

# **THE URBANIZATION OF INSURGENCY**

**THE POTENTIAL  
CHALLENGE TO U.S.  
ARMY OPERATIONS**

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## SUMMARY

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The likelihood of urban insurgency—irregular (i.e., guerrilla or terrorist) warfare in cities—is increasing as the dual demographic trends of rapid population growth and urbanization continue to change the face of the developing world. Whereas cities once provided a relatively better standard of living for people migrating from the countryside, they are now overcrowded and overburdened. Generations are growing up in the slums that surround the capital cities of many of the world's developing countries, and infrastructures are proving incapable of serving the massive urban populations. And the situation is getting worse. Moreover, insurgents are entering this ripe environment.

Unable to maintain operations among the dwindling rural population, insurgents are following their followers into the cities. In countries as diverse as Peru and Turkey, insurgents are setting up "liberated zones" in urban shantytowns. Such zones, which are nearly impenetrable, afford the insurgents many of the same advantages they enjoyed in the jungles of the rural areas. Perhaps most important, urban insurgencies are frequently linked to broader insurgent movements in the countryside. Using terrorist tactics, urban insurgents tie up the government's security forces in the cities, giving their brethren in the rural areas room to maneuver.

Although urban insurgencies have traditionally been the easiest kind to defeat, that may no longer be the case. The decreasing standard of living in the cities, the dispersion of security forces among increasing numbers of cities, and the development of impassable slums within cities have changed the three-way dynamic among the government,

the population, and the insurgents: The government can no longer provide adequate services even to the urban areas, the population is faced with few opportunities and little hope, and the insurgents can operate relatively securely within the cities while maintaining ties to the countryside.

No longer able to simply rely on their urban counterterrorist or rural counterinsurgency strategies, governments will have to develop a hybrid strategy that prepares them to fight a broad-based insurgency across rural and urban environments. They will require tactical capabilities ranging from counterterrorism to conventional urban warfare (i.e., fighting between standing, regular armies) techniques. Most important, they will not be able to afford the mistakes of past counterinsurgency efforts: Human intelligence must be improved to allow for early identification of budding insurgencies; police and military forces must train together and coordinate their counterinsurgent strategies; and governments must walk the fine line between overlooking or ignoring the development of insurgent movements on the one hand, and overreacting with repressive legislation and brutal counterattacks on the other.

The United States can provide only limited support in such efforts. It has neither the resources nor the will to become directly involved in foreign counterinsurgency efforts, especially with the end of the Cold War and the dissipation of the perceived threat of communist expansion in the developing world. Even if it wishes to provide limited support to foreign counterinsurgency efforts, however, the United States will need to improve its own counterinsurgency capabilities. Neither U.S. doctrine, nor training, nor equipment is designed for urban counterinsurgency.

Finally, the U.S. government must realize that there are factors over which it has no control, such as a foreign country's counterinsurgency strategy, its civil-military relations, external support for the rebels, or the legitimacy of the insurgents' concerns. The United States' huge effort over ten years in El Salvador—millions of dollars of support, the provision of advanced technology, and extensive U.S. military training of the Salvadoran armed forces—was not sufficient to conclude a decisive victory over the rebels there. Moreover, that insurgency was based mostly in the countryside rather than in the cities. Had the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front rebels

effectively operated from within the cities earlier in the insurgency, it is questionable how much the United States could have done to help maintain even the stalemate between the government and the insurgents.

Before committing its support to a counterinsurgency effort, especially an urban counterinsurgency effort, the United States will have to determine how much it is willing to spend, how much it can control, how its efforts will be perceived at home and abroad, and the minimum outcome it will accept—whether a stalemate, as in El Salvador, or an outright victory. Such determinations can help the United States realistically assess, from the outset, the potential costs and benefits of involvement in a foreign counterinsurgency.