Winning 'Hearts and Minds'? A Critical Analysis of Counter-Insurgency Operations in Afghanistan

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This article conducts a critical analysis of the historical lessons, the assumptions and the conduct of ‘hearts and minds’ approaches to counter-insurgency. This results in challenges. Theoretically the ‘hearts and minds’ approach is rooted in modernisation theory and a normative Western approach to legitimacy that fails to live up to the expectations of the local population. The approach is also based on lessons from past successes such as the British 1950s campaign in Malaya. However, a great contextual shift has taken place since then and the relevance of past experiences is therefore questionable in a context of complex state-building in the wake of intervention. This also has practical consequences as we seek to rectify the often misapplied approaches of today.

The early 21st century operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have created a renaissance of counter-insurgency thinking and doctrinal writing. A traditional principle and catchphrase in counter-insurgency theory is the importance of winning the ‘hearts and minds’ of the local population in order to increase the legitimacy of the host nation authorities and to ‘drain the sea in which the insurgents swim’. The main thrust of this line of thinking is the recognition that without the support of the local population, the aims of the campaign – whatever they may be – will not be achieved. However, the idea of winning ‘hearts and minds’ is used by many actors in different contexts. It also translates into diverse tactical activities related to the ambition of increasing the support from the local population and the legitimacy of the host central government and the international presence.

While common sense tends to support the notion of winning hearts and minds, there are problems involved in the way this concept is used, the underlying assumptions that provides its rationale, as well as in the translation of concept into practice. The purpose of this article is therefore twofold: First, to study how the concept of hearts and minds is used, what the assumptions underpinning the concept are, and how theory is translated into practice. Second, the article aims to present challenges to the idea of winning hearts and minds, theoretically as well as practically.

The article finds that hearts and minds approaches in counter-insurgency campaigns can broadly be divides into three categories: (1) a specific set of activities in the field of humanitarian and development affairs, conducted or financed by
military units; (2) a different mindset in the conduct of military operations, involving a less coercive approach that emphasises minimum use of force and cultural understanding, and; (3) a set of activities within the field of information operations and psychological operations. However, this article argues that the activities and principles of the contemporary hearts and minds approach is based on flawed assumptions about political legitimacy and that it is firmly rooted in experiences of counter-insurgency and hearts and minds approaches from a time of colonial policing and withdrawal that is of limited value in today’s context of international state-building in Afghanistan.

Two further arguments are therefore made: First, theoretically the hearts and minds approach is rooted in modernisation theory and a normative Western approach to legitimacy that fails to live up to the expectations of the local population. Second, based on empirical studies of hearts and minds activities in the field, the practical implementation of such approaches is problematic for reasons of competence, manpower and the quality and sustainability of projects. Many hearts and minds activities therefore become counterproductive as they are misapplied in a different context. Instead of viewing the operations in Afghanistan as a counter-insurgency campaign in which the military conducts hearts and minds approaches to remove the support base for a Taliban insurgency, it should be viewed as a competitive state-building campaign, in which military and civilian organisations should seek legitimacy from the local leadership and the population at large. This also has practical consequences as we seek to rectify the often misapplied approaches of today.

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF THE ‘HEARTS AND MINDS’ APPROACH

While ‘hearts and minds’ as a concept does not feature prominently in formal military doctrines and field manuals, it is nevertheless frequently referred to in official statements and media coverage from today’s conflicts. The importance of winning hearts and minds is also a traditional principle of counter-insurgency strategy and thereby serves as the foundation of much contemporary thinking about counter-insurgency, peace operations and state-building. As an example, the current published US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual (FM 3-24) describes the first historical principle of such operations as: ‘Legitimacy is the main objective’ and ‘to foster development of effective governance by a legitimate government.’ This section seeks to describe and structure the use of hearts and minds as a concept in theory as well as in practice.

The idea of winning hearts and minds, as applied within the context of counter-insurgency operations, is generally attributed to the then General Sir Gerald Templer, British high commissioner in Malaya 1952–54, as he sought to explain the key to victory in the Malayan counter-insurgency campaign: ‘The answer lies not in pouring more troops into the jungle, but in the hearts and minds of the Malayan People.’ Paul Dixon argues that Templer’s call for a hearts and minds approach is often seen as a response to the success of Mao Zedong’s guerrilla warfare in China in
1949. Mao emphasised the importance of winning the hearts and minds of the people, and famously commented that ‘The guerrilla must move amongst the people as a fish swims in the sea’.3

Templer’s colleague, Sir Robert Thompson, a British counter-insurgency expert and permanent secretary for defence for Malaya in the late 1950s, further explained the hearts and minds approach by arguing that counter-insurgents must give priority to defeating the political subversion, not the guerrillas. Counter-insurgents therefore achieve the most meaningful success by gaining popular support and legitimacy for the host government – winning hearts and minds – not by killing insurgents.4 Thus, the traditional concepts of hearts and minds are used as a metaphor that serves to highlight the importance of legitimacy and popular support in counter-insurgency campaigns.

It can also be argued that this is the only option available to counter-insurgency forces in the contemporary strategic context. An insurgency that maintains popular support has great advantages in terms of mobility, invisibility, and legitimacy, and is therefore a difficult target for counter-insurgents. Historically, the counter-insurgents had a larger toolbox of measures to deal with this disadvantage – many of them highly coercive. The British in Malaya, as well as the US in Vietnam, used forced civilian population movement to protected villages as a method, thereby removing the support of the insurgency quite literally.5 Equally Ashley Jackson argues that despite the British historical narrative of soft hearts and minds approaches, ‘the threat of maximum force and methods of dubious legality were the keys to counter-insurgency success’.6

Other options, although mostly of theoretical value in today’s context, would be to use high levels of indiscriminate violence to curb insurgencies and their supporters. Such measures had limited successes in the past as they tended to create resentment that alienated the population from the counter-insurgents even further. Moreover, in the contemporary context such coercive measures are not only considered illegitimate or even criminal, they could also be highly damaging in strategic terms with global instant media covering all aspects of operations. Nevertheless, Gil Merom makes the argument that democracies fail in small wars and counter-insurgency operations precisely because they cannot ‘escalate the level of violence and brutality to that which can secure victory’.7 It should, however, be noted that this argument fails to explain why authoritarian states also fail in small wars, or why democracies sometimes succeed.8

Another historical option was to flood the area of operations with troops, thereby leaving the insurgents without a possibility to manoeuvre or hide. This strategy required enormous amounts of manpower over long periods – two resources that even the most powerful professional armed forces of today simply lack. With limited manpower and strapped of highly coercive methods the only viable option is therefore to win over the hearts and minds of the local population. In other words, winning the population away from the insurgents and thereby removing their support and recruitment bases.9

Garfield argues that defeating the political subversion of insurgencies requires making a difference in the lives of the local population as early as possible.
This means ‘significant efforts to ensure fair treatment, the creation of jobs, improvements in education and medical services (in the short term, getting an education and being treated is far more important than the construction of new schools and hospitals), providing a bearable standard of living, basic personal security, and some form of legitimate representative governance’. Military presence and activity is vital to establish the necessary level of security and for coercive purposes. However, military activity can only work in a support function to the civilian activities of political and economic reform.10 As an example, the commander of International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan accurately notes that the Afghan people will decide who wins. The government of Afghanistan and ISAF is therefore involved in a struggle for the support of the local population. ‘The effort to gain and maintain that support must inform every action we take. Essentially, we and the insurgents are presenting an argument for the future to the people of Afghanistan: they will decide which argument is the most attractive, most convincing, and has the greatest chance of success.’11

What are the theoretical and ideological underpinnings of counter-insurgency in general and the hearts and minds approach in particular – especially within the contemporary renaissance version of these strategies? Michael Fitzsimmons has provided a very useful analysis of these questions:

The premise of most Western thinking on counter-insurgency is that success depends on establishing a perception of legitimacy for the ruling regime among some critical portion of the local population. Among the mechanisms available to counter-insurgents for establishing that legitimacy, one of the most prominent in both practice and doctrine has been the improvement of governance in the form of effective and efficient administration of government and public services. Good governance, by this logic, is the key to ‘winning hearts and minds’.12

More specifically, the foundation of counter-insurgency strategy has its roots in the legal-rational conception of legitimacy that permeates Western political thought, as well as in modernisation theory – a development theory ‘that emphasized a teleological convergence of societies through several stages of modernization from primitive traditional forms toward Western-style industrialization, secularization, and political pluralism’.13 In addition to the belief in ‘teleological convergence’ towards Western standards of good governance, the logical policy option was to support these processes in the Third World through state-building measures – by force if need be.14

American counter-insurgency strategy has been highly influenced by modernisation theory and thereby echoes the strategies of the colonial projects that should be added to the list of influences in the British approach to counter-insurgency.15 Western counter-insurgency has in this sense been a way to follow the currents of history towards an inevitable end state of Western form of governance with rational legal forms of legitimacy. Within this theoretical framework legitimacy ‘was earned by whoever could most reliably guide the society along these hypothesized paths of
modernization, with their characteristic signals of good governance – economic growth, political representation and effective administration’.16

As another example of what Fitzsimmons calls the conventional approach to counter-insurgency, Thomas Mockaitis argues that support and trust from the local population depend on recognising and addressing the needs and the legitimate grievances of the local population on which the insurgency thrives. ‘People generally support an insurgency out of a shared sense of wrong or frustration at not having their basic needs met.’17

This is also a common view among political philosophers who tend to view the rightful aspect of legitimacy as something moral or rational. Such an analysis indeed creates the possibility of identifying a politically objective difference between legitimate and illegitimate forms of rule.18 Moreover, it allows for a technocratic planning and implementation of operations that ‘simply’ fulfils these objective criteria that automatically lead to legitimacy. However, this one-sided approach is in stark contrast with the German sociologist Max Weber’s and other theorists’ view of legitimacy as nothing more and nothing less than the right to rule – a popular perception or belief in legitimacy. Thus, Weber identifies three different forms of legitimate authority in: Charismatic authority, based on the charisma of the leader, often implying certain extra or religious attributes. Traditional authority based on custom of the past or habit, and; Rational/legal authority with legitimacy based on the perception that a government’s powers are derived from set procedures, principles, and laws.19 Acknowledging different forms of authority and legitimacy beyond the legal/rational challenges some of the assumptions underpinning the hearts and minds approach and we have reasons to come back to this debate below.

Moreover, Paul Dixon highlights the fact that, historically, there were many interpretations of the phrase hearts and minds, which also leads to confusion about ‘what degree of consent should be expected from the people and the implication of this for the use of force’:20

Those seeking to win the consent and support of the population may well deploy less violence and coercion, with a higher regard for human rights because they believe that this is more likely to win the positive endorsement of the people and this is necessary if the objective is to establish democracy... Those who wish merely to win the acquiescence, ‘respect’, toleration or fear of the population may believe that this is possible even with the use of much higher levels of violence and that this had been the recipe for success in the British Empire.21

As an example, Hew Strachan makes a far more coercive interpretation of the historical approach to win hearts and minds: ‘When we speak about “Hearts and minds”, we are not talking about being nice to the natives, but about giving them a firm smack of government. “Hearts and minds” denoted authority, not appeasement. Of course, political and social reform might accompany firm government.’22

Templer, again with reference to Malaya, argued that ‘The shooting side of business is only 25 per cent of the trouble and the other 75 per cent lies in getting the
people of this country behind us’. This statement is somewhat problematic as it implies that the ‘shooting side of the business’ is not part of the activities that create local support. However, it raises an important question: What are the essential activities, beyond traditional military activities, that win hearts and minds? Related to that, can we ever identify such activities that are applicable in different conflicts, or in different societal and political contexts?

Dixon, as already noted, has argued that our understanding of past counter-insurgency successes may be flawed and that the operations during the colonial withdrawal were actually much more violent and coercive than the literature would imply.Jonathan Gumz even argues that the current historical narrative on counter-insurgency, as well as its theoretical grounding, are flawed due to its ahistorical and parochial nature. History, in the field of counter-insurgency, has been used as ‘a bland cupboard from which to raid lessons learned which serve to confirm ideas already arrived at in the present’. The selective or biased memory that blocks out the coercive past and emphasises the humanitarian and development aspects of the hearts and minds approach nevertheless means that this approach fits very well with the current emphasis on the link between conflict and security and the increasingly popular concepts of comprehensive or integrated approaches to operations – involving closer civil-military cooperation and co-ordination to achieve objectives.

However, a great contextual shift has taken place since the days of colonial policing and withdrawal, during which most counter-insurgency thinking was made. Building a liberal and democratic state in Afghanistan is a very different endeavour from that of achieving an organised and politically acceptable withdrawal from Malaya, or suppressing uprisings for national liberation in Kenya and Algeria. Winning the hearts and minds of the local population in order to remove the support base of insurgents is different from the attempt to establish a perception of legitimacy of the international presence and the revolutionary political and societal changes instigated by the international community in Afghanistan. The experiences of the past are therefore of limited relevance in the international state-building operations of today. Not only are there great differences in terms of the aims of operations and the activities involved to achieve those aims. There are also differences in the tools that can and should be applied for operational success. However, these are issues that are further discussed below.

The contemporary interpretation of winning hearts and minds in a setting of comprehensive approaches to stabilisation and peace building has according to Andrew Wilder created at least three questionable assumptions regarding the links between stabilisation and aid. First, reconstruction and modernisation efforts have stabilising effects on conflict. (Aid → economic development → stability). Second, aid projects help win hearts and minds and thereby increase support for the host government and for the international presence. Third, with specific reference to Afghanistan, extending the reach of the Afghan government contributes to stabilisation. This is explicitly expressed as the objective of the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). While these assumptions appeal to our common sense, Wilder’s research in Afghanistan indicates that the empirical evidence tells
a different story – the causal assumptions of the non-coercive hearts and minds approach may be false.27

There are reasons not only to question the contemporary normative reading of past experiences of counter-insurgency, but also to study the consequences of the underlying assumptions and intellectual foundations of the hearts and minds approach. In order to do that we must, however, first study the practical implementation of hearts and minds approaches.

‘HEARTS AND MINDS’ OPERATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN

Regardless if the aim of operations is to increase the legitimacy of the local government or the international presence, to increase force protection or to build trusted networks among the local population, a challenge of the hearts and minds approach is to operationalise these aims into appropriate tactical activities. How does one win hearts and minds? This section discusses a wide array of different activities referred to as hearts and minds operations, by both practitioners and theorists, and seeks to structure them into three categories that are analytically useful. First, hearts and minds are considered as a distinct category of tactical activities – separated from traditional military tasks. Second, hearts and minds can be regarded as a softer approach to traditional military activities – a way of conducting operations. Third, hearts and minds will be defined as different forms of information operations (IO), psychological operations (psyops) and Special Forces activities. The categories serve to highlight the diversity of the concept, as well as problematic features that will be further discussed subsequently in this study.

Hearts and Minds as a Type of Tactical Activity

The first category – hearts and minds as a distinct type of activities – is well highlighted by the British field manual on military support to peace support operations, which refers to hearts and minds activities as programmes or projects in the field of humanitarian affairs or development for which commanders can receive funding.28 These activities should use military resources to provide carefully targeted support to the local community in order to increase campaign authority and legitimacy, and that the main purpose is not impartial alleviation of humanitarian suffering or development:

A ‘Hearts and Minds’ programme requires careful co-ordination with information and media operations to ensure that it is not perceived as blatantly manipulative or conducted in a way that might degrade Campaign Authority. Such projects should be undertaken with the advice from both the CIMIC [Civil-Military Cooperation] and HUMAD [Humanitarian Advisors] … All staff should be clear that this work is not Humanitarian Assistance (HA).29

Hearts and minds programmes are also described as part of ‘short-term military necessity’ – something to balance against long-term considerations such as rule
of law, providing an acceptably steady state, and the success of the campaign as a whole. The range of different activities within this category is nevertheless only limited by commanders’ ingenuity. Hearts and minds activities are primarily conducted to achieve military objectives rather than to achieve development or humanitarian aims.

In Afghanistan most of these tasks are performed by the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs), which generally include civilian staff as political and development advisers. The strategy of the PRTs is to extend the central government’s reach and create zones of stability that will win over local people and then expand ‘like ink on a blotting paper and gradually, through a thousand successful blots, cover the bulk of the country’. Civil affairs or CIMIC-teams from the PRTs conduct social patrolling or set up meetings with local leaders in order to establish trusted networks and to collect information regarding the needs and wishes of the local population. As an example, the Dutch base in Oruzgan includes a tea house where local people are invited to air their grievances.

Based on information gathered, different types of humanitarian and development activities are conducted, sometimes by military units themselves, more regularly by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or international organisations operating in the area. American units have funding for these activities through so-called Commanders Emergency Response Programs (CERPS), which are specifically set up to provide quick responses that do not fall victim to the bureaucratic processes of going through the normal developmental chain of command. The assumptions underpinning the CERPS, echoing the conventional wisdom of counter-insurgency, were highlighted by the US defense secretary in a Senate Committee hearing as he described them as:

... resources to improve local governance, delivery of public services, and quality of life – to get angry young men off the street and into jobs where they will be less susceptible to the appeals of insurgents or militia groups ... By building trust and confidence in Coalition forces, these CERP projects increase the flow of intelligence to commanders in the field and help turn local Iraqis and Afghans against insurgents and terrorists.

A study at Tufts University, USA, notes that the CERP funds have expanded from zero in 2003, to $136 million in 2005, and a requested $456 million for 2007. As an example, a programme called Operation ‘Backpack’ involved soldiers from Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force – Afghanistan distributing backpacks filled with a full set of clothing, tennis shoes, winter jacket, basic school supplies and hygiene items to local Afghan schoolchildren. The programme coordinator and inventor is a US Green Beret officer stationed in Afghanistan.

In sum, hearts and minds activities are humanitarian and development operations performed mainly by military units or civil-military hybrids in order to increase stability through good faith and thereby increase the legitimacy of the government of Afghanistan, as well as the international presence. Although improvements in
terms of humanitarian and development situations are important, they are not the main concerns of hearts and minds activities.

Hearts and Minds as an Approach to Operations

The second category of hearts and minds refers to how operations are conducted – an approach rather than a set of activities. The idea is that by using minimum force, being careful not to risk civilian life and property, and by generally behaving in a respectful and culturally sensitive manner, one can win the local population’s hearts and minds. In this article the use of minimum force and different approaches to force protection will serve as examples of this tradition. A traditional principle of counter-insurgency is the minimum use of force. The lessons from the colonial era in general, and Malaya in particular, led General Sir Frank Kitson to stress the importance of using minimum force. In the wider goal of winning hearts and minds, he noted the negative impact of excessive force, and argued that such force tends to drive the population away from the administration and towards extremist positions.36

Nancy Youssuf reports of a frustration among US troops in Afghanistan created by the strict rules of engagement compared to those in Iraq. Apart from US forces in the separate Operation ‘Enduring Freedom’ (OEF-A) the US troops are operating under the rules of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan. ‘Under those regulations, only Afghans can search buildings and detain people.’37

General Sir Rupert Smith argues that the strategic aim of counter-insurgency operations always involves establishing some form of rule of law, and that tactical operations must consequently be conducted within the framework of the law in order not to attack one’s own strategic interests.38 Equally, Cohen and others argue that to establish legitimacy, all security operation must be treated as law enforcement rather than combat operations.39 This view has been more elaborately discussed by Sir Lawrence Freedman who argues that the political context of irregular wars, coupled with the fact that combat is integrated with civil society, means that both the purpose and the practice of all operations should be governed by liberal values. Freedman calls this ‘liberal war’.40

Another frequently discussed topic is how winning hearts and minds through a soft approach can be balanced against the need for adequate force protection. Force protection in operations ‘amongst the people’ is difficult, but can essentially be achieved in two different ways. Units can distance themselves from the local population by living in fortified camps, wearing full combat gear, and patrolling in armoured vehicles with guns pointed at all potential targets. However, force protection can also be achieved through ‘soft effects’, meaning the conduct of hearts and minds operations and reconstruction efforts rather than the application of force.41 The idea is that small unit patrolling and continuous contact with the local population will not only establish legitimacy for the operation, but also increase intelligence on insurgent activity.
Cohen *et al.* present force protection as a paradox of counter-insurgency. ‘The more you protect your force, the less secure you are.’ Since the ultimate aim of operations is to win the hearts and minds of the local population and establish legitimacy for the host government, the counter-insurgent achieves success by protecting the population and not himself.  

Force protection measures such as living in remote fortified camps and limiting patrolling to armoured vehicles at high speed, or always wearing full combat gear when interacting with the local population, are therefore likely to be counter-productive. Instead, Kilcullen argues that the most fundamental rule of counter-insurgency is to ‘be there’. Presence should be established by living in close proximity to the population, through frequent patrolling on foot, night patrolling and sleeping in local villages. This type of activity, though seemingly dangerous, will establish links with locals and increase human intelligence — thereby increasing the security of the counter-insurgents.

In sum, hearts and minds as an approach to operations is based on traditional counter-insurgency tactics of minimum force, respect for and understanding of the local culture, and soft forms of force protection.

**Hearts and Minds as Different Forms of Information Operations**

The third category of hearts and minds refers to different forms of information operations (IO) — also called psychological operations. These types of activities generally involve specialised units or Special Forces in an attempt to influence the local population. These activities obviously go hand in hand with the development activities in the first category. As the main objective is not to achieve development per se each project must be communicated for maximum impact. The importance of transmitting the right, as well as a believable, message to the local population is on a higher level closely related to the concept of strategic narratives. Freedman argues that narratives are ‘compelling story lines which can explain events’, and that they are intentionally designed to structure ‘responses of others to developing events’. The strategic feature of narratives lies in the fact that they are not spontaneous, but ‘deliberately constructed or reinforced out of the ideas and thoughts that are already current’. Smith argues that in the struggle for the hearts and minds of the local population, the number of battlefield victories or reconstruction projects completed matter little if the population thinks you are not winning, or visibly improving people’s situation. Instead, the achievement of victory takes place by communicating with the people through the media and other outlets, getting the right narrative out there and changing perceptions.

In the age of global media, the internet and mobile phones, controlling a story or a narrative, however, is not easy. Insurgents have the inherent advantages of better cultural understanding and closer contacts with the local population. They are therefore in a strong position to present alternative narratives to events, and even turning tactical losses into victories of perception. Turning a counter-insurgency bombing or attack against an insurgent stronghold into an ungodly attack on a local
school, killing women and children, has the potential of turning tactical losses into strategic victories for insurgents.

In sum, the idea of winning hearts and minds refers to a way of conducting operations that will strengthen the perception of legitimacy for the host nation government, as well as for the international community presence in the country. It is operationalised into three main categories of practice: First as military activity within the field of humanitarian relief and development with the main intent to increase force protection; second, as an approach to operations often involving minimum use of force and respect for local cultures and customs; finally, as information operations intending to influence the local population. Both historically and in contemporary operations, the effects of hearts and minds operations are nevertheless contested. The following section therefore discusses problems related to the practical implementation of the hearts and minds approach.

CHALLENGES OF THE ‘HEARTS AND MINDS’ APPROACH

The first and foremost problem is that the practical implementation of the hearts and minds approach does not seem to lead to the expected outcomes. In any case, there is a staggering lack of empirical evidence to support it. This article seeks to increase the understanding why that is and seeks to achieve this by dividing the challenges into problems of the basic assumptions underpinning the approach, as well as problems of practical implementation.

Theoretical Challenges to the Idea of Winning Hearts and Minds

The previous section has described the intellectual foundation of the hearts and minds approach as stemming from modernisation theory and a normative view of legitimacy as rational and legal. The conventional approach to counter-insurgency therefore advocates the need to address the needs and the legitimate grievances of the local population in order to win them away from the insurgents. However, the narrow conception of legitimacy has meant that counter-insurgents have had preconceived ideas about what needs and grievances to address rather than to actually listen to the local population.

The hearts and minds approach to counter-insurgency shares the fundamental problem of external state-building and security sector reform (SSR) as inherently normative activities. The aims of these related types of operations, as well as the focus on ‘reform’ in the SSR concept, indicates that it is not any type of governance or reform that is being supported by external counter-insurgents or SSR advisers. It is a very specific Western set of norms that are being introduced or reinforced – regardless of the local wishes or perceived needs. Malcolm Chalmers highlights the fact that at the heart of these projects is an acceptance of universal norms.47 However, as noted above, there are different types of legitimate authority and the normative Western approach fails to acknowledge the traditional forms of legitimacy that exist in many parts of the non-Western world.
In *Political Man*, Seymour Martin Lipset argues that the stability of a political system is determined by its decision-making effectiveness and the legitimacy of the political system. Effectiveness refers to the actual performance of the system in terms of satisfying the basic functions of government as the majority of the population in the state perceives them. This seemingly supports the conventional approach of development for increased legitimacy. However, Lipset emphasises that legitimacy stems from the political system’s ability to create and maintain a popular belief in the existing political system and a perception of the system’s institutions as the best suited to the particular society. It is the perception of effectiveness and suitability that is important – not ‘objective’ measures of legality and rationality. Moreover, legitimacy is a question of values by which different groups in society would perceive the system as legitimate or illegitimate based on how well their own values matched with that of the system. Legitimacy is thereby inherently subjective. Importantly, while effectiveness is largely instrumental, legitimacy is inherently evaluative in that the population regards a political system legitimate or illegitimate ‘according to the way in which its values fit with theirs’. These views on legitimacy are significant as they imply that if the main objective really is to win hearts and minds and legitimacy in Afghanistan, reforms and activities should ideally imitate local existing values and perceptions of legitimate governance rather than the current focus on Western, liberal norms of governance.

Lipset also argues that a crisis of legitimacy often is a crisis of change. The roots of legitimacy crises must therefore be sought in the character of change. Crisis occurs if the status of key institutions or power holders is threatened, or if all major groups in a society do not have access to the political system during the transition or the immediate aftermath of transition. After a new social and political structure is established, it must be able to sustain the expectations of major groups ‘for a long enough period to develop legitimacy upon the new basis’, or the risk is high for a new crisis of legitimacy.

Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* provides an excellent description of loss of legitimacy: ‘epochs sometimes occur in the life of a nation when the old customs of a people are changed, public morality is destroyed, religious belief shaken, and the spell of tradition broken... leaving the citizens with neither the instinctive patriotism of new monarchy nor the reflecting patriotism of a republic... they have stopped between the two in the midst of confusion and distress’.

David Kilcullen accurately notes that in many conflicts the counter-insurgent actually represents revolutionary change, ‘while the insurgent fights to preserve the status quo of ungoverned spaces, or to repel an occupier – a political relationship opposite to that envisaged in classical counter-insurgency’. While Kilcullen uses the non-Western example of Pakistan’s campaign in Waziristan since 2003 to exemplify this, one could also discuss to what extent the ongoing campaigns to reconstruct Afghanistan is actually an ‘insurgency’ in a traditional system of governance. Interestingly, David Last uses the concept of peacebuilding insurgency not only to highlight this opposite relationship, but also to explore the possibilities of using insurgency strategies to spread ideas of democracy and tolerance among the
population.\textsuperscript{53} The local population’s perceptions are obviously highly important when it comes to deciding who is the insurgent and who is the counter-insurgent. If the traditional systems of governance and justice command higher levels of legitimacy than the normative system that is introduced – the campaign is in serious trouble and is perhaps better advised to use a low key early insurgency strategy to spread Western norms while focusing on stability. The revolutionary insertion of alien norms of governance otherwise risks eroding the potential legitimacy of the international presence, as well as of the host government.

The key lesson of this reasoning is that Western state-building in a failed state is an intervention in an existing system of political power-sharing – regardless if we recognise it as such or not. The establishment of Western norms of governance and certain tactical efforts to win the hearts and minds of the local population is not simply an attempt to establish legitimacy. It may also constitute a crisis of legitimacy as it starts out by tearing down the existing structures of power-sharing, thereby threatening the power and status of existing power-holders. Every change in the direction of our perception of a legitimate system may in fact be the opposite in the eyes of the local population, or at least in the eyes of the local leaders with stakes to lose. In the specific context of Afghanistan, Anatol Lieven argues that ancient cultural traditions ‘have always inclined many Afghans, and Pashtuns in particular, to resist state power’.\textsuperscript{54} He also argues that resisting foreign occupation is part of the ‘Pashtun Way’ and that the insurgency in Afghanistan has to be understood as largely inevitable given this cultural predilection. ‘In view of the history of Pashtun resistance to outside military conquest over the past 150 years, it would on the contrary be nothing short of astonishing if massive insurgency had not occurred.’\textsuperscript{55}

As early as October 2001, while most commentators were simply celebrating the perceived defeat of the Taliban, Lieven called for an international force that would be able to counter this inevitable insurgency. However, he added that international forces in Afghanistan would need legitimacy in the eyes of Afghans in order to achieve the respect and protection that such legitimacy would provide. Given the Afghan political and cultural prejudices – especially in the context of conflict – such legitimacy could only be Islamic according to Lieven. ‘The peacekeeping force for Kabul should therefore be recruited by the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) from a range of Muslim countries.’\textsuperscript{56}

Beyond the specific clash between Western norms of governance and Pashtun culture as described by Lieven, this discussion raises fundamental questions about the compatibility of Western norms and Afghan and other local norms of governance. Are those Western norms actually incompatible or unfeasible in the Afghan context or can they be reconciled with local norms? Is it a matter of negotiation, time and perseverance? Clearly, as important as it is to avoid preconceived assumptions about global values, one must avoid preconceived ideas about inherent cultural clashes. This article is not the place to resolve these questions, but the need for further research into normative clashes and the possibilities of reconciliation deserves to be highlighted. However, it is of importance for Western counter-insurgents to understand that their basic assumption about what creates legitimacy in
a particular society may be false. Western counter-insurgents should also acknowledge that they are not the defenders of status quo but often the opposite – they are agents of change and thereby also sources of crisis in societal legitimacy. Struggling to win the support of the local population while at the same time forcing modernisation makes for a difficult balancing act and may create inherent contradictions.

Fitzsimmons questions the modernisation idea that interests and grievances are simply connected to material benefits and democracy. ‘What if legitimacy is sometimes conferred to governments not according to the quality of their governance, but according to their conformance to group loyalties and traditional hierarchies of power?’ While the economic and governance issues should certainly not be dismissed, a broader understanding of what commands legitimacy means that ethnic identity and dynamics, as well as other aspects of traditional systems of governance will have to be included in a sound counter-insurgency strategy.

A second fundamental challenge to the current conduct of hearts and minds operations is the Western problem to understand and meet the expectations of the local population. An interesting question is what the arrival of a few hundred foreign troops in an area far from Kabul means to the local population. What types of expectations are created with the arrival of these troops? Will security increase or decrease? Will they fix the road and drill a new well in our village? This is not the place to dwell in speculation on local expectations, but counter-insurgents certainly must take the time to do so. The fact that the coalition’s military units outside Kabul were named Provincial Reconstruction Teams was an attempt to produce a narrative that avoided military occupation and instead emphasised the potential positive aspects of the international military presence. However, the name also creates expectations beyond traditional military tasks. Since these units early on had very few resources for reconstruction these expectations were not met.

Andrew Wilder is studying the perceptions of reconstruction assistance in Afghanistan and has found that there are many potentially harmful consequences: First, various respondents find that the quality of the projects is poor, that many of the projects are inappropriate, that lots of money is being wasted and that promises are constantly broken. There are also complaints about corruption of PRTs as well as of government officials, and of much too limited consultation with local communities. Even when projects are finalised there are complaints of unmet expectations, that not enough has been done or that the local population finds that the neighbouring village received more than them in a perverse zero sum or relativist view of aid. Again, legitimacy is not an objective measure, but the result of local perceptions of the political system’s effectiveness, values and identity.

Finally, Mats Berdal highlights that there are always two kinds of legitimacy involved in post-conflict settings. First, the perceived legitimacy of the outside, or intervening, force itself – ‘a function of its conduct, identity and ability to meet local expectations’. Second, the legitimacy of the structures of governance that the outside forces establish and support. Are these structures seen as legitimate in the eyes of the local populations, by neighbouring states and by the international community at
A key problem is that the two types of legitimacy risk being contradictory – especially given the uncanny conduct of development operations within many of the PRTs. While much international aid is channelled through the Afghan government authorities, a substantial portion is handled in a decentralised fashion by PRTs or different NGOs. Despite emphasising the fact that all project serves to increase the legitimacy of the central government, the PRTs insist on attaching national flags on projects such as wells and bridges, thereby indicating which country and troops should be thanked for the project.

**Challenges when Implementing Hearts and Minds Approaches**

While it is impossible to separate underlying assumptions of hearts and minds approaches from their implementation, this section seeks to discuss challenges that are closer to matters of practical implementation. It is, however, important to emphasise that many of the practical challenges stem from flawed assumptions.

There is a general debate about the utility of military engagement in humanitarian and development projects. Canadian Major General Lewis MacKenzie has argued that ‘soldiers are not social workers with guns. Both disciplines are important, but both will suffer if combined in the same individuals’.61 This is an argument that has been echoed even more forcefully within the development community. There are two main reasons for this. First, soldiers and officers most often lack specific experience, expertise and training to conduct these types of activities effectively. The lack of expertise means that military projects in the sphere of development and humanitarian affairs often underperform in terms of cost-effectiveness and sustainability.62 Put simply, the military is not as competent as civilian organisations are in the provision of humanitarian and development assistance. Thus, military involvement in humanitarian type activities may undermine the quality of aid delivery, and the success of the humanitarian or development efforts. Stephen Cornish exemplifies this by arguing that the development projects of the PRTs in Afghanistan have often been ‘costly, wasteful, lacking in quality and often not taking into account community needs’.63

Michelle Parker, former development adviser to the commander of ISAF, has argued that military development activities created confusion as the local population, as well as NGOs and aid agencies, found it difficult to understand why the military was focusing on building schools when security was degrading. It also created harm because the military often made unintended, but harmful mistakes in its project choices and management.64

For example, another PRT dug wells in a village as a reward for providing information. The team did not conduct a water table analysis and the new wells caused wells in a neighboring village to dry up. The village with the dry wells thought the United States did it intentionally and was no longer supportive of the new Afghan government or US efforts in the area.65

Since the military is primarily focused on strategic or tactical victories in terms of winning hearts and minds they also blatantly fail to adhere to the humanitarian
principles of impartiality, independence and neutrality that, ideally at least, control the behaviour of humanitarian actors. While the utility and relevance of these principles in the contemporary strategic context can be questioned, they at least provide some form of transparency and benchmarks in the choice of projects.

The second reason why military involvement in humanitarian and development activity is often criticised is the argument that it blurs the line between military and civilian actors. Humanitarian tasks performed by the military may cause both recipients of aid, as well as the conflicting parties to find it difficult to distinguish between providers of assistance and combatants. If the humanitarian community is associated not only with the intervening powers, but also with the political and military agendas of the larger intervention, the humanitarian space – access to suffering communities on both sides of the confrontation line, based on the humanitarian principles – clearly risks being eroded.66 Brigety argues that while ‘military forces may wish to be identified with humane purposes for both tactical and strategic reasons, humanitarian groups almost invariably do not wish to be identified either physically or politically with any party to an armed conflict’.67

In areas where the Taliban have more influence the challenges of implementation are nevertheless beyond the humanitarian and development competences of the military. In the Korengal Valley of Kunar Province, the schools, clinics, irrigation pipes that are constructed are blown up by the insurgents as soon as they are finished. A road project is on hold as construction has been forbidden by a Taliban edict that the local population does not dare to disobey given the security situation.68

There is an inherent imbalance between the arguments by which the international coalition and the Taliban are influencing the local population. While the coalition seeks to influence the population by promising and sometimes delivering schools, wells and roads, the Taliban coerces the population by killing or threatening the lives of those that cooperate with the coalition. A recent Taliban tactic has been to deliver ‘night letters’, placed on doorsteps and pasted on walls, ordering the local population to boycott Afghanistan’s 2009 presidential election. These letters involve death threats and promise to cut off the fingers of people who vote and that are branded as ‘enemies of Islam’.69 The Taliban also target the development projects of the coalition in order to destroy the potential support for the central government of the coalition that such projects may create.70 However, the coercive nature of Taliban operation is only one part of the insurgency’s activities. At the same time the Taliban movement is offering a shadow government structure with substantive services. As highlighted in ISAF Commander General Stanley McChrystal’s, initial assessment of Afghanistan in August 2009:

The QST [Quetta Shura Taliban] has a governing structure in Afghanistan under the rubric of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan. They appoint shadow governors for most provinces, review their performance, and replace them periodically. They established a body to receive complaints against their own ‘officials’ and to act on them. They install ‘shari’a’ courts to deliver swift and enforced justice in contested and controlled areas. They levy taxes and
conscript fighters and laborers. They claim to provide security against a corrupt government, ISAF forces, criminality, and local power brokers. They also claim to protect Afghan and Muslim identity against foreign encroachment. In short, the QST provides major elements of governance and a national and religious narrative.\textsuperscript{71}

Clearly, this is not simply a struggle between good incentives from the government of Afghanistan and the international community on the one hand and coercive measures from the Taliban on the other. The challenges in Afghanistan are better perceived of as competitive state-building. In this competition, the legitimacy of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan should not be exaggerated but also not underestimated. It speaks more directly to the concerns of the local population without the conceptual limitations of Western norms of governance. General Sir David Richards, ISAF commander in Afghanistan between 2006 and 2007, made an interesting observation regarding hearts and minds operations and legitimacy in the Helmand province of Afghanistan:

> If you are an Afghan who has spent 30 years fighting, you have learned not to put faith in the wrong side, because it comes back to haunt you. Until we demonstrated that we had the resolve and the capability to beat the Taliban decisively, we were not going to be able to win the ‘hearts and minds’. We like to think that the concept of ‘hearts and minds’ is all about soft power – humanitarian aid, development projects – but in the Afghan context there is a hard edge to it. First you have to convince people that you are going to win, militarily.\textsuperscript{72}

In certain contexts, the military capability can never be replaced by soft power. If security fails it cannot be mitigated through development activities.

Another practical problem is that of manpower. David Ucko accurately notes that providing population security is inherently difficult as well as demanding in terms of manpower. Moreover, as the US military has found in Iraq and Afghanistan, security cannot be provided from afar, or only during certain hours. Instead, the security forces have to establish a sustained presence among the population they are seeking to protect, or risk having only a transient influence that places local partners under great risk as they may be punished by the insurgents following the withdrawal of security forces.\textsuperscript{73}

The link between the theoretical and the practical challenges becomes very clear in the light of lacking empirical evidence that hearts and minds activities have any positive impact. In combination with the difficulty of drawing any lessons from past operations in a completely different context and with different tools, there are reasons to question the hearts and minds approach to counter-insurgency. To which extent will limited and poorly executed projects within the development and humanitarian fields change the political behaviour of the Afghan population? Fundamentally, if the hearts and minds approach to counter-insurgency is flawed, what is left of the activity we call counter-insurgency? What tools are available to
counter-insurgents in order to achieve the ambitious political aims and can we foresee a positive outcome?

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS AN IMPROVED APPROACH

This article has sought to describe and discuss the hearts and minds approach to counter-insurgency operations. The intellectual foundations and underlying assumptions of this approach are rooted in modernisation theory and a legal/rational view of legitimacy and have in the contemporary context been coupled with a ‘force for good’ narrative within the normative state-building and democratisation agendas of operations. Not only are the theoretical foundations of the hearts and minds approach questionable, so are the historical. Studies of past operations have often over-emphasised the softer approaches of counter-insurgency campaigns. Moreover, a great contextual shift has taken place since the counter-insurgency campaigns of colonial policing and withdrawal. There are good reasons to doubt any relevance of lessons from such operations in the context of contemporary state-building operations in the wake of intervention. The practical implementation of the hearts and minds approach has therefore been informed by what Fitzsimmons describes as ‘a materialist conception of social welfare, justice, and legitimate authority’, which has been translated into military involvement in humanitarian and development activities with the intention of creating a network of trust and thereby establish legitimacy.

Doctrines and field manuals describe appropriate tactical behaviour that mirrors the lessons learned of the past. However, the intended operational and strategic effects of the reconstruction projects are painfully absent and Lieutenant General Sir Robert Fry, British Deputy Commander Multinational Force Iraq, has argued that one of the greatest problems in Iraq was the failure to translate tactical behaviour to operational effect in the pursuit of strategic goals. Some of these problems are related to the quality and frequency of the hearts and minds activities – the practical implementation. However, the more difficult problems are related to flaws in the very idea of winning hearts and minds as conceptualised by Western counter-insurgents. The limited and normative understanding of what constitutes legitimacy means not only that many activities are in vain, but that they may also be counterproductive. Instead, a broader understanding of legitimacy and the way it operates within the specific culture of Afghanistan is necessary in order to create informed strategies, and possibly to lower ambitions. However, the crux of the problem is whether the international community can ever work towards anything but modernisation – involving Western norms of governance and economic management?

The traditional sources of legitimacy in Afghanistan, often based on identity and cultural affinity, produces major problems for normative counter-insurgents and peacebuilders. The international coalition – military and civilian – is made up of infidels with values oceans apart from rural Afghans. These foreigners are on top of that imposing a ground-breaking and highly suspicious centralised system of governance. The result is a steep uphill battle for legitimacy that is therefore unlikely
to be won by incremental improvements in the economic and social situation of certain Afghans while continuously failing to provide the most basic services of security and justice. The primary focus of counter-insurgency operations should therefore be to improve the performance and legitimacy of indigenous actors. This is obviously also somewhat of a mantra in today’s context and the central question is how?

Seth Jones accurately argues that improving indigenous governance and performance includes ‘improving the quality of the police and other security forces, strengthening governance capacity, and undermining external support for insurgents’.

Another bonus is that the use of internal forces take in leading roles can ‘provide a focus for national aspirations and show the population that they – and not foreign forces – control their destiny’. However, the emphasis on indigenous actors will involve hard choices between the normative modernisation agenda and the often hypocritical concept of ‘local ownership’, in order to create a more pragmatic approach that is perceived as legitimate and desirable by the larger population in Afghanistan, while at the same time being acceptable to the international community.

Finally, at the tactical level, the limited positive impact and the negative risks involved in military participation in humanitarian and development activities means that a highly restrictive approach should be adopted until the causal relations between aid, security and legitimacy are established. Instead, military organisations at all levels and capacities should think hard about what their presence in a particular area of operations means to the local population in terms of expectations and perceptions. If the purpose of operations is indeed to win hearts and minds, whatever expectations are created are the ones that should be addressed. If the expectations created by foreign presence cannot be addressed effectively as perceived by the local population, the aim of legitimacy, of winning hearts and minds, is likely to be in vain. This also provides an opportunity for military organisations to focus on the core military tasks for which most of them have been trained and equipped to perform effectively.

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NOTES

10. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
29. Ibid. p.5-4.
30. Ibid. p.5-25.
32. Ibid.
34. Wilder (note 27).
41. Garfield (note 9) p.25.
42. Cohen et al. (note 39) p.52.
45. Freedman (note 40) p.22.
46. Smith (note 38) p.391.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid. p.78.
58. Ibid. p.358.
59. Wilder (note 27).
65. Ibid.
77. Ibid. pp.10–11.