Interview with Colonel Peter Mansoor

Octavian Manea

"_Local relationships are really the key in winning a counterinsurgency._**"**
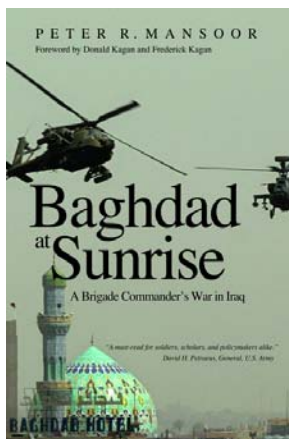
Interview with Colonel Peter Mansoor (US Army retired) conducted by Octavian Manea (Editor of _FP Romania_, the Romanian edition of _Foreign Policy_).

It is usually said that insurgencies and counterinsurgencies are always competitions for legitimacy. Could you explain this?

Insurgency and counterinsurgency are essentially struggles for legitimacy and for competing visions of governance and the future. The goal of the insurgents is political power and in order to gain political power they need to show the people that either they have better programs for the future or that the government is incapable of protecting them. Counterinsurgency is a struggle for winning the trust of the population. To win, a COIN effort needs to show the people that continuing existence under the government is preferable to a not-so-certain future. The struggle for legitimacy and for competing political programs is really at the heart of COIN and insurgencies.

Why is the "population" the center of gravity in a COIN campaign?

The issue is that guerillas don't wear uniforms, but rather civilian clothes and fight among the people. It is very hard to come to grips with who is the enemy and therefore killing or capturing them is difficult at best. The Western approach to COIN is to protect the population and by doing so make it very difficult for insurgents to live among them. By isolating the insurgents from the people, their strength decreases. Living among the people and protecting them normally leads to better intelligence which leads to identifying and targeting insurgents. Moreover, by decreasing the insurgent's support among the people you can reach out to the reconcilable elements.

How important is to understand the local people, tribal dynamics, mapping the local social networks, and how power brokers interact?

The most important aspect of command in counterinsurgency warfare is building relationships. Local relationships are really the key in winning a counterinsurgency. You have to build support for the legitimate government from the ground up. The relationship between the counterinsurgent and

the local population is vital. In this regard the understanding of cultural sensibilities, the ability to speak the language, the ability to understand the religion is fundamental for the ability of the counterinsurgent to establish and maintain a relationship. In Iraq and Afghanistan we were not really aware of the local dynamics at play or of the history and culture of the people.

What did the Iraq surge do? I mean the surge is not about mathematics, about numbers, but tactics. I think this aspect is crucial to understand in order to grasp the meaning of the current debate around the Afghan surge.

The Iraq war in 2006 was really a competition over power and resources. It was in this strategic setting the Bush administration decided to support a surge of additional forces in Iraq. But more importantly, those forces were going to be used differently according to the principles of COIN doctrine. The first thing the surge did was provide additional forces to enable strategic change (40,000 troops). But more important than the forces, than the numbers, was the changing in the strategic setting itself: the priority shifted from killing and capturing to securing the Iraqi people. This required first of all a changing of the operational mindset. Up to this point people were just a condition of the battlefield. They were something to be avoided and not necessarily the object of the operations. During the surge, the people became the focus of the operations. We understood that the people were the decisive factor on which victory depended on. In order to secure them, we had to move out from the secure bases into the communities where the people lived, to live there and protect them 24 hours a day. In new facilities we were partnered with Iraqi security forces that required more competent forces to model their behavior after and develop their skills. On top of that the Iraq surge was in many ways more important than the US surge. During the US surge, the Iraqi forces (military and police) increased by over 135,000 troops. Increasingly these forces were becoming more capable under the supervision of US advisory teams and working side by side with the US troops inside the communities. This process finally gave us enough forces to hold the ground that was cleared of enemy forces. Typically what happened was that after clearing an area of insurgent presence, we established gated communities using barriers to wall off communities and used check points at the entrances where the people were screened and biometrically identified. These procedures made it very difficult for the insurgents to operate in the gated communities. We were able to figure out who lived in the communities. Then we turned the communities over to the local Iraqi security forces that were stationed and lived in the communities in small outposts. And so we were able to hold these areas making it very difficult for the insurgents to live among the people and to draw dawn the violence in the urban areas. Another crucial thing that the surge did was to provide enough troops to pursue the enemy throughout Iraq and to eliminate the safe-havens the enemy enjoyed in the villages around Baghdad. Seizing the safe havens was one of the crucial elements of the surge.

Could you sum up the strategic rationale behind the Iraq surge?

The assumption behind the surge was that a political solution to the war could not be developed unless the level of violence could be brought down to a socially acceptable level. Simply put, there was too much communal violence in 2006 to expect the various Iraqi sects and factions to reach political accommodations on what to them were existential issues. The surge was designed

in part to lower the level of violence and by doing so create the conditions for politics to become operative in the longer term solution to the division of power and resources in Iraq.

How did the surge work in relation to the Sunni Awakening Movement? Was it a trigger or a catalyst?

The surge in itself was not a trigger of the Awakening movement, but a catalyst. The Awakening movement began before the surge. It began in Ramadi which was won over by AQ through a very brutal campaign of intimidation. But the AQ overplayed its hand. They killed too many tribal sheiks, they cut into their business dealings…Without the surge and the success of the surge, this tribal rebellion would have been limited to the area surrounding Ramadi. The surge did not create the first of the tribal "awakenings," but it was the catalyst for their expansion and eventual success. The tribal revolt took off after the arrival of reinforcements and as US and Iraqi units fought to make the Iraqi people secure.

Under what tactical circumstances could we see the peeling of the insurgency onion in Afghanistan?

There is one really important thing that people often overlook when analyzing the surge. And it is important to remind of that before talking about reconciliation as the key element to be applied in Afghanistan. The reason that reconciliation worked in Iraq is because of the surge. Because of the success of the surge, the insurgents finally realized that they were going to lose the war. And that made them amenable to reconciliation, enough to make a difference. Only when the Taliban think they are going to be defeated on the battlefield and in the minds of the Afghan people will they be willing to enter into agreements and to reconcile with the Afghan government. The two go hand in hand.

What is the rationale for creating and raising "concerned local citizens" or "community defense initiatives"? To what extent are these initiatives a danger or enablers/catalysts for stability?

Someone has to defend the people: whether police, army forces or local security forces. Someone has to protect the population and if you don't, the enemy will. If there aren't enough security forces under the control of the government then allowing tribal leaders to form some security forces that will act on behalf of the counterinsurgent could be an answer. What you don't want is to create a bunch of warlords with a bunch of militias. The local forces only make sense when they can be kept under the control of COIN leadership. And that is what we did in Iraq with the Sons of Iraq. The Sons of Iraq were authorized and controlled by the Iraqi government and US leaders and eventually paid initially by the US and than by the Iraqi government. And that gave us a great degree of control over their operations.

How important is the local ownership in managing a COIN effort?

To answer this question, I will quote T. E. Lawrence, who once wrote "*Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than that you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help them, not to win it for them.*"

Peter Mansoor is the Raymond E. Mason Jr. Chair in Military History, a joint appointment between the <u>Mershon Center for International Security Studies</u> and the <u>Department of History, Ohio State University</u>. Prior to coming to Ohio State, he served as Executive Officer to Gen. David Petraeus, then commander of the multinational forces in Iraq. In this position, Mansoor assisted Petraeus with strategic planning for the US war effort in Iraq and prepared him for meetings with top executive branch leaders as well as testimony before Congress. Mansoor also served on a Council of Colonels that enabled the Joint Chiefs of Staff to reassess the strategy for the Iraq War. Based in part on this group's deliberations, the United States began the "surge"strategy in 2007-08. His most recent book is <u>Baghdad at Sunrise: A Brigade Commander's War in Iraq</u> (Yale University Press, 2008).