

How relevant is counterinsurgency doctrine to the 'war on terrorism'?

Written by Patrick Ervine

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PATRICK ERVINE, DEC 2 2010

The 'War on Terrorism' has been the defining foreign policy and security issue for the early 21st century. Counterinsurgency has been defined as "military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency"[1]. Terrorism, however, is much harder to define as there is no internationally agreed legal definition of terrorism due to the pejorative nature of the term[2] and the phrase 'one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter'[3] is an accurate portrayal of different state's views on specific terrorist groups and acts. Terrorism is not just the use of bombs; it also includes assassination, hijacking and torture, this wide area that terrorist acts fall into does also make terrorism hard to define as bombing, torture and assassination are often used by states. Terrorism can be defined as: "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents." [4] with the addition of "to intimidate or to impress a wider audience" [5] this definition separates political violence from criminal violence and the violence of war therefore it is the best definition for the purposes of this essay. In this essay it will be argued that counterinsurgency doctrine is relevant to the war on terrorism and can be a very relevant part of the 'War on Terror' in the future if the counterinsurgency is waged properly. Initially, the argument for counterinsurgency doctrine's relevance will be made, covering the state's aggressive stance to terrorism to deter other terrorists, stabilisation of regions that support terrorism or allow it to thrive within its instability and the effect of effective counterinsurgency on the perception of the west in regions that support terrorists. The argument supporting the use of other means such as legislation and politics will take up the second half of the essay and will include the use of legislation against terrorists, within states and internationally, soft power to improve the west's image and the use of subterfuge to reduce the effectiveness of terrorist groups. It will be concluded that counterinsurgency is extremely relevant to the war on terrorism; however there are other, more effective ways to combat terrorism that can also be utilised in the present situation.

In the Wake of the attacks on the United States of America on September the 11th 2001 the 'War on Terror' was launched into Afghanistan with Special Forces from the United States of America and the United Kingdom assisting Northern Alliance troops and coordinating air strikes followed by larger forces from a coalition of states under the umbrella of the International Security Assistance Force. The Philippines then received a number of United States Special Forces to advise in its fight against the native Islamic extremists and conduct a hearts and minds campaign named 'Operation Smiles'. This was followed by the controversial invasion of Iraq in March of 2003[6] under the mantle of the 'war on terror'. These are the main events of the war on terrorism to date and they are all counterinsurgencies, this fact alone shows that the effect of counterinsurgency doctrine is extremely relevant to the war on terrorism.

The use of the military shows that the state will not tolerate an attack on its soil, will not be intimidated[7] and will actively pursue the perpetrators and punish the states that support and harbour those groups. The pursuit of Al Qaeda into Afghanistan so quickly after September 11th by the militaries of the 'coalition of the willing' was a clear message to terrorist groups that the United States of America and her allies would pursue the perpetrators all the way across the globe to their bases in Afghanistan and will stay to combat the insurgency there.

Counterinsurgency and 'stability operations' are two military options that are not identical but do have much in

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common[8] and the phrasing of 'stability operations' helps to understand how counterinsurgency is relevant to the 'war on terror'. A successful counterinsurgency can stabilise a state from a position of total instability or even civil war to a stable state which can aid in the stabilisation of surrounding states. If the counterinsurgency in Afghanistan is successful and Afghanistan is turned into a stable, pro-western, Muslim state it could be an example of how the west can coexist with Islamic states and would no longer be a safe haven for Islamic extremists where they can train extremists and plan international terrorist acts the way they did before the 2001 invasion[9], which has disrupted this activity significantly and forced the terrorists to become more locally focused or flee the country entirely and attempt to rebuild from scratch elsewhere. Effective counterinsurgency doctrine can make a state a permanent ally in the War on Terror instead of a breeding ground and training area for terrorist organisations.

The modern age of global, instant communication has given terrorists an edge by allowing terrorist propaganda to be spread worldwide without risking anyone in the organisation. Videos of American military personnel accidentally targeting civilians can be edited to maximise the guilt of the perpetrators and broadcast worldwide to an outraged audience, instantly giving the terrorists fresh support and recruits. The problem of mistakes being used by the enemy for maximum effect can be negated by the more careful use of force. The United States of America has always seen the conventional use of maximum force as the best option however it is detrimental in counterinsurgency operations and the economy of force, like that seen in Malaya, can minimise incidents of collateral damage and make the job much easier. If the incidents of collateral damage are kept to an absolute minimum and any investigation made completely transparent the occupying force can portray itself as a benevolent force genuinely trying to help the populace and undermine the image of the foreign invader.

The war on terror is being waged through counterinsurgency mainly in Iraq and Afghanistan with the counterinsurgency their deeply effecting the war on terror, failure or success there meaning success or failure of the war on terror.

Counterinsurgency doctrine is arguably much less relevant than other means of conducting the war on terror. The military actions are the most publicised and easy to trace part of the war on terror, however, civilian organisations, internal and domestic politics and legislation can be more relevant and effective than the counterinsurgency doctrine that is being utilised in Iraq and Afghanistan today.

Legislation against terrorists and specific terrorist acts can be an effective way of waging the war on terror that makes counterinsurgency doctrine irrelevant. The criminalisation of terrorism can delegitimise the terrorists by emphasising the criminality of the acts and not the political statement they are trying to make[10] this can have the effect of starving the group of the media coverage the terrorist acts are designed to attract. This is seen in Northern Ireland with the institution of the "Northern Ireland (Emergency Provisions) Act (NIEPA)"[11] and the "Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act (TPA)"[12] where legislation against terrorists has played a big part in removing the threat of terrorism and forcing the terrorists to voice their grievances through conventional channels, such as Sinn Féin in Northern Ireland. Anti-terror legislation is not just present at state level but also internationally with 13 conventions, each dealing with a separate terrorist threat, ranging from hijacking to nuclear terrorism[13]. If supplemented with regional conventions against terrorism such as the "European Convention on the prevention of terrorism"[14] and the "Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Convention on Counter Terrorism"[15] the war on terror can be fought globally with the use of effective legislation against terrorism.

The use of soft power by western states can be a very effective part of the war on terror as it provides terrorists and the societies they come from with a positive image of a the western world. One of Al Qaeda's aims is to remove American troops from the Middle-East and specifically Saudi Arabia[16]. Osama Bin Laden has also criticised the United States of America for its use of Nuclear weapons during the Second World War, human rights violations, its support of Israel and for its pollution output[17]. The use of nuclear weapons is morally ambiguous, the United States of America has been criticised for its human rights violations, its support for Israel is controversial in the Arab world and the United States of America is a major world polluter out of proportion to its population therefore the United States is unpopular with a large proportion of the Arab world and this gives a base of support with which to build up his extremist ideas and support for other terrorist groups that share this view. Obviously Al-Qaeda distorts the truth and it has other, less rational, arguments for targeting the United States of America but if the general populations of

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Arab countries can be convinced to support western views and cooperate with the west, this is where the use of soft power comes in. Soft power can be used to counter this and an effective worldwide propaganda campaign to improve the image of the United States of America could help remove the support for terrorist groups worldwide perhaps cause dissent within the terrorist groups leading to their effectiveness becoming compromised. As seen in Spain, political reform led to some factions of terrorist groups into abandoning violence and starting a dialogue with the Spanish Government[18].

Subterfuge can also be an effective part of the war on terror. The use of internet chat rooms with known affiliations to terrorist groups or controlled leaks of information through the media[19] could help to cause dissent among terrorist groups by offering amnesty to anyone who denounces violence, spreading rumours of spies within the group, causing mistrust and friction within the groups without actually having to infiltrate the group. This can "reduce the structural integrity, coherence, morale, communication and cooperation within subnational terrorist groups." [20] and therefore greatly reduce the ability of the terrorist group to operate without the need for complex counterinsurgency doctrine or even risky undercover work. An obvious problem with this is the secretive nature of terrorist groups means the chat room approach can result in the targeting of groups that may be radical but who do not actively engage in any violent activity[21], any amnesty and rumours of spies may be ignored by the terrorists or result in the organisation purging anyone they think they cannot trust, even in the absence of any real spies, and with the perceived threat removed they could feel able continue as normal.

Counterinsurgency doctrine has become the most prominent part of the war on terror with invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan becoming large scale counterinsurgencies and support sent to the Philippines to assist in countering the insurgency there. Success against these insurgencies can stabilise the states they are occurring in, aid in the stabilisation of the entire Middle Eastern region and turn the Middle East and other hotspots into areas that support the west and will assist in the war on terrorism. The use of minimum force in counterinsurgency and the doctrine can help to show western forces as benevolent therefore undermining support for terrorist groups and stopping demands for western troops to leave the Middle-East and Saudi Arabia. The importance of counterinsurgency doctrine is shown by the fact that the war on terror was started with invasions that have turned into counterinsurgency operations in the heart of the Middle East and Central Asia, both Iraq and Afghanistan share borders with anti western or unstable states meaning the stabilisation of both of these states through counterinsurgency doctrine will remove a massive area of support and recruitment potential for the terrorist groups.

While counterinsurgency doctrine has become a massive part of the war on terror, neglect of other aspects of the war on terrorism would be foolish as history has shown the effective use of legislation in counterinsurgency has removed the threat of terrorism from particular groups, such as the various factions of the Irish Republican Army. The use of subterfuge both undermines the terrorist's ability to operate, as it spreads distrust and can paralyse the group, and the support for the group among the population, on which they rely for support. Effective propaganda can also undermine support for terrorists and their causes while also increasing support for the west. All of this shows that while counterinsurgency is not the only part of the war on terror and other techniques may be more effective, the current situation with the insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan means that counterinsurgency doctrine is incredibly relevant to the war on terror as overall success in the war on terror is directly tied to the success of counterinsurgency doctrine.

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