

PS 114S. International Security in a Changing World

Insurgency and Counterinsurgency: A Cheat Sheet¹

1 Insurgency

1.1 Why do civil wars start?

There are three main stories about why insurgents rebel against the state:²

- **Grievances and Political Instability:** If a government is weakened by a recession, interstate war, or other blight, then there is a “window of opportunity” for disgruntled citizens to rise up and challenge the state. Rebels in this case often seek regime change or a political voice in future government.
- **Greed and Poverty:** Civil wars often arise in poor countries. Why? One reason argues that rebels hope to improve their own welfare by either forcing the government to increase redistribution policies or to mount secessionist claims in resource-rich areas to secure wealth.
- **Competing Ethnic/Religious Groups:** Civil wars arise from ethnic tensions either because ethnic (or religious) groups in power can’t commit not to discriminate against ethnic groups not in power, e.g. Shi’ite president Maliki arresting Sunni citizens in northern Iraq, or because ethnic secessionists wish to create their own state.

1.2 How do insurgencies fight the state?

Step 1: Get civilian support. The *most* important actor in a civil war are civilians - they’re like the swing voters between whether a rebel group or government should win the civil war. Rebels need civilian support and the government needs civilian support. Whoever has the most civilian support has a huge advantage in fighting. Most insurgency and counterinsurgency strategies are thus predicated on maximizing civilian support for your side.

Step 2: The Broadway musical “Hamilton” explains the insurgent’s strategy best as Act I deals with one of America’s first insurgent war: the American Revolution. As George Washington says: “There’s only one way for us to win this . . .”

- **Outrun:** Insurgents must stay ahead of government forces, avoid arrest, and stay alive. To do this, they rely heavily on the support of civilian collaborators who can provide them with resources, sanctuary, soldiers, and critical intelligence to keep ahead of government raids/sweeps.
- **Outlast:** The average interstate war lasts a little over a year; the average civil war lasts 10 years. Being patient and relentless is why wars of attrition work and why defensive strategies are so powerful in civil wars. If the war lasts long enough, then rebels put the government in a position that “makes it impossible to justify the cost of the fight.” The government concedes defeat and rebels win.³
- **Hit ’em quick - get out fast:** Insurgents are much weaker than government forces and cannot afford to fight on the battlefield. As a result, insurgents engage in small, quick guerrilla raids against troops

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²Note: None of these are really satisfying because they cannot explain why, in a country with two competing rebel groups, we see rebel group A escalate to civil war and rebel group B fall apart. There’s great research to be done here!

³Recall Professor Vardi’s Henry Kissinger quote from class: “The conventional army loses if it does not win. The guerrilla wins if he does not lose.”

to get supplies and intelligence. These don't often have any substantive impact, but are sufficiently annoying and demoralizing to government forces that it can force the state to give up.

Check your Understanding.

- What are wars of attrition? Why is the government not as patient as the rebel group?
- Can the three explanations listed above explain the rise of ISIL? Why or why not?
- Most civil wars today are not confined to two actors - 25% of civil wars have third-party intervention. How does outside actors intervening either on the side of the state or the rebel change how wars are fought?

2 Counterinsurgency

2.1 How do state fight insurgencies?

There are three types of counterinsurgency strategies states often pursue:

- **Search and Destroy:** Military forces go through areas systematically to get rid of rebel forces using all force necessary and taking little precaution to discriminate between civilians and rebels
- **Clear and Hold:** Military forces battle for control of a town and then occupy it to prevent rebels from re-entering.
- **Hearts and Minds:** States take efforts to build community relations, protect civilians, and implement social/public services to communities. These are all undertaken with the goal of convincing civilians to support the government. If this is successful and civilians support the government again, then rebels quickly lose the strength and resources necessary to continue to fight.

2.2 Does counterinsurgency work?

☹️ COIN is highly contextual - a strategy in one environment may work great and may fail catastrophically in another.

The largest obstacle to successful counterinsurgency is the *identification problem* or difficulty government forces have in discriminating between rebels and innocent civilians during search and destroy or clear and hold operations.⁴ If state forces attack the wrong actor, they risk galvanizing the rebel movement because the son or brother of a murdered innocent civilian might decide to take revenge by joining up with the rebel movement. Uncertainty about who is who makes it difficult to effectively target and minimize noncombatant harm and maintain *jus in bello* during wartime.

Some more disadvantages and advantages are:

- **Search and Destroy:** Harsh, but potentially effective in the short-term. It may backfire if harming civilians makes communities more likely to support rebels in the future.⁵

⁴Recall that this problem exists because rebels are not uniformed like conventional military forces so it is much harder to identify a civilian from a guerrilla if you're passing them in the street.

⁵This is known as provocation logic. Rebel groups strategically use violence to make governments respond in such an over-the-top manner that it actually convinces civilians to join the rebels. For example, one of Osama bin Laden's purported goals with 9/11 was to force the United States to take such a massive retaliation against Islamic states that it would change the beliefs of Muslims living in those countries and turn them against the West and towards Al-Qaeda.

- **Clear and Hold:** Not terribly effective for two reasons. First, a military occupation is costly and risks engendering perceptions as an occupier (the problem in Afghanistan and Iraq) rather than a protector. Second, rebels don't wear uniforms; they blend in with civilians so it's unclear whether occupying a town makes it any harder for rebels to move in and out of the area.
- **Hearts and Minds:** This is effective if it's what the community needs, but it's slow and it can be difficult to convince a community if the rebels are also providing these services (as in the case of ISIL or the Taliban). Further, this policy can't take place without employing one of the first two strategies above.

3 Barriers to Peace aka why do civil wars last so long?

The biggest obstacle to resolving insurgent conflicts is what we call a *commitment problem*. If the government offers to hold peace talks to end the war with the rebels, why should the rebels suddenly trust the government? If the insurgents lay down their arms, then the government can't credibly commit to not just shoot them all up and kill them when they're disarmed. As a result, rebels are very reluctant to approach the bargaining table. This is one reason, among many, why peace talks in Syria have stalled so many times and look set to stay that way.⁶

How can we get around these commitment problems? There are two mechanisms which involve making the costs of fighting higher than the cost of compliance and peace.

- (1) Bring in a third-party mediator, like the UN, to make sure the state complies with the deal. For example, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011 as a means for enforcement is suspected to be one reason why Maliki reneged on his promise to cooperate with Sunnis in the north.
- (2) Raise the costs of renegeing on the deal so that both sides prefer to strike a deal than continue fighting

Check your understanding.

- What is the identification problem in COIN and how do governments get around it?
- What is provocation logic and what kind of COIN tactics spur it?
- Why can't the government credibly commit to a peace agreement during wartime?

4 Famous Examples

4.1 Malayan Emergency (1948-1960)

- **Actors:** Malay Communist Party, backed by China, versus the British
- **Outcome:** British victorious under General Harold Briggs
- **Main Point:** The "Briggs Plan" is the origin of modern COIN "hearts and minds" doctrine along with Galula's work from the Algerian War. The British overcame the identification problem because the insurgents were ethnically Chinese (so they literally looked different than most innocent civilians) and the Briggs Plan involved literally moving civilians away from where the insurgents operated to new villages to protect them.

⁶<http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/02/19/467334470/u-n-mediator-for-syria-says-he-ll-delay-peace-talks>

4.2 Vietnam War (1954-1975)

- **Actors:** PAVN (North Vietnam) and Viet Cong (NLF) versus South Vietnam, US, international allies
- **Outcome:** Insurgents win against the US-South Vietnam Coalition
- **Main Point:** COIN failed because US strategy was lavish, extremely violent, and employed mass indiscriminate violence against civilians. The US couldn't differentiate between rebels and civilians in an area which led to mass atrocities while carrying out "search and destroy" operations like the My Lai massacre.