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Seeing the Other Side of the COIN:

A Critique of the Current Counterinsurgency (COIN) Strategies in Afghanistan

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Though the international visibility of Tribalized Rural and Muslim Environments (TRMEs) such as rural Afghanistan has dramatically increased for almost nine years with the efforts of Coalition Forces (CF) in Afghanistan, TRMEs have rarely been studied from Counterinsurgency (COIN) perspective. Although there has emerged a vast literature at the strategic level on the COIN efforts of the CF in Afghanistan and the prospective policies of the international community to resolve the current insurgency, unfortunately, we are still unable to see the other side of the COIN at the tactical level, or view on the ground.

The utmost aim of this article is to attack many “dogmas” currently exist in the COIN literature, and challenges traditional COIN wisdom available in the literature. It also aims to lay out a different perspective regarding the COIN efforts in rural areas at the tactical level, a rarely studied level from COIN perspective. This is, therefore, not an article of problem solver. It may be regarded, instead, as an article of problem setting at the tactical level and concerning Afghanistan in general. It claims that the current situation in rural Afghanistan do not conform to established frames or assumptions in the literature, and the current literature is, thus, far behind from figuring out what the real problem is.

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)

Introduction

According to the official numbers of NATO, in August 2010, 220 attacks were reported in Afghanistan, which claimed 494 lives.¹ The number of attacks has also increased roughly 18% compared to the same month in 2009.² In the first anniversary of the declassified version of General McChrystal’s initial assessment - though we do not know why Gen. McChrystal preferred to use “high,” a cloudy word hard to measure, when defining the stakes in Afghanistan at the beginning of his assessment - these numbers - specifically 18% increase - clearly and

¹ Monthly Global Terrorism Watch Report of Defense against Terrorism Center of Excellence of NATO (COE-DAT) in Turkey, June 2010.

² Ibid.

grimly indicate that the stakes in Afghanistan are higher in August of 2010 than the ones in August of 2009.³ In the light of this worsening picture in Afghanistan, there is no need to be a fortuneteller to foresee that the Coalition Forces (CF) in Afghanistan, which currently include roughly 150,000 troops, is far from seeing the light at the end of the Afghanistan tunnel.

Nonetheless, President Obama has increased the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan by authorizing 30,000 additional troops for the Afghan mission since taking office. The Obama administration has also announced a strategy, which claims that we would see the light at the end of the tunnel if we;

- Put extra pressure on al-Qaeda (AQ) safe heavens in the Afghan-Pakistani border,
- Stop the Taliban expansion by sending additional American troops to Afghanistan, along with an unspecified number of NATO troops. The objective of the extra forces to be put in the theater would not be to defeat the insurgency. Rather, to create suitable conditions under which an Afghan security force could be build up and take over the mission,
- Use the space created by the counteroffensive against the Taliban and the resulting security in some regions of Afghanistan to train and build Afghan military forces and civilian structures to assume responsibility after the U.S. withdraws.⁴ Ultimate success in this strategy has been announced as “a stable, secure, and self-sufficient democratic Islamic Republic,” capable of enforcing internal security and fulfilling international responsibilities.⁵

Furthermore, President Obama announced in December of 2009 that he pledged to withdraw the U.S. forces from Afghanistan by July 2011, which means that the recent military buildup is temporary. Then, the timeframe tailored for the strategy of exit is 18 months, which demonstrates the determination of the Obama administration to promise a rapid end to the war. With this deadline, the Obama administration seems to share the existing skepticism about the viability of a strong and centralized government in Kabul.⁶ Current developments demonstrate that the goal of creating a centralized government in Afghanistan is losing credibility. Nowadays, success in Afghanistan is thus defined as an intermediate end state, somewhere between ideal and tolerable in Washington.⁷

The implications of this political strategic confusion of the international community about the end state in Afghanistan has also led to ambiguities in the military efforts of the CF. Though there has emerged a sizable literature about the current dilemma of the CF in Afghanistan, one still cannot find clear answers of these very basic questions. What are the strategic objectives of the CF in Afghanistan? Are they trying to “win a war against extremists” or “rebuild Afghanistan?” Or are they trying to fulfill these two objectives, the accommodation of which at the same time is highly unlikely in military terms, *simultaneously*?

³ Please see the full report: http://media.washingtonpost.com/wpsrv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf?hpid=topnews (accessed 30 August 2010).

⁴ President Barack Obama, “White Paper of the Insurgency Policy Group’s Report on U.S. Policy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan,” A New Strategy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, March 27, 2009, please see: www.whitehouse.gov (accessed September 23, 2010).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Stephen Biddle and Fotini Christia, “Afghanistan” *Foreign Affairs*, May-June 2010.

⁷ Ibid.

The overall aim of this study is to draw attention to the conventional COIN strategies currently being applied in Afghanistan and to challenge traditional COIN wisdom available in the literature. To facilitate this objective, it first draws attention to this strategic confusion when tailoring military objectives of the CF in Afghanistan. That is, it addresses the protracted rivalry of enemy-centric and population-centric approaches as the fundamental source of this strategic confusion which spoils the unity of efforts, and thus distracts the very basics of warfare principles: objective, mass and economy of force. It then sorts vital points which seem to degrade the COIN efforts in rural Afghanistan as the primary sources of the currently existing strategic confusion. In conclusion, it humbly proposes a solution on how to resolve the current conflict in rural Afghanistan.

Killing mosquitoes or draining the swamp?

Traditional wisdom defines an *insurgency* as an important part of unconventional war, or a form of “irregular conflict” which aims at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict.⁸ 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.⁹ Political power is assumed to be the central issue in insurgencies; therefore, each side aims to get the people to accept its governance or authority as legitimate. Hence, insurgents aim to break the ties between the people and the government and endeavor to establish credibility for their movement.¹⁰ Put simply, traditional wisdom in the COIN literature defines the insurgency as an armed political competition between the government and insurgents over the control of local population.

It should also be stressed that, in an insurgency, local population may be categorized primarily into three groups. First are the voluntary insurgents, second are the persuaded or coerced supporters and third are the innocent fence-sitters. Insurgency may start with active support of few enabling individuals, but without passive acquiescence of coerced supporters and innocent fence-sitters, which constitute a majority of the population, it is highly unlikely to sustain it. David Galula, a French officer who gained his practical experience in Algerian War, notes that:

In any situation, whatever the cause, there will be an active minority for the cause, a neutral majority, and an active minority against the cause. The technique of power consists in relying on the favorable minority in order to rally the neutral majority and to neutralize or eliminate the hostile minority.¹¹

In the same vein, John A. Nagl asserts that the obligatory division of “people from the insurgents” is the chief among the effective COIN strategies.¹² Though distinguishing between these groups with an accurate analysis may be a fundamental task directly linked to the end state in an insurgency, it is the most difficult one since insurgents tend to camouflage themselves

⁸ FM 3-24 COIN Manual, 2006. pp.1-1.

⁹ U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide, U.S. Government Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative, January 2009, p.6.

¹⁰ Ibid, pp.1-13.

¹¹ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, (Westport, Connecticut, Praeger Security International), pp.53.

¹² John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*, (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp.249.

among civilian population. Nevertheless, an effective COIN strategy requires that a COIN force distinguish individuals presenting a threat from innocent civilians. Only after the accurate assessment of the fundamental characteristics coerced/persuaded supporters and fence-sitters such as their ratio among the populace, the demographic and socio-physiological facts of the environment in which they reside, can a COIN force determine the fundamentals of an effective strategy.

The utmost objective of insurgents is to gain control of contested population through a political strategy, which combines persuasive, subversive and coercive techniques, while implementing guerilla warfare to deny the control of the governing authority (a governing authority in rural Afghanistan may not only be the central government but also be COIN force-supported warlord or tribal leader) over population.¹³ Insurgents apply persuasive techniques, which not only include promotion of insurgent ideology but also can include provision of money, access to basic services, control of land and position for authority. Propaganda is the “force multiplier” of persuasion, which is designed to control population`s actions, disgrace the COIN forces` actions, provoke overreaction of security forces and aggravate ethnic, tribal, religious, sectarian differences.¹⁴ With subversive techniques, insurgents may not only effect the perception of local populace over the COIN forces and the governing authority but also may exploit the competing power structures in local politics such as tribal leaders, other politico-religious fractions and criminal networks. Lastly, with coercive techniques such as terror, assassination and kidnapping, insurgents would not only intimidate the supporters of the COIN forces and governing authority, but also be able to force local populace to side with them in the conflict. In a nutshell, to gain the support of local populace (or at least their acquiescence),¹⁵ insurgents follow a protracted low intensity conflict, which would lead to the exhaustion of the governing authority to break its will. The main effort of insurgents is not to kill as many COIN soldier as possible, but rather to establish an alternative control over the population.

To fight against an insurgency, there may possibly be two primary approaches: enemy centric and population centric.

Enemy-Centric Approach

The first one is the enemy-centric or direct approach the utmost aim of which is to destroy the will of the insurgents to fight by neutralizing their capabilities both in the recruitment phase and in the fighting, or put simply this is “the approach of killing mosquitoes.” In this kinetically-based approach, COIN forces use attrition warfare and focus their efforts, or all killing power, on annihilating the insurgents by killing or capturing them. In fact, the idea of an enemy-centric approach came from Clausewitz, one of leading military strategists of modern times. The enemy-centric approach, which he described in his famous book, *On War*,¹⁶ has been facilitated as the primary doctrine by modern armies, and eventually it has been the foundation of military strategy, force structuring, and training for decades. This Clausewitzian doctrine, has, therefore, turned out to be the core principle, around which modern armies are built. Because traditional wisdom consider insurgency a deviant form of war, traditional COIN strategies and

¹³ U.S. State Department, Counterinsurgency Guide, January 2009.

Please see for the full document: <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/119629.pdf> (accessed 12 October 2010)

¹⁴ Ibid, pp.9.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp.9.

¹⁶ Please see for the chapter of “What is war?”, the first chapter of *On War*, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1946/1946-h/1946-h.htm> (accessed 26 September, 2010).

doctrines are based on the same notion as the more general approach to war. When conventional direct approach applied to the COIN, therefore, the focal assumption is that COIN forces should find and isolate insurgents first, and then focus its killing power on insurgent's decisive point. In David Killcullen's words, this approach could be summarized with the motto of "first defeat the enemy, and all else will follow."¹⁷ Furthermore, following Clausewitzian view which postulates that war is essentially and inherently political, traditional wisdom on COIN solely focuses on the political causes and dimensions of insurgency, and tends to omit other dynamics such as socio-cultural and economic ones that may drive an insurgency.

The hot debates on the U.S. military missions in Afghanistan in the fall of 2009, for instance, revitalized the debates on conventional enemy-centric approach. The strategy of reducing the U.S. involvement in the nation building efforts and ramping up drone attacks and covert raids against high profile Al Qaeda targets in Pakistan's tribal areas, which was first proposed by Vice President Joe Biden, is a perfect case for this approach. The New York Times highlighted this strategy, the principal rationale of which was to neutralize Al Qaeda members, by reporting that "Rather than trying to protect the Afghan population from the Taliban, American forces would concentrate on strikes against Qaeda cells, primarily in Pakistan, using special forces, Predator missile attacks, and other surgical tactics."¹⁸ In the same vein, Ralph Peters writes that the CF forces in Afghanistan should concentrate on the destruction of Al-Qaeda and its allies, and nothing else matters in this mess."¹⁹ He continues that;

Here is a simple way to conceptualize our problem [in Afghanistan]: a pack of murderous gangsters holes up in a fleabag motel. The feds raid the joint, killing or busting most of them. But some deadly ringleaders get away. Should the G-men pursue the kingpins, or hang around to renovate the motel? Common sense says: Go after the gangsters. They are the problem, not the run-down bunkhouse. Yet, in Afghanistan, we've put the bulk of our efforts into turning a vast flophouse into the Four Seasons – instead of focusing ruthlessly on our terrorist enemies. It is politically correct madness."²⁰

It also should be noted that since the primary objective of the enemy-centric approach is the physical component of insurgents, the kinetic capabilities and intelligence efforts of COIN forces carry utmost importance during the planning and the implementation of a COIN strategy.

In conventional terms, when applying enemy-centric approach, the best military tactic is the search and destroy mission. Search and destroy mission is the tactical offensive method which is employed by ground and aerial military forces in short durations to contact, attack, exploit and pursuit the enemy.²¹ The utmost aim of this method is to develop a situation to establish a direct fire contact or regain it with the insurgents. If the precise location of the enemy is not known the objective of contact would be achieved through patrolling roads and villages with platoon or company level units, or with sweeping operations in a particular area with units larger than battalion. If known, the contact would be achieved by launching an attack, the types of which could be a hasty, deliberate or a special purpose. This said, in this method, which directly targets the physical component in an insurgency, the priority of the COIN forces seems

¹⁷ David Killcullen, *SmallWarsJournal*.

¹⁸ Peter Barker and Elisabeth Bumiller, "Obama considers a strategy shift in Afghan War" *NY Times*, 22 September 2010. Please see for the full text: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/23/world/asia/23policy.html> (accessed 01 September 2010).

¹⁹ Ralph Peters, "Afghan Agony: More Troops won't help", *Newyork Post*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Department of Army, FM 3-0, Operations, 7-16.

to conduct “kill/capture missions” concentrating on battalion or brigade size sweep operations and direct actions carried out by elite forces on the ground, and precision air strikes. The search and destroy missions are not only easier to plan for military staff but also endow immediate and quantifiable effects which can be followed and measured metrically. For instance, the number of missions or the number of killed/captured insurgents, as adequate statistical data easy to measure, would be good indicators when defining success. Search and destroy missions, therefore, perfectly fit for the conventional military planning and conduct of the operation, and thus, for modern armies, there has emerged an institutional inclination to apply this method over time in every campaign they encounter.

After explaining this conventional wisdom in COIN, I should also note that anybody who grabs a hammer sees every problem as a nail. Put another way, would the officer corps and the soldiers, who have been trained or indoctrinated to fight against the enemy with search and destroy missions, assess every incident in their area of responsibility in COIN theater as nail to hammer? Or would they be competent, cross-culturally well equipped, innovative and long sighted enough to unchain themselves from their institutional indoctrination of appraising each case in the theater through the lenses of this conventional wisdom? The answer of this question, which, in fact, reflects the current dilemma of the tactical and operational level planning in rural Afghanistan, is extremely relevant in determining the end state of the insurgency.

Population-Centric Approach

The second primary approach is the population-centric one which mainly targets the coerced supporters and innocent bystanders, and aims to control the population. Or put simply this is “the approach of draining the swamp.” According to this approach, if the objective of establishing control over the population and the environment in which the people live can be achieved, then the insurgents would be deprived from shelter, supply, recruitment, more importantly moral legitimacy. Among the followers of this approach, Galula proposes that COINs are not only primarily military conflicts but also a combination of socio-political, economic and military ones. He also suggests four laws in the implementation of an effective COIN strategy. These are;

- The aim of the war is to gain control of the population rather than control of the territory,
- Most of the population will be natural in conflict; support of the masses can be obtained with the act of active friendly minority,
- Support of the population may be lost. The population should be efficiently protected to allow it to cooperate without fear of retribution by the insurgents,
- Order enforcement should be done progressively, that is, removing insurgents, gaining support of the locals, building infrastructure, and setting long-term relationship with the local population.²² Galula also contends that:

A victory [in COIN] is not the destruction in a given area of the insurgent`s forces and their political organization. A victory is that the permanent isolation of the insurgents from the population, isolation not enforced upon the population, but maintained by and with the population. In conventional warfare, strength is assessed according to military or other tangible

²² David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, (Westport, Connecticut, Praeger Security International), pp.54-56.

criteria such as the number of the divisions, the position they hold, the industrial resources they obtain. In revolutionary warfare, strength must be assessed by the extent of support from the population as measured in terms of political organization at the grass roots. The counterinsurgents reach a position of strength when his power is embedded in a political organization issuing from, and firmly supported by the population.²³

Similar to Gaula, Thomas X. Hammes contends that COIN is a different kind of war, a 4th generation warfare which is centered on the battle of ideas and winning the support of innocent bystanders and coerced supporters, not the physical destruction of enemy.²⁴ In the same vein, General David Petraeus explicitly states that;

The decisive terrain is the human terrain. The people are the center of gravity. Only by providing them security and earning their trust and confidence can the Afghan government and ISAF prevail.²⁵

To win the support and legitimacy of the local populace, or to win their hearts and minds, the COIN forces should apply unconventional approaches, which would generally be hard to explain with traditional military wisdom. The term “hearts” represents the emotive component, which indicates that the victory of the COIN forces will best serve the long term interests of the local populace. The term “minds” represents cognitive component, which indicates that the COIN forces will win the war eventually, and therefore, to side with the COIN forces would be the better choice for the local populace. According to David Kilcullen, “neither concept [neither winning hearts nor winning minds] has to do with whether people like you. Calculated self-interest, not emotion is what counts.”²⁶ Then, one may conclude that winning hearts and minds would, in fact, be an applicable strategy as long as it serves for the interests of population.

To win the hearts and minds of the local populace, the population-centric approach should include;

- Separation of insurgents from the populace,
- Securing the populace against the threats of the insurgents,
- Establishment or strengthening of existing governing institutions to be legitimate in the eyes of the populace,
- Establishment of the rule of law, or a just social order.

Since the utmost objective of the population-centric approach is the psychological component of the local population, an inter-disciplinary understanding should be nurtured through the synthesis of different fields such as political, social and behavioral sciences. Since the population-centric approach targets the value system of the local population to gain their consent, an effective and comprehensive COIN strategy cannot be crafted without referencing to the fields such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, and theology. Value system of a society may be defined as a set of socially shared ideas of what is good, right and desirable. With proper mechanisms, it is likely to influence and regulate the value system of local

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Thomas X. Hammes, *The Sling and the Stone: On War in the 21st Century*, (St.Paul, MN:Zenith Press, 2004), pp.321.

²⁵ Please see for the full text of the Counterinsurgency Guidance of Gen. Petraeus published on August,1,2010. <http://www.isaf.nato.int/from-the-commander/from-the-commander/comisaf-s-counterinsurgency-guidance.html>

²⁶ David Kilcullen, “Twenty Eight Articles: Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency”, please see: <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/28articles.pdf> (accessed 10 August 2010).

population in a timely manner. In traditionally slow, complex and fragile societies like the ones in TRMEs, however, to tailor a proper mechanism to regulate the value system of the local people at an appropriate rate would be a very hard and extremely slow process. Nonetheless, population-centric approach assess that it is worth trying. This slow process of regulating the value system in TRMEs, however, may be less likely to serve the needs of a COIN force with less commitment and strategic patient and with no enough time.

Furthermore, the population-centric approach possesses an inherent challenge for COIN forces. Namely, both COIN forces and insurgents aim to de-legitimize the authority of other on the population. De-legitimizing phase gives advantages to insurgents since COIN forces must destroy insurgents or deny their access to the local populace in order to maintain legitimacy, whereas insurgents only need to “survive” to undermine the perceived control of the COIN forces over population. If so, insurgents may win the war by just not losing it.

Unlike the enemy-centric search and destroy missions, clear-hold-build method places the support of the population as the core of all efforts, and therefore is used as the primary tactical method for population-centric approach. This inherently defensive method includes removing insurgents from an area with military force and by force if necessary, and then securing the area and defending it from the attacks, and lastly establishing permanent governing institutions – host nation government in conventional sense – to create a stable and secure environment.²⁷ By applying the “clear” phase as the first stage, a terrain base is aimed to serve subsequently as a staging point for future operations and the expansion of the control of the COIN forces. Authority and security could be achieved and strengthened as long as the COIN forces stay in that particular terrain in the “hold” phase. When that particular terrain is determined to be independently functioning, the COIN forces would implement “build” phase, in which stability initiatives, including enhanced security, services and development.

One should note that population-centric approach does not mean that COIN is less violent than the enemy-centric one. The U.S. State Department’s Counterinsurgency Guides explicitly writes that;

It [population-centric approach] is extremely difficult undertaking, is often highly controversial politically, involves a series of ambiguous events that are extremely difficult to interpret, and often requires vastly more resources and time than initially anticipated. In particular, governments that embark upon COIN campaigns often severely underestimate the requirement for a very long-duration, relatively high-cost commitment (in terms of financial costs, political capital, military resources and human life).²⁸

It also continues that;

A purely enemy-centric approach might work against incipient insurgencies that are led or centrally controlled by a particularly charismatic or powerful individual. However, historical experience has shown that against mature insurgencies and complex, non-hierarchical insurgencies, population-centric approaches have a higher likelihood of success.²⁹

²⁷ FM 3-24

²⁸ U.S. State Department, Counterinsurgency Guide, January 2009,pp.12.

²⁹ U.S. State Department, Counterinsurgency Guide, January 2009,pp.15.

In reality, a sound COIN strategy would seldom be purely population-centric or enemy-centric, but, by and large, would be a combination of both, with a relative balance changing over time, area and the strategy of insurgents. Nonetheless, these approaches function as the starting points when crafting an effective COIN strategy. Which one would be the foundational principle or initial point when tailoring a COIN strategy specifically designed for the TRMEs?

First of all, fully relying on his field experience in the Tribalized Rural Muslim environments (TRMEs) of five different states, the author embraces population-centric approach as the primary route which would lead CF to the end of the tunnel. When reviewing the literature available on COIN efforts in Afghanistan, one may easily notice that all individuals who have hard-earned field experience, are in favor of engagement with the populace to gain their support as the core of any COIN strategy in Afghanistan. In contrast to their conceptualization of population-centric approach, the ones who sit in their air-conditioned offices and who do not smell the soil of COIN environment, are inclined to focus an enemy-centric approach and tend to disregard the importance of the legitimacy of the population. This difference would, in fact, reflect the fundamental debate on how to address current insurgency in Afghanistan. Following the dictums of the facts on the ground, should we pursue a risky population-centric strategy, which will surely necessitate long-term commitment and strategic patience? Or should we answer to the emergency calls of strategic exhaustion, and solely go after the al-Qaeda and the Taliban members, which would be a less risky – thanks to the drones - strategy that does not call for long-term commitment? Stated another way, should we attempt to drain the swamp and take the risk of being choked while doing this or should we cheer and satisfy only by killing one or two mosquitoes at a time?

The author wholeheartedly contends that the international community should drain the swamp with accurate strategies, because everybody in the outdoor business knows that it is merely possible to fight against mosquitoes by killing them one by one.

The question is then how to apply a sound population-centric approach to drain the swamp? Here are some points for military strategists.

First Rule: Afghanistan is not a broken 13th century country impossible to fix, we still should be optimistic and have faith on fellow Afghans.

The international community has a great responsibility to answer this knotty question: which political rhetoric would satisfy the residents of the rural Afghanistan in the coming years? If rural Afghanistan is abandoned by the international community to the extremists, the consequence of this fatal mistake would be very dire globally. The result would be a protracted and grim “chaos” in the region spillover effects of which drastically affect Central Asia and Pakistan. Unfortunately, though alarms bells have been ringing for almost four years, the signs of “strategic exhaustion” have become visible in the international community on any issue concerning the rural Afghanistan and a sense of “ignorance” – even insult-- has dangerously been growing with every passing month in the western world.

For some, for instance, Afghanistan is a backward and largely illiterate country where donkeys deliver ballot boxes, and where people are stuck in medieval times.³⁰ Britain's defense

³⁰ Thomas Barfield, “Is Afghanistan `Medieval` ” *Foreign Policy*, 2 June, 2010.

Please see for the full text: http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/06/02/is_afghanistan_medieval (accessed 15 August 2010).

minister, Liam Fox, has recently insulted Afghanistan by describing it as a "broken 13th-century country."³¹ Former Blackwater CEO, Erik Prince, declared that the Taliban were "barbarians" who "crawled out of the sewer" with "a 1200 A.D. mentality."³² These are remarks which identify "the West" with advanced science and technology, and confer an intoxicating sense of "superiority" on Westerners. This fallacy places less technological societies further back on the timeline of advancement, so that people may falsely conclude that Afghanistan is stuck in a time several centuries ago. The power of metaphor of technological progress on a time line may blind us to the fact that the people currently endeavoring to live in Afghanistan are still our "contemporaries." Even those owners of the donkey carrying ballot boxes, the people driving horse carts, the people living in sewer-like places are *a part of contemporary world*. Forcing ourselves to acknowledge this apparently simple fact may also help us become aware of relevance of current turmoil in Afghanistan.

Although there has emerged a vast literature on the COIN strategies of the CF in rural Afghanistan to resolve the current war for roughly none years, unfortunately we have still lacked reliable information about the motivations, aspirations and ideas of the residents of rural Afghanistan, which means that we are still unable to see the other side of the COIN. To some degree, mainly due to the absence of security and inhospitable conditions in Afghanistan, this gap in the literature is understandable. Nonetheless, without knowing the answers to the following questions, we are unable to predict the trend of the war in rural Afghanistan since "countering an insurgency begins with understanding the complex environment and the numerous competing forces within it."³³ What is the degree of the *popular base* of the Taliban in rural Afghanistan and is this popular base increasing or decreasing? For instance, what is the tendency of the numbers of intelligence tips flowing from locals to the CF, a good indicator of popular support? Are tips increasing or decreasing? Is the recruitment for the Taliban waning or increasing? Are the dead bodies of Taliban members being buried by their families when the dark falls with shame, or buried during the daytime with the participation of thousands and with emotional ceremonies? Are the insurgents seen by locals as aliens or are they local "*sons and nephews*?" What is the fighting strategy of the Taliban? Where are they deploying their members; to their own districts and villages or to the other territories? What does the insurgency mean for the locals in rural Afghanistan? How many Taliban members are surrendering to the security forces voluntarily? How do the locals, specifically their families, treat these defectors? Has there been an attempt to implement a general amnesty or rehabilitation program for them?

At first glance, these may be unfamiliar questions for most readers "who follow Afghanistan as an interesting foreign policy issue" when reading their Washington Post or NY Times in a Starbucks Café. These are, in fact, tactical level questions, the answers to which are directly related to the end state of the insurgency in rural Afghanistan. Is the CF winning or losing the insurgency in Afghanistan? To reformulate it, how do we measure "success" in an insurgency? Which one of these is the best indicator of the success in an insurgency: the number of killed and captured insurgents, the number of killed CF soldiers, the number of attacks conducted by insurgents, the number of missions conducted by the COIN forces, the number of engagements initiated by the CF, the number of civilians protected from insurgents, or the size of areas controlled by the CF? As the international community, the grim fact that we do not clearly

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ FM 3-24 COIN Manual, 2006, pp.2-3.

have any idea about the answers of these above-mentioned questions shows our “illiteracy” on the fundamentals of the ten years old insurgency in rural Afghanistan.

The turbulent contemporary history of Afghanistan which may be broken down into the following periods: Soviet Invasion (1979-1989); Afghan Civil War (1989- 1994); Taliban reign (1994- 2001); and lastly the entrance of the CF (2001-2010). The turmoil one witnesses today in rural Afghanistan is a direct result of exogenous inputs which have flowed in these periods and weakened social equilibrium of rural Afghanistan. When these periods examined meticulously, one may easily notice to what extent rural Afghanistan has been exposed to the bombardment of exogenous inputs. These inputs have primarily caused four profound impacts in rural Afghanistan:

- Disruption of the traditional socio-political structures and removal of the traditional tribal elites from the governance in rural Afghanistan, which created a sort of chaotic gap in the executive branch,
- Emergence of new networks of political Islamists under the flag of Taliban with the rhetoric of Islamic governance, which, in fact, has redesigned the traditional roles of religious class and decisively has reconstructed existing balance of power in rural Afghanistan,
- Violence has turned out to be a sort of core “norm” to settle all socio-political and economic issues in rural Afghanistan. Mainly because of the rise of violence as the core norm around which all values defined, non-violent and pacifist norms, once were prevalent in the society and rooted from the moral authority have declined.
- Traditional economic structures have been completely destroyed, creating space for the resurgence of non-traditional ways of making money such as milking foreigners, warlordism, participating local criminal networks, robbery, kidnapping, drug/arm trade, etc.

In spite of its turbulent history, Afghanistan should still be considered in the emergency room – not in morgue yet- and desperately needs our intensive care to eradicate the extremism, as the primary exogenous input, and to digest the efforts of international community. The international community should tailor its strategies in accordance with the requirements of emergency care such as hygiene and delicate treatment of the patient.

Why should we optimistic? Because history proved that fellow Afghans have potential to get through the social traumas in times of turmoil. Afghanistan in 1200 AD, or *Khorasan*, for instance, was a region of peace, tolerance and wisdom. Afghanistan was the soil which gave birth to Mawlana Rumi, Jami of Heart, Ansari, Sanayi of Ghazni any hundreds of more scholars, poets and philanthropists. Simply put, Afghanistan in 1200 AD was one of the stars of its era, the light of which enlightened the human history, and therefore was much more advanced from contemporary Afghanistan in terms of religious tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Anybody to deny this argument should read one or two pages from the *Mathnawi*, a poetry book of Mawlana Rumi which was written in late 1200s and in which he writes “The lamps [religions] are different but the light is the same.” If fellow Afghans could reconstruct their society after the traumatic period of Mongol invasion, then they can do it again.

Justice vs. Security: Which one is the core of COIN efforts in Afghanistan?

For this study, the most significant fallacy of the traditional COIN literature is the excessive emphasis of the notion of “security.” FM 3-24 COIN Manual, in which the word of “security” is used 137 times, asserts that “the cornerstone of any COIN effort is establishing security for civilian populace”³⁴ and concludes that “no permanent reforms can be implemented and disorder spreads”³⁵ without a secure environment. The manual also regards “the ability to provide security for the populace” as the first indicator of legitimacy.³⁶ Then, security should be primary concern in any COIN effort in TRMEs, specifically in rural Afghanistan. This study, however, humbly contends that security may be one of the imperatives of any COIN in Afghanistan, nonetheless, considering it as the first and utmost objective which should be obsessively achieved, may lead any COIN strategy to a wrong direction.

The notion of “freedom” is the primary value associated with Western civilization when defining the relation between the individual and governing political entity or the state. It is only the notion of “justice”, the primary value associated with Tribalized Rural Muslim Environments (TRMEs), that can only give enough legitimacy to govern in the people’s eyes, particularly if they have experienced a serious breakdown of order. Justice is a “glue” that binds all features of rural Afghanistan and orders the society. Put simply, it is much more important to be “justly” treated than to be “secured” for the residents of rural Afghanistan. If so, “*Hi guys, we are here to establish the state authority, but we should **secure** you first*” strategy is totally an alien concept for locals, and thus, presumably may attract less support than the strategy of “*Esselamun Aleykum ihvan-i muslimin (May 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.*”

Winning support of the population would often entail a breaking of physical, ideological, financial and more importantly psycho-sociological linkages between insurgents and the population. That is why an appropriate COIN strategy should be designed to exploit potential fracture lines between insurgents and population. In rural Afghanistan, the most significant line that connects population to insurgents is the notion of justice and the degree of which population perceives insurgents as justice-deliverer. Reminding the notion of justice in rural Afghanistan as the core principle around which all other socio-political and economic phenomena revolve, this section reemphasize on the importance of justice. It is an undeniable fact that there has been a huge gap in the emerging COIN literature with regards to the impacts of the notion of the justice on locals in rural Afghanistan, presumably because justice does more look like a matter of the fields of law, theology and sociology rather than military strategy. COIN strategists may, thus, disregard the notion of justice by claiming that it is not purely military and cannot be integrated into an effective COIN strategy. In contrast, the author stresses that the notion of justice in rural Afghanistan should be the most significant phenomenon, which determines the end state of the insurgencies in rural Afghanistan. That is why justice, the impacts in the rural Afghanistan of which should be analyzed with an interdisciplinary approach, must be studied very meticulously when tailoring an effective COIN strategy.

³⁴ FM 3-24, pp.1-23.

³⁵ Ibid, pp.1-23.

³⁶ Ibid, pp.1-21.

Assuming that you are a village leader in rural Afghanistan, people expect you to deliver justice to settle the disputes no matter they are rooted from social, economic and political affairs. Which authority should you turn to ask for the delivery of the justice to settle the disputes and comfort the sides in it? When you look at the CF forces to ask for the delivery of the justice, you would notice the “this is none of our business” attitude and their pointing out the formal legal system and the courts of the central government? What about the courts and formal legal system of the central government? The current government-facilitated justice system is extremely slow, corrupt and insufficient to impose the rule of law in rural Afghanistan. This is the best offer is to settle the dispute within a uncertain period of time – maybe years later - in favor of the side, which pays more. On the other hand, when you turn to the Taliban for the delivery of the justice, the justice system of the Taliban is swift and relatively just since it takes its legitimacy from the Shari`a Law, one of the primary sources of the superstructure. Furthermore, you would have a chance to criticize the judgment, if it may seem to violate the tenets of the superstructure. The justice system proposed by the Taliban entices many in rural Afghanistan since;

- It is delivered by a man on a motorcycle carrying only *Quran* and a document to record the agreed judgment. It is, therefore, swift, mobile and one call away from the locals.
- It is compatible with the basic tenets of Islam and traditional tribal codes. The judgments are, therefore, more or less “predictable.”
- It is not a “one-size-fits all” system, instead, is specifically tailored for that particular area. It is, therefore, highly adaptable to the specific characteristics of that particular village.
- It is relatively more just and cleaner system than the legal system of central government.

At first glance, establishment of security may seem to be the fundamental enabler for the other COIN efforts such as establishing rule of law, constitutioning administrative mechanisms and developing judicial activities. COIN forces would, therefore, excessively focus on security when designing a strategy. In rural Afghanistan, however, the question of to which party local population turn for the settlement of disputes carries utmost importance for the future of COIN efforts. This study suggests that if a dispute is perceived to settle unjustly by the individual exposed or the settlement delays, this unjust settlement or long delay not only humiliates that individual but also disgraces the reputation of all family or tribe collectively in rural Afghanistan. In this case, security becomes an irrelevant concept which may be easily underestimated. While justice is a necessary precondition for the establishment of secure environment in rural Afghanistan, secure environment does not necessarily provide the just settlement of disputes. The ones who are killed while seeking for justice, for instance, are highly commended by local community in rural Afghanistan. Success of any COIN strategy in rural Afghanistan is difficult to define since traditional wisdom usually takes into account the level of security as the measurement of success, this study strongly suggests that the percentage of the disputes settled by the COIN force-supported governing authority in the total disputes should be the main indicator of the success. To reformulate, the level of perception of locals to see COIN force-supported governing authority as the justice deliverer should be the measurement of success of the COIN efforts in a particular area.

Another dilemma in FM 3-24 regarding the notion of justice is that it excessively emphasizes on the physical component of security. One of the pillars of the COIN is to separate

insurgents from the populace, which, according to the FM 3-24, necessities cordon and control based military operations to deny the physical access of insurgents to the locals.³⁷ This pillar, however, should not be understood solely physical terms. The other component of security is the emotional and mental one, which is by far more important than the former one but precisely underestimated by current COIN strategies. In behavioral science, value is defined as socially shared idea about what is “good”, “right”, ”desirable.” Norm is defined as shared rule or guideline that prescribes the behavior appropriate in a given situation. Then, the efforts to help the society to secure the correct norms and values against the war on extremism should be of higher importance rather than the physical security of the society itself. Nonetheless, the question of how we would secure the hearts and minds of the locals from the rhetoric of the insurgents is often omitted in the current COIN literature, and the literature by and large focuses on the physical security of the villages, districts and towns. The excessive focus on the material or physical security in the existing COIN literature, which, in fact, leads to the omission of the mental and emotional component, is, therefore, worth mentioning as an erroneous effort.

Hi-tech Trap

It is true that kinetic hi-tech capabilities constitute a principal method to break the will of insurgency to continue struggle whether a COIN force embrace a population-centric or an enemy-centric approach. Currently, the CF in Afghanistan, however, has been experiencing a sort of “hi-tech trap,” which is fallen by the technologically advanced armies fighting in the “primitive” terrains such as rural Afghanistan. That is to say, this is an “uncomplicated war” which must be conducted by simple foot soldiers (boots on the ground strategy), with the simplest means and procedures. If the numbers of the COIN soldiers who are watching the war from their screens are more than the numbers of soldiers who see the pupils of the insurgents with their own eyes, COIN cannot disrupt this insurgency. Stated another way, the more soldiers you have fighting the insurgency from behind their screens in their hi-tech bubbles, instead of fighting on the ground in the theater of war, the more easily you fall into this trap. If COIN soldiers are not able to see, smell, taste, and, more importantly, feel the theater (by saying feeling the theater I mean to fully understand the terrain and weather conditions, and the agonies, perceptions, motivations, hatred, happiness of the local people who live in it) they experience a sort of alienation from the reality on the ground. Mainly due this deficiency, The CF fall the nirvana fallacy of “capability based planning.” This study defines capability based planning, one of the most strategic mistakes currently made by the CF, as to desperately relying on the highly sophisticated hi-tech weapon systems such as unmanned aerial vehicles, aircrafts, surveillance radars, attack helicopters and making plans considering these “capabilities” first without thinking the necessary imperatives of COIN. For instance, suppose that there is a suspicious meeting of so-called Taliban commanders in a village. Who gave this intelligence tip? A local collaborator? May this tip be confirmed and the source is reliable or not? But the point is since the commander sitting in the op-center is **capable** to destroy that house with a sudden air raid without taking risk of sending troops to this village. It is likely that he is more inclined to prefer an air raid as a low risk solution rather sending troops to the village. It is these hi-tech assets which could deceivably and overwhelmingly make the commanders “capable” to react to anything suspicious in his area of responsibility without considering the extent of reliability of the target and unintended consequences such as the notion of collateral damage. **Currently, however, the CF forces in**

³⁷ FM 3-24 pp.1-29.

Afghanistan has ample kinetic capabilities/resources to conduct direct military attacks but inherently are limited by the availability of the legitimate targets.

These hi-tech kinetic capabilities “dehumanize” the nature of the fighting for the commanders, which must be fought as a human-centric COIN. I should also note that the term we use “collateral damage” – a phenomenon mainly rooted from the excessive reliance on the hi-tech kinetic capabilities - is the “sons, daughters, mothers and fathers” of many in TRMEs.

The recently available video of a 2007 helicopter attack in Baghdad of U.S. military, a Wikileaks published footage political effects of which is likely to rival the Abu Ghraib prison photos as a source of Muslim outrage,³⁸ would be a grim example.”³⁹ In this bloody attack twelve civilians were killed, including a Reuter’s photographer and his driver. Here is an example of the “hi tech trap” in which modern armies keep their soldiers at a safe distance from the insurgency they are fighting. They start to live a virtual reality. They fight as if they are playing a video game and become brutal and reckless. The senseless and shocking words of the pilots in the footage really hit anybody to watch. They sound like they are sharing a video game rather than a real life battle in which they are killing civilians. This footage will as well be remembered as a good example how to make a strategic mistake for the sake of tactical accomplishment.

This study also underlines that while the CF in rural Afghanistan has “**capability**” to destroy a village within 10 seconds with hi-tech capabilities, it has no “**capacity**” to hold this village 24/7. On the contrary, by sending two foot soldiers with AK-47 in their hands and a high cause in their mind, Taliban has capacity to hold this village 24/7. The CF with all resources and hi-tech weapon systems, though **capable** to do anything in seconds has no **capacity** to project 24/7 presence in rural Afghanistan. This fact turns CF into an “unreliable and weak” player in the eyes of rural people. In contrast, Taliban though technologically weak and has limited capability, has **capacity** to project 24/7 presence in rural Afghanistan, which makes it more reliable and strong player in the game. In an Insurgency, the side which is able to establish 24/7 presence in residential areas outruns the other. The objective of establishing 24/7 presence could only be achieved living in close proximity to the population, rather than raiding in to the residential areas from remote and isolated operational bases.

Nirvana Fallacy of Force Protection: Trying to feel the environment behind the bullet-proof glasses and cloistered bases

In FM 3-0 Manual of the Army, force protection is defined as a package of measures; to prevent or mitigate hostile actions against DOD personnel, resources, facilities, and critical information. These actions conserve the force’s 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.⁴⁰

The CF forces have built Forward Operation Bases (FOBs) across Afghanistan to provide security for the soldiers and, launch and support tactical operations. Large FOBs, in which

³⁸ Elisabeth Bumiller, “Video Shows U.S. Killing of Reuters Employees”, *New York Times*, April 5, 2010.

³⁹ Please see to watch the footage: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/04/06/wikileaks-iraq-killing-vi_n_527383.html (accessed 06 October 2010).

⁴⁰ FM 3-0, Operations.

thousands of soldiers could stay, offer all comforts 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 pampered and continues;

Being on a big military base can feel a bit like being on a cruise ship. Grand exertions are made 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.⁴¹

He, then, adds that the restaurants in Kandahar Airfield, with prestigious examples from North American, Mediterranean, French and Dutch cuisines, are scattered among “a vast array of tents-mostly half-pipe structures with wooden interiors and air-conditioning.”⁴²

FOBs highly require personnel to function and to secure. Hundreds of the soldiers could be assigned for the task of securing FOBs instead of contributing to the overall COIN efforts. Furthermore, when significant resources are diverted to support the FOBs which are supposed to support operations, then we may assert that there is a problem. The problem is fourfold. First, is that to observe the life from the cloistered FOBs may isolate the CF forces from Afghan population. The boundary of FOBs may not only be 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.”⁴³ Second, excessive emphasis on the force protection, the heart of military doctrine of the U.S. military in conventional terms, may be seen as a prove for the locals, whom the CF should protect, that the CF looks like it 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 luxury way of life, turn the operations in to routine, limited, short duration patrolling missions in the proximity of them.

Large number of CF troops have been concentrated in Kabul, Kandahar and other big cities of Afghanistan, roughly 80% percent of which is rural. Thousands of U.S. soldiers are stationed at Bagram Air Base, shopping centers of which are highly popular among CF soldiers. Bagram Base is located hundreds of miles away from the insurgency. On the other hand, the contact of the CF soldiers in rural areas where the Taliban control is rare, timid and limited to daylight hours. The Taliban seem to highly aware of the fact that the center of gravity in the fight in Afghanistan is the rural areas, where the CF are seldom seen.

Going Tribal and Buying Security

When incompetency of the central government to stabilize the rural Afghanistan was understood, military strategists, who have sought for new options to target Taliban and al-Qaeda fractions, the feasibility of recruiting Afghan tribesmen has increasingly been a hot debated issue among U.S. government, academia and think-thank community. This strategy of going tribal has gained a ground specifically when strategy of building “Sunni awakening councils” against insurgents in Iraq emerged as a success story in 2006. Simply, copying Sunni awakening

⁴¹ Graeme Wood, “An Air-Conditioned Nightmare”, *The Atlantic*, August 2008.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Norman Emery, “Information Operations in Iraq”, *Military Review*, (May-June 2004)

councils and pasting them to the rural Afghanistan would be success story as well.⁴⁴ For instance, in his interview in New York Times, Gen. David Petraeus emphasized thickening of “local forces as well, through greater political engagement of tribes and reconciliation with fighters who were not hard-core.”⁴⁵ He continues that “certainly many on the ground think that perhaps in certain areas local reconciliation initiatives hold some potential.” He was right about the experiences of U.S. soldiers who managed to feel the realities on the ground. By mainly means of some soldiers in the U.S. military, who served in Afghanistan and came to realize the importance of tribal dynamics and incompetence of state-centric approaches in rural Afghanistan with their own eyes, there has recently emerged a vast literature about the strategy of countering insurgency at the local level.⁴⁶

A local initiative of tribal structures may be the first line of defense against the insurgents in the countryside. In the same vein, during a speech at the U.S. Institute for Peace in Washington, Defense Secretary Robert Gates acknowledged his support of bringing supra-national elements into the fold by stating that “At the end of the day, the only solution in Afghanistan is to work with the tribes and provincial leaders in terms of trying to create a backlash against the Taliban,” yet he recognized that he did not know “how this strategy would evolve.”⁴⁷ How would this strategy evolve? The answer of this question is, in fact, does mainly rely on how the CF implements this strategy. When established literature of going with supra-national elements in rural Afghanistan reviewed, it is evident that many studies in this literature, though they correctly diagnosed the current turmoil in rural Afghanistan, have proposed excessively inaccurate strategies such as going tribal and buying security from the tribal structures as their prescriptions. Though the authors of these studies spent some time in rural Afghanistan and closely experienced the importance of supra-national dynamics in rural Afghanistan, they are, fatally, inclined to measure power in material terms in TRMEs. Major Jim Grant, for instance, states in his report, *One Tribe At a Time*, that “Money and guns equal the ultimate power” in TRMEs. He continues that “Power in this area [in TRMEs] was about the ability to put armed men on the ground to attack an adversary or to defend the tribe. Guns were the ultimate currency.”⁴⁸ As a “hard-head” Special Force soldier, his argument could be seen accurate at first glance. This study, however, contends that the power rooted from the “money and gun” strategy could foster temporary solutions on particular issues in specific part of TRMEs, but cannot cultivate a stable, permanent and comprehensive end state. The end state of the reliance of material powers to mobilize tribes against a common enemy is warlordism, the symbiotic relationship of which with the Taliban, in fact, feeds the current chaos in Afghanistan. Any strategy, the reference point of which is not the superstructure is null and void.

⁴⁴ Greg Bruno, “A Tribal Strategy in Afghanistan”, Council on Foreign Relations Publication, November 7 2008, Please see for the full report: http://www.cfr.org/publication/17686/tribal_strategy_for_afghanistan.html (accessed 17 October 2010).

⁴⁵ Carlotta Gall, “Insurgents in Afghanistan Are Gaining, Patreous says”, New York Times, September 30 2008. Please see for the full interview: <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/10/01/world/asia/01petraeus.html> (accessed 24 October 2010)

⁴⁶ Please see the papers below:

Jim Grant from US Special Forces, “One Tribe At A Time”, Please see for the full report: http://rohrbacher.house.gov/UploadedFiles/one_tribe_at_a_time.pdf (accessed 17 August 2010)

David S. Clukey from US Air Force, “A District Approach to Countering Afghanistan Insurgency”, Naval Postgraduate School Thesis, Please see: http://edocs.nps.edu/npspubs/scholarly/theses/2009/Dec/09Dec_Clukey.pdf

Please also see the papers delivered in Tribal Engagement Workshop of Small Wars Journal, 25 March 2010, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/events/tew/>

⁴⁷ Greg Bruno, “A Tribal Strategy in Afghanistan”

⁴⁸ Ibid.

Engagement should be based on the objective of reaching to all power sources in a geographic area, which may be referred as “community engagement.” Solely engaging specifically selected tribal leaders could subvert non-tribal sources of power.

Engagement strategy should not be solely built on particular tribes or individuals since engaging only selected tribes and individuals could alienate other tribes and power brokers in the local politics such as religious and socio-economic networks in the same geographic area. Any money which goes to one particular individual or one particular interest group in TRMEs may be called a contribution to the local corruption and warlordism. In November 2009, Hanif Atmar, the Afghan Interior Minister, said in an interview that a few militia commanders, who were specifically selected and supported with the Local Defense Initiative of the CF, in the northern city of Kunduz, turned out to be local warlords after they acquired power (money and arms) from the CF. He also adds that after expelling Taliban, they started collecting taxes from the locals.⁴⁹ That is why, after seeing that the Local Defense Initiative fostered decentralization and local chiefdoms, U.S. Ambassador Eikenberry temporarily suspended it out of the fear that it was creating a new breed of warlords.⁵⁰

Highly Visible Foreign Presence in Afghanistan: A part of a solution or a problem?

Specifically in TRMEs, the legitimacy of foreign presence in the eyes of the locals is a crucial component of a successful COIN. Accordingly, especially in the case of TRMEs of Afghanistan, where a strong “skepticism” towards the presence of foreigners – in particular foreign military forces – exists, it is essential to establish some form of legitimacy in rural Afghanistan. With a highly visible, large scale and long term ground presence, however, which is currently the case in Afghanistan, it is highly unlikely to establish legitimacy. The term “occupation,” as the misadventure in Iraq has clearly demonstrated as well, has the disastrous effect of giving extremist 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 says that;

Muslim Brothers: Understand that the person who helps launch an attack with infidels is no longer a member of 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.**⁵¹

According to many in the Muslim world, “the U.S.-led coalition’s very presence in Afghanistan fuels an indigenous insurgency. It keeps the flame of transnational terror alive and blocks the return of Afghan refugees to their villages.”⁵²

Then it is likely to assert that the presence of non-Muslims in this almost exclusively Muslim land of rural Afghanistan constitute a powerful tool for the rhetoric of extremist. When the author interacted with the locals in Afghanistan as a Muslim soldier, he witnessed that many

⁴⁹ Thomas Henriksen, “Afghanistan, COIN and Indirect Approach”, pp.68. please see for the full report: http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2010/1004_jsou-report-10-3.pdf (accessed 23 December 2010).

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Human Rights Watch, “Lessons in Terror”, please see: <http://www.hrw.org/campaigns/Afghanistan/2006/education/index.htm> (accessed 14 November 2010) .

⁵² Arif Rafiq, “A Muslim Solution for Afghanistan”, *Christian Science Monitor*, 6 October 2009.

describe the U.S.-led coalition as “crusaders” and are inclined to equate it with previous invaders such as British and Russians. Furthermore, sensitivity to the non-Muslim military presence in their homeland bestows Taliban-led Afghan insurgents common cause with global transnational extremist networks such as al-Qaeda. Put differently, the foreign military presence originates a “solidarity among Muslim brothers” and constitute a fundamental reason for the cooperation of the local insurgents most of whom even cannot accurately show the location of the U.S. in the world map and global extremists who seek for proper grounds to challenge “infidels” militarily. Foreign military presence functions as a good bridge to combine local considerations with global aspirations. Stated another way, foreign presence is the most important obstacle before the divorce of the marriage 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. Nevertheless, 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 solutions for now to neutralize very basic propaganda theme of the extremists.

Local Politics vs. Insurgency: Whose hands are whose pocket?

At the strategic level, there are three players in the insurgency, insurgents and counter-insurgents as the active players, and 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, the news on any insurgency is served by the media to the international audience at the strategic level mainly due to the need of simplifying the incidents in the insurgency as a play with three players. For instance, the western audience read news about the insurgency in Afghanistan beginning with the titles, in which these three players are generally the objects or subjects. Many still think that insurgency is a sort of armed competition between good guys and bad guys for the support of neutral majority. They also are inclined to categorize each individual as a “friend” or “foe.” This inclination of oversimplifying the incidents into a game with three players in the insurgency and habit of getting rid of every detail may lead to unintended consequences, the primary of which is the underestimation of all other dynamics in the game. “All other dynamics” of a particular incident in any insurgency should, in fact, be analyzed by tactical level leaders such as platoon and company commanders. Only tactical level leaders, who have been cross-culturally competent and have plugged in to the local environment, could analyze “the details” and decode “the local ciphers” of that specific incident. The process of decoding the local ciphers of each incident is, in fact, directly linked to the success of the COIN in that particular area.

Let’s assume that an IED attack in which three CF soldiers killed has recently happened in the X province of Y district in rural Afghanistan. The western audience reads or watches this attack with these titles: “ Three CF soldiers has been killed in an Taliban IED attack in Afghanistan” or “ Insurgents killed three CF soldiers in Afghanistan” or “an IED attack has claimed the lives of three CF soldiers in Afghanistan.” This attack, which could be summarized and simplified in to a sentence at the strategic level, may, in fact, mean days of investigation and hundreds of pages for an astute and competent tactical leader, who aims to decode the local ciphers with an 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

that Y 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 with ideological reasons. In the light of the “cow to be milked syndrome” of the wealthy COIN forces in impoverished insurgency environment, the involvement of some would be primarily from economic reasons.

The anger of an ex-contractor of the COIN forces, whose contract has recently been declined, would be much more prevailing motivation for him than the concept of global Jihad. Or the personal grievance of an individual, whose relatives have recently been killed in a drone attack and has been labeled as “collateral damage, could be a more powerful motive for him to join to this band. Or 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. Or this attack may be planned by a local warlord to get his local opponent messed with the CF. Or the location of this attack could be chosen by the elders of the village, which aim to get the CF forces concentrated on the rival village. Put simply, economic, socio-political, psychological motives or interests of individuals or groups such as tribes, villages, local political factions, and warlords may blend with the ideological motives in this IED attack.

In a nutshell, there could be involvement of different aspirations and motivations in this IED attack, which the westerners read or watch in the news as the act of insurgents solely carried out by ideological reasons. Relying on his field experience, the author would explicitly contend that in roughly all attacks he encountered, different motives and aspirations of individuals and groups intermingled with the ideological motives. The author captured an ex-contractor, whose water-carrying contract had been declined, as the placer of the IED in a road to our battalion. He captured a villager whose livestock had been killed accidentally by friendly forces, as an informer who reported the movements of our troops. He witnessed the exploitation of our forces by the tribal leaders who sought for more power against their rival tribes. He came across many times that to what extent the economic struggle between the “happy minority,” who exuberantly milk the COIN forces, and “the frustrated majority”, who seek for the equal share of the corruption flowing from the COIN forces, shaped the fundamental dynamics of the insurgency. He witnessed the misuse of our troops in a water dispute between two villages. He witnessed how a fight between rival tribes over pastures shaped the local politics in that particular area. He encountered how the marriage problem of a husband and wife from different tribes led to local inter-tribe feud and predominantly shifted the political stances of the players in the insurgency. Put differently, he has witnessed many times that water or land disputes, a honor killing, a marriage, a young lady, an economic transaction between two individuals, a decline of the contract, an inter-tribe or intra-tribe rivalry, a leader struggle in a tribe, a rivalry between different religious sects, a rivalry between different local political groups, and personal grievance shaped the local politics, consequently the nature of insurgency in that particular area. Following our IED example, IED attack which claimed the lives of three CF soldiers would mean that water or a land dispute, an intra-tribe/intra-family feud, a decline of the contract, even a marriage problem may be the primary reason of the exact location and timing of the IED attack, or even the attack itself.

The Fallacy of Looking Islam Solely Through the Prism of Politics

Islam in Afghanistan, in traditional sense, does look like a socio-cultural issue rather than being a political one. There is, therefore, an immediate need to exclude it from the legacy of

politics and think it as a matter of socio-cultural studies in Afghanistan. When current literature on COIN reviewed, one finds that all phenomena, specifically Islam, are excessively examined through the lenses of politics. There may be two reasons for this. First reason which turns Islam into a politicized phenomenon in rural Afghanistan is the excessively politicized Islamic rhetoric of Salafi/Wahhabi understanding, which seems to accurately address current problems of rural Afghanistan, but delivers vague Islamo-political promises how to solve them. Second reason is the excessive emphasis of current COIN strategies of the CF forces in rural Afghanistan on politics. Mainly because of the traditional COIN wisdom, the CF forces seem to assess COIN as a political game between them and insurgents. This inclination of CF forces of solely looking at the political dimension of every phenomenon when crafting COIN strategies in rural Afghanistan seem to be the second obstacle in front of studying Islam as a matter of socio-cultural studies. Nonetheless, the monopoly of the Taliban rhetoric and manifesto on Islam should be dissolved in rural Afghanistan. There is a high need to prove that Islam could coexist with the lifestyle proposed by the CF forces. This alternative lifestyle, which may be regarded as a contemporary interpretation of traditional equilibrium in the system, should be compatible with the tenets of moral codes of behavior and legitimized by the superstructure. This alternative model endorsed with divine references, may be attractive enough to raise the curiosity of the locals in rural Afghanistan, and consequently, may help the people in TRMEs of Afghanistan unchain themselves from the arrest of the Taliban. The messages disseminated by this alternative model may beguile many in rural Afghanistan.

In the same vein, COIN in Afghanistan is not a solely political-military campaign that is designed to deny insurgency. It is, instead, a blend of military and civilian efforts, not only deal with denying insurgency but also address root causes of it, a process which requires a distinctive understanding of socio-cultural, economic and psychological context. In many cases in COIN, the civilian efforts constitute the avenues of approach to the desired end state, while military efforts play enabler role in the construction of these avenues. Complexity of COIN efforts in TRMEs, by and large, highly calls for an interdisciplinary approach, in which a broad knowledge of a wide variety of related disciplines are synthesized appropriately. That is, an accurate and clear assessment of insurgency requires a deep and shared understanding of cultural, ideological, religious, demographic, geographic, sociological and psychological dynamics that effect insurgency.

Certainly all insurgencies do have an important political component. But that should be considered only one part of the picture. Insurgency also fulfills the socio-cultural, economic and psychological needs, which is a perfect case in TRMEs. It provides, for instance, a source of income out of proportion to what the insurgents could otherwise earn, particularly for the lower ranks. And, it provides a source of identity and empowerment for those with few other sources of these things. Without a gun, most insurgent foot soldiers are simply poor, uneducated, disempowered, disengaged youth with no prospects. Insurgency changes that. It makes insurgents important, powerful and defender of a high cause, which aims to purify the exogenous inputs that spoiled the society with divine references. And it provides them a livelihood and a sense of belongingness. On the other hand, insurgency may also be aptly exploited by the players of local politics and may turn into a good means to make a fortune or to consolidate power for local power brokers. Local politics may drive the insurgency and COIN efforts and the COIN forces may turn out to be the pioneers in local political chess game. There may be good allies who side with COIN forces against insurgency, but these allies may seek for turning their alliance with COIN forces into financial or political bonuses, or to take advantage of it to

intimidate local populace. Regarding any insurgency in TRMEs solely a political military two party campaign between the insurgents and COIN forces, and trying to address it at the strategic or operational level may lead to false conclusions on the nature of the insurgency.

Therefore, analysis of the present conflict in TRMEs cannot be limited to the insurgency and insurgents; indeed the insurgency should be understood as merely a symptom of deep-rooted political and socio-cultural divisions, as well as pernicious economic interests in TRMEs; hence countering the insurgency is not fighting the insurgency *per se* but understanding these multiple types of strife and responding in kind. That is why, there is a high need to study social roles, group status, institutions and relations among different population groups, often in non-elite and non-state-based frameworks. The first step of this study may be an accurate, unbiased and comprehensive analysis of the superstructure, and moral codes of behavior that shape in TRMEs. All values and norms in the superstructure, firstly, may be categorized into three folds: the ones that are rooted from Islam, the ones that are rooted from the traditional tribal codes and the ones that would be rooted from both.

After classifying all norms and values, social roles of each player in the TRMEs may be examined meticulously. The ones, for instance, such as traditional tribal leaders, or the *khan* class; the village leaders as the intra-tribe and community leaders; and elders, or the grey beards in the advisory position, constitute the executive branch. The traditional Islamic networks such as *Sufi* ones traditionally function as a legislative forum and help creating new norms and values compatible with the superstructure. And *Mullah* class, which traditionally functions as the judiciary branch that solve every socio-political and economic dispute (with the consent of executive branch in most cases), is the third tier in the system. The delicate balance of the superstructure could only be achieved by, first, the peaceful co-existence of those legitimate players, and second, their directing of efforts for the common good of the people they lead. After studying the social roles of each player in the system, which may, more or less, vary from one TRME to another one, the phase of analyzing the relations of every player to one another would be implemented. A comprehensive analysis of the relations of every player in the system and the institutions that constitute the type and extent of relations would endow accurate insights for achieving the objective of acquiring a framework to better understand how the local governance is carried out in that particular TRME.

Since traditional COIN wisdom views insurgency as a political rivalry between host nation government and insurgents, current COIN strategy of the CF in rural Afghanistan stresses the need for a state-centric political reform in Afghanistan. This is necessary objective as a desired long-term end state but irrelevant at the moment since there is no, or there is a trivial passive role, of the central government in the local governance in many TRMEs of Afghanistan. In FM 3-24, “the end state” is “secure and stable environment” in any COIN campaign. One should notice, then, that the end state should be divorced from any political or ideological suggestion, which points that there is no superiority of one particular political system over another. Stated another way, stable and secure environment may not necessarily mean a state-centric democratic end state in Afghanistan. A comprehensive COIN strategy precisely tailored for any particular region in rural Afghanistan should take into account this simple fact. The attempts to impose central government as an important player in the local governance would create frustration and alienation in the society since there is no room for the central government in the governance in traditional sense, at least for now. One should notice as well that all solutions are local in Afghanistan; that is why strategists should tailor a COIN strategy for the

people where they live and considering the local dynamics. That is why, any “one size-fits all” COIN strategy crafted in Kabul and only addresses strategic and operational considerations may be futile.

Firstly, it is time for international community to come to the realization that there is only one solution for peace in rural Afghanistan – and it’s an Afghan solution. That is, Afghans should be the ones who play the leading roles in the strategy and all efforts of COIN forces should be kept low-profile and low-visibility in this “Made in Afghanistan” solution. This strategy should also be tailored as a community based approach. Geographic proximity: the people living in the same village or district should be the focal point in this approach. Engaging only selected tribes or individuals may alienate other tribal structures and other key figures in rural Afghanistan, and therefore drastically change the local balance of power in the system. To build a strategy relying on one particular tribe or individual and their sustained support by COIN forces may result in the emergence of warlords in the system.

A comprehensive strategy should make the rhetoric of Wahhabi/Salafi understanding irrelevant not in material and purely military terms but also in socio-political, religious, socio-psychological and economic areas. A strategy should also regulate equilibrium in the superstructure by turning religious leaders to their traditional spiritual guidance roles in legislative and judicial areas and recreating the responsive *Khan* class at the seat of the execution.

When history, socio-political and economic background, geographic and demographic features of Afghanistan taken into account, a COIN strategy which relies on a government-imposed top-down approach is highly likely to falter. A strategy for rural Afghanistan should be tailored with a bottom-up approach, by means of which the CF may turn out to be an active player in the real world. Whereas a top-down strategy includes outside actors allocating resources to the highest political and military level in that particular state, a bottom-up approach allocates resources to promote local leaders and assist them in providing security and services to the local population. Socio-political reform route should be pursued bottom-up. Bottom-up approach aims to connect local political entities to the central government, when the environment gets matured. Put it differently, while a top-down strategy aims to spread influence of the government institutions to the periphery, a bottom-up approach allocates resources to promote the influence of the political institutions in the periphery to the expense of center. This said, the current approach of fixing Afghanistan as a whole and through strengthening the institutions of central government to stand on their own would be more likely a task that will require decades-long commitment.

There may be a legitimate concern that too much focus at the local level may result in the collapse of the central government in Kabul and destabilize Afghanistan. The strategy proposed in this book would, therefore, be regarded as a futile one, which is at odds with the policy of creating a strong central government. Nonetheless, one should accept that change acceptable by the TRMEs of Afghanistan will simply not come from the central government, which has still been described as an “alien” political entity that promote corruption by the rural population.

Conclusion

The solution for Afghanistan is very simple. The locals in rural Afghanistan should get rid of the extremism and warlordism, two phenomena the symbiotic relationship of which, in

fact, feed each other, and the international community should help them do this. Afghans need the CF should need to encourage this effort. To apply this strategy, first, we need to realize that Afghanistan is too big and too corrupted to fix as a whole. A wise COIN force must not bite more than it can chew in rural insurgencies. Currently, in Afghanistan we, as the international community, are highly and desperately in need of “small success stories” to sell both domestically and internationally to neutralize the rhetoric of the Taliban. These success stories cannot be realized in Kabul. If the transformation route is top-down then it means that the majority of the international staff and billions of dollars will be stuck in Kabul and big headquarters in the provinces. In essence, our efforts in Afghanistan need to be refocused away from central government level. In other words, our center of gravity needs to be on the ground; i.e. in simple villages where people live. Rebuilding Afghanistan must start from the most “deprived” rural areas and the most deprived people with a community-based approach.

That is to say, in rural Afghanistan, the CF must create “islands of peace”⁵³ for the local people, in whom they could find these three things in the order of priority: justice, security, and access to the essential services. For instance, a town with the population of 5000 people in Kandahar province could be a good candidate for the island of peace project at the battalion level. How does the CF choose which community is worth supporting in this new initiative? This should be a purely voluntary initiative and the demand, or invitation, must come from the local communities which are volunteered to unchain themselves from two mutants, the Taliban which spoiled the structure by eliminating the traditional religious class, and the warlords which spoiled the superstructure by eliminating the responsive and caring Khan class.

The first rule concerning the intervention of the CF should be that the CF forces seek a careful balance which employs a most appropriate, most indirect and least intrusive form of intervention, though still gives a high probability of achieving the required effect. Recent history of rural Afghanistan proves that too high COIN profile in this initiative could be counter-productive. There must be mosques, in which people could find alternative (non-violent and native) Islamic teaching, health clinics, schools, dormitories, and all types of necessary facilities on these islands of peace to entice local population. Using development projects, humanitarian assistance, information operations and whatever else the CF could use as a leverage partnered with local governance initiative with Afghans (always in the lead) at all levels of local governance, they should offer a reason, or a high cause to cooperate with the targeted community. Rural Afghans also should re-empower the village councils and restore their community leadership which means the creation of a traditional check-and-balance system. Those who cooperate must see immediate and tangible benefits to their community.

To reestablish traditional balance of power in rural Afghanistan;

- A ruling council with three members (one central government official, one high profile tribal leader and one high profile religious elite) may be in charge of local governance.
- A hybrid judicial system, which may be fostered with the delicate combination of formal state laws and local traditional legal practices, could be established to assure the locals that this model can swiftly, accurately, transparently, and fairly deliver justice.

⁵³ When reviewing the literature, the author encountered that some used this term in their studies. The author, however, wants to inform that he has been using this term since early 2008.

- A local council, or *jirga or majlis*, may be formed with the participation of all key figures from all ethnic, religious, tribal fractions to handle legislative procedures. Importantly, an oversight mechanism of this legislative council may be constituted over the ruling council and local courts.

Instead of demolishing the superstructure with state-centric approaches, this new initiative may propose to fix it, at least for a transitional period, to provide the locals everything they need. This new model may emerge as the third alternative political rhetoric in the real world of the locals. This alternative socio-political system, which totally rejects extremism and warlordism, would pull the people like a magnet. The CF must defend this alternative system at all cost from the attacks of the Taliban and local warlords. The CF should reconfigure its operations creating small compounds, which would be the home of a platoon-size unit supported by 30-40 staff personnel to manage the logistics and supervise the local development projects on the islands of peace under the supervision of the ruling council. The soldiers of Afghan National Army may also be in charge of the security of the area and under the control of ruling council. The soldiers of CF should be aware that they are on that island of peace to strengthen the position of this newly-emerged third alternative, which means that they review their old relationships in the local politics.

This strategy may undoubtedly put more personnel at risk, nonetheless, ultimately we should accept that the CF must fight the extremism wherever it is, not in the Burger Kings or shopping centers of the military bases. Like flies coming to the meat, the extremists will come and attack these islands. The CF must defend this alternative socio-political system, as a high cause, with the local populace benefiting from it. CF supported Afghan security forces may implement “defensive measures” to protect the locals and the cause at all cost from the attacks of extremists and warlord system. With this model, the CF-supported locals may fight against the root causes of the extremism, not extremists. In this initiative, “the attitude of the local populace”, not the enemy should be the center of struggle. That is, instead of focusing on direct approach which would be summarized as killing/capturing insurgents, the CF should target the idea of the Taliban since behind all actions lie ideas in any COIN effort in TRMEs. In this model, there is no need to “search and kill” strategies for the extremists, because, they will eventually come with their own legs to “destruct” these islands of peace, which would neutralize their rhetoric. Then the CF and local population will “defend” these islands of peace physically, and the high cause morally, against anybody claim to destruct. After establishing political stability in these islands of peace, then, the process of binding them to Kabul may be launched.

The central government should not go these islands of peace. They must come to central government when the local socio-political and economic environments get matured. Only by means of development based strategies and creation of these islands of peace, can rural Afghanistan be rebuilt. In this grand strategy, the local population could be persuaded to evacuate their villages to join the islands and even they may be armed to defend their islands with the CF with proper local defense initiatives. The important point here is that the CF **must build a high cause** which economically, politically and ideologically fits for the local population, to entice them and **defend this cause**, against anybody threaten to destruct, whether ideologically or socio-economically. After crafting the cause, it will be whispered from tongues to ears in the speed of lightning in rural Afghanistan.

In the building phase of “the cause”, the key players would be the local religious elites in a prospective island of peace. Nonetheless, there is, still, little contact between the CF and the

high religious profiles of Afghanistan. Rather than labeling all religious leaders and groups extremists, the CF should foster sound policies that engage these religious networks and incorporate them into civil society when building a alternative rhetoric that should be strengthened with Islamic references.

One may assert that it is too late to systematically institute such an ambitious strategy which necessitates heavy investment and long term commitment. Furthermore, the delusions of buying security from selected individuals by paying cash or pursuing enemy-centric approaches to kill the extremists one by one may have come to the minds of many as the best COIN strategy in rural Afghanistan. I, however, humbly contend that these are fatal mistakes that do not contribute to a proper resolution, the consequences of these strategies are, instead, excellent means that feed the root causes of the Taliban-led insurgency in rural Afghanistan.

In conclusion, a longer analysis than this one would be required to try to describe and justify such a large departure from the current debates about Afghanistan, which, erroneously, has been described as a two-party conflict of Taliban and the CF-supported Kabul.

Sadly, unless the international community and fellow Afghans who seek for a permanent peace in rural Afghanistan, could find proper departures from current futile COIN efforts, history will judge harshly “capability” and “willingness” of the current international system in the long fight against global extremism. This article may be regarded as a humble attempt to enable this departure from traditional wisdom on how to handle current turmoil in the TRMEs of the globe. As Sa’adi Shirazi from Afghanistan in 1200 AD said more than eight centuries ago:

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.

Many TRMEs in states such Afghanistan, Iraq, Central Asian states have been afflicted with pain and desperately in need of the “sympathy” of the international community, not their ignorance, and not their insult. Unless their calls for help cannot be met with proper strategies, the consequence of this ignorance is highly likely to be an immense threat to the global peace and prosperity, which would soon affect global freedom and prosperity.

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