

# Compassionate Warfare, a Hard Promise to Keep: COIN in Iraq and Afghanistan

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Both the US and the UK expected the military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan to be quick, using a classic, enemy-centric, military approach involving air strikes and special forces operations (Benes, 2017: 70). However, although the US military quickly overthrew the Taliban government in Kabul, insurgent activity grew and continued to do so in the following years (Benes, 2017: 71). In Iraq, ineffective policies of the post-war administration contributed to the collapse of state authority and insurgency increased (Benes, 2017: 71). Support for the invasions reduced as a result of the still present terrorist threat along with increasing numbers of casualties (Benes, 2017: 72). Therefore, architects of what would become the US COIN doctrine, proposed a new approach to battle the insurgents. The doctrine vowed to swap the old kinetic tactics for economic aid, military training and social projects (Shorrock, 2016: para 2). The idea was to win the 'hearts and minds' of the population, as without its support the campaign aims could not be accomplished (Egnell, 2010: 282).

Throughout this essay I will examine some of the policies carried out in Iraq and Afghanistan as part of the 'hearts and minds' campaign and evaluate their efficacy. I argue that the counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan did not achieve their objectives and that they have in some cases worsened the lives of Iraqis and Afghans. To demonstrate this, I will start by looking at the development of the revised COIN doctrine. I will then explore the efforts to reconstruct Iraq, the creation of a local defense force in Afghanistan and the establishment of the Human Terrain System and its function to compensate for the lack of 'cultural knowledge' in the military. Lastly, I will introduce some critiques of the COIN campaign, where I will present some of the ethical complications that has accompanied the 'hearts and minds' agenda and the promise of peaceful warfare.

### War to COIN

In 2005 reports described that the situations in Iraq and Afghanistan had become more problematic than expected, the US military needed to turn to a different approach (Human Terrain, 2010). US politicians and military introduced the term 'counterinsurgency' during the Cold War to describe guerrillas. As many Americans positively associated 'revolution' with heroism, they dismissed the term 'counterrevolutionary' and 'counterinsurgency' was coined (Dixon, 2009: 356). The US rediscovered the COIN doctrine during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and came to serve a central role (Eikenberry, 2013: 59). The key objectives of the updated doctrine, the Field Manual 3-24, "are to reduce violence, address core grievances, and enable the HN government to exercise political control over its population territory via a system of legitimate governance" (Department of Defense, 2013: 61). The doctrine expresses importance regarding the protection of civilians as well as the elimination and replacement of the insurgents with a legitimate government (Eikenberry, 2013: 59).

The COIN doctrine grew to a great extent out of the British counterinsurgency campaign in Malaya (1952-1954). The 'successful' campaign established for a British counterinsurgency approach in which it was key to win the 'hearts and minds' of the local population (Egnell, 2010: 283). The 'hearts and minds' approach is rooted in modernization theory, where stages of modernization are measured against a very specific set of Western norms. It also aligns with the belief that such standards must be achieved, if 'necessary' through force, and that this path will inevitably lead to an end state of Western 'rational' governance (Egnell, 2010: 285). Although the Malayan counterinsurgency

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campaign has been acknowledged as successful, the description of it as a 'hearts and minds' campaign has been questioned. Dixon (2009: 370) writes that "the phrase 'hearts and minds' when applied to the successful operation in Malaya conceals the reality that the counterinsurgency campaign was not fought within the law and involved high levels of coercion and the abuse of human rights".

Yet, the Malayan counterinsurgency served as an inspiration in Iraq and Afghanistan leading to the repeated recognition that "the success or failure of an insurgency is largely dependent on the attitude of the population" (Tan, 2014: 248). Therefore, counterinsurgents were to put aside conventional warfare methods, seeking the annihilation of the enemy with the use of overwhelming force and with little regard for civilian life, and replace them with less coercive tactics. Hence, rather than an enemy-centric approach with 'purely' military features and complete focus on the insurgents, the importance of politics and a population-centric approach became central (Miller, 2016). To avoid alienating the population, the 'hearts and minds' approach required tighter constraints regarding the use of violence (Dixon, 2009: 359). "By using minimum force, being careful not to risk civilian life and property, and by generally behaving in a respectful and culturally sensitive manner, one can win the local population's hearts and minds" (Egnell, 2010: 290).

## Reconstructing Iraq

The insurgency in Iraq was far more complicated than first perceived by the US military. The primary objective of the various Iraqi insurgents differed from what the US considered a 'rational' end goal; the formation of a stable government (Walker, 2009: 910). Additionally, the insurgents in Iraq were not made up of one homogenous group and the number of forces in Iraqi politics were many.

There are the tribes, clans, family alliances, and feud politics. There are the ethnic and religious identity politics of the Sunni-Shi'a-Kurd division. There are the disconnected political elites, such as Iraqis in exile. There are the religious political parties, whose presence or absence can legitimize or delegitimize the central government. There is the old oligarchy of former Ba'athists; there are the pseudo-state criminal networks like Al Qaeda (Walker, 2009: 913).

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the removal of Saddam Hussein in 2003 created a power vacuum in Iraq which in turn allowed for the rise of regional violence and after only a few months Iraq faced a full-blown insurgency (Walker, 2009: 911). The ongoing conflicts led to the recognition that the role of the Iraqi Coalition forces needed to be widened. Counterinsurgency in Iraq would expand from its original purpose, combatting insurgency, to also include nation-building (Walker, 2009: 909).

The revival of the COIN doctrine in Iraq had much to do with General David Petraeus. Due to his experiences in Central America and Bosnia, Petraeus possessed a different understanding of modern warfare (Tan, 2014: 249). When stationed in Mosul he managed to, through a hearts and minds campaign, stabilize the area which led to the approach being implemented in the rest of Iraq. Petraeus focused greatly on reconstruction and economic revival in Iraq, claiming this to be the best way of winning over the population (Tan, 2014: 249). Additionally, he saw that nation-building as the way forward and that the need to create institutions was pressing (Tan, 2014: 250). The strategy seemed to have had a remarkable effect and it quickly looked like the US would be able to reduce its forces without risking their 'progress' (Tan, 2014: 252).

However, according to Tan (2014: 252), US forces did not solely cause this development, since prior to the surge, Sunni tribal leaders realized that they would lose the civil war against the Shiites. They therefore decided to join the US forces against Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) hoping that this would provide for a better deal in an Iraq where they would be a minority. However, in 2008, reports described the situation in Iraq as fragile as a result of the weak institutions that had been implemented as well as continued violence from AQI. Furthermore, there had been a lack of reconciliation between Sunnis and Shiites (Tan, 2014: 253). As argued by Eland, (2013: 131) the eventual 'success' in Iraq "came after years of societal chaos and guerilla warfare caused by the unnecessary US invasion of a previously stable country". What had once been a quest to win the 'hearts and minds' of the Iraqi people turned into an acceptance of their toleration, as the discontent regarding the occupation continued to grow stronger (Dixon, 2009: 366). Although Operation Iraqi Freedom succeeded in removing Saddam Hussein, it replaced his rule with a

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civil war (Gautney and Reinhardt, 2010: 156).

## **AP3 in Afghanistan**

Similarly to Iraq, following the US invasion, Afghanistan suffered a great deterioration regarding security (Hakimi, 2013: 390). By 2008, insurgents still carried out frequent attacks in the Afghan province of Wardak resulting in new measures to handle the increasing insecurity in the area (Hakimi, 2013: 391). The US and UK military believed that an increase in both foreign and Afghan security forces would promote good governance and facilitate the establishment of the rule of law (Eikenberry, 2013: 60). Additionally, they recognized that in order to establish legitimacy it would be necessary to treat all security operations under COIN not in the context of combat, but law enforcement (Egnell, 2010: 290).

The British counterinsurgency model, which in turn inspired the US doctrine, assigns much importance to police primacy. By restricting the role of the army, the police and other local forces would re-establish the local civil government (Dixon, 2009: 360). The model relies to a great extent on intelligence and recognized the police forces as more effective at gathering intelligence than the army, given for instance the belief that the police would be more sensitive to local opinion, possess more familiarity with the terrain and be able to create an impression of normalcy. Furthermore, the formation and use of a local police force would be a better long-term option than relying on the army. This would also foster more public support considering it was the cheaper alternative and because it would ensure more safety for British soldiers (Dixon, 2009: 360). Police primacy became a prominent feature in the US COIN doctrine as well, as can be displayed in its implementation in Afghanistan.

The creation of a local defense force, serving as part of US COIN, was proposed to counter the increasing insecurity in Afghanistan and was first tested in the province of Wardak (Hakimi, 2013: 391). The Afghan Public Protection Program (AP3, later APL) had little support from local elders and government officials, nevertheless the implementation of the program was carried out soon thereafter. The following year showed little progress, perhaps due to misconceptions regarding local hierarchies. Ultimately the intended leaders did not hold the power but the militia commanders (Hakimi, 2013: 392). Hakimi (2013: 399) claims that the program, rather than reducing violence in the region, aggravated power struggles amongst local militias and lead to further insecurity for Afghans in Wardak. "The case of ALP in Wardak highlights the real intent and outcome of US counterinsurgency and its externally driven, militarized version of state-building" (Hakimi, 2013: 389).

The AP3 program, that was supposed to benefit the wider population, turned into a mission of protecting US forces with a shield of local fighters against the Taliban. It did not play the intended role of protecting civilians (Hakimi, 2013: 389). "Local commanders argued that the Americans simply contracted the war out to local villagers, while they adopted a bunker mentality and sat in their fortified bases, from the safety of which they watched as local armed groups clashed with one another" (Hakimi, 2013: 390). In Wardak the program did not improve security and left the province politically unstable (Hakimi, 2013: 399).

Despite the failure to achieve the campaign objectives in both Iraq and Afghanistan, more resources were allocated to the operations. Continuing the theme of 'humane warfare', with a budget of approximately \$60 million (Gonzalez, 2008: 21), the US military developed a deeper 'interest' in the pool of 'resources' that came to be known as human terrain.

## **The Human Terrain System**

As winning the hearts and minds of the people in Afghanistan and Iraq seemed to require further measures, the US military designed and implemented a new element of the COIN campaign, called the Human Terrain System (HTS) (Zehfuss, 2012: 175). The US recognized that any successes in Iraq and Afghanistan were associated with efforts to 'respectfully' engage with and understand the culture (Zehfuss, 2012: 177).

Teams of five (Human Terrain Teams or HTTs) containing regional experts and social scientists, some of them armed, aimed to make up for what the US forces lacked in cultural knowledge (Zehfuss, 2012: 176). Some of the key

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objectives for the Human Terrain Teams were to; gather and report on the sociocultural conditions in the area of interest; to support the ongoing operations; to provide sociocultural training; to evaluate the result of the HTS (Zehfuss, 2012: 177). The first team arrived in Afghanistan early 2007 and in Iraq during the summer of 2007 (Gonzalez, 2008: 24). Zehfuss (2012: 175) states that “given the criticism of the USA’s failure to consult regional experts before its invasion of Iraq, an interest in culture appears progressive, and all the more so if lives may be saved”.

The portrayal of the HTS as progressive and humane, packaged as a gentler counterinsurgency, has let the program escape a critical media narrative (Gonzalez, 2008: 21). However, Gonzalez argues (2008: 21) that the claim of the HTS having the ability to reduce casualties is unsupported by evidence, data to support such claims have not been released nor has it been confirmed by an independent source. Gonzalez (2008: 21) further states that “there is no verifiable evidence that HTTs have saved a single life – American, Afghan, Iraqi or otherwise”. Zehfuss (2012: 177) too, looks to claims of the HTS’s success critically. As stated above, supporters of the initiative meant that the HTS could reduce the death toll. This is meant to have been accomplished in two ways; due to the reduced violence as a result of more support for US institutions, or the initiative’s ability to influence the military’s attitude regarding violent warfare. However, as this lacks any evidence, the success rate of the HTS is difficult to demonstrate (Zehfuss, 2012: 177).

Furthermore, one should investigate whether social scientists can ‘successfully’ conduct research in conditions that require them to wear arms, be transported or protected by troops, given the coercive force that accompanies military presence (Zehfuss, 2012: 177). Additionally, argues Zehfuss (2012: 178), social scientists’ participation in the HTS is inherently contradictory since they are participating in military activity that is exercising control over the local population that the social scientists are claiming to aid.

Gonzalez (2008: 21) argues that one of the more likely purposes of the HTS is surveillance and intelligence gathering. He compares the HTS to the Civil Operations Revolutionary Development Support (CORDS) that led to the development of the Phoenix Program which was used during the Vietnam War. The program was used by US agents and South Vietnamese officers to gain intelligence and led to the incarceration and/or assassination of tens of thousands. The program, like the HTS, gained praise for its ‘humanitarian’ nature (Gonzalez, 2008: 21). Even though it is claimed that the HTS is not used for lethal targeting, it seems unlikely that the information provided by social scientists is kept separate from such operations. Additionally, there is no guarantee that the ‘subject’ will not be targeted by insurgent groups (Zehfuss, 2012: 179). Another probable purpose that the HTS serves, argues Gonzalez (2008: 25), is for propaganda use, to help advertise US military operations as more humane; “propaganda that offers the apparently wonderful compromise of fighting a war that makes us feel good about ourselves” (Gonzalez, 2008: 25). The Human Terrain System clearly demonstrates the failure, bias and immorality of the ‘attempt’ at ‘compassionate warfare’ pursued by the COIN doctrine.

## Critiques

The relationships that counterinsurgents form with civilians and combatants tend to develop a rather complicated dynamic (Terry, 2015). Counterinsurgents operate under a perceived role as liberators, while simultaneously causing destruction and terror. Civilians are not merely passive participants but are actively operating in a community under pressure from both insurgents and counterinsurgents. Lastly, combatants do serve as the opposition to the counterinsurgents, but might also assume a role of informant or ally (Terry, 2015). As Terry (2015) argues “these complex relationships have resulted in a practice that is often ad-hoc and without formal regulation, putting counterinsurgents in positions where they are forced to exercise judgment without necessarily holding the proper training or knowledge to do so”. Jason Thomas (2012: 2) remarks that it is ironic how the COIN doctrine has been built on “military failures (Algeria, Vietnam), wars where the insurgents won (China) or where the counterinsurgent uprooted an entire population (Malaya) or brutalized their way to victory under a media free zone (Sri Lanka)”.

Furthermore, the current analyses of COIN and how it is experienced by both the insurgents and population are incoherent (Terry, 2015). Iraqis and Afghans have little to no agency regarding their participation in the campaign (Zehfuss, 2012: 186). Western counterinsurgents should be aware that the perception of societal legitimacy, and

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what it derives from, is not necessarily the same everywhere. They must also question their seen role as the defenders of the status quo, they are in fact agents of change and a potential source of crisis (Egnell, 2010: 294-295). As Egnell (2010: 295) argues “struggling to win the support of the local population while at the same time forcing modernization makes for a difficult balancing act and may create inherent contradictions”.

The sense of distrust that has been present among the populations in Iraq and Afghanistan for over a decade, is inherently tied to Western military presence, despite the COIN aspiration to counteract mistrustful relationships between governments and citizens (Terry, 2015). The unavoidable us-vs-them mentality, that accompanied the invasions and the COIN campaigns, has not encouraged positive encounters but has led to further suspicion and doubt (Terry, 2015). According to Zehfuss (2012: 179) trust is key in the anthropologist's research methods, which the HTS puts in jeopardy. Furthermore, anthropologists have a responsibility towards their 'research subjects', to keep them from harm (Zehfuss, 2012: 179). Which, familiarly, also relates to the promise COIN and the 'hearts and minds' campaign. However, as seen above, the campaign's coercive nature, non-optional participation as well as the potential of lethal targeting that it is accompanied by, seems to make this a promise that is hard to keep. Furthermore, the objectifying and dehumanizing effects of referring to people as 'terrain' poses an interesting complication to the 'hearts and minds' agenda (Gonzalez, 2008: 23). Zehfuss further argues (2012: 183) that the HTS contributes to promoting imperialism and that no anthropological contributions can change the “neocolonial nature of the larger mission”. The strongest incentive for anthropologists to partake in this campaign, Lutz argues (Human Terrain, 2010), would be the idea that one is able to help in a situation of crisis. Lutz (Human Terrain, 2010: 23:19) however emphasizes the importance to “step back and ask help what? Help whom to do what?”

According to Lindisfare (2008: 3) the 'war on terror', and by extension COIN, protects elite interest by nature. She further argues that counterinsurgency is simply the occupiers' name for the suppression of an organized resistance movement”. Lindisfare (2008: 3) also states that regarding military occupations, employees of the UN, Western NGOs or NATO government, or participants of their activities, are choosing sides. This considering the close ties between such agencies and Western imperialism.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan quickly turned out to require other measures than conventional warfare. The COIN doctrine was revived, and the mission turned into winning the 'hearts and minds' of the local population through investing in reconstruction, creating local defense forces or by attempting to implement a dimension of 'cultural sensitivity' in military activities through the creation of the HTS. As shown above many of the COIN actions had questionable results and arguably worsened the life of Iraqis and Afghans, such as for instance the AP3 program's stir of local power struggles. Some of the critiques formed against COIN and the HTS show; the complication resulting from anthropologists taking part in the campaign since much of their research methods relies on trust between them and the population with which they engage; that analyses of COIN and the civilian experience is intensely disconnected; that the complex relationships between counterinsurgents, civilians and combatants often lead to ad hoc practices without formal regulation; that counterinsurgency is the suppression of resistance movements. We are reminded that the revised COIN doctrine was inspired by counterinsurgency campaigns that are not necessarily considered all that successful, which makes one reflect further on the purpose of the campaign. Is COIN nothing more than an imperialist venture in the disguise of a humane quest for 'hearts and minds'?

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