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 in Bürgerkriege,
 Militär,
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 Strategie, Terrorismus

Kommentare (1)

How to deal with ISIS? Lessons Learned from Afghanistan

Von Thomas Müller


 Teil XVII unserer **Serie** zum „Islamischen Staat“

Obama is often criticized for not allowing “boots on the ground” against ISIS. But lessons learned from Afghanistan show that there are no simple military solutions to political problems. Achieving a sustainable success will not be possible without a long term political commitment to the region.

Insurgent movements: more than armed fighters

Chardara District, Kunduz Province, between 2008 and 2011: several thousand national and international troops, including Special Forces, conducted patrols, clearing operations, night raids and air strikes. When this did not yield the expected results, the US established local government-backed militias and tasked them to “hold” the ground. However, literally within bicycle distance from the former international military camp, an insurgent hotbed remains until this very day.

When asking district elders how the insurgents managed to continuously operate from the area they often shrugged their shoulders and said that insurgents were mainly locals, enjoyed community support and disliked the government.

A simple but nevertheless strikingly accurate assessment of the situation which highlights some common ground between Afghanistan and the ISIS controlled territory in the Middle East. In both areas, insurgents are able to gain grounds because of a permissive human terrain. In both areas, armed groups are only part of a larger logistical and organizational infrastructure that is deeply intertwined with the local political economy. Further, in both areas, local support thrives on a complex web of underlying socio-political grievances directed – amongst other factors – against a government considered to be the enemy. This deeply rooted structure creates resilience, as it is the breeding ground from which armed groups sustain and reproduce themselves.

Like pulling one’s hand out of water

International military operations only impact the symptoms, not the causes of the insurgency. In Afghanistan, Special Forces managed to slow the insurgents’ operational tempo, but killed or captured fighters were usually replaced within weeks, if not days. Likewise, faulty intelligence oftentimes led to civilian casualties, which helped insurgents to recruit new members.

Large sweeps by ground forces temporarily squeezed fighters out of an area but mostly failed to remove local support structures. The actual “problem” (locals actively or passively supporting the insurgents, Mullahs and

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community leaders preaching against the “invading infidels”, and local security forces cooperating with the insurgents) remained in place. This allowed the insurgents to reconnect with their largely intact ideological, logistical and organizational infrastructure even after clearing operations.

Military operations in this context had an effect similar to dipping one’s hand into water: there is some movement but after pulling out the hand the surface will smoothen again.

Defeating ISIS... and then what? Lessons learned

Afghanistan has taught us that any military success against ISIS would not be sustainable unless accompanied by a political process and long-term commitment. Even if ISIS was defeated militarily today, it is likely that a similar organization would appear tomorrow if the *raison d’être* of such movements is not addressed.

Military actions are not ineffective. Coalition airstrikes helped to stop ISIS and allowed local security forces to gain ground. The real challenge, however, will be to establish a legitimate use of force once the fighting is over.

Regional cooperation is needed to achieve a political end state acceptable to the Sunni and Shia populations and to prevent people who now feel excluded from or are attacked by their sectarian governments from taking up arms. While some achievements have been made in Iraq, Syria lags behind.

The US should attempt to sign strategic framework agreements. This would create political leverage when pushing for the implementation of an inclusive government and establishment of the rule of law.

It is also vitally important to reach out to Sunnis, in order to build trust that their rights will be respected and that there will be a place for them after the war. This is crucial as ground operations increasingly push into ISIS-controlled Sunni heartlands. If civilians in these areas have to fear human rights abuses and reprisal killings by local security forces, they are likely to fight for ISIS.

Continued international assistance to security forces in the region will be necessary to ensure the integration of various factions under unified structures and the creation of professional, non-sectarian and multi-ethnic security forces. Security assistance must be long-term. Afghanistan has shown that the sheer presence of international advisors and the promise of continuous funding significantly improves the combat performance of local security forces, as well as their legitimacy.

The US-led coalition should push the Iraqi Government towards a clear commitment of reintegrating “accidental guerillas”, i.e. those who never were die-hard ISIS fanatics but simply chose the side of the conflict which – at the time – seemed to ensure the biggest chance of survival at a time of chaos.

None of the above measures will be a silver bullet. Building legitimate and effective institutions is a lengthy and often frustrating process. But it is the best the US-led coalition can do, given the limitations of a military intervention.

Thomas Mueller holds an M.A. in Middle Eastern Studies and International Law and has spent several years in the field, both in Afghanistan and the Middle East, serving as an advisor to different organizations on

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KATEGORIEN

Außenpolitik (64)

Bürgerkriege (24)

Cyber Security (52)

Demokratisierung (14)

Drohnen (15)

Flüchtlinge (17)

Humanitäre Interventionen (15)

Innere Sicherheit (32)

Interviews (10)

Katastrophen (4)

Konferenz (29)

Militär (31)

Pandemien (2)

Podcast (7)

Popkultur (22)

Raketenabwehr (1)

Sanktionen (8)

Security Culture (27)

Sicherheits-Kommunikation (16)

Sicherheitskultur (237)

Sozialwissenschaft Online (71)

Stellenangebote (55)

Strategie (12)

Terrorismus (60)

Theorie (5)

Umwelt (1)



matters of security and development. He has 10 years of experience, both as an active duty soldier and reserve officer, with an airborne division of the German Armed Forces. He speaks Arabic and Persian. The views expressed in this blog are strictly his own and not those of any of the organizations he

is affiliated with.

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lotti-san | 12. Mrz. 2015 um 18:03 |

Eine klare Analyse der aktuellen Situation. Hoffentlich sehen das die Verantwortlichen Personen ähnlich. P.S.: schnieke photo

#1

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