# Controlling the Human High Ground

## Identifying Cultural Opportunities for Insurgency

**Major Mark J. Broekhuizen, U.S. Marine Corps**

*Major Mark J. Broekhuizen is an infantry officer and a student in the Foreign Area Officer program, currently conducting in-country immersion training in Indonesia. He received a B.S. from Grand Valley State University and an M.A. in national security affairs from the Naval Postgraduate School. He has served three tours in Operation Iraqi Freedom, most notably as a company commander and battalion operations officer.*

*PHOTO: A U.S. Army Soldier from the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment looks down into villages in the Yayakhaill District from an Afghan police station, 17 December 2009. (ISAF Joint Command photo by U.S. Air Force, SSGT Logan Tuttle)*

RECENTLY, GENERAL DAVID Petraeus said, "The core of any counterinsurgency strategy must focus on the fact that the decisive terrain is the human terrain, not the high ground or river crossing."[1] While this statement is clearly true, we must deepen our understanding to identify the *high ground* of that human terrain. Only after identifying and establishing control of this key human terrain will we be able to achieve the population influence required for successful counterinsurgency.

The occurrence of insurgencies has been described as a function of "motive and opportunity."[2] Specifically, cultural motives can contribute to the causes of an insurgency. Eliminating these cultural motives for insurgency is the oft-espoused objective of the military's cultural training and analysis. But this training and analysis must also account for the *opportunities* required for an insurgency to occur. Just as a physical terrain analysis is used to identify key terrain on the battlefield, an analysis of cultural opportunities for insurgency can be used to identify the key human terrain. An understanding of operational culture can support identification and control of this *human high ground*.

References to the role of culture in counterinsurgency are often used in the context of how populations are impacted by the counterinsurgent's operations. The common logic of this approach is that a counterinsurgent who fails to understand the local culture may conduct his mission in a manner that violates a local custom or taboo. The result of this violation may be that the counterinsurgent's efforts are viewed as illegitimate and result in rebellion against him.[3] The counterinsurgent has inadvertently sparked new motives for insurgency. In response to this dynamic, cultural analysis and training can limit these violations and reduce local resistance.

While this removal of motive has obvious merit, identifying and eliminating a motive for behavior may be more difficult than simply eliminating the opportunity for that behavior.[4] For example, the looting after the fall of Baghdad was not necessarily the result of a new motive, but

| Report Documentation Page | | Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188 |
|---|---|---|

Public reporting burden for the collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instructions, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington Headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington VA 22202-4302. Respondents should be aware that notwithstanding any other provision of law, no person shall be subject to a penalty for failing to comply with a collection of information if it does not display a currently valid OMB control number.

| 1. REPORT DATE **NOV 2010** | 2. REPORT TYPE | 3. DATES COVERED **00-11-2010 to 00-12-2010** |
|---|---|---|
| 4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE **Controlling the Human High Ground: Identifying Cultural Opportunities for Insurgency** | | 5a. CONTRACT NUMBER |
| | | 5b. GRANT NUMBER |
| | | 5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER |
| 6. AUTHOR(S) | | 5d. PROJECT NUMBER |
| | | 5e. TASK NUMBER |
| | | 5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER |
| 7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) **U.S. Army Combined Arms Center,Military Review,Truesdell Hall, 290 Stimson Ave., Unit 2,Fort Leavenworth,KS,66027** | | 8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER |
| 9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) | | 10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S) |
| | | 11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S) |
| 12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT **Approved for public release; distribution unlimited** | | |
| 13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES | | |
| 14. ABSTRACT | | |
| 15. SUBJECT TERMS | | |

| 16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF: | | | 17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT | 18. NUMBER OF PAGES | 19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a. REPORT **unclassified** | b. ABSTRACT **unclassified** | c. THIS PAGE **unclassified** | **Same as Report (SAR)** | **6** | |

**Standard Form 298 (Rev. 8-98)**
Prescribed by ANSI Std Z39-18

a new opportunity allowed by the decrease in law and order. In general, we must distinguish between criminal or insurgent activity that is in response to a new motive and that which is merely the response to a new opportunity.

Since opportunities are more readily reduced than motives, understanding cultural opportunities for insurgency should take precedence over cultural motives during our cultural training and analysis.[5] Since insurgents are often locally or regionally based, their initial levels of cultural understanding undoubtedly add to their overall "information advantage."[6] As limited resources constrain both the counterinsurgent and insurgent's use of force to establish population control, they must each identify the most *culturally effective* strategies. By identifying cultural opportunities for insurgency, the counterinsurgent can reduce the insurgent's information advantage and prioritize his own efforts.

In its simplest form, an insurgency is a battle between the insurgent and the counterinsurgent (also referred to here as the "state") for control of the population.[7] Control of the population allows the state to overcome its information disadvantage while the same control allows the insurgents to overcome their force disadvantage.[8]

Even absent an insurgency, states are not always capable of penetrating and controlling all of their populations.[9] States can have difficulty maintaining a monopoly on violence, and may not be able to displace local strongmen operating on different rules.[10] The weakness of the state provides the opportunity for resistance or insurgency. Logically, we can then assume that any element of the population not under the state's control represents a *cultural opportunity* for the insurgent. The counterinsurgent must understand how an insurgent can exploit this available cultural space and deny him the chance.

To survive and win, insurgencies need inputs—recruits, materiel, food, etc.[11] The manner they seek these inputs can be numerous and culturally specific. Insurgent inputs are a result of opportunities allowed by the counterinsurgent or the structural environment and can be obtained from within the conflict area or outside it.[12] In some cases, the environment may simply not allow the counterinsurgent to limit all insurgent inputs. An example of this is the availability of insurgent safe havens beyond national borders. However, if the counterinsurgent understands and controls the cultural opportunities within the country, the insurgent seeking safety in a cross-border haven may find he is becoming irrelevant.

Outputs are as important to the growth of an insurgency as inputs.[13] Outputs may be activities aimed at acquiring new inputs (recruits, tax revenues, etc.) or at attacking the state's ability to maintain its control of the population, thereby creating new opportunities to grow. Like inputs, outputs take culturally specific forms. An example is the February 2006 bombing of the al-Askari Mosque in Samarra, Iraq, by Al-Qaeda in Iraq. This output decreased the state's monopoly of force by increasing sectarian fighting. The insurgents did not target a physical or symbolic element of the state, but indirectly targeted the state's (and coalition forces') ability to maintain control of the population through a culturally specific opportunity. The resulting decrease in the state's control of the population allowed Al-Qaeda greater opportunity to recruit and grow.

## A Map for the Human Terrain

Any discussion of a topic as opaque as culture must include definitions of key terms. While such definitions can be the topic of much debate, the Marine Corps Center for Advanced Operational Culture and Learning provides the definitions necessary for this article. The center defines "culture" as "[t]he shared world view and social structures of a group of people that influence a person's and a group's actions and choices."[14] Of more concern to the counterinsurgent is "operational culture," which the center defines as "[t]hose aspects of culture that influence the outcome of a military operation; conversely, the military actions that influence the culture of an area of operations."[15] The center refines it by identifying five key dimensions of operational culture—"physical environment, economy, social structure, political structure and belief systems."[16] These five dimensions provide an effective model for identifying cultural opportunities for insurgent inputs and outputs.

## Physical Environment

All insurgencies need a supportive physical environment to grow and survive. The physical environment consists of such elements as food, shelter, water, land, climate, fuel, and power.[17]
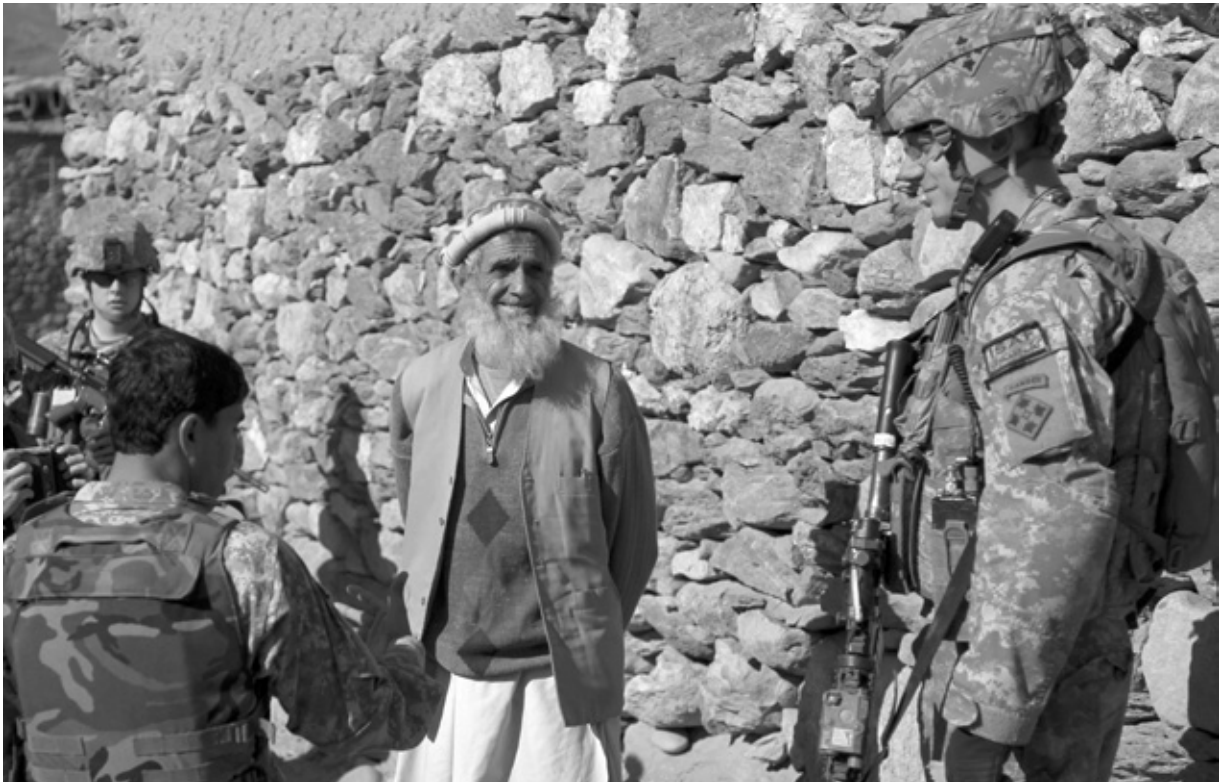
A U.S. Army first lieutenant and his translator speak with an Afghan during a patrol through Kandigal Village, Afghanistan, 15 December 2009.

Neither the state nor the insurgent can control all these elements. Therefore, the state must attempt to control those environmental inputs without which the insurgent cannot survive. For example, during the Malayan Emergency, the Malayan Communist Party relied on inputs of rice from Chinese "squatters" to sustain them in the jungle.[18] In response, the British enforced strict rice controls and achieved the effect of "starving the guerrillas out."[19]

Land itself may be the most difficult element of the physical environment to control, as insurgents can often retreat to mountainous, desert, or jungle terrain that is difficult to reach. However, it might also be the most insignificant, for insurgents need access to the population. As the British in Malaya demonstrated, targeting and controlling access to the people is more important than controlling the land.

## Economy

The state often lacks the ability or the will to control all elements of its economy, resulting in an "informal economy" that involves illegal and unregulated goods and services.[20] The state by definition lacks control of the informal economy, which presents a cultural opportunity for the insurgents. First, he obtains needed money. Second, insurgent control of the informal economic sector can deteriorate the formal sector, an output that further undermines this element of state control.[21] Insurgents can exploit such culturally specific opportunities within the informal economy like *hawala* networks to transfer funds and receive funds from external sources.[22] Because the insurgents in Iraq controlled much of the fuel distribution routes, they were able to profit substantially from the sale of black market fuel.[23]

Identifying insurgent economic opportunities can be challenging. In some cultures, corruption and bribery are an "accepted way of doing business."[24] While these illegal transactions can provide a source for insurgent revenue, they are also often confused with culturally accepted patronage. In many cases, the counterinsurgent mistakes such legitimate patronage for criminal or insurgent behavior and

misidentifies a patron as an insurgent. As patrons can be holders of social or political power, such mistakes can create new cultural opportunities for the insurgents to exploit.

Insurgents also pursue outputs aimed at exploiting economic opportunities such as kidnapping affluent citizens. These actions simultaneously demonstrate the state's inability to protect them and allow the insurgent to gain inputs from ransoms.[25] If they conduct the same operations against members of the state's control infrastructure (i.e. police), they can create even more space to grow. Insurgents can also collect rents for "protection."[26] The insurgents gain income from these rents and the "protection" they provide is an output that effectively replaces the state's monopoly of legitimate violence.[27] It serves as one more step by which the insurgents supersede the state. By understanding economic opportunities, the counterinsurgent can focus efforts on controlling them to force the insurgent to use harsher methods to extract economic inputs from the population. This undermines the insurgency's popular support and can serve as a new motive to support the state.

## Social Structures

Social structures also provide cultural opportunities for the state and the insurgent. Social structures are a "set of organized relationships or ties among people."[28] These relationships could be organized around characteristics of age, gender, tribe, class, ethnicity, and religious lines.[29] In Malaya, the British understood the insurgency was concentrated within a sub-ethnic group of Chinese and was able to target that group. In the 1990s, Saddam Hussein recognized the limited authority of tribal sheiks and exploited tribal affiliation to strengthen his social control.[30] During Operation Iraqi Freedom, gender played a significant role in targeting social structures for control. Specifically, coalition forces heavily targeted young men

while cultural constraints prevented significant contact or searching of Iraqi females by males. Unsearched females were a significant opportunity for insurgents until culturally acceptable measures were put in place to remove it.

The counterinsurgent must recognize the opportunities certain groups present to the insurgent and prioritize its efforts to help these groups resist insurgent control. Given the counterinsurgent's information disadvantage, this type of cultural knowledge is critical. As with criminal profiling, understanding social structures allows the counterinsurgent to more effectively target specific elements of the population. The importance of age and gender are obvious when considering that the young adult male population is so often the target of insurgent recruiting efforts. Religious groups can also be the target of insurgent recruiting. For example, although the majority of Salafi Muslims are not extremists, many Islamic extremists are Salafi, an association that gives them another cultural opportunity to exploit.[31]

A recent example of a social structure opportunity for the counterinsurgent is the partnered efforts with Sunni tribes to combat Al-Qaeda in Iraq. The success of this alliance demonstrates effective targeting of a social group to support the counterinsurgency. In this manner, social structures can present cultural opportunities for the state or the insurgent to increase control over the population.

## Political Structures

Political structures also provide cultural opportunities. Political structures are "[t]he way that power and leadership is apportioned to people, and exercised, according to the social structure of the society."[32] States are often incapable of consolidating political power in the society, leaving a void that an insurgent group can fill. This was apparent in Iraq. After the removal of the Ba'ath Party, as many new holders of political power

*In many cases, the counterinsurgent mistakes such legitimate patronage for criminal or insurgent behavior and misidentifies a patron as an insurgent.*

emerged, some supported the state but many did not. These holders of political power may be tribal leaders, business owners, labor unions, or religious leaders. Identifying the holders of nonstate political power and coopting them is a proven counterinsurgency approach. For example, as American leaders struggled to gain control of the Philippines at the turn of the 20th century, they executed a policy of "benevolent assimilation" by providing "greatly expanded opportunities for political power to elites."[33] However, the counterinsurgent must use caution if the support of nonstate holders of power involves supporting local strongmen or warlords. The warlords could actually end up contesting the state or other groups for power.[34]

## Belief Systems

A culture's belief systems include history, imagined memory, folklore, icons, symbols and communication, rituals, norms, mores and taboos, and religious beliefs.[35] Belief systems matter, and the counterinsurgent must understand their influence. For example, Hindu "untouchables" had dramatic motives for rebellion at the bottom of the Indian caste system, but often did not because their values and their environments were synchronized.[36]

If the counterinsurgent's policy is not in accordance with the population's belief systems, the disequilibrium provides a cultural opportunity for the insurgent even if that policy is part of his own agenda. He translates the disequilibrium into the *motive* he also requires to recruit.

Belief system opportunities can also be converted into inputs and outputs for the insurgency. For example, insurgents may attempt to use memory and folklore. Consider the Sunni-insurgent group that adopted the name "1920 Revolutionary Brigade" in an attempt to gain legitimacy by capitalizing on the popularity of the 1920 revolt against the British. But with cultural understanding, the counterinsurgent can establish control of belief system opportunities before the insurgent can exploit them. By promising independence in Malaya, the British denied the communists the opportunity to exploit anti-colonialist beliefs.[37] Al-Qaeda in Iraq attempted to exploit belief system opportunities by claiming that it was the duty of Muslims to fight coalition forces, while the counterinsurgents did the same by claiming it



**A human terrain team research analyst and linguist talk to Afghan citizens during a village medical outreach in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 4 February 2010.**

U.S. Marine Corps photo by Chief Warrant Officer-3 B. T. Parra-Milks

was a tribal duty to fight Al-Qaeda in Iraq. Some circumstances simply prevent counterinsurgent efforts from being completely compatible with existing belief systems. This may be the case with the presence of a foreign occupation force that cannot overcome the perception that it is present merely for the intrusive influence of a third country. A successful insurgency will take advantage of this and exploit a belief system opportunity that neither the state nor the foreign counterinsurgency force can counter without risking its own power.[38]

## Making Motives Irrelevant

Insurgents take advantage of countless individual motives to pursue greater control of their environments, to pursue economic gain, to obtain social or political power, or act in accordance with their beliefs. But while these motives for insurgency are necessary, they alone are not sufficient. Any effective counterinsurgency strategy will aim to reduce these motives for insurgency, but attempting to address motives without control of the population will simply result in more opportunities for the insurgent to exploit.

The fact that an insurgency exists at all indicates state weakness and open political space for the insurgent to exploit. The counterinsurgent's primary objective must be to identify this available space and establish control of it without inciting popular resistance. By denying or limiting the opportunities for insurgents, these motives can be made irrelevant in the short term. Understanding cultural opportunities for insurgency should therefore be the primary focus of cultural training and a key requirement for planning counterinsurgency operations. **MR**

**NOTES**

1. GEN David H. Petraeus, "Afghanistan is Hard All the Time, But It's Doable," *The Times*, 18 September 2009.
2. Gordon H. McCormick, "Seminar in Guerrilla Warfare" (SO3802), Department of Defense Analysis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA (27 January 2009).
3. Headquarters, Department of the Army, FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006), 1-10.
4. Barak A. Salmoni and Paula Holmes-Eber, *Operational Culture for the Warfighter: Principles and Applications* (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, 2008), 192.
5. Nathan Leites and Charles Wolf, Jr., *Rebellion and Authority: An Analytic Essay on Insurgent Conflicts* (Chicago: Markham Publishing Company, 1970), 42.
6. Ibid., 45.
7. Gordon H. McCormick, Steven B. Horton, and Lauren A. Harrison, "Things Fall Apart: The Endgame Dynamics of Internal Wars," *Third World Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (2007): 328.
8. Ibid., 322.
9. McCormick, "Seminar in Guerrilla Warfare" (19 February 2009).
10. Joel S. Migdal, *Strong Societies and Weak States: State-Society Relations and State Capabilities in the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988), 18.
11. Ibid., 40.
12. Leites and Wolf, 32.
13. Ibid., 32.
14. Ibid., 53.
15. Salmoni and Holmes-Eber, 36.
16. Ibid., 15.
17. Ibid., 51-52.
18. Salmoni and Holmes-Eber, 55-69.
19. Robert W. Komer, *The Malayan Emergency in Retrospect: Organization of a Successful Counterinsurgency Effort* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1972), 8.
20. Ibid., 51.
21. Salmoni and Holmes-Eber, 76.
22. Robert Looney, "The Business of Insurgency: The Expansion of Iraq's Shadow Economy," *The National Interest*, Fall 2005, 1.
23. Ibid., 5.
24. Ibid., 3.
25. Salmoni and Holmes-Eber, 78.
26. Looney, 4.
27. Salmoni and Holmes-Eber, 81.
28. Ibid., 105.
29. Ibid., 111.
30. Charles Tripp, *A History of Iraq*, 3d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 260.
31. David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), xix.
32. Salmoni and Holmes-Eber, 147.
33. Paul Hutchcroft, "Colonial Masters, National Politicos, and Provincial Lords: Central Authority and Local Autonomy in the American Philippines, 1900-1913," *Journal of Asian Studies* 59, 2 (May 2000): 284.
34. Gordon H. McCormick and Lindsay Fritz, "The Logic of Warlord Politics," *Third World Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2009): 82.
35. Salmoni and Holmes-Eber, 167-199.
36. Chalmers A. Johnson, *Revolutionary Change* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982), 66.
37. Komer, 64.
38. David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1964), 20.