DEFEATING ISIS IN IRAQ: AN ANALYSIS OF THE COUNTERINSURGENCY

STRAGTEY USED TO LIBERATE THE CITY OF TIKRIT

HONORS THESIS

Presented to the Honors College of
Texas State University
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements

for Graduation in the Honors College

by

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San Marcos, Texas
December 2016

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Acknowledgements

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Bishop, for supporting me throughout this process. You unwavering support and constant encouragement has allowed me to not only produce quality work, but also enhance my skills as a writer and academic. This thesis would not have been possible without you, and I thank you for your guidance. I would also like to thank Dr. Ronny Haas and the Texas State University Honors College for supporting my goals and guiding me through the thesis writing process. I am grateful to have been given this opportunity in my undergraduate career, and am confident this experience will help me in my future academic goals.

Lastly, I would like to thank my family, especially my parents, for pushing me to be the best person I can be. You have reminded me to never give up on my dreams. I am grateful to have such a strong support system throughout my academic career, and I am excited to see where my next opportunity takes me.

Abstract

The Department of State released the *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* under the Bush Administration. The guide's main purpose was to define what constitutes a powerful counterinsurgency strategy, and how it should be implemented in certain situations. During 2014, the Iraqi Government, along with U.S.-led coalition forces, the US Air Force, and Iranian Shiite militias, battled with the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to regain land and control of the population in Tikrit. This offensive was intended to stop ISIS from capturing more territory in northwest Iraq. The counterinsurgency strategy used was a success, with Tikrit being liberated by the end of March 2015.

The end goal of any successful counterinsurgency strategy is for the government to regain and maintain control. It is considered "effective," if the government can establish, consolidate and transition authority over the territory and human population to the legitimate government. The counterinsurgency strategy used in Tikrit will be analyzed, in order to conclude how it was successful in defeating ISIS. This thesis will assess the counterinsurgency strategy used in Tikrit, paying particular attention to specific components from the *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*. This assessment will focus on information gathering, use of security forces, and implementation of political and economic/development strategies.

Success of the counterinsurgency strategy used in Tikrit rests on very unique circumstances specific to that city and country. One factor was the difference in religious views of the Shiite Iraqi government and the Sunni population of Tikrit; because of this, the military and political efforts of the offensive were calculated not to aggravate and increase the risk of sectarian and religious violence. A second factor was the involvement

of the United States and Iran; while both worked with the Iraqi government for liberation of Tikrit (influencing the Iraqi government's counterinsurgency strategy), their political motivations simultaneously hampered counterinsurgency efforts. The assessment of the implementation of these components in Tikrit will conclude if the *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* is effective in defeating insurgencies. Furthermore, the following analysis will answer the question if the guide could be used to combat other insurgency conflicts, whether in Iraq, or other countries facing ISIS insurgency.

Table of Contents

I. Introduction

Prompted by failed counterinsurgency tactics in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Bush Administration created a document formulating a successful strategy for the Middle East. The *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (COIN), signed on January 13, 2009, provided a step-by-step process intended to eliminate current acting insurgencies, and prevent future insurgencies. The city of Tikrit in Iraq will serve us as a case study, enabling an in-depth analysis of the counterinsurgency strategy developed by U.S. coalition forces and the Iraqi government from the guide. The unique circumstances of the "Tikrit Offensive" will be taken into account when analyzing this strategy, because the Iraqi government was not the only group fighting ISIS in Tikrit. Both the U.S. and Iran were involved in the offensive as well, and their relationship can be seen in all four components of the strategy used.

A successful counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy guided the defeat of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in present day Iraq. ISIS had come to dominate the political and military narrative of Iraq, with the country losing most of its northwest provinces to the insurgent group. Implementation of a COIN strategy was imperative in order to stop ISIS from gaining more territory. While the "Tikrit Offensive," as it came to be known, initially carried a hesitant tone—especially from American officials—the Iraqi military, with Shiite fighters and U.S. coalition forces, launched an offensive in March of 2015 to retake the city from ISIS insurgents (Castillo & Wedeman, 2015). While recapturing Tikrit would have been a great step for the Iraqi government, American officials were unsure if Iraqi military forces had the capabilities to prevent the offensive from becoming another sectarian bloodbath (Castillo & Wedeman, 2015). In the end, the offensive

proved successful, with Iraqi forces liberating the city on March 31, 2015 ("Iraqi forces take back Tikrit," 2015).

The COIN guide defined four main components necessary to a counterinsurgency strategy. These four components were: information gathering, use of security forces, implementation of a political strategy, and implementation of an economic/development strategy. All four of these components were intended to focus on enabling the affected government to regain and maintain control of the population (Department of State, 2009, 18). If control could be attained, then it was evident that the counterinsurgency strategy would be successful.

This analysis will focus on the Tikrit Offensive's unique circumstances, and how these affected the implementation of the four components. Which components were operationalized, and which components were omitted? Any counterinsurgency strategy's main goal is to regain and maintain control for the legitimate government. Although the Iraqi military was able to expel ISIS from the city, they also needed to consolidate and transition control of Tikrit to the municipal government. The success of any counterinsurgency strategy hinges on both these aspects, specifically how they were implemented based off of the political and religious dynamics of Tikrit.

II. Tikrit

Demographics

Sitting on the banks of the Tigris River, about 100 miles northwest of Baghdad, Tikrit has a population of 150,000 (Morris, 2015). Most of the city's residents and the surrounding tribal areas in Northwestern Iraq, including Tikrit, are Sunni Muslim. Members of the government of Iraq (GOI) have been Shia Muslim, so there are certain

disagreements between civil servants representing the Salah Ah Din province, and the staff of the GOI. In addition, most civilians fled Tikrit when ISIS overtook it; resulting in a severely diminished police force after ISIS took control during 2014.

Tikrit During Occupation

Tikrit offers an interesting perspective on COIN strategies, because the city experienced many insurgent attacks since 2003 (Britannica, 2016). During that year's U.S. invasion and the subsequent Iraq War, occupation of the city destabilized the city's government, and contributed to insurgent attacks. Within two years, however, U.S. coalition forces developed a working relationship with the Governor of Salah Ah Din providence, providing a direct line to the GOI. (Britannica, 2016). As a result, local officials were in a position to improve the city's local economic and social infrastructure.

ISIS

During June 2014, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared a new Islamic caliphate, condoning the capturing of multiple cities in northern Iraq, including Tikrit, Ramadi and Mosul (Tran & Weaver, 2014). The war waged by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is alleged to be led by religious beliefs, and ways religion should be used in society; ISIS targeted both Sunni and Shiite Muslims in areas it occupied. While ISIS is considered a Sunni faction, the organization condemns other Sunni Muslims for not abiding by their laws and practices (Nicks, 2014). Similarly, ISIS murdered Shiite citizens in areas it occupied, prompting Secretary of State John Kerry to label it "genocide" (Labott & Kopan, 2016).

With that said, ISIS is a sophisticated administrative network, having the capability to gather intelligence on the Iraqi military and U.S. coalition forces. Its

extensive internal and external intelligence networks include sleeper cells, capable of

molding and shaping data, to mislead intelligence-gathering forces (Behn, 2015). This

sophisticated administrative network allowed ISIS to have the upper hand in gathering

intelligence, a major factor that played out in the Tikrit Offensive.

During their successful seizure of Tikrit, ISIS-affiliated militants aimed their

attacks at police and security forces within the city ("Iraq crisis: Militants seize Tikrit",

2014). This caused most of the police forces to flee out of fear and leaving the Iraqi

forces with low morale, rendering the city defenseless. For this reason, insurgents found

it easy to control the inhabitants of Tikrit.

Tikrit Offensive

Tikrit was the second largest city under ISIS control, making it imperative that

any Tikrit offensive be successful (Bradley & Barnes, 2015). Any assault had to show the

Iraqi military as capable of regaining control of a city. The GOI was also alarmed by the

high number of Shia being targeted by ISIS in Tikrit due to government being run by

predominantly Shia officials. This seemed to give the GOI a particular incentive to be

more involved in the offensive.

Two factors were evident in the offensive in Tikrit. One factor was the difference

in religious views of the Shiite Iraqi government and the Sunni population of Tikrit;

because of this, the military and political efforts of the offensive were calculated not to

aggravate and increase the risk of sectarian and religious violence. A second factor was

the involvement of the United States and Iran; while both worked with the Iraqi

government for liberation of Tikrit (influencing the Iraqi government's

counterinsurgency strategy), their political motivations simultaneously hampered counterinsurgency efforts.

Tikrit was the first city to be recaptured by the GOI. Although immediate economic assistance was given, a long-term plan was not put into place to make sure economic stability continues. Because of the insurgency's nature, as well as their progressive territorial gains, it was likely that the GOI would move on to regaining another city. It was imperative that there is a strong foundation for the economy to rebuild before all governmental assistance is pulled out of the city.

The Tikrit Offensive furthered the political motivations of participating actors, at the same time as it recaptured Tikrit from ISIS. While Tikrit is predominantly a Sunni Muslim city, the fact that Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, a Shiite Muslim, was leading the fight against ISIS, and the fact that Iranian forces were also involved, meant that different religious and political factors were intertwined within the COIN strategy in Tikrit. If the US forces, coalition partners, and the Iraqi arm proved successful in liberating Tikrit, they would be able to liberate Mosul (an even larger city under ISIS control). Furthermore, the offensive would push ISIS further away from Baghdad, Iraq's capital (Bradley & Barnes, 2015).

U.S. Military Involvement in Iraq

Based on President Obama's election promise, all U.S. military personnel were pulled out of Iraq by December 2011. However, the GOI, under the leadership of Prime Minister Maliki, continued to struggle with power-sharing arrangements between Shiite, Kurdish, and Sunni groups (Logan, 2011). While Iraq succeeded in rebuilding some forms of public authority and re-stabilizing the sectarian balance, it was still susceptible

to attacks from non-state actors—such as ISIS. The U.S. and other countries reassessed the need to join together in order to stop ISIS from capturing land in Iraq and Syria. The U.S. Department of Defense, along with other coalition forces, established "Operation Inherent Resolve" (OIR) on October 15, 2014.

The U.S. recognized the need for an international response to the rise of ISIS, without actually mobilizing troops on the ground. This operation was, "intended to reflect the unwavering resolve and deep commitment of the U.S. and partner nations in the region and around the globe to eliminate the terrorist group ISIL [ISIS] and the threat they pose to Iraq, the region and the wider international community." OIR focused primarily on launching airstrikes and training government officials to successfully combat ISIS ("About CJTF-OIR", 2016). OIR was first implemented during the liberation of Tikrit.

With Operation Inherent Resolve, focus shifted from direct U.S. military intervention, to training and implementing Iraqi security forces. In December of 2015, a training program was established at Camp Taji, north of Baghdad, in order to give "5,000 Iraqi soldiers basic weapons and tactics training within 6 to 8 weeks" (Morris, 2015). In this particular campaign against ISIS, the U.S. military took on a less dramatic role than during the 2003 invasion, as when Staff Sgt. Timothy Barnhouse claimed: "We're not here to fight anymore; we're only rolling on amber" (Morris, 2015).

Iranian Shiite Militias

The Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) played a major role in the Tikrit Offensive. During the offensive, there was a combination of about 30,000 IRGC and Iraqi Security Forces fighting on the ground. The IRGC "forces were tasked with supporting

the Iraqi military and Shiite militias, including Hezbollah (Hezbollah Brigades)" (Roggio & Weiss, 2015). It is obvious that Iran had a strong presence in Tikrit, and helped the Iraqi Security Forces in liberating the city.

Although the presence of Iranian fighters was a successful and strategic move, the combination of U.S. led coalition forces and Iranian backed Shiite fighters within the same offensive caused tensions, which affected implementation of the counterinsurgency. The U.S listed most of the Iranian-back Shiite militias fighting in Tikrit as Foreign Terrorist Organizations (Roggio & Weiss, 2015). The U.S. did not want to be associated with any identified terrorist organizations (such as Hezbollah), and were strictly against working alongside the Iranian government. This combination of factors ultimately hindered the effectiveness and swiftness of the offensive.

III. Background

The *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (COIN) offers a foundation for a successful counterinsurgency strategy. Such a foundation includes the definition and explanation of what an "insurgency" is, what might motivate "insurgency groups" to form, and how a "counterinsurgency strategy" would be formulated based on these factors. Furthermore, the COIN guide defines four essential components to a counterinsurgency strategy. These four components are 1: information functionality, 2: uses of security forces, 3: implementation of a political strategy, and 4: implementation of an economic strategy. Finally, the guide explains how a counterinsurgency strategy ends with the legitimate government regaining and maintaining control over a city.

Insurgency, according to the COIN guide

Insurgency is defined as "the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify or challenge political control of a region" (Department of State, 2009, pg. 6). Insurgencies are focused on overthrowing any current ruling government, in order to implement their own rules, laws and forms of governance. They do this, through the use of force (including terrorism, guerilla warfare and coercion/intimidation). According to the COIN guide, each insurgency group has a different motivation, whether religious movements, within-governmental disapproval, or independent movements which lashed out at government authority. The guide offers six points that could potentially motivate an insurgency network: charismatic insurgent leaders, financial award, population grievances, dislike of ruling government, pre-existing local conflicts, and tribal/faction conflicts (Department of State, 2009, pg. 6).

According to the guide, two main strategies insurgencies use are a specific political strategy, and a general government security strategy. Their political strategy includes elements of persuasion (which promotes ideology), propaganda (which aims at diminishing the acting government's authority), and coercion (used to mobilize support from the general population). This specific political strategy is aimed at the general population, so the insurgent group would gain more followers, by dissuading people from supporting the local government. By undermining the government's morale and capability, the insurgent group will be able to gain a more secure foothold in the political terrain (Department of State, 2009, pg. 9).

According to the COIN guide, challenging the government's security also allows the insurgent group to "weaken, discredit or paralyze the less agile government security

forces" (Department of State, 2009, pg. 10). Insurgents typically use four tactics to undermine security forces: provocation, intimidation, protraction and exhaustion. Insurgencies use provocation in hopes that the opponents will react irrationally, causing them to indirectly alienate the population (Department of State, 2009, pg. 11). According to the COIN guide, the outcome would be a population showing a more favorable response to the insurgency groups, as opposed to government forces. Similar to political persuasion, "intimidation" focuses on singling out individual members of the government, and intimidating them (either by killing civilians, or other government officials).

Protraction and exhaustion are similar security strategies, as they try to exhaust the opponents by prolonging the conflict. This could include the insurgents hiding for a prolonged period of time, forcing the conflict to drag out, or bombing government facilities that contain resources—any of which would exhaust the opponents' ability to fight back (Department of State, 2009, pg. 11). COIN states that these four functions are essential components of any insurgency strategy that succeeds in undermining the government's security, and ultimately weakening their control over the population.

The COIN strategy acknowledges that outcomes of these insurgencies vary, with regard both to the political landscape, and the international actors involved. The COIN guide lists three outcomes an insurgency group might have. The first would be that an insurgency group would actually succeed in overthrowing the government; as the guide points out, this is typically a rare event. The second outcome is that the insurgent group may force the government into political accommodation, a more common event. Lastly, the insurgency may be co-opted by the existing government and stop fighting all together,

another common outcome (Department of State, 2009, pg. 11). Planners and policy makers must understand and take all of these components into consideration when crafting a successful COIN strategy.

Counterinsurgency, according to the COIN guide

"Counterinsurgency," as defined by the guide, was the "comprehensive civilian and military efforts taken to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes." COIN's primary purpose was to "build popular support for a government while suppressing or co-opting insurgent movements" (Department of State, 2009, pg. 12). Because this was neither an invasion nor an occupation, COIN should not be focused on creating a new government; rather, it would help the overthrown government regain its legitimacy in the eyes of the population. While the guide states that COIN is more population-centric than enemy-centric, there should be elements of both within a successful strategy (Department of State, 2009, pg. 14). The approach of a COIN strategy (population-centric) or (enemy-centric) should depend on the nature and past history of the insurgent group.

The *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* has four main components; information functionality, security enforcement, political reconciliation and economic reconciliation. According to the guide, these four components are imperative to conducting a counterinsurgency strategy. The efforts of each function must be integrated within the other, making sure to "maintain a balance between functions requires an integrated conflict management system" (Department of State, 2009, pg. 18). Although subjective, these four conditions can be used to measure if the government is able to

regain control of the population and territory, thereby deeming the COIN strategy a success.

Information functionality is the base for the COIN strategy. Information must be collected and formulated in a timely manner, in order to stop the insurgency from progressing. Information functionality can be divided into two sections: information used to assimilate order to inform an approach ("knowledge"), and information disseminated among populations ("influence") (Department of State, 2009, pg. 18). That these two functions of information gathering be integrated was imperative in stopping the insurgency.

In a counterinsurgency strategy, a crucial function is training the local police or the fighters who are going to be involved in the battle. Building the capacity of security forces is a larger process of Security Sector Reform (SSR), which includes developing civil institutions that oversee security personnel and intelligence framework (Department of State, 2009, pg. 22). It's necessary to restore the police primacy, in order to reinforce general perceptions of the insurgents as "criminals" (rather than "freedom fighters"). In turn, this highlights local government's commitment to protect their citizens (Department of State, 2009, pg. 23). While not directly involved in the offensive, U.S. coalition forces helped to liberate Tikrit as much due to training the local/government police forces, as due to airstrikes.

COIN strategies' political reconciliation provided the necessary framework for the other three components (Department of State, 2009, pg. 23). In other words, the political strategy of a COIN operation was supposed to act as a foundation, allowing other components to be built on top of it. These functions of the political strategy would

focus on the government facing the insurgency, and how it would respond to any current conflict. Given that a weak or unstable political strategy would not enhance the goals of a COIN strategy, the three main functions of a political strategy became: 1: political reconciliation and reform, 2: popular mobilization, and 3: governmental capacity building. Specifically focusing on how the current government can change in order to successfully and strategically face the insurgency, the guide defined these as "behavior modifications" (Department of State, 2009, pg. 24).

Although the last strategy employed, economic development was not the least important; in fact, it is probably the most important, since a strong economic and development plan would prevent future insurgencies. Once a strong political framework was put into place, a strong economy would follow; without an economic strategy, the region control of an would become a likely candidate for some future insurgency. As its name suggests, the "economic and development components" focus its main efforts on building "the absorptive capacity of local economies and generate government and societal revenues from economic activity." This component focuses on humanitarian assistance, such as safe water, basic health care, and the development of infrastructure to support different economic activities, as well (Department of State, 2009, pg. 24). The combination of these yielded rapid, yet effective, economic development.

These four components would allow any government to regain and maintain control of the political framework and the human population. This is the ultimate goal of a counterinsurgency strategy; if the insurgents lose control, and the legitimate government returns as the acting political body, then the insurgency has been successfully defeated. Once the four components have been fully implemented, the level

of control would be determined by three distinct phases: 1: establishment, 2: consolidation, and 3: transition.

Establishing control would be the initial phase, focusing on regaining control of the terrain, both human and physical. This phase focuses particularly on the kind of military and security measures that would be used against insurgents. During the second phase, consolidation, government control would be extended, and pro-government forces put in power. Lastly, the third and final phase would be transition, when control would be handed over from military force to local civilian authority (Department of State, 2009, pg. 26). These three phases would conclude, if and when the GOI gained control over Tikrit, after any military offensive to liberate the city.

IV. Discussion

This section will assess the COIN guide's success in Tikrit, keeping in mind integration and implementation of the four components identified above, as well as the role of both the U.S. Coalition forces and the GOI. Although this analysis is based on the *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide,* it is important to acknowledge that the U.S. with its coalition allies played a major role in only two of these components, information functionality, and the use of security forces. The GOI bore responsibility for the last two components (the formation of political and economic strategies). Although the U.S. was not involved in these last two components, the COIN guide was used for the Government of Iraq's strategy.

Information Functionality

The U.S. and coalition forces took a lead role in collecting and gathering intelligence in Tikrit through "Operation Inherent Resolve" (OIR). Since the first part of

OIR focuses on intelligence gathering and reconnaissance missions, the United States needed to gather intelligence. At this point in time, the airstrike campaign had not been launched in Tikrit, and the coalition forces were focusing on sending drones over the city ("U.S.-led coalition providing tactical support", 2015). In order to complete the second half of OIR (airstrikes), coalition forces needed to know where ISIS insurgents were located. This also decreased the number of building destroyed in the city.

Intelligence-gathering drones picked out buildings in which ISIS insurgents were hiding, allowing for a pre-selected target for the airstrikes. Intelligence officials were also able to provide video feeds to the Iraqi forces, which gave them a different perspective on how to approach the city center (Barnes & Abdulrahim, 2015). By providing intelligence to Iraqi security forces, the United States was able to fulfill the information functionality of the COIN strategy. Information and intelligence gathered during the offensive dramatically helped the Iraqi military and U.S. coalition groups defeat ISIS.

The COIN strategy's "information functionality" in Tikrit implemented only one of the two functions listed in the *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*. Under the first component, "knowledge," the GOI requested help to gather intelligence and counterintelligence on ISIS, which was then used to conduct airstrikes that exponentially weakened ISIS's stronghold in Tikrit. The second component, "influence," was not implemented during this information-gathering phase, as the population could not be influenced (because most of the civilians had fled the city during 2014). For that reason, information functionality used in Tikrit was predominantly aimed at helping the GOI combat ISIS, as well as aid U.S. coalition forces as they carried out airstrikes.

Use of Security Forces

In Tikrit, the use of security forces proved the COIN strategy's most important component. This included training military personnel, as well as providing arms/equipment that might help stop the insurgents' progress. Even though ISF training had led to Tikrit's liberation, U.S. coalition troops still faced roadblocks. On account of low morale, "will to fight" classes were integrated into officers and commanders' training program (Morris, 2015). Their training was intended to build the police personnel's confidence, as well as teach commanders/officers to project that confidence to others in their battalions. This effort also focuses on stopping corruption inside the Iraqi military. Training military personnel was also intended to oust old, corrupt military officers, in order to stop corruption from spreading.

A second tactic employed by U.S. coalition forces in Tikrit was airstrikes. Given the troop withdrawals, this was the only way the U.S. military could carry out combative military action. U.S.-led coalition airstrikes were necessary on account of their "advanced technical and powerful capabilities," something that the Iraqi Air Force severely lacked; the idea behind this air campaign was that "aerial bombardment will pave the way for Iraqi forces to go in and take control of the ground" (Botelho, 2015). During the offensive, U.S.-led coalition forces carried out 17 airstrikes, targeting ISIS checkpoints, and it became obvious that the U.S.-led airstrikes were responsible for liberating the city.

However, because Iraqi forces failed to coordinate with the U.S. at the beginning of the offensive, it was believed that airstrikes would not be necessary (Barnes & Abdulrahim, 2015). Consequently, during the first half of the battle, U.S. coalition forces did not carry out airstrikes on Tikrit. It was only after fighting had stalled two weeks into

the offensive that the Iraqi military requested air support (Barnes & Abdulrahim, 2015). Since ISIS insurgents barricaded themselves within the city, Iraqi and Shiite militias could not successfully storm it; instead, they had to call upon U.S. led airstrikes to move forward with the offensive.

After airstrikes on Tikrit started, fighting resumed on the ground, eventually allowing Iraqi forces to move closer to the city center. This success, however, came at a price. The United States did not want Iran to have any control of or influence on the Iraqi military forces in Tikrit, and would only help Iraqi forces in Tikrit if Baghdad would agree to "sideline upwards of 20,000 Iran-backed Shiite militiamen" (Nissenbaum, 2015). American officials defended this hesitation with the notion that sectarian violence would result if Iran were involved; U.S. forces were working only with those Shiite fighters who answered directly to the GOI. Popular mobilization forces implemented by Iran and coordinated with Baghdad where they were seen as legitimate, therefore they were invited into joint Iraqi-U.S. operations (Nissenbaum, 2015). U.S. coalition forces also attempted to prevent sectarian violence by recognizing and giving control to the legitimate government.

Security forces were a major component of the battle for Tikrit. Although all four components should have been implemented in a COIN strategy, it was the management of security forces in Tikrit that exponentially helped Iraqi and U.S. coalition forces liberate the city. One major difference between the COIN strategy as implemented in Tikrit, and the COIN strategy other places on the Middle East, was that the United States had less of a military presence. Through OIR, U.S. coalition forces trained Iraqi forces, while refraining from actually fighting ISIS. Also, it was not until the GOI requested U.S.

16

intervention that coalition airstrikes began. Once the U.S. had joined the offensive, American officials made sure that Baghdad was directing it (not Iran, nor their Shiite militias). According to all these indicators, Baghdad was slowly regaining authority and control—which was the preferred outcome of a COIN strategy.

With that said, Tikrit Offensive did not see "Security Sector Reform." Instead, the focus turned to training Iraqi forces through OIR, and conducting airstrikes. Civil institutions and intelligence frameworks were not rebuilt during this phase of the COIN. Instead, Security Sector Reform was used during the last two phases, building a political and economic strategy.

Political Strategy

The political strategy used in Tikrit shifted control from U.S. led airstrikes and training, to a more independent GOI. The large number of actors participating in the fight against ISIS raised the concern of political and sectarian conflict. Due to major religious and political undertones, "political reconciliation" became necessary in Tikrit. During actual fighting for city, U.S. coalition forces refused to coordinate operations with Iranian-backed Shiite militias. While such a dynamic could potentially lead to sectarian infighting, rather than cooperatively working together to defeat the insurgency, a thought commonly expressed by the U.S., Prime Minister Abadi stated that "keeping the sectarian peace around Tikrit and pursuing the Islamic State farther north toward its self-declared capital in Mosul cooperative victory" (Barnard, 2015).

After the city's liberation, the GOI's responsibility was to rebuild the city's infrastructure, as well as provide a political framework. By keeping this sectarian peace, all of the actors that had participated in the Tikrit offensive (regardless of their political

or religious identification), were able to work with the forces and government in Tikrit to reestablish the political infrastructure and reconcile the ongoing religious conflict. "Popular mobilization" emerged as a major component of the political strategy in Tikrit. This referred to Shiite militias that stayed in Tikrit after the city was liberated, in order to help rebuild the political and governmental framework. This popular mobilization was considered an "Iraqi institution within the Iraqi security system that expresses unity between the Iraqi citizens and the armed forces" (Barnard, 2015). While because these popular mobilization forces were Shiite controlled militias, and while Sunni civil servants staffed the municipal governments, it was thought that sectarian conflict was imminent (Trofimov, 2016). This caused some members of the Sunni population to feel as if Shiite militias were trying to take the city, as ISIS had done before (Trofimov, 2016). In order to rebuild infrastructure within Tikrit, Shiite militias needed to work alongside the municipal government, as well as with Sunni civilians. The population needed to witness the local government's control over the city. Once the armed forces recaptured the city, the first step was to create unity between the populations; with a second step was to transition power from the popular mobilization a force to the municipal government.

After the city had been successfully recaptured, focus shifted to bringing home the people who fled before the fighting started. Prime Minister Abadi called the security forces to facilitate the displaced citizens' return, emphasizing, "bringing civilians back without continuing conflict will be a critical measure of government control" (Barnard, 2015). Once civilians felt they could return safely to their homes, a greater chance emerges that government will have the capacity to rebuild, preventing insurgencies from forming in the future.

Economic and Development Strategy

 Economic development depends on civilians (shopkeepers, professors, merchants) who are in the city. After Tikrit's liberation, as some civilians slowly started to make their way back into the city, many others refused to return amid fears that ISIS would reappear. Because of the decreased population, businesses were off to a slow start; in addition, property prices fell to half their 2014 prices (Trofimov, 2016). It became apparent that extensive economic development would be needed. The GOI, along with such international organizations as the United Nations, attempted to rebuild infrastructure destroyed by ISIS. This included reopening educational institutions, rebuilding buildings destroyed during the fighting, and assisting displaced civilians who returned to the city.

 Most efforts focused on reopening Tikrit University, in order to bring local merchants back into the city (Neurink, 2016). Reopening the university was not to facilitate education; this was only secondary. The U.N. hoped that with the students' return to the university, their family members (who were local merchants) would also return to the city, which would dramatically increase economic activity. Education took a backseat role to this economic strategy, which focused on rebuilding and reopening of these local institutions.

 During 2015, the United Nations reported that at least 536 buildings in Tikrit were damaged during the fighting, and 137 structures had been completely destroyed (Abdul-Zahra, 2015). These needed to be rebuilt for economic activity to resume. Along with rebuilding infrastructure, the GOI also made efforts to help citizens return to the city. They provided residents with six months' worth of food and water (al-Jawoshy &

Arango, 2015). Six months is relatively a short time period; medium-term economic stability should also be a concern when developing the local economy.

Control

During the Tikrit Offensive, establishment of control was evident through intelligence gathering and airstrikes that were led by U.S. coalition forces. These efforts combined allowed Iraqi forces to successfully expel ISIS from the city and establish control of the terrain. The intelligence on ISIS gave the GOI a more certain control over the offensive, allowing them to plan accordingly and figure out exactly how they wanted to enter the city. U.S.-led airstrikes were also seen as an establishment of control. Like mentioned previously, U.S. airstrikes were not conducted until the GOI requested the support. Similarly, U.S. coalition forces would only work with Shiite forces that answered to Baghdad. By letting the GOI make decisions about the offensive, coalition forces indirectly let the GOI establish control. The economic strategy of the offensive also helped the Iraqi forces establish control. Citizens of Tikrit were able to return to the city after it was liberated, allowing for the economy to rebuild. Economic activities were able to flourish under this established control, such as re-opening the university and stores/restaurants. Civilians, who once feared ISIS and fled the city, are regaining trust in the GOI, ultimately giving them more and more control.

Consolidation was also seen in the GOI regaining control of Tikrit. The consolidation of Tikrit can be seen in two parts: training Iraqi police forces and the implementation of popular mobilization forces. Consolidation, like mentioned earlier, is focused on replacing insurgent networks with pro-government forces. During the security phase of the COIN strategy, U.S. coalition forces trained Iraqi forces in urban military

tactics. This training also helped eliminate corruption in the political/security framework of the GOI. New military officials were being trained to replace the corrupted officers, which allowed a successful replacement of ISIS forces within the city. Although problems arose with the political agenda of the popular mobilization forces, they were a major part of the consolidation phase. Once trained Iraqi forces were able to retake the city, popular mobilization forces were established to maintain control of the population. Even though the population of Tikrit was unhappy about Shiite forces being in power, it was imperative that this happened to initiate the consolidation of control.

Lastly, the transition phase concludes the three phases of control. In Tikrit, the transition of authority is between the Shiite popular mobilization forces and the local city government. This transition phase has not been completed yet. A year after forces liberated the city, popular mobilization forces were still active, although they were not as prominent as they were right after the offensive. However, they are still enforcing rules and establishing checkpoints through Tikrit even though the Sunni-led local government has been reestablished (Trofimov, 2016). The transition phase of control will only be complete when control is given to the city government. This transition will also allow the population to view the government as legitimate and not in need of help from popular mobilization forces.

It is obvious that control has been taken away from ISIS and put back in the hands of the GOI. The establishment and consolidation phases are complete, with the transition phase considered an ongoing effort. The establishment of control was seen through the use of U.S. coalition airstrikes and the rebuilding of the local economy. Consolidation was successful through the implementation of the popular mobilization forces as well as

the training of Iraqi security personnel. And finally, the transition of authority between the popular mobilization forces and the city government will completely give control back to the legitimate government. However, because the ISIS insurgency is still an ongoing problem in Iraq, the GOI is fearful of losing cities again to ISIS. Because the GOI established these popular mobilization forces, it might be the plan to keep them in the city until ISIS is fully extinguished from all northwestern cities. Short term, this might be a good way to keep control, but a transition to the city government needs to be initiated to have long-term control.

V. Conclusion

Summary

The four components listed in the *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (COIN) were implemented and carried out in the course of the Tikrit Offensive. Use of these four components led to a successful strategy, and, ultimately liberation of Tikrit from ISIS. However—contrary to popular belief —the GOI and military led this, not the U.S. Rather, the U.S. and coalition forces took a back-seat role, only helping in this offensive at the request of the GOI. While the COIN guide had been written with the intention that the U.S. government would use it while dealing with an insurgency threat, the GOI's strategy used the four components the COIN guide laid out, which ultimately led to the liberation of Tikrit.

Information gathering and functionality, the first component used, was primarily the responsibility of U.S. coalition forces. At the request of the GOI, coalition forces carried out intelligence and counterintelligence missions, which included sending drones over Tikrit to identify ISIS insurgents' hiding places, as well as targeting the sleeper cells

gathering intelligence on Iraqi forces. This is considered the "knowledge phase" of the information functionality; the second phase, "influence" was neglected, primarily because the population of Tikrit that would have been influenced had already fled once ISIS captured the city in 2014. The information gathered led to the success of airstrikes that were carried out in the second phase.

Use of security forces, the second component, proved crucial to liberating the city. Within this component, U.S. coalition forces trained Iraqi police forces in the city and conducted airstrikes. Security personnel succeeded in forcing ISIS insurgents out of the city, so that they could themselves reclaim the city center. Police and security forces' training also eliminated corruption within the political infrastructure.

These police and security forces then played a major role in the third component of the COIN, which was implementation of a political strategy. The three political functions listed in the strategy (political reconciliation and reform, popular mobilization, and governmental capacity building) played out after the GOI regained the territory. First, political reconciliation became evident with the resolution of sectarian conflicts; on account of the different religious affiliations among the different actors involved in battle, political reconciliation seemed unreasonable, yet a cooperative effort led to military cooperation, simultaneously stabilizing the political infrastructure. Second, Shiite militias stayed in the city to implement popular mobilization. While tension emerged between the Shiite militias and the Sunni-led municipal government, the popular mobilization made it possible for displaced citizens to move back into the city. Third, this influx of civilians back into the city allowed the government to rebuild, and permitted a more effective governmental structure.

In Tikrit, implementation of an economic strategy was the last component of the COIN strategy, with the goal of resuming economic activity within the city, and allowing citizens to resume their normal, daily tasks. This included reopening the local university, as well as civilians reopening their stores and businesses. The government also gave civilians provisions. However, these allowances were short-term, only allowing people to get back on their feet; to continue stability, the GOI needed to establish a long-term plan for the continued progress of local economic activity, in order to help strengthen both the economic and political sectors, and protect the city from future insurgency attacks.

A final question that needs to be answered is: was the legitimate government able to regain control? In the case of Tikrit, the answer is "yes," since the GOI successfully liberated the city and extinguished ISIS from the area. By combining the four components listed in the *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*, the government succeeded in establishing control, meaning they were able to take authority away from ISIS and have the government regain power. They were also able to consolidate local administration, and put the popular mobilization forces in charge of maintaining stabilization in the city. While the last phase of control, "transition," has yet to be fully accomplished, it is in the process of being complete. Once the popular mobilization forces have successfully transitioned authority between them to the local city government, the legitimate government will have full control and the COIN strategy will be complete.

How influential was the *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* during the Tikrit Offensive? Based on the analysis of the guide and the COIN strategy used in Tikrit, it is plausible to conclude that it was, since all four components listed in the guide were

used during the offensive. The government was able to regain and maintain control of the population, which was the desired outcome of a COIN strategy. However, the COIN strategy used in Tikrit was the result of a unique set of circumstances, which came to together to create this successful COIN strategy. One unique circumstance was a fact not listed in the guide, that the U.S. did not play a major role in the offensive, which was carried out by U.S.-led coalition forces and Iranian-backed Shiite militias. A second unique circumstance was the insurgent groups' nature, and Iraq's divided religious territory. Both these (along with the four components listed in the *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*) allowed for a successful implementation of a COIN strategy in Tikrit.

The Future of COIN in the Middle East

The Tikrit Offensive was a test run for the Iraqi military; if Tikrit could be liberated, then an even larger city (Mosul) could be liberated as well. Finally liberated during spring 2015, this was considered a major victory for GOI (even though other cities remained under ISIS control). After Tikrit, cities like Fallujah and Ramadi were liberated, continuing to exemplify the Iraqi military's success; at the same time as such cities as Tal Afar and Mosul remain under ISIS control (Almukhtar, Wallace, Watkins, 2016). The current battle for Mosul is proving the greatest test of strength for the GOI. With this in mind, what (if anything) can be learned from the Tikrit Offensive, in terms of implementing a COIN strategy? How can these learned objectives apply to other Iraqi counterinsurgency battles?

One major point to remember when implementing COIN strategy, specifically in Iraq's Northwest provinces, is the diversity of religious views among people living there,

as well as among those fighting the insurgents. For example, while Sunni Islam is the predominant religion in Tikrit, and ISIS is an extremist Sunni Islam group, the men who serve in Iraq's fighting forces (who take orders from Baghdad) are Shiite, as are the Iranian-backed militias that assisted in the offensive. This diversity of religious and sectarian views dramatically affects how a COIN strategy is implemented, specifically when trying to implement a political or economic strategy. This is evident in Tikrit when a number of civilians were under the impression that Popular Mobilization forces (who are Shiite) were trying to gain control over the city. In particular, American forces were concerned that differing views would lead to a bloody, sectarian conflict between Sunnis and Shiites. This did not prove to be the case, however; religious violence was only seen sporadically, outside the city limits. With that acknowledged, let's move to a next step. Just because violence was contained in Tikrit does not mean it will be contained in Mosul, which is both a larger city, and sustains a much larger ISIS presence. As implemented, the COIN strategy must take into account the larger religious divide between the citizens and GOI, and realize that sectarian violence will not be as easily contained as it was in Tikrit.

International actors and their political motivations also need to be understood when formulating a COIN strategy in Iraq. Although not involved in the offensive until the end, the U.S. and coalition forces had a presence in Tikrit; Iranian and Shiite militias also had a presence in Tikrit, providing large amounts of troops and equipment. The U.S. and Iran have had a complicated relationship in the past, with the U.S. not wanting Iran to exercise influence over Baghdad, and Iran not wanting the U.S. to exercise influence over any Middle Eastern country. These differing points of view dramatically affected the

COIN strategy in Tikrit; as one example, the U.S. refused to conduct airstrikes (at request of the GOI) when Iranian Shiite militiamen were involved in any offensive, and U.S. forces would only work with Iranian forces that answered directly to Baghdad. Although this granted certain legitimacy to the Iraqi government, and allowed it to make specific military decisions, it did stall the offensive in some ways. The GOI needs to acknowledge the different international actors involved in the COIN strategy, in order to make sure that hidden political agendas are not interfering with the goals of the offensive.

Since the formation of ISIS during 2014, the GOI succeeded in recapturing many cities. Considering that during 2014, it was predicted Baghdad would fall to ISIS as well, the recapture of Tikrit is considered an awesome victory for Iraq. However, even though ISIS has been uprooted in Iraq, the Government of Syria is still experiencing territorial losses from ISIS. Could the COIN strategy that was successful in Tikrit, be used in Syria as well? This is a difficult question. Syria is in a much worse political state than Iraq, and the Syrian Civil war hampers efforts to eliminate ISIS. A number of rebel groups fighting both ISIS and the Assad regime, have grown exponentially over the past two years, making it hard to pinpoint their goals. Other international actors are also involved in the civil war, including Russia, the intentions of which are not to eliminate ISIS (even though Moscow states that is their intention). On the contrary, their goal is to support the Assad regime and their military efforts in the Civil War.

Lastly, the Assad regime (unlike the Iraqi government) is not focused on defeating ISIS. At least during the Tikrit offensive, the Iraqi government was focused on liberating the city and allowing citizens to return to their homes. Therefore, a COIN strategy was easily implemented and carried out. A counterinsurgency movement in Syria

led by the Assad regime would not be as successful because of the current civil war and the state of the human population. If the Assad regime gained control of ISIS-held cities such as Raqqa, the government would not be able to establish control and the population would not view the government as legitimate. As stated in the *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide*, establishing control should be the main goal of any strategy, and should be the index of its success. Legitimate government control can not be attained in Syria, therefore concluding that the guide will not be useful in implementing a counterinsurgency strategy.

The liberation of the city of Tikrit was a success. The COIN strategy used was particularly focused on militarily forcing ISIS out of the city. However, other components, such as information gathering, political reconciliation and resuming economic activity also led to the success of the offensive. The *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* has proven an effective way to combat insurgency in Iraq, specifically in the city of Tikrit.

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