India and Counterinsurgency
Lessons learned

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7 Lessons from India's experience in the Punjab, 1978–93

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Introduction

Between 1978 and 1993, India's northern state of Punjab was riled by violence perpetrated by groups seeking to create a Sikh state called Khalistan.[1] The year 1978 is generally taken to be the insurgency's starting point. In that year, Sikh extremists attacked an annual gathering of Nirankaris (a sect Sikhs believed to be heretical and even apostates) in Amritsar, the most important city for Sikhs.[2] Many analysts put the insurgency's end at 1993, following the restoration of normal electoral cycles, the near cessation of violence, and the absence of new militant recruitment (Gill and Sahni 2003). Few analysts outside India are aware of this insurgency, but it claimed many lives—far more than the fatalities in all Indo-Pakistan wars combined.[3]

In the insurgency's early years, most observers agree that the militants retained a coherent ideological and political platform, centering around, at a minimum, greater Sikh autonomy and, in the extreme, independence. One of the most important leaders was Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale, who led the call for Khalistan. He was killed in 1984 when the Indian Army stormed the Golden Temple during Operation Blue Star.[4] After his death, no leader emerged, while Sikh militant groups mushroomed under personalized and fractious leadership. The Sikh militants, along with their political supporters, argued that only Sikh governance could protect Sikh religious, social, and cultural interests from a predatory, Hindu-dominated state. Sikh perceptions of a Hindu-dominated India were aggravated by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's efforts to concentrate power in the center, which culminated in the declaration of a state of emergency between 1975 and 1977.[5]

However, by 1988, the remnants of any ideological commitment by the militant groups dissipated and their ranks became swollen with criminal elements seeking to establish spheres of influence as violence entrepreneurs. In this phase, militant groups engaged in theft, kidnapping for ransom, bank robberies, and targeted and random killings. Equally problematic for the "Khalistan movement" was the internecine fighting that developed as militant groups splintered, formed alliances, and developed rivalries. Consequently, although militant groups claimed to be fighting the Indian state on behalf of

Indian Sikhs, Sikh villagers often were the victims of these proliferating gangs. Because of the changing nature of this violence and the groups perpetrating it, the violence from 1978 to 1993 has been characterized differently, with some analysts considering it to be a terrorist campaign devoid of meaningful political content while others consider it to be an insurgency.

This chapter identifies key lessons from India's experience during the Punjab crisis to inform efforts of other countries conducting counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. After identifying some salient considerations of the Punjab insurgency and India's response, the chapter draws out considerations that should inform a more general understanding of COIN operations.

The chapter concludes with caveats to the traditional understanding of the insurgency's demise and, thus, some limits to a generalized applicability of lessons learned from this case study. First, it discusses empirical issues that are poorly explained by the conventional exposition of the insurgency's defeat. This chapter is largely predicated upon certain beliefs about the insurgency, so a discussion of the limits of the conventional wisdom is warranted. Second, the conclusion identifies Indian features that may limit the case study's applicability to COIN operations waged by other national security forces.

India's quest for a counterinsurgency strategy

Throughout the 1980s, the Indian government had no comprehensive strategy for the Punjab insurgency. Initially, the Punjab and central authorities were slow to realize that the "Punjab problem" was an emergent insurgency. Until early 1984, the prevailing view was that the violence was a law and order problem. The police neither collected nor maintained data on the militants, conducted few investigations, and were unprepared to understand and react to the insurgent movement. When the insurgency developed, the police were poorly trained, under-manned, outfitted with rudimentary equipment, had inadequate vehicles for rapid response, and had no intelligence capabilities. Federal forces, including the army, viewed the police as corrupt, unwilling to fight, and incapable of addressing the threat. For these reasons, in the early years central forces had primary responsibility for security in the region. However, federal forces were not well prepared to contend with the problem either (Chapter 6).

Although all governments were adamant the Indian state would never accede to the militants' demand for independence, the central government wavered in virtually all other aspects and pursued conflicting policies in different periods.[6] Prime Minister Indira Gandhi preferred strong central responses and refused to negotiate with provincial non-state actors, fearing erosion of the union and central authority. Her successor and son, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, preferred political engagement and struck an accord with moderate Sikh leaders within the Akali Dal (Longowal faction).[7] This accord, the Rajiv–Longowal Accord of 1985, was a landmark agreement and signaled a new central approach to regional policy. As Singh observed,

The territorial, economic, and religious demands that had fueled the Sikh agitation before 1984, and were held to be non-negotiable by Mrs. Gandhi were now recognized, and for the moderate Akali Dal–Longowal [AD(L)], the accord provided a return to democratic politics. For Rajiv Gandhi, it represented a dynamic breakthrough and a befitting start to his premiership.

(Singh 1996: 412)

However, the accord did not herald a break with the central government's history of forging agreements for symbolic purposes then stalling their implementation; rather, the accord continued that practice. Gandhi demurred from implementing the accord when his party, Congress, suggested that he would lose the Hindu vote if he accommodated Sikh ethno-nationalist demands. This retrenchment humiliated the Akali Dal leadership, degraded their legitimacy derived from the widespread support for the accord, and expanded the political space for militants who benefited from Sikh anger over the center's reneging.

The Akali Dal (Longowal) came to power in 1985 with public support for the accord, but its government crumbled when the accord stalled. Unfortunately, the center viewed the Akali Dal (Longowal) as useful only if it could mitigate violence, something it could not do after the government dumped the accord. In 1987, the central government dismissed the Akali Dal (Longowal) government and imposed President's Rule, citing chaos and anarchy in the province. Many analysts believe that the center's reneging on the accord and imposing President's Rule explains the explosion of violence that followed (Singh 1996; Kohli 1999; Brass 1991).

Rajiv's successor, Prime Minister Chandrashekhar, pursued accommodation with the militants and de-emphasized security operations. Under his tenure, violence expanded as militant groups used the reprieve to increase recruitment, raise funds, gather munitions, and plan for resurgence. With the Akali Dal denuded of legitimacy, militant groups were not competing with moderate Sikh leaders. In 1990, Narasimha Rao's Congress Party was elected and formed the central government. Rao's first priority was restoration of peace in the province. Under Rao, the federal government kept its distance, allowed the Punjab police to do its job, and helped improve the police force. Rao made important appointments to the police force, who restored police morale and enabled the force to cripple the insurgents. At the same time, federal forces were used in effective supporting roles.

By 1992, elections were held despite militant threats and ushered in a return to normal electoral cycles at all levels of governance. Although the massive deployment of security forces throughout the Punjab facilitated the elections, turnout was low. The Congress Party came to power under the leadership of Chief Minister Beant Singh. By 1993, the insurgency had largely disappeared with civilian casualties at all-time lows. By 1997, the moderate Akali Dal became the predominant vehicle for rural Sikh political expression and regained control of the political agenda. The Akali Dal also prevailed at state and national elections until 2002, replacing the Congress Party as the preeminent

party in the Punjab. Critically, when the Congress Party returned to power in the Punjab in 2002, violence did not resume.[8]

This insurgency is distinctive among Indian conflicts because it was completely defeated, and today Punjab is one of India's most prosperous provinces, characterized by political normalcy and exhibiting few signs of renewed violence. Typical explanations suggest that certain events caused the insurgency's demise. First, most analysts point to the successful Operation Black Thunder, which was conducted against militants in the Golden Temple in 1988 and led by the Punjab police supported by the army, paramilitary police, and National Security Guards (NSG).[9] That operation broke the militancy by arresting key leadership members and turning public opinion against the militants. Although Operation Black Thunder was successful, the insurgency's most violent years were 1990 and 1991, well after the operation.

Another milestone in normalizing the Punjab was the election of February 1992. As noted, the years preceding the elections were the most violent in the whole conflict. Elections were managed because of the deployment of 120,000 army personnel, 53,000 Punjab Police, 28,000 Home Guards, 10,000 Special Police, and over 70,000 paramilitary personnel (Singh 1996). However, those elections were of questionable legitimacy. Despite the security blanket, militants threatened politicians and their supporters with death as the price for participation. Consequently, the Akali Dal boycotted the elections, and only 23.9 percent of the eligible voters voted, bringing Congress (I) to power (Cheema 2007).

A third development often attributed to quieting the insurgency was improvements in the police by increasing their end-strength; developing their COIN/counterterrorism capabilities through training by the Indian Army; massive enhancement of firepower and munitions, communication technology, and ground mobility; development of intelligence capabilities; and increased co-operation among police, military, and paramilitary formations. At the same time, the police were freed with the election of Prime Minister Rao's government and pursued a "bullet for bullet" policy that prioritized eliminating terrorists (Gill 1999, 1997; Sharma 1996). Lists of high-value targets were assembled, and the police were rewarded for eliminating them (Puri *et al.* 1999; Jaijee 1995; Human Rights Watch 1994a, 1994b, 1997).

A fourth factor in the insurgency's demise is the promulgation of laws that addressed challenges of terrorism and the lacunae in the Indian Penal Code. These laws included the National Security Act of 1980; the Terrorist and Disruptive Activities (Prevention) Act of 1987; the Anti-Hijacking Act of 1982; the Religious Institutions (Prevention of Misuse) Ordinance of 1988; and the Armed Forces (Punjab and Chandigarh) Special Powers Act of 1983, in conjunction with the Punjab Disturbed Areas Act of 1983 (Kang 2005; Wallace 2007).

Observers note that these legislative efforts, coupled with investments in the police and intelligence capabilities, led to more suspects being detained and interrogated. At the same time, interrogation techniques became more invasive and included activities that were torture (Jaijee 1995; Human Rights Watch

1991, 1994a, 1994b). Some analysts maintain that more arrests led to more interrogations and actionable intelligence, which in turn permitted the police to be more effective and selective in the targeting of suspects. This dynamic diminished the need to rely on profiles and other methods that often led to arrest and mistreatment of innocents. This approach allowed a rapprochement between the population and the Punjab police, fostered a sense of confidence in the police force, and encouraged the local population to provide high-quality information to the police about militants. These actions helped to separate the population from the militants (Kang 2005). This improvement in police–public relations was facilitated by the militants' indiscriminate violence and criminality, which alienated Sikhs. Militants' conduct and improved policing also turned the opinion of diaspora Sikhs against the insurgency, which dried up overseas financial and political support for the militants (Gill 1999, 1997; Joshi 1993; Nandi 1996).

Finally, some analysts have noted that the character of the insurgents explains why they lost. The movement's composition remained fairly consistent in that most militants were Sikh males below the age of 25 from the Jat Sikh caste. Most were high-school dropouts from families of low socio-economic standing, and a significant fraction of the militants had had previous law-enforcement encounters (Puri *et al.* 1999). Moreover, the movement relied upon the Jat Sikh peasantry and its integrated social structure and networks. Inevitably, the militants became ensnared in "local feuds and factional enmities, kinship retribution, and the social underworld of criminality as well as in the private accumulation of wealth and personal aggrandizement" (Singh 1996: 416). This context rendered the movement vulnerable to infiltration by security forces and to manipulation through exploiting local vendettas and other factional weaknesses.

Learning the lessons of this case study

This section examines several lessons from this case that may be useful to COIN efforts by the United States or other national forces. The first cluster of lessons derives from the problem of operating against insurgents who have ensconced themselves in religious shrines. In this case, insurgents used the most sacred Sikh shrine, the Golden Temple, as their operational base. However, militants throughout the Punjab availed themselves of Sikh places of worship (*gurudwaras*). The second cluster of lessons pertains to improving local police forces and better utilization of those forces in concert with national security forces.

Next, this section examines how Indian security forces improved their local intelligence. However, the applicability of some activities undertaken in the Punjab may be limited as they could run afoul of national or international laws governing combat and police operations. The fourth cluster of insights pertains to the perils of using proxies (e.g. Bhindranwale), enervating moderate political parties, and the need for strategic patience to determine the lagged

affects of policy interventions. Sixth, the section examines new laws promulgated to deal with the emergent threat and, finally, the media's importance in shaping public views of insurgent and counterinsurgent forces.

The problem of counterinsurgency and sacred spaces[10]

Perhaps the most important lesson learned from the Sikh case pertains to the special requirements of conducting COIN operations against and within structures sacred to insurgents and the local population. Between 1978 and 1988, Sikh insurgents extensively used *gurudwaras* for several reasons. *Gurudwaras* have traditionally served as rallying places in Sikh martial history and historical *gurudwaras* house weapons of famous Sikh fighters and gurus' armies. Symbolically, *gurudwaras* are the locations from which to wage legitimate Sikh warfare.

Gurudwaras have also been sites of religious indoctrination. By controlling the *gurudwaras*' high priests, militants could control messages disseminated through sermons as well as the financial flows from devotees' contributions. Ensconced in *gurudwaras*, militants characterized themselves as Sikh religious and political leaders, often legitimized by the *gurudwaras*' leadership. Militant organizations co-opted this leadership through violence or threats of violence if the leadership differed from the militants' views. In some cases, militants and their supporters managed and controlled the *gurudwaras* and their human, material, and financial resources. The *gurudwaras* also afforded militants access to youth who could be recruited without being observed.

Apart from religious legitimacy and access to congregations, *gurudwaras* offered logistical and strategic benefits. *Gurudwaras* often have dining and rest facilities, affording militants places to stay. They often have walls, towers, and other features that can be fortified and serve as lookout posts and sniper positions. They frequently have phones, electricity, running water, and other amenities required by the militants to plan and execute operations. They also offer anonymity. Even small and rural *gurudwaras* have visitors, allowing militants to come and go, execute missions, retreat to the *gurudwaras*, and plan operations without being observed. Because many *gurudwaras* are tied to important events in Sikh history and are considered historically significant buildings and institutions, the security forces were unwilling to dislodge the militants, fearing religious violence or other adverse public ramifications. As several analysts observed, the police acted as if they required visas to enter the Golden Temple and other *gurudwaras*.[11] Thus, militants took advantage of these reservations and this angst.

Unfortunately, by the time the authorities realized that they faced a Sikh insurgency, the militants had availed themselves of these facilities and co-opted religious leadership and institutions. The first operation at the Golden Temple, Operation Blue Star, relied upon the army and was executed amidst a curfew and media outage. This operation caused massive damage to the temple, killed hundreds (some say thousands), galvanized a much wider insurgency within the Indian Sikh population, and mobilized the international Sikh community.

In 1988, the government demonstrated appreciation for the delicacy of operations in sacred spaces in executing Operation Black Thunder, which the police and NSG conducted, with assistance from military and paramilitary organizations. In appreciation of the importance of this issue, the Indian government promulgated the Religious Institutions (Prevention of Misuse) Ordinance of 1988, which sought to deny militants access to these institutions. This legislation also emboldened law-enforcement agencies to exercise the writ of the law.

The Sikh case underscores the need to identify early and pre-empt the use of sacred space by insurgents. Similarly, by the time the Indian authorities recognized the problem, the insurgents had co-opted or intimidated many of the clergy to comply with their message. COIN forces need to protect clerics who disagree with militants because they are important assets in undermining the credibility of the insurgents' arguments. If religiously motivated insurgents cannot be denied access to structures and clerical institutions, then operational planners must pay attention to mapping the "sacred battle space."

The planning for Operation Black Thunder appreciated the sensitivities of operating within and around the Golden Temple. K. P. S. Gill explained that, in the planning, the Indian security forces determined that some places were more sacred than others and could, if need be, become the site of operations. However, under all circumstances, the *Harminder Sahab* would be off limits (Fair 2004). Operation Black Thunder emphasized minimal use of force and discipline with respect to the sanctity of the space and minimizing harm to the structure.

Operation Black Thunder contrasted with Operation Blue Star, the planners of which made no effort to account for the challenges of taking on insurgents in such an important shrine. Rather, the planners treated it like any other battle space, with the caveat that they hoped the army would not need to fire on the *Harminder Sahab*. As discussed on pp. 120–2, the media was an important dimension in the conduct of Operations Blue Star and Black Thunder. Operation Blue Star was conducted under a media blackout, ceding the information terrain to the militants. Operation Black Thunder was carried out under the full eye of the media, which allowed the government to shape the media message.

Improved police and better utilization of national forces

In the conflict's early years, federal military and paramilitary forces took the lead for a number of reasons. First, the police were unable to recognize the extent of the problem and were unprepared to conduct effective COIN operations. The police were under-strength, and most police officers were used in counterproductive static activities, such as manning pickets. These activities produced few COIN benefits and left the police vulnerable. Second, there is a tendency in India to believe that the army is needed to put down large-scale insurgency or civil strife because of the presumption that the police are

co-opted by the militants or otherwise ineffective. However, by the insurgency's end, the Punjab police demonstrated that the civil police can be an effective COIN force even under trying circumstances, and that the presumption of bad faith was unfounded (Gill and Sahni 2003).

Much of the success of the Punjab police stemmed from improvements in human and other resources. Beginning in 1989, a recruitment drive filled vacancies for the expanded force. In 1989, there were 51,833 authorized police billets (Economics and Statistical Organization 1990), compared to 32,855 in 1984 (Economics and Statistical Organization 1984). Another expansion occurred in 1993 with 65,658 billets, and in 1994 the force was again expanded to 70, 228 (Economics and Statistical Organization 1994).[12] With this expansion, the police leadership, especially J. Ribeiro and K. P. S. Gill, developed a more effective posture by increasing patrols and raids and assigning specific persons to identify and capture terrorists (Gill 1999; Kang 2005).

In addition to expanding the police force, improvements in the quality of training were made. To address the police's insufficient COIN and counter-terrorism training, the Indian Army provided police with training in operational tactics. The NSG also trained the Punjab police in the early 1990s (Joshi 1993; Rakshak no date). Police equipment was also improved. By May 1987, Sikh militants routinely used AK-47s. A surplus of such weapons was available from Pakistan because of the resources Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) had received for use in the anti-Soviet *jihad* in Afghanistan. Prior to 1987, no significant differences in the arms used by the militants and the security forces existed because militants mostly armed themselves through pilfering supplies of the latter (Gill and Sahni 2003). To counter the insurgents' advantage in weaponry, light machine guns and automatic weapons replaced the police's World War II vintage .303 rifles and bolt action 7.62s. The improved weapons allowed the police to engage the militants, resulting in higher militant casualties and greater restrictions on their movement. The police also received modern radio communications and additional vehicles, which allowed more frequent patrols over larger areas and reduced police response time.

In all, these changes transformed the police from an unproductive and passive force into an aggressive and mobile force willing and able to engage the militants (Gill 1999; Sharma 1996; Joshi 1993; Kang 2005). These innovations helped suppress violence and increase the capture of militants, arms, and explosives. As Marwah notes in Chapter 6, the NSG was also a new and effective force, amply demonstrated in Operation Black Thunder. Drawn from police, paramilitary, and military personnel, the NSG was an important force multiplier in that operation, while not undermining the fact that the operation was police owned.

Much has also been made of the importance of political leadership upon the efficacy of the police. For most of the conflict, the political strategy changed frequently. However, with the arrival of Prime Minister Rao, the direction was at last consistent and clear. The police were freed to put down the violence. K. P. S. Gill was again appointed as Chief of Police in Punjab, and he established

organizational structures that integrated the police and other agencies into a single command, with the police at the apex.

In the end, local police—not the military or paramilitary forces—crushed the insurgency, with the federal (military and paramilitary) forces providing critical support. The army, for example, was deployed in a supplementary role and tended to be confined to urban areas, where they—not the police—guarded infrastructure and manned checkpoints. This approach freed the police for more mobile activities. Paramilitary groups assisted the police in rural areas and in areas with a high prevalence of terrorism. The Border Security Force (BSF) was used to seal the border with Pakistan, where training, sanctuary, and weaponry were provided to the insurgents.[13] These activities permitted the police to be more proactive and effective.

The army and paramilitary forces played an important role in fortifying and expanding control of the Pakistan–India border, which also allowed the police to work more effectively. Operations Rakhshak I and II aimed to exert control over the border, deny militant cross-border movement, and disrupt the movement of weapons and explosions.[14] Although hardening borders is difficult, the Punjab border is easier than the mountainous Line of Control, where border hardening is ongoing without considerable success.

The need to secure borders and reduce outside support is underscored by ongoing COIN campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. Much of the insecurity plaguing U.S. efforts to pacify Iraq stems from failure to control Iraq's borders, which permits foreign fighters and other resources to move into Iraq. Similarly, international efforts in Afghanistan are hamstrung by the problematic, rugged Pakistan–Afghanistan border, across which Taliban and allied fighters move. To a lesser but still important degree, the border with Iran also presents challenges to the international security forces in Afghanistan.

Another important dimension of using local forces involves the ethnic and religious composition of the police. The Indian army and paramilitary organizations have many Sikh cadres and officers, so using the police as the primary COIN force recast the conflict as "Sikh on Sikh" because many, if not most, of the Punjab police's personnel are Sikh. Relying upon Sikh counterinsurgent forces deprived the militants of the propaganda value of claiming that the security forces were Hindu oppressors of Sikhs. The local, often Sikh, police—when manned, trained, equipped, and appropriately resourced—proved best situated to understand local developments, cultivate local informants, and act effectively.

This experience suggests that COIN efforts should prioritize the standing up of effective police forces. Currently, U.S. police training for Afghanistan comes under the auspices of the Department of Defense. Ladwig has argued that "assigning the job of developing foreign police forces to Department of Defense is not a long-term solution. Military police can provide basic training for foreign security forces, but they lack the specialized expertise of civilian law enforcement agencies" (2007b: 289). Many within and outside Afghanistan have raised the concern that the Afghan police force being constructed is really

a paramilitary force which has assumed frontline duty in combat and COIN operations in support of Afghan and international military operations. Whether such a paramilitary force will produce the desired COIN benefits remains to be seen. Similarly, concerns have also beset the training of police in Iraq.

Getting grassroots intelligence

As noted above, in the insurgency's early years intelligence was poorly collected (if at all), and the police had no intelligence capability. The federal agencies, including the Intelligence Bureau, the Central Bureau of Intelligence, the Research and Analysis Wing, and army intelligence were not operating in the Punjab. The security forces did not record or investigate militant events, and they did not document what action—if any—they had taken. This failure to record basic information likely accounts for the early failures to identify the nature of the Punjab militancy, and it precluded an earlier understanding of trends in the violence, the members of the groups perpetrating it, and the militants' sources of support and weapons (Gill 1999; Jaijee 1995).

In 1984, the Punjab police established an intelligence wing that drew officers from various security organizations. Over time, it expanded and was augmented with officers from military and intelligence organizations. They organized and analyzed incoming intelligence, documented their findings, and disseminated these findings to frontline security organizations. These efforts helped single out specific villages that provided above-average support for militant groups (Gill 1999; Jaijee 1995).

The ability to collect intelligence at the grassroots level also changed in the early 1990s because of innovations in collection. In the 1980s, the under-armed and poorly trained police officers hesitated to participate in arrest and interrogation of suspects because they feared that militants would target them and their families. Gradually, this attitude changed as the police became better prepared for COIN and as those unfit or unwilling to countenance the challenge were removed or retired (Gill 1999).

Punjab police efforts to cultivate grassroots informants also enabled this shift towards enhanced intelligence. One such local asset was known as CATs—"Concealed or Covert Apprehension Techniques."[15] CATs involved using ex-militants, who had surrendered to the police, to provide information about militant groups. CATs worked with the police on a daily basis, providing information about militants' identities and support networks. CATs often accompanied police to specific areas, where they identified former associates (Puri *et al.* 1999). At least one observer called them the "pivot" of K. P. S. Gill's "post-1991 anti-terrorism strategy," noting important successes, including the arrest of Sukhdev Singh Babbar (leader of the Babbar Khalsa) and the "neutralization" of Gurjant Singh Budhsinghwala (leader of the Khalistan Commando Force) in CAT operations (Vinayak 1995, quoted in Wallace 2007: 448).

CATs had (and has) detractors, especially among the human rights community. Human rights groups argued that paying bounties to former militants

and shielding them from criminal prosecution is a "grossly illegal practice of the Punjab Police" (Vinayak 1995, cited in Wallace 2007: 448). Reportedly, some former terrorists engaged in extortion, robbery, and other criminal activities when the crisis ended. Other human rights advocates voiced concern about the "summary executions" CATs produced, which likely involved innocents. Human rights organizations also lamented that, while the militants harmed the Punjab's population, "so too have they been stricken by the methodical brutality of their protectors—the police—who often chose to enforce the law by breaking it" (Sarin 2004, quoted in Wallace 2007: 449).

Another local asset was touts, which were civilians the police hired to provide services on the basis of financial rewards. Touts acted as local spies. The police used touts and undercover officers in areas with known militant activities (Jaijee 1995). The police also recruited Special Police Officers (SPOs) in the villages, who acted as "unconventional counter-insurgents. SPOs were given a daily stipend, a gun, and permission to eliminate militants within their villages and adjacent localities" (Cheema 2007: 630).

These organizational changes and development of human resources at the grassroots level allowed the security agencies to capture, arrest, and remove militants; conduct raids on safe houses and seize weapons and explosives; and eliminate militants' networks of logistical, financial, and material support. As noted, some practices may not accord well with U.S. or international humanitarian law or other legal frameworks concerning the conduct of warfare and law-enforcement operations.

Proxies, political partners, and the need for strategic patience

Bhindranwale led the call for Khalistan, but he was initially an instrument of Mrs. Gandhi's Congress Party, and some would say that her government and allies created the nightmare Bhindranwale became.[16] With Congress (I)'s support, Bhindranwale contested elections of the Shiromani Gurudwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC), which is the management body that overseas the majority of Sikh *gurudwaras* (Mahmood 1996; Tully and Jacob 1985; Pettigrew 1995). Prime Minister Indira Gandhi chose to buttress Bhindranwale's political following in order to split the Akali Dal, which, as the most prominent Sikh political party in the Punjab, was the most viable opposition to Gandhi's Congress Party. In hindsight, this support was a tremendous miscalculation, as Bhindranwale, with his separatist objectives, gained popularity within the Sikh population. His vociferous and militant position illuminated the comparatively moderate position—at least initially—of the Akali Dal.[17]

When Bhindranwale realized that Congress (I) had used him to undermine Sikh political goals, he became more resolute in his anti-government campaign. With the benefit of hindsight, had Mrs. Gandhi been willing to countenance political competition and forgone instrumentalizing Bhindranwale, things may have turned out differently. Of course, Bhindranwale's patronization was only one effort to manipulate, and thus weaken, Sikh political leadership. The

center routinely sought to sow discord among the Sikh leadership and undermine their legitimacy.

In 1985, Rajiv Gandhi sought conciliation and rapprochement in the wake of Operation Blue Star, his mother's assassination, and the anti-Sikh pogroms that ensued. The Akali Dal leader, Harcharan Longowal, and Gandhi forged an eleven-point agenda, which permitted the Akali Dal to satisfy the majority of Sikh demands.[18] This accord was well received by the Akali Dal and Sikhs. Surprisingly, the factions of the Akali Dal set aside their differences to support Longowal. The radicals did not support the accord and impugned the Akali Dal for negotiating with a "Hindu" government with a track record of harming Sikh interests. Only a few weeks after signing the accord, Longowal was killed. Rajiv Gandhi persisted with the state elections in 1985, believing that the re-institution of elections would ensure the accord's implementation. Despite threats from militants, turnout was high (67 percent), and the Akali Dal (Longowal) faction won, led by Surjit Barnala, who was a moderate leader and ally of Longowal.

Unfortunately, Prime Minister Gandhi had hoped that the elections would lead to an immediate decrease in violence. Sikh extremists escalated their attacks to act as spoilers. Lacking strategic patience and convinced by the Congress that conciliatory gestures had eroded Hindu support, Gandhi retreated from the accord. This move left the Akali Dal humiliated because it was unable to deliver on the popular agreement.

Gill and Sahni (2003) are also critical of the Barnala-led Akali Dal government, because it pursued appeasement and released over 2,000 militants, most of whom rejoined the insurgency. By January 1986, the militants ousted the SGPC from the Golden Temple, and within another month the extremist *Damdami Taksal* (Bhindranwale's "religious institution') was in control. Khalistani flags were hoisted above the temple, and the militants demolished the newly rebuilt *Akal Takht*, which the Indian government had reconstructed following Operation Blue Star. By spring of 1986, murder, rape, and torture again took place within the Golden Temple (Gill and Sahni 2003).

By 1988, Rajiv Gandhi decided that implementation of the accord was futile. This decision left the Akali Dal bereft of legitimacy and deprived the central government of a moderate Sikh partner. It took years for the Akali Dal to recover its political coherence and legitimacy. At the same time, the militant groups, which never developed coherent political representation, continued to devolve into criminal bands, losing the minimal political infrastructure they had. Thus, from 1988 onward, the government had no legitimate negotiating partner with which to pursue peace. Some analysts contend that, had the government been able to implement the Rajiv–Longowal accord, peace *may* have been possible earlier (Singh 1996: 412).

The political dimensions of the conflict suggest a few lessons. First, governments should be wary of supporting proxies because one cannot guarantee continued alignment of interests between the principal (the government) and the proxy agent. Second, the central government's interest in targeting Sikh

moderates likely worked against its own interests. By stripping moderates of legitimacy, the central government ceded political space to the militants and antagonized the majority of the population who did not support the violence.

Legislation

India's colonial-era penal code has not effectively supported COIN or counterterrorism efforts. In the Indian penal system, courts cannot accept confessions unless they have been given to a magistrate. The drafters of the penal code feared that, if confessions given to the police were adequate, then police would use torture to extract confessions. Although using only confessions given before a magistrate may make sense, if suspects anticipated police brutality they would still confess to the magistrate fearing police abuse *after* they were removed from the magistrate's office.

India's legislature made various attempts to circumvent evidentiary and procedural barriers to effective COIN and counterterrorism law enforcement. Critics condemned them as "black laws," and claimed that they curtailed civil liberties and were draconian as implemented (People's Union for Civil Liberties 1984, cited in Wallace 2007). For example, the National Security Act of 1980 authorized preventive detention of individuals who acted "prejudicial to the defence of India" or any state therein. Unfortunately, the law was not used to target militants and their supporters but to repress political dissent, including protests and civil disobedience by Sikh political parties. The Akali Dal was a consistent target of this legislation because of its public positions (Kang 2005; Leaf 1985). Similarly, this law tended to be used against innocent civilians through mass arrests. Such targeting of political parties and innocent civilians permitted the militants to point to the inefficacy of political and nonviolent approaches, and the insurgency benefited from an alienated and humiliated Akali Dal and Sikh public.

The Armed Forces (Punjab and Chandigarh) Special Powers Act of 1983 and the Punjab Disturbed Areas Act of 1983 were complementary pieces of legislation. The Punjab Disturbed Areas Act empowered the governor to declare all or part of the Punjab to be "disturbed," and the Armed Forces (Punjab and Chandigarh) Special Powers Act authorized the military to act, including allowing armed forces personnel to use as much force as required (including lethal force) to prevent the commission or contravention of any order or status. The Special Powers Act also allowed armed forces personnel to arrest (without warrant) anyone who had committed a "cognizable offense" or anyone about whom "reasonable suspicion" existed and to enter any premises without a warrant to arrest a suspect or prevent suspected illegal behavior (Kang 2005; Human Rights Watch 1991).

The Punjab Disturbed Areas Act also gave the police the power to use maximum force against any individual whom they believed to be causing a serious breach of public order, otherwise violating prohibitions against the assembly of five or more persons, or the carrying of firearms. Human rights

groups complained that the legislation prevented prosecution of armed forces or police personnel for any official action executed under the special powers (Kang 2005; Human Rights Watch 1991). The armed forces argue that protection from civil lawsuits and criminal prosecution is necessary to maintain the confidence of the forces to conduct COIN/counterterrorism operations effectively and that their disciplinary procedures are adequate to contend with inappropriate conduct.

Operation Rakhshak II (November 1992) illustrates the effective use of this legislation. Punjab was declared a disturbed area, and the army was deployed to assist the civil administration. Army troops conducted patrols, raided safe houses and homes, seized weapons caches and explosives, detained persons for criminal offenses, with particular focus upon members of Sikh militant organizations and their support networks. This operation was perhaps the last army operation against the insurgency and played a major role in ending it. The legislation granting the army special powers allowed the army to use maximum force to eliminate militants and their supporters (Kang 2005).

Another important law was the Religious Institutions (Prevention of Misuse) Ordinance of 1988. As noted above, militants used Sikh religious infrastructure and personnel, while the authorities hesitated to enter those shrines, fearing a variety of adverse outcomes. As such, within the confines of the *guruduwaras'* precincts, militants acted with impunity. The Religious Institutions (Prevention and Misuse) Ordinance clarified the legality of operations in religious institutions, criminalized militants' access to these facilities, and held the *guruduwaras* accountable should the law be broken.

The success of Operation Black Thunder was partially due to this important legislation. Indeed, Operation Black Thunder demonstrated that the advantages *guruduwaras* afforded militants could be rendered weaknesses. Whereas once high walls gave them safety and privacy, during Operation Black Thunder the walls were used to lay effective siege to the temple, and limited egresses became choke points, allowing the security forces to monitor and apprehend those trying to escape.

As the foregoing discussion suggests, some of India's legislative efforts were successful in forging effective COIN and counterterrorism activities. Other legislation (e.g. the National Security Act) was used to target the wrong persons and may have undermined the state's interests. Even at the insurgency's height, India's legislature functioned with legitimacy within and outside the Punjab.

Media and information operations

Often the disastrous army-led Operation Blue Star is compared unfavorably with the nearly non-lethal, police-led Operation Black Thunder. One way in which they differed was in the handling of the media. Operation Blue Star was conducted in a media blackout, at night, in the context of a curfew. There was a road blockage, and travel in and out of the Punjab was restricted. The

national and international media speculated about what was transpiring, allowing persons to imagine the worst scenarios. When the media was allowed into the Punjab and the Golden Temple, the hundreds of fatalities confirmed some of the worst fears.

The Golden Temple complex had been destroyed, with serious damage to the inner sanctum, the *Harminder Sahib*.[19] However, the Indian government claimed that the Indian Army had not fired at the *Harminder Sahib* and alleged that militants caused the damage. The government found itself unable to deny accusations leveled against it because it had forfeited control of the information terrain. In contrast, Bhindranwale expected some sort of action, and he distributed cassettes detailing his expectations and rallying people to come to the temple. Indeed, large crowds gathered to protest the operation, and they even tried to move towards the temple to disrupt the operation (Fair 2003).

The government could have exploited elements of the operation and militants' activities in the temple had it developed a media strategy. First, operating at night was disastrous. The Indians had inadequate night capabilities and struggled to meet their objectives in the dark in a complex with which they were unfamiliar (Fair 2003). This mistake likely resulted in the excess of force used and the damage wreaked upon the complex. But night operations during a media blackout under curfew also meant that the Indian government could not communicate in real time the events that were transpiring. In particular, the Indian forces could not communicate that Bhindranwale had committed sacrileges by staying in an important building in the temple complex, the *Akal Takht* (timeless throne, where the Sikh sacred text, the *Guru Granth Sahab*, is housed when not used in service), and lodged himself on floors above the *Guru Granth Sahab*. Such behavior is considered an egregious offense in Sikhism. Moreover, Bhindranwale marred the *Akal Takht* by cutting out firing positions and making other fortifications. He and his henchmen also killed many persons within the temple, disposed of their bodies within the temple precincts, accumulated massive arms caches, and made destructive changes to the temple in order to make it a fortress. By the time the government sought to explain these predations, it had lost the war of public perception, which held the army and the government accountable for all that went wrong.

In contrast, Operation Black Thunder was conducted with complete media openness during the day, with only selective use of curfews. Over one hundred media personnel provided live coverage. Their presence likely encouraged the police and allied forces to conduct themselves professionally and restrain their use of force, which garnered the government considerable accolades for its efforts to preserve the temple. Many—if not most—Sikhs appreciated the restraint and were dismayed by the militants' desecration of the temple, which the media exposed and which included torture, murder, and even defecation in the *Harminder Sahab* (*India Today* 1998; Wallace 1996). Whereas Operation Blue Star galvanized a wider insurgency, Operation Black Thunder turned the tide against the insurgents by arresting key militants and demonstrating that

the militants did not respect Sikh religious institutions. It became difficult to argue that militants protected Sikh interests when they appeared most active in appropriating and undermining important Sikh institutions for personal gain.

Operation Black Thunder's media strategy worked not through domination but through open access and allowing different media to cover the story as they saw fit. Such an approach demonstrated Indian confidence in the legitimacy and efficacy of the operation. Thus, Operation Black Thunder demonstrates that free media access can be beneficial and underscores that a state does not need to dominate the media if the goal is to demonstrate the legitimacy of a particular action.

Popular support?

Virtually every discussion of the Punjab insurgency and its demise eventually addresses the issue of popular support. The consensus narrative contends that the central government under Indira Gandhi mismanaged Sikh grievances and, with Operation Blue Star, mobilized Sikhs who had been ambivalent or even hostile towards the militants. With a hostile community and poor intelligence capabilities, the security forces' indiscriminate use of force, detention, and harassment further alienated the population. With the criminalization of the militants and their organizations, increasing reliance upon local police rather than the army, and simultaneous improvement of police capabilities and consistent policy direction, steady rapprochement between the police and the increasingly victimized local population developed. As police–public relations improved, the security forces obtained higher-quality information about the militants, which allowed ever more precise operations and deepening public trust in the security forces. Indeed, the logic of the virtuous cycle appears at first blush to be sound.

However, these arguments are deductive because there was no testing of popular opinion throughout the insurgency. The United States and other national forces engaged in COIN operations conduct polls to ascertain public opinion in insurgency-affected areas. However, as polling in Iraq and Afghanistan shows, it is not clear that polling elicits actual views. Rather, the exercise is most useful when the surveys are repeated at regular intervals to discern trends rather than gathering a snapshot of public satisfaction at any given time. Empirically, the connections between public opinion and militancy are weak. There has been no serious effort to demonstrate that public resentment towards the state or militants affects the ability of insurgents to operate— although it is a commonsense assumption. A corollary is the claim that, by investing in human capital, alleviating poverty, and building roads and infrastructure, COIN forces can win hearts and minds, another proposition for which there is no empirical support.

In fact, in the short term, public opinion may turn against the state as militant activities increase. In other words, as militants increase their activities, the public determines that the state is to blame. The primary axis of conflict is

between the insurgents and the state, with civilians serving as the terrain over which the conflict is waged. Thus, civilians comprise the conflict's victims. Citizens can pressure government through the ballot box, but have no ability to put pressure on the militants. Thus, civilians may conclude that, by opposing government action, their personal safety is maximized in the short run.

This dynamic may explain why militants increase their activities when conditions for political resolution seem ripe, as happened with the Rajiv–Longowal Accord. With that accord, the government could have met Sikh demands. The militants had no political organ and no way to benefit from the solution, so their only option was to sabotage those conditions for normalcy or risk ceding all political space to the Akali Dal. By increasing their violence, the militants forced the public to turn away from the government, and they forced the state to conclude that there is no link between security and public opinion, leading to the state's jettisoning of the accord.

Had the central government thought through these counterintuitive links between public opinion and violence and demonstrated strategic patience to implement the accord, it is *possible* that the insurgency could have ended sooner—particularly if the state increased the number and quality of police to enforce the peace. These points serve as a reminder that facile beliefs about public opinion and violence are untenable and may lead to ill-conceived policies that dampen prospects for peace—and may lead governments to switch course before the effects of the previous policy can be evaluated.

Conclusions: limitations of this case study and its lessons

There remain puzzling questions about the way in which the Sikh insurgency dissipated. The lessons analyzed in this chapter are predicated upon the standard findings about the Punjab crisis. If this story is flawed, then these lessons may also be ill founded. First, the conflict subsided without any accommodation of Sikh demands. The accords negotiated between Sikh moderates and the center were never implemented, leaving important issues pertaining to water usage and the disposition of Chandigarh unresolved (Singh 1996).

Second, the much-heralded 1992 elections engaged few voters and most of the Sikh peasantry stayed away because of militant threats and the Akali Dal's election boycott. Thus, it is questionable that a non-representative election could herald the path to peace. Third, the improvements in police capabilities came at a high price. Even police proponents concede that many innocents were captured and harassed and suspected perpetrators tortured and killed in "encounters," among other abuses. Human rights proponents take a far more critical view of the human costs of COIN efforts in the Punjab. Manipulations of the Akali Dal and its humiliation through the reneging on the Rajiv–Longowal accord ceded political space to militants. It took several years to recuperate the standing of the Akali Dal.

Despite these questions, the insurgency evaporated and has not reappeared. These peculiarities should be kept in mind when considering the impact of

India's efforts to put down the Sikh insurgency because they suggest that conventional wisdom may not be correct and may even be misleading.

A second set of issues that may limit the applicability of this case study to COIN efforts in other theaters derives from its Indian context. First, this insurgency involves Indian security forces operating primarily against Indian insurgents on Indian soil. Although Sikh insurgents would refer to national security forces as "occupiers," there was no legal basis to these allegations, and this view was not widely shared outside militant circles. The Indian Army includes a large percentage of Sikhs in the officer corps and the rank and file. Thus, the argument by Pape (2003, 2005) that the Indian Army was a "Hindu army" targeting Sikh militants and supporters is ill founded. In contrast, the United States and other modern states engaging in COIN operations are most likely to be operating in foreign countries in conditions that are more like occupation and against people of different cultural and political backgrounds.

Second, although the Indian government used different kinds of security forces, the Indian government had control of these forces at all times. The United States, or other such state, when inter-operating with the security forces of a host country, would not have such control over all security forces. Despite the utility of India's national forces, the Punjab police put down the insurgency. This fact emphasizes the importance of fortifying and relying upon local forces.

Third, despite the organizational flaws and technological shortcomings that plagued India's COIN campaign, India had linguistic, social, and cultural expertise to understand the conflict once it realized its nature. The United States would, however, face difficulties fielding such "soft power" assets during COIN operations, as evidenced by the problems the United States has had in these realms in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Fourth, even at the height of the Sikh insurgency, India retained functional legislative bodies (with the exception of the emergency), at least at the center. This continuity allowed the government to pass laws that had credibility among most Indians, even if the insurgents and their supporters rejected these laws. Most occupying powers in foreign environments lack such legitimacy, and the public would likely reject the legislative output of an occupying government. The biggest source of friction over India's counterterrorism laws centered on their exceptionalism, suspension of civil liberties, and alleged human rights abuses in implementation—not on the legitimacy of the Indian parliament's right to pass the laws. In other words, the legitimacy of the parliament was never at stake, and the laws were contested through political and judicial processes.

Fifth, this insurgency took place before the global media revolution. How the insurgency would have played out had the information terrain resembled that of contemporary conflicts is difficult to say. The proliferation of cellphones, personal digital recording devices, access to the Internet, cable and satellite television, as well as traditional communications devices (e.g. telephones and faxes) have fundamentally altered the way in which local and

global communities experience conflicts and obviated strategic communications campaigns.[20]

Finally, the Sikh insurgency was a religious as well as ethno-nationalist insurgency. The insurgents sought to mobilize political, social, and economic grievances, and they deployed religious symbols and argued the need for a separate Sikh state to protect Sikh religious and cultural identity. They used Sikh martial history and historical narratives of past Sikh religious oppression to mobilize their base. Thus, some insights from this case study may not be applicable to more secular insurgencies. However, most contemporary insurgencies involve religious or sectarian issues, and many analysts believe that this reality will remain the case for the future. For this reason, this case study offers insights into the management of COIN on sacred spaces that may be the most enduring across conflict zones and actors.

Notes

1 Sikhs account for about 2 percent of India's population and are concentrated in the Punjab, where they comprise a majority of the state's population.
2 I use the starting point of 1978 because it was the year in which a violent clash took place between a group led by Bhindranwale and Fauja Singh (of the Akhand Kirtani Jatha) against the Nirankaris, who Bhindranwale and Singh viewed as a heretical off-shoot of mainstream Sikhism. The Nirankaris had gathered in Amritsar for their annual convention and were attacked. While Fauja Singh tried to kill the head of the Nirankaris, he himself was killed. Bhindranwale did not participate in the assault, claiming he was ill. However, 2 of his followers, 11 of the Akhand Kirtani Jatha, and 3 Nirankaris were killed. This attack was seen as the first act of gratuitous violence by Sikh militants and is often taken as the starting point for the Sikh insurgency.
3 Estimates of the insurgency's casualties vary. According to official figures, some 21,000 people died between 1980 and 1993 (Wallace 2007), and according to unofficial estimates as many as 40,000 people perished (Human Rights Watch 2007).
4 The most authoritative account of this operation is by the officer that led the operation, Lieutenant General K. S. Brar (1993).
5 Prime Minister Gandhi declared emergency rule largely to nullify legal proceedings that implicated her in illegal pre-election activities that may have facilitated her 1972 election and to silence accusations of political corruption within the Congress (I) government.
6 This chapter rejects the thesis of Cheema (2007) that opposing Sikh secession while pursuing ad hoc and ever-changing policies comprises a "strategy." Cheema asserts that India pursued a "long-fuse strategy" that forced the militants to fragment. Of course, states do not routinely permit groups to secede and, thus, there is nothing unique or even interesting in this position.
7 The "Akali Dal" generally refers to the political party, which represents Sikh interests. However, there are numerous personality-driven factions of the Akali Dal. For most purposes, the term "Akali Dal" refers to the collective faction. Specific factions are referenced when distinctions among them or their leaders are important.
8 The Akali Dal forged an alliance with the Hindu-nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). While this move may appear peculiar, the BJP was a major Congress rival. The alliance allowed the Akali Dal to tap rural Sikh interests, while the BJP harnessed urban Hindu support, forging a Sikh–Hindu coalition that tempered tensions between the two communities (Wallace 2007).

9 An authoritative, but descriptive, account of Operation Black Thunder is given by Singh (2002).

10 This issue is treated at length by Fair (2008).

11 This situation was especially notable after the killing or shooting of several high-profile police officials in or near the Golden Temple. In April 1983, A. S. Atwal (a deputy inspector-general of the police) visited the Golden Temple to pray, and as he entered the temple complex he was shot. His body lay in the main entrance of the Golden Temple for more than two hours before the District Commissioner secured the necessary approval to enter the temple (Tully and Jacob 1985). See also Singh 2002 and Singh 2004, especially pp. 50–3.

12 These figures have since been reduced. In 2005, police end-strength was 52,142 (Punjab Government no date).

13 Pakistan's support was substantial and included training, money, and weapons, and it maintained Pakistan-based pro-Khalistan media operations (e.g. Punjabi radio stations for propaganda). Pakistan also took advantage of Sikh pilgrims visiting Pakistan, exposing them to pro-Khalistan materials and personalities (author fieldwork in Pakistan in 1995–6). As another example of Pakistan's involvement, Lieutenant General Javed Nisar, former ISI director-general, was appointed chairman of the newly created Pakistan Gurudwara Prabhandhkak Committee (PGPC), in which role he declared "his resolve to revive militancy in Punjab saying that he stood by the goal of Khalistan and would work to that end as PGPC chair" (quoted in Gill and Sahni 2003).

14 Operation Rakhshak I (1990) and Rakhshak II (1992) had two objectives: (1) seal the border with Pakistan with patrols and checkpoints behind BSF positions; and (2) assist the authorities in repressing militant activities in the border areas and restoring law and order. Operation Rakhshak I failed to arrest cross-border activities because the army was unskilled in this effort, the local population did not welcome army personnel, and operations were poorly coordinated. In contrast, Operation Rakhshak II was successful. It expanded the army footprint to all districts—not simply the border districts, and it deployed forces along the entire Indo-Pakistan border rather than only in "hot" border districts. Although the objectives of both operations were similar, Rakhshak II was pursued with greater intensity and breadth of human and other resources (Joshi 1993; Kang 2005).

15 CATs were also used in the Kashmir COIN campaign (Chapter 5).

16 In the words of Gill and Sahni, "The cynicism of the Congress-I leadership in supporting—indeed 'creating'—Jarnail Singh Bhindranwale as a leader of Sikh militancy in its initial phase in order to undermine the political base of the Akalis, is unquestioned" (2003: n.p.). In Chapter 6 Marwah declares Bhindranwale to be the creation of Congress leader Giani Zail Singh.

17 In particular, many analysts contend that Giani Zail Singh (who became president of India in 1982) developed Bhindranwale as a foil to the Akali government in order to diminish the ability of the Akalis to challenge the Congress Party in Punjab (see Nayar and Singh 1984). For a more detailed account of this miscalculated strategy of Indira Gandhi's Congress Party, see Tully and Jacob 1985; Telford 1992; Kapur 1986; Pettigrew 1995; Malik 1986.

18 These demands were articulated in the Anandpursahab Resolution of 1973, which was a document highlighting several Sikh political, economic, territorial, and religious grievances (see Telford 1992).

19 The *Harminder Sahab* is covered in gold leaf (thus the name of the Golden Temple) and sits in the center of a sacred pool of water.

20 Cragin and Gerwehr (2005) examined U.S. strategic communications efforts over the last fifty years in post-World War II Germany, Vietnam, Eastern Europe, and in targeting the Soviets, but they found few prospects for strategic communications to be effective in modern COIN and counterterrorism efforts because of the near impossibility of having complete or near-complete media dominance.