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Understanding Proto-Insurgencies

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Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense

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Summary

Small bands of fighters and terrorist groups usually seek to become full-blown insurgencies as part of their strategy for victory. But their task is difficult. The groups often start out with few members, little funding, and limited recognition, while the governments they oppose enjoy coercive and financial advantages and are seen as legitimate by most domestic and international audiences. Despite these difficulties, some groups do make the successful transition to full-blown insurgency. That transition is the focus of this paper.

The Tasks Before the Proto-Insurgent

To gain the size and capabilities of an insurgency, a terrorist group or other would-be insurgent movement must take several steps:

- First, proto-insurgents must create a politically relevant identity—a surprisingly difficult task. Success requires undermining rival identities put forward by the state or other groups and convincing people that the group comprises Muslims, Kurds, or whatever particular identity it champions. This identity is the basis for a group’s subsequent organization and expansion.
- Second, the identity must be linked to a cause that is popular beyond the terrorist group or band of insurrectionists. Many causes championed by proto-insurgents have little inherent popularity, and governments can often co-opt the more popular elements of a cause. Nationalism is perhaps the most potent cause to harness.
- Third, the proto-insurgents must gain dominance over their rivals. The primary foe at this early stage is not the government, but the welter of rival organizations that compete for recruits and money. Many of these organizations seek to exploit the same cause as does the proto-insurgent, but they use a different identity or platform to do so. Not surprisingly, proto-insurgent energies are often consumed by fights within their own community.
- Finally, proto-insurgents need a respite from police, intelligence, and military services. Many groups thus find that a sanctuary or “no go” zone is often essential for their survival.

Violence is instrumental in all the tasks proto-insurgencies seek to accomplish. Violence can aid recruitment, attracting media attention and separating the group from more peaceful,

and thus more accommodating, rivals. Even when it fails to inspire, violence can intimidate citizens into supporting the would-be insurgents, or at least not supporting the government. Violence also forms a bond within the group and makes the moderate option less tenable. In part, this occurs through intimidation: Moderates are often the first target for radical groups. Also, the climate of violence over time makes promises of moderation wear thin. Perhaps most important, violence reduces confidence in government administrative and police structures by demonstrating that the government cannot fulfill its most essential task, that of protecting the citizenry.

Violence, however, can also backfire on the proto-insurgents. Simply put, few people support violence. Thus proto-insurgents face the dilemma of deciding whether and how much to target civilian populations. They seek to provoke a reaction from a government or from rival groups but not to alienate their constituencies.

The success or failure of a proto-insurgent movement depends only in part (and at times only in small part) on its own campaign. The reaction of the state is often the most important factor in a movement's overall success. In particular, states can disrupt organizations through various forms of policing and repression and can co-opt potential leaders and make them allies of the state. States can also divide the identity that proto-insurgents wish to put forward.

Some regimes are unable to implement effective repressive measures, while others can capitalize on circumstances that increase the effectiveness of control. The resources of the would-be insurgent group, the level of outside backing, its access to arms, its social structure, and the type of regime are among the many factors that affect the effectiveness of control. Governments with a high degree of popular support and skilled police and intelligence services are more likely to implement control policies more effectively.

The Role of Outside Support

State support offers numerous advantages to groups seeking to become insurgencies. Outside states can offer a safe haven that groups often lack. They can also offer money, training, and help with political mobilization. State support also helps groups overcome logistical difficulties and hinders intelligence-gathering against them. Finally, state support legitimizes a proto-insurgent group and makes government delegitimization efforts almost impossible. Such backing can help a group resist government counterterrorism and counterinsurgency (COIN) campaigns.

Despite all these benefits, state support is a mixed blessing. Even the most supportive and ideologically sympathetic regimes have their own distinct national interests and domestic politics, making them unlikely to completely embrace the proto-insurgents' agenda. Proto-insurgents may also lose freedom of action, as states fear risking an all-out confrontation and thus put a brake on their proxies. At times, a purported backer will deliberately try to weaken the overall movement, even as it supports particular groups. Finally, outside support can hinder a group's effort to harness nationalism.

Defeating Proto-Insurgencies

Governments opposing proto-insurgencies must recognize the proto-insurgents' many weaknesses and avoid an overreaction that may inadvertently strengthen the group. Perhaps the best and most efficient way to prevent proto-insurgents from gaining ground is through "in-group" policing. Individual communities know their own members, particularly in tight-knit societies in the developing world. These communities thus make intelligence-gathering easier and enable the use of arrests or other forms of pressure with far greater discrimination. In-group policing, of course, requires a government to work with more-moderate members of a community and often to make political concessions to them.

States can also promote rival identities. Ideally, states can build up the national identity to increase bonds among citizens. They can use powerful tools such as education, control of language, and influence over the media to build a rival identity to the one the proto-insurgents support. Alternatively, they can also divide the identity of the proto-insurgent movement.

The most obvious action for the United States to take in its COIN campaign is to anticipate the possibility of an insurgency developing before it materializes. Many of the recommended steps are relatively low cost and easy to implement, especially when compared with fighting a full-blown insurgency. Indicators of potential insurgencies are discussed in Appendix C.

It is often important for the United States to stay in the background when dealing with potential insurgencies. Since the best cause for insurgents to harness is nationalism, direct and open U.S. support of a government can undercut that government's legitimacy. The United States can, however, provide training and advisory programs that are largely behind the scenes, particularly if they are conducted outside the country. These programs should focus on improving indigenous capabilities rather than on substituting U.S. roles for them.

Building a strong police force is also important—usually much more important than aiding the military. Police typically are far better suited to defeating small groups, because they know the communities well and are trained to use force discriminately. Success in defeating insurgent movements requires not only that the police be strong and numerous, but that the laws they enforce be suited for counterinsurgency. Thus, legal reform is a vital early step in counterinsurgency. Creating programs that combine the talents of military officers, police officials, and intelligence professionals would be an important step forward in fighting proto-insurgents.

Intelligence should also be redirected to focus on the conditions that foster insurgency as well as on the presence of insurgencies. Once an insurgency is manifest, it is far harder to defeat. Identifying would-be insurgents and assessing their chances of success thus is a highly effective way to help direct resources.

Finally, the United States can help inhibit outside support for proto-insurgencies. U.S. power is often better directed at coercing hostile states than it is at directly fighting insurgents within friendly countries.