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Understanding and Influencing Public Support for Insurgency and Terrorism

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense
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NATIONAL DEFENSE RESEARCH INSTITUTE
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

Understanding and influencing public support for insurgency and terrorism / Paul K. Davis ... [et al.].

p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.

HV6431.U3466 2012
363.325—dc23
2012028228

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Cover photo: Protesters shout slogans as they march on a street in the southern Yemeni town of Radfan on December 19, 2009, to denounce a government military operation that the authorities said killed about 30 al-Qa’ida militants. (Reuters)

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Published 2012 by the RAND Corporation
1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138
1200 South Hayes Street, Arlington, VA 22202-5050
4570 Fifth Avenue, Suite 600, Pittsburgh, PA 15213-2665
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Summary

Overview

This monograph presents, assesses, and improves a conceptual model dealing with public support of insurgency and terrorism. It builds on an earlier RAND study that reviewed social science for counterterrorism and introduced conceptual “factor tree” models to integrate knowledge, improve coherence of discussion, and take a modest step toward relatively general theory. The present study extends the scope to insurgency and incorporates insights stimulated by social movement theory, which add a dynamic dimension relating to the purposeful methods, i.e., stratagems, by which insurgents stimulate and maintain support.

Much of the monograph describes lessons learned from assessing the validity of early versions of our model against empirical information from Afghanistan, Turkey, Nepal, and the cross-national aspects of al-Qa’ida. Broad features of the initial model held up well, but the empirical work motivated refinements. As expected, the salience of the conceptual model’s various factors varied markedly with case. That is, the conceptual model is intended to be rather general, identifying possible specific factors for and causal pathways to public support. In applications to a particular context, such as our cases, the conceptual model is merely a starting point indicating what to look for. Only some of the general factors will be salient, which allows useful narrowing—albeit with recognition that which factors are important may change with time as the result of insurgent and counterinsurgent strategy, as well as changes of circumstances.

The last part of our study uses a generic model of “persuasive communication,” based on a rich scholarly literature, to relate our con-
ceptual model of public support for insurgency and terrorism to broad suggestions about strategy in overlapping domains referred to variously as “public diplomacy,” “strategic communication,” and “influence operations.”

**Approach**

We began our study by constructing a static factor tree conceptual model that built on the previous counterterrorism work, and by adding insights stimulated by social movement theory. The resulting combination was the initial hypothesis base for evaluation. The evaluation was largely qualitative and somewhat subjective because the phenomena being studied are complex, with no laboratory in which to control and measure variables rigorously. Nonetheless, we could use the empirical information to see (1) whether the factors of our theory showed up in the cases studied, (2) whether the cases revealed additional factors that had been omitted (a kind of falsification of the original theory), (3) whether the cases suggested better ways to relate the factors to each other (i.e., better depictions of causal pathways), and (4) whether (as expected) there were sharp differences in the relative salience of factors from one context to another.

The intent in all this was not just “testing,” but also iterative theory refinement in the spirit of qualitative case studies as pioneered by Alexander George. Entangling theory development and testing was appropriate given the embryonic state of integrative knowledge. Correspondingly, we took an opportunistic, adaptive approach rather than, say, fixing the hypotheses and methods, selecting a representative set of cases, and proceeding linearly and rigorously to test the hypotheses. Our initial empirical work was for the Taliban in Afghanistan and included experimenting with quantitative methods. We also did substantial qualitative research on al-Qa’ida, illustrating the explanatory value of the factors suggested by social movement theory. We then extended our research, exploiting the opportunity to have doctoral fellows from Turkey and Nepal do case studies on insurgencies in their native countries. These studies were purely qualitative and used differ-
ent types of data than in earlier phases. As we neared completion of the study, another opportunity arose: We obtained specialized public-opinion data on Afghanistan that allowed us to supplement the earlier analysis. The study, then, evolved in nonlinear fashion, with diverse methods and data types.

Data
We drew on extensive primary- and secondary-source material. The Afghan work reflects press accounts, with testimonials and quotations from local sources in the largely Pashtun areas of southern and eastern Afghanistan. These came from two English-language Pakistani newspapers, as well as the New York Times and Asia Times Online and translated versions of Afghan-language material. We supplemented the press-account data with information from surveys conducted in Afghanistan. Results were largely consistent, but the survey data highlighted additional factors and clarified some issues. The material on al-Qa’ida consisted largely of original-Arabic or translated statements of al-Qa’ida leaders and other significant figures debating matters of ideology and strategy. The material on Turkey came from Turkish-language newspapers and English- and Turkish-language government reports, books, and articles about the Kurdish PKK (Kurdistan Workers’ Party). The Nepalese case depended primarily on the work of Nepalese scholars writing in English, the website of the United Communist party of Nepal, and the work of some other scholars.

The Conceptual Model

Initial Hypothesis, Evaluation, and Revision
As noted above, our initial hypothesis base consisted of (1) a factor tree based on combining trees from past work and (2) insights motivated by social movement theory that we treated as constituting a second, supplementary lens. We then evaluated the cases using this combination of lenses.

The higher-level aspects of the factor-tree model held up very well in the empirical testing, and nearly all of the lower-level factors showed
up as important in at least one of the cases studied. Further, very few factors arising in the data had previously been omitted. Nonetheless, experience with the new cases stimulated many refinements. Also, they and reviews of the draft monograph caused us to integrate the two “lenses” into a single integrated factor tree, shown in Figure S.1.

The conceptual model of Figure S.1 is actually quite simple if only the top layer of factors is considered (the items in red), but understanding phenomena typically requires considering some of the more specific lower-level factors. A positive or unmarked arrow means that more of the first factor tends to cause more of the second factor (the actual effect depends on the other factors influencing the higher-level factor). A negative arrow means that more of the first factor tends to cause a reduction of the second factor. Where +/- appears, the direction of the effect is ambiguous—perhaps because it varies with population segment or because of hidden variables. Where factors are connected by “-and” (as at the top level in Figure S.1), it means that the effect (public support, in this case) depends in a first approximation on all of the connected factors being present. Where factors are connected by “or,” it means that the higher-level effect may occur as the result of any one of the factors or a combination. The lower-level factors indicate alternative causal pathways, such as different motivations, rather than decomposition. In a particular country at a particular time, only some of the lower-level factors shown may be important.

The boxes at the bottom of Figure S.1 show cross-cutting factors affecting several or all of the higher-level factors.

In interpreting the model, it is crucial to understand that “the public” consists of many subpopulations. Which factors of Figure S.1 are important varies not only with country, but also across those subpopulations. For example, the portion of the public that is already sympathetic to a violent organization may have an enduring resonance with the organization’s allegedly high-minded ideology. Another portion may be uninterested in or hostile to the ideology but nevertheless animated by the organization’s efforts to protest long-held grievances or recent actions by a despised government. In a similar manner, the factors may have different effects on different classes of insurgency sup-
Figure S.1
Factors Underlying Public Support for Terrorism or Insurgency

Public support for insurgency and terrorism

Effectiveness of organization

Motivation for supporting group or cause

Perceived legitimacy of violence

Acceptability of costs and risks

Leadership
• Strategic
• Charismatic
• Otherwise effective

Opportunism, adaptation

Resource mobilization

Ideological, religious concepts

Glory, excitement

Social services

Identity
• National/ regional
• Ethnic
• Religious

Presence, tactics, and deeds

Attractors

Duty, honor
• Fight repression
• Defend homeland or people
• Eject occupier
• Seek revenge

Rewards
• Financial
• Power
• Prestige

Revenge
• Religious, ideological, ethical beliefs; intolerance

Necessity, desperation

Cultural propensity for, acceptance of violence

Intimidation

Assessment of likely victor

Cultural propensity for, acceptance of violence

Counter-vailing social costs, pressures

Shared grievances, aspirations
• Repression
• Corruption
• Humiliation
• Freedom

Unacceptable group behavior
• Excessive casualties and other damage
• Distasteful religious rules

Impulses, emotions, social psychology

Environmental factors
• International political-military (e.g., state support)
• Economic and social
• Cultural and historical

NOTES: Applies at a snapshot in time. Current factor values can affect future values of some or all other factors.

RAND MG1122-S.1
porter (e.g., those offering indirect financial support rather than safe havens).

The Narrative

**Top-Level Factors.** The narrative that goes with Figure S.1 is that public support for insurgency and terrorism depends on four top-level factors: effectiveness of the organization, motivation, perceived legitimacy, and acceptability of costs and risks.

**Effectiveness of the Organization.** Public support for an insurgent or terrorist organization requires that the organization exist and have some level of effectiveness. Grievances, identity, and many other individual-level factors are ubiquitous; only sometimes, however, does public support for insurgency build to significant levels. The insurgent organization’s effectiveness, then, is crucial and may be seen as the result of leadership, ideological package and related framing, the mobilization of resources, opportunism and adaptation to circumstances, and presence, tactics, and deeds. This effectiveness is a prerequisite for—and, over time, a cause of—the other factors.

**Motivation.** Most people who support insurgency and terrorism believe that they are doing something positive, such as contributing to a worthy cause, fulfilling a duty, or maintaining honor. Some attractions are rooted in religion or other ideology, a sense of identity, appreciation of social services provided by the violent organization, the glory and excitement of the cause or activity, or some combination. Referring again to the issue of identity, people may feel a sense of duty or honor to support the insurgency because of nationalism (e.g., when dealing with an occupier) or their connection with a particular ethnic group, tribe, religion, or cause. Other motivations may involve financial payments or gaining power or prestige.

**Sense of Legitimacy.** Violence may be perceived as legitimate for any or a combination of many reasons. The reasons may be religious, otherwise ideological, or ethical; they may be due to intolerance rooted in unthinking ethnic prejudices and ignorance that denigrate “others”; they may be rooted in a sense of legitimate personal revenge or, in a culture with endemic violence, a belief that legitimacy is a non-issue. And, even if violence is seen as deplorable, it may be seen as necessary.
It should also be remembered that “good” revolutionaries are often insurgents and that only sometimes do they have the luxury of taking a peaceful approach, as in Gandhi’s India or in the Egypt of 2011’s Arab Spring. A public may deplore (or come to deplore) terrorism but approve other forms of violence as necessary for the cause.

Acceptability of Costs and Risks. The fourth branch is expressed as acceptability of costs and risks (given motivations), because the behaviors in question are often not the result solely of sober cost-benefit calculations but also of emotions, such as the excitement of revolution or the horror of having witnessed slaughter. Responding to intimidation is less a matter of calculation than of being frightened by the government, insurgent group, or both. For those cross-pressured by both, a calculation may indeed occur: Who will be the likely victor and, thus, with whom is it most important to cooperate? There may also be personal-level risks and opportunities to consider, and a variety of countervailing social and culture pressures against support.

All of the top-level factors affect the others over time. Additional cross-cutting factors are indicated at the bottom of Figure S.1. These include shared grievances and aspirations, unacceptable behavior by the insurgent organization (which can undercut public support), various psychological and emotional factors, and such environmental factors as international relations, economics, instability, and culture.

Lessons from the Case Histories

Our case studies dealt with al-Qa’ida, the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan and Pakistan, the Kurdish PKK separatist movement in Turkey, and the Maoists of Nepal.

Al-Qa’ida. We drew on past research to construct a specialized factor tree for public support of al-Qa’ida in the large, i.e., of al-Qa’ida as a transnational, global Salafi-jihadi organization. That is, we did not consider al-Qa’ida affiliates, for which public opinion is often driven by local considerations, or to rank-and-file participants, who are sometimes more like a “bunch of guys” than those attracted strongly to the tenets of al-Qa’ida. Our empirical work on al-Qa’ida in this study was
primarily to assess the value of the additions to our model from social
movement theory. The result, Figure S.2, stems from the general factor
tree (Figure S.1), but uses thickened arrows and bold font to show fac-
tors that we see as noteworthy for the al-Qa’ida case.

Al-Qa’ida’s organizational effectiveness has been due in part to
the late Usama bin Ladin and to Ayman Zawahiri, who between them
brought a combination of charisma, strategic thinking, and organiza-
tional skills. Al-Qa’ida’s framing of issues has been extremely impor-
tant, especially the notion that violent jihad is an obligation of good
Muslims, on behalf of brother Muslims worldwide (not in a single
country).

The motivations for public support stem from religious beliefs
(a violent-extremist version of Salifism), an ideology stressing identity
within the universal brotherhood of Muslims, and a duty to defend
Muslims, who are seen as under attack worldwide. All of this is sup-
ported by shared grievances related to an accumulated but inchoate
sense of humiliation in the Muslim world and by widespread repres-
sion and corruption by the governments of Muslim countries. The per-
ceived glory and excitement of supporting a cause that seeks to redress
these problems is also a factor.

Religious and brotherhood-of-Muslim beliefs are also major fac-
tors in the perceived legitimacy of violence against Westerners, unbelievers, and even Muslims who do not agree with Salafi-jihad inter-
pretations. However, religious and cultural beliefs also operate in the
opposite direction (hence the +/- in Figure S.2), with many in the
Muslim world disapproving of the extreme violence of al-Qa’ida.

As for the acceptability of costs and risks, the most notable point
is the strength of factors against support (negative effects in Figure S.2).
The scale and ferocity of anti-al-Qa’ida activities worldwide (as well
as religious and cultural values) have spawned broad countervailing
pressures that discourage would-be supporters for pragmatic reasons,
perhaps in part because it seems unlikely that al-Qa’ida will emerge as
the victor.

Notably absent in Figure S.2 is an emphasis on social services,
e.g., health and sanitation (al-Qa’ida does not provide such services,
as do some insurgent organizations); the search for financial, power,
Figure S.2
Salient Factors in Public Support for al-Qa’ida

Public support for al-Qa’ida

- Effectiveness of organization
  - Leadership
    - Strategic
    - Charismatic
    - Otherwise effective
  - Opportunism, adaptation
  - Resource mobilization
  - Ideological package and framing

- Motivation for supporting group or cause
  - Presence, tactics, and deeds
  - Attraction
    - Ideological, religious concepts
    - Social services

- Perceived legitimacy of violence
  - Duty, honor
    - Fight repression
    - Defend homeland or people
    - Eject occupier
    - Seek revenge
  - Rewards
    - Financial
    - Power
    - Prestige
  - Religious, ideological, ethical beliefs; intolerance

- Acceptability of costs and risks
  - Intimidation
  - Assessment of likely victor
  - Personal risks and opportunity costs
  - Cultural propensity for, acceptance of violence

- Counter-vailing social costs, pressures

NOTES: Applies at a snapshot in time. Current factor values can affect future values of some or all other factors.

Environmental factors
- International political-military (e.g., state support)
- Economic and social
- Cultural and historical

Impulses, emotions, social psychology
- Shared grievances, aspirations
  - Repression
  - Humiliation
  - Freedom
- Unacceptable group behavior
  - Excessive casualties and other damage
  - Distasteful religious rules

Presence, tactics, and deeds
- Strategic
- Charismatic
- Otherwise effective

Identity
- National/regional
- Ethnic
- Religious

Glory, excitement
- Real or fictive kinship
- Cause

Leadership
- Strategic
- Charismatic
- Otherwise effective

Resource mobilization
- Ideological package and framing

Attractive
- Ideological, religious concepts
- Social services

Media
- Opinions
- Information

Politics
- Ideology
- Influence

Economic
- Opportunities
- Rewards

Religious
- Beliefs
- Practices

Homeland
- Protection
- Security

Defend homeland or people
- National
- Regional
- Ethnic
- Religious

Eject occupier
- Expulsion
- Liberation

Seek revenge
- Retaliation
- Justice

Homeland
- National
- Regional
- Ethnic
- Religious

Duty, honor
- Sacrifice
- Loyalty

Assessment of likely victor
- Victory
- Defeat

Intimidation
- Fear
- Compliance

Personal risks and opportunity costs
- Financial
- Power
- Prestige

Cultural propensity for, acceptance of violence
- Religiosity
- Nationalism

Shared grievances, aspirations
- Repression
- Corruption
- Freedom

Environmental factors
- International political-military (e.g., state support)
- Economic and social
- Cultural and historical

Impulses, emotions, social psychology
- Shared grievances, aspirations
  - Repression
  - Humiliation
  - Freedom
- Unacceptable group behavior
  - Excessive casualties and other damage
  - Distasteful religious rules

NOTES: Applies at a snapshot in time. Current factor values can affect future values of some or all other factors.
or prestige rewards; personal revenge; and calculation of personal risks and opportunity costs. Such factors almost surely play a role but are not prominent in the data. To be sure, some active participants and supporters of al-Qa’ida engage also in criminal activities, which can bring personal benefits. These, however, do not characterize what drives such public support as al-Qa’ida enjoys.

The Taliban in Afghanistan. The Taliban, although not a tightly unified organization, has also benefited from strong leadership, a narrative that taps into cultural points of reference, and adaptations in response to changing circumstances (see Figure S.3). A subset of the Afghan population supports the religiously extreme views of the Taliban. Another major factor in popular support is a broad sense of duty and honor in repelling the occupier (whether Alexander the Great, the Soviet Union, or the United States). Decades of nonstop violence in Afghanistan have also created a culture in which violence is part of the norm. Intimidation by the Taliban is an especially powerful factor, with “support” often being a matter of acquiescence to the less-bad option—cooperation with the side most present and most feared. And, finally, there is the strong sense of identity among Pashtuns, who live in both Afghanistan and Pakistan, and distrust of what they see as a Tajik-dominated central government (even though President Karzai is a Pashtun). The cross-border bonds among Pashtuns are strong enough that many observers over the years have regretted failure, in the 19th century, to have drawn borders creating a separate Pashtunistan.

The PKK in Turkey. Public support for the PKK in Turkey (Figure S.4) has been motivated overwhelmingly by a sense of Kurdish identity and Abdullah Öcalan’s charisma. Other notable factors include widespread intimidation by the PKK within portions of Kurdish Turkey, as well as various cultural aspects, such as acceptance of violence in the poorly developed Kurdish areas. Considerations such as revenge have also played a role at times. Legitimacy of violence arising from perceived necessity is another consideration, but with an unusual twist. For those who embrace Kurdish nationalism, the PKK was long a unique outlet, because in earlier years the PKK largely eliminated what might have been less violent competitors. The state of Turkey has become much more accommodating about Kurdish identity in recent
Figure S.3
Salient Factors in Public Support of the Taliban in Afghanistan

Public support for the Taliban

Effectiveness of organization
- Leadership
  - Strategic
  - Charismatic
  - Otherwise effective
- Opportunism, adaptation
- Resource mobilization
- Ideological package and framing

Motivation for supporting group or cause
- Presence, tactics, and deeds
- Attraction
- Ideological, religious concepts
- Social services
- Identity
  - National/ regional
  - Ethnic
  - Religious
- Duty, honor
  - Fight repression
  - Defend homeland or people
  - Eject occupier
  - Seek revenge
- Rewards
  - Financial
  - Power
  - Prestige
- Religious, ideological, political beliefs
- Revenge
- Necessity, desperation
- Intimidation

Perceived legitimacy of violence
- Cultural propensity for, acceptance of violence
- Assessment of likely victor
- Personal risks and opportunity costs
- Countervailing social costs, pressures
- Positive
- Negative
- Neutral

Acceptability of costs and risks

Impulses, emotions, social psychology

Shared grievances, aspirations
- Repression
- Corruption
- Humiliation
- Freedom

Unacceptable group behavior
- Excessive casualties and other damage
- Distasteful religious rules

Environmental factors
- International political-military (e.g., state support)
- Economic and social
- Cultural and historical

NOTES: Applies at a snapshot in time. Current factor values can affect future values of some or all other factors.

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Figure S.4
Salient Factors in Public Support for the PKK

NOTES: Applies at a snapshot in time. Current factor values can affect future values of some or all other factors.

RAND MG1122-S.4
times, but support for the PKK continues. For those who become involved with the PKK, ideology is very important, but—aside from the core issue of Kurdish identity—the “ideology” has been inconsistent and incoherent over time, the product of a single individual who has played a dominant role despite having been in prison for more than a decade.

The Maoists in Nepal. The noteworthy factors in Nepal (Figure S.5) are different because the problems that led to the Maoist insurgency included government incompetence, corruption, inequality (e.g., separation by castes), and a vacuum of government at critical times. The movement has had a single leader from the beginning. Ideology has played a role (including Maoist thinking with strains of Marxist-Leninist thinking), but the most powerful strand has been that of a “people’s movement” in response to many grievances—i.e., the cause was more important than particular political ideological concepts. Despite their name, the self-described Maoists support a pluralistic republic, participate in elections, hold a substantial number of seats in parliament, and have struck compromises with other political actors. During the bloodiest period of the insurgency, however, they employed intimidation effectively, appealed to identification themes, and used other methods expected by social movement theory.

Comparisons. Table S.1 summarizes the differences across cases subjectively, in a manner consistent with the highlighting in Figures S.2–S.5. The numbers 1, 2, and 3 indicate, respectively, that the factors were seldom observed, were present, or were present and seemed to us noteworthy by virtue of unusualness or significance. All top-level factors are rated 2 (and not shown in the table) because all are seen as necessary. We also used 2’s where coding was uncertain, in part because data sources varied across our cases studies. Some factors were certainly significant even though we did not see them as noteworthy for purposes of discussion.

Table S.1 shows the results. The primary observations are as follows:

- Organizational effectiveness (the factors motivated by social movement theory) were noteworthy in all cases. How these fac-
Figure S.5
Salient Factors in Public Support for the Nepalese Maoists

Public support for the Nepalese Maoists

Effectiveness of organization

Motivation for supporting group or cause

Perceived legitimacy of violence

Acceptability of costs and risks

Leadership
- Strategic
- Charismatic
- Otherwise effective

Opportunism, adaptation

Resource mobilization

Ideological, religious concepts

Social services

Identity
- National/regional
- Ethnic
- Cause

Attractions

Duty, honor
- Fight repression
- Defend homeland or people
- Eject occupier
- Seek revenge

Rewards
- Financial
- Power
- Prestige

Religious, ideological, ethical beliefs; intolerance

Revenge

Necessity, desperation

Cultural propensity for, acceptance of violence

Counter-vailing social costs, pressures

Assessment of likely victor

Personal risks and opportunity costs

Unacceptable group behavior
- Excessive casualties and other damage
- Distasteful religious rules

Environmental factors
- International political-military (e.g., state support)
- Economic and social
- Cultural and historical

Impulses, emotions, social psychology

NOTES: Applies at a snapshot in time. Current factor values can affect future values of some or all other factors.

RAND MG1122-S.5
tors were triggered, however, varied across case, as indicated in Table S.2.

- Attractions, duty and honor, and intimidation were noteworthy in all cases.
- Identity was noteworthy in all cases, manifesting itself through both attractions and perceived legitimacy of violence.
- In these particular cases, public support seems not to have been strongly affected by purely personal motives, such as gaining great wealth, or by exogenous events.

Table S.2 elaborates on how factors that were triggered varied and uses the subfactors under “Effectiveness of the organization.”

**Leadership.** Charismatic leadership appears to have been more closely associated with the PKK, al-Qa’ida, and the Taliban than with the Nepalese Maoists (which has had effective although not especially charismatic leadership).

**Ideology and Framing.** Ideology of one sort or another was important in all cases: Salafi-jihadism for al-Qa’ida, nationalist hardline Deobandism for the Afghan Taliban, Kurdish nationalism and socialism for the PKK, and anti-feudalism and Maoism for the Nepalese insurgents. All groups, however, tended to pragmatism in accenting or downplaying aspects of ideology at various times depending on circumstances. This has been least so for al-Qa’ida, since its extremist religious ideology is so central to its identity. In its framing, al-Qa’ida has emphasized pan-Islamic global-Muslim-identity, religious duty, and grievances. Taliban support has primarily been based on Pashtun identity and Afghan nationalism with respect to outsiders. The PKK has focused on building support from within the Kurdish community. The Nepalese Maoists exploited state repression while differentiating among subpopulations (e.g., nationalists, ethnic and caste groups, women, and students), creating a “big tent” movement and providing a political framework for meeting various ethnic demands. In addition, al-Qa’ida and the PKK appear to have done more to use intellectuals in mobilizing support.

**Resource Mobilization.** The Taliban’s principal organizational resource appears to have been the hardline madrassas out of which the
Table S.1
Noteworthiness of Factors in the Case Studies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural Level</th>
<th>Top-Level Factor</th>
<th>Second-Level Factor</th>
<th>Third-Level Factor</th>
<th>Al-Qa’ida</th>
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<th>The PKK in Turkey</th>
<th>The Maoists in Nepal</th>
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<td>Glory, excitement</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duty and honor</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fight repression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defend homeland,</td>
<td>people . . .</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rewards</td>
<td>Financial, power</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Top-Level Factor</td>
<td>Second-Level Factor</td>
<td>Third-Level Factor</td>
<td>Al-Qa’ida</td>
<td>The Taliban in Afghanistan</td>
<td>The PKK in Turkey</td>
<td>The Maoists in Nepal</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceived legitimacy of violence</td>
<td>Religious, ideological ethical (+/−)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Intolerance</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal revenge</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cultural propensity for violence</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Necessity or desperation</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acceptability of costs and risks</td>
<td>Intimidation (+/−)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assessment of likely victor (+/−)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal risks, opportunity costs (−)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Countervailing pressures (−)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Global”</td>
<td>Shared grievances</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unacceptable group behavior (−)</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Other (impulses, actions . . .)</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTES: 1 = “not present”; 2 = “present”; 3 = “present and noteworthy.” Where coding was uncertain, 2 was used.
core of the organization arose, whereas al-Qa’ida, the PKK, and the Nepalese Maoists have built their organizations over time—sometimes incorporating the splinters of prior organizations.

**Adaptation to Political Opportunities.** Over the years, al-Qa’ida has exploited local political circumstances to gain safer havens for operation and shelter (e.g., in Pakistan and Yemen), but has exhibited no intent to negotiate or moderate on core matters. The Afghan Taliban has many different elements but is, at best, in the embryonic stages of negotiations with the Afghan national government. In contrast, both the PKK and Nepalese Maoists took a page from the socialist playbook in emphasizing political-front organizations to build mass support and position their organizations for elections. Somewhat uniquely, the Nepalese Maoists engaged in peace negotiations and were able to secure an election victory.

**Presence, Tactics, and Deeds.** Across all of the cases, violence against civilians (terrorism) sometimes resulted in growing disaffection. In the case of al-Qa’ida, the killing of fellow Muslims in Iraq and elsewhere appears to have diminished support, which has sometimes caused leadership to advise caution on such matters. The Taliban has sought to mute the impact of civilian deaths resulting from its actions by periodically releasing updated guidance on rules of engagement for its commanders. In the case of the Nepalese Maoists, the 2001 Royal Family Massacre created shock and bereavement among the Nepalese due to the public’s strong affection for King Birendra, which necessitated a toning-down of demands for a republic. In the case of the PKK, intimidation and coercive violence have undercut some of its popularity, but the PKK has nonetheless ruthlessly used both to enforce discipline and build support within the Kurdish community.

**Implications for Strategy**

Although our study was primarily focused on the interface between science and policy analysis, we also considered implications for strategy—working at the general level rather than for a specific context, such as Afghanistan. Our primary observations relate to “persuasive commu-
Table 5.2
Case Comparison for Factors Motivated by Social Movement Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Al-Qa’ida</th>
<th>Taliban</th>
<th>PKK</th>
<th>Nepalese Maoists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Charisma, strategic thinking, and organizational talent</td>
<td>Charisma rooted in religious authority</td>
<td>Charisma of leader seen as at core of the movement</td>
<td>Effective leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>Religion as core element</td>
<td>Nationalism, religion, ethnic identity(^a)</td>
<td>Kurdish nationalism with varied political concepts</td>
<td>The cause of overturning government to redress grievances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framing</td>
<td>Muslim identity, grievances, religious duty, global jihad</td>
<td>Expulsion of occupier, identity, religious duty, preservation of traditions, restoration of sharia</td>
<td>Kurdish identity and grievances</td>
<td>Support of cause and need to fill vacuum of governance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource mobilization</td>
<td>Decentralization, effective unifying propaganda</td>
<td>Roots in madrasas, with later evolution</td>
<td>Developed over time</td>
<td>Developed over time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dealing with political opportunities and constraints</td>
<td>Many adaptations, to extent permitted by core ideology</td>
<td>Tactical adaptations, reinvigoration</td>
<td>Numerous adaptations as Turkish government has evolved and Soviet socialism has lost sheen</td>
<td>Substantial adaptation leading to full participation in mainstream political processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presence, tactics, and deeds</td>
<td>High-visibility attacks as well as smaller ones; many have proved counterproductive</td>
<td>Daring attacks (e.g., to liberate prisoners) with consistent presence and intimidation</td>
<td>Small-scale attacks, intimidation, ubiquitous presence, political monopoly (in early years)</td>
<td>Helped topple government</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\) Portions of the Taliban are more religiously radicalized along Salafi-jihadi lines than others, and also more transnational in outlook due in part to al-Qa’ida influence.
nications” relating to aspects of public diplomacy, strategic communication, and influence operations.

**Persuasive Communications**

It is a big step to move from the research conclusions above to recommendations on how to issue persuasive messages and otherwise influence attitudes. It is useful to keep several points in mind:

- “The public” consists of numerous discrete groups with different prior beliefs, psychologies, and circumstances. These are the battleground for competition as actors seek to recognize and influence the different target audiences—pushing hot buttons of some and avoiding hot buttons of others. *Each actor tries to affect all the relevant factors of our conceptual model.*
- The sources of influence include real-word events and actions, which often speak louder than words, but can affect segments of the public quite differently.
- Influences are received through a variety of channels (e.g., direct experiences, mass media, or personal networks). Receptivity to the information, and the way it is interpreted, depends heavily on details, such as how information is presented.

We concluded from our analysis that it is useful to think explicitly about three *levels* of strategy, which can be called macro, meso (faction-level), and micro.

**Macro Level.** The macro level of strategy can be seen as akin to a broad-spectrum antibiotic in enhancing a population’s overall resistance to insurgent and terrorist group appeals. Messages need to be informed by an understanding of real-world events and the larger framing contests between government and insurgent or terrorist groups; the frames and themes within the mass media and both social and personal networks; and the extent to which target populations are aware of, resonate with, and react to the various events, actions, and messages.

Many of these matters can be monitored and analyzed. For example, content analysis, citation analysis, and network analysis can be integrated to map the public and private discourse of an insurgent or
terrorist group, as well as the commentary of critics. Analysis can pro-
vide insights into the changing level of intra-movement contention,
specific wedge issues and fault lines, the leading voices associated with
competing positions, and vulnerabilities to external criticism. Most
publicly available polls, however, do not have the richness necessary for
this purpose. More could be done to connect survey and focus-group
efforts with theory.

Many generic options exist for reducing macro-level support for
an insurgent or terrorist group. These include weakening the resonance
of the group’s narrative, exploiting or disrupting its propaganda net-
works, exploiting or creating divisions, and strengthening the reso-
nance of counter-narratives.

**The Meso Level of Factions.** The meso level concentrates on the
various factions, stakeholder, and subpopulation groups engaged in
framing contests. Each has its own preferences on both proximate and
underlying issues (e.g., whether to support the insurgents and whether
the final power structure should be centralized or decentralized). Each
has its own political, economic, and/or military capabilities. The event-
tual outcome will frequently be achieved when one side accumulates
the cooperation of enough factions and segments to tilt the balance.
As a result, understanding relationships among factions is crucial to
counterinsurgency and counterterrorism, as is being able to anticipate
what is feasible.

Fortunately, there exists a class of models, called agent-based
rational choice stakeholder models, which have been used for about
25 years to simulate the bargaining and other interactions among
stakeholders and to forecast outcomes of insurgencies and many other
issues. The models have been surprisingly good at this, with moder-
ate data requirements that can be provided by subject-matter experts.
Recent developments (including at RAND) have broadened the power
of these methods.

**Micro Level.** If macro-level actions are like broad-spectrum anti-
biotics, then we also need micro options for special strains of “disease”
(e.g., influence of special issues on special segments of the public). Cor-
responding options require additional knowledge, such as the ability to
detect and interrupt the pipelines, networks, and processes that radi-
calize and mobilize individuals. This has been seen as in the domains of intelligence and law enforcement.

In addition to traditional security activities, a number of other micro-level actions could be fruitful. These would operate “left of the boom,” preemptively addressing potential problems rather than reacting to actions, such as terrorist attacks. As radicalization and recruitment are most likely to take place at the fringes of at-risk communities, the most interesting opportunities may lie in community-based efforts to strengthen resistance to extremist appeals, and improving detection of radicalizing individuals or cells. Community policing, for example, can increase the willingness of the community to assist police in identifying at-risk individuals, members of insurgent or terrorist recruitment networks, and radical voices. More broadly, community outreach can provide training, tools, and resources to combat extremism at a local level. Engagement with local religious, business, and other community leaders can improve a community’s ability to police itself and steer at-risk individuals away from harm. Community-based programs led by former insurgents or terrorists can, as with anti-gang programs, help to divert youth away from an extremist path; events featuring credible voices, such as former adherents, popular athletes, or musicians, can help to draw youth into these programs. Intervention programs—supported by law enforcement—can help protect members of the community against predation by insurgent and terrorist groups. Although we could discuss such matters in this monograph only briefly, evidence is accumulating on the effects of community-based outreach methods, and also about outreach methods in prisons.

A problem, of course, is that doing something along these lines calls for whole-of-government(s) activities (not just effort by defense and intelligence agencies), especially since so much intervention must occur at the state and local level, and most of it in foreign countries. In many cases, the current governments would have little credibility in related efforts.

**Suggestions for Applied Analysis of Strategy in a Context**

Finally, we offer some summary suggestions about counterterrorism and counterinsurgency strategies. For the given context in which a
commander or civilian policymaker is developing strategy, we suggest the following:

1. Review the applicable “whole of government” strategy to have it firmly in mind, seeing the public-support issue as part of that much larger context. Coordinate accordingly.

2. Identify the entities in competition (e.g., internal factions, government, alliance assisting in counterinsurgency, other foreign governments).

3. Characterize the insurgent’s strategy, in part by characterizing how it addresses each of the elements of organizational effectiveness identified by the social-movement-theory portion of this study.

4. Develop specialized factor trees for each subpopulation so as to appreciate where potential actions could have both intended and counterproductive effects, depending on subpopulation and targeting. Plan efforts accordingly.

5. Focus on possible actions that are feasible, for which there can be congruence between reality and messages, and for which bad side effects (also called second- and third-order effects) are either unlikely or subject to mitigation.

6. Observe, assess, and adapt—reinforcing successes and adjusting where actions prove ineffective or counterproductive.