



## Revista Científica General José María Córdova

(Colombian Journal of Military and Strategic Studies)

Bogotá D.C., Colombia

ISSN 1900-6586 (print), 2500-7645 (online)

**Journal homepage:** <https://www.revistacientificaesmic.com>

## How insurgencies end: The quest for government victory

**Spyridon Plakoudas**

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7271-5940>

[spyridon.plakoudas@aue.ae](mailto:spyridon.plakoudas@aue.ae)

Rabdan Academy, United Arab Emirates

**How to cite:** Plakoudas, S. (2019). How insurgencies end: The quest for government victory. *Revista Científica General José María Córdova*, 17(28), 923-938. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21830/19006586.523>

**Published online:** October 1, 2019

The articles published by *Revista Científica General José María Córdova* are Open Access under a Creative Commons license: Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives.



**Submit your article to this journal:**

<https://www.revistacientificaesmic.com/index.php/esmic/about/submissions>



Miles Doctus



**Revista Científica General José María Córdova**  
(Colombian Journal of Military and Strategic Studies)  
Bogotá D.C., Colombia

Volume 17, Number 28, October-December 2019, pp. 923-938  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.21830/19006586.523>

---

## How insurgencies end: The quest for government victory

---

Cómo terminan las insurgencias: en busca de la victoria del gobierno

**Spyridon Plakoudas**

Rabdan Academy, United Arab Emirates

**ABSTRACT.** Insurgency is currently the most prevalent type of war. However, success in irregular warfare cannot be quantified and measured with absolute certainty. This paper will examine how insurgencies end and how a government can achieve the optimum scenario, military victory. An insurgency could end in three possible ways: a (military) victory for the insurgents or the regime, a peace deal, or a stalemate. However, war constantly evolves; therefore, the above three scenarios can manifest at any time during the course of an insurgency. Therefore, the state should use a balanced mix of reforms and repression. A state must implement a situation-dependent policy that includes good governance and outside support, that ensures the welfare and security of the population, buttressed by an adequate narrative.

**KEYWORDS:** counterinsurgency strategy; enemy-centric; military victory; peace settlement; population centric; stalemate

**RESUMEN.** Actualmente, la insurgencia es el tipo de guerra más frecuente. Sin embargo, el éxito en la guerra irregular no puede cuantificarse y medirse con absoluta certeza. Este documento examina cómo terminan las insurgencias y cómo un gobierno puede lograr el escenario óptimo: la victoria militar. Una insurgencia podría terminar de tres maneras: una victoria (militar) para los insurgentes o el régimen, un acuerdo de paz o un estancamiento. La guerra, no obstante, evoluciona constantemente; por lo tanto, los tres escenarios anteriores pueden manifestarse durante el curso de una insurgencia. En consecuencia, el Estado debe implementar una mezcla equilibrada de reformas y represión: una política dependiente de la situación, que incluya una gobernanza justa y apoyo externo, que garantice el bienestar y la seguridad de la población y que sea respaldada por una narrativa adecuada.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** acuerdo de paz; centrado en el enemigo; centrado en la población; estancamiento; estrategia de contraingurgencia; victoria militar

Section: DOSSIER • Scientific and technological research article

Received: July 4, 2019 • Accepted: September 12, 2019

---

**CONTACT:** Spyridon Plakoudas ✉ [spyridon.plakoudas@aue.ae](mailto:spyridon.plakoudas@aue.ae)

## Introduction

At the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, insurgency (a variant of irregular warfare) undoubtedly represents the most prevalent type of war (Themnér & Wallensteen, 2013, pp. 509-521). Indeed, the last conventional war was recorded in 2008 between Russia and Georgia. Except for uninhabited Antarctica, every other continent of the world is currently plagued with insurgencies –even in Oceania where a low-intensity insurgency rages in Papua New Guinea since 1962 (Rabasa & Haseman, 2002a, pp. 106-112)<sup>1</sup>. However, the vast majority of these insurgencies are not new; they appeared many years ago, and several of them will not end anytime soon.

Because of their nature as protracted intra-state conflicts, in modern times, these wars often demonstrate an unhappy record of intense polarization and indiscriminate violence among the civilian population of a country (or a particular region of the country) (Kalyvas, 2006; Zhukov, 2014). The invasion of Iraq (the conventional war between Iraq and the US-led coalition), for example, lasted 1.5 months at the cost of 13,500 dead amongst the Iraqi Armed Forces whereas the subsequent civil war in Iraq (the insurgency) ended (partially) after 8 years at a cost of over 200,000 dead (or as high as 655,000 fatalities according to other estimates) amongst the civilian population of Iraq. This country still reels from the war against ISIS (2014-2019) (Benjamin & Davies, 2018).

Unsurprisingly, policymakers, and scholars around the world debate how this type of war ends, when and why. This paper will examine how insurgencies end and how a government can achieve the *optimum scenario* of military victory.

## How insurgencies end

An insurgency could end in three possible ways: a) a (military) victory for the insurgents or the regime (e.g., the defeat of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka in 2009), b) a peace deal (e.g., the Good Friday Agreement between Britain and the IRA in Northern Ireland in 1998), and c) a stalemate (e.g., the deadlock in the War in Donbass since 2015) (Connable, Libicki, 2010, pp. 13-20).

### *Military victory*

The issue of military victory in irregular warfare has always puzzled scholars and policy-makers, mainly, how can a military victory be defined accurately? Despite repeated efforts (Jones, 2006; Clancy & Crosset, 2007, pp. 88-100; Campbell, O’Hanlon & Shapiro, 2009), success in irregular warfare cannot be quantified and measured with absolute certainty as in positive sciences. Insurgency amounts to one of the most “elastic types of war in terms of defeat” because space and time allow the insurgents to regroup and reclaim any lost ground (Kiras, 2008, pp. 229-232).

1 For additional information on this largely unknown conflict, see Rabasa & Haseman (2002b).

Victory for the insurgents can be either partial or complete, *partial* if the insurgents achieve only a part of their political objectives (often via a propitious peace settlement), and *complete* if they accomplish their mission in full (e.g., overthrow of a government or expulsion of the foreign invaders) (Paul, Clarke & Grill, 2010, pp. xiii-xiv; Connable, Libicki, 2010, pp. 14-20). The Mujahedeen in Afghanistan, for example, attained their primary objective (i.e., the withdrawal of the Red Army) when the Kremlin abandoned the communist regime in Kabul in 1989, whereas the Kurds of Iraq achieved a partial victory when in 1970 they acceded to a short-lived peace treaty (null and void just 4 years later). The insurgents usually require 5 (maximum 9) years to overwhelm a government, whereas a government requires between 12 and 15 years to overcome an insurgency (Gorka, Kilcullen, 2011, p. 17).

Though the odds do not favor the insurgents, according to a survey of modern wars (Kilcullen, 2012, pp. 128-153), their victories meet more considerable publicity than their defeats. Whenever an “underdog” defeats its (far more powerful) opponent in this “war of the flea” (Taber, 2002)<sup>2</sup>, this automatically generates “big headlines” (Mack, 1975, pp. 199-200; Arreguin-Toft, 2005).<sup>3</sup> Indicatively, the USA defeat in Vietnam overshadowed the victory of the Philippines (with the support of the USA) over the Huk Rebellion in 1954. On the other side of the spectrum, how can victory for the counter-insurgents be measured? The return to the status quo antebellum appears to be rather unlikely in such type of wars (Beckett, 2007, p. 82). Victory for a government could manifest in three forms: *total victory* (i.e., the elimination of the insurgency), *temporary victory* (i.e., the defeat but not complete destruction of the insurgency), and *sufficient victory* (i.e., the temporary neutralization of the insurgents’ military capacity) (Amidror, 2010, pp. 1-42). The rout of the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka in 2009 is a standard case of a total victory, the defeat of the PKK by Turkey in 1999 is a typical case of a temporary victory, and the victories of Israel over Hamas since 2008 are representative cases of a sufficient victory.

### *Peace settlements*

A peace settlement represents another exit strategy for belligerents in such wars. Quite naturally, such an option carries both risks and opportunities. Whenever a government agrees to initiate a dialogue with a militant group, the legitimacy of the latter is upgraded, and the former’s (conversely) undermined. Thus, the negotiations could potentially backfire for the government, the public opinion could punish these politicians in the ballot box, or the diehards amongst the military could even overthrow the government amid allegations for “treason.” Conversely, such negotiations can be utilized by insurgents to either exact concessions from an ostensibly “weakened government” or just “buy time”

2 The term is borrowed from the title of Robert Taber’s seminal book on insurgency, *War of the Flea: The Classic Study of Guerrilla Warfare*.

3 For example, see Mack (1975, pp. 199-200); Arreguin-Toft, I. (2005).

(especially after adverse developments in battle or other domains) and continue the armed struggle after a (free of enemy pressure) recovery (Byman, 2009, p. 129; Bernstein, 2012, p. 31; Duyvesteyn & Schuurman, 2011, pp. 679-679). The ultimate prize, however, renders the entire (risky) effort worthwhile. Negotiations (in good faith) could reinforce the hand of the “peace doves” versus the “hardliners” within the militant leadership and, thus open the way to a permanent cease in hostilities (Johnston, 2007, pp. 559-577; Byman, 2009, pp. 127-128).

But, how do such talks start in the first place? Usually, failures on the field of battle or transitions in the leadership (i.e., the rise to power of “peace doves”), for both belligerents, act as triggers for the initiation (or acceleration) of a peace process (Zartman, 1995, pp. 16-19). A “shock incident” (i.e., a catastrophic event such as the collapse of an external ally) (Pruitt, 2005, p. 4) and a “mutually hurting stalemate” (i.e., a deadlock in military terms) could create a “period of ripeness” (Zartman, 2001, pp. 8-18), a propitious situation for negotiations between the two sides. The mediation of an internal or external actor (mutually accepted as an “honest broker”) can, quite often, contribute positively to a peace process (Henry, 2006, pp. 60-71; Call, Cousens, 2008, pp. 1-21). As a rule of thumb, the longer an irregular conflict drags on, the bigger the prospects of a peace settlement of any variation (Mason, Weingarten & Fett, 1999, pp. 239-268).

Such negotiations can be a minefield. Often, the regime does not possess accurate information about the (actual) intentions of the rebels (*information asymmetry*) (Walter, 2013, pp. 664-665) and, by extension, their genuine willingness for peace; nor can the regime easily identify the party or person that can act as a reliable “spokesman” for the rebels (*delegation issue*) (Zartman, 1993, pp. 25-27; 1995 *Ibid*, p. 10). However, even when negotiations commence despite the above obstacles, the two sides cannot easily and completely reconcile their contradictory claims over a mutually sought-after prize (*divisibility issues*); for example, the possession of a specific city or territory (Walter, 2013; pp. 659-660; Plakoudas, 2017, p. 159).<sup>4</sup> Often, hard-line factions among one or both sides act as *spoilers* and undermine the peace talks with their provocations (Stedman, 1997, pp. 5-53; Greenhill, Major, 2006-2007, pp. 6-40).

The most significant obstacle to peace, however, is the reluctance of both sides to *honestly commit* to a peace process –especially if the war, violence, and polarization have reached notoriously high levels or one side has reneged on its promises in previous times (Walter, 1999, pp. 127-155; Mattes, Savun, 2009, pp. 737-759). Therefore, it is fairly common practice for both sides (and usually, the insurgents) to continue their operations on a low tempo in order to dictate new favorable terms for a peace settlement or compel their adversary to abide by the roadmap for peace (Wagner, 2000, pp. 464-484; Reiter, 2003; pp. 27-43; Henry, 2006, pp. 60-71). However, the danger of an unwanted escalation and eventual collapse of negotiations from such operations is evident. A remedy to

4 See also Plakoudas (2017).

that problem would be a roadmap for peace with clear-cut power-sharing clauses guaranteed by a third (mutually-accepted) party (Walter, 2002, p. 92; Hartzell & Hoddie, 2003, pp. 318-332).

Since the 1980s, a pattern can be easily discerned. Before the 1980s, the majority of irregular wars were decided on the battlefield; most of them are now settled at the negotiation table (Licklider, 1995, pp. 681-690; Duyvesteyn & Schuurman, 2011, p. 667). The record, so far, is quite varied: 12% of the insurgencies ended through negotiations in favor of the regime and only 7% in favor of the rebels, whereas another 20% of them ended in a balanced way (McCormick, Horton & Harrison, 2009, p. 128). The peace treaty between Guatemala and the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG) in 1996 clearly amounted to a defeat for the insurgents in the Guatemalan Civil War. Conversely, the settlement between Sudan and the Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) in 2005 was a victory for the later in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sudanese Civil War. Lastly, the deal, in 2005, between Indonesia and the Free Aceh Movement (GAM) yielded a balanced conclusion of the "Aceh Disturbance."

The viability of the peace settlements, however, cannot always be assured; relapse to violence was observed in over 40% of the cases in recent years (Licklider, 1995, pp. 681-682, 684-687; Derouen, Bercovitch & Wei, 2009, pp. 103-120). For example, the peace treaty of 1970 between the Iraqi Kurds and Baghdad collapsed four years later. The survivability of peace settlements is especially difficult in cases of sectarian conflict due to the high levels of violence and polarization that such wars elicit (Kaufmann, 1996, pp. 136-175). For example, the Taif Accord ended the Lebanese Civil War but did not avert the outburst of violence entirely in this volatile country. Quite often, external powers intervene to undermine a peace deal that they deem injurious to their interests, causing a relapse to violence (Licklider, 1993, pp. 306-315). For instance, in 2017, Haftar declared the Skhirat Agreement null and void and, buoyed by the support of outside powers such as Egypt, endeavored to end the Libyan Civil War militarily. Thus, countries and organizations of collective security should intervene and act as guarantors of "positive peace." However, these actors should insist on the establishment of non-partisan state institutions so that peace-keeping will be substituted over time by peace-building (Mason, 2007, pp. 70-77).

### *Stalemate*

However, not every insurgency ends in a military victory or peace treaty; some of them could very well degenerate into a stalemate (Toft, 2005). The Yemen Civil War is a typical case, despite the armed intervention of an international coalition (under the leadership of Saudi Arabia) in favor of the legitimate government. These stalemates usually occur because of the interventions of external actors (Elbadawi & Sambanis, 2000; Regan, 2000, pp. 1-35). The intervention of Moscow in support of the communist Afghan govern-

ment, in 1979, against the Mujahedeen prolonged the survival of an otherwise ineffective and unstable regime until 1992.

Some stalemates appear to drag on forever; for example, the Western Sahara Conflict has been a stalemate since 1991. In other cases, such as the “frozen conflict” in the Donbass, peace talks attempted to end the stalemate. In the Sri Lankan Civil War, the stalemate ended with a decisive victory on the field of battle. As in the sub-category of the peace settlements, other parameters (e.g., the intervention of outside actors or a change in the balance of power) determine how long a stalemate will endure (Preston, 2004, pp. 65-83).

### How governments can win

So, how does a state realize the optimum scenario –victory– over its irregular opponents? Despite the efforts of scholars to standardize the optimum practices in counter-insurgency (COIN), no panacea for every single type of insurgency has been invented thus far (Kilcullen, 2009, p. 183). Two schools of thought in COIN can be, nonetheless, discerned based on their modus operandi: an *enemy-centric* and a *population-centric* approach.<sup>5</sup>

The advocates of the *enemy-centric* approach consider the military defeat of the insurgents as a state’s top priority. Viewing the insurgents as nothing more than criminals or terrorists, the partisans of this school of thought contend that the elimination of these “subversives” will terminate the violent upheaval once and for all. Adopting an offensive modus operandi (the *search-and-destroy doctrine*), this school is notoriously associated with a propensity for mass violence (Kilcullen, 2009, p. xv; Heuser, 2010, pp. 422-427). For example, Nazi Germany adopted such an approach towards the various insurgencies in occupied Europe during World War II and employed mass violence in a rather indiscriminate and, eventually, counter-productive way.

In sharp contrast, the partisans of a *population-centric* approach claim that a state authority must, first and foremost, deny insurgents control over the population and the insurgency will inescapably die out since people – not the insurgents – constitute the “center of gravity” in this type of war (Kilcullen, 2009, p. xv; Heuser, 2010, pp. 427-436). The population-centric approach is further divided into two sub-categories based on the tactics employed by a state to acquire effective control over the people; one emphasizes the use of *coercion* (on a vast scale, if necessary), and the other insists on *tailored reforms* and *targeted violence* (Plakoudas, 2015, p. 132).

According to the first variant of this approach, insurgents represent nothing more than a violent minority that uses coercion to terrorize the population into submission and, by extension, subvert the regime’s authority. Accordingly, the state must prevail over

5 The section about victory in counter-insurgency appeared originally as an article in the journal *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* under the title “Strategy in Counter-Insurgency: A Distilled Approach.”



the insurgents in this critical “contest of coercion” with far higher levels of force and, thus, compel the population to side with the legitimate government (Plakoudas, 2015, p. 132). The French, for example, *competed* efficiently with the National Liberation Front (FLN) in Algeria over violence and fear. The natives, in fact, dreaded the French *armée coloniale* more than the insurgents. According to the second variant of this approach, the insurgents represent the military wing of a mass political movement which, in turn, springs from popular discontent. Therefore, the state should use a balanced mix of reforms and repression that will both address the sources of widespread rancor and deny the insurgents’ control over the (local) population, depriving the irregulars of the resources vital for their armed struggle (Plakoudas, 2015, p. 133). During the Malayan Emergency (1948-60), for example, Britain suppressed the communist insurgency in two ways: by promising the people of Malaya independence from colonial rule and transferring the pro-insurgent peasantry into new villages under state supervision.

Though widely popular with the academic circles and military academies of the West in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the population-centric approach has been criticized as an overrated concept that offers solutions only at an operational or tactical level. In other words, this approach does not represent a strategy in itself, according to its polemic (Gentile, 2009, pp. 11-15; Cox & Bruscano, 2011). After all, the population-centric focus of the USA in Afghanistan, since 2007, has not yielded the results promised by its pundits.

How then should a government act to avoid a defeat? Irregular warfare involves a formidable variety of principles, paradoxes, and imperatives on COIN (Cohen, Crane, Horvath, Nagl, 2006, pp. 49-53). However, these principles should be used as a guide and not as gospel and, therefore, a state must always implement a situation-dependent policy (Kilcullen, 2009, p. 183; Springer, 2011, p. 38). In general terms, a successful strategy broadly contains five components, the political, diplomatic, economic, ideological, and military. However, a government may not employ all the available means or utilize them in different combinations at different phases of this irregular war. The *ways* a government uses all the available *means* varies for various reasons (e.g., the quarrels between the political and military leadership). One must always remember that strategy does not remain static during the course of a war. The “*reciprocal nature* of all action in war” suggests that the policies of a state interact with those of the insurgents and, by extension, evolve over time (Handel, 1992, pp. 94-95).<sup>6</sup>

### *Good governance*

Many theorists and practitioners of COIN have underlined the imperative of “good governance” (Shafer, 1988, p. 117; Fitzsimmons, 2009, pp. 11-14, 16-20) as targeted reforms; just governance usually increase the legitimacy and popularity of a state authority (O’Neill, 2005, pp. 171-172; Gregg, 2009, p. 25). Just and legitimate governance, how-

<sup>6</sup> Handel (1992), emphasis on the original.



ever, should not be associated exclusively with a specific type of regime, such as a Western-style liberal democracy (Gregg, 2009, pp. 23-25). Often, the person who governs, not the method of governance per se, matters most (Fitzsimmons, 2009, pp. 278-279). The culturally-acceptable standards of legitimacy of the (local) people should be understood and respected (Cordesman, 2005, p. 16; Gregg, 2009, p. 24). For example, in Afghanistan, the elders and imams play a pivotal role in the governance of villages—as they have for centuries. In south-east Turkey, as well, the so-called *aghas* (the Kurdish feudal lords) still manage whole villages through private armies.

The counterinsurgent should be pre-occupied with how to improve the quality of governance, not what political system to adopt (Cordesman, 2006, pp. 14-15). However, good governance does not represent a panacea for every irregular threat; nor can good governance alone secure victory (Hazelton, 2013).<sup>7</sup> David Kilcullen (2006), a renowned Australian soldier-theorist during the War on Terror, upheld that a state must accomplish four core political objectives: a) provide lawful and just governance, b) strengthen the institutional capacity of the state, c) rally the people under the flag, and d) re-integrate the insurgents back to society (p. 5).

### *Outside support*

Outside support has been recognized as a key factor (Byman, Chalk, Hoffman, Rosenau & Brannan, 2001, pp. 83-102; Salehyan, Gleditsch, Cunningham, 2011, pp. 709-744) and facilitator (Record, 2006, pp. 36-49) for the success of an insurgency and, therefore, a state should sever the insurgents' ties with the outside world (Manwaring, 2001, pp. 20-21; Staniland, 2005-2006, pp. 21-40). Usually, the counterinsurgents endeavor to achieve this isolation via diplomacy (e.g., a direct appeal to the insurgents' allies to cease this intervention in a third country's internal affairs). The vigorous propagandization of a persuasive cause (Cornish, 2009, pp. 76-78; Amend, 2010, pp. 222-226) and the continuous support from external allies (Handel, 1981, p. 120; Byman, 2006, p. 87)—especially powerful ones— increase the effectiveness of a counterinsurgent's diplomatic campaign. For example, Turkey successfully isolated the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) internationally in the 1990s thanks to its persuasive counter-narrative and powerful allies (most notably, the USA).

However, diplomacy does not always yield results; the neutralization of outside support for the insurgents may also require military operations against the foreign supporters of these insurgents (Trinquier, 1964, pp. 83-88; Salehyan, 2008, pp. 54-66). In 1998, for instance, Turkey threatened Syria with open war unless the latter ceased support for the PKK. Conversely, a beleaguered government can appeal to its external allies for aid and even intervention in its support. For example, the pro-Western regime in Saigon invited

7 For an extensive analysis of this view, see "The False Promise of the Governance Model of Counterinsurgency Warfare" (Hazelton, 2013).

the USA to intervene militarily against the twin threats of the Vietcong and Vietminh in the 1960s.

### *Welfare*

A government should protect the welfare of its citizens during a “war amongst the people” and, most importantly, redress the socio-economic wellsprings of the insurgency in a timely and qualified way (Barrett, 2009, pp. 43-44; Berman, Shapiro & Felter, 2011, pp. 766-819). Such a social and economic policy would provide public services (e.g., electricity) and emergency humanitarian relief (e.g., food) to the suffering people (Gompert, Kelly, Stearns Lawson, Parker & Colloton, 2009, pp. xiv-xv). For example, the monarchist regime in Greece won the *battle for the stomachs* of the people and, thus, the war against the communist insurgency in the 1940s.

A state may well request economic aid from its external allies (and the international community as well) in support of its welfare and relief policies, especially a failed or fragile state. However, funds (no matter how generous) do not operate as a magic formula for victory (Moyar, 2011, p. 2). In truth, economic aid to a beleaguered government without any insistence by the donors on reforms and transparency will inevitably lead to the misuse of the aid (Fishstein & Wilder, 2012, pp. 42-51; Connable, 2013, p. 35). The International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), for example, did not insist on the above, and successive Afghan governments have squandered the international economic aid since 2001 due to endemic corruption. The same applies to the aid by the USA to Iraq in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion.

### *Narrative*

Sir Frank Kitson (1977), a famous British warrior-scholar of the Cold War, declared that an insurgency differed from other types of war for being “primarily concerned with the struggle for men’s minds” (p. 290). Quite naturally, ideology forms an integral element of a conflict waged for the “hearts and minds” of the population (McFate & Jackson, 2006, p. 19). A state should propagandize a “narrative” that the population understands and supports (Cornish, 2009, pp. 76-78). Turkey, for instance, demonized the PKK as a Zoroastrian or Armenian terrorist group and effectively decreased its appeal among the conservative and religious Kurds.

A government should also try to win the “favor” of the international audience (Cornish, 2009, pp. 76-78). For example, Colombia internationalized the violent conflict against the FARC through a vigorous information campaign –supported by the USA. The government should not just subvert the insurgents’ narrative but also construct and actively propagate a “narrative of victory.” A government should not, however, cultivate unrealistic expectations of victory to avoid credibility issues (Hoffman, 2007, p. 82; Cohen,

Crane, Horvath, Nagl, 2006, p. 51). The Tet Offensive in 1968, for example, shattered the Johnson Administration's "narrative of victory" that claimed that the USA was winning the war in South Vietnam against the Vietcong.

### *Security*

Security operations in COIN intend to achieve two principal objectives: a) furnish a fair measure of security to the (local) people and b) neutralize the insurgent threat. Because the majority of the population regularly stays neutral until coerced or convinced to side with one faction (Galula, 1964, p. 56; Marks, 1992, p. 43), the state can fatally weaken the insurgents by denying them control of this "silent majority" (Kilcullen, 2006, p. 5; Cohen et al., 2006, p. 50). Given that this war is waged amongst the (local) people, a government ought to use the military tool with caution to avoid civilian casualties. Indiscriminate violence (Thompson, 1966, pp. 50-58; Kitson, 1971, p. 165; Cohen et al., 2006, pp. 51-52) and disrespect for the rule of law can greatly minimize the popularity and legitimacy of a counterinsurgent (Cohen et al., 2006, p. 51; Etzioni, 2011, pp. 21-22). For example, the mass violence by Nazi Germans turned away even those peoples of the USSR (e.g., Ukrainians) who had greeted them as liberators in 1941.

The security policies of a state usually undergo an evolutionary process. The state re-orientates its army from regular to irregular warfare (e.g., use of drones) (Trinquier, 1964, pp. 3-5; Galula, 1964, pp. 68-69), absorbs the harsh lessons of irregular warfare (e.g., use of armored units in urban environments) (Sepp, 2005, pp. 8-12), and adapts to the prevailing circumstances (e.g., adopt a clear-build-hold doctrine) (Cohen et al., 2006, p. 51). The British, for example, underwent a similar uphill process; after 12 years, they prevailed over the communist insurgency in the Malayan Emergency.

These military operations depend on timely and reliable intelligence for their efficacy and information, which, in turn, stems from an astute understanding of the (local) population and a solid commitment to the security of the non-combatants (Cohen et al., 2006, p. 50; Kilcullen, 2010, pp. 155-156). For example, the USA's breakdown in Afghanistan is owed partly to the failure of successive Washington policy-makers to understand the inner workings of the traditional Afghan society and offer the ordinary villagers a fair measure of security. In general, the government and its military must adapt and evolve continuously (Cohen et al., 2006, p. 51; Alderson, 2007a, pp. 16-21; Alderson, 2007b, pp. 12-19); the military must become, in effect, a learning organization (Nagl, 2005, pp. 213-225).

Several theorists and practitioners have stressed the imperative of political primacy in COIN, i.e., the need to subordinate every policy to the pursuit of specific political objectives and secure political control over the direction of the war (Joes, 1996, pp. 8-9; Cohen et al., 2006, p. 50). After all, the integration of civil and military actions (unity

of effort) constitutes one of the cornerstones of theory and practice in COIN (Cohen et al., 2006, p. 50; Gompert et al., 2009, p. 182; Schadlow, 2010, p. 184). Under Sir Gerald Templer, the British achieved a robust unity of effort in the Malayan Emergency and implemented a sound COIN strategy. However, other variables, such as the type of a regime (Zhukov, 2007, pp. 458-460; DeVore, 2013, pp. 169-191) and its military culture (Cassidy, 2008, pp. 37-126; Kitzen, 2012, pp. 1-24) may exert a heavy influence on a state's security policy. For example, the Bolsheviks used excessive force (even poisonous gases) to quell all armed opposition to their rule during the first years of the Soviet iron-fist rule.

## Conclusion

Despite claims to the contrary (Van Creveld, 2008, p. 268), the majority of insurgencies from 1815 to 2010 ended in defeat for the insurgents, according to a recent study (Gorka & Kilcullen, 2011, p. 17). Indicatively, Turkey suppressed four uprisings by the Kurds (1925, 1927-1930, 1937-1938, and 1984-1999) in the 20<sup>th</sup> century without suffering any territorial losses. Similarly, Assad defeated an insurgency supported by outside powers against all the odds and, after a grueling 8-year war, victory is near.

Although according to experts, the most durable peace settlements of such wars occur on the battlefield and not at the negotiation table (Toft, 2009, pp. 5-6; Luttwak, 1999, pp. 36-44), military victory over an insurgency does not necessarily translate into a permanent peace; often, space and time allow the insurgents to regroup and reclaim any lost ground (Kiras, 2008, pp. 229-232). For example, Turkey defeated the PKK in 1999, but the latter started its armed campaign anew in 2004. Moreover, the Caliphate was destroyed after the capture of Raqqa and Mosul but, as the recent crescendo of attacks demonstrates, ISIS still operates underground in eastern Syria and northern Iraq.

War is not a static phenomenon; war constantly evolves owing to the interaction of the belligerents. For that reason, the above three scenarios can manifest during the course of an insurgency: military victory for one side, peace negotiations (or even a peace treaty), and a stalemate. The case of the PKK in Turkey is an iconic example. The PKK was routed entirely in 1999; in 2004, it rose from its ashes like a phoenix and started a new armed struggle. In 2013, it agreed to initiate a peace dialogue with Erdogan, which collapsed in 2015 amidst mutual recriminations of "bad faith" (Plakoudas, 2018).

## Disclaimer

The author does not declare any conflict of interest concerning this article.

## Funding

The author does not declare any source of funding for this article.

## About the author

**Spyridon Plakoudas** is an Assistant Professor of Homeland Security in Rabdan Academy, a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of Macedonia, Thessaloniki and Adjunct Lecturer at the Hellenic National Defence College. He was previously Adjunct Lecturer at Panteion University. He holds a PhD in War Studies from the University of Reading. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7271-5940> - [spyridon.plakoudas@aeu.ac](mailto:spyridon.plakoudas@aeu.ac)

## References

- Alderson, A. (2007a). Counter-insurgency: Learn and Adapt? Can We Do Better? *British Army Review*, 142, 16-21.
- Alderson, A. (2007b). Learning, Adapting, Applying US Counter-insurgency Doctrine and Practice. *RUSI Journal*, 152(6), 12-19.
- Amend, K. (2010). Counterinsurgency principles for the diplomat. *Orbis*, 45(2), 222-226.
- Amidror, Y. (2010). Winning counterinsurgency war: The Israeli experience. *Strategic Perspectives*, 2, 1-42.
- Arreguin-Toft, I. (2005). *How the weak win wars: A theory of asymmetric conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Barrett, T. J. (2009). *Operationalizing economics for counterinsurgency and stability operations* (pp. 43-44). Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: US Army Command and General Staff College.
- Beckett, I. (2007). Victory, counter-insurgency and Iraq. In I. Duyvesteyn, & J. Ångström (Eds.), *Understanding victory and defeat in contemporary war*. London: Routledge.
- Benjamin, M., & Davies, N. J. S. (2018). The staggering death toll in Iraq. *Salon*. Retrieved from [https://www.salon.com/2018/03/19/the-staggering-death-toll-in-iraq\\_partner/](https://www.salon.com/2018/03/19/the-staggering-death-toll-in-iraq_partner/)
- Berman, E., Shapiro, J. N., & Felter, J. H. (2011). Can hearts and minds be bought? The economics of counterinsurgency in Iraq. *Journal of Political Economy*, 119(4), 766-819.
- Bernstein, J. (2012). Negotiating the insurgency: The case for settling Afghanistan's war and securing "negative" peace. *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, 7(1), 23-37.
- Byman, D., Chalk, P., Hoffman, B., Rosenau, W., & Brannan, D. (2001). *Trends in outside support for insurgent movements*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
- Byman, D. (2006). Friends like these: Counterinsurgency and the war on terrorism. *International Security*, 31(2), 79-115.
- Byman, D. (2009). Talking with insurgents: A guide for the perplexed. *Washington Quarterly*, 32(2), 127-129.
- Call, C. T., & Cousens, E. M. (2008). Ending wars and building peace: International responses to war-torn societies. *International Studies Perspectives*, 9(1), 1-21.
- Campbell, J., O'Hanlon, M., & Shapiro, J. (2009). *Assessing counterinsurgency and stabilization missions*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institute.
- Cassidy, R. M. (2008). *Counterinsurgency and the global war on terror: Military cultures and irregular war*. Westport: Praeger Security International.
- Clancy, J., & Crosset, C. (2007). Measuring effectiveness in irregular warfare. *Parameters*, 37(2), 88-100.
- Cohen, E., Crane, C., Horvath, J., & Nagl, J. (2006). Principles, imperatives and paradoxes of counterinsurgency. *Military Review*, 86(2), 49-53.
- Connable, B., & Libicki, M. C. (2010). *How insurgencies end*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
- Connable, B. (2013). *Leveraging development aid to address root causes in counterinsurgency: Balancing theory and practice in "hold" and "build"*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.

- Cordesman, A. H. (2005). *The Iraq war and its strategic lessons for counterinsurgency*. Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Cordesman, A. H. (2006). *The importance of building local capabilities: Lessons from the counterinsurgency in Iraq*. Washington DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies.
- Cornish, P. (2009). The United States and counterinsurgency: 'Political first, political last, political always.' *International Affairs*, 85(1), 76-78.
- Cox, D. G., & Brusolino, T. (Eds.). (2011). *Population-centric counterinsurgency: A false idol?* Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: US Army Combined Arms Center.
- Derouen, K., Bercovitch, J., & Wei, J. (2009). Duration of peace and recurring civil wars in Southeast Asia and the Pacific. *Civil Wars*, 11(2), 103-120.
- DeVore, M. R. (2013). Institutions, culture and counterinsurgency operations: Why do States fight similar insurgencies differently? *Comparative Strategy*, 32(3), 169-191.
- Duyvesteyn, I., & Schuurman, B. (2011). The paradoxes of negotiating with terrorist and insurgent organisations. *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 39(4), 678-679.
- Elbadawi, I., & Sambanis, N. (2000). *External interventions and the duration of civil wars*. Washington DC: World Bank.
- Elbadawi, I., & Sambanis, N. (2002). How much war will we see? Explaining the prevalence of civil war. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 46(3), 307-334. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022002702046003001>
- Etzioni, A. (2011). Whose COIN? *Joint Force Quarterly*, 60(1), 21-22.
- Fishstein, P., & Wilder, A. (2012). *Winning hearts and minds? Examining the relationship between aid and security in Afghanistan*. Medford, MA: Tufts University, Feinstein International Center.
- Fitzsimmons, M. F. (2009). *Governance, identity and counterinsurgency strategy* (Ph.D. Thesis). University of Maryland, College Park.
- Galula, D. (1964). *Counterinsurgency warfare: Theory and practice*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Gentile, G. P. (2009). A strategy of tactics: Population-centric COIN and the Army. *Parameters*, 39(3), 11-15.
- Gompert, D. C., Kelly, T., Stearns Lawson, B., Parker, M., & Colloton, K. (2009). *Reconstruction under fire: Unifying civil and military counterinsurgency*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
- Gorka, S., & David Kilcullen, D. (2011). An actor-centric theory of war: Understanding the difference between COIN and counterinsurgency. *Joint Force Quarterly*, 60(1), 14-18.
- Greenhill, K. M., & Major, S. (2006-2007). The perils of profiling: Civil war spoilers and the collapse of intrastate peace accords. *International Security*, 31(3), 7-40.
- Gregg, H. S. (2009). Beyond population engagement: Understanding counterinsurgency. *Parameters*, 39(3), 23-25.
- Handel, M. (1981). *Weak states in the international system*. London: Cass.
- Handel, M. (1992). *Masters of war: classical strategic thought* (1st ed.). London: Frank Cass.
- Hartzell, C., & Hoddie, M. (2003). Institutionalizing peace: Power sharing and post-civil war conflict management. *American Journal of Political Science*, 47(2), 318-332.
- Hazelton, J. L. (2013). *The false promise of the governance model of counterinsurgency warfare*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the American Political Studies Association (APSA), "Power and Persuasion." Illinois (USA), 29 August–1 September.
- Henry, L. W. (2006). *What is the role of negotiations when countering an insurgency?* (MA Thesis). US Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California.
- Heuser, B. (2010). *The evolution of strategy: thinking war from antiquity to the present*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hoffman, F. G. (2007). Neo-classical counterinsurgency? *Parameters*, 37(2), 1-17.



- Joes, A. J. (1996). *Guerrilla warfare: A historical, biographical and bibliographical sourcebook*. Westport, CT; London: Greenwood Press.
- Johnston, P. B. (2007). Negotiated settlements and government strategy in civil war: Evidence from Darfur. *Civil Wars*, 9(4), 559-577.
- Jones, D. (2006). *Understanding measures of effectiveness in counterinsurgency operations*. Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: US Army Command and General Staff College.
- Kalyvas, S. N. (2006). *The logic of violence in civil war*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Kaufmann, C. (1996). Possible and impossible solutions to ethnic civil wars. *International Security*, 20(4), 136-175.
- Kilcullen, D. (2006). *Three pillars of counterinsurgency*. Remarks delivered at the U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Conference. Washington DC (USA), 28 September.
- Kilcullen, D. (2009). *The accidental guerrilla: Fighting small wars in the midst of a big one*. London: Hurst.
- Kilcullen, D. (2010). Intelligence. In T. Rid, & T. Keane (Eds.), *Understanding counterinsurgency: Doctrine, operations and challenges*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Kilcullen, D. (2012). Counterinsurgency: The state of a controversial art. In P. B. Rich, & I. Duyvesteyn (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of insurgency and counterinsurgency*. London: Routledge.
- Kiras, J. D. (2008). Irregular warfare. In D. Jordan et al. (Eds.), *Understanding modern warfare* (pp. 224-291). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Kitson, F. (Sir). (1971). *Low intensity operations: Subversion, insurgency and peacekeeping*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kitson, F. (Sir). (1977). *Bunch of five*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Kitzen, M. (2012). Western military culture and counterinsurgency: An ambiguous reality. *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*, 40(1), 1-24.
- Licklider, R. (1993). What have we learned and where do we go from here? In R. Licklider (Comp.), *Stopping the killing* (pp. 306-315). New York: New York University Press.
- Licklider, R. E. (1993). *Stopping the killing: how civil wars end*. New York: New York University Press.
- Licklider, R. (1995). The consequences of negotiated settlements in civil wars, 1945-1993. *American Political Science Review*, 89(3), 681-690.
- Luttwak, E. (1999). Give war a chance. *Foreign Affairs*, 78(4), 36-44.
- Mack, A. (1975). Why big nations lose small wars: The politics of asymmetric conflict. *World Politics*, 27(2), 199-200.
- Manwaring, M. (2001). *Internal wars: Rethinking problem and response*. Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College.
- Marks, T. (1992). Making revolution: Sendero Luminoso in Peru. *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 3(1), 22-46.
- Mason, D. T., Weingarten, J. P., Jr., & Fett, P. J. (1999). Win, lose or draw: Predicting the outcome of civil wars. *Political Research Quarterly*, 52(2), 239-268.
- Mason, D. (2007). *Sustaining the peace after civil war*. Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College.
- Mattes, M., & Savun, B. (2009). Fostering peace after civil war: Commitment problems and agreement design. *International Studies Quarterly*, 53(3), 737-759.
- McCormick, G. H., Horton, S. H., & Harrison, L. A. (2009). Things fall apart: The endgame dynamics of internal wars. In M. T. Barger, & D. A. Borer (Eds.), *The long war: Insurgency, counterinsurgency and collapsing States*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- McFate, M., & Jackson, A. V. (2006). The object beyond war: Counterinsurgency and the four tools of political competition. *Military Review*, 86(15), 13-26.
- Moyar, M. (2011). *Development in Afghanistan's counterinsurgency: A new guide*. McLean, Washington D.C.: Orbis Operations.



- Nagl, J. (2005). *Learning to eat soup with a knife: Counterinsurgency lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.
- O'Neill, B. (2005). *From revolution to apocalypse: Insurgency and terrorism*. Washington D.C.: Potomac Books.
- Paul, C., Clarke, C. P., & Grill, B. (2010). *Victory has a thousand fathers, sources of success in counterinsurgency*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
- Plakoudas, S. (2015). Strategy in counterinsurgency: A distilled approach. *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 38(2), 132-133.
- Plakoudas, S. (2017). Doomed from the start? Peace negotiations in the Greek Civil War, January-July 1947. *Balkan Studies*, 50, 135-159.
- Plakoudas, S. (2018). *Insurgency and counter-insurgency in Turkey: The new PKK*. London; New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Preston, M. (2004). Stalemate and the termination of civil wars: Rhodesia reassessed. *Journal of Peace Research*, 41(1), 65-83.
- Pruitt, D. G. (2005). *Whither ripeness theory?* Retrieved from <https://gsdrc.org/document-library/whither-ripeness-theory/>
- Rabasa, A., & Haseman, J. B. (2002a). *The military and democracy in Indonesia: Challenges, politics, and power*. Retrieved from <http://purl.oclc.org/DLF/benchrepro0212>
- Rabasa, A., & Haseman J. B. (2002b). *The military and democracy in Indonesia: Challenges, politics and power*. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation.
- Record, J. (2006). External assistance: Enabler of insurgent success. *Parameters*, 36(3), 36-49.
- Regan, P. M. (2000). *Third-party interventions and the duration of intrastate conflicts*. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Political Science Association (APSA), Boston (USA), 28 August-1 September.
- Reiter, D. (2003). Exploring the Bargaining model of war. *Perspectives on Politics*, 1(1), 27-43.
- Salehyan, I. (2008). No shelter here: Rebel sanctuaries and international conflict. *Journal of Politics*, 70(1), 54-66.
- Salehyan, I., Gleditsch, K. S., & Cunningham, D. E. (2011). Explaining external support for insurgent groups. *International Organization*, 64(4), 709-744.
- Sepp, K. (2005). Best practices in counterinsurgency. *Military Review*, 85(3), 8-12.
- Schadlow, N. (2010). Governance. In T. Rid, & T. Keaney (Eds.), *Understanding counterinsurgency: Doctrine, operations and challenges*. London; New York: Routledge.
- Shafer, M. D. (1988). *Deadly paradigms: The failure of US Counterinsurgency Policy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Stedman, S. J. (1997). Spoiler problems in peace processes. *International Security*, 22(2), 5-53.
- Springer, N. R. (2011). *Stabilizing the debate between population-centric and enemy-centric counterinsurgency: Success demands a balanced approach* (MA Thesis). US Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.
- Staniland, P. (2005-2006). Defeating transnational insurgencies: The best offense is a good fence. *The Washington Quarterly*, 29(1), 21-40.
- Taber, R. (2002). *War of the Flea: The classic study of guerrilla warfare*. New York: Potomac Books.
- Themnér, L. L., & Wallensteen, P. (2013). Armed conflicts, 1946-2012: A new dataset. *Journal of Peace Research*, 50(4), 509-521.
- Thompson, R. (Sir). (1966). *Defeating communist insurgency: Experiences from Malaya and Vietnam*. London: Macmillan.
- Toft, M. D. (2005). *End of victory? Civil war termination in historical perspective*. Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the International Studies Association (ISA), Honolulu (USA), 3 May.

- Toft, M. D. (2009). *Securing the peace: The durable settlement of civil wars*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- Trinquier, R. (1964). *Modern warfare: A French view of counterinsurgency* (Daniel Lee, Trans.). New York: Praeger.
- Wagner, H. B. (2000). Bargaining and war. *American Journal of Political Science*, 43(3), 464-484.
- Walter, B. F. (1999). Designing transitions from civil war: Demobilization, democratization and commitments to peace. *International Security*, 24(1), 127-155.
- Walter, B. F. (2002). *Committing to peace: The successful settlement of civil wars*. Princeton; Oxford: Princeton University Press.
- Walter, B. F. (2013). Civil wars, conflict resolution, and Bargaining theory. In W. Carlsnaes, T. Risse, & B. A. Simmons (Eds.), *Handbook of international relations* (pp. 664-665). London: SAGE.
- Van Creveld, M. (2008). *The changing face of war: Combat from the Marne to Iraq*. New York: Presidio Press.
- Zartman, W. I. (1993). The unfinished agenda: Negotiating internal conflict. In R. Licklider (Ed.), *Stopping the killing: How civil wars end*. New York: New York University Press.
- Zartman, W. I. (1995). Dynamics and constraints in negotiations in internal conflicts. In I. William Zartman (Ed.), *Elusive peace: Negotiating an end to civil wars*. Washington D.C.: Brookings Institution.
- Zartman, W. I. (2001). The timing of peace initiatives: Hurting stalemates and ripe moments. *Global Review of Ethnopolitics*, 1(1), 8-18.
- Zhukov, Y. (2007). Examining the authoritarian model of counter-insurgency: The Soviet campaign against the Ukrainian insurgent army. *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, 18(3), 458-460.
- Zhukov, Y. (2014). *A theory of indiscriminate violence* (Ph.D. Thesis). Harvard University, Cambridge, MA.