



# Militarisation of Civil Life and the Invasive Nature of Counter-Insurgency

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THE 21<sup>st</sup> century has commenced with conflict and war – wars which string local conflicts and events into conspiracies and global conflict. The century has seen an acceptance of outrageous claims of a “War on Terror” – a claim that has not only led to the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in the wake of the 9/11 attacks on the US, but have led to divisions in communities and societies around the world. This claim is part of an imagined world where threat looms around every corner, where the binary of good and evil is obvious, and where insidious threats from fifth columnists loom behind every turn – individuals who seek to scupper peace, prosperity and modernity, undo scientific advance, and enslave every man, woman and child to a single dogma.

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This is a common and time tested political model to try and mobilise the “home front” to believe that they have a common enemy, and to try to mobilise groups to act together to defeat such enemies. It worked during the First and Second World Wars, later during the Cold War, and now it is a key plank to the “Global War on Terror”. The “War on Terror” claim, so closely aligned with Huntington’s Clash of Civilizations hypothesis has given cover for undemocratic and illiberal regimes to torture and harass

anew - completely unimpeded by the West. It has created artificial boundaries between Muslim and non-Muslim communities in Europe, and made all the claims of those seeking to foment ill-will come true – because in this context, claims that the West has one standard for themselves, and another for Palestinians, Iraqis, Afghans and countless others can appear to be true.

Thus, we find ourselves in a moment where every claim and counter-claim seeks to support or contest the notion of the “war on terror”. While the British and US Governments quickly dispensed with incendiary language, such as “crusade”, “Islamofascism” or even now “war on terror”, the conceptual framework remains. This is reflected in the recent (relatively positive) shift away from seeing Islam as in and of itself an inherent threat to modernity, with a new mantra that the West must “fight for the hearts and minds and of Muslims” around the world – that the West must win the argument against those who seek to block its political interests. Obama’s recent announcement of a troop surge in Afghanistan can very much be seen within this paradigm.

Popular commentators discuss the relative merits of COIN (an abbreviation for COunter-INsurgency) strategies, the buzz word. Military and political leaders in the United States and the United Kingdom talk about the need to launch effective COIN strategies in Afghanistan, and against global threats of Islamic extremist violence. Armchair analysts and experts on ‘strategy’ hail the lessons of Malaysia and Kenya, and former President Bush was rumoured to have been tutored on the lessons of French counter-insurgency in Algeria by no less a figure than Henry Kissinger, when trying to grapple with the disaster of Iraq. It is a particularly useful military orientation for the post-Vietnam American military,

who learned from General Westmoreland's strategic mistake to emphasise 'body count' at the expense of 'popularity'.

In practice, this has meant that the American led conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan now include polling data and the introduction of "Human Terrain Teams", a situation where the US and British Governments are more likely to assess victory as an ability to shift public opinion abroad and maintain support at home, as opposed to an ability to gain and hold territory and achieve a clear military victory. In part, this has reflected the realisation that a clear military victory in Afghanistan is unlikely at best; there have never been enough military forces to clearly 'win', and many would argue that the country is so complex, and weaved with ethnic and tribal splits that there can be no such thing as a centralised stable state.

The failure to stabilise Afghanistan through the COIN approach indicates a fundamentally incorrect analysis of the conflict from its outset. The War in Afghanistan did not start as an operation to support a central government against those that sought to destabilise a regime. In the aftermath of 9/11, the intervention in Afghanistan was justified on the basis that the attacks were planned there, by Al-Qaeda who were shielded by the Taliban. Afghanistan began as a conflict about creating a stable Western friendly state. Stability and safety here were not envisioned as a bottom-up idea about an Afghanistan for the Afghans, or more accurately, an Afghanistan for the Pashtuns, Tajiks, Hazaras, Uzbeks, and Turkmen and the Baluchs.

Western intervention in Afghanistan has subsequently failed to establish a legitimate state through popular national self-determination. By definition, this means there is no rebellion in Afghanistan, no insurgency against the legitimate state by unrecognised belligerents - just reaction to Western intervention. The combatants in Afghanistan may be guerrillas, but they quite simply are not insurgents. This makes the conflict in Afghanistan a completely different conflict from anti-colonial movements in Kenya, Malaysia and Algeria. Yet, many in the USA and the UK continue to lean on

clichés of the War in Afghanistan being a form of counter-insurgency. Even in applied military tactics, it is clear that military action, for example through 'drone plane' bombings, prizes Western interests and Western lives more highly than those of Afghans.

There is no official count on the impact of the conflict on the local populations - only references to the need to fight for 'hearts and minds'. There is no call to create an Afghanistan for the Afghans, only an Afghanistan acceptable to Washington DC and the West - no real indication that self-determination and political responsibility is part of a permanent answer to its current instability, only an assertion that the conflict is part of a wider effort to counter a threat emanating from the likes of ideologues like Bin Laden, and a disparate 'army' opposing Western intervention which becomes more popular every day that foreign occupation continues. COIN is useful, because the West can define friend or foe, state desired outcome, and call all opponents bandits, guerrillas, malcontents and a danger to liberalism and democracy not only in Afghanistan, but in neighbouring Pakistan and throughout the world

However, the persistence of lazy COIN clichés are more about domestic politics than effective military tactics. Viewing a global 'Al-Qaeda' threat, based in Afghanistan, props up the image of an insidious insurgency and is a useful political image to mobilise support for a War which the West has started and cannot now understand how to end. For Western politicians, in the US and the UK, coupling instability in Afghanistan with "Islamic extremist" threats at home, is a populist and reactionary mantra which wrongly and dangerously links the extremely small and unpopular (amongst Muslim communities) threat posed by Islamically inspired extremist violence, with complex and Afghan specific reasons for opposing Western military intervention in Afghanistan. This creates a situation within Britain where it is too easy to equate opposition to British participation in the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, to disloyalty to the British State, and a lack of respect and sympathy for those in the British Armed Forces.

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The terrible events in Luton over the summer of 2009 indicate how easily this overly reductionist spiral takes over – where extremists on all sides find it wonderfully convenient to find each other. Islam4UK's disruption of the homecoming parades play perfectly into the tabloid stereotype of "mad mullahs" and British Muslims as irrational and disloyal. Meanwhile, the violent and despicable actions of those individuals in the "English Defence League" (EDL) make all the claims of those who seek to isolate Muslim communities come true – their hateful and spiteful attempt to bully and harass Muslim communities makes it seem as through the "war on terror" paradigm is true – that if you don't want to be a victim, you must pick a side.

It goes without saying that this outlook is outrageous, specious, and just plain wrong. A recent MCB report, entitled *Remembering the Brave*, points out that while 75% of Muslims over the age of sixteen do not support Western intervention in Afghanistan, 78% of those polled think there is no justification for Taliban attacks on Nato and British forces serving in Afghanistan. Muslims in Britain are consistently key contributors to British civil society and the state – at all levels, and in all fields – not least of all the military. As Professor Humayun Ansari's contribution to *Remembering the Brave* clearly points out, Muslims have always been in the forefront of the defence of British state interests – whether formerly in the days of Empire, or whether more recently as active, willing, and vital participants in the British Armed Forces. Yet the COIN paradigm is insidious. There is a great deal of evidence to show that the British Government has increasingly come to see a need to battle for the hearts and minds of British Muslims,

rather than as potential partners to make a better Britain. To this extent, the COIN framework can even be understood to have coloured the worst excesses of the Counter-Terrorism Strategy's (CONTEST) – where programmes rolled out under the aegis of the Prevent strand went well beyond attempts to forge meaningful and equal partnerships with British Muslims and their communities, to become a policy driven by a need to monitor patterns of thought and part of a fight for the 'hearts and minds' of Muslims living in 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain.

Perhaps, this is what hurt most in the various revelations about CONTEST's Prevent strand, as highlighted by Arun Kundnani's *Spooked* report for the Institute of Race Relations. The shock wasn't that the security services were engaging in espionage as part of their counter-terrorism work. The shock came from the scale of this spying, the wholesale assumption that all Muslims in Britain constituted a threat to the state, not because they were engaging in terrorism, but because they were concerned with British military engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan – because they felt that Israeli actions in Operation Cast Lead were immoral and unjust. It felt as though the Government was translating policies from Afghanistan back to Britain – believing that it needed to fight for and influence the hearts and minds of British Muslims, because they were potential insurgents rather than potential partners. The military lens had come to influence not only how operations were being conducted on the battlefields in Iraq and Afghanistan, but were now evidenced to be influencing policy at home.

The way in which COIN has come to dominate military engagement abroad, and political engagement with Muslims at home indicates the basic assumptions that lie behind this current engagement. It betrays the fundamental persistence of the "war on terror" paradigm amongst current policy makers, and indicates some basic tenets that they may feel as though they are fighting a war on two fronts – in essence a belief that it is necessary to fight for Muslim hearts and minds around the world. Instead of treating all Muslims as potential traitors

and/or victims, the American and British Governments would be much better served removing these lenses, and trying to see the reality of situations as they are, rather than as imagined.

Now that there is a War in Afghanistan, the number one strategic objective should be to establish a popularly accepted and relevant state through national self-determination – an Afghanistan for Afghans. This is not something which militaries are designed to do, and puts the lives of many brave and able men and women at unnecessary peril. In fact, this is not a job for the West at all – but something which Afghans, of all ethnic and tribal affiliations, must work out for themselves – potentially, though not necessarily, with Western help. National self-determination in Afghanistan need not contravene British interests, but it does create a meaningful basis for popular legitimacy. If this were the clearly stated objective, it would be much less problematic for the domestic Muslim audience as well.

Furthermore, the more that the US and UK Governments continue to play the 'global counter-insurgency' card – where small, though dangerous, terrorist threats at home are conflated to the Afghan War, the more they help those who seek to recruit young men and women to participate in extremist violence for them. To this extent, the militarisation, through COIN orientation, of relationships with British Muslim communities not only is the wrong assessment, but actually is counter-productive – as the use of these clichés make it easier to argue that there is a global War on Islam.

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