

## SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

# Parochialism as a Central Challenge in Counterinsurgency

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America's power preponderance since the end of the Cold War has not translated into an ability to win quickly and decisively against insurgency. The U.S. military, designed to fight Soviet tanks on European battlefields, for the past decade has fought insurgents wearing flip-flops and using improvised explosives in Iraq and Afghanistan. Clear victories in counterinsurgency are rare, and these wars are costly (1) and long-lasting (table S1). Peace after civil wars, of which insurgencies are a subtype, is tenuous.

Is self-sustaining peace an elusive goal for U.S. intervention? How can the conduct of counterinsurgency (COIN) be better designed to shift violent, fragmented societies to a peaceful equilibrium? We describe how scientific knowledge on the determinants and characteristics of human parochialism—the tendency to cooperate with and favor members of one's group—should change the way we approach these questions.

## Insurgency and Parochialism

In an insurgency, an armed group or groups fight to depose the incumbent government by eroding its legitimacy and territorial control. Insurgency involves violence, but insurgents and civilian sympathizers also fill nonviolent roles, e.g., in intelligence, logistics, propaganda, service provision, and even governance. Throughout history, civilian support has been key to insurgents' ability to operate. Civilian support can be coerced but can also reflect commitment to the cause and prosocial behavior (e.g., hiding members of



A clearing operation in Marja, Afghanistan.

the resistance during the Nazi occupation of France; and providing food to American revolutionaries during the war of 1776).

Parochialism can be manifested in enhanced intragroup cooperation (e.g., by contributing to group-specific public goods or offering oneself to protect the group's security) but also in competitiveness and antisocial behavior toward rival outgroups (from diminished intergroup cooperation to preemptive strikes to neutralize threats from outgroups and attacks to increase the ingroup's resources and status) (2–13). COIN policies can make defeating insurgency harder by inadvertently activating ethnic or sectarian cleavages. If COIN reifies these social divisions, it can also undermine integrative institutions that cultivate a common national identity—institutions that are critical to the stability of postwar transitions.

Contemporary COIN tactics assume that civilians are uncommitted and seek to win their support by providing security and material incentives. COIN can be effective against opportunistic fighters and frightened civilians. However, the motive to fight and the impetus to support a particular side can vary, from marginalization (14); opportunistic profit-seeking (14, 15); fear, coer-

Current U.S. practice in Afghanistan may reify social divisions, which undermines institutions critical to postwar stability.

cion, or revenge (14, 16, 17); or political exclusion (18) to commitment to a group or cause (19). Evidence on the connection between violence and economic factors—such as employment and economic growth—is mixed (both across cases and, importantly, across regions or periods within particular cases) [see (20–26)]. Current approaches to COIN do not fully consider evidence on the determinants of parochial behavior in group settings. COIN operations can sow the seeds for future challenges to peace: As violence hardens group identities, counterinsurgency, which necessarily involves the use of force to secure territory, can strengthen the power of ethnic and/or local parochialism against efforts to gain the allegiance of the population.

## The Logic and Practice of COIN

As it faced escalating violence in Iraq's civil war in 2006–07, the U.S. military endeavored to relearn the theory and practice of COIN. Current COIN doctrine, which reflects this experience, places primacy on a “population-centric” approach [(27) and supplementary materials (SM)]. Only by getting the population to side with the government can counterinsurgents achieve victory. This represents a shift from an “enemy-centric” approach, which centered on the pursuit and destruction of the insurgents [e.g., (28), SM].

“Clear-hold-build” operations, the cornerstone of COIN in Iraq and currently at work in Afghanistan, rest on two central assumptions: that the majority of civilians can be induced to support the government if their security is guaranteed and that insurgents and their civilian sympathizers can be “flipped” if given sufficient incentives (29, 30) (SM). These assumptions derive from interpretation of a sample of historical cases of insurgency rather than scientific evidence on individual-level behavior in civil wars. The experiences of the British in Malaya, the French in Algeria, and the Americans in Vietnam have been particularly influential (31, 32).

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The logic of clear-hold-build operations is as follows. Operations aim first to destroy insurgents' military capabilities through offensive action and to separate them from the population ("clear") so that civilians can feel secure. The emphasis can then shift to defensive military operations to protect the population from insurgents. Counterinsurgents demonstrate presence through patrols, assess and remedy the population's immediate needs, police the population to further separate out insurgents and deter reinfiltration, and target the insurgency's infrastructure ("hold"). Counterinsurgents then assist in improving economic and human development and help institute political reforms ("build"). These activities, aided by an information campaign to explain and justify the events taking place, set the stage for effective governance over the long-term.

Counterinsurgents adopt the view that only a small number of individuals are committed activists for the insurgents, while most of the population attempts to remain neutral and swings toward whichever side can better guarantee their safety. As security increases, material improvements can be used to ensure ongoing cooperation with the government. Coercion and provision of goods, both public and private, are counted upon to create sufficient incentives to support the government.

#### Understanding COIN Through Scientific Research on Individual Behavior

The COIN doctrine's characterization of individual behavior is incomplete. Security-seeking

is a key motivation, but it is not always paramount, and human behavior is shaped by parochialism. Theoretical analysis (2) and archaeological and ethnographic evidence (3) suggest the emergence of parochial altruism in early humans where competition for resources favored groups with individuals willing to engage in conflict with outsiders on behalf of their group. Studies of group behavior further find that individuals do not automatically care about—or identify with—every group they belong to. Rather, identification is sensitive to factors shaping the salience of group boundaries, intra- and intergroup interactions, and group status. Some major empirical findings on parochialism in observed behavior are summarized in the table [for studies on stereotypes and prejudice, see (33)].

A first empirical finding is that even arbitrary assignment of individuals into groups is sufficient to trigger discriminatory behavior (34, 35) and to generate altruistic behavior toward ingroup members and malevolent (envious) behavior toward outgroup members (13). Thus, any identity-based boundary that can plausibly define the government and counterinsurgent forces as belonging to an outgroup in reference to the target population can activate parochialism. This can hinder cooperation and counter the effectiveness of coercion and material incentives in gaining the population's support.

A second set of findings indicates that conditions, including institutions, which increase the salience of group membership

or divisions, tend to increase parochialism (5, 12, 35). This is especially true with respect to intergroup conflict and violence. Individuals contribute more to their group under intergroup conflict when such contributions harm outgroup members (9). Even judges show significantly more bias against litigants from the opposite ethnic group after ethnically based terrorist activity near the court (7). There is also evidence that indiscriminate violence and "collateral damage" polarize the population (17, 36). Coercion and violence directed by counterinsurgents against the local population are therefore uniquely problematic because they harden group boundaries.

This is an important lesson. Consider evidence on civil wars since 1945. Over half are ethnic (37), and ethnicity figures prominently in historical case studies of even wars that are not coded as being of an "ethnic" nature. Yet most empirical studies find no association between ethno-linguistic fractionalization and civil war onset (38). Others find a positive correlation between ethnic polarization (few large groups rather than many small ones) and conflict. But even then, polarization by itself explains very little of the variation in the incidence of civil war. Countries that are similar in ethnic structure—as well as along geographic, economic, and political lines—still exhibit quite different levels of conflict (39). Some highly diverse countries—like Angola, Indonesia, and Sudan—have experienced periods of intense violent conflict, whereas similarly diverse countries—like Tanzania, Zambia, and Brazil—

BEHAVIORAL EVIDENCE ON PAROCHIALISM

Setting	Data source*	Task	Main findings†	Factors shown to enhance parochialism
Dictator games	Lab (13), Field (8, 44, 11)	Allocate endowment between self and other.	Ingroup bias	Mere categorization into groups (13); subjective closeness to one's ethnic group (8); third-party punishment by ingroup member (44); mutual knowledge of coethnicity (11).
Minimal group paradigm	Lab	Allocate resources between anonymous ingroup and outgroup members	Ingroup bias	Mere categorization into groups (34, 35); high group status (42).
Public goods games	Lab (12, 9, 4), Field (5, 10, 11)	Allocate endowment between self and contribution to group. Zero contribution maximizes own payoff; full contribution maximizes total (ingroup) payoffs. In some games contributions also affect outgroup payoffs.	Higher cooperation with ingroup than with outgroup members	Random assignment to platoons (10); Intragroup interaction (12); intergroup competition (12, 9); segregated institutions (5).
Voting games	Lab	Vote over redistribution of income.	Ingroup bias	Low monetary cost for supporting group (40).
Judicial decisions in court	Natural	Award or deny monetary transfers between litigants in civil cases.	Ethnic ingroup bias	Recent ethnic violence in vicinity of court (7).
Time and risk preference elicitation	Lab	Choose between receiving money earlier and receiving a larger amount later; choose between a sure sum and a lottery.	Conformity to ingroup norms	Salience of group membership (45).

\*Lab: lab experiments; field: field experiments; natural: naturally occurring data. †Ingroup bias: preferential treatment of members of one's group.

have been relatively peaceful. It is not ethnicity per se but ethnicity made salient by violent conflict that leads to a vicious cycle in which violence and parochialism reinforce each other (39). COIN operations can inadvertently fuel this cycle.

Third, actively supporting one's group is sensitive to the cost of doing so (40). Parochialism does not trump other motives under all conditions. On the one hand, this is consistent with clear-hold-build. On the other hand, group loyalty is often cultivated in war, especially among combatants, and is widely considered a primary motivation for risking one's life in battle (41). During the American Civil War, fewer than 10% of Union soldiers deserted—although chances of being caught were low and risk of death if arrested insignificant—and consistent with experimental results, desertion was lower in more homogeneous units (6). Moreover, the government cannot maintain the high level of coercive force used during COIN over the long run, particularly when its efforts are supported by foreign forces. Parochialism could manifest itself in the postwar period, hindering the transition to peace. And material incentives alone are unlikely to be sufficient to guarantee the support of a population where ethnic or sectarian identification is entrenched and the government is part of the outgroup. Indeed, because parochialism tends to increase with the status of the relevant ingroup (42), material inducements to key social groups might even be counterproductive. The high risk of civil war recurrence and the difficulty in reaching and implementing agreements for power-sharing and integration of the rebels into the national army (table S1) are also indicative of these problems.

In Afghanistan, a large randomized control trial finds that development aid improved perceived security and attitudes toward the government only in districts with already low levels of violence (23). Where the level of conflict was high, aid could not buy loyalty or improve security. Ethnicity alone does not explain this. Residents of the most violent Pashtun regions, but not other Pashtun regions, maintained negative attitudes toward the government, despite welfare improvements. A survey experiment in the Pashtun-dominated southern provinces also questions whether aid had any effect on attitudes (24). Overall, the effects of COIN-related strategies are far from uniform. Development aid has exacerbated violence in some cases (25) and improved security in others (21), and the effect depends on the time period or region analyzed and the nature of the aid programs and types of violence considered (22). Exist-

ing evidence does not allow us to speculate as to how much the activation of parochialism accounts for variation in COIN success. It is clear, however, that short-term, strategic alliances across group boundaries are no indicator of parochialism's absence, although sometimes interpreted as such. Pragmatic alliances forged during conflict rarely reflect deep convictions. They are also no guarantee that, absent war's pressures, parochialism will not shape postconflict cooperation patterns.

Scientific research has yet to establish the relative importance of parochialism in explaining human behavior compared with material incentives. There is also need for more experimental evidence on the antisocial aspects of parochialism and the long-term effects of conflict on parochialism. Yet existing evidence is sufficient to raise concerns about the potential for intergroup cooperation in societies where COIN-related violence has reified ethnic, religious, or other cleavages.

The current approach to COIN is supposed to have worked in Iraq. This seemingly validates assumptions about individual behavior in insurgencies. Yet U.S. policy-makers may have drawn the wrong lessons. The 2007 military "surge" in Iraq did result in security gains (21), but clear-hold-build cannot claim all—or even most—of the credit for COIN's apparent success. Rather, the Sunni "awakening" was key to the defeat of al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI) and led to the transformation of the Iraqi army into a national, integrative institution in the making. The threat of Iranian domination and Sunni resentment of AQI's indiscriminate violence pushed Sunni elites to collaborate with the United States and the Shia-led government (43). The Iraq experience does not travel to Afghanistan, where COIN is not assisted by a common external threat or a preexisting strong national identity that can bring the insurgent factions together to side with the government. In the presence of social divisions, COIN as currently practiced can both compound the difficulty of defeating the armed challenge and make nation-building even harder.

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