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Improving the U.S. Military's Understanding of Unstable Environments Vulnerable to Violent Extremist Groups

Insights from Social Science

David E. Thaler, Ryan Andrew Brown, Gabriella C. Gonzalez,
Blake W. Mobley, Parisa Roshan

The research described in this report was sponsored by the United States Army under Contract No. W74V8H-06-C-0001.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available for this publication.

ISBN 978-0-8330-8164-3

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Summary

The 2012 strategic guidance of the U.S. Department of Defense affirms counterterrorism and irregular warfare (IW) as a primary mission of the U.S. armed forces.¹ Over more than a decade, this mission has placed large and new demands on U.S. ground forces. The current thinking reflected in the new guidance holds that these ground forces should emphasize non-kinetic operations intended to persuade the population in areas affected or threatened by violent extremist groups to cooperate with the United States and its local partners in order to counter and resist the activities of those groups. Engagement with partners to prevent conflict before it occurs—“Phase 0” operations—minimizes both cost and the need for intervention with U.S. ground forces. However, little consensus exists on why the conditions that require such operations emerge, creating uncertainty as to the actions needed to mitigate conditions in which violent extremist groups emerge, survive, and thrive.

This report sheds light on conditions that give rise to and sustain environments that are susceptible to insurgency, terrorism, and other extremist violence and instability. The objective of the report is to help defense analysts identify and assess key factors that create and perpetuate such environments to enable them to inform military decisions on allocating resources globally across areas of instability and within nations encountering instability. The report focuses in particular on sources of understanding about environments vulnerable to extremist violence from the fields of sociology, cultural anthropology, and related social sciences. The research team surveyed existing sociological and anthropological theories and schools of thought as to the main sources of instability that could give rise to local instability. From this review, we identified key relevant factors and then discerned areas of consensus among social scientists regarding the salience of these factors through focused discussions with experts. Finally, we identified qualitative and quantitative metrics that could be used in analysis of environments in which these factors may play a role. We also used an analytic framework to demonstrate how analysts might apply the factors, using two historical cases (the Shining Path in Peru and the Maoist Insurgency in Nepal) as examples.

Twelve factors emerged from the research:

- the level of *external support* for violent extremist groups
- the extent to which the *government is considered illegitimate or ineffective* by the population

¹ U.S. Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense*, Washington, D.C., January 2012.

- the presence of tribal or ethnic indigenous populations with a *history of resisting state rule* and/or cultures that encourage or justify violent behavior
- the levels of *poverty and inequality* or the presence of one or more groups that have recently lost status or power
- the extent to which *local governance is fragmented, weak, or vulnerable* to replacement or co-option by nonstate group institutions
- the existence of *ungoverned space*
- the presence of *multiple violent, nonstate groups competing for power*
- *the level of government restriction on political or ideological dissent* and the extent to which individuals feel alienated from the governing process
- *the level of consistency and/or agreement* between a violent extremist group's goals and philosophy and the preferences, worldview, and ideology of target populations
- the extent to which population and extremist *groups perceive faltering government commitment* to a counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign
- *the capacity, resources, and expertise of violent extremist groups*
- the pervasiveness of *social networks* capable of being galvanized and mobilized to resistant action.

Key Findings

The following findings emerged from our research:

- While U.S. military doctrine espouses a number of root causes and perpetrators of environments in which IW is engaged, it does not offer critical analysis of the concepts. Moreover, there are significant commonalities among U.S. doctrinal publications on trends and triggers associated with such conflicts. However, military doctrine does not acknowledge that uncertainty exists among social scientists about the salience of some of these causes in general as well as in specific conflicts.
- Sociology, anthropology, and related fields offer insights into instigators and perpetrators of environments vulnerable to insurgencies and terrorism. The application of sociological and anthropological theories to the study of these environments can shed light on the interplay between individuals' personal inclinations, beliefs, or position in a society and the political, economic, and organizational structures in which they are situated.
- We discerned 12 underlying factors relevant to unstable environments prone to violent extremism from anthropology, sociology, political science, and related fields. These were validated through a combination of literature review, comparison with detailed COIN case studies, and focused discussions with social scientists.
- Agreement in the literature and among experts regarding the salience of these factors generally is high. Disagreement tended to center on the degree to which the factors are universally applicable and the relative importance of certain subfactors.
- Factors are linked to one another through complex, mutually dependent interrelationships. There are multiple feedback loops in which each factor strengthens or exacerbates others over time in a given conflict. Where these interrelationships can be disrupted, individual factors can be weakened as sources of instability or sustainment of violence.

- Qualitative and quantitative metrics can be developed that enable assessment and tracking of factors. There are a number of relevant metrics in the public domain that are updated annually and can be easily accessed for analysis.
- Metrics can be used in a scheme for assessing and prioritizing countries and regions based on the presence of factors that could give rise to unstable environments. Such a scheme could help U.S. planners and analysts focus level of effort and identify priorities for resource allocation globally across regions that are susceptible to violence and instability.

Recommendations

We recommend that the U.S. Army analytic community take the following actions:

- ***Incorporate factors and associated metrics into IW-related analytic games and models.*** Supplement existing tools with components that enable consideration of the relative strength of factors in particular scenarios and encourage concepts for mitigating negative effects on the fight.
- ***Evaluate levels of potential instability and extremist violence using the assessment scheme outlined in this report.*** Analysts can track trends in factor prevalence in particular countries or regions to alert decisionmakers to growing areas of instability or to follow the consequences of U.S. or local government action.
- ***Conduct research to probe and map overlays and interrelationships among factors in specific cases.*** Such research would indicate where overlays exist and how factors interact with each other. Research on Iraq and Afghanistan, two environments with which U.S. analysts are intimately familiar and where understanding is relatively fresh, should be considered.
- ***Develop a prioritization approach based on the factors and assessment scheme that helps indicate where best to allocate analytic and security-assistance resources.*** Analysts may use the factors and associated metrics not only to track sources of instability or conflict in states and regions but also to prioritize allocation of resources. This would require development of a transparent approach that weights alternative metrics for each factor, and even the factors themselves.