Background and Policy Implications

Background

Rebuilding social and economic order in conflict and post-conflict areas will remain critical tasks for the United States and our allies as we seek to defeat violent organizations and prevent the emergence of new non-state threats. The goal of IGCC's Governance, Development and Political Violence workshop is to introduce young researchers and practitioners to the theoretical tools, practical skills, background, data, and contacts they will need to carry out fresh research on the political economy of terrorism and insurgency.

Workshop participants will include Ph.D. students, junior faculty, and practitioners from the U.S. military and USAID. Students and faculty will be recruited from leading university programs in political science, economics and other fields. Lectures will be by leading researchers in multiple disciplines, and will include both soldier/scholars with experience in COIN/CT and practitioner/scholars with experience in Stability, Security, Transition, and Reconstruction operations (SSTR). The workshop will run for five teaching days and include informal receptions and small dinners to allow participants and lecturers opportunities to exchange ideas openly.

The five-day workshop will conclude with a short academic conference on the Political Economy of Terrorism and Insurgency for faculty and graduate students, including workshop participants and additional academics, with the aim of assimilating and guiding new research.

This activity is part of “Terrorism, Development and Governance,” a multi-year research grant funded by the U.S. Department of Defense through the peer-reviewed Minerva Initiative.

Policy Implications

Three development-oriented policies dominate efforts to enhance social and economic order: (1) providing security assistance to friendly states; (2) encouraging inclusive governance; and (3) improving the population’s economic welfare. These policies are universally embraced yet not methodically evaluated.

Recent research shows that these policies, while often productive, may also be mutually undermining in some contexts or phases of conflict, especially if improperly sequenced. For instance:

- Encouraging inclusive governance by decentralizing power and authority can result in more effective representation, better delivery of services, and tangible regional autonomy, undermining incentives for violence (Weinstein 2007). Yet decentralization and inclusion can foster formal, autonomous bases of political power for oppositional groups, strengthening their ability to challenge the state (Lake 2008) and possibly sparking new cycles of violence through score-settling (Lyall 2008).

- Strengthening friendly states has also made them resistant to democratic opposition and driven insurgents to terrorism (Laitin 2008). By making it riskier for terrorist leaders to communicate, security assistance to allied states has forced terrorist organizations to become less centralized, leading to less discriminate violence and making it harder to end terrorist campaigns (Shapiro 2007).

- Improving the population’s material welfare by providing public services can create incentives for communities to share information with government forces (Berman, Felter, and Shapiro 2008). Yet that policy can also: (1) cause organizations with the capacity to prevent information leakage to switch to high-damage operations such as suicide attacks (Berman and Laitin 2008); (2) create resources for opposition forces to capture; and (3) relieve them of the burden of providing public goods on their own.
Lacking an integrated theory of terrorism, governance, and development, U.S. decision makers combating terrorism and political violence cannot explicitly consider the interactions between policies. An integrated theory would lead to better doctrine, allowing limited development resources to be applied optimally to combat violence and informing future policies by better incorporating tactical and strategic lessons from current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Social scientists have the tools to address these questions, yet little empirical research has focused on political violence in poorly governed spaces, especially in its contemporary form—characterized by politically active, violent religious radicals. Understanding the optimal mix of policies, coercive and benign, in a given context requires an integrated theory of the relationship between development and political violence.