



CSIS's Afghanistan IED Metrics Report Does Not Tell the Whole Story

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We were recently sent the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) 21 July 2010 improvised explosive device (IED) metrics for Afghanistan report.¹ This report illustrates a significant spike in IED activity in Afghanistan over the past year. This report also suggests that in this same period there has been an exponential decrease in the number of IEDs found by the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) due to local national tips or turn-ins. Upon reviewing this report, we can understand why one might argue that the current counterinsurgency (COIN) operational design in Afghanistan is flawed and/or in part responsible for the seemingly increasing IED threat. For a variety of reasons, we discourage anyone from using this report to draw conclusions on the tactical conduct of the fight in Afghanistan today, especially conclusions about how best to counter the IED threat.

We caution against doing so because the experiences of the Marines, Sailors, and Afghan National Army (ANA) Soldiers that we had the privilege to serve with in southern Helmand Province from October 2009 to May 2010 completely contradict the seemingly logical conclusion that one might make from the report: IED incidents continue to grow while IED turn-ins due to local national tips appear to be exponentially decreasing; therefore, more troops and resources in Afghanistan have not led to greater security and cooperation for and among the population, but rather increasing hostility between ISAF/Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) and the Afghan people.

The Marines and Sailors in our two rifle companies, along with their ANSF partners, found more than 220 IEDs during our deployment. In stark contrast to the reported 3-7% turn-in ratio in the CSIS Report, approximately 85% of our company's IED finds were due directly to local national tips, if not local nationals digging the IEDs out of the ground for us.² Further, we, partnered with our ANA brothers, locked up, killed, and/or reconciled the majority of Taliban fighters in the IED cells within our company areas of operations (AO's) -- primarily due to local national tips.

¹ The report is located here: (http://csis.org/files/publication/100722_IED_INCIDENTS_IN_AFGHANISTAN.pdf.)

² While unknown, we suspect the turn-in ratio presented in the CSIS report is significantly lower than what our unit's experienced, and most likely far lower than what most units experience, because nowhere in the NATO UXO/IED 9-line report is a unit required to state whether an IED find or attack was with or without the aid of a local national tip.

At our very core, we do not believe that our partnered companies would have had this level of success in the IED fight without embracing the COIN fundamentals laid out in Field Manual (FM) 3-24, or the four fundamentals that our companies lived by when it came to crushing the enemy and specifically his IED capabilities:

- Truly embrace that the Afghan people are the prize – and give them reason to believe in themselves and their future.
- Truly partner with the ANSF in EVERYTHING that we do.
- Counter and/or crush the enemy “cause” at every opportunity.
- Ruthlessly – and precisely – hunt down, close with, and convert, capture or kill our enemy anytime that he dares to stand in our way.

At initial glance, we suspect one could argue that more than 220 IED incidents within two company AO's suggest that the FM 3-24 fundamentals are flawed, or at least not helping reduce the IED threat. This, again, is why we think one needs to be very careful when drawing conclusions from PowerPoint slides without the context behind them. In our company AO's, the majority of IED attacks occurred within the first two months of our deployment. This time period was dominated by Marines and Sailors daily hunting down and capturing/killing our enemy while simultaneously building relationships with our ANSF brothers and the population that we moved in with throughout the AO. The majority of our IED finds that occurred without the aid of local national tips also took place during this period. That said, from mid-January through mid-May, almost 100% of our IED finds were due directly to local national tips. And, the majority of the IEDs themselves were emplaced in the ground months before we arrived in Afghanistan. Of the small percentage of IEDs that were new, or emplaced during our final 4.5 months in southern Helmand, we typically would receive at least 1, if not potentially ten different tips from local nationals about the location and construct almost immediately upon the device being implanted. In multiple instances, partnered Marine/ANSF ambush patrols withheld firing on innocent Afghans as they moved around known IED sites because these Afghans were marking the sites for us prior to coming up to our patrols and/or patrol bases to tell us about them -- and who put them in. And since we've returned to the US, the units that relieved our companies have encountered very, very few IED incidents in these same areas.

Another concern that we have with the CSIS report and the increasingly prevalent views on COIN fundamentals potentially not working in Afghanistan – and by extension some arguing incapable of working elsewhere -- is that, in many cases, the COIN fundamentals within ISAF's operational design are only recently, if not in the past few months, being implemented. Take Kandahar as an example: we saw many of the Soldiers that are now in areas of Kandahar Province for the first time when we were flying through Germany in route back to the US. The current conditions in Marjah have also led some analysts to argue that the COIN fundamentals laid out in FM 3-24 are flawed. Again, we think it's important to appreciate where the COIN fight in Marjah really stands – we're at 9 months now in a war that started in 2001.

Which leads us to our main concern with the conclusions that one might draw from the report – how to approach the counter-IED fight if he or she believes the turn-in ratio is really only 3-7%. Recent advances in counter-IED efforts have often been focused too much on material,

equipment, and training associated with new vehicles, systems, and other “things.” Put another way, the focus has too often been on “defeating the device” rather than on “defeating the network.” We believe counter-IED efforts have been focused in this way because very hard working and well-meaning professionals suspect that such tangible “things” will help counter command detonated, pressure plate, remote controlled, and the remaining variety of IEDs. Tests and combat experience do unequivocally show that the addition of new gear and equipment has saved lives; we do not argue these facts. This said, we believe that in the long run many, many more lives will be saved by focusing primarily on securing the Afghan people and truly partnering with the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), which, when done together, greatly increases a unit’s ability to “attack the network” that seeks to emplace IEDs in the first place. This approach also enables us to accomplish our tactical level mission.

We often hear about and talk about making the people the prize in COIN, and convincing them to believe in the struggle and their future. We also hear and talk about teaching our small unit leaders to understand and to believe in our mission and believe in the people and the ANSF down to the rifle squad and fire team leader levels. When both of these groups “believe,” COIN fundamentals work, and the enemy is forced to either fight without popular support, or to reintegrate into the population. This is real counter-IED. This is how we limit, if not altogether, stop IEDs from being a threat to our forces. We cannot stop IEDs with technology and equipment.

We also recently came across Marine Lieutenant General “Brute” Krulak’s “This Kind of War” here: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/krulak.htm>. We found the following paragraphs particularly insightful to discussions about COIN fundamentals and the counter-IED fight in Afghanistan today:

“All together, the first Marines in Vietnam created an innovative strategy that was well attuned to the problems. It recognized that the people themselves were both the battlefield and the objective and that the usual tactical objectives--hills, bridges, rivers--meant little and the usual battlefield statistics--enemy killed and wounded--meant even less.”

“Between 1962 and 1968, I went to Vietnam fifty-four times for periods of five to twenty days. I saw a lot of the country, from the DMZ in the north to the Ca Mau Peninsula in the south. And I saw a lot of the people, from French-speaking dilettantes in Saigon to Moslems at Phan Rang on the seacoast to Montagnards in the hills near the Laos border. As far back as 1963, I went on operations with the Vietnamese Army and the Vietnamese Marines and saw how easily sizable enemy forces could melt into a countryside willing to support, or at least to tolerate, them. Everything I saw kept bringing me back to the basic proposition that the war could only be won when the people were protected. If the people were for you, you would triumph in the end. If they were against you, the war would bleed you dry and you would be defeated.”

Our great country will likely be in Afghanistan for years to come. As such, we think it is important that when drawing conclusions about COIN's effectiveness, and specifically the best way to attack the enemy’s IEDs capabilities, that we all dig much, much deeper than PowerPoint

slide summaries for context. And based on our experiences in southern Helmand, we believe that heeding Lieutenant General's Krulak's advice is a good place to start.

From October 2009 to May 2010, Captain Gorman and Captain Cuomo served as Easy Company and Fox Company Commanders, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Marines, respectively, in Garmsir District, Helmand Province, Afghanistan. The views expressed herein are their own and do not represent those of the United States Marine Corps or the Department of Defense.

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