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Counterinsurgency in Practice: Tactical Lessons from Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Sahel

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Introduction

Counterinsurgency is fundamentally a political contest fought in the lives of ordinary people. This book begins from that premise and from the lived experience of practitioners who served in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Sahel. Drawing on after-action reports, commander and civilian-leader interviews, and field notes, it distills what worked, what failed, and why outcomes often diverged from plans. The goal is not to offer a universal template—there is none—but to equip readers with a repertoire of tested approaches, warning signs, and decision frameworks that can be adapted to local realities.

The chapters that follow are organized around four enduring tasks: protecting populations, earning durable consent, fusing intelligence to decision-making, and transitioning from military primacy to civilian governance. In each area we identify common pitfalls—misreading local power structures, chasing metrics that reward activity over effect, and overlooking civilian harm—and the practices that proved more promising, such as sustained neighborhood engagement, empowered liaison teams, and security arrangements that local leaders view as legitimate. Throughout, the emphasis is on aligning tactical choices with political ends.

Because insurgencies are embedded in social and economic ecologies, this book treats “terrain” as including roads, markets, water points, tribal boundaries, and rumor networks. The cases show that where units mapped these human systems with the same rigor given to physical terrain, they tended to mitigate violence more effectively and enable governance to take root. Where they did not, well-intended operations often amplified grievances or displaced violence to new communities. The lesson is humility: listen first, learn fast, and act with restraint calibrated to the political objective.

Intelligence fusion receives special attention. The most effective efforts linked patrol debriefs, community reporting, open-source signals, and partner insights into a shared picture that commanders and civilian officials could actually use. The least effective drowned in data, mistook collection for understanding, or separated analysis from those making daily trade-offs. We highlight practices that moved teams from “find and fix” cycles to community-informed security, while maintaining oversight and respecting legal and ethical constraints.

Transition is not an endnote; it is a design principle from day one. Units that planned early for local governance, rule of law, and service delivery—while building accountable partner forces—were better able to hand off without creating security vacuums. Those that delayed or substituted short-term military solutions for political

settlement found that tactical success decayed quickly. The book therefore treats stabilization, governance support, and institutional reform as core lines of effort rather than ancillary tasks.

Finally, a word on scope and limits. These pages offer field-focused insights for practitioners and students of security studies, but they avoid sensitive operational detail and emphasize ethics, legality, and civilian protection. The cases span diverse geographies and adversaries, yet they converge on a consistent theme: counterinsurgency succeeds when it privileges legitimacy over lethality, precision over presence for its own sake, and partnership over unilateral action. Readers will find in the chapters ahead both cautionary tales and usable doctrine—tools to think with, not checklists to follow blindly.

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Chapter One: The Contemporary Insurgency Landscape

Insurgency, at its heart, is a political struggle for legitimacy and control, often characterized by asymmetric warfare where irregular forces challenge a stronger, state-backed adversary. These conflicts are fought within societies, not merely between them, making the "hearts and minds" of the population the true center of gravity. While the tactics and tools employed by insurgents have evolved, certain core characteristics remain remarkably consistent throughout history. Understanding this enduring nature, alongside the dramatic shifts brought about by globalization and technology, is crucial for anyone seeking to grapple with contemporary insurgencies.

A defining feature of insurgency is its non-state nature; insurgents typically do not possess the traditional apparatus of a government, although this is often their ultimate goal. This lack of a formal state structure grants them a unique advantage over conventional state forces, as they have fewer fixed targets vulnerable to direct attack or sanction. Instead, insurgents blend with civilian populations, leveraging this anonymity to expand their territorial control and military capabilities gradually. This often leads to significant violence against civilians, perpetrated by both insurgents and state forces, blurring the lines of traditional warfare.

Distinguishing insurgency from terrorism is often a point of confusion, yet a critical one. While both involve violence to achieve political ends and may employ similar tactics, their fundamental objectives differ. Insurgency aims for political control, often through systematic and organized violence to challenge state authority directly and establish an alternative governance structure. Terrorism, on the other hand, often seeks political change through sensational, indiscriminate attacks on non-combatant civilian targets, primarily to create an atmosphere of fear and psychological shock. An insurgency might incorporate terrorist tactics, particularly in its early stages to gain attention or widen a security gap, but it is not defined by them.

Historically, insurgencies have evolved in waves, each shaped by the prevailing geopolitical and technological landscape. The first wave, exemplified by Mao Zedong's movements and the Vietnamese insurgency, was often politically focused and sought to replace the state entirely, typically originating in remote, ungoverned regions before engulfing urban centers. The second wave, spanning from the early 1990s to the 2010s, saw a greater emphasis on economic factors, with groups like the Taliban in Afghanistan and the insurgency in Iraq serving as prominent examples.

The contemporary insurgency landscape, particularly as seen in Afghanistan, Iraq, and

the Sahel, reflects a complex interplay of these enduring characteristics and newer dynamics. These conflicts are rarely discrete struggles; instead, they are often "nested within complex, multidimensional clashes" with political, social, cultural, and economic components. Insurgencies thrive on systemic failures in these realms, exploiting weak or failing states and broader societal flaws. This creates a volatile, competitive environment where various actors, including insurgents, criminals, and militias, vie for power, profit, and protection.

Globalization has profoundly transformed the contemporary insurgency. It has enabled the rapid spread of information, technology, and ideas across borders, effectively narrowing the technological gap that once favored government forces. Insurgents can now access advanced tools and technologies, improving their command, control, and intelligence gathering, and allowing them to operate over larger distances. This global connectivity also facilitates the spread of insurgent narratives, allowing groups to gain international sympathy, recruit new members, and secure funding from around the world through global media and social networks. The economic dimensions of globalization have also opened new avenues for insurgent financing, with traditional methods now supplemented by cybercrime and contributions via the dark web, reducing reliance on physical resources.

The structure of insurgent groups has also evolved, moving away from traditional hierarchies towards more decentralized networks. This decentralized approach enhances their resilience against targeted strikes, as leadership and operational cells are spread out and connected through secure communication channels, making disruption more challenging for state forces. This "network of networks" characteristic makes them more survivable, as the destruction of a single node or even a small number of nodes does not cripple the entire movement.

Technology, particularly the internet and new media, has become a crucial force multiplier for insurgents. These platforms allow them to aggregate anger and resentment across societies, reaching a far larger audience than traditional, face-to-face recruitment methods. The low cost and ease of access to these technologies mean that many potential recruits already possess the tools and know how to use them, providing a degree of security, especially in the early, vulnerable stages of an insurgency. Artificial intelligence, too, is emerging as a potential game-changer, with applications ranging from targeted propaganda campaigns to advanced cyber warfare and even the development of autonomous weapons systems.

Financially, contemporary insurgencies are often complex, multi-dimensional phenomena involving both external money flows and internal revenue generation. In Iraq, for example, mosques played a significant role as conduits for insurgent funding from both internal and external sources, often through alms-giving, with sympathetic religious leaders openly espousing support. Former regime elements have also been a source of funding, establishing financial bases in neighboring countries to support

insurgent activities. Illicit trades, such as the poppy trade in Afghanistan or illegal timber in the Sahel, also provide significant income. Furthermore, insurgents exploit weak governance and regulatory gaps, engaging in criminal activities like drug trafficking and cybercrime to fund their operations.

The political objectives of contemporary insurgencies can vary, ranging from seizing power and replacing the existing government (revolutionary insurgency) to more limited aims such as separatism, autonomy, or policy alteration. Regardless of the specific aim, the core goal is to undermine the legitimacy of the existing regime and establish themselves as a viable alternative. They achieve this through propaganda, information warfare, and actions that demonstrate their ability to provide better services or a more just system than the state. In essence, they fight in domains where morale and psychological characteristics often matter more than tangible military power, recognizing that these factors can effectively even the odds against a superior conventional force.

The experiences in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Sahel highlight these characteristics vividly. In Afghanistan, the Taliban's resurgence after 2006, despite significant leadership losses, demonstrated their organizational strength and ability to exploit grievances, including the economic livelihood provided by the poppy trade. External support, particularly from Pakistan and Iran, also bolstered their capacity to conduct violent attacks. In Iraq, the insurgency was a complex mix of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Sunni resistance, and Shi'a militias, each with varying motivations and funding sources. The conflict was further exacerbated by the breakdown of sectarian relations and a perceived economic and political marginalization of certain communities. The Sahel, facing multiple insurgencies, exemplifies how economic hardship, social marginalization, and weak institutions create fertile ground for extremist groups to thrive, recruiting vulnerable populations with promises of financial support and belonging.

In essence, contemporary insurgencies are adaptable, resilient, and leverage the interconnectedness of the modern world to their advantage. They are not merely military challenges, but deeply embedded political, social, and economic phenomena that demand a comprehensive and nuanced understanding from those seeking to counter them. Overcoming these complex threats requires more than just military might; it necessitates a deep appreciation for the motivations, structures, and external enablers of these movements, and a willingness to engage in a contest of legitimacy and governance that extends far beyond the traditional battlefield.

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