

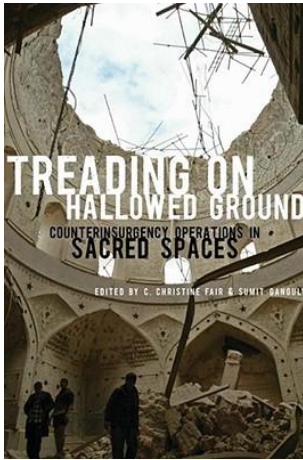


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## *Treading on Hallowed Ground: Counterinsurgency in Sacred Places*

**Reviewed by William T. Anderson**



C. Christine Fair and Sumit Ganguly, eds. *Treading on Hallowed Ground: Counterinsurgency Operations in Sacred Spaces*. Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York: 2008.

A common tactic used by Shi'ite militias and rogue elements during Operation Iraqi Freedom has been the use of holy shrines for sanctuary and logistics. In 2004, for example, the US military fought members of Moqtada al-Sadr's militia in Najaf, one of Shi'ia Islam holiest cities. On two occasions that year, followers of al-Sadr used the grounds of the most sacred Iman Ali shrine to conduct military operations and terrorist attacks. These operations posed particularly thorny issues for responding forces who were very sensitive to possible repercussions resulting from any damage to the shrine.

Obviously, the use of force against holy sites can antagonize and deeply affect religious communities. Any desecration, whether perceived or real, can generate a back-lash of local sentiment against the counterinsurgency force. The potential for a positive outcome in the eyes of the insurgent forces means that we can expect them in future security environments to continue to use this tactic. Thanks to this book, however, we can now identify some valuable lessons learned that warrant our attention. When responding to insurgents using sacred sites, counterinsurgent forces often failed to achieve desired outcomes due to several critical shortcomings: poor or faulty intelligence, the absence of a "deft public relations strategy" and a lack of restraint on the use of force.

From a legal perspective, intentional attacks against sacred places are generally prohibited. Article 27 of the 1907 Hague Regulations states that all necessary measures need to be taken to protect "buildings dedicated to religion." The 1977 Geneva Protocols specifically prohibit hostile acts directed toward "places of worship" and the use of such places for military purposes (Art. 53, Protocol I). On the other hand, as pointed in FM 3-24 (*Counterinsurgency*), it just makes good sense to avoid any actions that may be perceived by the local populace as disrespectful of religious traditions. Unfortunately, there is no specific discussion in FM 3-24 about the use of sacred sites by insurgents or, more importantly, any recommended responses. Fortunately, now there is some written guidance that will prove helpful.

Christine Fair and Sumit Ganguly have done an admirable job in compiling some case studies on the successes and failures of counterinsurgency operations against religious sites. Originally conceived as a study of urban operations, the project evolved into a study of an important but neglected area of concern. We can all agree that much has been written about military operations in an urban environment. However, according to the editors, little if any has been published about operations against religiously motivated insurgents in sacred spaces. Indeed, any successes in Iraq have been the result of trial and error. Attempting to fill this void, Fair and Ganguly have collected an impressive array of articles about these kinds of operations.

Noting both successes and failures, the case studies in this small book include the Indian security forces operations against Sikh separatists in the Golden Temple in Amritsar and the Israeli siege of Palestinians holding the Church of the Nativity in Jerusalem. Pascal Ménoret discusses the 1979 take-over of the Grand Mosque in Mecca by Salafi insurgents. Of particular interest is the chapter on Iraq's sacred spaces and the two operations in Najaf in 2004. In the process, the authors highlight some planning factors for responses when insurgents commandeer holy places.

Intelligence professionals must determine how revered the site is within the local community. This analysis will permit an assessment of the possible reactions to any counterinsurgency operations. In addition, the physical layout of the site and the disposition of the insurgents are critical information requirements. Significantly, the case studies analyzed in the book emphasize the dangers of a poorly executed public relations campaign. Often, insurgents are more interested in the sacred site as a symbol of their struggle (the corollary to "propaganda by deed") and the use of the media to promote their agenda. Thus, an effective operation against hallowed ground must integrate a quality strategic communication plan.

One of the common threads in the book is the religiously-motivated insurgents' desire to obtain popular support by making the sacred shrine a symbol of their struggle. This is particularly important if the insurgents can lure the regime into attacking the site resulting in physical damage. The excessive use of force is always detrimental to a counterinsurgency strategy. In addition, occupying the site can often be used as evidence of the powerlessness of the regime undermining its legitimacy, always an important strategy of an insurgency. Further, the occupation of a holy site can provide valuable tactical advantages as they are usually within an urban environment and are not easily isolated by counterinsurgency forces without incurring collateral damage. As a result, the occupying insurgents can receive replacements and store supplies with little effort. Also, if offensive operations are directed, avenues of approach for counterinsurgent forces from outside the community may be limited because they are not familiar with the layout of the site.

As noted in the conclusion, counterinsurgency operations are hard, but those operations involving religious sites are harder. It is axiomatic that popular support is a key ingredient of success in a counterinsurgency. When sacred places become the focus of such operations, the success of the counterinsurgency can hang in the balance. Operational planners must account for the critical nature of hallowed ground in these circumstances and take the appropriate steps to minimize any potentially negative consequences. Reading this book is an important place to start.

*Colonel William Anderson is a retired Marine officer and is currently a senior analyst with the U.S. Marine Corps Combat Development Command in Quantico, Virginia.*

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