

Guide to the

# Analysis of Insurgency

2012





## Preface

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This Guide provides definitions, a series of indicators, and an analytic framework designed to assist in evaluating an insurgency. Analysts with knowledge of the political, military, cultural, and socioeconomic characteristics of a specific insurgency will find these definitions and the framework helpful in analyzing the conflict. Among other things, this Guide is intended to assist in conducting net assessments of specific conflicts.

- This booklet updates the *Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency* published in the mid-1980s.
- The definitions, indicators, and framework contained in this Guide draw on commonalities and best practices identified in the original *Guide to the Analysis of Insurgency*, classic and contemporary insurgency and counterinsurgency literature, academic journals, other official US Government publications, and case studies.

No two insurgencies are identical, and this Guide is not intended to provide a one-size-fits-all template. No insurgency is unique in all aspects, however, and most share some combination of characteristics, tactics, and objectives. Most pass through similar stages of development during their life cycle. These commonalities are the focus of this Guide, but analysts should note that the specific insurgencies they are examining will probably not exhibit all of the characteristics or undertake all of the activities addressed in the Guide.



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## Definitions

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Multiple definitions exist for the terms highlighted in this section, but most competing definitions contain common elements. The definitions used in this Guide draw upon these commonalities and some of the most useful, unique elements of individual definitions.

***Insurgency*** is a protracted political-military struggle directed toward subverting or displacing the legitimacy of a constituted government or occupying power and completely or partially controlling the resources of a territory through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations. The common denominator for most insurgent groups is their objective of gaining control of a population or a particular territory, including its resources. This objective differentiates insurgent groups from purely terrorist organizations. It is worth noting that identifying a movement as an insurgency does not convey a normative judgment on the legitimacy of the movement or its cause; the term insurgency is simply a description of the nature of the conflict. (See Appendix B for a detailed explanation of the derivation of this definition.)

***Counterinsurgency***—frequently referred to by the acronym COIN—is the combination of measures undertaken by a government to defeat an insurgency. Effective counterinsurgency integrates and synchronizes political, security, legal, economic, development, and psychological activities to create a holistic approach aimed at weakening the insurgents while bolstering the government’s legitimacy in the eyes of the population.

***Guerrilla warfare*** is a form of warfare in which small, lightly armed groups use mobile tactics against a stronger opponent. Guerrillas employ small-scale attacks, such as ambushes and raids, to harass their enemy rather than to win a decisive victory in battle.

A ***militia*** is a body of armed fighters often representing specific ethnic, religious, tribal, clan, or other communal groups or political parties. Militias may serve the government directly or indirectly, operate independently to combat other militias or insurgent groups, pursue criminal activity, or support an insurgency.

**Terrorism**, as defined by US law (US Code, Title 22), is premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents. Most insurgent groups use terrorism as a tactic in pursuit of their goal.

This Guide uses the term **the government** to describe the authority against which an insurgency is waged. In some instances, however, insurgents may oppose a foreign occupying power rather than, or in addition to, the ruling government in the target country. Most of the principles in this Guide pertain to either case, but the Guide highlights exceptions when applicable.

## Common Characteristics of Insurgency

Insurgency is a violent political struggle for control of people and resources. Insurgent groups often pursue some common objectives to undermine the legitimacy of the government and bolster their own standing with the population. Insurgents seek to:

- Undercut the ability of the government to provide the population security and public services, including utilities, education, and justice. An insurgent group may attempt to supplant the government by providing alternative services to the people, or it may be content to portray the government as impotent.
- Obtain the active or passive support of the population. Not all support has to be—or is likely to be—gained from true sympathizers; fear and intimidation can gain the acquiescence of many people.
- Provoke the government into committing abuses that drive neutral civilians toward the insurgents and solidify the loyalty of insurgent supporters.
- Undermine international support for the government and, if possible, gain international recognition or assistance for the insurgency.

Insurgency is primarily a political competition for legitimacy, but the violent aspect of the struggle most often alerts observers to the insurgency's existence. Insurgent warfare is characterized by a lack of front lines, sequenced battles, or campaigns; a protracted strategy, often lasting more than a decade; and unconventional military tactics, including guerrilla warfare, terrorism, or ethnic cleansing. The distinction between civilians and combatants is blurred in insurgency, often resulting in proportionally higher civilian casualties than suffered in conventional conflicts.

## Common Insurgent Typologies

Insurgencies can be categorized in a number of ways; two of the most common ways are to distinguish insurgencies by their goals or by the primary method they employ. These categories are archetypes, however, and many insurgencies exhibit characteristics combining multiple types, or their goals may evolve during the course of the conflict. In some conflicts, multiple insurgent groups may operate simultaneously, either competing with one another or setting aside the fact that they may have differing views on postconflict governance to form temporary alliances against the government. Moreover, the motivations of individual fighters may differ from that of the group in general, giving the insurgency a more chaotic, less unified quality. Nevertheless, at the broadest level, the goals of an insurgency most often fall into one of five categories.

- *Revolutionary* insurgencies seek to replace the existing political order with an entirely different system, often entailing transformation of the economic and social structures.
- *Reformist* insurgencies do not aim to change the existing political order but, instead, seek to compel the government to alter its policies or undertake political, economic, or social reforms.
- *Separatist* insurgencies seek independence for a specific region. In some cases, the region in question spans existing national boundaries.
- *Resistance* insurgencies seek to compel an occupying power to withdraw from a given territory.
- *Commercialist* insurgencies are motivated by the acquisition of wealth or material resources; political power is simply a tool for seizing and controlling access to the wealth.

Another way of categorizing insurgencies is to focus on their organizational structure and whether the insurgents stress the political or military aspects of their struggle. Insurgents, of course, may adjust their organization during the course of a conflict.

- *Politically organized* insurgencies develop a complex political structure before or at the same time they begin undertaking military operations against the government. These groups stress consolidating control of territory through the use of shadow governments rather than through military power. The military component of politically organized insurgencies is subordinate to the political structure.

- *Militarily organized* insurgencies emphasize military action against the government over political mobilization of the population. The insurgents calculate that military success and the resulting weakening of the government will cause the population to rally to the insurgents' cause. Militarily organized insurgencies begin with small, weak, ill-defined political structures, often dominated by military leaders.
- *Traditionally organized* insurgencies draw on preexisting tribal, clan, ethnic, or religious affiliations. Established social hierarchies—a system of chiefs and subchiefs, for example—often substitute for political and military structures in traditionally organized insurgencies.
- *Urban-cellular* insurgencies develop and are centered in urban areas. These insurgencies lack hierarchical political and military leadership structures, instead organizing around small, semiautonomous cells. Urban-cellular insurgencies generally rely more heavily on terrorism than do other types of insurgency. Their cellular structure and reliance on terrorism can limit their ability to mobilize popular support.

# The Life Cycle of an Insurgency and Keys to Analysis

Each insurgency is different—shaped by conflict-specific factors such as culture, grievance, and history—but insurgencies often progress through certain common stages of development. Not every insurgency will pass through each stage; some will skip stages, others will revisit earlier stages, and some will die out before reaching the later stages. Moreover, the amount of time needed to progress through a given stage is likely to vary.

The characteristics of an insurgency will likewise be case specific and fluid. Nevertheless, some common factors will aid analysts in evaluating an insurgency through its life cycle. Factors for analysis are identified for each stage, but these factors are both continuous and cumulative. As an insurgency advances through the stages, indicators from earlier stages will remain relevant, as will the ways in which the factors build on each other.

## Preinsurgency Stage

A conflict in the preinsurgency stage is difficult to detect because most activities are underground and the insurgency has yet to make its presence felt through the use of violence. Moreover, actions conducted in the open can easily be dismissed as nonviolent political activity. During this stage, an insurgent movement is beginning to organize: leadership is emerging, and the insurgents are establishing a grievance and a group identity, beginning to recruit and train members, and stockpiling arms and supplies.

### *Preexisting Conditions*

Insurgent organizers can use historical, societal, political, or economic conditions that generate discontent among a segment of the population to rally support for their movement. These conditions, most of which are exacerbated if they affect one subgroup disproportionately, include:

- A recent history of internal conflict that has left lingering grievances against the government or hostility among groups and that establishes violence as an accepted means of resolving political disputes.
- Recent or ongoing conflicts in neighboring states that generate refugees who could become recruits, make weapons available, or establish ungoverned spaces in the neighboring countries that can serve as sanctuaries for insurgents.
- Societal factors such as a strong warrior or conspiratorial culture or a youth bulge (a high proportion of 15- to 25-year-olds relative to the adult population), which can provide a pool of potential recruits.

- Inhospitable terrain—such as jungles, forests, mountains, deserts, or swamps—which allows insurgents to move, hide, train, and organize in areas that are difficult for government forces to enter. Increasingly, dense urban areas meet this need, as do cross-border sanctuaries.
- Government policies that disadvantage a segment of the population on the basis of religion, tribe, ethnicity, region, or class, reinforcing insurgent efforts to foster a group identity.
- A polarized winner-takes-all political system, which generates grievances among out-groups and undermines the potential for cooperation in pursuit of common agendas. Such a system often creates government paralysis in the face of a crisis because competing parties are unable to reach consensus. Moreover, the existence of party militias can serve as recruiting pools for the insurgents or simply add to an atmosphere of insecurity.
- An inability of the government to provide basic services, such as security, justice, health care, education, utilities, or transportation infrastructure.
- Inept or corrupt security forces, especially the police because they interact most frequently with the people.
- An economic crisis or extended period of poor economic conditions that generates discontent with the government and provides a base of unemployed or underemployed youth ripe for recruitment.
- A “window of vulnerability,” created by events such as natural disasters, political assassinations, or hotly disputed elections, that causes societal or political upheaval, overstretches security forces, or disrupts government services.

### *Grievance*

During the preinsurgency stage, insurgents identify and publicize a grievance around which they can rally supporters. Insurgents seek to create a compelling narrative—the story a party to an armed struggle uses to justify its actions in order to attain legitimacy and favor among relevant populations. Specific indicators that insurgents are seeking to mobilize the population around a grievance might include:

- Emergence of websites or the circulation of flyers, pamphlets, DVDs, or other promotional materials that generate popular discussion of the grievance.

- Media articles or opinion pieces on the issue.
- Espousal of the grievance by legitimate political or social organizations.
- Demonstrations or protests in which the issue plays a prominent rallying role.

### *Group Identity*

Most insurgencies seek to create a group identity that separates the group from the national identity or that of the ruling elite, establishing an “us versus them” dynamic to the conflict. The identity might center on ethnicity, tribal affiliation, religion, regionalism, political affiliation, or class. Indicators that insurgents are seeking to exploit a group identity might include:

- Propaganda about or inclusion in the insurgent narrative of a unique history for the subgroup that sets it apart from the rest of the nation.
- Increased emphasis on cultural, religious, language, or ethnic symbols that set the subgroup apart from the rest of the nation. This emphasis might emerge in books, music, or movies in the subgroup’s language or about the subgroup’s history or culture. It may include calls for schools to teach these subjects or for the country to observe the subgroup’s holidays.
- Use of language that casts the government in the role of occupier, foreigner, or puppet of outside interests.

### *Recruitment and Training*

The first indications of insurgent recruitment and training may emerge during the preinsurgency stage. They might include:

- The disappearance of significant numbers of subgroup members, especially young men.
- Reports of people training with arms or the identification of nongovernment military training sites, such as sports clubs or other social groups conducting paramilitary-style physical training.
- Reports of subgroup members traveling abroad for training or of sympathetic outsiders providing training in country.

### *Arms and Supplies*

In this early prevalence stage, insurgents will probably have few weapons and limited military supplies. Nevertheless, analysts may see indications that the insurgents are gathering materiel. These may include:

- Increased subgroup involvement in criminal moneymaking enterprises, such as robberies, kidnapping for ransom, protection rackets, or the drug trade.
- Theft of weapons, equipment, or uniforms from the military or police.
- Reports or discovery of caches of weapons, explosives, or military or police equipment or uniforms.
- Government interdiction of arms or supplies entering the country.

### *Government Reaction*

The government's reaction in this and the next stage is perhaps the most important determinant of whether a movement will develop into an insurgency. During these early stages, a potential insurgent group is weak, disorganized, and vulnerable to nonviolent government countermeasures. For these reasons, however, the government is likely to err either by dismissing the problem and failing to address the grievances behind the unrest—which gives the insurgents unchallenged space to organize—or by overreacting and cracking down hard—which can alienate the population and generate support for the insurgents. Elements of a productive government response might include:

- Efforts to undermine insurgent attempts to establish a group identity. The government may choose to reinforce national identity and patriotism by emphasizing shared history, culture, and traditions, or the government may attempt to further divide the subgroup using alternative identities, such as tribe, ethnic group, religion, sect, region, or class.
- Efforts to address grievances through political, economic, or legal reform.
- Efforts to shore up the moderate opposition.

Security forces may need to make arrests or otherwise move against the insurgents, but a government crackdown, if not carefully calibrated and targeted, risks reinforcing insurgent efforts to polarize the conflict. A counterproductive crackdown might:

- Employ extrajudicial means, such as unlawful detentions or death squads.
- Indiscriminately target members of the subgroup, thereby reinforcing the group identity and an “us versus them” mentality.
- Target all opposition—and legal moderate opposition groups are the easiest targets—thereby making the insurgents the only viable alternative to the government.

## Incipient Conflict Stage

A struggle enters the incipient conflict stage when the insurgents begin to use violence. Often these initial attacks provide analysts the first alert to the potential for an insurgency. The target government, however, frequently dismisses insurgent actions as the work of bandits, criminals, or terrorists, which increases the risk that the government will employ counterproductive measures.

The incipient stage is the most dangerous phase for insurgents; they have made their presence felt through initial attacks, but they are still weak and organizing. An incipient insurgency must balance the need to conduct attacks to demonstrate its viability, publicize its cause, rally supporters, and provoke a government overreaction while limiting its exposure to government security forces. Insurgents may emphasize highly asymmetric and terrorist tactics, such as kidnappings, small bombings, assassinations, and night letters during this phase. Understanding the characteristics, capabilities, and actions of both the insurgents and the government can help analysts assess whether an incipient conflict is likely to sputter out or expand into a full-blown insurgency.

### *Insurgent Leadership*

Knowing not only the identities of the insurgent movement's leaders but also understanding the leaders' motivation for joining the insurgency and the experience they bring to the movement—especially military service, political experience, or participation in prior insurgencies—can provide insights into the direction and character the organization is likely to take, as well as its potential early effectiveness. An ideal insurgent leader displays charisma, the flexibility to balance ideology with the need to be inclusive and leverage local grievances, and an ability to engender loyalty and maintain group unity.

### *Theory of Victory*

Understanding the insurgents' theory of victory answers the question: "How do they see this ending?" Insurgents may believe they will eventually defeat the government on the battlefield, spark a popular uprising that forces the government to accede to the insurgents' demands, provoke international intervention on the insurgents' behalf, or prolong the conflict long enough for the government to judge that it is better to negotiate a settlement. Insurgent documents, propaganda, or public statements will sometimes provide indications of how the insurgents envision achieving their goals.

### *Insurgent Unity*

During this and subsequent stages, it is important to note any competing motivations of members within an insurgent group or of different groups within an insurgent coalition. This disunity may lead to infighting within the insurgency, can be exploited by the government to encourage defections, and may provide insights into which individuals or groups might be more open to a negotiated settlement. Although disunity is a potential vulnerability for the insurgents, they may still prevail, especially against a weak government.

### *Popular Support*

Insurgents generally rely on the civilian population for food, medicine, shelter, or intelligence—provided either voluntarily or under duress.

Indicators of genuine or forced popular support for the insurgents include:

- Refusal of the population to provide intelligence on the insurgents and evidence that insurgents are being warned of security force operations.
- Signs that the insurgents have expanded their base of support beyond their initial subgroup.

### *Insurgent Logistics*

Insurgents must establish sources for supplies they cannot obtain from the civilian population, including arms, ammunition, and other military equipment. Indications that the insurgents have established sources for military supplies include:

- Evidence of insurgent theft or capture of security force stocks.
- Evidence the insurgents are purchasing supplies on the black market—possibly using funds from diaspora contributions, operation of legitimate businesses, criminal activity, “revolutionary taxes,” or plunder of natural resources such as timber or diamonds.
- Evidence of external support—logistical, rhetorical, political, training, or sanctuary—for the insurgents, especially the acquisition of a state sponsor. Transnational terrorist organizations also can act like state sponsors in providing assistance to local insurgent movements. Moreover, the Internet increasingly allows for “virtual support” from sympathizers abroad, including fundraising, recruitment assistance, dissemination of propaganda, and transfer of insurgent techniques.

### *Government Leadership*

The government's willingness to acknowledge the budding insurgency and take corrective actions is paramount to preventing the conflict from escalating, and effective leadership is a critical element. Understanding which people and institutions lead the counterinsurgency program is critical to assessing the effectiveness of the government's effort. The willingness and ability of government leaders to act decisively and authoritatively and to compel all elements of state power—security, economic, social, and political—to work toward a common purpose are the clearest signs of effective government leadership.

### *Security Force Effectiveness*

The causes of the insurgency and the elements of an eventual resolution may be primarily political, but the security forces—military, police, and intelligence—play a critical role in containing the insurgency and protecting the population. Indicators of an effective security force response include:

- The extent to which security forces are tactically proficient, are apolitical yet loyal to the government, and display discipline and respect for human rights. Their ability to operate in small units is especially important. Strong leadership at the small unit level, a willingness to delegate responsibility and authority to these leaders, and high levels of training facilitate the effectiveness of small units.
- Employment of appropriate coercive methods. Force is a necessary element of an effective counterinsurgency strategy, but indiscriminate violence or the use of repression or heavy firepower is likely to drive the population into the insurgent camp.
- An ability of government intelligence agencies to collect intelligence and a willingness to coordinate their efforts and share intelligence across agencies.
- Legal reforms that give the police, military, and judiciary the authority and tools they need to arrest and prosecute insurgents while operating within the law.

### *External Support for the Government*

The government's counterinsurgency effort benefits through each stage if it can enlist support from neighboring states and the broader international community to cut off the flow of funds, fighters, or supplies to the insurgents; to deny the insurgents sanctuary; and to reinforce the government's own legitimacy through concrete or rhetorical displays of support. A government may also get support from an ally in the form of weapons and materiel, training, intelligence, advisers, or combat troops.

## Open Insurgency Stage

At this stage, no doubt exists that the government is facing an insurgency. Politically, the insurgents are overtly challenging state authority and attempting to exert control over territory. Militarily, the insurgents are staging more frequent attacks, which have probably become more aggressive, violent, and sophisticated and involve larger numbers of fighters. As the insurgency becomes more active, external support for the belligerents probably becomes more apparent, if it exists.

### *Political Factors*

An insurgency at this stage often progresses from undermining state authority to displacing and replacing it. Insurgents may develop a “shadow government” that mirrors state administrative structures and may establish “no-go” areas where government representatives have been driven out and where only large formations of security forces can operate. Indicators of insurgent political strength include:

- Reports of large-scale infiltration of insurgents or insurgent sympathizers into government agencies, especially at the local level.
- Defections of government officials to the insurgency.
- Indications that the insurgents have established shadow governments or are providing social or administrative services, such as education, health care, or courts.
- Evidence of no-go areas, sometimes labeled with color designations such as *red* or *black* by target nation security forces.
- De facto recognition of insurgent administration, such as neighboring governments or foreign businesses dealing with insurgents.

### *Military Factors*

On the military front, insurgents are conducting more frequent attacks, usually employing terrorism and guerrilla warfare tactics, including hit-and-run raids on military and police units, ambushes, assassinations, improvised explosive device (IED) attacks, and attacks on infrastructure and symbols of government authority such as schools, hospitals, utilities, cell phone towers, and bridges. Insurgents are probably willing to engage security forces more frequently, but the insurgents still seek to avoid prolonged firefights that would allow the military to capitalize on its

advantage in firepower. Indicators that the insurgents are growing militarily stronger include:

- Changes in the size and composition of the insurgent force, including full-time fighters, part-time fighters, active supporters, and coerced supporters, that indicate greater organization or an increased capacity to deploy fighters outside home areas. Some insurgencies make use of one or more levels—for example, village-level and district-level—of local forces that operate only in their native area and only part-time; one or more levels of local full-time fighters; and a mobile force of full-time fighters that moves from area to area and draws on local forces as needed.
- An increase in the rate, size, sophistication, and geographic spread of insurgent attacks, as well as an expansion of the types of targets selected. Nevertheless, simply counting attacks can be misleading. Insurgents desperate to shore up support or under pressure from counterinsurgency operations may conduct more attacks or attacks in new areas, but these attacks by themselves would not necessarily signify that the insurgents were growing stronger.
- An increase in the proportion of fighters who are armed with modern firearms or an increase in the quantity and quality of insurgent arms—and the availability of ammunition for those arms—especially whether the insurgents possess crew-served weapons such as mortars or heavy machineguns.
- Insurgents using more sophisticated methods and equipment for communications or possessing larger quantities of communications equipment.
- Evidence of insurgent penetration and subversion of the military, police, and intelligence services.

An additional consideration for analysts might be changes in qualitative measures, such as which side is initiating attacks or the degree of insurgent discipline (e.g., maintaining command and control; conserving ammunition; and recovering weapons, ammunition, and bodies of fallen fighters). If used as simple indicators, however, these measures can be deceptive. For example, some counterinsurgency tactics, such as using small units resident in villages, are meant to draw insurgent attacks and would appear to reflect insurgent initiative. Likewise, insurgent recovery of weapons and ammunition may be indicative of shortages as well as discipline.

The most important task for the government once an insurgency has reached this stage is to reestablish security. If the security forces cannot protect the population from insurgent intimidation and reprisals, the people are unlikely to actively support the government. Indicators of the strength of government security forces include:

- The degree to which the population indicates that it trusts the security forces to protect it. This trust might manifest itself through the population's willingness to provide intelligence on the insurgents, to associate with government personnel, or to use government services. Conversely, the departure of subgroups targeted by the insurgents from certain areas or the spontaneous formation of civilian self-defense forces would indicate a lack of faith in the security forces.
- Whether the size, composition, role, leadership, and training of the military, police, and intelligence services meet the government's counterinsurgency needs and whether the strategy and tactics the government is employing are appropriate to the specifics of the particular insurgency.
- Security forces are able to expand their numbers without undermining the cohesion, discipline, or effectiveness of the forces.
- Civilians, especially across subgroups, voluntarily join government-organized civilian self-defense groups.

### *External Assistance*

With the insurgency more in the open, support from foreign actors, if it exists, is probably more evident. Indicators of effective external support for both the insurgents and the government include:

- The assistance—including diplomatic, financial, arms, nonlethal equipment, sanctuary, intelligence, training, or advisers—enhances the political or military operations of the recipient.
- The patron provides assistance without restrictions or constraints. The foreign actor and the recipient have some shared purpose that has created their alliance, but they most likely have their own broader interests that diverge. An external patron, in accordance with its own interests, may limit the type, scope, or location of attacks; attempt to change the nature of the conflict; or seek to prevent its client from winning, wishing instead to prolong the conflict indefinitely.
- External aid bolsters the recipient's legitimacy rather than causing it to be portrayed as a puppet to foreign interests.

## Counterinsurgency Approaches

The approach a government employs in dealing with an insurgency can be broadly categorized by whether its primary focus is on attacking the insurgents, securing the population, or punishing the insurgents and their supporters. Each approach employs violence and military force against the insurgents, and each may use elements central to the others, but they differ in their emphasis. The approach a government chooses will probably depend on the country's historical experience, culture, military capabilities, and form of government, as well as the character of the insurgency. The government may change its approach and adjust its focus over time as the situation changes.

- An *enemy-centric* approach emphasizes the destruction of insurgent fighters and infrastructure. It is often characterized by heavy reliance on search-and-destroy and cordon-and-search types of operations. Security forces operate in a near continuous pursuit of the insurgents.
- A *population-centric* approach emphasizes securing the population and bolstering its support for the government; operations to destroy the insurgents are secondary but also important. Population-centric counterinsurgency is often characterized by a clear-hold-build approach—by which security forces clear an area of insurgents, maintain a presence in the area to prevent the insurgents from returning, and enable governance and development projects that build support for the government and give the population a stake in maintaining security. Government control is often then extended through an “oil spot” technique, establishing secure areas and expanding them.
- An *authoritarian* approach seeks to punish not only the insurgents but also the population that supports them. This method eschews basic counterinsurgency best practices—such as minimal use of force, appropriate respect for human rights, and winning over the population—seeking instead to make the cost of supporting the insurgents unbearable. Many colonial powers historically employed this approach, but probably only countries with authoritarian governments that are unconcerned with international opinion are likely to use this approach in the future.

## Resolution Stage

Some insurgencies progress steadily through the life cycle stages; many grow in fits and starts, occasionally regressing to earlier stages; and others remain mired in one stage for decades. In theory, an insurgency will eventually reach a conclusion, either an insurgent victory, a negotiated settlement, or a government victory. At least 130 insurgent conflicts have occurred since World War II—estimations vary widely and go as high as nearly 300 insurgent-government conflicts—and at least two dozen were ongoing as of late 2011. The average duration of these continuing insurgencies is more than 21 years. Of the insurgencies that have ended:

- About 36 percent concluded with an insurgent victory after an average duration of about 10 years.
- Almost 28 percent had mixed outcomes, generally because the belligerents reached a compromise that required all to make significant concessions. These insurgencies lasted an average of about 8 years.
- Approximately 36 percent resulted in a government victory after an average duration of almost 12 years.

### *Stalemated or Stagnant Insurgencies*

Many insurgencies linger for years or decades as low-level security nuisances to the governments they oppose. Often during these stretches, the goals of the insurgency will shift or evolve. In some cases, the insurgents become more radical, in others, more moderate. Sometimes, the insurgency becomes an end unto itself for the fighters—providing a sense of meaning to their lives, status that would otherwise be unattainable for them, and income from criminal activities associated with the insurgency. In some cases, it is difficult to discern whether the group's primary motivation remains political or has become criminal—a change that reduces the chance of resolving the conflict through negotiations or political reform.

### *Insurgent Victory*

An insurgent victory is the only potential outcome that is likely to be clear-cut, marked by the insurgents seizing control of the government, expelling a foreign occupier, or gaining independence for their region. Nevertheless, an insurgent victory may spark another insurgency by the ousted regime's supporters or by a subgroup excluded from the new government. The final

collapse of the government will probably appear in retrospect to have been rapid, but the signs of imminent insurgent victory may be difficult to see as they are occurring. Signs that insurgents may be on the verge of obtaining their goal include:

- Withdrawal of support for the government by specific, critical segments of the domestic population, possibly even including elites aligned with the government leaving the country.
- Evidence that the population increasingly views the government as illegitimate.
- Insurgent co-optation, incorporation, or elimination of other major groups opposed to the government.
- Withdrawal of support for the government from critical foreign allies, pressure from those allies to overhaul the government's policy to address insurgent grievances, or increasing international support or recognition for the insurgents.
- Rapid growth of insurgent forces or significant expansion of insurgent control of territory and population.
- Severe weakening of the national economy, possibly including departure of multinational corporations, as a result of the insurgency.
- Reports of military plots, coup attempts, or massive desertion, defection, or surrender of security forces.
- Evidence of a sudden government willingness to seek a negotiated settlement with the insurgents.

### *Negotiated Settlement*

A negotiated settlement is likely to have many false starts, delays in implementation, and attempts by spoilers to undermine the agreement. Moreover, the risk of renewed violence—either by the original insurgent organization protesting perceived government duplicity or by splinter groups unsatisfied with the terms of the settlement—will probably persist for several years after fighting has officially ended.

Recognizing sincere efforts to reach a negotiated settlement can be difficult because belligerents often engage in negotiations to buy time to recover from setbacks and to prepare for the next round of fighting. If the conflict has been protracted, the belligerents' expectations of a purely military victory will probably be tempered, and they then will be more likely to seek genuine compromise. The belligerents are unlikely to reach this conclusion until they have been fighting for some time, suggesting that sometimes an insurgent conflict needs to run its course for a while before serious negotiations are possible. Indicators that insurgents are sincere include:

- Reports that neither side believes it can win militarily.
- Reports that the insurgents believe they can win an election or otherwise achieve their goals through legal political participation.
- A moderation of insurgent goals.
- Incorporation into the government's negotiating position of a liberal amnesty offer and mechanisms for former insurgents to participate in the legal political process.
- A dramatic and unexpected battlefield victory by one of the belligerents that is quickly followed by overtures to negotiate. Neither party wants to negotiate from a position of weakness, and a belligerent on the decline may seek a symbolic victory to improve its bargaining position.
- Evidence that foreign patrons or allies are cutting off support or are pressing the insurgents or the government to negotiate.
- A change of government that brings to power a strong leader whom the insurgents view as personally committed to resolving the conflict and capable of ensuring the compliance of other government elements.
- Willingness of both sides to accept third-party mediation and monitoring of a cease-fire and the eventual implementation of an agreement.

## *Agreement Is Just the Beginning of the End*

It is beyond the scope of this study to provide guidelines for comprehensively analyzing peace agreements, but it is worth noting that a signed agreement does not guarantee that an insurgency is over. Apart from the potential for a splinter group to continue the insurgency, other factors can undermine an agreement in the early stages.

- Government control of the security forces, especially the military, is critical to ensure that they do not sabotage an agreement.
- Implementation of most peace agreements requires passage of new laws or revocation of old laws, and a legislature divided by political rivalries or united against the executive will probably resist making these changes.
- Some agreements require amendment of the country's constitution that, even with a supportive and united legislature, can take time and might require the support of subnational governments that may be unwilling to sacrifice their parochial interests to resolve the insurgency.

## *Government Victory*

A government victory is likely to be a protracted process marked by gradual decline in violence as the insurgents lose military capabilities, external assistance, and popular support. Low-level violence may persist for years, and, lacking a climactic final battle, the end will probably be indistinct.

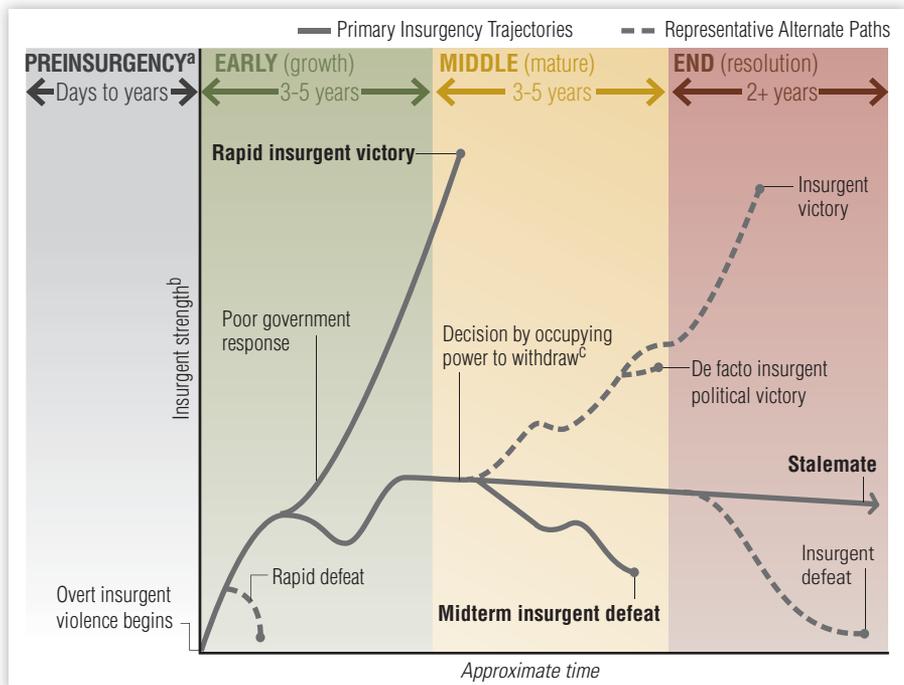
- As the government succeeds in reducing the number of insurgents and the size of their infrastructure, the insurgents become harder to find and to eliminate.
- If the conflict has lasted a long time, insurgency may have become a way of life for many fighters, and the violence may continue long after the insurgents have abandoned any hope of achieving their goals. The conflict is even more likely to persist if the insurgents have become heavily involved in criminal activities such as drug trafficking or resource plunder, which can become the insurgency's primary reason for existence.

Signs of an impending government victory would probably be ambiguous and seem more like atmospheric than specific indicators. Evidence of daily life returning to normal, government services and administration fully functioning, and government forces operating nationwide probably suggest the government has effectively defeated the insurgency. Other specific signs that can signal a government victory include:

- Commercial activity increases, markets reopen, and businesses remain open after dark.
- Civilians feel safe enough to leave their homes at night.
- Refugees or internally displaced persons voluntarily return to their homes.
- Civilians openly interact with officials or security force personnel.
- Civilians promptly alert security forces to the presence of insurgents.
- Officials can travel with minimal security and can spend their nights in areas that formerly were unsafe.
- Government offices are open and functioning normally.
- Security forces—even in small units—are able to operate throughout the country, including in formerly insurgent-held areas.
- The police reclaim responsibility for security, and the military largely returns to base.

## Insurgency Life Cycle

Each insurgency unfolds in a distinct manner, but most insurgencies develop along broad common stages. In general, an insurgency that survives its appearance as an armed challenger and has some degree of competence often goes through a period of growth as the counterinsurgent fails to identify the insurgent challenge and to develop an adequate response. Even given initial survival of an insurgent challenge, a swift and determined government response and insurgent errors can push a movement into an early decline. If an insurgency continues to grow while the government is able to mount a credible response, the conflict can reach a dynamic plateau, that can last a number of years, the median duration being about 12 years. Moreover, the slope of the plateau can vary during the course of months or years, marginally favoring one side or the other. Exhaustion and errors by either side can push the conflict toward resolution, either on the battlefield or through negotiation.



<sup>a</sup>Preinsurgency activities include the emergence of insurgent leadership; creation of initial organizational infrastructure and possibly training; acquisition of resources; and unarmed, political actions, such as organizing protests.

<sup>b</sup>Insurgent strength is a subjective measure of the size of a movement, its ability to mount attacks and inflict casualties, popular support, logistics capacity, and/or territorial control. The insurgency trajectory will vary according to insurgent and government actions.

<sup>c</sup>The decision by an occupying power to withdraw is commonly made four to seven years into the conflict.

## Enduring Qualities of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency

Many elements of *insurgency* have remained consistent across different regions for centuries and will probably continue to shape insurgency in the future. These fundamental tenets include:

- Insurgency is first and foremost a political struggle. It is unlikely to be waged or defeated by military means alone.
- Insurgents begin their struggle militarily weaker than the government and seek to avoid large-scale, direct, prolonged confrontations with the military. Likewise, they strive to make their existence known while keeping their structure, leaders, and fighters hidden.
- Insurgents rely on the population for support, but not all support needs to be—or is likely to be—gained from true sympathizers. Intimidation can secure the compliance of much of the population.
- Insurgents force the population to choose sides and try to provoke the counterinsurgents into committing abuses that drive the neutral population toward the insurgents and solidify the loyalty of supporters.
- To defeat an external counterinsurgent, the insurgents need only to destroy the intervening country's political will, not defeat it militarily.

**Counterinsurgency** methods vary from conflict to conflict, but the basic tenets of an effective counterinsurgency approach are likely to remain constant, including:

- Counterinsurgency is a struggle for legitimacy. The government seeks to prove that it can provide the basic necessities for the people and that it can do so better than the insurgents.
- The most basic need of the people is security. The counterinsurgent is responsible for protecting the population from the insurgents.
- The types of reforms that can resolve an insurgency—such as opening up the political system, granting greater rights to minorities, or reining in the security services—are sometimes more threatening than the insurgency itself to the target government's hold on power, and, thus, the government sometimes seeks to contain rather than eliminate the insurgency.

- The counterinsurgent seeks to separate civilians from insurgents through population control measures, including censuses, identification cards, checkpoints, and curfews.
- Intelligence is critical to finding the insurgents and separating them from the population.
- Military operations employ the minimum amount of force necessary to achieve their objectives while adhering to the country's laws and cultural norms.
- Counterinsurgent forces benefit from being forward deployed and located among the population, and small-unit operations are preferable in order to match the insurgents' mobility.
- Counterinsurgency requires unity of effort, including among agencies within a government and among countries operating in a coalition.
- The counterinsurgent can benefit from using supervised local forces, such as militias, to augment government troops, especially to gather intelligence and provide static defense.
- A foreign-led counterinsurgency will eventually have to pass the lead to indigenous forces.



### Preexisting Conditions

*What historical, societal, political, or economic conditions contribute to and shape the conflict?*

- History of conflict.
- Conflict in neighboring states.
- Societal factors.
- Terrain.
- Polarized politics.
- Government discrimination.
- Economic crisis.
- Window of vulnerability.

### Insurgent Characteristics

*What do I need to know about the insurgents?*

- Goals/type.
- Organizing principle/strategy/theory of victory.
- Grievance, group identity, and base of support.
- Leadership/structure.
- Unity within or among groups.
- Life cycle stage.
- Size and force composition
- Recruiting and training.
- Arms, communications, and supplies.
- Funding.
- External support.
- Sanctuary.

### Government Characteristics

*What do I need to know about the government?*

- Leadership.
- Unity.
- Ability of government to provide basic services.
- Willingness of government to address grievances through reform.
- Size, composition, roles, training, and recruiting of security forces.
- Security force discipline, effectiveness, and cohesion.
- External support.

## **Insurgent Actions**

*What are the insurgents doing?*

- Tactics.
- Method of population control, use of intimidation/coercion.
- Propaganda.
- Displacement of government structure and functions.
- Penetration of government and security forces.
- Rate, size, type, sophistication, and geographic spread of attacks.
- Conditions or constraints imposed by external supporters.

## **Government Actions**

*What is the government doing?*

- Treatment/tolerance of legal opposition.
- Attempts to address grievances through reform.
- Creation and composition of civilian self-defense forces.
- Security force expansion or reorganization; effect on discipline and effectiveness.
- Conditions or constraints imposed by foreign allies.

## **Net Assessment**

*Who is winning?*

- Changes in control of territory.
- Existence of no-go areas for government forces.
- Population movements—displacement or return.
- Nature of civilian interactions with security forces.
- Shifts in population loyalties.
- Shifts in international community support or recognition.
- Withdrawal of formal support for either belligerent.
- Emergence of cleavages or weakening of unity on either side.
- Ability of civilians to conduct normal daily life.
- Government functioning normally.

## Appendix B | Defining Insurgency

*Insurgency is a protracted political-military struggle directed toward subverting or displacing the legitimacy of a constituted government or occupying power and completely or partially controlling the resources of a territory through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations.*

In revising the Guide, we have modified the definition of insurgency contained in the original version. We have added elements of definitions used in two other US Government publications and deleted portions of the original that we deemed unnecessary. Because the definition contained in the original Guide has been cited widely by insurgency and counterinsurgency experts, an explanation of the change is in order. The three potential definitions we considered are:

- The original Guide defines insurgency as “a protracted political-military activity directed toward completely or partially controlling the resources of a country through the use of irregular military forces and illegal political organizations. Insurgent activity—including guerrilla warfare; terrorism; and political mobilization, for example, propaganda, recruitment, front and covert party organization, and international activity—is designed to weaken government control and legitimacy while increasing insurgent control and legitimacy.”
- Joint Publication 3-24 *Counterinsurgency Operations*, published in 2009, defines insurgency as “the organized use of subversion and violence by a group or movement that seeks to overthrow or force change of a governing authority.” JP 3-24’s definition replaces that contained in the *US Army-Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (FM 3-24), published in 2006. FM 3-24 defined insurgency as “an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict. Stated another way, an insurgency is an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control.”
- The *US Government Counterinsurgency Guide* produced by the US Government Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative in 2009 defines insurgency as “the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region.”

The simplest alternative would have been to adopt one of the other definitions. However, the definition in JP 3-24, excludes any insurgency that does not seek to overthrow or change the governing authority—such as reformist insurgencies, which seek to compel the government to change policies, and possibly separatist insurgencies, which aim to break a segment of territory away from an existing state or states. The Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative’s definition is the most straightforward and broadly inclusive, but it lacks some of the richness of the other definitions. Nevertheless, both of these definitions—as well as the definition in FM 3-24—contain elements that could be used to enhance the definition from the original Guide, and we drew upon those elements in our revised definition:

- FM 3-24’s characterization of insurgency as a “struggle” reflects the element of conflict inherent in insurgency better than “activity” does. Moreover, insurgency is not one activity but a protracted campaign of activities.
- Each of the definitions describe insurgency as subverting or displacing government legitimacy or control. We moved this element of the definition forward to stress its importance and to underscore that many insurgencies in their early stages seek to undermine the government but cannot yet replace it or control territory.
- Most of the second sentence of the definition in the original Guide is less a definition than a list of some, but not all, of the activities normally associated with insurgency. A complete list would be unreasonably long, and a partial list begs the question of how many and which activities must be present to classify a conflict as an insurgency









