

Viewpoint

Adopt and Overcome: The U.S. Military Doctrinal Gap in the COIN Fight

by Todd A. Anderson

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Introduction

Although the Army manuals (FM 3-24 Counter Terrorism, FM 3-05.30 PSYOP, and FM 3-13/JP 3-13 Information Operations) cover issues that are related to fighting an insurgent force, none of these manuals address the social mobilization concept of framing. Framing has a direct application to U.S. military operations in Iraq. The concept defines the battle for opposition leaders to garner support from the populace in order to deny the established power or regime the ability to counter opposition through force or policy. The application of framing to counter-insurgency (COIN) is appropriate and U.S. military doctrine should adopt and integrate the concept in order to guide maneuver commanders in non-kinetic and kinetic COIN operations. More specifically, framing pertains to the Information Operations (IO) battlefield, an aspect of military planning formerly placed on the conventional back burner but has now come to the forefront of U.S. military operations where 'taking the hill' has become replaced by policing streets. Should the U.S. military doctrine continue to neglect framing in its doctrinal and operational writings, it will be denying a conceptual resource to its troops that can help define the information battlefield, in which conventional armies traditionally are lacking, when conducting counter insurgency operations.

In this article, I argue that the concept of framing, as defined by the social mobilization theory framework (SMT), can and should be applied to U.S. military counter insurgency (COIN) operations. Framing provides an academic focus of study that could increase Soldiers' and Marines' concept operations within the COIN environment. The concept of framing immediately focuses the U.S. military leadership on the enemy's plan to secure the support of the population, which is the widely accepted center of gravity in the COIN fight.^[1] This paper will utilize U.S. Army and USMC operations in al Anbar province, Iraq as an example for three reasons: because of the organizational requirement to cooperate between military branches, the current successes of IO in this theatre, and the detailed focus of the commanders to the IO fight from 2003-2007 which yields more data focused on framing.

This article is organized in three sections: first, a definition of framing and an outline of the current academic work on the subject. Second, this paper covers a brief application of framing to Islamist Movements, such as Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). Third, I provide an account of actions in Al Anbar Province from 2004-2007 in two vignettes: the second battle of Fallujah (2004), 1st BCT 1st AD (2005-6). The conclusion of this paper finds that the application of a framing lens can aid the U.S.

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military in its operations and help prevent an insurgency, as well as focus Coalition Forces' (CF) interactions with the populace.

Framing

Framing is a cognitive theory that originally came to sociology from psychiatry. Zald defines frames as "the specific metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues used to render or case behavior and events in an evaluative mode and to suggest alternative modes of action."^[2] Johnston defined it the most succinctly when he labeled framing as a function "much the same way as a frame around a picture: attention gets focused on what is relevant and important and away from extraneous items in the field of view."^[3] Acts of oppression or injustice must be illuminated for the population to mobilize into a movement, or an insurgency, which means that people must be convinced of the necessity to move against the regime, occupational forces, or government. Thus collective action frames must not only define the problem, but what must be done about it, and why it must be done.

The concept of framing is relatively new to social mobilization theory. Unlike its more quantitative, resource-based mobilization theoretical predecessors, the concept of framing acknowledges that there are more subjective forces to social mobilization at work. Within the theoretical work surrounding the concept of framing, the academic study is clearly led by Benford and Snow. Their work on framing illuminated the cultural use of symbols, frame resonance, and diagnostic/prognostic frames in order to demonstrate how ideology plays a part in social mobilization. Snow's theory of framing came from a modification of Goffman's concept which stated that organizations use "primary framing" in the attempt to "allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms."^[4] Goffman originally picked up the term "framing" from Bateson's use in the field of psychology where the definitions of a situation are "built up in accordance with principles of organization which govern events-at least social ones-and our subjective involvement in them" and 'frame' is used in reference to these basic elements.^[5]

What Benford and Snow brought to this dialogue, argues McAdam et al., was the more refined definition of framing, referring to it as "the conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion a shared understanding of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action."^[6] McAdam, et. al., acknowledged that framing processes encourage mobilization as they define the problems and vulnerability of the system and its illegitimacy in a definition.

Benford and Snow identify four common characteristics to collective action frames that will aid in focusing this study. These characteristics are: problem identification and direction/locus of attribution, flexibility and rigidity/ inclusivity and exclusivity, interpretive scope and influence, and degree of resonance. Problem identification and direction/locus of attribution is considered as the "most obvious"^[7] way in which frames vary. Gerhards and Rucht studied West German mobilization campaigns in the late 1980s and they hypothesized that "the larger the range of problems covered by a frame, the larger the range of social groups that can be addressed with the frame and the greater the mobilization capacity of the frame."^[8] They add the caveat to their hypothesis that it only holds to those frames that can be logically or plausibly connected to each other. With flexibility and rigidity, inclusivity and exclusivity, Benford and Snow explain that the more inclusive and flexible frames are, the more likely they can become "master frames."^[9] Master frames are those that are broader in scope and influence and act as a kind of blueprint for the orientation and activities of other movements. According to Swart, "frames that have been adopted by two or more distinctive movement... exist not only because of [their] qualities but also because they are culturally resonant to their historical milieu."^[10] The transportation of master frames affects U.S. IO and PSYOP as new master frames appear from outlying movements in the Middle East from Iran's nuclear program to Hezbollah's victory over Israel in the 2006 Summer War.

The degree of resonance is the fourth way in which frames can vary. Two factors are identified by Benford and Snow as key to the variance in degree of frame resonance: credibility of the frame itself and its relative salience. The credibility of a frame is a function of its consistency, empirical credibility, and the credibility of the frame articulators. Inconsistency in a frame can be found in contradictions between the frame and beliefs or claims, and in the popular perception of the frame articulators, whether or not their frame conflicts with their tactical actions. Empirical credibility has to do with whether or not the frame can be verified by common experience, or be proven through logical discourse. The credibility of the articulators ties into empirical credibility. The corroboration of experts with social status on a movement-worthy issue creates credibility of fact, since the experts are assumed to know about their area of expertise, and the relatively 'elite' or known qualities of the articulating individual lend credibility to the movement. Benson and Snow use the example of peace groups enlisting former members of the Department of Defense, such as Admiral Eugene Carroll, Daniel Ellsberg, and John Stockwell, to speak at rallies in order to enhance the movement's credibility.[11]

The salience of a frame has to do with its capacity to move through a society at multiple levels, not just through one sub-culture or compartment of society. Benford and Snow identify three dimensions: centrality, experiential commensurability, and narrative fidelity. Johnston writes that a frame must have amplification, which directly describes a frame's salience. He illustrates amplification with the bumper sticker; pithy, catchy slogans that cut to the argument in memorable, striking, and fundamental ways. His examples are from the issue of abortion in the United States: "I'm Pro-Choice and I Vote," "It's a Child Not a Choice," "Keep Your Hands off My Body," and "Abortion Is Murder." [12] These simple yet direct statements leave no question in the mind of any person who is even remotely aware of the issue as to what side the bearer (or driver) ascribes. These simple statements divide the line of battle between the rights of citizens, natural rights as argued by Locke and Jefferson and codified in the U.S. Constitution, and the Judeo-Christian ethical understanding of the sanctity of life.

Johnston and Noakes attempt to simplify academic work on framing by defining frame resonance as consisting of the frame makers (what they called the social movement entrepreneur), the frame receivers, and the frame itself (which Kubal defines as, of necessity, being in the styles, forms, and normative codes of the target audience). [13] Cutting terms and combining nuances makes the memorization of key tenants of framing easier for the student; however, the nuances exist for a reason: framing is a nuanced concept. From these sources and the academic dialogue that they encouraged, a complete understanding of the concept of framing can be applied in this study, but it must be understood that the 'answer' to a definition of framing is, by the very nature of framing, that it is not an exact science. The variance in academic studies, proliferation of writing and additions to jargon and terminology can make the study of framing daunting. The extraction of hard numbers from frame analysis is more time-consuming than potentially fruitful; however, one can build the argument, as I will hereafter, that the application of the study of framing can help military operations in stability support operations (SASO) engaging in the counterinsurgency fight.

Islamic Framing and Social Movements

Central to the U.S. Army's fight against Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) are the Islamist leaders' uses of framing in respect to *Jihad*. The concept of *Jihad* is a religious concept used to mobilize a society to conduct religious warfare against an oppressive regime, or, more typically, against a non-Muslim or apostate occupying power. When framing *Jihad*, religious leaders rely on a rich historical religious dialogue based on the right leader for, the correct time to conduct, and the correct impetus to wage *Jihad* from Qur'anic sources and from later Muslim scholarship. Their argument is powerful and focused towards a particular target audience (TA) at a particular time. This section will briefly show how framing is applied in Islamist leaders' efforts to win popular support.

Islamist leaders turn Islam political in order to create a social movement based on religious identity that has had great effect on Muslim versus non-Muslim powers such as in Israel and in Lebanon. Islamic activism is a formidable adversary to U.S. military operations, especially in the information operations arena where they hold the 'high-ground' of cultural understanding, immediate common identity, and the trust of their religious followers. The following section applies framing to Islamic activism and will provide a definition of terms and a general application by academics in this field of study. The work of Williams, Kubal, Benford, and Snow form a conceptual academic understanding of framing in a cultural context not specific to the Muslim world. The works of Wiktorowicz, Robinson, Gurr and Hafez will then help apply the concept of framing to the Muslim situation in particular; each author addresses social movement leading to warfare and how leaders use framing to justify their actions within culturally legal bounds.

Benford and Snow argue that the proliferation of scholarship on collective action frames and framing processes demonstrates the growing regard for this aspect of social mobilization theories as a vital dynamic alongside resource mobilization and political opportunity processes.^[14] Studying framing and its manifestations helps to further understanding of the issues relevant to the society, culture and temper of a given community. Islamic scholars have a rich background of academic work from which to extrapolate arguments and apply the religion to current day problems, and *Jihad* is only one of many topics of discussion. Islamists in particular have, of necessity, opened their own schools to train their own scholars at as high a level of competence as their religious, social, and political opponents. In order to disseminate their message and form a social base from which to influence politics, Islamists have to match wits in a highly competitive religious academic atmosphere.

The Islamists' measure of effectiveness in this academic arena is their ability to manipulate doubt in the opposition and then fill this void with their own message. Doubt in the opposition is brought about through framing. The idea of framing comes from social mobilization theory, it is a tactic used by movement leaders to rally support for their cause while simultaneously preventing other leaders from 'bleeding' their ranks of members. The message used by the framing leader is intended to create resonance, defined by Williams and Kubal as when "frames used by activists fit within the existing repertoire of legitimate ideological constructions" thus providing the movement activists with the cultural resources to dominate the public perceptions on a particular issue.^[15] The hope is therefore that the population that will, in turn, be convinced to be led by these activists. Wiktorowicz argues that Muslim leaders are often hindered not by religious facts to support their arguments either for or against *Jihad*; rather, these leaders, when framing, utilize four basic strategies to promote their group of clerics and debunk the credibility of the opposition. These strategies are: 1. vilification or demonizing the oppositions' popular clerics, 2. exaltation or praise for the "in-group" clerics, 3. credentialing, the emphasis placed on the particular expertise of the in-group's intellectuals, and 4. de-credentialing, or raising doubts as to the oppositions' clerics.^[16]

Wiktorowicz makes the astute observation that, since there is no formal hierarchy within the Muslim world, the religious interpretation within the community is subject to the intellectual experts that are commonly or particularly favored by the community. Unlike the Catholic Church, there is not a living supreme pontiff (an exception to this rule: Twelve Shi'a have the Hidden Imam whose guidance will trump all other religious expertise once he returns) with the organization and authority to control religious doctrine. The academic requirements of a jurist are not codified and the title *alim* or religious scholar is not a formal designation or appointment. Therefore, when *fatwas* are issued, the Muslim community at large relies on the perceived character and competence of the scholar to determine legitimacy.^[17] It is therefore the nature of Islamic scholarship to rest on the popular perception of the scholar in question, which lends this scholarship particularly susceptible to framing.

The study of framing does not come without detractors. As Williams and Kubal point out, framing is overtly focused on the elites in a movement, what they say and how they organize their

campaign of words, and the fact that most framing scholarship has maintained its focus at the interpersonal level and not at the elite level.[18] In effect, problem with culture, and therefore framing, is finding a balance between the “influence and processes of the active agency of human actors and the structuring power of cultural forms.”[19] The primary problem with scholarship on framing is the lack of focus on the macro-culture and its overwhelming focus on interpersonal resonance.[20] Though critical of some of the scholarship around framing, Williams and Kubal are far from throwing the whole concept out. Rather, they point out some of the failures of frames within the United States’ history (such as Marxism and Labor Rights) and relate it to the failure of the movement leaders to apply the intended message to the greater American culture and social ethics regarding labor and rights. Their application of framing to its failures only furthers the understanding of framing influence on a social movement, especially when these frames are not in sync with the popular demands for social change.

Frames, whether intrinsically powerful or not, have to be targeted at social desires, cultural triggers, and a common social problem that a sizeable group of the population demand to see solved. Why people activate, revolt, and form social movements is an important question in understanding the frames used in creating movements. Gurr introduced the concept of relative deprivation which argued that men rebel due to economic reasons. Hafez argues to the contrary that Muslims rebel due to a “defensive reaction to predatory state repression that threatens the organizational resources and lives of political Islamists.”[21] Hafez’s research focuses on the Islamist movements in the Middle East and North Africa and finds this commonality that is specifically within the Qur’anic construct of *Jihad*.

U.S. Military Application: Al Anbar Province, Iraq, 2004-07

Al Anbar Province is seated at the southwestern point of the ‘Sunni Triangle of Death,’ as it has been labeled by the media. It was a hotbed of support for Saddam Hussein and includes the cities of (from West to East) Hit, Ramadi, Habbinaya, and Fallujah. Al Anbar is the largest province in Iraq and its terrain consists of the Euphrates River basin and desert. Demographically, al Anbar is mostly Sunni, with some Kurdish settlements and Shi’a neighborhoods. The relative lack of sectarian differences poses the threat of easy unification of the society under an insurgent cause and the promise of simplicity in composing IO talking points and PSYOP messages for the U.S. forces. Al Anbar shares borders with Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria, which makes it much more susceptible to foreign influence. Al Ramadi and Fallujah are settled along a direct highway to Jordan and Syria and have a long history of smuggling with the neighboring states that has posed a threat to the growth and maintenance of indigenous police and security forces in al Anbar.[22]

The Second Battle of Fallujah: November 2004

The importance of the second battle of Fallujah is not simply that it was another high-intensity contact between the insurgent and U.S. forces; rather, the battle was a fusion of IO and maneuver that was developed after the first attempt to take Fallujah, without an IO plan, failed miserably to quell the insurgency or impose U.S./Coalition Forces (CF) messages throughout the region. The first battle, in fact, actually reinforced the frames of the insurgents and clerical leaders who had made the town ungovernable by the Interim Iraqi Government (IIG) or CF.

The first attempt on Fallujah began in April 2004 with a cordon of the city and weak attempts to coax the fledgling Iraqi security forces to attack hardened insurgent positions. The rapid response of the IIG/Bremer government to the execution of four U.S. contractors left little time to plan and little desire to attack on the part of the maneuver commanders who received the order to assault the city resulting in a hastily constructed and resourced attack called Operation Vigilant Resolve. Essentially, the task force assembled had had little time to plan, coordinate, or research the best way to take the town, minimize civilian casualties, and nullify the leadership of the clerics who

were leading the insurgents from within the city.[23] Even though the U.S./CF had clear military dominance against the insurgents in Fallujah during Operation Vigilant Resolve, the operation was a failure because “operations in the information domain were not integrated into the battle plan.”[24] Steps to integrate IO into the battle plan would have included “engaging numerous and varied Iraqi leaders, removing enemy information centers, and rapidly disseminating information from the battlefield to worldwide media.”[25]

The mistakes made in Operation Vigilant Resolve were avoided in the Second Battle of Fallujah, code named Operation Al Fajr (New Dawn). The operation was planned and coordinated under the auspices of Iraqi leadership and taken with IO in mind. The planners at Multi National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I) created the “IO threshold” in order to prevent another informational defeat. The planners knew that the best way to prepare the battlefield was not through conventional artillery and air strikes; rather, it would be through gaining a dominant position on the information battlefield and nullifying the insurgent leadership through coercing them to leave or proving them wrong. The very name of the operation, Al-Fajr, was chosen because it put an Iraqi face on the assault and was intended to leave no doubt in the mind of the enemy that the attack had the license of the IIG.

I have first-hand experience with the Second Battle of Fallujah as a Mechanized Infantry Company Fire Support Officer (FSO) and was a part of the planning and execution of lethal and non-lethal fires used during the battle. For example, my company was augmented with a Forward Air Controller (or FAC, which is a pilot trained to call in air-strikes from the ground) and a PSYOP loudspeaker team prepared to play harassment and non-intervention messages throughout the battle. Throughout our time in Fallujah, the company sought to fight the insurgents and provide for the civilians who had stayed. We provided medical aid to wounded civilians, license to come and go along the streets to families trying to get to their homes, and security from insurgent reprisal.

The importance of IO was evident during the preparation for the battle. Prior to the attack, the IO plan was briefed down to the platoon and squad level with each unit knowing their part and the restrictions on their actions that were emplaced in order to win a victory not just over the fighters, but over the insurgency in the area. The purpose of the attack was not to destroy the city; rather it was to remove the insurgents. Several weeks prior to the initial attack, leaflets had been dropped and a ‘whisper campaign’ initiated that warned fighters in Fallujah that the Iraqi and U.S. forces were going to attack. Many of the insurgents and leaders fled the impending invasion, but, more importantly for CF, so did many of the civilians which would vastly reduce the chances of collateral damage. The commander’s intent was to raise the IO threshold and gain the ‘high ground’ of information, not just the temporary control of the city.

“Using this intent as a guideline, MNF-I, MNC-I, and Multi-National Force-West (MNF-W) developed courses of action to mass effects in the information domain, thereby raising the IO threshold and creating additional ‘maneuver’ room for combat operations in Fallujah. We deliberately countered enemy information campaigning, planned and executed IO shaping operations, and executed carefully planned senior leader engagements, military diplomacy, and public diplomacy, and public diplomacy activities. As a result of these synchronized, integrated, and complementary actions, we were able to mass information effects and build a strong base of support for combat operations in advance of the operation.”[26]

1st Brigade Combat Team (BCT)-1st Armored Division (AD) in Ramadi 2006-7

Under the command of COL MacFarland, 1-1AD has been primarily recognized as the unit that helped to turn Ramadi from one of the most violent areas in Iraq into a success story for U.S.-Iraqi combined COIN operations. His method is surprisingly simple: first he regained control of the town through kinetic operations. He ordered his subordinate battalion commanders to break out of the Brigade and Battalion sized Forward Operating Bases and create smaller, platoon sized, combat outposts throughout the city. Next, he enlisted the support of Iraqi forces, Army and police, and the support of the sheikhs to launch information operations in the area. Finally, he emplaced

a system wherein the CF's voice could be heard above the threats and messages of the insurgents and Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) forces' voices. This system is called the TAVWAVE system and it is basically a sort of closed circuit radio-broadcasting system with a centralized broadcasting station controlled by U.S. and Iraqi security forces that broadcasts to large speakers secured within each of the platoon-sized combat outposts and the Iraqi police stations around the city. These speakers broadcasted alerts for CF operations, daily news, and alerts to AQI activities within the area.[27] Previously, AQI had held the 'high-ground' of information operations; they would simply talk to the people and inform them that the CF were conducting all the attacks in the area, causing all the damage to infrastructure, buildings, and civilian casualties and that AQI's forces were the ones providing for the population of Ramadi.

Essential to the use of the TACWAVE system is the cultural repertoire that it intrinsically built on: namely the local custom of receiving news from mosque loudspeakers.[28] The TACWAVE enabled CF to begin daily interaction with the populace and established the Iraqi police and army as legitimate authorities in the area. The fact that 1-1AD used local Iraqis to broadcast on the radio gave further legitimacy to cooperative local leaders, such as the chief of police, and bypassed the awkward differences in Iraqi dialect that CF interpreters used. This integration of IO uses tenants of the concept of framing but had to be brought about in a slow and painstaking way. The success of the TACWAVE system and the employment of information in Ramadi by 1-1AD happened in spite of the Army organization; it was not brought about because of doctrine, training, or standard operating procedures (SOPs) inherent in the CF organization.[29]

Conclusion

In this paper I covered the concept of framing, briefly how it is evident in Islamist leadership, where it can be applied to U.S. military operations and doctrine and have concluded that the concept can and should be applied to U.S. military doctrine. At the very least, a more in-depth list of references including Benford and Snow, Hafez, Schleifer, and other academics should accompany COIN related manuals so that Soldiers and Marines may explore the field of study and get a feel for the nuances in the field. The U.S. Armed Forces are well equipped, trained, and mentally prepared for conventional warfare and have proven itself as a supreme power in this regard, even against a weakened enemy such as Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. forces have proven their conventional capacity to the world. The problem is that the current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have moved beyond the conventional scheme of fires and maneuver and into a peace-keeping, stability and support, counter-insurgency operations that have been kept well outside the doctrinal and professional dialogue since Vietnam.[30]

In light of the doctrinal gap, social mobilization theory, and framing in particular, stands at the forefront of academic disciplines that can immediately help foster an understanding of counter-insurgency operations conducted by a coalition of occupying foreign troops and fledgling indigenous security forces. The focus that framing places on the messaging, leadership and cultural repertoire used by insurgent organizations to rally support from the population can better align conventionally organized U.S. forces to attend to the true center of gravity in military operation within Iraq; namely the civilian population. Controlling the flow of information, e.g. the frames produced and countered by the insurgency, reduces the supply chains of the enemy and constricts his ability to operate, as demonstrated in al Anbar Province since 2006. To deny Soldiers and Marines on the ground the tools to accomplish their mission by omitting or neglecting a key concept—that of framing—is to increase the probability of defeat.

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