Winning the War in Afghanistan: Echoes of Northern Ireland and the IRA?

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Seven years ago, the Taliban regime was deposed by Operation Enduring Freedom, and a seemingly new future was offered (if not promised) to Afghanistan. Yet today, Afghanistan is anything but a stable and secure country. The spiralling Afghan insurgency, as well as a responsive counterinsurgency, has claimed the lives of over 3,200 people this year alone.¹

It is reasonable to argue that 2008 has witnessed Afghanistan fall further into the abyss of instability and chaos: the re-emergent Taliban² seems stronger than ever and has even been able to install shadow governments in certain districts in the east and south of the country. Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden remain very much alive and influential in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. Afghan President Hamid Karzai’s regime, which has minimal influence outside of the Kabul city limits, is increasingly viewed as illegitimate by non-Kabuli Afghans.³ Corruption driven by record opium crops⁴ still permeates all levels of society and government. Lastly, civilian death tolls continue to mount⁵ and fissures are beginning to appear in NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) coalition.

The problems in Afghanistan are compounded by the fact that the ongoing political and military crisis in Afghanistan has been partially eclipsed by contemporary problems in Iraq. But it is arguably Afghanistan, rather than Iraq, that is the more significant theatre in the war on terror. The depth and urgency of the Afghan crisis are evident from the escalation of insurgent violence, with 2007 being the most deadly
year since the initiation of Operation Enduring Freedom in October 2001. Last year witnessed a significant increase in Taliban and insurgent operations, making for a destabilization “surge.” Yet this year, things are even worse, as evidenced by Table 1, which presents coalition military fatalities by month and year. It is clear that 2008 will continue the trend of annual increases in coalition fatalities and serve as an additional indicator that things are not well in Afghanistan.

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Table 1: Coalition Military Fatalities By Year and Month

The insurgency has moved significantly beyond the south and east of the country and is now even closing in on Kabul. The Senlis Council has recently written that “the Taliban has shown itself to be a truly resurgent force” with an “ability to establish a presence throughout the country.”

The current approach of the U.S. and its NATO allies in Afghanistan is simply not working, and our strategy in this vital setting for the struggle against terrorism urgently requires rethinking. This article is based on the assumption that such a rethinking requires both a deep contextual knowledge of the Afghan political and security situation and an ability to learn from the lessons of post-conflict and violence-plagued zones elsewhere. We draw on lessons learned from recent Northern Irish experiences of terrorism and counterterrorism and consider these in relation to how we should proceed most effectively in the current and future situation within Afghanistan.

AFGHANISTAN: NORTHERN IRELAND REDUX

There are, of course, some significant differences between the two settings considered here. The timeline is different, with the Northern Ireland conflict erupting in the late 1960s and the immediate Afghan crisis emerging as this century’s phenomenon; the historical contexts of the Afghan state and the Northern Ireland state are different; the religious cultures involved in the Northern Ireland and Afghanistan combatant groups diverge in significant and drastic respects; and the respective scales of disorder, crisis, and military engagement have been different in the two places.

However, there are striking echoes and similarities between the Northern Irish
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First, in each case, we find the extraordinary power of religiously infused ethnic identity. The Provisional IRA emerged and fought as an explicitly nationalist movement, pursuing the goal of national self-determination and attempting to further the communal interests of the Irish people as such. But it did so with backing from a very particular ethnic community within Northern Ireland—the nationalist community there—and this community was overwhelmingly drawn from one side of a starkly drawn religious divide between Catholics and Protestants. In terms of membership, the IRA was almost exclusively Catholic; Irish nationalism had, since the early nineteenth century, effectively been a Catholic phenomenon.

Parallel to the conflict in Ireland is that of Afghanistan. Proto-nationalist Taliban and other insurgent groups are seeking to overthrow the democratically elected Afghan government in favor of a state run almost exclusively by leaders of the Pashtun ethnicity, according to a very specific (and bastardized) code of Deobandi Islam. Fiercely xenophobic and long the rivals of other ethno-linguistic groups in Afghanistan, the Taliban has also sought to construe its opponents as un-Islamic for their belief in other sects or schools of Islamic law.

Second, in both cases we see the profound intersection of rival nationalisms with violence, as well as considerable tension between nation and state. Both cases also point toward the political importance of historic tensions between nation and state and the significance of fierce opposition to foreign rule. In Ireland, the IRA felt that the six-county state in the northeast was wrongly incorporated into a hostile state (the United Kingdom) and that violence was legitimate as the only effective means of liberating that territory from British control. The IRA sought the establishment of an independent and united Ireland: a state comprising the entire Irish island and one that was fully independent of British power. Similarly, the Taliban seeks to establish an Islamic Emirate in Afghanistan of the type they almost had from 1996 to 2001. To their minds, all that prevents them from achieving this goal is the presence of foreign troops, even if the majority of Afghans have no desire to return to Taliban rule either.

Third, both the IRA and the Taliban have practiced violence that has straddled the division between terrorism and insurgent or guerrilla warfare. This is a vital point. If terrorism is defined according to the U.S. State Department (“premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against non-combatant targets by sub-national groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience”), then it is clear...
that both the IRA and the Taliban have indeed practiced terrorism but also that not all of their violence has been terrorist in nature. The IRA did kill hundreds of civilians, many of them murdered in an unambiguously terrorist fashion. However, it also more frequently killed military or security personnel. The Taliban treads the line between terrorism and insurgency as well. Undoubtedly they would like to be insurgents, but without true popular support they are relegated to terrorist and criminal acts in order to perpetuate their organization. This can most easily be seen in the surge in the use of improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and in suicide attacks, as well as their increasing reliance on narcotics as a source of revenue. Additionally, the Taliban has been attacking in much larger units than they were previously and overrunning district centers with alarming frequency.

In both the Irish and Afghan cases, we have seen a deployment of violence for political ends in ways that include terrorism. Despite an understandable tendency for Western governments to highlight the terrorist complexion of their enemies’ campaigns, this combination of different forms of violence is often what we actually face when dealing with terrorism across much of the world. An effective response to this challenge requires honest recognition of such a reality.

Finally, there are also numerous organizational similarities between our two case studies. Both the IRA and the Taliban have benefited very significantly from international support. In the IRA’s case, this involved both the backing of some U.S. sympathizers and the help offered by sympathetic regimes, including that of Libya’s Colonel Gaddafi. Such international support networks provided money, weaponry, and other forms of important backing for the IRA’s lengthy campaign. The IRA also made good use of the porous border between Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic, storing weapons in the latter (beyond the jurisdiction of the United Kingdom) and often launching attacks from or establishing safe havens in the Republic rather than in the more deeply hostile atmosphere of the north.

Outside support and areas of safe haven have also been vital for the Taliban. In terms of comparison, one could easily equate the financial support of Irish-Americans for the IRA to that given the Taliban by Pakistan’s Inter-Service Intelligence (ISI) and the Saudi intelligence and government. The Taliban, reliant on external funding, have managed to maintain strong financial ties outside Afghanistan’s borders, and gunrunning has been closely linked to financial support in both the Afghan and Irish cases. Again, the Taliban have enjoyed the benefits of secure and reliable areas of geographic
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The Provisional IRA, particularly from the mid-1970s onwards, gave great organizational autonomy to local operatives. Initially organized along traditional military lines (into brigades, battalions, and so forth), the IRA then moved during the 1970s toward a more flexible cellular structure, with the result that considerable initiative and autonomy were enjoyed by local units. This reflected and reinforced the varied pattern of IRA activity with some areas, such as south Armagh, becoming particularly dynamic and active. This is a pattern echoed in Afghanistan. For example, the Quetta Shura, controlled by Mullah Omar, was able to exert its will throughout much of the area controlled by the Taliban. In the current insurgent environment, however, it has proved much more difficult for the Taliban to maintain any effective central control over the various commanders throughout the provinces. Today’s Taliban is being forced once again to depend on operations originated and executed at the local level, with the shuras attempting to at least exude the appearance of control. This has led to a number of localized political and tribal accommodations and complexities.

Within Northern Ireland, much of the IRA’s energy and activity has been devoted to intracommunal efforts at control, a phenomenon that has existed long into the peace process period of the 1990s and beyond. Punishment beatings, shootings, intimidation, and murder have all been used in order to establish, maintain, and enforce control in areas populated by republican constituencies. This intracommunal dimension of the IRA’s long war was often eclipsed by its conflict with the British state and with the unionists of Northern Ireland. But intracommunal punishment attacks occupied much of the Provisionals’ energy, as those Catholics in the north who were deemed to be engaged in antisocial action (such as repeated house robberies, car thefts, or joy-riding) were brutally policed with, for example, beatings or kneecappings (the shooting of victims through their knees). These were extremely numerous, with Irish republicans carrying out 1,228 punishment shootings between 1973 and 1997, and a further 755 beatings from 1982 to 1997.

Clearly, there was a problem in some republican areas with petty (and with not so petty) crime; it also seems clear that in some cases people’s real crime was to have defied the writ of the IRA. Intracommunal vendettas and power struggles played their part in these gruesome IRA policing methods. In Afghanistan, a significant part of the Taliban’s appeal and strength has been its willingness and ability to impose law and order amid chaos. Prior to their ouster in 2001, many crimes in areas they controlled were punished summarily and brutally. The person punished may not have always been the guilty party, but someone was always punished. Despite economic reliance on opium production, the Taliban did wage a short yet successful campaign against the cultivation of poppy throughout much of the country. Today, the Taliban is forced to deal with a
number of rival internal and external factions often with competing interests: Gulbuddin Hekmatyar’s Hezb-e Islami (HiG), the Tora Bora Front, the Haqqani network, various warlords, and other groups linked to the former Northern Alliance. While the Taliban may show a willingness to cooperate with some of these groups due to a shared animosity toward the Karzai government and international forces, they harbor no long-term power-sharing plans with these factions. The result is occasional violent clashes between these groups and a willingness to betray their temporary partners to the coalition or the Karzai government. Indeed, groups such as HiG are consistently formulating plans to supplant the Taliban in case the Karzai government falls. Just as those deemed to be cooperating with the IRA’s enemies in Ireland were frequently targeted and punished as a result, so too the Taliban wages a constant campaign against those who may sympathize or work with the Karzai government, international forces, or even international aid organizations. Ignoring the Taliban’s threats has often resulted in bombings, assassinations, public executions, and increasing levels of threats.

Implications of the Afghan and Irish Cases

What lessons can we draw from reflection on these significant Afghan-Irish comparisons? Are there broader implications for how to deal with the crisis in Afghanistan, and indeed with the problems posed by terrorist and insurgent violence in other settings? Five points are especially important.

First, in both the Northern Irish 1970s and the post-9/11 era of the war on terror, we can clearly see the counterproductive dangers of over-militarizing our response to terrorism. In this sense, the war on terror model has arguably been an obstacle rather than an advantage in recent years. Superior military force, well-suited to the winning of formal military conflict, has proved repeatedly counter-productive in settings where the state faces embedded terrorist and insurgent violence.

In 1970s Northern Ireland, the British Army did eventually help to contain the worst excesses of intercommunal disorder, but at a high price in terms of the anti-state disaffection that they had generated in the process. One-sided curfew and internment policies between 1970 and 1971—combined with heavy-handed treatment of internees and of suspect communities beyond the jails—helped to stimulate precisely the kind of anti-state terrorist violence that such measures had been intended to uproot. Friction between the British Army and the Catholic working class in Belfast and Derry from 1970 to 1972 pushed people towards, rather than away from, the Provisional IRA and made the IRA a far more significant force than they would have been otherwise.

In Afghanistan, there is a similar dynamic in effect. As one Pakistani diplomat told the International Crisis Group, “When a child is killed in one of these villages,
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There is a very counter-productive set of effects that can be produced when states drift across the Weberian line of legitimacy18 that divides them from their terrorist opponents. The abuse of human rights in settings such as Northern Irish internment in the 1970s—or more recently in Guantanamo Bay or Abu Ghraib—might be considered slight when set against the atrocities of either the Provisional IRA, al-Qaeda, or the Taliban. But this misses the central issue: namely, that our primary objection to such human rights abuses should be that they demean both state and victim and that they simultaneously widen the pool of disaffected opponents willing to join precisely those terrorist groups we want to stifle. In Northern Ireland, the embryonic IRA told people that the British state was a brutal colonial power, hostile to the Catholic community. The one-sided Falls Curfew of 1970 in Belfast, the internment of many innocent Catholics from August 1971 onwards, and the fatal shooting by the Parachute Regiment of 14 Catholic civilians on Bloody Sunday in January 1972 all seemed to make the IRA’s case more plausible. IRA recruits swelled as a result, and the lessons for our own times are clear enough.19

In a counterinsurgency, it is important that civilian casualties be kept to an absolute minimum. When they do occur, it is important that the military force involved take responsibility for its actions, and if necessary make restitution or punish the guilty parties. While the military response to insurgency is far from ideal, coupled with good intelligence it can produce very successful counterterrorist efforts. By the latter days of the Northern Ireland conflict, the state had developed an extensive range of agents and informers within paramilitary groups such as the IRA, and this proved of greater value in countering their terrorist campaign than had the all-out deployment of the Parachute Regiment. By the late stages of the Northern Ireland Troubles, many (if not most) IRA operations came to be thwarted on the basis of prior state information; while the IRA’s campaign was not ended as a result, a ceiling was put on its capacity.20

At the beginning of the Iraqi invasion in 2003, many U.S. units with language
and cultural training were shifted from Afghanistan to Iraq. The overall value of such experience and training became quickly evident as intelligence collection declined precipitously in Afghanistan. Evidently, the United States has ignored the value of experience in the theatre of war, deploying divisions to Afghanistan, then Iraq, and then back to Afghanistan.

Second, in many of the settings in which the war on terror is being fought, we face in fact a combination of the terrorist and the communal-insurgent, and we have to recognize the frequently ethno-national basis for the resistance that we encounter. The implications of this understanding are huge if what we seek is the basis for an end to conflict in settings such as Afghanistan. Not all conflicts can be resolved, of course. Where they can, however, it seems clear that durable and pervasive state legitimacy is the truly vital foundation for such resolution. This was certainly the case in Northern Ireland. The failure of the IRA’s violence to achieve its ostensible goals (British withdrawal or the defence of Catholic communities) established the basis for peace talks and some form of compromise deal. But the essence of that deal was the creation of a Northern Ireland state that could command the allegiance of the majority of both warring communities. This necessitated significant reform, and it involved recognition of the rival ethno-national aspirations and interests of the competing groups.

Third, if we do acknowledge (and seek) the possibility of a lasting settlement, then we have to recognize that this will involve protracted negotiation and that it will result in disagreeable ex-opponents being in power and pursuing what might seem unappetizing policies. In Northern Ireland’s twenty-first-century power-sharing government, a prominent ex-IRA man (Sinn Fein’s Martin McGuinness) is the Deputy First Minister. McGuinness is on record as having been a proud member of the IRA, an organization that killed more people than did any other group in the Northern Ireland conflict. Yet his inclusion in government exemplifies two encouraging realities: first, that the method of campaign previously espoused by such figures has been judged by them not to be successful, and second, that such figures have the capacity to promote peaceful politics to a constituency previously hostile to the state and previously supportive of anti-state violence.

In Afghanistan, the Taliban have to a certain extent fractured between Pashtun nationalists and global “jihadists,” seeking a greater Islamist state. The jihadist faction shows an increasing reliance on foreign fighters, suicide tactics, and harsh terror as a means of enforcement. The Pashtun nationalist wing, however, has proved more willing
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to negotiate. Many former pre-9/11 Taliban have been incorporated into the present government. It is entirely possible that the neutralization of the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan will require the co-option of some of their leaders by the national government.

Also related to the overlap between terrorism and insurgency is a fourth point: the vital question of state credibility in response to terrorism. Clearly, terrorist violence—whether that of the Provisional IRA or of the Taliban—lacks moral or political legitimacy when considered in terms of its supposed justifications and efficacy. But there are dangers also in states drawing implausibly stark, Manichaean contrasts between their own violence and that of terrorist opponents. In terms of the terrorists’ support community, a depiction of the terrorist group as merely criminal, thug-like, inherently evil, fanatical, or insane will make it more difficult for the state to win the vital battle of hearts and minds within that constituency.

The Northern Irish experience is telling here. During the late 1970s and early 1980s the UK authorities attempted to present the IRA and other terrorist groups in Northern Ireland as ordinary criminals, and they sought to deal with paramilitary prisoners just as any other prisoners were treated. Prisoners refused to conform with the prison system, friction escalated between prison warders and inmates, and by 1980 and 1981 they had reached such a stand-off that republican prisoners embarked on two hunger strikes in pursuit of political status, the latter strike involving ten prisoners famously starving themselves to death.22

It was quite understandable that the UK authorities wanted to delegitimize the actions of groups such as the IRA. It is also important to remember that, while the funeral of an IRA hunger striker like Bobby Sands gained much attention, the funerals of the 472 people killed by the IRA during the prison protests between 1976 and 1981 should demand at least as much attention when we reflect on this era.

Yet this prison war reflected the problems of states when they present terrorist opponents in ways that lack credibility. Even those Irish nationalists who did not support the IRA (and this represented the majority of Irish nationalists)23 knew that the IRA’s activities were primarily motivated by political rather than merely criminal ambition. When the government forced people to decide between starving IRA prisoners’ claim to be political, and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s denial of such status, very many non-IRA nationalists lost sympathy with the government, and UK credibility in the counterterrorist campaign was undermined. Moreover, there were alternatives. The state presented a choice between seeing the IRA as political (and therefore legitimate) or criminal (and therefore illegitimate). But a far more persuasive and credible way of presenting matters would have been to acknowledge the political nature of a group such as the IRA, but to point out that not all political campaigns are legitimate.
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History abounds with political movements that are rightly denied legitimacy for their brutal actions (Hitler was unambiguously political), and such an approach would have allowed the government to retain more sympathy among the IRA's potential support community.

In fighting terror, states damage themselves if their rhetoric, policies, and pronouncements lack credibility among one's own backers and among the potentially disaffected. The presentation of widespread support for violent movements must resonate with what people will see on the ground to be the case. The Taliban movement initially came into being in an anarchic void; they had popular support because the southeast of the country existed without law or order, and the Taliban's justice, however harsh, was still justice. One Afghan farmer tellingly remarked, after the chaos of the early 1990s, that at least with the Taliban, one could leave their plow outside overnight, and in the morning it would still be there. This is precisely why the Taliban are trying to destabilize the security situation to the greatest extent possible, instead of focusing on strikes against foreign forces. The insecurity of insurgency proves the illegitimacy of the Afghan government and the international community that supports it. They want to recreate the anarchic circumstances that led them to power in the first place.

It was also this power vacuum that encouraged so many capable men to join the Taliban's ranks; it was simply the only game in town. These men may not be in complete agreement with the Taliban leadership, but they have goals that can be utilized by the Afghan government, namely the hope for a better Afghanistan. With the exception of the hard-core extremists, the Taliban can be co-opted. Karzai has publicly stated that all but a few of the Taliban are “reconcilable.”

Fifth, we must recognize and utilize the essential rationality of our opponents and their support group. The lesson of the Northern Irish peace process is that it was (in the end) the pragmatic rationality of the IRA that allowed for establishing an end to the conflict. The IRA had mistakenly thought that their violence was necessary and that it would produce victory. When (by the late 1980s) they recognized that violence would produce lasting stalemate rather than victorious success, they began to be open to the possibility of alternative means of achieving political momentum. States are often wary of acknowledging that their terrorist opponents act with the same mixture of the rational and the visceral that motivates most other people in politics. But we should use this reality to our advantage. In Ulster, when the IRA recognized that elections would yield greater results than car bombs, they eventually swapped the latter for the former.

As previously stated, the Taliban is an organization with methods that serve articulated goals, even if there is dissension among the ranks. To a certain extent, these goals are those of a legitimate government: the safety, security, and independence of
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Afghanistan. These aims, then, can be presented in such a way as a function of the present government of Afghanistan as to induce some insurgents to pursue their goals through other means. Just as the Taliban has moved from an insurgent force to a national government to an insurgent force again, so perhaps some part of their force can be persuaded to present their ideas in a civilized, democratic manner.

Were the Taliban to participate fully and openly in the democratic process in Afghanistan, there is a significant chance they could eventually push their politics to the dominant position in the state. If this were to happen, if they were slowly to be integrated into the process, they might eventually buy in to the system, having some stake in it. This could result in their attempting to protect the system and prevent their more zealous compatriots from subverting the government.

There are those who would argue that no understanding can be reached with the opponents in a counterinsurgency, and that victory can only be won when the last insurgent is in his grave. Unfortunately, insurgencies are not tangible things; they exist in the minds of humans, and their physical manifestations are but extensions of that thought process. In order to truly pacify a troubled land such as Northern Ireland or Afghanistan, opponents must be co-opted whenever possible, and force used only as a last resort. The British experience and time served in pacifying Northern Ireland holds a number of valuable lessons for foreign forces in Afghanistan today. For decades, the British sought through a combination of carrots and sticks to bring that fractured territory to heel, and their lessons learned deserve careful study for students of counterinsurgency. The five points mentioned above—avoiding an over-militarized response; understanding the ethno-national nature of the conflict; seeking settlements through political accommodation wherever possible, even where this empowers disagreeable ex-enemies; maintaining state credibility in argument and analysis; and recognizing and co-opting the rationality of our opponents—are all notions that have been crucial in Northern Ireland, where a durable peace seems finally to have been created.

These points are also of high importance in Afghanistan, where such insights can provide the basis for successful policy. Delaying the implementation of the points presented here will prolong the Afghan insurgency and keep NATO troops in harm’s way; and as the British learned, every trooper on the ground and every armoured vehicle patrolling a neighbourhood were victories for insurgent propaganda. In Afghanistan, the circumstances are even direr: a successful insurgency in Afghanistan affects not only the nation itself, but its neighbors as well. And as we have seen, failure there can easily and...
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quickly result in death and destruction on our own shores. The parallels between the two conflicts considered in this article are true for many insurgencies. Ethnic, political and religious grudges are not so dissimilar from one another that certain themes cannot be isolated. By doing so, we cannot only better understand the nature of the insurgent and insurgency, but we can seek to minimize that disagreement. To paraphrase Mao, if an effective insurgent must move among the people as a fish in the sea, the trick then is to get the fish out of water. In Northern Ireland the British eventually produced conditions within which popular support for IRA violence could be eroded. In Afghanistan, we must strive to do the same. Only then will the insurgency wither.

Notes

5. “Internal U.S. Air Force figures reveal that 272 tons of bombs were dropped on Afghanistan during June and July [of 2008]—the same amount dropped on the country during all of 2006. At least 500 civilians have died this year as a result of the actions of foreign forces.” See: Mark Townsend, “Army told to switch its Afghan tactics,” The Guardian, 31 August 2008, http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/aug/31/afghanistan.defence.
9. On the Catholicism of Irish nationalism, see English, Irish Freedom; on the Protestantism of British-
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16. Interviews with tribal elders (by Thomas Johnson in Kandahar City, September 2008) from Arghandab, Maywand, Panjwayi, and Zhari Districts of Kandahar all suggested that one of the great selling points of the Taliban in the areas they control has been their deployment of traditional justice systems that quickly administer justice.


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