the opinions and arguments of each side. Put simply, he is the one who moderates the meeting and determines its atmosphere. I witnessed many interpreters who joined the conversation as a third party, who made comments and advised the other parties. The incompetence of a local interpreter may, therefore, result in confusion in the COIN efforts and may drastically impact their efficiency. On the one hand, an interpreter's capabilities are often highly limited. A competent interpreter is generally able to catch roughly 70 percent of what the tactical leader intends to say, and he will deliver roughly 40 percent of the message to the audience. On the other hand, the interpreter, though he understands 90 percent of what the audience says, mainly due to pragmatic considerations and his understanding of local politics, is inclined to filter the words of the locals, who have already filtered their words because they are communicating with foreigners. In such a case, I would suggest that the tactical leaders may only understand one-third of what the audience intends to say.

Using a local interpreter in the intelligence business is the dream of every tactical leader. Tactical leaders often hesitantly ask a series of leading questions to interpreters, who are in fact waiting for this opportunity. The local interpreters, who generally not only know how to analyze the personality of their bosses but also are fully aware of the details of local politics, artfully exploit the leader's desperate need to acquire local intelligence. If the commander is too submissive to the interpreter, imagine the power of the interpreter as the local power broker: He is “the unofficial king” of that particular area.

Bobby Ghosh, one of the longest-serving correspondents in Iraq, depicts the quintessential role of the interpreter in the following story:

Inside Saddam’s gilt- and chintz-filled office, I found a [US] marine taking down one of Iraqi flags that hung next to the dictator’s desk and asking his Kurdish interpreter to translate the green Arabic lettering that ran through the middle. I’ll never know why the Kurd lied, replying “It says ‘Saddam Hussein.’” (Actually, it read, “Allahu Akbar,” or “God is great.”) Delighted, the Marine took the flag out to the main portico and brandished it at the crowd of Iraqis. Then he fired up a Zippo lighter and with a triumphant look announced: “This is what we will do to Saddam.”

The Iraqis were aghast. None of them understood English, and all they could see was a lanky, blond American Marine about to burn their national flag. Some of them shouted at the Marine, but he mistook their anger for enthusiasm. “Yeah! We are gonna fry his ass!” he whooped, with an exaggerated, nasal Southern drawl.

My interpreter and I were able – only just – to stop the marine from setting the flight alight. When we explained what the Arabic lettering really said, he turned pale. “Oh, man, I did not know,” he said, looking nervously at the crowd, which was seething with resentment. “Can you explain that to them?” He thrust the flag into my hands and ran back indoors.

This example demonstrates how the ignorance of a U.S. soldier—who can be pardoned to some degree since he aimed to show the decisiveness of the U.S. military to the local audience—can be manipulated by an ill-intentioned interpreter. More importantly, it also displays how a simple manipulation of interpretation can cause strategic communication disasters for COIN forces on the ground.

14. Security or Justice: Which Comes First in TRMEs?

Traditional COIN literature puts excessive emphasis on the notion of “security.” The U.S. military’s famous COIN manual FM 3-24, in which the word “security” is used 137 times, asserts that “the cornerstone of any COIN effort is establishing security for the civilian populace” and concludes that “no permanent reforms can be implemented and disorder spreads” without a secure environment. The manual also regards “the ability to provide security for the populace” as the first indicator of legitimacy. In contrast, the notion of “rule of law” is only used two times throughout the manual. Therefore, security should be the primary concern in any COIN effort in TRMEs like Afghanistan. There are,

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10 Ibid, 1-23.
12 The first usage of this is on page 1; the second is on page 23.
however, reasons to think differently. Security may be one imperative of any COIN; nonetheless, considering it as the first and utmost objective in TRMEs may lead in the wrong direction.

There was an interesting saying that was commonly used in my village during my childhood in Central Anatolia as a wish for loved ones. They say, “May God give you a just death.” If a death is considered “just” within TRMEs, then people welcome it. Therefore, among TRMEs it is the notion of justice that is significant, not the notion of security. Ali’s, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad, remark explicitly demonstrates to what extent the notion of justice is important for Muslim societies: “Government [any political entity] can endure with unbelief, but not with injustice.” Thus, security should not be an “end” when tailoring an effective COIN strategy for TRMEs: It should instead be a means in the process of creating a “just socio-political order.” In TRMEs, justice is the “glue” that binds all structures, processes, and interactions together.

For the residents of TRMEs, it is much more important to be treated “justly” than to be “secured.” The strategy of showing up and saying, “Hi guys, we are here to establish the state authority, but we should secure you first” is an alien concept for most locals, and thus, presumably may attract less support than if the CF showed up and said, “Esselamun Aleykum ihvan-i muslimin (May the peace of God be upon you fellow Muslims), we are here to establish a just social order and aim to clean the environment from all earthly sins you currently suffer.”

In practical terms, we may say that the primary concern of anyone living in TRMEs is corruption – and developing a solution to have less is preferred. Conversely, more chance to participate in corruption is less preferred. To reformulate this, the residents of TRMEs either seek a social order in which they would share “misery” equally, as long as it is just, or an unequal share of wealth, which is an unjust solution, as long as they could exploit the system. While the former concept is represented by the Taliban in rural Afghanistan, the latter is represented by the corrupt warlord order and the CF-supported central government. The reference point for both of these concepts is justice, not security. Any social interaction is evaluated through the lens of justice in TRMEs. That is why badal, or kisas, a just retaliation that legitimizes the proportionate use of violence in response to a crime, is common practice.

Naturally “justice” and “security” are linked to each other. But not in the way that “security” is a precondition for “justice”: rather, “justice” is regarded as the precondition for “security.” In this relation, the dimension of “time” takes central stage.

With regard to justice, the Western mindset puts “accuracy” above all other considerations. In the Western world, a methodical and long process in seeking justice is always appropriate, since the environment provided by the authority of the state is secure enough to await a verdict. The Western mindset demands that the decision of the judge be accurate and objective. In contrast, people in TRMEs seek “the swift implementation” of justice rather than concern themselves with accuracy, since they do not have enough time and patience to wait, and the environment is not secure.

Thus, a TRME is an inappropriate setting for a prolonged legal dispute since there is no superior authority to compel both sides to wait patiently and peacefully for the decision. Further, the uncertain result of any legal issue can cause more destructive consequences in TRMEs than the issue itself, potentially turning a crime into a tribal or interfamily feud, which could last for decades and claim the lives of many adult males. To reach a decision as soon as possible that would somewhat satisfy each side and avoid intertribal or interfamily conflicts is preferable to a lengthy judicial process.
2. TACTICAL AND STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

2.1. COIN Is Not Something to Learn in a 4-6-Month Deployment

While serving in the Turkish Armed Forces, my shortest deployment was three months, and I gave two years of my life for the longest one. I was also sent to four and six-month deployments as well. In light of this experience, I suggest that it takes almost three months for a tactical leader to adapt to the new environment mentally and at least that long to reach a preliminary analysis of local politics, the insurgency, and the relation of different local factors with one another. The last two months, on the other hand, are, by and large reserved for what I call packing “the stuff.” This process of packing “the stuff” includes not only physical activities regarding departure such as shopping for souvenirs and preparing the archive for the upcoming successor but also mental and emotive components. Any tactical leader who has been excessively bombarded with thousands of issues over the course of his deployment needs to reset his memory. His/her motivation and performance thus declines, and he/she experiences a sort of alienation from the environment.

The most efficient performance of a tactical leader is in the period between the first three months and last two months. Any deployment shorter than five months creates confused and cloudy leaders at the tactical level roaming around without clear and sharp focus on the insurgency and local politics.

2.2. No Unity of Command: Fighting Insurgency with a “Coalition of the Willing”

As a tactical level commander, I had to ask and answer this very basic question thousands of times: “Who is in charge here?” In military terms, this basic question reflects one of the central principles of war, “unity of command,” which is best achieved by vesting a single commander with requisite authority.14 “Who is in charge of the COIN efforts in Afghanistan?” is often an open question: The U.S. military or NATO? The United Nations or Kabul? International non-governmental organizations? The existence of a multi-national structure makes COIN efforts more complicated though not necessarily more effective. Hence, how this principle has been forsaken in the evolution of military command in Afghanistan is highly problematic.

Unfortunately, who will hunt down the insurgents, trace opium producers, fight corruption, provide justice and security, aide reconstruction, disarm/demobilize/reintegrate ex-combatants, implement development projects, train Afghans, fulfill peacemaking/peacekeeping missions, conduct humanitarian relief efforts, make political and socio-economic reforms, etc. is up to the changing coalition of the willing members who comprise the COIN front in Afghanistan. Nonetheless, it is sad to see that there is no “unity” in the contents or scale of the responsibilities that the military and civilian members of the COIN front take within the scope of a comprehensive and cohesive strategy. This fatal deficiency shows the strong need to develop a coordinated institutional capability if the coalition of the willing is to continue to focus its attention on dealing with COIN efforts in Afghanistan. Put differently, the answer to the question of who is to be blamed for the failure of COIN in Afghanistan, or to be praised for its success, is still unclear.

2.3. The Dilemma of Huge Strategic Input and Limited Tactical Outcome

Regarding COIN efforts in rural Afghanistan, it is evident that roughly all reports that have been written to date address primarily the strategic level. They present strategic recommendations or suggest strategic approaches to resolve the current dilemma. How many soldiers do we need in Afghanistan? How much money should we invest? What kind of resources do we need? Which sort of strategy should the Obama Administration craft? Not enough attention has been drawn to the fact that the war in Afghanistan is a rural and local one that has to be conducted not only in harsh weather and terrain conditions but also against extremely devout believers and potentially adverse local populations. This is a tactical war that can only be fought with a “boots on the ground” strategy. David Galula writes, “The basic unit of counterinsurgency warfare is the largest unit whose leader is in direct and continuous contact with the population. This is the most important unit in counterinsurgency operations, the level where most of the practical problems arise, where the war is won or lost.”15

One may then contend that the “organizational capacity” of the CF at the tactical level in Afghanistan is less than is required to win the war. Currently almost

nobody discusses this phenomenon in the United States, and the U.S. military does not mention this deficiency. A country may invest billions of dollars and send thousands of soldiers to the area, but what about the “outcome” of these efforts at the tactical level? Neither President Obama nor General X in charge of military efforts in Afghanistan can win the war in Afghanistan; rather, it is only the organizational capacity of the CF soldiers at the tactical level that can win this war. Put simply, the billions of dollars and thousands of soldiers about to be sent to Afghanistan as strategic inputs will most likely have little impact on the course of the war unless they serve to promote tactical effectiveness and efficiency. In fact, all of the resources that the United States, and NATO are contributing to Afghanistan—the tens of thousands of soldiers and the billions of dollars—may only be the initial steps towards a strategic solution to a tactical problem. Until the CF redirects its tactical efforts towards TRMEs, these new resources will be all for naught. More accurately analyzed mechanisms should be fostered to transform the efforts at the strategic level into “effective” tactical outcomes.

It is also worth mentioning that, most recently, the conceptualization of contemporary insurgencies has been broadened to the widest level through the inclusion of the term, “global insurgency,” which is “led by al-Qaeda or ISIS-like transnational networks.” This is a very assertive term used to define insurgencies in the contemporary security environment that supercede the national level, have a global reach, and impact areas far beyond the domestic borders of Afghanistan. This new conceptualization of global insurgency has greatly distracted from COIN efforts at the tactical level in local areas in rural Afghanistan. In this context, the existence of external actors such as al-Qaeda or ISIS and their involvement in the insurgency in Afghanistan constitute an additional obstacle on the tactical level when crafting COIN strategies in rural Afghanistan. Assessing the insurgency in rural Afghanistan first and foremost as a fraction of a global insurgency, thus, may lead military planners to conceive of it more as a matter of enemy-centric strategic planning and less as a matter of population-centric tactical planning—which, in fact, would be the real remedy for rural Afghanistan. Everyday knowledge about Afghanistan of junior level officers from coalition countries such as the United States, Germany, Canada, and Poland already reflects the outlined discourse of a global insurgency. These young officers are inclined to claim that Afghanistan is currently the most important front against a larger global insurgency, and they truly believe their presence in Afghanistan contributes more to the fight against global extremism than fighting extremists in Washington DC, Berlin, Ottawa, and Warsaw. In this mindset, Afghanistan is simply a front in a grand struggle against global extremist insurgents, and Afghans are the “unlucky residents” who happened to be born in this important battlefield. This discourse is apt to “dehumanize” the nature of COIN efforts and may lead to the fatal mistake of regarding Afghan victims of war simply as “collateral damages” of the global insurgency. This kind of thinking reaches its peak as many of these officers adopt a pure enemy-centric approach, which takes no notice of the local populace.

2.4 Hi-tech Trap

No matter whether a COIN force embraces a population-centric or an enemy-centric approach, kinetic hi-tech capabilities constitute a principal method in breaking the will of an insurgency. However, regarding Afghanistan, the CF are facing a sort of “hi-tech trap,” one of the central problems technologically advanced armies experience when they fight in “primitive” terrains. When the number of COIN soldiers who are watching the war from their screens is more than that who are seeing the insurgents in person, the COIN cannot disrupt the insurgency. Stated another way, the more soldiers fighting the insurgency from behind their screens in hi-tech bubbles as opposed to fighting on the ground in the theater, the more easily one falls into this trap. When COIN soldiers are not able to see, smell, taste, and, more importantly, feel the theater—to fully understand not only the terrain and weather conditions but also the agonies, perceptions, motivations, hatred, and happiness of the local people who live in it—they are in a way alienated from the reality on the ground. CF risk falling into the nirvana fallacy of “capability based planning”: one of the most strategic mistakes of modern armies in TRMEs. I define capability based planning as the desperate reliance on highly sophisticated hi-tech weapon systems such as unmanned aerial vehicles, aircrafts, surveillance radar, and attack helicopters and the corresponding approach to consider “capabilities” of this kind without taking the necessary imperatives of COIN into account. Suppose that COIN forces are told that there is a suspicious meeting of so-called Taliban commanders in a village. Who gave this intelligence tip, a local collaborator? Is the source reliable, and can the information be confirmed? Answering these questions has become less important for the CF, because the commander who is sitting in the op-center is capable of destroying the house in which the meeting is allegedly

brother, are you flying to the moon?” I could not understand this when I was asked in Hindi by a watermelon in a plastic bag, smiled and asked, “Hey old AK-47s. One of the fighters, who was also carrying sandal slippers made from soft rubber and carrying a sarcastic smile on their faces. Both were wearing old clothes. During the last check, I saw two local fighters staring at me with untrust in the local commander), GPS, and so forth. During this coordination meeting, I started to harness my gear and then I mounted the thermal camera on the rifle, checked radios (one for my unit and one for the local commander), GPS, and so forth. During this last check, I saw two local fighters staring at me with a sarcastic smile on their faces. Both were wearing old sandal slippers made from soft rubber and carrying old AK-47s. One of the fighters, who was also carrying a watermelon in a plastic bag, smiled and asked, “Hey brother, are you flying to the moon?” I could not understand what he intended to say and asked him what he meant. He said, “You are like a very hi-tech man on a space mission. This will be a simple operation, no need to get panicked.” I realized then that as a modern soldier harnessed with gear worth more than 50,000 USD how naïve I looked in front of these two fellows whose stuff was roughly equal to the cost of only my GPS. I also came to conclude that the notion of courage is twofold. One side is courage rooted from knowledge, which a highly trained and well-equipped modern soldier tries to follow, aiming to know everything in the theater to lessen the risks involved in the mission, cautiously stepping forward and endeavoring to take only thoroughly calculated risks. The other side, in contrast, is courage rooted from illiteracy and fatalistic mentality, a good blend of specifications that would be trusted in prolonged conflicts. It is this mentality, the idea that “the one knowing his end cannot be a hero,” that generates the tenacity and resilience of local fighters in rural areas, not hi-tech gadgets.

2.5. Nirvana Fallacy of Force Protection: Trying to Feel the Environment behind Bullet-Proof Glass and Cloistered Bases

The FM 3-0 Manual of the U.S. Army defines force protection as a package of measures:

... to prevent or mitigate hostile actions against DOD (Department of Defense) personnel, resources, facilities, and critical information. These actions conserve the forces’ fighting potential so it can be applied at the decisive time and place and incorporates the coordinated and synchronized offensive and defensive measures to enable the effective employment of joint force while degrading opportunities for the enemy.17

The CF have built Forward Operation Bases (FOBs) across Afghanistan to provide security for the soldiers and to launch and support tactical operations. Large FOBs, in which thousands of soldiers can stay, offer all the comfort that can be found in any Western city such as coffee shops, restaurants, massage parlors, shopping malls, well-equipped gyms, and movie theaters. Graeme Wood writes that in Afghanistan, some soldiers are even pampered on base:

Being on a big military base can feel a bit like being on a cruise ship. Grand exertions are made to ensure comfort, and leisure is organized: basketball at six, bingo at 11. B-list celebrities, armed with camera-ready smiles, are on the deck to shake your hand. To keep the coalition forces happy, starting point is food. The food is rich and plentiful.18

He then adds that the restaurants in Kandahar Airfield, with prestigious examples of North American, Mediterranean, French, and Dutch cuisines, are scattered

15
FOBs require a huge amount of personnel to function and to be secure. Hundreds of soldiers could be assigned the task of securing FOBs instead of contributing to the overall COIN efforts. Furthermore, when significant resources are diverted to support the FOBs that are supposed to support operations, we may assert that there is a problem. This problem is often fourfold. First, life in the cloistered FOBs may isolate CF forces from the populace. The boundary of FOBs may not only be a physical but also a physiological and cultural one, which divides soldiers “on the one side, the people whose trust, safety, and information they should be securing on the other.” Second, excessive emphasis on force protection, the heart of the U.S. military doctrine in conventional terms, may be seen as proof to the locals, whom the CF are assigned to protect, that the CF cannot even protect itself. Third, the FOBs, which can easily be monitored 24/7 by the insurgents, make the CF “predictable” in every movement and, therefore, increase the vulnerability of the soldiers. Fourth, the FOBs, which function as the anchors for soldiers who are reluctant to sacrifice their luxurious way of life, often turn operations into routine, limited, short duration patrolling missions within close proximity to the base.

2.6. Highly Visible Foreign Presence in Afghanistan: Part of the Solution or Part of the Problem?

Specifically in TRMEs, the legitimacy of the presence of foreign forces in the eyes of the locals is a crucial component of a successful COIN. Accordingly, especially in the case of TRMEs in Afghanistan, where a strong “skepticism” towards the presence of foreigners – in particular foreign military forces – exists, it is essential for the CF to establish some form of legitimacy. With a highly visible, large scale, and long-term ground presence, which is currently the case in Afghanistan, however, it is highly unlikely that the CF can establish legitimacy. The term “occupation,” as the misadventure in Iraq has clearly demonstrated, has had the disastrous effect of giving extremists a powerful recruiting tool that they are quick to exploit and a good propaganda theme to effectively disseminate. A night letter sent from the Taliban to the locals siding with the CF reads as follows:

Muslim Brothers: Understand that the person who helps launch an attack with infidels is no longer a member of the Muslim community. Therefore, punishment of those who cooperate with infidels is the same as the [punishment of] infidels themselves. You should not cooperate in any way – neither with words, or with money, nor with your efforts. Watch out not to exchange your honor and courage for power and dollar.22

According to many in the Muslim world, “the U.S.-led coalition forces’ very presence in Afghanistan fuels the indigenous insurgency. It keeps the flame of transnational terror alive and blocks the return of Afghan refugees to their villages.”

If this is the case, it is likely to assert that the presence of non-Muslims in this almost exclusively Muslim land of rural Afghanistan constitutes a powerful tool for the rhetoric of extremists. When I interacted with the locals in Afghanistan as a Muslim soldier, I witnessed that many describe the U.S.-led coalition as “crusaders” and are inclined to equate them with previous invaders such as the British and the Russians. Furthermore, sensitivity to the non-Muslim military presence in their homeland reinforces the Taliban-led Afghan insurgents’ common cause with global transnational extremist networks such as al-Qaeda. The foreign military presence originates from a “solidarity among Muslim brothers” and constitutes a fundamental reason for the cooperation of the local insurgents, most of whom cannot even accurately show the location of the United States on the world map, and global extremists to challenge “infidels” militarily. Foreign military presence functions as a bridge to connect local considerations with global aspirations. Stated another way, foreign presence is the most important obstacle before the divorce of “local considerations rooted mainly from Pashtun nationalism and religious reflexes” and “global extremism.”

On the other hand, one should note that the immediate withdrawal of the CF from Afghanistan is not the solution either. To keep the presence and visibility of the CF in every COIN effort “low profile,” to increase the visibility of Afghans, and to increase the number of Muslim troops in the CF may be the proper solution for now in order to neutralize the very basic propaganda themes of the extremists.

19 Ibid.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS LEARNED FROM AFGHANISTAN

As the soldiers of modern militaries, we are conditioned to ask questions such as what should the army be prepared for and how should it be armed. We have no doubt about the aim of an operation – the destruction of the enemy. Afghanistan, however, shows that we need a new kind of thinking and new cognitive templates on the use of military power in COIN operations. As emphasized in this paper, the operational level, which acts as a bridge in the traditional sense connecting the tactical level to the strategic-political, is eroding. This is widening the gap between the strategic-political level and the tactical level, the first consequence of which is the inability to translate tactical achievements on the ground into sustainable political end states in COIN settings. This paper thus suggests that in order to overcome this setback we should seek new cognitive templates and concepts in military studies to critically engage the problems at hand and, to some extent, problematize such templates with military design. Military design, i.e. setting the stage and defining the operational theater, should be the very first step in military efforts in any COIN setting.

Afghanistan has brought to the fore the distinction between “planning” and “design.” While both activities seek to formulate ways to bring about preferable futures, they are cognitively different. Planning applies established procedures to solve a largely understood problem within an accepted framework. Design, on the other hand, inquires into the nature of a problem in order to conceive of a framework for solving that problem. In general, planning is problem solving, while design is problem setting. Where planning focuses on generating a plan—a series of executable actions—design focuses on learning about the nature of an unfamiliar problem. At the initial phase, one may suggest that coalition forces were so busy solving problems in Afghanistan with the traditional cognitive and material tools that they did not have the foresight to define the nature of the conflict and develop solutions that are compatible with the Afghan way. Afghanistan has proved that in hybrid settings general planning is not enough to adapt to an unorthodox situation. In Afghanistan, one needs new designs, preferably asymmetric ones, which zoom closer into the nature of an unfamiliar conflict and conceive of effective solutions. Unfortunately, modern militaries still fall short of learning the nature and characteristics of new and unconventional problems as they traditionally and blindly aim to prepare for the present conflict as if it were the previous war.

The Islamic State’s attempts to jump into Afghanistan clearly show that COIN operations in hybrid settings are constantly changing and will soon transform well beyond our current conceptions. The evolving character of COIN operations thus presents a great intellectual challenge ahead of us. To some extent, soldiers in COIN settings will first need to find the answers on their own, without clear political directives. Modern militaries of the world should therefore heighten the debate on how to increase their capacity for military design and thus their situational awareness.

In future COIN settings, the current questions asked by modern armies will no longer be relevant. New questions must be raised: How can we set the problems to define the security environment at hand? Which sort of military design can we tailor to this particular security environment? Why, how, and through which mechanisms can we adapt to this time and through which context specific design? Simply, it is the design we should adapt to, not the design we should make adapt to our ways of thinking and doing things. What the modern Western militaries need more of are “military designers,” not “military planners.”
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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