Counterinsurgency and Human Security: A Critical Analysis of the US Counterinsurgency Strategy in Afghanistan and Iraq, 2001-2014

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Abstract

In this article I take up the counterinsurgency policy and practice of the US armed forces in Afghanistan and Iraq. By focusing on the Counterinsurgency Manual 2006, I highlight how the US counterinsurgency policy did not fully incorporate the concept of human security. Accordingly, the counterinsurgency operations that were carried out in the wake of the War on Terrorism failed to ensure human security to the vulnerable segments of the populations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Key words: Afghanistan, Counterinsurgency, Human Security, Iraq, War on Terrorism.

Introduction

> The intervening soldiers are positioned as protecting the vulnerable, innocent civilians, who are feminized, from the hypermasculine 'evil' insurgents amongst them. Through being feminized, the locals are portrayed as weak, vulnerable, passive and are thus disempowered, not then included as partners in creating their own security.
>
> --Duncanson and Cornish[1]

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The increasing incidence of terrorism around the world during the later years of President Barak Obama highlighted the limited success of the US-led global war on terrorism. By 2014, not only did the incidence of terrorism increase, there was also an apparent surge in the strength and numbers of the terrorist groups. In 2013, a Rand Corporation report estimated that since 2010 there had been a 58 percent increase in the number of terrorist organizations, a doubling of the number of jihadist fighters and tripling of attacks by these terrorist groups.[2]

The security situation for the vulnerable groups in the regions under US counterinsurgency operations has particularly exacerbated. In 2013, violence against women in Afghanistan touched record levels.[3] The Yazidi minority in Iraq was practically faced with genocide.[4] Iraqi Christians had to choose between their faith and their lives. The number of Christians in Iraq had plummeted from 1.3 million at beginning of counterinsurgency and had fallen to a reported 250,000.[5]

The trends towards increased traditional and human security threats for the populations the US set out to protect undoubtedly expose the limitations of the military based counterterrorism strategy. This paper uses the guiding documents for the US counterinsurgency operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and juxtaposes it with empirical examples to argue that despite their claims to the contrary, the US policymakers and field operation commanders devised and implemented counterinsurgency operations primarily from a strategic advantage perspective rather than with a view to promote human security. The paper advocates a more culturally sensitive and people-centered approach to counterterrorism. This paper argues that if counterinsurgency policy is informed of local practices of peacebuilding and if it includes the hitherto marginalized groups then it will have a greater likelihood of success.

The paper has three sections: First section analyzes the *Field Manual 3-24 Counterinsurgency* published by the US Department of Army in 2006. The document claims to represent an important shift from looking at counterterrorism as high impact combat to looking at ways that better address the underlying causes of violence. The second part of the paper deals with the current practices of counterterrorism adopted by the US forces in Afghanistan and Iraq

to determine the extent to which the practices outlined in the document are effectively combining the counterterrorism goals with objectives to promote human security. In this section, I evaluate the US counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq through its impact on Afghan women and Iraqi Christian. The third and final section will attempt to establish the manner and extent to which the people-centered human security approach can add to the counterterrorism discourse.

Counterinsurgency and Human Security: A Critical Analysis of the *Counterinsurgency Manual 2006*

The counterinsurgency manual published in 2006 claims to represent a major departure from the earlier manuals of field operations. Applicable to both the US Army and Marine Corps, the document contained instructions for the US forces in dealing with insurgents. The key idea behind the document is to make counterinsurgency efforts more aware of the local politics and culture. The manual recognizes the changing nature of insurgencies in the context of globalization, technological advances especially advances in the information technology and the declared religious nature of insurgent groups. It is worth pointing out that this was the first time in 20 years that the document was revised and published.[6]

For the purpose of this paper, I focus on those chapters of the Manual that relate with the definition of insurgency, counterinsurgency and the culture and environment of counterinsurgencies. The purpose is to determine the manner in which the document takes up the issues of security and insecurity, particularly to analyze if it deals with aspects of human security.

The document defines insurgency as "the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify or challenge political control of a region." It is a form of irregular militant struggle for control and influence, usually waged from a position of weakness. It can start before, during or after the conventional conflict. More importantly for us, the manual defines counterinsurgency as a set of "civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes."[7] It is an important recognition by the document that civilian efforts have to be an essential part of counterinsurgency efforts. It also recognizes the importance of addressing the root causes. It obviously raises

optimism regarding the inclusion of the concept of human security into this definition of counterinsurgency.

The most important recognition in the introduction of the manual is the role assigned to the host society. The document admits that the host society "must eventually provide a solution that is culturally acceptable to its society and meets the US policy goals" (page: 1-2). Interestingly, the document ignores the possibility that some local solutions might be at odds with the purported US policy goals, and does not state what is to be prioritized if such a situation arises.

In outlining the US response to insurgency, the document again refers to securing the civilian population as one of the foremost objectives of the operations. For example, in the introductory chapter, the document mentions that the host nation should determine the criteria for victory in an insurgency based on local cultural expectations. The US counterinsurgents should avoid judging local solutions based on their own cultural perceptions.

Chapter 1 also brings forward the important issue of local resilience. It involves enabling the local populations to counter future situations like insurgencies themselves without the need for international interventions. It suggests that for long-term resolution of the conflict, the host government and political institutions have to gain legitimacy within the local populations as the insurgents try to undermine government's legitimacy.

The report raises the interesting issue of coercion and consent in dealing with populations during counterinsurgency operations. It suggests that coercion in some form is always used. However, if government's use of coercion is justified under local norms and traditions, it will not impact government's legitimacy (pages 1-8). The document evades the question of vulnerable and silenced groups. It fails to recognize cases where certain minorities or marginalized groups are persecuted by the state in the name of security through coercion. Such coercion may be accepted by the majority or the dominant groups within a society and therefore may not create what the manual calls a legitimacy crisis. However, such a situation which is surprisingly common around the world will result in continued persecution of the marginalized groups. It is the kind of issue that better human security approaches would enable us to

avoid. It is such persecution that makes vulnerable groups see the insurgents as their protectors and the state and foreign counterinsurgents lose their legitimacy.

Chapter 3 of the manual deals specifically with the local cultures as operational environment. The report makes the important admission that the insurgents have massive advantage over foreign insurgents in understanding the local cultures and grievances. It admonishes the US soldiers against judging behaviors and reactions based on their own perceptions. Once more, the manual evades the common dilemma referred to by Amartya Sen that in certain contexts, the predominant groups use cultural relativism to undermine the efforts to restructure in favor of suppressed groups.[8] For instance, "emancipating women" was one of the driving motives for intervention in Afghanistan. However, numerous studies suggest that Afghan attitude toward women's participation in public life was often closer to the one of the Taliban than those promoted by the United States.[9]

Chapter 3 also makes the important argument of the changing perception of security in the minds of local populations during war. It says that values and traditions of a society are the product of evolution over hundreds of years. It then insinuates that the marginalization of women in these Middle Eastern societies is a reasonable response to changes brought about by the conflict (pages 2-3). Furthermore, it goes on to suggest that the identification of individuals who are seen as community leaders locally is important to the success of counterinsurgency. Such an approach can be counterproductive for securitizing groups that are marginalized in the social structure and the conflict presents them with an opportunity to realign the social order to their advantage. By preserving the social order through cooptation of the community leaders would undermine groups such as Afghan women that research has exhibited do benefit from conflicts due to increased roles and responsibilities.[10]

The manual further advises operation commanders to integrate Human Terrain Teams into counterinsurgency policy planning. Consisting of social scientists and researchers, Human Terrain Team helps commanders better understand the local environment (Page: 3-4). The encouraging aspect of the human terrain system is that, at least theoretically, it provides for inclusion of the vulnerable groups.

For example, the document says that each team in Afghanistan is supposed to have an Afghan woman, so as to make it possible to reach out to the women. However, research has indicated increased level of security threats to individuals working with the human terrain teams resulting in some cases of fatalities.[11] It questions the strategy as it focuses excessively on gathering intelligence even when it might jeopardize the security of human subjects involved.

Chapter 4 raises the important issue of understanding the identities in the local contexts. It cautions the commanding officers against becoming part of the local power struggles. It recommends that in certain situations there might be populations that are underrepresented in the state apparatuses and therefore might provide support base and recruiting ground for insurgents. In order to cope with the insurgency in the long-term, it is essential to eliminate such underrepresentation.

The manual admonishes US armed forces personnel engaged in counterinsurgency in other parts of the world about issues arising from cultural relativism. It points to the changing trends in global politics and the flux in the nature of counterinsurgencies. The manual is not the only effort to integrate broader human and economic security goals into the US counterinsurgency strategy. The subsequent sections refer to other actions and pronouncements to this effect. Our goal in this article is to understand if this slight shift in approach towards more human-centered counterinsurgency has any bearing on situation on the ground.

Human Security of the Vulnerable: Case Studies of Women in Afghanistan and Christians in Iraq

My assumption about the US approach to counterinsurgency is that it is contrary to the claims made in the Counterinsurgency Manual. In practice commanders and strategists on ground prioritize the traditional military security concerns over the human security. In this section I look at two case studies—women in Afghanistan and Chritians in Iraq who have often been neglected in counter-insurgency operations in the past. Through these case studies I highlight how the current counter-insurgency also neglects them and therefore fails in concerns about human security.

a) Afghan Women:

We know well that the Taliban were notorious were their suppression of women.[12] They did not allow women to go outside of their houses for any purpose whether it was education or health care or shopping.[13] The Taliban had imposed a hard-line Islamic policy which envisioned complete control of women and taking them out of the public sphere. With such a policy the overall conditions of life for women of Afghanistan began to deteriorate. On the other hand, it is also worth mentioning the Taliban and other warlords, and alliances, targeted women of their adversaries and committed grave acts of violence against them.

It was in this background of violence and precarious conditions for women in Afghanistan that the US began its counter-insurgency program. Let me point out that in launching the War on Terror in Afghanistan, one of the justifications put forward by President George W. Bush was that the struggle was about restoring the rights and dignity of Afghan women.[14] The White House consistently referred to the plight of Afghan women in the Taliban controlled Afghanistan and the need for their liberation from violence and depression that they were facing. Thus the legitimization of war on the grounds of protecting women raised hopes that special measures would be taken during the war and later though the counterinsurgency operations.

However, some critical feminist writers pointed out that in practice Afghan women were being treated as mere victims rather than active agents of change in their societies. They further pointed out that cooptation of women issues into political projects so as to draw moral foundation on the claims of serving women but in fact compromised them to "more important matters of national interest."[15] Others pointed out that there was lack of interest in the dismal conditions of Afghan women during the Taliban rule. And now after the 9/11 attacks there is sudden growth of interest, which shows the coincidental and opportunistic face of the US counterinsurgency policy.[16]

After the removal of the Taliban rule when the US armed forces designed and implemented its counter insurgency policy, they gave special attention to the Afghan women. Accordingly they set up separate teams called the Female Engagement Teams (FETs). The FETs were composed of women soldiers from Army and the Marines. The rationale behind setting up FETs ranged from winning hearts

and minds of Afghan Women to gathering intelligence through them. The FETs were to perform various functions including humanitarian assistance, facilitating women and children access to health care and, interestingly, to "mediate between American and Afghan Male egos."[17] Despite the proclaimed important role assigned to the FETs, they had little actual engagement with Afghan women. One of the reasons for this is that they are always escorted by their fellow male soldiers like Afghan women are escorted by their men and all this escorting practice diminishes the possibility of women on the two side.[18]

Although a constructive and commendable step, the FETs could not succeed in their envisioned role. The failure of FETs thus points to the failure of ensuring security of Afghan women. It also points out to the failure of the larger claim of their liberation in post Taliban era. Generally this failure was attributed to the thinking and training of the battlefield commanders who saw little strategic utility in engaging with local women, or women to women engagement, and that reaching out to Afghan women might offend Afghan men.[19] Other reasons of the failure include the precedence that the strategic advantage has over issues of human security in the practice of counterinsurgency. Whereas it is understandable that operational commanders would try to maximize output from engagement with local populations, a hardcore utilitarian approach betrays the earlier commitment regarding the protection of vulnerable local populations, particularly Afghan women.

There is also certain lack of motivation among commanders to challenge the status quo and restructure gender relations in Afghanistan due to the fear of backlash from the more conservative segments of the local population. Again it suggests that the aim of regime change has been prioritized over ensuring human security. More properly, such an approach might even perpetuate the state in which Afghan women had been living under the Taliban.

Despite increased representation Afghan women currently enjoy in the public spaces, the levels of insecurity remain high. Although women have been given representation to sit in the Afghan Parliament, and schools for girls have been reopened, maternal mortality rates of 650 per 100,000 live births and a high suicide rate among women tell a different story. Not only has women liberation been excluded as an object from the counterinsurgency campaign,

various writers argue that Afghan women have been made more insecure as a result. Displacement, violent death as collateral damage from both sides of the conflict and use as human shield by the Taliban insurgents have left Afghan women with little hope for immediate improvement in their security.[20] Unfortunately, the focus on traditional security has also resulted in a shift of focus from domestic violence against women.[21]

It is worth mentioning that the counter insurgency policy generated a major problem as the US made an alliance with the Northern Alliance. The latter were no good in their reputation about treating women and they continued to suppress rights of women. Reports suggest that in parts of rural Afghanistan punishment for 'disobedience' during the Taliban period was flogging, now it is rape.[22] Reports suggest that women still remain confined to their homes. The incidence of rape by armed factions still remains extremely high.[23]

Despite all the tall claims of providing security to women of Afghanistan, the US counter-insurgency practice subordinated it to concerns of controlling the territory against the Taliban. Secondly, in order to defeat the Taliban and al Qaeda, the United States thought that it needed support of local warlords, even though they were notorious for the crimes against women. The US could have made them to write agreements relating to human security and especially women security before making alliance with them. But no such agreements were done. Therefore, the security of women grew weak with the passage of time. The US failed to condition its support to them on their treating of women.

b) Iraqi Christians:

In 2003 the US Armed Forces intervened in Iraq and removed Saddam Hussain's government. After the removal of Saddam Husaain's government, his political faction, the Ba'ath Party, started insurgency. It had not yet been quelled that the Shia insurgency under the leadership of Muqtada us Sadr started. The US had to deal it with a different approach. Meanwhile al-Qaeda by creating linkage with local tribes, under the leadership of Abou Musab al Zarqawi took hold in the border regions of the country. The US had to suffer substantial damage and had to make compromises with the tribes on Iraqi Syrian border in dealing with the al Qaeda as well. Meanwhile,

the predominantly Shia, Maliki government in Baghdad failed to include Sunnis in the political power structure. The long series of events involving misunderstanding of the Iraqi culture, tribal and sectarian divides led to the rise of the most hardline extremist group in the region in the form of the ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria).[24]

Just like the condition of women in Afghanistan, the condition of Christians in Iraq went from bad to worse during the counterinsurgency phase. Christians faced violence at the hand of almost all the parties involved in the conflict. One of the indicators of violence and the sense of victimization and insecurity among Christians was that their population dropped from more than a million at the start of the war to about 450,000-250,000 by 2013.[25]

It is worth mentioning that Christians were not persecuted in Iraq under Saddam Hussain. The last deputy prime minister in his government, Tariq Aziz, was a Christian.[26] Shias and Kurds were seen as the primary threats to his government and, therefore, the harshest treatment was usually reserved for them. In the post-Saddam Iraq, Shias and Kurds started to play a more prominent role as they had greater numbers and greater importance for the US strategic goals in Iraq. However, Christians had to bear the brunt of lawlessness in the country.

On the one hand, the US despite its resolve mentioned in the Manual, which we analyzed earlier, did little to ensure security of the Iraqi Christians. On the other hand, the insurgents also projected them to have connections the US because of their same Christian faith.[27] On August 1, 2004, a series of car bombings took place outside five churches in Baghdad and Mosul. The perpetrators later declared that the act had been undertaken because they saw Christians to be helping the US and its allied forces in Iraq.[28]

The situation for Iraqi Christians deteriorated even further after the rise of the ISIS. The group is particularly brutal on religious, sectarian and ethnic minorities. More than 100,000 Christians fled from areas under control of the ISIS to Kurdistan, which wa still controlled by Kurd Peshmerga forces, and remained unsure about ever returning back to their homes.[29] On September 10, 2014 President Barak H. Obama made a promise to Christians of Iraq that

he would make sure the ISIS would not drive the out of their historical homelands.[30]

The status of Iraqi Christians is particularly tricky: one cannot blame the US policy directly for their increased level of insecurity. Insurgent groups see them as a soft target as infidels and a population that can be linked with the US. However, my primary critique of the US approach to counterinsurgency remains the same: as long as the priorities of the US or any other counterinsurgency operations revolve around regime change and defeating the insurgents without looking at the impacts that such an approach would have on vulnerable populations, human security objectives will remain compromised.

A Critical Appraisal of Human Security Approach to Counterinsurgency

Despite the rise of concepts such as humanitarian intervention, human security, and the responsibility to protect,[31] the US counterinsurgency approach does not seem to have benefited from them. Saddam's regime in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan had been violating human security of their vulnerable populations with impunity. There was hardly any significant reaction from the international community. It is only when they posed traditional security threats – Saddam in the form of alleged Weapons of Mass Destruction and the Taliban by harboring Usama bin Laden – that the international community felt the need to (or made pretext of) protecting the vulnerable. In doing so, they jeopardized even further the security of the vulnerable communities.

Due to their asymmetrical organization and opportunistic vision, insurgents create human security issues for the vulnerable population. Most counterinsurgency campaigns involve use of force. As soldiers are trained and equipped to fight conventional wars, the terrain that involves vulnerable populations makes it difficult for them to operate.[32] In this way, both insurgencies and counterinsurgencies tend to create human security issues.

My approach to counterinsurgency is based on problem solving and conflict resolution through human security lens. The approach does not just view local vulnerable populations as subjects to be saved, but also they should be the primary focus of counterinsurgency operations. On the other hand the US

counterinsurgency policy and practice that we discussed in the two case studies treat these local vulnerable populations as mere passive victims in the conflict between insurgents and counterinsurgents. It should rather adopt the human security approach and focus on securitizing the vulnerable populations. In this way it can also win minds and hearts of the people.

I argue for the focus on vulnerable population because it provides for recruiting ground for insurgents. As it is rightly recognized by the Manual that we discussed in the first part of our discussion insurgents normally have an edge at understanding and instrumentalizing the local grievances and desires. They also have better chances to shift the blame for miseries of the people on the foreign counterinsurgents as the 'other'. This advantage makes it easy for them to recruit more soldiers and fighters in their ranks. To cope with these strengths of insurgents a counterinsurgency policy cannot be oblivious to local cultures and traditions, the grievances of the people and the power structures. It is for this reason that counterinsurgency cannot be indiscriminate in their use of force.

On many occasions, indiscriminate use of force helps on eliminating members of the insurgent groups, but it also results in boosting the ranks of insurgents. As more civilians die, there grows resentment against foreign counterinsurgents. It makes insurgents' claims seem more justified and their battle worth fighting. Therefore, ensuring human security needs to be the first priority of a counterinsurgency force. This approach could bring more legitimacy to counterinsurgency and leave insurgents without much to build their claims on.

As mentioned earlier, the foreign counterinsurgents usually fall into the trap of supporting one powerful group at the expense of another. It only facilitates the ascendance to power of a group that may not be diametrically different from the insurgents, but is preferred due to the ease of cooption and its military power. It creates resentment among the local populations that might look at both set of groups in the same light. Turning a blind eye to the Sunni boycott of elections and restoring Shia elite to power in Iraq after the downfall of Saddam was one such mistake.[33]

On the other hand, the examples of Afghan women and Iraqi Christians demonstrate the grievous situation counter-insurgencies

bring upon vulnerable and marginalized populations. These populations are seen as relatively important for the counterinsurgents in achieving their immediate goals, and are therefore, not prioritized over the issues of hardcore security. However, it is these policy priorities on the part of the counterinsurgents that create their image as an "Empire", and their goals as self-serving.[34] But we need to keep on mind that in the long run insurgents and counterinsurgents try to draw their legitimacy from the morality of their means and goals.[35]

Conclusion:

As conventional wars between states become less frequent, and as armed engagements conflicts become more asymmetrical, the need to study the impact of such conflicts on human security is of paramount importance. In traditional interstate warfare, the possibility of victimhood was less dependent on people's gender, racial or religious identities as the national identities would be viewed as the primary identity of combatants and civilian populations. In the more localized insurgencies, these identities determine the amount of security threat an individual faces.

Conflicts at these levels seriously threaten the social fabric and weaken political legitimacy for all actors. In such an environment in which various parties are contesting for legitimacy, the protection of vulnerable groups is not seen as anyone's responsibility in particular. Further, the competing forces prioritize defeating one another over securing the populations.

In this line of thought, I think the US counterinsurgency policy should prioritize its human security goals. As we discussed above, such an approach will not only increase human security but will also bring greater legitimacy to the counterinsurgency among the local populations. Moreover, the Counterinsurgency Manual and the rhetoric about promoting human security need greater operationalizing to be effective. The most important dimension of promoting human security is to avoid 'substitutionism' that allows certain groups to claim representation towards the rest.[36] In many cases, counterinsurgency operations bring individuals to power without regard to their record and beliefs about issues of security to the vulnerable groups. In such a situation, even if the insurgency is

defeated, it will bring little comfort to the populations in whose name the counterinsurgency was started in the first place.

Notes

[1] Duncanson and Cornish, "A Feminist Approach to British Counterinsurgency," 162.

[2] Jones, "A Persistent Threat."

[3] Mashru, "Violence Against Women in Afghanistan Peaked in 2013."

[4] "Islamic State Killed 500 Yazidis, Buried Some Victims Alive | HuffPost."

[5] MacFarlane, "Four Christians Beheaded by ISIS in Iraq for Refusing to Convert to Islam | Daily Mail Online."

[6] U. S. Army and U. S. Marine Corps, "Counterinsurgency Field Manual."

[7] "Insurgencies and Counterinsurgencies," 1–3.

[8] Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 251.

[9] See Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women*.

[10] El-Bushra, "Fused in Combat."

[11] Joseph, *"Soft" Counterinsurgency*, 11.

[12] Bakshi, *Afghanistan*, 10.

[13] Skaine, *The Women of Afghanistan Under the Taliban*, 9.

[14] Hunt and Rygiel, "(En)Gendered War Stories and Camouflaged Politics," 13.

[15] Hunt, "'Embedded Feminism' and the War on Terrorism," 72.

[16] Abu-Lughod, "Do Muslim Women Really Need Saving?"

[17] Pickup, "Military Training: Actions Needed to Further Improve the Consistency of Combat Skills Training Provided to Army and Marine Corps Support Forces," 19.

[18] Lanzona, "Engendering Counterinsurgency: The Battle to Win Hearts and Minds of Women."

[19] Pottinger, Jilani, and Russo, "Half-Hearted: Trying to Win Afghanistan without Afghan Women."

[20] Nojumi, Mazurana, and Stites, *After the Taliban*, 289.

[21] Romkins, "In the Shadow of No Law: Navigating Cultural Legitimacy and Legal Protection of Women against Violence in Afghanistan," 77.

[22] Hunt, "Disciplining Women, Disciplining Women Rights," 57.

[23] "Afghanistan: Women Still under Attack-A Systematic Failure to Protect."

[24] Napoleoni, *The Islamist Phoenix*, 41.

[25] "Christian Areas Hit by Baghdad Bombs."

[26] Barker, *Iraq*.

[27] Frelick, *Jordan: The Silent Treatment*, 76.

[28] Blasim, *The Corpse Exhibition by Hassan Blasim*, 174.

[29] Williams, "Christianity in Iraq Is Finished - The Washington Post."

[30] "Statement by the President on ISIL."

[31] MacFarlane, "Four Christians Beheaded by ISIS in Iraq for Refusing to Convert to Islam | Daily Mail Online."

[32] Catignani, *Israeli Counter-Insurgency and the Intifadas*, 116.

[33] Cordesman and Khazai, "Iraq in Crisis," 92.

[34] Kienscherf, *US Domestic and International Regimes of Security*, 134.

[35] Nachbar, "Counterinsurgency, Legitimacy, and the Rule of Law."

36 Phillips, "Multiculturalism, Universalism and the Claims of Democracy."

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