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## 12 Small Wars Are Local: Debunking Current Assumptions about Countering Small Armed Groups

Peter Curry

In 2005, I was chief of operations in a multinational headquarters that deployed to Kabul, Afghanistan. The headquarters had no American generals and only a small American contingent—a unique experience in my 25-year experience as a soldier. As the person who managed day-to-day operations, I witnessed many approaches to the challenges of dealing with various armed groups. Upon returning to the United States and being assigned to the academic environs of Brookings and Marine Corps University, I have had time to reflect on those experiences and discuss them with other combat leaders who had served on other battlefields. The result of that reflection is that there is an evolving set of new assumptions about countering armed groups in the developing world. Contrary to academic opinion that Americans do not have a methodology for dealing with small armed groups, I contend there is a common mental model being used by most Western nations and that model has several faulty assumptions that are exposed on the battlefields of today.

What follows are one learned soldier's considered observations on this Western model and is not intended to be a classic work of political science. Evident in this chapter

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is a clear American-centric, operational bias modified by observing the actions and exchanging concepts with many other Western officers. Though my experience and lessons may be unique now, it is likely that many American officers in the future will find themselves deployed in similar situations. This chapter is about new or relearned assumptions. First, old assumptions are identified. Next, updated and consciously contrarian assumptions are offered to replace the old assumptions, not with the clarity of empirical data, but with the intuition of those who have served at war's pointy end. Hopefully, with these new assumptions offered, new strategies will be developed to handle the complex issue of countering armed groups. At the very least, gaining a deeper understanding of ourselves and our capabilities, limitations, and deeply implicit beliefs can help in future battlefields.

### **DIVERGENCE BETWEEN BOOK AND BATTLEFIELD**

The gulf between current literature and the battlefield has much to do with our current doctrinal understanding. Current doctrine is a useful starting point, for the strategist or operator, but the battlefield's rapid pace of change is causing significant divergence between the battlefield and the literature. Doctrine will never keep pace with the constantly evolving situation, so soldiers and academics must make assumptions to fill in the gaps of our knowledge and those in the conflict must be able to use their education and training to be effective.

At the risk of oversimplification, our general concept of small wars is too anchored in the revolutionary, Maoist or "*foco*" models of the 1950s and '60s. Today's armed groups may employ elements of vanguardism or tactically "swim among the fishes," but to assume that modern armed groups have strategic aims and motivations similar to Mao or Guevara is incorrect. If we accept the revolutionary model, then we subscribe to the revolutionary model's main weakness that reduces the conflict to three basic sides: (1) the antigovernment insurgent, (2) the government (the counterinsurgent), and (3) the bulk of the population. In this model the first two sides compete for the allegiance of the third in order to gain power and control the nation-state.<sup>1</sup> My experience suggests that this is a limiting and counterproductive mental model. The battlefield environment is more complex than the three-sided model and clinging to this mental blueprint limits our effectiveness.

We need a more up-to-date and realistic approach to the armed-group problem than what is currently available.<sup>2</sup> The study of history provides context to this "wicked problem,"<sup>3</sup> but understanding how to counter small groups from a historical context is very different from current operational application. The historical record on armed groups is a necessary starting point, but the battlefield has evolved well beyond the classic Western model. There is nothing wrong with learning from the classic small-war literature, but when this ternary framework of insurgent versus counterinsurgent versus neutral locals becomes normative, it anchors a mind-set, creates a set of faulty assumptions, and ultimately causes weak and faulty operational implementation. Valuable time is lost "un-learning" some past lessons. I offer new assumptions that should be tested and retested, but I think they get us closer to the current state of fighting small groups in small wars.

## RETHINKING ASSUMPTIONS

**Old Assumption:** *The government and the antigovernment elements are vying for the allegiance of the locals.*

**New Assumption:** *Small wars are local.*

A major assumption of the Western small-wars model treats the insurgents as a relatively homogeneous group with largely convergent political ends and assumes that the counter-insurgent government group also has convergent political goals. The model equates the remainder of the local population's neutrality with helplessness or passivity, whereby the indifference of the people can be manipulated or "won" by either side. In communist-inspired revolutions or anticolonial situations, this model had some arguable utility. Today, this model is limited. Diverse factions are the rule today, with a "balkanization" of former nation-states occurring. The clan is the fundamental element in today's developing countries and many armed groups are an amalgam of different clans with divergent internal factions and goals. Any goal convergence is largely temporal and expedient; there are coalitions of convenience that tend to fracture once the urgent threat is gone. Goals among groups range from the existential to more ideological, cultural, religious, economic, or political ends. Armed groups are difficult to categorize, especially into the two broad camps of insurgents and counterinsurgents.

Some military officers noticing the change in war's character have called fighting armed groups and insurgencies more akin to "armed politics."<sup>4</sup> There is a diffusion of conflict. Small groups of people fight for political power and social justice at the local level. Armed groups fight a collection of "microwars," where local agendas are paramount and goals are attained through violent and nonviolent means. Rupert Smith correctly posits that wars today are truly "amongst the people."<sup>5</sup> If all politics are local, then it follows that (sm)all wars are local as well.

As a result, the natures of armed groups parallel societal trends. Modern groups are becoming less hierarchical and more interconnected and find niches or nodes in the business of combat. Each node can have tremendous capability, hence influence, especially at the local level. Groups no longer take instruction from upper-echelon groups; both insurgent and counterinsurgent (if those terms even still apply) operate with increasing autonomy. Few groups take orders from headquarters as they once did; they pursue different ends because they can gather their own means. They are flattening their structures, outsourcing support tasks, and contracting other groups to meet operational goals. Armed-groups methodologies have evolved, so Western approaches will have to be updated as well.

Today's small wars are a "fur ball" of enabled groups vying for influence. Below is just a sampling of group types that may compete with each other:

- The local population,
- The local informal governing groups (tribes, clans, families),
- The local formal governing groups,
- The "national" governing groups,
- The antigovernmental groups,
- International governments and governmental organizations (IGOs),

- Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs),
- Private entities,
- Possible outside intervention or assistance forces, and
- Local and international media.

Within each of these categories, there are several subgroups, each with proprietary agendas and interests. Each subgroup has different capabilities and influences based on local conditions. Additionally, different agendas influence local, regional, and global media. Each with its own point of view. Each with its own biases. And each with its own incomplete understanding of the situation.

So dealing with armed groups is more than complex; it is “complexity squared”—each group taking action, which causes a subsequent, possibly unpredictable reaction, creating a violently dynamic environment with infinite permutations. Armed groups make modern wars kaleidoscopic; the issues are narrow and as the political viewpoint changes or the conditions change ever so slightly, the security picture changes as well.<sup>6</sup> Solutions to perceived problems that work in one area under one set of conditions could be disastrous under another set of conditions or in a different location.

**Old Assumption:** *Power is an absolute. The side with the most power will eventually win.*

**New Assumption:** *Power is a relationship, not an absolute.<sup>7</sup>*

One cannot equate capability with power. When fighting armed groups, we believe the side with the most combat power, resources, and political clout will probably “win” the fight. However, power is a relationship, not an absolute. In any situation, one group will have a power advantage relative to another group, and under different circumstances that relationship could be reversed. Each group possesses some power and will use that leverage wherever and whenever it can. Effective groups, not surprisingly, understand their relative strengths and weaknesses and, perhaps most important, know how to wield power and fashion weakness into political strength. Not understanding the reciprocal nature of power can be fatal to any plan.

Local power reigns supreme. In places such as failed states or the outer provinces of weak states that have no governmental checks and balances, no judicial system, and no Western-model structured social justice, power must be gained and maintained in order to survive. In lawless places, people use power in an existential, zero-sum game. Power is not shared; it is gained through any means available, including theft, intimidation, or coercion. The loss of power is equivalent to public humiliation and fear of humiliation is one of the most powerful human motivators. A group must maintain whatever power it has at all costs. This need leads to coalitions of convenience.

**Old Assumption:** *War and peace are mutually exclusive, and these wars can be won.*

**New Assumption:** *Conflict is constant. States of war and peace are temporary.*

Most wars, including small ones, rarely have defined conclusions. The corollary to Clausewitz’s dictum—war is politics by other means—might be that politics is conflict by other means. Peace, as defined as a cessation of hostilities, rarely ends the political conflict. Politically, we must accept that chaos and progress coexist when fighting armed groups. War and peace are temporary arrangements. Political conflict continues until one

side of the struggle becomes incapable of armed struggle, is unwilling to continue, or loses credibility. Complete annihilation of a group will certainly end the conflict but annihilation is usually not politically feasible (especially if a group is good at using the power of weakness) and militarily impossible. Any good small-war strategy aims to change attitudes, to force the opponent into the political process while eliminating the recalcitrant elements. The tenet of political primacy guarantees that violence and negotiation will exist as a natural course of events.

The idea of a desired military and political “end state” must be adjusted to a goal of an acceptable steady state. The military, regardless of its conventional or unconventional methods, can rarely “win” these wars; it can only set conditions that allow some acceptable outcome. The military is a means to an end, not the end itself. Strategically, “victory” in small wars will have elements of *peace* and *war* merging to reach “par,” a set of acceptable conditions. Peace, as understood in the West, will have an acceptable level of political agitation that occasionally turns violent. The military can only secure peace as the political actors define it.

**Old Assumption:** *Neutrality is possible and preferable.*

**New Assumption:** *Neutrality is not possible and many times is not even preferable.*

When outside or allied troops enter a local situation, regardless of intention, a sort of “observer effect” phenomenon occurs.<sup>8</sup> The very presence of “outside” troops inevitably alters the situation, people’s perception of the situation, and the local balance of power. Military power is to be respected, feared, or tested. Without question, outside troop actions are measured and evaluated by all groups resident in the immediate area. Alternative opposing strategies will develop. Any outside force, regardless of whether it is made of foreigners or native groups, will be viewed as a competing group. Troops become a factor in any power equation resident in the local mix.

An outside force’s attempt at neutrality creates confusion among all groups, including the force claiming neutrality. Neutrality cannot be claimed; it is a status given to an outside force by the indigenous groups. An outside force must earn “neutrality” by its actions. Also, by assuming its own claimed “neutrality,” the military force weakens its credibility with competing groups. Competing groups view any neutral status as a sham ripe for exploitation. For the outside force, earning local respect is the critical element. In order to achieve that respect, the aim of any outside force should be transparency, not neutrality. Transparency involves telling the locals what you are going to do, and then following through to completion. Stopping short of stated outcomes is weakness. Military forces must demonstrate transparency with restraint until action is required, but when it is employed, muscular force must be swift, accurate, and clear in its purpose. Convincing small groups that the outcome is not in doubt sets the proper conditions to end local violence—a critical condition for progress. Failure to use the appropriate level of force within the laws of armed conflict and appropriate social norms creates a lack of trust within the population. Trust is a luxury that most villagers caught in a “small” war can ill afford. At the local level, action strips away any ambiguity. Neutrality creates ambiguity and ambiguity is seen as the tactic of the weak and disrespected.

**Old Assumption:** *The truth is absolute and objective.*

**New Assumption:** *There is no truth; there is only the perception of truth.<sup>9</sup>*

Western-based societies rely on reason to reveal the truth; the facts speak for themselves. Of course this assumes facts are attainable and agreed upon. In many tribal and honor-based societies what really matters are not facts but honor and position. The facts do not speak for themselves and, often, reality is suspended to “save face.” When one loses honor, community standing and power are also lost. Retaining honor through deception is expected; therefore every word and deed will be viewed with a large dose of skepticism. Revealing “the truth” makes one vulnerable and vulnerability in a lawless world can be a death sentence. Often, this asymmetry of perceptions leads Westerners into the “correlation is causation” trap. However, outside observers cannot always believe what they see or hear.

Information flow is nearly impossible to manage in tribal societies. Information operations should be based on the facts, but the messages must also be sensitive to the rumor mill. Local rumors easily outpace any Western-force public affairs operation. Any slight can be strategically significant, because a sense of injustice or humiliation is quick to surface. Messages, no matter how well intentioned or well crafted from our point of view, rarely take root in the sanitary soil of truth. Messages root themselves in the compost of a decaying Hobbesian situation, where every slight can be magnified and any cause can be exploited to gain power. Cultural sensitivity will help us understand this challenge, but Westerners in general must understand that our deeply ingrained desire for truth and rule of law is one of the most difficult needs to fill.

**Old Assumption:** *“Winning Hearts and Minds” is paramount.*

**New Assumption:** *You cannot “win” their hearts and minds.*

The “Win Hearts and Minds” cliché is simply not useful. Hearts-and-minds approaches assume the neutrality of the locals, a very flawed assumption that drives Western perception. The local population has power and interests. People affiliate with groups for several reasons, but most reasons are highly pragmatic. The central question of the population is “What’s in it for me?” They perceive that the group they have aligned themselves with will help achieve their ends. Rarely do locals form strong political affiliations with armed groups or the government. People avoid risk, hedge their bets, and throw their support behind the group that will get them what they want.

Because of the highly political nature of fighting armed groups, what the people think and feel is still the center of gravity. In the current models, however, the “neutrals” are usually portrayed as a group that is just waiting to be “won” with hearts-and-minds campaigns. It has been my experience that people cannot be “won” in the sense that once we have “won” them, they are forever on our side. People’s aspirations change, and the more successful you are at helping people attain their goals, the higher their expectations become. No one is really neutral; everyone has personal agendas and desires and is waiting for some group to demonstrate its ability to help achieve those desires. Our strategies should not be aimed at becoming popular—that is an impossibility—we won’t “win” that game because expectations continually change. Our goal should be to gain and maintain

respect, a respect for our restrained but potential power (if required) and our ability to keep the promises that we do make.

**Old Assumption:** *Better governance and administration are the key to victory.*

**New Assumption:** *Being governed is not always welcome.*

Westerners expect a responsive, benevolent government. Combine that expectation with the belief that the locals can be manipulated, and the conditions are set for a high probability of failure. In an area where governments have been weak, the locals view government agents and agencies as tax-levying parasites or gangsters who extract resources and return little benefit—often an accurate description of some government officials. Resident antipathy resists any government-sponsored program. Ungoverned people believe that no government is preferable to bad government, and in their experience any government is bad.

While a negative view of the government does not equate to active resistance, almost all government programs are met with significant skepticism. A typical scenario goes something like this. First, the existing local power structure will view any outside program as a challenge to its authority, especially if executed without prior consultation. Second, the project is likely to be financed and conceived elsewhere, oblivious to the desires or needs of the locals. The locals perceive the government and its proxies as an arrogant, paternalistic group of outsiders with an exploitive agenda. Consequently, the warlord views such actions as a challenge to be confronted, and the local believes the project is a colossal waste of money from an ineffective government. In short order the project is destroyed by a local power broker or neglected by the local people because few have an interest to sustain it.

At best, reconstruction and development projects become prohibitively expensive because of the faulty assumptions that villagers will see the goodness of the projects. At worst, the situation can become catastrophic through mutual misunderstanding. The government misreads local intentions and sees active resistance to the government when there is none. Soon the village is classified as opposing the government. It is not long before the government is either eradicating the “opposition,” which of course drives the locals toward the opposition, or shunting aid to places more responsive to government largess. There are times when the government is better off leaving the village alone until a more inclusive and comprehensive program can be set up. While they won’t love the government, the locals probably will not actively support the opposition either. Again, the populace is not neutral. They do have hearts and minds and they will use them more than we sometimes give them credit for.

**Old Assumption:** *Security first, then build the society.*

**New Assumption:** *The nature of the conflict dictates what comes first.*

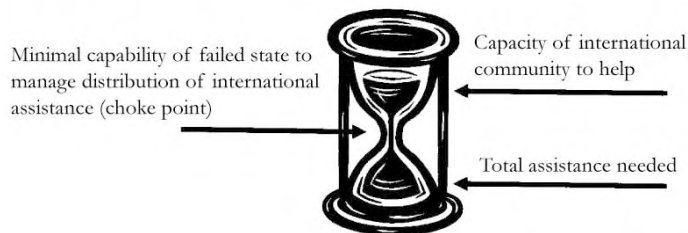
What makes countering armed groups seem different and more intractable is the dual nature of two monumental tasks: (1) building a nation and (2) countering the armed threat. Armed groups exist because the government was perceived as so unresponsive that the group decided it was in its best interests to adopt violence as a political act. Developing strategies to counter groups becomes a “chicken or egg” problem. Ultimately the goal is

to build a nation. However, if groups have an alternative end state, what comes first, building the nation or fighting the groups?

Of course, the academic answer is to create comprehensive government programs that emphasize a multidimensional response to armed groups requiring (1) a balance of security, (2) economic development, (3) social justice, and (4) political reform. The difficulty in orchestrating the need for harmonious action of all four elements guarantees that in every situation a paradox confronts the government. If economic development occurs without security, then government improvement projects become “insurgent magnets” that armed groups must destroy in order to gain group credibility. If security is gained without responsive economic development, armed groups will recruit and pay the unemployed to fight the government. If security occurs without a rudimentary judicial system, then there is no ability to challenge authority peacefully. People perceive the incarceration of most able-bodied men as unjust. Without real political reform, a power status quo will remain with the warlords retaining power. Attempts at bringing those warlords into the government fold can be problematic if promises of reform have been made, since that is a threat to their power. A coordinated multidimensional response is obvious, but attaining success is easier said than done.

There is a relationship between how long the “nation-state” has not functioned and an inability to build a new government. The relationship deteriorates exponentially the deeper into chaos a state sinks. The longer the downward spiral, the more acute the “brain drain” of professionals, and over time the state lacks managers to perform even the most basic of administrative tasks. Every facet of modern life becomes a challenge, from adequate education to adequate infrastructure to an adequate business environment. A failing state eventually becomes an illiterate nation incapable of building institutions. Little trust exists in the few existing institutions. Self-preservation is paramount. Jeffersonian-inspired democracy is not even a dream; it is simply not fathomable to most people caught in these situations.

A societal “hourglass” paradox develops. At the bottom of the hourglass are the large numbers of people who need assistance within the failed state. At the top is the relatively large amount of assistance that is available from the international community. In the narrow middle is the dearth of trained managers to get the massive assistance into the hands of the many needy people. Aid trickles in. If expedient measures are taken and



Societal “Hourglass” Paradox



management expands too quickly, corruption and a dependence on outside sources develop. If expansion is slow, then developmental programs slow, international donors lose interest, and the system collapses. There must be a balance between foreign assistance and developing indigenous capabilities to handle all forms of governance. Too often there is an imbalance; nations do not provide assistance for years. Then once a situation becomes an “international crisis,” both governments and nongovernmental organizations easily overmatch the paltry indigenous capacity. This hourglass phenomenon is a large reason why countering armed groups and insurgencies takes sometimes decades. One cannot win the war while gutting the society.

**Old Assumption:** *Multilateralism is always better than going it alone . . . as long as there is unity of effort.*

**New Assumption:** *The goal of unity of effort is elusive; unity of goals is about as good as it will get.*

If our bias is that more government is better, then we also have a bias that more governments and organizations are better still. Multilateralism is still a positive term in the international community, but “multilateralism is always good” is the last of our faulty assumptions. The assumption is that governments and nongovernmental organizations in the area will work toward the same goals. In reality, this is not only untrue but also unrealistic. Just as the enemy and the locals are multifaceted, so are friends and allies. Our partners have their own interests and must honor their constituencies and benefactors. Organizational policy tends to drive action; and to the members of those organizations, nothing matters more than pursuing the charters and guidelines envisioned in the organizations’ creations. Whether friend or foe, independent groups compound war’s complexity with additional layers.

The first layer is the multinational military force. Troops and security forces from different countries have different mandates—usually expressed in caveats. Caveats are a nice term for restrictions, or “what our forces cannot or will not do.” Often these restrictions are minor obstacles, but are subject to interpretation by senior leaders on the ground. At times, the political exigencies at home dictate the most cautious interpretation possible and will likely be contrary to the stated purpose of the deployment. Nations may be operating under rules of a charter or alliance, but the senior alliance commander has little or no leverage to employ forces under his “command.”

The next layer of complexity is the nongovernmental organizations and international governmental organizations that are instrumental to the success and stability of a region. They bring a wealth of expertise in most non-security-related fields and fiercely guard their independence. These organizations will likely operate independently of the security aims of the local military commander. Communication and cooperation is a function of organizational charters. Too often, these groups operate under the notion of neutrality and feel that coordination with military forces violates that neutrality. NGOs and IGOs are free agents in the field with agendas that may compromise or “suboptimize” security goals (as the military defines them) in pursuit of their own agendas.

To effectively operate in an area, military leaders must accept the complexity of the competing interests that are on “your side.” It is naive to assume that all of the

organizations, with their national mandates and organizational agendas, will operate in concert with one another. Allied groups are independent operators on the battlefield. With scant leverage to coerce any allied group, the military professional must build consensus to reach an acceptable set of conditions that will achieve the end state. Trying to get all organizations to follow one leader is a high-cost, low-payoff strategy. Coalescing around convergent goals is a worthwhile endeavor, but the military should lower its expectations of control within any given area. From a military standpoint, the upside is that success can be measured by the increasing amount of consensus building required. Increased security brings more independent groups into an area. As much as military professionals disdain a lack of unity in command, the military has to accept a “command by committee” approach in many situations.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is time to dispense with the old assumptions of countering armed groups and insurgencies. Armed groups are enabled as never before. They are not beholden to any masters from a larger organization. Strategically, armed groups may be loosely driven by broad ideologies, but tactically they generally fight for pragmatic reasons. Operationally, the grass roots political issues increase battlefield complexity—countering armed groups is more a series of microwars than a broad, three-sided struggle. A new Western model must embrace complexity as it exists on the battlefield.

What armed groups lack in military firepower, they make up with the politics of power. Successful groups turn battlefield weakness into strategic political strength. Masters at understanding the reciprocal nature of power, armed groups focus less on “the truth” of physical capability and more on the perceptions of honor and reputation. Countering armed groups begins with changing the perceptions of reputations, not by completely eliminating the armed group, but by negating its message and reducing its physical influence.

Changing perceptions is not “winning hearts and minds” to win popular support. Popularity is short lived, as perceptions change rapidly. Any new model must change from winning hearts and minds to earning respect for the authority of your power in all its forms: moral, ethical, and physical. Transparency, not neutrality, earns that respect in the Hobbesian world where significant numbers of armed groups exist. Neutrality is in the eyes of the beholder; therefore it is impossible to build a meaningful, political-military strategy around it. The strategy must have local support where strategic goals and local agendas converge, while accounting for local deviations. Those local deviations will occur with allies as well.

Armed groups are living organisms, not mechanistic organizational structures. Groups change, morph, and recombine in infinite permutations that force strategies and concepts to change over time. The contrast between book (theory) and battlefield (application) is caused by reliance on old mental models of revolutionary war. Classic literature is still useful in understanding the character and nature of countering armed groups, but the model needs updating. It is time to question the old assumptions and replace them with new ones. Moreover, the new assumptions of today will have to be tested and undoubtedly replaced by even newer ones. When considering long-term strategic goals to

counter armed groups, it is wise to remember that when implementing strategy, small wars are local.

## NOTES

1. This model is most explicit in the classic work of Sir Robert Thompson's, *Defeating Communist Insurgency* (New York: Praeger, 1966). Thompson's work is still valid and some of the concepts for this paper's new or re-learned assumptions can be traced back to Thompson and other authors. The issue is not the work of Thompson's era but the templating of their model in the twenty-first century.
2. David Kilcullen is one author who is recognizing the changes and has written extensively on the subject. His "Counterinsurgency Redux," *Survival* 48 (Winter 2006–2007), is an excellent review of the Western model as well as his emerging thoughts on counterinsurgency. This paper shares many of Kilcullen's views, but its focus is on armed groups in a broader context than counterinsurgency.
3. The idea of wicked problems in design was originally proposed by H. J. Rittel and M. M. Webber (1984). In solving a wicked problem, the solution of one aspect of the problem may reveal another, more complex problem. Discrepancies in representing a wicked problem can be explained in numerous ways. The choice of explanation determines the nature of the problem's resolution. Hence how you model the problem largely governs the solution set. Reference: [www.cs.utexas.edu/users/almstrum/classes/cs373/fa99/cs373fa99-e1.html](http://www.cs.utexas.edu/users/almstrum/classes/cs373/fa99/cs373fa99-e1.html).
4. "Politics" in this sense is of the "polity" or the people's interests instead of a narrow sense of politics.
5. Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World* (London: Penguin Group, 2005), 17.
6. For complex issues, sometimes a metaphor is most useful in trying to describe something that is difficult to describe. A senior Special Forces officer with recent combat tours offered the kaleidoscope metaphor as a way of describing how quickly events on the ground can change perception.
7. Conversations with a retired senior officer from a NATO member nation.
8. The "observer effect" refers to how the act of observing changes what is being observed. Both security forces and local groups alter their behaviors when they know they are being observed, especially in politically motivated conflicts. A certain observer bias is at work as well. Observers tend to give credence to their expected outcomes and discount unexpected ones. Simply put, people believe what they want to believe.
9. Officers from many different countries that have been deployed to many different geographic areas where honor-based societies exist have repeatedly emphasized this point. Their experiences were so global that I consider it a universal assumption of Western militaries.