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# Heads We Win

## Improving Cognitive Effectiveness in Counterinsurgency

One of the keys to greater success in counterinsurgency is a shift in emphasis toward thinking better and fighting smarter, says the author of a new RAND study, *Heads We Win—The Cognitive Side of Counterinsurgency (COIN): RAND Counterinsurgency Study—Paper 1*. With the emergence of global jihad, the United States is facing a new type of insurgency in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Lebanon, and elsewhere—even Europe. To combat it, the United States needs more brainpower, not more firepower. All COIN demands cognitive excellence: superior understanding, analyzing, reasoning, problem-solving, and decisionmaking. But today, advanced cognitive capabilities are the linchpin of success. Against a shrewd, networked adversary whose strength lies in its ability to recruit new terrorists and inspire martyrs, and whose reach extends worldwide, the pillars of traditional COIN—use of military force and an emphasis on controlling territory—are inadequate. The author explains those cognitive resources most important for countering this form of violent extremism. Going beyond previous research, the study lays out a concrete plan to create conditions that will enable the soldiers, police, diplomats, aid-providers, and others engaged in COIN to hone their cognitive abilities and put them to effective use.

### A New Type of Insurgency

In its traditional form, insurgency involves a violent, organized political opposition movement aiming to overthrow a nation-state from within. But recent years have brought a major development in the evolution of insurgency—with the most prominent example the Islamist-Sunni-Salafist jihad spearheaded (though not necessarily controlled) by al Qaeda. The core message of jihadism is an impassioned, personal call to duty

### Abstract

Traditional COIN is falling short against the new type of insurgency presented by global jihad. Today, the United States faces a complex and geographically dispersed enemy whose brainpower is key to its success. It must adapt in kind, shifting its primary focus away from military force—the hallmark of traditional COIN—toward a greater emphasis on cognitive excellence, from the top to the bottom of the ranks of counterinsurgents. Investments in policies to build individuals’ mental skills and create institutional conditions to encourage their use are vital next steps.

in defense of an embattled Islamic community spread around the globe, held to be under attack by the United States and its infidel accomplices. The call is strong enough to motivate suicide bombing—an extremely difficult weapon to counter. The aim is nothing less than global holy war, leading to a new order—powerful, puritanical, and unified—throughout the Muslim world.

The complexity of this adversary is unprecedented. Today’s jihad is essentially stateless. Its operations are highly decentralized and utilize small teams indistinguishable from larger Muslim populations. It joins forces with, and sometimes radicalizes, local insurgencies, as it has done in Iraq and Afghanistan and threatens to do in Palestine and Southeast Asia, dashing prospects for peaceful resolution. Heavily reliant on its own brainpower and ability to use information, global jihad continuously adapts to its environment and efforts to counter it. Its message—that Muslims are under attack by crusaders and Zionists—is intended to enrage

the Muslim community and recruit jihadis to kill and die to defend that community. Comprehending and countering a movement this multifaceted and dynamic presents unprecedented cognitive challenges.

### **Why Traditional COIN Falls Short**

The COIN being waged today by the United States and its allies is still rooted in tradition: reliance on centralized organizational structures, control of territory, and heavy use of military force. But combating the new type of insurgency with such an approach is not working and will not work:

- Centralized decisionmaking bound to rigid policies can prevent COIN from adapting and acting as quickly and effectively as the enemy.
- A strategy focused on controlling territory is not useful against a geographically dispersed and mobile adversary.
- Using military force against targets hidden within urban populations carries a high risk of civilian casualties and can spark intense anger.
- The use of force provides ammunition for the jihadist story that Muslims are under attack and must fight back, strengthening the very insurgency it is meant to weaken.

While force will still be necessary, it must be used judiciously, following well-informed decisions by individuals with exceptional abilities to use information and reason under pressure.

### **Unprecedented Problems Make Cognitive Skills Vital**

To contend with the challenges posed by this type of adversary, the United States needs to be more effective in *understanding* insurgency, *shaping* the attitudes of a contested population, and *acting* directly against insurgents—three key functions of successful COIN. Each hinges on improved cognitive abilities.

*Understand the insurgency.* The basis for informed decisionmaking and problem-solving is an accurate analysis of how Muslims of all sorts perceive their world, religion, and values and the West and its values. Here, collecting data, weighing evidence objectively, considering a variety of viewpoints, and maintaining cultural sensitivity are key.

*Shape conditions to diminish jihad's effectiveness and impact.* Insurgents are battling with states for the allegiance of Muslim populations. Giving local governments the advantage in this contest, including a monopoly in the legitimate use of force, is at the heart of an effective shaping strategy. Counterinsurgents at every level must be able to interpret the attitude of the contested population and devise ways to affect it, e.g., by discrediting the adversary's core message, delegiti-

mizing its violence, or weakening ideological links between global jihad and local insurgencies.

*Act to undermine jihad's operations and weaken its capabilities.* The nature of 21st-century jihad places counterinsurgents in unfamiliar and often urgent circumstances. Because the use of weapons and violence may help insurgents as much as hurt them, sound judgment is vital, especially by those on the front lines. Personnel must be able to

- exploit networked information quickly and fully
- anticipate and recognize opportunities ahead of the adversary
- make fast decisions that create options, yield information, and gain time
- learn through action and gain awareness and objectivity
- blend intuition with reason to solve unfamiliar problems.

Enhancing such cognitive abilities would translate into an advantage in putting information to best use under severe time constraints—an advantage that presently lies with the insurgents.

### **Investing in People and Brainpower**

Currently given little emphasis in COIN, cognitive capabilities need to be cultivated and strengthened. With the tools of the information age, never has the opportunity to do so been better. Network access and the technology to facilitate collaboration exist (albeit more so in the civilian than in the military world). What remains is to exploit them. The author presents a two-pronged plan to (1) create institutional conditions conducive to smarter COIN and (2) implement measures designed to develop brainpower and put it to good use.

#### **Creating Supportive Institutional Conditions**

- Change is not possible without the backing of key decisionmakers. The leaders of agencies and services involved in COIN must recognize the need for a shift in focus and make a public commitment to prioritizing cognitive capabilities.
- Traditional institutional cultures—military, intelligence, diplomatic—may hinder cognitive excellence. They should be reformed to encourage intellectual and political risk-taking, objectivity, circumspection about the use of force, and suspicion of groupthink.

#### **Implementing Measures Designed to Build Capabilities**

- Cognitive excellence in COIN is about people and minds. Current personnel policies should be revised to

recruit individuals who show great intellectual aptitude, assign them to career paths and missions that will call on them to use their cognitive skills, and promote those who do so effectively.

- Professional training and education should be made available to all personnel.
- The authority to make decisions should be decentralized and distributed throughout the ranks of counter-insurgents.

- Networks and the rules that govern their use should make information easily accessible to those engaged in COIN.

This plan calls for an investment in mental capacity. As with any investment, the costs should be weighed against the benefits to determine the best use of available dollars. But the ample returns at stake are no less than the ability of the United States to outsmart global jihad. ■



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This research brief describes work done for the RAND National Defense Research Institute documented in *Heads We Win—The Cognitive Side of Counterinsurgency (COIN): RAND Counterinsurgency Study—Paper 1*, by David C. Gompert, OP-168-OSD (available at [http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional\\_papers/OP168/](http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP168/)), 2007, 80 pp., \$24.00, ISBN: 978-0-8330-4021-3. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. **RAND**® is a registered trademark.

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