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*Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188*

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1. REPORT DATE <b>2011</b>	2. REPORT TYPE	3. DATES COVERED <b>00-00-2011 to 00-00-2011</b>	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE <b>Counterinsurgency Scorecard: Afghanistan in Early 2011 Relative to the Insurgencies of the Past 30 Years</b>		5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
		5b. GRANT NUMBER	
		5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)		5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
		5e. TASK NUMBER	
		5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) <b>Rand Corporation, National Defense Research Institute, 1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA, 90407-2138</b>		8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)		10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
		11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT <b>Approved for public release; distribution unlimited</b>			
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES			
14. ABSTRACT			
15. SUBJECT TERMS			
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT
a. REPORT <b>unclassified</b>	b. ABSTRACT <b>unclassified</b>	c. THIS PAGE <b>unclassified</b>	<b>Same as Report (SAR)</b>
			18. NUMBER OF PAGES <b>27</b>
			19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON

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OCCASIONAL PAPER

# Counterinsurgency Scorecard

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Afghanistan in Early 2011 Relative to  
the Insurgencies of the Past 30 Years

*Christopher Paul*

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The research described in this report was conducted within the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community under Contract W74V8H-06-C-0002.

**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data** is available for this publication.

ISBN: 978-0-8330-5248-3

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*Cover photo: A U.S. Marine with the Police Mentoring Team, 2nd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, Regimental Combat Team 7, conducts a routine security patrol in Marjah, Afghanistan, September 20, 2010.  
(U.S. Marine Corps photo by Sgt. Albert J. Carls)*

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Published 2011 by the RAND Corporation  
1776 Main Street, P.O. Box 2138, Santa Monica, CA 90407-2138  
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## Preface

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This short paper seeks to extend findings from the previously published RAND monograph *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency* to ongoing operations in Afghanistan. The core of the research involved designing and conducting an expert elicitation exercise (using classic Delphi methods) to complete the counterinsurgency (COIN) scorecard developed as part of the earlier study, extending its application to ongoing operations in Afghanistan. The expert elicitation was completed in January and February 2011.

This work will be of interest to defense analysts and military planners who are responsible for evaluating current U.S. operations and COIN approaches, particularly in Afghanistan; to military and civilian decisionmakers with responsibility for Afghanistan; to academics and scholars who engage in historical research of COIN, insurgency, and irregular warfare; and to students of contemporary and historical international conflicts.

Readers will also find the following RAND publications to be of interest:

- *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency*, by Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill (MG-964-OSD)
- *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Detailed Counterinsurgency Case Studies*, by Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill (MG-964/1-OSD).

This research was conducted within the International Security and Defense Policy Center of the RAND National Defense Research Institute, a federally funded research and development center sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Staff, the Unified Combatant Commands, the Navy, the Marine Corps, the defense agencies, and the defense Intelligence Community.

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## Abstract

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The previously published RAND monograph *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency* used detailed case studies of the 30 insurgencies worldwide begun and completed between 1978 and 2008 to analyze correlates of success in COIN. One of the core findings of that effort was that a case's score on a scorecard of 15 good factors or practices minus 12 bad factors or practices perfectly predicted case outcomes in the data. Cases in which COIN forces were able to maximize the presence of good factors and minimize the presence of bad factors resulted in COIN force success. Specifically, cases with a good-minus-bad score of +5 or greater were always won by the government, and cases with a good-minus-bad score of zero or lower were always won by the insurgents.<sup>1</sup>

The current research effort involved developing and conducting an expert elicitation exercise to complete the scorecard for operations in Afghanistan in early 2011. A panel of 11 experts on Afghanistan were asked to make "worst-case" assessments of the scorecard factors. Based on consensus results for the scorecard, early 2011 Afghanistan scores +3.5. This score is lower than the lowest-scoring COIN win in the past 30 years (which was +5), but it is higher than the highest-scoring loss (which was 0). This highlighted that certain factors are absent whose presence would likely increase the prospects for success.

Specifically, certain government legitimacy and good governance factors were scored as missing. Perhaps of greatest concern are scores indicating the failure to date to substantially disrupt the fulfillment of the insurgents' tangible support needs. In the 30 historical cases, all the COIN winners did this while none of the losers were able to. This analysis recommends seeking further improvements to increase key good factors and decrease bad factors in order to increase confidence in the prospects for and likelihood of victory in Afghanistan.

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<sup>1</sup> Perfect prediction in the 30 historical cases is by no means a guarantee of perfect prediction across all possible cases. Full details of the historical research can be found in Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-964-OSD, 2010b. For the full case studies, see Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Detailed Counterinsurgency Case Studies*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-964/1-OSD, 2010a.



# Findings from Previous Research on 30 Years of Insurgency<sup>1</sup>

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The previously published RAND monograph *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency* used detailed case studies of the 30 insurgencies begun and completed worldwide between 1978 and 2008 to analyze correlates of success in counterinsurgency (COIN). That study produced six key findings regarding success in COIN in recent history:

- Effective COIN practices tend to run in packs.
- The balance of good versus bad practices perfectly predicts outcomes.
- Of 20 COIN approaches tested, 13 received strong support, while three were not supported by the evidence.
- Repression wins phases but usually not cases.
- With regard to insurgent success, tangible support trumps popular support.
- Poor beginnings do not necessarily lead to poor ends.

A more detailed explanation of these findings can be found in the earlier monograph. The current study focused on the importance of maximizing good factors and minimizing bad factors in COIN, and it sought to assess the balance of these factors in Afghanistan in early 2011.

## The Counterinsurgency Scorecard

As mentioned, one of the core findings of the previous effort was that a case's score on a scorecard of 15 equally weighted good factors or practices minus 12 equally weighted bad factors or practices perfectly predicted case outcomes in the data. Table 1 lists the good and the bad factors.

Over the 30 cases, taking the sum of the good minus the bad reveals that cases with a good-minus-bad score of +5 or greater were always won by the government, and cases with a good-minus-bad score of zero or lower were always won by the insurgents.<sup>2</sup> In other words, scores on the scorecard perfectly discriminated the historical cases into wins and losses.<sup>3</sup> The

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<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank John Gordon IV at RAND and Joseph Collins at the National Defense University for their insightful comments on an earlier draft as part of RAND's quality assurance process. Thanks, too, are owed to the members of the anonymous expert panel for their participation in the Delphi exercise.

<sup>2</sup> Full details can be found Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, MG-964-OSD, 2010b.

<sup>3</sup> Note that perfect discrimination in these 30 cases does not guarantee perfect discrimination across all possible cases. With an increased sample size (additional cases and data), it is possible—even likely—that the estimated model would change slightly.

**Table 1**  
**“Good” and “Bad” COIN Factors and Practices**

15 Good COIN Practices	12 Bad COIN Practices
The COIN force realized at least two strategic communication factors.	The COIN force used both collective punishment and escalating repression.
The COIN force reduced at least three tangible support factors.	The primary COIN force was perceived to be an external occupier.
The government realized at least two government legitimacy factors.	COIN force or government actions contributed to substantial new grievances claimed by the insurgents.
The government realized at least one democracy factor.	Militias worked at cross-purposes with the COIN force or government.
The COIN force realized at least one intelligence factor.	The COIN force resettled or removed civilian populations for population control.
The COIN force was of sufficient strength to force the insurgents to fight as guerrillas.	COIN force collateral damage was perceived by the population in the area of conflict as worse than the insurgents’.
The government/state was competent.	In the area of conflict, the COIN force was perceived as worse than the insurgents.
The COIN force avoided excessive collateral damage, disproportionate use of force, or other illegitimate applications of force.	The COIN force failed to adapt to changes in adversary strategy, operations, or tactics.
The COIN force sought to engage and establish positive relations with the population in the area of conflict.	The COIN force engaged in more coercion or intimidation than the insurgents.
Short-term investments, improvements in infrastructure or development, or property reform occurred in the area of conflict controlled or claimed by the COIN force.	The insurgent force was individually superior to the COIN force by being either more professional or better motivated.
The majority of the population in the area of conflict supported or favored the COIN force.	The COIN force or its allies relied on looting for sustenance.
The COIN force established and then expanded secure areas.	The COIN force and government had different goals or level of commitment.
The COIN force had and used uncontested air dominance.	
The COIN force provided or ensured the provision of basic services in areas that it controlled or claimed to control.	
The perception of security was created or maintained among the population in areas that the COIN force claimed to control.	

lesson for current or future counterinsurgents is obvious: Maximizing the presence of good factors and minimizing the presence of bad factors will lead to the best chances for success.

Table 2 lists the 30 insurgencies that began and concluded between 1978 and 2008.<sup>4</sup> Table 2 also lists for each case the sum of the good factors (of a possible 15, listed in Table 1), the sum of the bad factors (of a possible 12, listed in Table 1), the net of good-minus-bad, and the outcome of the case (either a government loss or a government win).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For full details on case selection and the process of data collection and factor scoring for each case, see Paul, Clarke, and Grill, 2010b.

<sup>5</sup> Note that “loss” also includes outcomes assessed as “mixed, favoring insurgents,” and “win” includes outcomes assessed as “mixed, favoring the COIN force.”

**Table 2**  
**Cases and Scorecard Scores**

Case	Years	Good Factors (of 15)	Bad Factors (of 12)	Good – Bad Factors	Outcome
Afghanistan (post-Soviet)	1992–1996	0	10	–10	Loss
Somalia	1980–1991	1	10	–9	Loss
Chechnya I	1994–1996	2	10	–8	Loss
Rwanda	1990–1994	2	10	–8	Loss
Zaire (anti-Mobutu)	1996–1997	0	8	–8	Loss
Nicaragua (Somoza)	1978–1979	0	8	–8	Loss
Sudan (SPLA)	1984–2004	2	9	–7	Loss
Kosovo	1996–1999	1	8	–7	Loss
Afghanistan (anti-Soviet)	1978–1992	1	7	–6	Loss
Papua New Guinea	1988–1998	3	9	–6	Loss
Burundi	1993–2003	2	8	–6	Loss
Bosnia	1992–1995	1	6	–5	Loss
Moldova	1990–1992	2	6	–4	Loss
Georgia/Abkhazia	1992–1994	1	5	–4	Loss
Liberia	1989–1997	3	7	–4	Loss
Afghanistan (Taliban)	1996–2001	2	6	–4	Loss
Nagorno-Karabakh	1992–1994	1	4	–3	Loss
DR Congo (anti-Kabila)	1998–2003	1	4	–3	Loss
Tajikistan	1992–1997	2	5	–3	Loss
Kampuchea	1978–1992	1	3	–2	Loss
Nepal	1997–2006	3	5	–2	Loss
Nicaragua (Contras)	1981–1990	4	4	0	Loss
Croatia	1992–1995	8	3	+5	Win
Turkey (PKK)	1984–1999	11	5	+6	Win
Uganda (ADF)	1986–2000	8	0	+8	Win
Algeria (GIA)	1992–2004	9	1	+8	Win
El Salvador	1979–1992	12	2	+10	Win
Peru	1980–1992	13	2	+11	Win
Senegal	1982–2002	13	0	+13	Win
Sierra Leone	1991–2002	14	1	+13	Win

### Scoring Afghanistan in 2011

In addition to providing an interesting summary of historical results, the scorecard is meant to be a useful prognostication tool for current and future COIN efforts. Without asserting that the scorecard's ability to discriminate wins from losses perfectly over the period 1978–2008 guarantees its ability to predict outcomes in the future, scores for a current or future COIN effort should be indicative of whether that effort is on a path likely to lead to success or on a

path less likely to do so. Specific factors scored as present or absent should also provide guidance to decisionmakers, strategists, and planners about areas ripe for renewed emphasis.

With that in mind, the current research effort sought to complete the scorecard for ongoing operations in Afghanistan as of early 2011. Because the assignment of specific scorecard factors as present or absent is potentially both contentious and sensitive, an expert elicitation exercise was conducted using an anonymous panel of persons who are knowledgeable about ongoing operations in Afghanistan. Panelists included RAND staff with expertise on Afghanistan or who had research experience with or had deployed to Afghanistan, serving field-grade U.S. military officers with multiple (and recent) deployments to Afghanistan, military veterans who were current on COIN research, university faculty members, journalists, and experts from other prominent think tanks. Full details of the expert elicitation process are provided in the appendix.

In keeping with the approach used in the previous study to quantify the 30 cases and create the scorecard, *participants were asked to make worst-case assessments*. To be considered present, positive factors were required to be present over the preponderance of the area of conflict, not just in isolated cases. Similarly, bad factors were counted as present if they occurred with any frequency greater than isolated incidents. So, good factors needed to be preponderantly present, but bad factors needed only to be routinely present in certain areas or among certain segments of the force. (Further details about the scoring instructions can be found in the appendix.)

The expert elicitation provided scores for the 51 specific factors in the scorecard necessary to calculate the 15 good and 12 bad factors and practices listed in Table 1.<sup>6</sup> All 51 subfactors and how they roll up into the 15 good and 12 bad factors can be seen in Table 3. Where there was consensus on the presence or absence of a factor, it was scored “1” if present or “0” if absent; where there was not consensus among the panelists, factors were scored “0.5” for neither present nor absent.<sup>7</sup> The detailed scorecard and the consensus assessment of each factor and subfactor are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

The scorecard as completed through expert elicitation indicates that eight good factors are currently present in Afghanistan and 4.5 bad scorecard factors are present. Half-points result from the panel’s lack of consensus on a factor, resulting in it being scored 0.5—neither present nor absent. The eight good factors include two half-points and thus represent a range from 7 to 9. The 4.5 bad factors include a single half-point, thus representing a range between 4 and 5. Subtracting 4.5 from eight provides a scorecard net result of +3.5. (With all the half-points maximized in one direction or the other, this represents a range from +2 to +5.)

Table 3 shows where these scores (8 good, 4.5 bad, +3.5 net) would fit in among the 30 insurgencies that took place between 1978 and 2008. Having eight good factors present is tied for the lowest number of good factors present in a historical government win but is noticeably better than the best score achieved in a loss (4). Having 4.5 bad factors is close to the outcome of the worst-scoring government winner and is more typical of scores for cases in which governments lost. The net score, +3.5, falls squarely within the empirical gap between historical

<sup>6</sup> Note that it is 51 factors rather than  $15 + 12 = 27$  factors because some are summary factors (such as “COIN force realizes at least two strategic communication factors”) that rely on multiple subordinate factors for calculation.

<sup>7</sup> Consensus, for this exercise, was considered to be agreement among at least 70 percent of panelists. In practice, for most consensus factors, the degree of accord was considerably higher. The raw averages (equivalent to percent agreement) are listed in Table A.1 in the appendix.

**Table 3**  
**Cases and Scores from the Study of 30 Historical Insurgencies, with Early 2011 Afghanistan Scores**

Case	Years	Good Factors (of 15)	Bad Factors (of 12)	Good – Bad Factors	Outcome
Afghanistan (post-Soviet)	1992–1996	0	10	–10	Loss
Somalia	1980–1991	1	10	–9	Loss
Chechnya I	1994–1996	2	10	–8	Loss
Rwanda	1990–1994	2	10	–8	Loss
Zaire (anti-Mobutu)	1996–1997	0	8	–8	Loss
Nicaragua (Somoza)	1978–1979	0	8	–8	Loss
Sudan (SPLA)	1984–2004	2	9	–7	Loss
Kosovo	1996–1999	1	8	–7	Loss
Afghanistan (anti-Soviet)	1978–1992	1	7	–6	Loss
Papua New Guinea	1988–1998	3	9	–6	Loss
Burundi	1993–2003	2	8	–6	Loss
Bosnia	1992–1995	1	6	–5	Loss
Moldova	1990–1992	2	6	–4	Loss
Georgia/Abkhazia	1992–1994	1	5	–4	Loss
Liberia	1989–1997	3	7	–4	Loss
Afghanistan (Taliban)	1996–2001	2	6	–4	Loss
Nagorno-Karabakh	1992–1994	1	4	–3	Loss
DR Congo (anti-Kabila)	1998–2003	1	4	–3	Loss
Tajikistan	1992–1997	1	5	–3	Loss
Kampuchea	1978–1992	1	3	–2	Loss
Nepal	1997–2006	3	5	–2	Loss
Nicaragua (Contras)	1981–1990	4	4	0	Loss
Afghanistan (early 2011)		8	4.5	+3.5	Loss
Croatia	1992–1995	8	3	+5	Win
Turkey (PKK)	1984–1999	11	5	+6	Win
Uganda (ADF)		8	0	+8	Win
Algeria (GIA)		9	1	+8	Win
El Salvador		12	2	+10	Win
Peru	1980–1992	13	2	+11	Win
Senegal	1982–2002	13	0	+13	Win
Sierra Leone	1991–2002	14	1	+13	Win

winners and losers (between 0 and +5), making it unclear which of those two outcomes is most likely.

The results from the previous study suggest that 8 good factors is good news, 4.5 bad factors is marginal, and +3.5 net is indeterminate. From a policy perspective, *this recommends seeking further improvements to increase good factors and decrease bad factors in order to increase confidence and the likelihood of victory in Afghanistan.*

Of course, the general findings of the previous RAND study make this a general recommendation; COIN forces should always seek to maximize good factors and minimize bad factors. Further value of this scorecard and elicitation comes from the specific factors deemed present or absent. Specific factors and related discussion (along with suggestions regarding which factors might be improved upon) are presented in subsequent sections. By way of preview, critical factors that are absent or only marginally present but ripe for improvement include government reform/improvement (in terms of legitimacy, state competence, governance, and services provided), security (success and consistency in establishing and expanding secure areas, creation and maintenance of a perception of security throughout the area of conflict), and interdiction of tangible support to the insurgents (interrupting flows of materiel and other forms of support both from within Afghanistan and across borders).

### Detailed Factors in the Current Case

Tables 4 and 5 present all factors and subfactors in the scorecard and the factors scored as present or absent in the RAND Afghanistan Delphi exercise. In each row, a “1” indicates that the consensus view was that the factor or practice was deemed to be present in the current conflict; a “0” indicates that the consensus view was that it was absent. When viewing the scores, remember that participants were asked to make worst-case assessments; isolated anecdotes or limited accounts of success in these areas were not considered sufficient grounds to score a factor (be it a good factor or a bad factor) as present. Where the score is “0.5,” there was no clear consensus among participants. These factors are discussed in greater detail later. Rows beginning with numbers are primary factors (i.e., the top-level factors listed Table 1); rows beginning with lowercase letters are the subfactors that constitute the primary factors.

### Critical Factors

The discussion and findings from the previous research suggest that some of the good factors that the participants identified as absent are particularly concerning.

Early 2011 Afghanistan was scored as having eight of a possible 15 good factors present and thus seven (actually, six and two half-points) absent. The absent factors are as follows:

- COIN force realizes at least two strategic communication factors
- COIN force reduces at least three tangible support factors
- Government realizes at least two government legitimacy factors
- Government/state is competent
- Majority of population in area of conflict supports/favors COIN forces (0.5)
- COIN force establishes and then expands secure areas (0.5)
- COIN force provides or ensures provision of basic services in areas it controls or claims to control
- Perception of security created or maintained among populations in areas COIN force claims to control.

These absences suggest three areas for improvement. First, in terms of government, legitimacy, state competence, governance/services, and the support of the population were all scored as lacking. Improving the legitimacy of the Afghan government in the eyes of its people and

**Table 4**  
**Good Factors Present in Early 2011 Afghanistan (Total: 8 of 15)**

Good Factors	A	B
1. COIN force realizes at least two strategic communication factors (Score 1 if sum of a through g is at least 2)		0
a. COIN force and government actions consistent with messages (delivering on promises) (Score 1 if YES)	0	
b. COIN force maintains credibility with population in the area of conflict (includes expectation management) (Score 1 if YES)	0	
c. Messages/themes coherent with overall COIN approach (Score 1 if YES)	0.5	
d. COIN force avoids creating unattainable expectations (Score 1 if YES)	0	
e. Themes and messages coordinated for all involved government agencies (Score 1 if YES)	0	
f. Earnest IO/PSYOP/strategic communication/messaging effort (Score 1 if YES)	1	
g. Unity of effort/unity of command maintained (Score 1 if YES)	0	
2. COIN force reduces at least three tangible support factors (Score 1 if sum of a through j is at least 3)		0
a. Flow of cross-border insurgent support significantly decreased, remains dramatically reduced, or largely absent (Score 1 if YES)	0	
b. Important external support to insurgents significantly reduced (Score 1 if YES)	0	
c. Important internal support to insurgents significantly reduced (Score 1 if YES)	0	
d. Insurgents' ability to replenish resources significantly diminished (Score 1 if YES)	0	
e. Insurgents unable to maintain or grow force size (Score 1 if YES)	0	
f. COIN force efforts resulting in increased costs for insurgent processes (Score 1 if YES)	1	
g. COIN forces effectively disrupt insurgent recruiting (Score 1 if YES)	0	
h. COIN forces effectively disrupt insurgent materiel acquisition (Score 1 if YES)	0	
i. COIN forces effectively disrupt insurgent intelligence (Score 1 if YES)	0	
j. COIN forces effectively disrupt insurgent financing (Score 1 if YES)	0	
3. Government realizes at least two government legitimacy factors (Score 1 if sum of a through e is at least 2)		0
a. Government corruption reduced/good governance increased since onset of conflict (Score 1 if YES)	0	
b. Government leaders selected in a manner considered just and fair by majority of population in area of conflict (Score 1 if YES)	0	
c. Majority of citizens in the area of conflict view government as legitimate (Score 1 if YES)	0	

Table 4—Continued

Good Factors	A	B
d. Government provides better governance than insurgents in area of conflict (Score 1 if YES)	0	
e. COIN force provides or ensures provision of basic services in areas it controls or claims to control (Score 1 if YES)	0	
4. Government realizes at least one democracy factor (Score 1 if sum of a through d is at least 1)		1
a. Government a functional democracy (Score 1 if YES)	0	
b. Government a partial or transitional democracy (Score 1 if YES)	1	
c. Free and fair elections held (Score 1 if YES)	0	
d. Government respects human rights and allows free press (Score 1 if YES)	0.5	
5. COIN force realizes at least one intelligence factor (Score 1 if sum of a and b is at least 1)		1
a. Intelligence adequate to support kill/capture or engagements on COIN force's terms (Score 1 if YES)	1	
b. Intelligence adequate to allow COIN force to disrupt insurgent processes or operations (Score 1 if YES)	1	
6. COIN force of sufficient strength to force insurgents to fight as guerrillas (Score 1 if YES)		1
7. Government/state is competent (Score 1 if YES)		0
8. COIN force avoids excessive collateral damage, disproportionate use of force, or other illegitimate applications of force (Score 1 if YES)		1
9. COIN force seeks to engage and establish positive relations with population in area of conflict (Score 1 if YES)		1
10. Short-term investments, improvements in infrastructure/development, or property reform in area of conflict controlled or claimed by COIN force (Score 1 if YES)		1
11. Majority of population in area of conflict supports/favors COIN forces (Score 1 if YES)		0.5
12. COIN force establishes and then expands secure areas (Score 1 if YES)		0.5
13. COIN force has and uses uncontested air dominance (Score 1 if YES)		1
14. COIN force provides or ensures provision of basic services in areas it controls or claims to control (Score 1 if YES)		0
15. Perception of security being created or maintained among populations in areas COIN force claims to control (Score 1 if YES)		0

NOTE: IO = information operations. PSYOP = psychological operations.

**Table 5**  
**Bad Factors Present in Early 2011 Afghanistan (Total: 4.5 of 12)**

Bad Factors	A	B
1. COIN force uses both collective punishment and escalating repression (Score 1 if sum of a and b is at least 1)		0
a. COIN force employs escalating repression (Score 1 if YES)	0	
b. COIN force employs collective punishment (Score 1 if YES)	0	
2. Primary COIN force perceived to be an external occupier (Score 1 if YES)		1
3. COIN force or government actions contribute to substantial new grievances claimed by the insurgents (Score 1 if YES)		1
4. Militias work at cross-purposes with COIN force/government (Score 1 if YES)		1
5. COIN force resettles/removes civilian populations for population control (Score 1 if YES)		0
6. COIN force collateral damage perceived by population in area of conflict as worse than insurgents' (Score 1 if YES)		0
7. In area of conflict, COIN force perceived as worse than insurgents (Score 1 if YES)		0
8. COIN force fails to adapt to changes in adversary strategy, operations, or tactics (Score 1 if YES)		0
9. COIN force engages in more coercion/intimidation than insurgents (Score 1 if YES)		0
10. Insurgent force individually superior to COIN force by being either more professional or better motivated (Score 1 if YES)		0
11. COIN force or allies rely on looting for sustainment (Score 1 if YES)		0.5
12. COIN force and government have different goals/level of commitment (Score 1 if YES)		1

improving the services and governance provided could dramatically improve the situation there.

Second, in terms of security, the forces of order are already attempting to establish and then expand secure areas, though the expert panel was mixed regarding the success of those efforts (see the discussion in the next section). If that “0.5” could be converted to “1,” then the “perception of security” factor might also become “1,” again improving the situation (and the scorecard).

The third area for improvement is the interdiction of tangible support. This concerns the extent to which COIN forces have cut flows of support (e.g., materiel, personnel, financial, intelligence) to the insurgents. The expert panel scored only one of the ten tangible support reduction factors as present; to be scored “1” on the scorecard, at least three must be present (and obviously even more would be better). This is particularly concerning, because in the 30 historical cases, all of the COIN winners disrupted at least three tangible support factors and none of the losers did. The discussion revealed that the insurgents meet their tangible support needs using many sources, none of which has been significantly disrupted: supporters across the border in Pakistan (and in other countries), profits from drug trafficking and other

criminal activities, and supportive populations inside Afghanistan. Disrupting tangible support would require significant efforts to interrupt support flows from all of these sources, but it may well be necessary for COIN forces to prevail.

Four (and one half-point) of the 12 bad factors were scored as present by the expert panel:

- Primary COIN force perceived to be an external occupier
- COIN force or government actions contribute to substantial new grievances claimed by the insurgents
- Militias work at cross-purposes with COIN force/government
- COIN force or allies rely on looting for sustainment (0.5)
- COIN force and government have different goals/level of commitment.

Of these five factors, most are things that the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) can do little about, directly. “Primary COIN force perceived to be an external occupier” will not go away until ISAF draws down considerably and the Afghan National Security Forces substantially increase in size and capability.<sup>8</sup> “Militias work at cross-purposes with COIN force/government,” “COIN force or allies rely on looting for sustainment,” and “COIN force and government have different goals/level of commitment” are all squarely on the Afghan government or the Afghan forces. “COIN force or government actions contribute to substantial new grievances” might be more tractable, but that depends in part on Afghan government decisions and in part on the capabilities available (air strikes being a core source of complaint).

This suggests that ISAF would do well to focus on increasing the good factors that are present (as discussed earlier), ensuring that the bad factors that are absent stay that way, and encouraging the Afghan government to increase the good factors under its control and decrease the bad factors under its control.

### Notes on Factors for Which Consensus Was Lacking

Although the participants in the expert elicitation had or achieved consensus on most factors, some factors remained sources of disagreement throughout the exercise. Several of them merit specific mention.

The first such factor was “Messages/themes coherent with overall COIN approach.” This factor is notable not so much for the discussion (during which there was genuine disagreement) but for its impact on the scorecard. Had this factor been consensually accepted as present (scored “1”), then the superordinate factor, “COIN force realizes at least two strategic communication factors,” would have been minimally satisfied and also would have been scored “1.” Remember, however, that the goal of a COIN strategy should not be to cross minimum thresholds on a scorecard but to synchronize a coordinated campaign that maximizes good factors and minimizes bad factors. To maximize effectiveness in the area of strategic communication, COIN forces will not only need to more firmly establish the presence of more strategic communication–related factors but, as noted earlier, they would also benefit from improving the underlying conditions that inform the themes and messages communicated—namely, government legitimacy and security.

<sup>8</sup> Note that the Afghan National Security Forces *have* increased substantially in size in the past year. However, as long as international forces are still in country in substantial numbers, the perception that they constitute an occupying force will likely remain.

More contentious than the lack of consensus over the connection between themes/messages and the overall COIN approach in Afghanistan was disagreement over “Government respects human rights and allows free press.” Disagreement here hinged primarily on issues of women’s rights and religious freedom. Participants broadly agreed that women’s rights have improved, as have press freedoms and freedom from extrajudicial detentions and killings. Those who scored this factor as present emphasized improvement, expanded press freedom, and limited extrajudicial killings and detentions on the part of government or coalition forces. Those who indicated that this factor was absent emphasized the insufficiency of improvement and the failure to meet global standards regarding women’s rights and religious freedom. From a scorecard perspective, consensus on whether this factor is present or absent does not change the net score, as the superordinate factor, “Government realizes at least one democracy factor,” is satisfied by Afghanistan’s partial democracy, independent of this factor. Again, note that the objective should be to maximize good factors and minimize bad ones, not achieve (or accept) minimal threshold levels in pursuit of a higher score.

Another hotly contested factor was “Majority of population in area of conflict supports/favors COIN forces.” Discussion surrounding this topic was particularly intense, with several participants citing different public opinion polls, other participants disparaging poll results in general, and significant mention of regional variation in perceptions. One of the most striking observations (and one about which there appeared to be consensus) was that “the Afghan people hate the Taliban but they equally despise the government.” With significant agreement on that part of the issue, the discussion then focused on arguments in favor of the lesser of two evils, and consensus was not reached.

Even if the government and the forces of order are viewed as the lesser of two evils, being minimally favored does not imply the kind of popular engagement and popular support that is viewed as essential by advocates of population-centric COIN (and as validated in the earlier RAND study). This is an area that is ripe for improvement going forward.

Another disputed factor was “COIN force establishes and then expands secure areas.” Panelists agreed that COIN forces are trying to do this, but they were split on their views of the success of those efforts. One participant noted, “They are doing this in some areas, but secure areas are contracting in other areas.” According to another, “Forces of order establish a secure area and, when they depart or transition the area to government forces, lose the area to insurgents.” The missing piece, the critics on the panel asserted, is the ability to transition cleared areas to the authority and supervision of the indigenous civilian government and police—a step, they emphasized, that is not being taken and is not likely to be taken in the near future.

The final contentious factor was from among the 12 bad factors, “COIN force or allies rely on looting for sustainment.” None of the participants asserted that members of ISAF were engaged in looting, but several stated that some “taxation” occurs as part of the corruption of the Afghan National Security Forces, including the army and the police. The dispute, then, involved three issues: first, whether this behavior was sufficiently widespread to count as present; second, whether such “taxation” or required bribes were equivalent to looting; and third, whether such taxation was essential for these forces’ sustainment or just supplemental to their incomes. Consensus was not reached.

## Afghanistan in Comparison to Specific Historical Cases

The analysis thus far has compared Afghanistan in early 2011 with patterns of data observed in the 30 historical cases or with those cases in the aggregate. Is Afghanistan particularly like any specific case? Short answer: Not really.

Afghanistan in early 2011 is not particularly similar in its specific details to any of the 30 historical cases. In terms of its good-and-bad-factor summary, Afghanistan (8/4.5) appears closest to the insurgency in Croatia (8/3, and a COIN win). Though similar in scorecard summary score, Croatia is not at all similar in the specific pattern of detailed scorecard factors present or absent, or in the narrative of the case.

Considering all phases of all cases,<sup>9</sup> and examining the extent to which the 51 constituent factors and subfactors in the scorecard match between cases, is a better way to assess the similarity between the historical cases and the current Afghanistan case. Following this procedure reveals again that none of the phases of historical cases is particularly similar to Afghanistan (not even the previous Afghanistan cases), and no phase of any case shares more than 39 of the 51 detailed scorecard subfactors with early 2011 Afghanistan.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Comparing Afghanistan in early 2011 with the 30 insurgencies conducted and concluded between 1978 and 2008 offers some support for optimism but not unreserved optimism. Specifically, when compared using a scorecard of 15 good and 12 bad factors based on previous historical research, Afghanistan's eight good factors present is tied for the lowest number of good factors present in a historical government win, but it is noticeably better than the best score achieved in a loss (4). Its 4.5 bad factors is close to the worst-scoring government winner and is more typical of scores for governments that lost. Finally, Afghanistan's net score, +3.5, falls squarely within the empirical gap between historical winners and losers (between 0 and +5).

The scorecard score is an interim step toward recognizing the need for further efforts and identifying specific factor areas in which to make enhancements going forward. Considering the specific good factors that are absent and the bad factors that are present suggests an emphasis on improving progress toward good factors, with three specific points of focus, as discussed in the section "Critical Factors": (1) the competency, legitimacy, and popular support of the Afghan government; (2) security; and (3) disrupting the tangible support of the insurgents.

Most of the areas highlighted for improvement are already focal efforts of the coalition leadership. Further, while it is easy to assert that these things should be done, that does not make them any easier to actually do; some of these suggestions have been the focus of ongoing efforts for some time now and continue to face tough challenges. These conclusions provide further support for and endorsement of many command priorities, and the historical data suggest better prospects for positive outcomes if these difficult challenges can be overcome and if better legitimacy/governance, security, and disruption of tangible support can be achieved.

<sup>9</sup> In the previous RAND study, each case was divided into between two and five phases, for a total of 86 phases. In the context of this paper, data for each case refer to the decisive (and usually terminal) phase of the case.

## Details of the Expert Elicitation

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### The Delphi Method

The Delphi method was developed at RAND in the 1960s. While the technique has been refined over the years,<sup>1</sup> the fundamental premise remains the same. Experts individually make assessments or provide input and then offer written justification for those assessments. These experts are then given the opportunity to privately review the justifications offered by other participants and revise their assessments based on lines of reasoning that they had failed to include in their own initial calculations. The result is a consensual set of expert assessments based on more information than any single expert initially considered. Because participants work in private and remain anonymous to each other, final evaluations are reached without any of the psychological pitfalls of committee work, such as “specious persuasion, the unwillingness to abandon publicly expressed opinions, and the bandwagon effect of majority opinion.”<sup>2</sup>

A somewhat pedestrian example of a Delphi exercise demonstrates this logic. Imagine that a Delphi exercise is convened to assure victory in a carnival game: The investigators wish to know how many peanuts are contained in a large glass pig. A panel of experts is assembled, including (among others) a physicist, a mathematician, a materials scientist, a statistician, and an expert in the history of mountebanks. Each performs his or her calculations and generates an estimate of the peanut content of the pig. Then, each is asked to justify his or her response, explaining the calculations involved. One participant might begin with the formula for the volume of an ellipsoid and then assume a volume for peanuts and proceed. Another might begin with the volume of an ellipsoid and then add a clever correction factor for the additional volume represented by the pig’s feet and head. Yet another might simply use the volume of a sphere but add an innovative adjustment for the stochastic nature of the space between peanuts as they do or do not nest well with each other. The expert on mountebanks might not be able to articulate his or her volume calculation well at all but might make two critical observations about the kinds of tricks that carnival operators are likely to pull to make such estimation difficult—say, inconsistent thickness of the glass of the pig or the use of peanuts of different sizes. As the experts review the justifications and calculations made by the others, they may recognize factors that they failed to include in their own calculations or come to understand that they have over- or underestimated some critical quantity. The revised estimates are likely

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Carolyn Wong, *How Will the e-Explosion Affect How We Do Research? Phase I: The E-DEL+I Proof-of-Concept Exercise*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, DB-399-RC, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> Bernice B. Brown, *Delphi Process: A Methodology Used for the Elicitation of Opinions of Experts*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, P-3925, 1968, p. 2.

to be based on more complex calculations, be better calculations, and be closer to each other than were the initial individual expert estimates.

## The RAND Afghanistan Delphi Exercise

The RAND Afghanistan Delphi exercise was an iterative Delphi exercise based on the classic model. It was completed via iterative email exchange between January 21 and February 25, 2011. This section details the process used.

By definition, an expert elicitation is only as good as the experts elicited. An initial list of candidate participants was generated in consultation with senior RAND managers; by considering authors of recent books, reports, studies, and articles on Afghanistan; and in consultation with the editors of *Small Wars Journal*. An initial list of 27 candidates emerged from this process. Of these 27, 15 initially agreed to participate. Of those 15, 13 completed the first round of the exercise, with two declining to participate when the details of the exercise became clearer to them. Of the 13 initial participants, 11 completed the entire exercise, with two further withdrawals due to time constraints or discomfort with the electronic discussion format. Participants included RAND staff with expertise on Afghanistan or who had research experience with or had deployed to Afghanistan, serving field-grade U.S. military officers with multiple (and recent) deployments to Afghanistan, military veterans who were current in COIN study and research, university faculty members, journalists, and experts from other prominent think tanks.

A summary set of instructions defined each factor more extensively and gave general guidance regarding the exercise. This guidance included the following text:

Please evaluate each factor as present (1) or absent (0) in contemporary Afghanistan. All questions pertain to the area of conflict unless otherwise specified. If the answer is “well, it depends on where specifically you consider—that factor is present in part of the country but absent in another part,” *please make “worst-case” assessments*. That is, if something is going well in RC [Regional Command] South but poorly in RC East, make your scoring based on RC East.

A caveat: While we want “worst-case” assessments, we do not want assessments driven by isolated events. If a positive factor is present over the vast majority of the area of conflict, score it as present even if there are one or two isolated incidents where the factor was not present.

The iterative Delphi exercise included three scoring rounds with two phases in each round except the last, for a total of five phases. In the first phase of each round, participants provided scores for each factor, indicating whether they believed it was present (“1”) or absent (“0”) in Afghanistan. In the second phase of each round, participants were shown their scores relative to the mean scores of all participants. Regardless of whether it was a first or second phase, in all phases save the very first and the very last, participants were asked to justify their minority positions (factors on which they deviated from the group mean by 0.4 or more) and contribute to the ongoing discussion about the presence or absence of the factors.

In each phase save the first (nothing to discuss yet) and the last (discussion concluded), participants were asked to contribute to the discussion. In a traditional Delphi exercise, scor-

ers are asked to justify all their ratings or calculations in the first round. However, because this exercise included 51 individual factors and because all participants volunteered their time, participants were asked to provide justification only for minority positions, lest a great quantity of volunteered time be consumed generating justifications for positions about which the entire panel was in complete agreement. In the second phase of each round, participants whose score on a factor differed from the group mean by 0.4 or more were informed that theirs was a minority position and asked to justify it. In this way, the discussion remained focused on factors that were actually contentious, rather than being diluted with justifications of factors about which there was already significant concordance. Scores that became minority positions in subsequent rounds (due to either changed scores or movement of the mean) were flagged as newly minority positions, indicating that a new justification was required from the participant.

After responding to requests for justification of their minority positions, participants were asked to weigh in on any of the ongoing discussion of any of the factors. Space was made available for written rebuttals, counterarguments, endorsements, and so on, aimed at initial minority defenses or at discussion ensuing from them. No limit was placed on the volume or character of the discussion, though participants were encouraged to be concise. Instructions invited participants to refer to studies, data sets, personal experiences, or other evidence that they felt supported their positions or otherwise accounted for their reasoning or logic. The discussion was considerable, spanning more than 50 single-spaced pages in aggregate.

## Raw Delphi Scores

Table A.1 presents the average score for each factor across the 11 participants who ultimately completed the exercise. Because the scoring was binary (0 or 1), the raw average can be accurately interpreted as the proportion of participants who indicated that a factor was present in their final scoring. For example, the first factor is “COIN force and government actions consistent with messages (delivering on promises).” The raw average is 0.18, which indicates that 18 percent of participants indicated that the factor was present (scored it as “1”) in their final scoring.

For reference, Table A.1 also presents the consensus results (in the “rounded result” column) used in the main body of this paper. Recall that 70-percent agreement was the threshold specified for consensus. This means that raw average scores of 0.7 or higher were considered to indicate consensus on presence and were rounded to “1” accordingly. Inversely, scores of 0.3 or lower were rounded to consensus absence, or “0.” Scores between 0.3 and 0.7 were left as contentious scores and rounded to 0.5, indicating a lack of agreement and neither presence nor absence.

**Table A.1**  
**Raw Average Scores from RAND Afghanistan Delphi Exercise and Rounded Consensus Results**

Factor	Raw Average	Rounded Result
COIN force and government actions consistent with messages (delivering on promises)	0.18	0
COIN force maintains credibility with population in the area of conflict (includes expectation management)	0	0
Messages/themes coherent with overall COIN approach	0.55	0.5
COIN force avoids creating unattainable expectations	0.27	0
Themes and messages coordinated for all involved government agencies	0	0
Earnest IO/PSYOP/strategic communication/messaging effort	0.9	1
Unity of effort/unity of command maintained	0	0
Flow of cross-border insurgent significantly decreased, remains dramatically reduced, or largely absent	0	0
Important external support to insurgents significantly reduced	0	0
Important internal support to insurgents significantly reduced	0	0
Insurgents' ability to replenish resources significantly diminished	0	0
Insurgents unable to maintain or grow force size	0	0
COIN force efforts resulting in increased costs for insurgent processes	0.91	1
COIN forces effectively disrupt insurgent recruiting	0	0
COIN forces effectively disrupt insurgent materiel acquisition	0	0
COIN forces effectively disrupt insurgent intelligence	0	0
COIN forces effectively disrupt insurgent financing	0	0
Government corruption reduced/good governance increased since onset of conflict	0.09	0
Government leaders selected in a manner considered just and fair by majority of population in area of conflict	0.18	0
Majority of citizens in area of conflict view government as legitimate	0.27	0
Government provides better governance than insurgents in area of conflict	0.27	0
COIN force provides or ensures provision of basic services in areas it controls or claims to control	0.27	0
Government a functional democracy	0	0
Government a partial or transitional democracy	0.91	1
Free and fair elections held	0.18	0
Government respects human rights and allows free press	0.45	0.5
Intelligence adequate to support kill/capture or engagements on COIN force's terms	0.91	1
Intelligence adequate to allow COIN forces to disrupt insurgent processes or operations	0.91	1
COIN force of sufficient strength to force insurgents to fight as guerrillas	0.91	1
Government/state is competent	0	0

Table A.1—Continued

Factor	Raw Average	Rounded Result
COIN force avoids excessive collateral damage, disproportionate use of force, or other illegitimate applications of force	1	1
COIN force seeks to engage and establish positive relations with population in area of conflict	0.91	1
Short-term investments, improvements in infrastructure/development, or property reform in area of conflict controlled or claimed by COIN force	0.91	1
Majority of population in areas of conflict supports/favors COIN forces	0.45	0.5
COIN force establishes and then expands secure areas	0.55	0.5
COIN force has and uses uncontested air dominance	1	1
Perception of security created or maintained among population in areas COIN force claims to control	0.18	0
COIN force employs escalating repression	0	0
COIN force employs collective punishment	0	0
Primary COIN force perceived to be an external occupier	1	1
COIN force or government actions contribute to substantial new grievances claimed by the insurgents	0.82	1
Militias work at cross-purposes with COIN force/government	0.73	1
COIN force resettles/removes civilian populations for population control	0	0
COIN force collateral damage perceived by population in area of conflict as worse than insurgents'	0.27	0
In area of conflict, COIN force perceived as worse than insurgents	0.09	0
COIN force fails to adapt to changes in adversary strategy, operations, or tactics	0.09	0
COIN force engages in more coercion/intimidation than insurgents	0	0
Insurgent force individually superior to COIN force by being either more professional or better motivated	0.09	0
COIN force or allies rely on looting for sustainment	0.4	0.5
COIN force and government have different goals/level of commitment	1	1



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