



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

Many Paths up the Mountain: Population-Centric COIN in Afghanistan

Nathan Springer



The *reality* of how Troops implement and execute Population-Centric Counterinsurgency (COIN) in Afghanistan and the associated narrative *spin* in the Western COIN community of interest are at odds. A misguided and mistaken narrative surrounds ISAF's Population-Centric strategy in Afghanistan. I have listened to countless experts describe Population-Centric COIN as soft, focused on anything but the enemy, and extremely left leaning while Enemy-Centric COIN gets pegged the right-wing counter-terrorism approach, wholly focused on the enemy. This over-simplifies both schools of thought and fails to accurately describe either of them.

I have heard leaders voice strong concerns that the Population-Centric strategy will constrain them in Afghanistan while some contend Population-Centric COIN is glorified nation building. Others have adopted Population-Centric COIN whole-heartedly and without much question, as if it is the ultimate cure-all for any Area of Operation.

COIN experts have seemingly come out of the woodwork, each articulating their own COIN theory on Afghanistan. Population-Centric, Leader-Centric, Enemy-Centric, tribally motivated, religiously motivated, externally organized, internally organized, you name it. I have experienced a recurrent thought as I have traveled to various COIN venues over the past few months, scrutinizing the dialogues about these theories. A few days ago, at the COIN symposium, I decided to just get it out there.

Congratulations, you all win gold stars. You are all right. Your theories are all sound.

Each one of us will erect a different solution to the complex, dynamic, and rapidly changing situation in our Areas of Operation. Not one of the theories above can be perfectly applied to solve local problems. The counterinsurgent leader must fully grasp each of these theories, along with their associated histories and contexts, and be ready to apply components from all of them to achieve success in a specific Area of Operation. You are a chef of sorts, with all the ingredients necessary to peace laid out before you. Your country may call upon one of you to whip up a strategy to counter a religiously motivated, externally organized insurgency, while a mere ten miles from your AO, another leader must skillfully blend a strategy to counter a tribally motivated, internally organizing insurgency, all with the ultimate aim of achieving a Population-Centric (a la) mode of daily operations. There is no brightly illuminated path to success here; rather, the path is muddy and convoluted and it is up to you to make your own way and your own success.

Make no mistake, if the Area of Operation you inherit in Afghanistan is conducive to executing a Population-Centric Strategy from the start, you damn well better. Population-Centric COIN is an order. If your area is not conducive to implementing the all-out strategy, and many are not, instead of wringing your hands and concluding your options constrained, you need to do some analysis and ask some important questions.

What, specifically, is precluding me from executing the Population-Centric Strategy in my AO?

What Population-Centric characteristics *does* my area allow me to apply?

What methods am I forced to apply that do not nest with Population-Centric COIN and why?
What resources do I need from my higher Headquarters to assist me in creating an environment that is conducive to conducting the population focused strategy?

How will I recognize the [transition point](#) when I reach it in my area?

No one is going to tie your hands behind your back in Afghanistan. That surely was not what I experienced executing a [Population-Centric Strategy](#) in 07-08 at the tactical level in the Kunar Province or what I witnessed in Afghanistan in March 2010 at the Operational level. You will have the autonomy to do what you must to make your unit successful and keep your men safe. Yes, Population-Centric COIN is an order but none of our leaders are blind to realities on the ground. It is up to you to accurately detect those realities, articulate them, and then apply the appropriate concoction of tactics, techniques, procedures, and best practices to achieve progress in your area. You will be a leader who listens to the local population, learns the tactics of enemy elements there and acts to neutralize or eliminate the obstacles to peace and progress. You may never implement Population-Centric strategy in your AO full-time. That is the reality of a constantly shifting human landscape.

So what has the narrative of Population-Centric COIN given us?

Frankly, it has given us all a common understanding, unity of thought and purpose, a new way to approach complex problems and the enemy, and most importantly, an over-arching goal that each leader and Soldier must aim for. That is the sense I get from Commanders on the ground in Afghanistan today. They do not feel constrained, they feel empowered.

Operation Moshtarak, around Marjah in Helmand Province is a good example of the Population-Centric strategy in action. ISAF could have taken Marjah in one day. Instead, it spent months setting the necessary conditions. Each line of operation, Development, Governance, I/O, and partnership with Afghan National Security Forces was developed prior to the actual clearing of Marjah with a focus on solving local issues, using local solutions. Once the conditions were set, the clearing of Marjah was conducted methodically and with precision. The enemy still suffered a great defeat. ISAF approached the problem more methodically than it might have before adopting Population-Centric strategy, and this new approach resulted in fewer civilian casualties and more local support. It was a more effective approach to destroy the enemy and set Marjah up for sustained success in the future. This strategy is neither left nor right wing. It simply represents a more innovative solution to a complex problem, which paid dividends to the Troops stationed there and to the local population.

How has ISAF's Population-Centric narrative been convoluted in the West?

It is a mix of a couple things. ISAF initiated a massive and hugely successful education and information program to change the mindsets of its Soldiers, many of whom had wartime experience that was largely Enemy-Centric. The ISAF narrative directing Population-Centric COIN is powerful and direct. It must be this way to adequately communicate this crucial strategy shift to its members. This, coupled with the Western media's near obsession with the new strategy and the inevitable media spin, caused some leaders to interpret ISAF's Population-Centric COIN strategy as a prescriptive directive to be implemented no matter the situation. If this were a math problem, $1+2=3$. The Population-Centric narrative has become a black or white issue to many and, therefore, does not represent the reality on the ground in Afghanistan or the integrity of the narrative in the first place.

Setting the Record Straight

Each of you who has spent time in Afghanistan understands that each village, valley, or area possesses its own unique set of challenges, dynamics, and circumstances. ISAF's Population-Centric banner is flying high in Afghanistan and has provided each of us with a 'model type' that instills in us a unity of thought, purpose, and action. The approach will not work everywhere as it did for me in N.E. Konar and Eastern Nuristan Province and it will not work the same way it did in Marjah for ISAF as they apply it to Kandahar in the future. The key here is to figure out what is going to get you there so it will work. Our Areas of Operation are constantly evolving and the dynamics constantly shift. We must continuously assess our situations, communicate our circumstances to our Chain of Command, and find new and innovative ways to support the

mission of Population-Centric Counterinsurgency. No two leaders will achieve success the same way. How you get there is not as important as actually getting there.

Major Nathan Springer is the Chief of Operations at the U.S. Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Center. The thoughts and opinions in this article are entirely his own and do not represent the position of the United States Army.

This is a single article excerpt of material published in [Small Wars Journal](#).
Published by and COPYRIGHT © 2010, Small Wars Foundation.

Permission is granted to print single copies for personal, non-commercial use. Select non-commercial use is licensed via a Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 3.0 license and per our [Terms of Use](#). We are in this together.



No FACTUAL STATEMENT should be relied upon without further investigation on your part sufficient to satisfy you in your independent judgment that it is true.

Contact: comment@smallwarsjournal.com

Visit www.smallwarsjournal.com

Cover Price: Your call. [Support SWJ here.](#)