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From Insurgency to Stability

Volume II: Insights from Selected Case Studies

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense
Approved for public release; distribution unlimited
The research described in this report was prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD). The research was conducted within the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by OSD, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community under Contract W74V8H-06-C-0002.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

From insurgency to stability / Angel Rabasa ... [et al.].
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.

U241.F76 2011
355.4'25—dc23
2011029543

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Published 2011 by the RAND Corporation
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Summary

The Office of the Secretary of Defense asked RAND to examine how conflicts transition from intensive counterinsurgency (where the level of violence might be very high) toward stability. The ultimate goal of the research was to identify good—and bad—practices that the United States military in particular, and the U.S. government in general, can implement in the insurgencies that it faces today as well as in possible future interventions.

The research was divided into two phases. The first phase, which took place from March to September 2009, examined a series of case studies of past and ongoing insurgencies to identify the key policy decisions, techniques, and technologies that helped facilitate the transition to a more stable situation. This document is the result of that research. After the second phase of the research had been completed, it was decided that the case studies contained in this document would be presented as Volume II.

The other phase of the research, From Insurgency to Stability, Volume I: Key Capabilities and Practices, MG-1111/1, OSD, is an examination of the U.S. capabilities required to successfully transition an insurgency toward stability. That portion of the research focused on the Department of Defense but included insights on other elements of the U.S. government that are also involved in the transition process.
The Transition from Counterinsurgency to Stability

Insurgencies tend to last a considerable amount of time. The post–World War II average has been roughly 12 years; some insurgencies last much longer than that. The counterinsurgency (COIN) effort may have been conducted exclusively by the threatened nation, or that country may have received various levels of assistance from third-party nations such as the United States. For the indigenous government, the COIN campaign can end in success, which involves a transition to complete peace or some less intensive, perhaps police-led, stability operation. Ideally, the transition away from COIN will result in a stable, lasting peace. If the government does not achieve a clear-cut win against the insurgents, the transition could include some type of accommodation with the insurgents, for example, a political compromise to allow more autonomy to a particular region or ethnic or religious group.

If, on the other hand, the government fails to defeat the insurgents, there will not be a transition period. In that case, the insurgents will have achieved all or a major portion of their goals. There are also cases where the government threatened by an insurgency initially thought it had reached the transition phase, only to see the situation worsen. Instead of moving forward toward a more stable situation (the goal of transition) the government was forced to revert to COIN. Such “false transitions” are often the result of a government’s incorrectly assessing the strength of the insurgents or reverting to bad internal policies that cause the insurgency to reignite.

There is no universally accepted criterion for how, when, and under what circumstances an insurgency can be said to have entered a transition phase toward stability. For purposes of this document, we define a COIN transition as having started when the following are taking place:

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• The level of violence has been declining in the contested region for at least 12 to 24 months. The number of insurgents and insurgent attacks has been declining and there have been significant defections or demobilization of combatants.
• Reforms are being pursued. These include government programs to improve the political process, establish an impartial and credible judicial system, reduce corruption, invigorate the economy, address religious or cultural discrimination, or remove other sources of dissatisfaction that resulted in part of the population siding with the insurgents.
• The population interacts with and supports the security forces and government representatives and assistance workers.
• The police forces of the government combating the insurgency are taking over responsibility for internal security from indigenous (and any foreign) military forces.

How the indicators listed above are assessed or measured can be difficult. In many ways, each insurgency is unique, even if the underlying motivation of the insurgents may be based on a universalistic ideology such as Communism or Islamism. The aim of post-COIN operations is to ensure that these conditions are followed by lasting peace and stability rather than a relapse into violence. The COIN transition can be said to be complete when the insurgency has been reduced to a level at which the state is able to provide security to the population and perform its basic functions. Figure S.1 depicts the concept of COIN transition.

During the transition from COIN, which tends to have a large military-security component, to less violent stability operations, a change normally occurs in the nature of support provided by third-party nations. In this transition period, there will probably be significant changes in the relationship between various U.S. government agencies that have been assisting the threatened nation. For example, the role of the Defense Department will probably decline while that of other agencies, such as the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), will increase.
For each of the cases included in this study, we review the cause and key players in the insurgency. We emphasize what the threatened government (often referred to as “the incumbent” because that term is frequently used in COIN literature) did right—or wrong—to bring the insurgency to an end and its actions in transitioning from COIN to a more stable situation. As will be seen, in some of the cases we examined the transition process was successful; in others, it was not.

The Case Studies

In selecting the cases, RAND decided to include situations where the United States was (or still is) deeply involved, as well as insurgencies where there was little or no American participation. Some of the cases are large insurgencies; others are small. Most are still under way to one
extent or another, while in some cases the insurgency has been resolved and a successful transition has taken place. As mentioned above, we purposely did not choose “success stories” only, since we felt that important lessons could be learned from insurgencies where the COIN transition has not yet been successful. Below, we list the cases included in the study. They are presented in generally chronological order, from oldest to newest in terms of when they started.

**The Communist Insurgency in the Philippines.** This is a long-running (since the 1940s) effort to suppress the New People’s Army that has seen several “false transitions”: The Philippine government thought the insurgents were defeated, but policy errors and other factors led to a reignition of the insurgency. There has been some American involvement in the Philippines in the form of assistance to the Philippine government. Today, despite some serious challenges, the Philippine government is probably better positioned to transition from COIN to stability than at any point in the past 30 years.

**Colombia from the 1960s to 2009.** In one of the longest-lasting insurgencies in the world, it appeared at times that the Colombian government would be defeated by the FARC (the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). Today, however, the Colombian government is clearly in the transition phase in many parts of the country that were controlled by the FARC until a few years ago. As with the Philippines, the United States has provided support and assistance to the local government.

**El Salvador from 1980 to 1992.** This was a relatively small insurgency that has ended. Again, the United States provided assistance to the local government. Although the formal insurgency is over, the mismanagement of the “end game” (i.e., the transition phase) resulted in a major spike in lawlessness in El Salvador; there are important lessons to be learned from this case.

**Mali from 1990 to 2007.** This former French colony was threatened by an insurgency in the northern part of the country by a portion of an ethnic minority. Despite a few false starts, this insurgency is also now generally in a transition phase. This is a case with little American involvement.
Iraq’s Anbar Province from 2005 to 2008. This is a large insurgency with considerable American involvement. Between 2006 and 2008, the difficult and dangerous situation in Anbar Province clearly transitioned from COIN to a more stable situation.

Afghanistan from 2001 to the present. At the time of this writing, a major insurgency is still under way in Afghanistan, and it has not reached the transition stage. This case was included because of Afghanistan’s great importance to the United States. Important lessons can be learned from this case because the United States initially thought it was going directly from a successful regime-toppling invasion to stability, only to see a serious insurgency develop that has not yet transitioned toward stability.

Conclusions from the Case Studies

Volume I of the project focused primarily on identifying capability gaps and possible policy changes on the part of the United States. This volume provides insights from the case studies that helped guide the determination of what capabilities are required to ensure a successful transition from COIN to stability. It should be noted that although there are some similarities in the cases, there are also important differences. It is therefore difficult to assess whether a “more military” or more “economic/political” approach was the most significant reason why a particular insurgency started to transition toward stability. It is, however, safe to say that in each case we examined there was a need for an approach that balanced security needs with making important reforms in other areas. Important, overarching insights from this phase of the work include the following:

1. Successfully transitioning from COIN to relative stability requires an interagency approach. Counterinsurgency requires security measures to protect the population and maintain pressure on the insurgents as well as simultaneous efforts to reform political, economic, and other sources of real or perceived grievance that the insurgents are capitalizing on. Only by addressing
both problems will the legitimacy of the local government be enhanced in the eyes of its people. Almost by definition, this requires an interagency approach. COIN is not exclusively the responsibility of security forces (police, military, and intelligence). An explicit effort to coordinate the security and civil aspects of COIN, starting at a very high level of government, is a strong indicator that there will be a successful transition toward stability. Important insights on interagency approaches were derived from the Philippine and Colombian case studies, both of which we describe in detail in this volume.

2. *It is important to develop an in-depth understanding of the participants in the insurgency, including what issues are driving a portion of the population into the hands of the insurgents.* Unless and until this is accomplished, moving toward a successful transition period is virtually impossible. Only when those involved in the counterinsurgent effort (the local government as well as that of any external participants such as the United States) become well versed in the issues that the insurgency is attempting to exploit, the key personalities that are involved, and the grievances and needs of the local population, will meaningful efforts at reform become possible. The longer the process of learning the nature of the insurgency takes, the greater the risk that support for the insurgents will increase, possibly to unmanageable levels.

3. *There is a clear need to manage the demobilization of the various militia groups, which may number many thousands of armed men.* Militia groups (either pro-insurgent or pro-government) almost always arise during an insurgency. Successful transitions include explicit efforts to “find a home” for former militia members by integrating some of them into the police and/or military of the country or providing job opportunities for them. If this is not managed properly, the insurgency could either restart (a fear in Anbar Province today) or the presence of large numbers of unemployed, armed, former militia members could lead to a rise in criminal violence (as in El Salvador).

4. *Gaining some degree of cooperation from nearby nations to end or minimize support for the insurgents is essential.* Most studies
of insurgencies acknowledge the key role of nearby countries. Combating the insurgency is a much more difficult proposition when insurgent groups can obtain sanctuary and support from neighboring countries. Therefore, the cooperation of nearby states is essential. In some cases, this could be as simple as their neutrality (including denial of sanctuary for the insurgents); in other cases, overt assistance from nearby nations might be required, such as helping to monitor border areas, sharing the burden of dealing with refugees, or providing economic assistance to the neighbor that is in the process of transitioning from an insurgency toward stability.

5. *There must be sufficient resources and time for meaningful transition efforts.* Even when an insurgency enters the transition phase, it could still be years before the country reaches a sustainable degree of stability. During this possibly years-long transition phase, there will be a need to continue to address the issues that contributed to the insurgency in the first place. Economic and political reforms, job creation, and reforming the security forces, for example, are resource- and time-consuming undertakings. If sufficient resources to complete the key goals of the transition phase are not available, the insurgency could restart, albeit in a somewhat modified form. To a large extent, this is the problem the Philippine government has faced since the 1940s. Periodically, the communist insurgents have apparently been “defeated,” but inadequate follow-through in the transition phase allowed dissatisfaction among elements of the population to reemerge and thus reinvigorate the insurgency.

**Insights and Implications for U.S. Policy in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Beyond**

The issues raised above can apply to the host nation, other countries (such as the United States or the United Kingdom) that are attempting to assist the host nation’s transition effort, or both. There are,
however, some insights derived from the cases that are of particular importance to “external participants” such as the United States. Ideally, a counterinsurgency effort—and the post-COIN transition period—should be overwhelmingly in the control of the host nation that is threatened by the insurgency. Although other countries can offer important help, ultimately it is the effectiveness and legitimacy of their own governments that will cause the local population either to side with that government or with the insurgents. In situations where the host nation’s government and its security forces are so weak that considerable direct involvement by foreign forces is needed, the goal should be to strengthen the COIN capacity of the host nation as rapidly as possible and pass most of the effort to them as soon as they are capable of performing adequately.

That said, some issues apply primarily to the “outside” parties, such as the United States. Several of them are highlighted below.

**Providing Intelligence Support to the Host Nation**

In several of the cases, intelligence support to the host nation was a key capability provided by outside, external powers. In the broadest terms, modes of intelligence collection fall into two categories. Technical collection includes the interception of electronic communications, telemetry from missile tests, and the electromagnetic emanations from military equipment, such as radar transmitters (known collectively as signals intelligence, or SIGINT), and the gathering of photographic imagery. Human intelligence collection (HUMINT) is in essence the use of agents by an intelligence organization to collect information. As demonstrated in the cases of El Salvador, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Colombia the United States provided important technical intelligence to the host nation government and its security forces, intelligence that often gave them significant advantages over the insurgents. This can, of course, help improve the security situation, thus facilitating the transition from COIN to a more stable, less violent situation.

In general terms, HUMINT should be an area where the host nation’s security forces have the advantage over foreign forces, at least in theory. After all, the incumbent’s security forces are operating among their own people, and it seems unlikely that foreign forces would ever
be able to develop the same degree of knowledge and detailed cultural insights as the local forces. That said, it is certainly the case that in many instances the incumbent power badly misreads the nature, scope, and motivations of armed opposition groups. Typically, insurgents (particularly in the early stages of a given conflict) are dismissed as mere “bandits,” “criminals,” or “terrorists.” At a political level, this may make good sense, since labeling the armed opposition as something other than criminal may provide them with a measure of legitimacy.\(^2\) But such labeling is seldom the result of a prudent political calculation. More often, it reflects a profound lack of understanding of the insurgent challenge. Indeed, the emergence of a full-blown insurgency is in part a product of the incumbent’s inability and unwillingness to understand and take appropriate steps to thwart its growth and development.\(^3\) This appears to have been the case in Iraq in 2003–2004, when the incumbent regime (effectively the United States, in this instance) branded the insurgents as mere malcontents and Baathist “dead-enders.”\(^4\)

Paradoxically, some of the most threatened regimes are often in a state of self-denial. Acknowledging the full scope of an insurgent challenge would be a tacit (or perhaps even explicit) acknowledgment that the regime in question is facing a profound crisis that it was unable or unwilling to prevent and for which it may be deemed responsible. Such an admission could further erode whatever little standing and legitimacy the incumbent regime possesses.

All of this suggests that threatened “host nations” may not always be the most competent or reliable intelligence partners. The U.S. government is likely to be tempted to rely heavily on intelligence provided by the so-called “liaison services” of threatened regimes. Politically,

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such reliance can help reinforce the notion that the threatened government is a full counterinsurgency partner; in economic terms, depending on the host nation for intelligence on the insurgency is likely to be far cheaper than mounting “unilateral” U.S. collection operations. But for the reasons suggested above, such dependency can have potentially dangerous consequences for U.S. policy. Of course, the United States can ill afford to ignore intelligence provided by a supported government. However, such intelligence (as with any intelligence provided by another government) must be evaluated and considered along with other sources of information, including U.S. sources.

Managing Militias and Government Forces Toward the End Game
American policymakers need to be alert to the challenges surrounding the use of militia forces. Self-defense units “clearly need support, or else the guerrillas will overwhelm them one village at a time,” as Anthony James Jones concludes. But in many instances, host nations underequip, undertrain, and underpay—and fail to protect—auxiliary forces such as militia groups. The incumbent government is often reluctant to provide modern arms to villagers, fearing that such weapons will “bleed out” and find their way into insurgent hands. Conventional military forces typically view self-defense militia forces with disdain and as a distraction from the “real business” of fighting guerrillas. Conventional forces also tend to regard militias as potential “little soldiers” and as low-cost light infantry who should be deployed to fight insurgents rather than guard villages. Recognizing their potential utility as a counterinsurgency instrument, insurgents will typically make major efforts to infiltrate and otherwise disrupt auxiliary units. Insurgents are often successful in this regard, and this success serves to reinforce suspicions that surrogate forces are unreliable.

In addition to understanding how self-defense forces can be neglected and misused by the host nation, U.S. policymakers need to ask three questions before beginning any program of support to militias and home guards: (1) How will these forces contribute to broader political and military objectives? (2) How will they be organized, trained, equipped, and resourced, and by whom? (3) As the insurgency starts to transition toward stability, what is the “end game” plan for militia groups (i.e. will they be integrated into the host nation’s police and military, will they be “paid off” with money or jobs, etc). The answers to these questions are not usually self-evident early in an insurgency. Local conditions, culture, resources, and the nature of the insurgency should play a major part in determining the roles, missions, and functions of the auxiliaries. These factors should also shape the program for raising, training, and sustaining these forces. Additionally, U.S. policymakers need to consider how such forces might upset local power balances in ways that undercut wider counterinsurgency objectives. For example, “[i]n states whose societies are divided by ethnic, racial, tribal or confessional strife, the use of surrogates from one particular group . . . can exacerbate internal tensions and encourage civil war,” as Hughes and Tripodi have observed. Iraq and Afghanistan clearly fit these criteria, so any program of support to auxiliary forces in those countries should be carefully crafted to avoid aggravating communal tensions and grievances.

Finally, the issue of the role of government forces after the conflict requires careful consideration, ideally during early stages of transition planning and execution. As cases such as El Salvador demonstrate, the failure to properly plan and implement disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) of government forces (including local self-defense units) can undercut the prospects for long-term peace and security. Given the prominent role played by auxiliaries in many counterinsurgency campaigns, it is essential that these forces be included in any comprehensive program of DDR.

Providing the Resources and Management Structure for What Might Be a Protracted Transition Phase

It was noted in all of the cases that had either successfully transitioned from COIN to stability (El Salvador) or were apparently well along in that process (Colombia, Iraq, the Philippines) that the transition period lasted years. The local government’s resources might be greatly strained following a multiyear COIN effort. For the transition period to be truly successful, economic, political, and other reforms will usually need to be carried through to completion. A considerable portion of these resources may have to come from the external power(s) that are assisting the incumbent government during the COIN phase.

Not only is the sheer level of resources an issue, the management of their delivery is also critical for the external power. As COIN transitions toward stability, there will probably be a change in the roles and responsibility between, for example, the Department of Defense and the Department of State. This highlights the reality that other agencies of the U.S. government, which will probably assume a leading role from the Department of Defense (DoD) as the insurgency transitions toward stability, must have sufficient financial resources and enough personnel (either on staff as government employees and/or contractors) to accommodate what might be a multiyear effort to complete the transition process.