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# Heads We Win

## The Cognitive Side of Counterinsurgency (COIN)

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

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## Summary

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### The Need to Reorder Priorities

This paper documents an effort to specify requirements for stronger *cognition*—comprehension, reasoning, and decisionmaking—in 21st-century counterinsurgency (COIN). Different from information technology (IT) (e.g., sensors, chat rooms, displays), cognition is what occurs “between the ears” after receiving information. It is as crucial to COIN as physical capabilities, organizational structures, and territorial control, especially against shrewd, distributed insurgents.

Greater attention to cognitive capabilities is dictated by the rise and persistence of a new class of insurgency that combines utopian aims, intense motivation, global connectivity and mobility, extreme violence, and constant adaptation. The foremost example of this is the Islamist-Sunni-Salafist jihad, which aims to overthrow what its adherents see as a corrupt nation-state order in the Muslim world, devised by the West to dominate Islam. Like classical insurgency, the jihad vies for the support of a contested population—in this case, alienated Muslims in both Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority states. Jihad not only aids but also infects local insurgencies with anti-Western venom, religious extremism, and suicide terrorist leanings, making them more vicious and intractable. As we know from Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Levant, such hybrid (global-local) insurgencies are complex, unstable, and harder to comprehend than purely national insurgencies.

The U.S. response to this pattern of insurgency has stressed (1) new bureaucratic layers, e.g., the Department of Homeland Security and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, that seem to have improved neither analysis nor decisionmaking; (2) increased investment in military platforms, which are of marginal utility against a diffuse and elusive insurgency; and (3) the use of force, which may validate the jihadist argument, producing more jihadis and inspiring new martyrs. What has been missing is a systematic attempt to identify and meet critical analytical, planning, and operational decisionmaking needs for global COIN, exploiting revolutionary progress in information networking. Consequently, U.S. COIN has been as clumsy as the new insurgency has been cunning. Among other benefits, more attention to cognition would improve the cost-effectiveness of U.S. structures, forces, and operations.

## The Jihadi Cognitive Challenge

Leaders of the global jihad are charismatic and gifted at strategy and unifying ideology. They skillfully convey a story of relentless American-Christian-Zionist attacks on the global Muslim community (or *ummah*) and Islamic faith, with the violent occupation of Iraq offered as the latest proof. From this comes the call to jihad and martyrdom in *defense* of Islam, which, given the superior military power of the “Crusaders,” must include terrorist counterattacks in the West. The ability to tell and sell this story is the energy source of the global Salafist insurgency.

Using this ability, the jihad relies more on intense individual commitment than on advanced weaponry, organizational structure, or territorial control. As Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has observed, the fact that jihad has no territory to defend makes it harder, not easier, to combat. Even the Salafist idea of a new caliphate, from which Western influence and apostate rulers would be expunged, is more utopian than practical. Jihadis have no practicable scheme or competence for organizing, governing, and defending a nation-state, let alone a vast caliphate. De-territorialization, along with globalization, multiplies jihad’s locations, links, cells, and operations, compounding the cognitive challenges of global COIN.

The jihad’s ability to generate intense motivation based on individual duty to defend fellow Muslims and Islam is like a resonant cognitive frequency that induces people to commit horrendous acts out of moral conviction. The jihad is able to perpetuate itself by relying on perceived Western injustice and aggression to turn disgruntled Muslims into radical Islamists and then using the story of the West’s assault on Islam to recruit radicalized individuals to violence and martyrdom. Understanding this cognitive process is the first step toward breaking it. Preventing Muslims from being radicalized, preventing radicals from choosing violence, and protecting society from violent radicals are different problems requiring different cognitive strategies.

Keeping Muslims from becoming radicals or radicals from becoming terrorists cannot be achieved through a U.S.-led propaganda assault on Islamic fundamentalism any more than it can by reliance on force. Trying to build American domestic support for COIN or to isolate jihadis from other Muslims on ideological or religious grounds may validate the jihadis’ story and fulfill their wish for holy war. Where the jihadist argument is weakest is in its theological justification for killing innocents, killing Muslims, and suicide. Provided it is challenged by respected Islamic scholars, as opposed to Western politicians, this weakness can be exploited to undermine potential Muslim public support for jihadis, impede recruitment of new jihadis, and dissuade suicide terror.

While jihad’s global aims and reach take it beyond traditional insurgency, it is familiar in the difficulties it poses for the use of deadly force and military occupation. Unlike war between sovereigns, insurgency, local or global, is a contest for the trust and allegiance of a common population. Reliance on force must take into account its likely impact on the sentiment of that population. The classical COIN problem of the ambiguity of force is compounded by the jihadist story that Western attacks on Muslims demand heroic acts of defense by champions of Islam. Killing insurgents may increase their recruits, fanaticism, and violence, making an attrition strategy futile. Moreover, the governing authority and its COIN can fail if the loss of

the legitimacy of force puts it on the same level as the insurgents. The answer must be found in smarter COIN, not just at headquarters but spread among the soldiers, police, intelligence agents, and diplomats directly involved with COIN operations.

## Cognitive Capabilities for COIN

Smarter COIN demands an improved ability to *understand* the insurgency, to *shape* the conditions in which it vies for public allegiance, and to *act* directly against it.

*Understanding* jihad requires empirical and innovative research, sensitivity to the psychology of the insurgency and of Muslim populations, vigorous debate in and out of government, and continuous reflection. It also requires advanced analytical tools, an American specialty. Launching a definitive interagency study of jihad would not be fruitful, especially if the findings were negotiated and then frozen for bureaucratic convenience. Against an insurgency as smart as jihad, the effort to understand must be free of the assumptions, constraints, and buzzwords of current policy. It must also be as fluid as the insurgency itself. Analysis should be interdisciplinary and international. Understanding must extend throughout the rank and file of COIN, not held in capitals.

*Shaping* COIN strategy is largely about enabling the governing power to gain a monopoly in the legitimate use of force in the eyes of the people, even if it cannot gain a monopoly in the capacity for force. Establishing the illegitimacy of jihadist violence is more likely to succeed at acceptable cost than is trying to wipe out all jihadis. The best possibility of delegitimizing jihad lies in its violence against innocents and Muslims, for which there is no basis in accepted Islamic theology. Yet, careless COIN violence, indiscriminant arrests, nonjudicial detention, and cruel interrogation can delegitimize the governing power, validate the jihadist story, legitimize terrorism, and spawn new martyrs. This has been borne out in Iraq, where half of those polled nationwide—and nearly nine out of ten Sunni Arabs—approve of attacks on U.S. forces as a legitimate form of resistance. In contrast, only 1 percent of Iraqis believe that attacks on civilians are justified, whether by jihadis or U.S. forces. The insurgents' strategy of blending in with civilians is intended not only for defense but also to provoke attacks on the contested population. Winning legitimacy under these conditions is fundamentally a cognitive challenge. Effective shaping can reduce the need for force and legitimize force when it is unavoidable.

In COIN *operations*, as in other security operations in the new era, intuition must be integrated with reasoning into a “battle-wise” decisionmaking ability. Intuition alone may not be reliable in unfamiliar situations, whereas reasoning can be aided by networked information. Four cognitive abilities are particularly important in operations: anticipation, opportunism, decision speed, and learning in action. These abilities can be put to good use in operations through *rapid-adaptive* decisionmaking, whereby intuition provides initial direction, creating the opportunity to gather information and reason—all at high speed. With such cognition, COIN can gain an operational *time-information* edge over global insurgency, using time to gain information, using information to gain time, and thus acting in a timely yet informed fashion. COIN does not now enjoy time-information superiority over global insurgency. Rather, it is slow to act when lacking complete information, or else it may produce unwanted results,

e.g., civilian deaths, if forced to act in haste. Essential cognitive abilities and decisionmaking methods can be taught.

In COIN, force might weaken an insurgency, strengthen it, or both. With global media and the Internet, violent action against 21st-century insurgency can have such effects globally. Consequently, there is a temptation to rely on, or even tighten, control over COIN by military headquarters or political authorities. Yet, the more diffuse and fluid the insurgency, the less satisfactory centrally controlled COIN will be. Better cognitive abilities must not be concentrated among “the few” at the center but instead spread across “the many” in the field, who must, in turn, have unobstructed access to information, the authority to act, and the chance to collaborate horizontally without deferring to a higher authority. The habit of control must yield to the power of networking.

Finally, COIN must adjust to the reality that the energy source of violent Salafism—the ability to regenerate martyrs and thus perpetuate itself—is not confined to one place, one country, one person. It is increasingly distributed—virtual, not physical. Consequently, this core cannot be destroyed by bombs or commandos alone. It will take cognitive ability, also distributed, to isolate, delegitimize, and extinguish it.

## Investment

To improve cognitive capabilities to understand, shape, and operate, a number of investments must be made:

- Cognitive profiles for COIN personnel should be developed.
- The government should gear up to compete vigorously with the private sector to attract people matching these profiles.
- Personnel policies should be tailored to stress COIN cognitive abilities in recruitment, performance evaluation, promotion, assignment, and retention.
- Professional education should address the sorts of problems and choices that arise in COIN analysis, strategy, and operations. Curricula for military, police, and intelligence education should stress analysis and questioning, not rote and groupthink.
- COIN training should be expanded and improved. It should include techniques that integrate intuition with reasoning and foster rapid-adaptive decisionmaking under the stress and uncertainty of COIN conditions.
- COIN training and education should include the study of the process by which ordinary Muslims travel the path to becoming suicide terrorists, including Islamic attitudes, ideals, and grievances, as well as consequences of the use of force.
- Experts on insurgency, Islam, and Muslim populations should be paired with military, police, and intelligence operators.
- Time and space for questioning existing views and for objective research and analysis on jihad should be created within military, policy, and intelligence institutions.

- The personnel departments of military, intelligence, legal, and other national security organizations should be brought into COIN capability-building.
- IT concepts, networks, and applications should be examined critically with a view toward elevating the power and pull of users, along the lines of the Internet-based smart-user revolution.

Along with such investments in cognitive capabilities for COIN is the need for civilian and military institutions involved in COIN to encourage criticism, exploration, and a shift from firepower to brainpower. A smart and dangerous enemy leaves no choice.