

Questioning the Counter-insurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan

Gulrukhsar Mujahid*

Abstract

The framing and rewriting of the counter-insurgency (COIN) manual by the United States (US) post 9/11 was put into practice in Afghanistan in 2001. The counter-insurgent theorists postulated a rhetorical population-centered approach and narrative of “winning hearts and minds” of the indigenous population to achieve legitimacy and effectiveness of this asymmetric warfare. This paper sheds light on the doctrine of “securing populations” through social work parallel to the military campaign as a tactical device in the war-ravaged Afghanistan. This is presented as one of the facets of a “population-centric” strategy for the interests of the Afghan civilians. This is a critical analysis of the claims of a humane approach in devising this strategy. The humane aspect was engineered to alleviate the civilian grievances and casualties. However, the paper argues that re-framing of the doctrine couched in a rhetoric expression and empathetic language was a strategic choice to win over the indigenous populations rather than being a normative underpinning of a population-centered approach. Therefore, this paper presents a brief review of COIN literature, while focusing on US-led COIN programme in Afghanistan as a case study to raise questions on the exploitation of the civilian populations. Hence, raising a fundamental question that whether wars can ever be humane?

Key words: Counter-insurgency, Afghanistan, Population-centric, Strategy, Warfare.

Introduction

The United States’(US) programme of “War on Terror” led to a series of steps towards alleviating the perceived threat of terrorism,

* The author is Lecturer of International Relations, Institute of Business Management (IoBM), Karachi.

which chiefly comprise counter-insurgency (COIN) warfare against militant groups inside terrorist ‘hotspots’” such as Afghanistan. The term, Counter-insurgency, was coined by John F. Kennedy in 1960¹. One of the founding theorists of COIN in the twentieth century, David Galula, a French military officer and scholar, focused on the enemy centric nature of this asymmetric warfare. However, the COIN doctrine was re-appropriated by the US during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The warfare strategy of COIN was updated and codified in 2006 in *Field Manual 3-24* (FM 3-24) which was jointly published by the US Army and the Marines. COIN practices in Afghanistan, since 2006, mainly aim at creating an environment inhospitable to the armed insurgents. According to Australian COIN expert, David Kilcullen, in modern Counter-insurgency, global, regional and local support is of prime importance in winning the war. Therefore, the counterinsurgents are required to mobilize the home population, the host country, the global audience, the populations of allied and neutral countries, and the military and government agencies involved.²

COIN is mainly recognized as asymmetrical warfare by a powerful military against irregular combatants who are perceived to be supported by civilian populations. Therefore, the civilians are at the heart of any strategy adopted to eliminate the threat of insurgency inside a certain territory. The revised doctrine theoretically placed high confidence in the capability of military leadership at all levels of engagement (political, social and economic) with the indigenous population in the conflict zone. Moreover, its manual proposes a partnership between the governments, non-governmental and international organizations, and the private sector to ensure regional and international stability, while putting at the forefront the national security of [the]US.³ COIN warfare is, therefore, presented as a new form of warfare in the 21st century by emphasizing on its population-friendly aspect, keeping civilians of the insurgents’ land at the centre as a

¹Laleh Khalili, “Gendered Practices of Counter-insurgency,” *Review of International Studies*(2010) :1471-491. Please see comments at the end of the draft!

²David Kilcullen, “Counter-insurgency Redux,” *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 48, no. 4 (2006): 111-30.

³Khalili, Laleh, “Gendered Practices of Counter insurgency”

veritable tool. This was opposed to the conventional irregular warfare used to decapitate the insurgents' strength mainly through military force i.e. military operations.

The rhetoric and language used to explain the strategy stresses on three factors: winning hearts and minds of the people,) securing the populations, and) "armed social work" in order to bring about long-term stability in the occupied country. This new form of warfare reflects the importance of public opinion and the obligation towards international law in order to legitimise COIN warfare amongst the international community due to growing criticism against civilian casualties and infringement of sovereignty. Moreover, it is believed to be effective in cutting off the human resources of the insurgents' as well gaining intelligence which is vital to insurgents' sustenance. Therefore, making public opinion and the legitimizing needs of warfare in the present scenario as well as its effectiveness in the long-run were driving forces behind the COIN warfare being presented as a population-centric approach.

The newness of the COIN approach is intended at being opposite of the hard and muscular enemy-centric COIN and counter-terrorism approach. The population-centric COIN, in which the civilians are persuaded to defect to the counterinsurgent forces, is contrasted with the enemy-centric COIN as well as the counter-terrorist approach, which are mainly concerned with the use of violence as deterrence for the civilians from cooperating with the insurgents.⁴

This paper argues that COIN doctrine, despite the claim of a population-centric strategy through various civilian oriented tactics, remains largely occupied with tactical gains rather than protection of the people and their interests. In the 21st century, it has been a campaign in which the civilians of the conquered country are viewed as mere instruments for legitimation of war; and where the liberal anti-war rhetoric has assumed relevancy due to the far-reaching and damaging consequences for the civilians and human rights violations. This paper discusses the concept of winning hearts and minds of the civilians to counter Taliban propaganda. It also discusses the rhetoric and tactics of

⁴Ibid.

counter-insurgents' claims of securing the populations. This discussion is used to reflect on the instrumentalised way in which military strategies are adapted for material gains and legitimation because of an increasingly well-aware populace in and outside the conquering and the conquered nations.

A Population-centric Approach: Winning “Hearts and Minds”

COIN is presented as the opposite of the technologically advanced warfare and the focus of this strategy is to transform civilian allegiances and restructure their social surroundings.⁵ The discourse to win hearts and minds is used in counterinsurgency doctrinal scholarship and practice as part of the population centric strategy for garnering public support. This is described as: “Hearts mean persuading people that their best interests are served by your (counter-insurgent/conquering nation’s) success. Whereas, minds mean convincing them (the civilian population) that you can protect them and that resisting you is pointless. It amounts to calculated self-interest and not emotion”.⁶

Though it is a population-centric approach, the counterinsurgents had no qualms in strictly defining the strategic nature of aligning civilian’s interests in order to achieve effectiveness for the US war. Therefore, one could question the claim of working for the best interests of the civilian populations while simultaneously prioritizing the national interests of the US as a result of this well-informed and calculated policy.

Indigenous populations are seen as mere instruments to be controlled in order to acquire military and political gains during war-time. There is an emphasis on the relationship between the people and the troops. Allegedly, there is always a “neutral population” which has to be won over by deterrence, which may include militarized tactics as well as persuasion through protection of the people or the use of language of protection. Therefore, exercising higher level of control by a political actor in an area will result in attaining the higher level of civilian

⁵Ibid.

⁶Laleh Khalili, *Time in the Shadows Confinement in Counterinsurgencies* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013).

collaboration.⁷ Winning hearts and minds in the COIN doctrine equates with winning over the loyalties of Afghan populations in order to socially and politically decapitate the enemy insurgents such as Taliban and al-Qaeda, in this case. The victory of the counter-insurgents is in some ways presented to be tied with the social and political elevation of the civilians. Therefore, emphasis is laid on the instrumental value of the civilians in the conflict to achieve political objectives.

More importantly, the stress on winning over hearts and minds was a counter-force against the armed propaganda of Taliban, since one of the major tactics used by the Taliban is their propaganda campaign⁸. Therefore, the indigenous Afghan Taliban are perceived to have influence on the majority of the Pashtun populations of the region. Afghan insurgents were believed to be strategic spoilers because of their efforts to discredit and destabilise the Afghan government by targeting coalition forces, officials and President Karzai's support base. Again, there was no apparent strategy to seize the instruments of the state.⁹

Moreover, Taliban used slogans such as "Our party, the Taliban; our people and nation, the Pashtun; our economy, the poppy; our constitution the Shariah." Besides providing a political platform, it served as unifying and rallying calls to a wide range of discontents and aspirations among the populations, such as Pashtun nationalism, religious conservatism, the desire of narcotics traffickers to be left alone, and discontent against the foreign occupation.¹⁰ This political propaganda was aided with armed propaganda such as the use of night letters as a threat and intimidation to punish those who do not cooperate with them, including government officials.¹¹

Therefore, the counterinsurgency doctrine was to counter the political and armed propagandist moves of the insurgents by using rhetoric of winning the minds and hearts of the people. The tactics were

⁷Ibid.

⁸David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁹David Kilcullen, "COIN Redux," *Survival: Global Politics and Strategy* 48.

¹⁰David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*.

¹¹Ibid.

popularizing and presenting the doctrine as the soft option whereas the kinetic force was supposed to take a backseat. The language of development and agendas such as a vibrant economy, genuine political participation, psychological and information operations, the use of local proxies and the integration of civilian and military efforts including aid and governance were used to win the largely “neutral population”.¹²

However, these efforts to counter the Taliban propaganda were challenging as many people regarded the foreign occupiers and the Afghan Government as existential threats rather than the insurgents whom they considered more as miscreant relatives or fellow citizens gone astray. According to a tribal leader (*Malik*), people in the South of Afghanistan wilfully fought the occupying armies and joined Taliban considering them to be ones amongst them. This apologetic behaviour towards Taliban illustrated anti-American and anti-government rhetoric during the occupation days.

Therefore, a robust COIN had long-term tangible aims, that is, to challenge local insurgents as well as improve the image of the Afghan Government and the US. Apart from the anti-Taliban propaganda campaigns and winning the population support by its population-centric approach, the US also faced challenges due to unfamiliarity with local terrain. The counter-insurgent forces sought to win civilians’ loyalty and support for the US policy against terrorism by claiming to be their protectors and catering to their needs as part of “winning hearts and minds strategy”.

Securing the Population

The assumption that if security is adequately addressed, people will not turn to their co-ethnic insurgents for protection is problematic. The notion of “securing population” is based on the concept that a more secure and content people would rally behind local elected and appointed officials, and hence peace and stability would prevail¹³. However, the methods deployed to achieve stability and security is without the consent

¹²Laleh Khalili, “Gendered Practices of Counter-insurgency.

¹³Ibid.

of the people at large due to the divisive political settings and system inside Afghanistan.

Moreover, the groups and spaces previously coded as private were brought in to precarious public realm and civilian populations as part of the political setting, were instrumentalised in the war of rhetoric and narratives. The conquered population is controlled, surveilled, monitored and made to acquiesce¹⁴. Therefore, people are viewed and treated as strategic assets of the US and its allied forces in the war against terror. The division of civilians based on their allegiances, a part of the counterinsurgent's theory/manual, points towards the intended interactions between the civilians and the counterinsurgents. In this approach, the civilian support was neither entirely ideological nor political.

Moreover, it underestimated the dynamic nature of the allegiances of civilians during the course of a conflict, therefore, being able to be won over. Therefore, negligible weightage is given to fixed political and ideological allegiances of the civilians, while at the same time regarding them as a serious threat to the United States. Therefore, the misguided and under-researched propositions made in the process of strategizing efforts in Afghanistan offer a veritable challenge to the Counter-insurgency's effectiveness and legitimising capabilities as elucidated below.

The stated aim of counter-insurgency was to secure the Afghan people by employing the method of "clear, hold, and build," that is, push the insurgents out, keep them out, and use the resulting space and time to establish a legitimate government, build capable security forces, and improve the Afghan economy. During the clear-hold-build strategy, entering Afghanistan and capturing the cities was relatively easy for the US armed forces but holding the country (Afghanistan) and securing the populations posed difficulties. The Western powers confused entry into Afghanistan with victory.¹⁵ The coalition's tactics involving military operations became even more problematic considering "the

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*.

discomforting contrast between Afghanistan's mud brick communities and the West's supersonic fighter jets armed with earth-shaking bombs and missiles"¹⁶. With persistent outside efforts, advocates of the COIN doctrine COIN assumed and hence asserted, that the capacity of the Afghan government would gradually grow, the levels of the US and international assistance would decline, and the insurgency would hence be defeated¹⁷.

It is considered important to secure and serve the population, by "understanding local circumstances" separating irreconcilables from reconcilable and living "among the people" was the pinnacle of COIN thinking. This thinking and outlook towards the situation in Afghanistan dominated national security debates in Washington in 2008 and 2009.¹⁸ However, the behaviour of the government and public officials simultaneously, along with increasing their capacity, was not given enough importance. For securing the populations, there was a need to have the support of the Afghan government and security forces. This seemed unlikely inside Afghanistan considering the conduct of the Afghan government, as the government was notoriously corrupt and inefficient with a "rapacious police force and nonexistent public services."¹⁹

Moreover, the securing and protecting the population's rhetoric was also to include the age-old claim to secure the "brown women from brown men" and children.²⁰ This rhetoric also popularized through

¹⁶Federico Manfredi, "Rethinking U.S., Policy in Afghanistan," *World Policy Journal* 25, 4 (Winter 2008/9): 23-30.

¹⁷Karl W. Eikenberry, "The Limits of Counter-insurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, October 10, 2013, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2013-08-12/limits-Counter-insurgency-doctrine-afghanistan>.

¹⁸Michael Cohen, "General David Petraeus's Fatal Flaw: Not the Affair, but His Afghanistan Surge," *Guardian*, Opinion sec., November 13, 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/nov/13/general-david-petraeus-flaw-surge-afghanistan>

¹⁹Federico Manfredi, "Rethinking U.S., Policy in Afghanistan."

²⁰"Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Post Colonial Reader*, eds., Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffin & Helen Tiffin (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), <https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=zcpQwtw4hMC&pg=PA33&lpg=PA33&dq=%E2%80%9Cbrown+women+from+brown+men%E2%80%9D+and+children..&s>

media to attain international support for the cause inside Afghanistan. However, this is debatable as protecting women, children as well as men in a war torn country can become even more difficult when they have to explicitly take side in the conflict as was the case in Afghanistan.

Armed Social work

Armed social work is another term popularized in COIN warfare, a term used to define functions of the ground forces in the occupied country. The military officials are responsible for civilian tasks. It was believed that such an approach if applied vigorously and simultaneously at the national, provincial, and district levels would gradually dismantle Taliban's power and influence and inevitably lead to their defeat. A military leader who is accorded with the task of managing violence and attaining training for the aforementioned task is required to be prepared in performing various roles, because it is better to entrust civilian tasks to civilians".²¹ The second part of the statement reflects on the logistical aspect of the COIN enterprise. The soldiers are required to play various civilian roles. Military assumes explicit political roles as opposed to previously being framed as having apolitical existence. In this process, not only war making and governance are interdependent but the role of social work was also tied to the armed forces. The US and NATO in the pursuit of their nation-building strategy, expanded the Provincial Reconstruction Teams. The main function of the Team was to combine civilian and military resources and personnel to deliver reconstruction, governance and security to local communities under the local government in Kabul. This entailed deployment of teams around 60-100 throughout the country to perform the reconstruction projects.²²

source=bl&ots=JtY7P5yaCP&sig=thNV4V-H5-RYp5n8xycy2y-i1pZI&hl=en&sa=X&redir_esc=y#v=onepage&q=%E2%80%9Cbrown%20women%20from%20brown%20men%E2%80%9D%20and%20children..&f=false

²¹Karl W. Eikenberry, "The Limits of Counter-insurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, October 10, 2013, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2013-08-12/limits-Counter-insurgency-doctrine-afghanistan>.

²²Russell Crandall, *America's Dirty Wars: Irregular Warfare from 1776 to the War on Terror* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

In the long-run, this inhibits the growth and nurturing of societal and governance structure with the aim to increase the capacity of the state systems and not necessarily their behaviour. The all-important local police structure could not be strengthened in Afghanistan as it was, at times, even claimed that the people feared the local police even more than the Taliban towards the end of the US efforts of training the local policemen. Moreover the local Afghan National Army was plagued with morale and retention problems.²³

The protection of population and armed social work inside Afghanistan as a part of the “winning hearts and minds” strategy in the population-centric COIN, faced challenges in its implementation due to governance and military mishaps that focused on short-term objectives. Moreover, even though COIN doctrine seeks to distinguish itself as a humane war tactic, the language and discourse of protection echoed the counter-terrorists advocacy for the use of drones. The advocates claimed to highlight their concerns about the security of the US civilians as a reason, justifying the use of violence through drone technology. On the other hand, the counterinsurgents use the language of protection for the indigenous Afghan populations as tools in their campaign of social engineering, being portrayed as protective activities. Laleh Khalili aptly described this as the states pulling a “veil of liberality and consideration of civility and safety over the machinery of death wielded against an enemy which cannot possibly match their lethality.”²⁴ Therefore, the new strategy can be questioned on the grounds of instrumentalist view of indigenous populations for the “good war.”

Legitimacy and Effectiveness

Winning hearts and minds of the population by emphasizing the conquering nation’s security and providing them services through armed social work directs our attention towards the driving forces behind these counterinsurgent tactics. This paper recognizes two of the most

²³RussellCrandall,*America’s Dirty Wars: Irregular Warfare from 1776 to the War on Terror*.

²⁴Laleh Khalili, “Fighting Over Drones | Middle East Research and Information Project,” Fighting Over Drones | Middle East Research and Information Project (2012), <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer264/fighting-over-drones>.

important reasons; legitimization and concerns over the effectiveness of the US policy in the occupied country. In this pursuit, politics as well as larger societal concerns are connected with military acts. AUS National Security advisor once observed that the nature of war has changed. “It’s become very legalistic and very complex”²⁵. This suggests that the law has evolved to become a decisive element of contemporary conflicts. Law is also used as a tool for legitimizing or delegitimizing, depending on circumstances. The choice of a population-centric strategy is a strategic move. The tactics aimed at gaining public support and winning hearts and minds reflect on the requirements of modern popular democracies where allegedly “even a limited armed conflict requires a substantial base of public support. That support can erode or even reverse itself rapidly, no matter how worthy the political objective, if people believe that the war is being conducted in an unfair, inhumane, or iniquitous way.”²⁶ This public support would help in giving political legitimacy to the actions of the counterinsurgents and in conducting their policies in the conquered lands in partnership of the acquiescent publics. However, this is most likely to prove ineffective to a large extent foreign collaboration in their civil and political life, especially after the occupation is viewed with calculated suspicion.

Moreover, the use of politics in war can be supported through Clausewitz’s famous dictum that war is a “continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means”²⁷. It focuses towards the other aspects of wars or violent conflicts which are also included in the COIN doctrine. This can be instructive for the effective use of resources of the counter-insurgents in their war against the insurgents as a political manoeuvre and a strategic asset.

Moreover, COIN and other contemporary “irregular warfare” situations are especially sensitive to illegalities that can undermine the efforts to legitimize the government (and those wishing to assist it) that

²⁵Jr. Dunlap, Charles J, “ Lawfare: A Decisive Element of 21st-Century Conflicts?,” Research Gate (2009), http://www.researchgate.net/publication/235192515_Lawfare_A_Decisive_Element_of_21st-Century_Conflicts

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Ibid.

the insurgency is aiming to topple. In Afghanistan, where the Taliban and al-Qaeda are proving themselves sophisticated and effective law fare practitioners which means that they use the language of law to de-legitimise the actions of their opponents. Specifically, the Taliban and al-Qaeda attempted to demonize the air weapon through the manipulation of the unintended civilian casualties airstrikes can produce. Moreover, by using the media, they seek to create the perception, especially among Afghans, that the war is being waged in an “unfair, inhumane, or iniquitous way.”²⁸ At the same time the US and its counter-insurgents in carrying out their population centric campaign, correctly recognize that perceptions are a “strategic battleground” and therefore they seek to “prioritize strategic communications” to remind the world that the Taliban are the barbaric killers and abusers of human rights that they have always been.²⁹ The claims are not without any grounding but the way they are publicized becomes even more important in a war of perceptions and concerned with legitimacy of actions. Secondly, the effectiveness of the COIN efforts is reliant on cutting off the human resources of the insurgents, while getting information regarding the insurgents’ hideouts and potential campaigns. Therefore, intelligence becomes a key aspect of counter-insurgency. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is a gap between theoretical and practical aspects of the COIN warfare which is based on various assumptions which were subject to critique on various levels. The doctrine’s implementation is reliant on the conduct of the local factors as well as the host COIN nation, in this case, the United States, which is inevitably difficult to control and invites mounting challenges.

Conclusion

The projection of COIN a new form of population-centric warfare in the 21st century through rhetoric of securing and serving the Afghan civilians at times indicative of being rather humane, is nonetheless a strategic move veiled with notions of liberal values of saving human lives and rights. War is converted and camouflaged into a political intervention which gives legitimacy to further interventions justified as politically motivated acts. Moreover, lack of understanding regarding the

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹Ibid.

Questioning the Counter-insurgency Doctrine

dynamic nature of the conditions on the ground, the US policies under the strategy of COIN are bound to face failures while being implemented become counterproductive. Warfare, especially dealing with civilians with the help of a manual with a set doctrine fails to capture dynamic nature of conflicts. Therefore, COIN even though presented and portrayed as being concerned with the civilians protection and goodwill, was a strategy just as uncharitable , in its manoeuvre to save a losing war inside Afghanistan.

It can be concluded that COIN, in Afghanistan as a war tactic against insurgents and militant groups charter concerns with respect to the regional politics and security.

The realities on the ground are pertinent to any sort of warfare and the 21st century COIN campaign in Afghanistan are devoid of the considerations of governance and the damage caused to the indigenous populations for a wide range of reasons despite being presented as a “population centric” approach since waging wars requires force and loss of human lives and interests is an inevitable result of the scourge of military exercises.