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RAND COUNTERINSURGENCY STUDY • VOLUME 5

Rethinking Counterinsurgency

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

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Summary

The contemporary international security environment has become a frustrating place for Western powers. Even with great technological and military advances, British and U.S. counterinsurgency (COIN) operations have been slow to respond and adapt to the rise of the global jihadist insurgency. Operational failures in Iraq and Afghanistan have highlighted the need for the West to rethink and retool its current COIN strategy. By analyzing past British COIN experiences and comparing them to the evolving nature of modern jihadist insurgencies, this document suggests a new outlook for future COIN operations. This strategic framework considers the political, social, and military aspects of an insurgency and likewise looks for a political, social, and military solution.

Historically, the United Kingdom has been successful in countering insurgencies faced at home and abroad. During the period of decolonization in Asia and Africa, the British government and military were faced with more insurgent activity than any other Western power. During this time, British forces proved proficient in defeating, or at least controlling, the rebellions rising throughout their empire. Most notable were the British successes in Malaya and Northern Ireland. However, these protoinsurgencies were far less complex and sophisticated than the jihadist insurgency faced today. Past insurgencies were primarily monolithic or national in form. Although the popularity of these past insurgent movements may have spread globally, the insurgencies were working for very specific local goals (like overthrowing a local government), and they derived most of their power from the local

population. With such a centralized base of power, previous insurgencies were vulnerable to strong military responses and were countered by triumphant British military campaigns. Although successful at the time, this old British strategy is not comprehensive enough to meet the challenges posed by modern jihadist movements.

Modern insurgent movements are characterized by their complex and global nature. Unlike past insurgent forms that aspired to shape national politics, these movements espouse larger thematic goals, like overthrowing the global order. Modern insurgencies are also more global in terms of their population and operational territory. The jihadist movements are sustained economically and politically not only through Arab and Persian populations, but also through the support of parts of the global Muslim community. This community is made up of immigrants and refugees in Western states, first- and second-generation immigrants who have become involved in various fundamentalist movements, and Western Muslims who share a sense of religious and cultural solidarity with jihadist insurgents. This paradigm shift has caused many problems for Western nations that are still aiming COIN operations at individual terrorist actors in specific geographic locations. While this type of response may quell a certain level of violence and unrest in one region, it does nothing to quell the overarching insurgency. Short-term, local victories celebrated by the West are being overshadowed by the growing strength and intensity of the global insurgency at large.

In order to counteract this growth, Western COIN operations must change to address longer-term political and social questions. Western security forces and insurgents are engaged just as intensely in a propaganda war as they are in a traditional military war. U.S. and British COIN operations must do more than pay lip service to "winning the hearts and minds" of a population. Instead, the U.S. and UK militaries must make fundamental cultural changes to the way they view COIN warfare and success. To successfully defeat modern jihadist insurgencies, the West must shed its desire for quick military victories and instead engage in the larger, underlying political and social dimensions of this global phenomenon.