**Cultural Insensitivities and Aggravating Factors in Iraq and Afghanistan**

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**Abstract**

When examining terrorism, you can find many reasons as to why people may resort to such violence; whether they be for financial purposes, religious incentives, revenge, or for the thrill of violence. However, in Western literature one aspect infrequently written about is how cultural insensitivities and other aggravating factors, presented in this paper, contribute to grievances that help solve the collective action problem posed by many organizations. Throughout my paper I introduce flaws in the handling of cultural practices in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, how they have plausible correlation with increased recruitment by extremist organizations, and what the Department of Defense is doing to the promote the elimination of these factors. This paper explores instances of cultural mishandlings and abuse at the arms of United States service members; including Abu Ghraib, U.S. drone strikes, and ground force activities. Using empirical data on the amount of terrorist attacks occurring in Iraq and Afghanistan and the dates of significant military incidents, I try to narrow the gap between grievances and the use of political violence by terrorist organizations. Later, I introduce programs created by the Department of Defense to increase cultural awareness and boundaries of the regions that troops will be deployed to.

Throughout the two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States has been fighting asymmetric battles against the Taliban, Islamic State, and al-Qaeda. As of 2018, these conflicts have taken the lives of over 475,000 individuals and have turned parts of the Middle East and western Asia into war zones, displacing tens-of-thousands of people (Brown, 2018). Although these conflicts themselves are important, the United States has neglected to significantly train and equip its troops with the necessary cultural training in understanding the various sects and ethnicities within the Middle East, causing greater grievances among the local populations relating to an increase in violence and anti-American rhetoric. This situation allows for non-state actors to gain an upper hand and continue to wage their *jihad* against western influence in the region, giving them a greater ability to use the local populations to their benefit.

After the attacks on September 11, 2001, the United States began its invasion of Afghanistan, nicknamed Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), with the hopes of ousting the Taliban from power for harboring al-Qaeda terrorists, and to remove their influence from the country. In addition to the war in Afghanistan, the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, nicknamed Operation Iraqi Freedom, with over 100,000 troops, officially starting the Iraq War ("U.S.", 2003). The goal of Operation Iraqi Freedom was to topple the Saddam regime and establish a new government. This goal, however, did not foresee the tribal struggle for power after the Saddam regime was toppled, and further drove the country into a cultural sandpit. In both wars, the United States has been reducing its troop presence as the conflicts have been ongoing for almost two decades with moderate success.

This paper will be greatly influenced by the grievance theory, which will help explain the rise of terrorist activity proceeding important events related to the United States and its coalition within Iraq and Afghanistan. According to the grievance theory of terrorism, actors turn to violence due to an event in their life that triggered an emotional response such as sadness, anger, or distress. In their paper, "The Rationality of Radical Islam," Kaltenthaler and Wiktorowicz suggest that grievance theory helps rationalize the actions taken by individuals within a terrorist organization and is an offset of systematic inequality and alienation (2016, p. 297). In order to further support grievance theory explanation and its tie to this paper, different cases backed by statistical data will be presented and elaborated on in order to prove that cultural insensitivity has had a negative impact on local populations and shows correlation with an increase in terrorist activity.

When approaching the Middle Eastern cultures, you cannot use a westernized viewpoint; which characterized the United States' actions early on in the two conflicts and is still going on in some instances today (Lazarus, 2018). The disparity between these two groups of peoples creates more animosity towards the Americans and an increasingly negative image of the military (Gharib, 2009, p. 16). Gharib further elaborates that American service members' lack of cultural preparedness prior to deployment to an Arab region caused "severe mishandling of various incidents" and further demonstrates the crucial need for a stronger sense of cross-cultural [training] for all levels of the military" (2009, p. 16). The cultural insensitivity contributed by the West is not the only act that has caused grievances among the Arab population. Throughout the conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq, American service members have been involved in incidents, controversies, and human rights violations which have greatly contributed to the increase of violence from terrorist organizations.

Within the cultural framework of the Arab community and their interactions with the United States military, there have been many instances in which its forces have unintentionally insulted and humiliated the citizens by disrespecting their cultural norms. When American forces

first entered Iraq, they did so with Kuwaiti translators. This was viewed by many Iraqi's as insulting due to the country's history with Kuwait in the 1990s ("CAAT", 2004). Additionally, US hired translators were often plagued by cultural biases that ran in the opposite direction of military objectives and critically harmed the relationship between the local tribes and US forces. Through this early display of insensitivity by American forces and lack of adequate translators, Iraqi tribal leaders had a negative view of the Western forces occupying their country.

As outlined is the United States Army's Chapter on Civil Military Operations and Cultural Issues in Iraq, they list a few scenarios that have contributed to the increase of anger and distrust with US forces. The first is the detainment of family members of anti-coalition members. The United States response to this was that they hoped the individual whose family was being detained would turn themselves in, however what actually happened was greater distrust among the Iraqi population. In addition to the detainment of family members, American forces would also detain the "women and children [of the family] without due process [which] contribute[d] to a lasting negative image" ("CAAT", 2004). In the Arab household, women and children are seen as a symbol of the man's honor, and taking their family away is seen as dishonoring the man.

In another instance where the family was targeted, Mohamed Ghani gives a personal narrative "of a man he knew whose wife had been searched by American soldiers" (Gharib, 2009, p. 23). Gharib adds that the act shamed the woman's husband and destroyed his honor (2009, p. 23). The issue portrayed in this scenario was that male soldiers would often search the females, as female soldiers were often not in the field. In the Arab culture, touching another man's wife is a sign of disrespect and is highly looked down upon, and in some instances sparks long lasting feuds between families. Some can argue the Americans were doing their job and ensuring their safety, however their insensitivity to the Arab culture cost more than it benefited them by contributing to the local population's rage.

In addition to the above scenarios which question cultural fluidity between the Arab people and the West, mosques were often used as staging areas for militant operations and frequently raided by American soldiers on patrol ("CAAT", 2004). In the Islamic religion, individuals must take their shoes off prior to entering the mosque and leave any weapons outside, as not doing so is considered disrespectful and insulting. This was not followed by the US Army who would enter with their boots on and weapons up ("CAAT", 2004). This sign of cultural ignorance created greater anger among the Arab population due the disrespect and dishonor the American soldiers had brought upon the Muslim peoples.

Further contributing to the rise of grievances among the populations of Iraq and Afghanistan during the wars are additional aggravating factors that created a breeding ground for ideas and helped spread the *jihadist* ideology to a greater populous. Included in these factors are certain acts perpetrated by the US military or a member within its ranks, and consist of unlawful engagements against civilians, prisoner abuse and torture, and collateral damage as a result of targeted strikes on suspected terrorist forces. There is also a positive correlation between an increase of terror attacks and the acts mentioned above, however, no causation could be appropriately concluded from the data.

Coming into the public eye in 2004 were the atrocities that took place among American service members towards prisoners at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Within the compound, Arab prisoners were stripped of their clothes, hooded and "piled on top of each other in a pyramid shape" (Nasr, 2009). The males were additionally forced to touch their genitals on camera, beaten, and dragged around on leashes by female soldiers (Nasr, 2009). In addition to the events at Abu Ghraib, Human Rights Watch reports similar treatment of prisoners have reportedly taken

place in detention centers in Afghanistan at Bagram air field, Kandahar, Jalalabad, and Asadabad (Sifton, 2004). This event significantly harmed relations and public support for the United States in the middle east, and further attributed to the anger of the local populations.

In the Islamic culture, Nasr writes, "the human body is a taboo, a sacred temple that should be covered and respected… exposing the naked body is a sin" (2009). At Abu Ghraib, the soldiers lack of cultural conscientiousness and religious tolerance gave terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda and the Taliban greater leverage over the United States with respect to its recruitment campaign. The public outrage at these crimes was significant and spread across the Arab world like a wildfire. When the first images of the abuses leaked out of the prison in 2004, data gathered in Iraq on terrorist attacks significantly increased during the period of 2003 through 2004, from 102 to 323 (Ritchie et al., 2013). Additionally, when the second set of images emerged in 2006, attacks rose from 617 to 838 in Iraq alone (Ritchie et al., 2013). Although correlation does not necessarily mean causation in this case, there was a dramatic jump in the numbers compared to other years observed.

Furthermore, in 2008, a United States airstrike targeted a wedding procession in Haska Meyna, Iraq. After three bombs were dropped, 47 individuals were killed, including 39 women and children (Shah, 2008). According to the deputy chairman of the Senate in Iraq, Burhanullah Shinwari, "[t]hey were all civilians, with no links to al-Qaeda or the Taliban" (Shah, 2008). The indiscriminate targeting of US strikes on the local Iraqi people has caused additional grievances among the population and is also seen as correlation with an increase in violence among terror groups. Following the trend in data, there is a small increase in terror attacks in Iraq from the years 2007 to 2008, with a continued increase through 2009; from 1,047 to 1,106 to 1,137 (Ritchie et al., 2013). The increase shown in those two data points shows a unique correlation between the incident and the increase, however causation cannot be appropriately inferred due to lack of evidence

Much like the earlier scenario of American soldiers entering a mosque with boots and weapons, the defamation of a religious event in the Islamic culture is also a sign of cultural insensitivity within the Iraq war. Throughout Iraq and Afghanistan, religion has played an important role in creating distrust between the Americans and local populations. For example, in Rwaida Gharib's thesis, he describes an unnecessary violence that often took place, writing, "a white flag, which in Western definitions is a means of surrender, led many Marines to assume a black flag was the opposite of surrender. As a result, many Shiites, who traditionally fly black flags at home as a religious symbol" were often labelled as an enemy and shot at (Gharib, 2009, p. 22). This use of unnecessary force gave greater leverage to terrorist organizations in their recruitment by characterizing the American's as enemies who came to occupy their land and tame their people.

The United States coalition has been working on ways of addressing the difference of culture issue presented in the cases earlier in this paper and has implemented new ways to train and equip allied forces to limit the number of incidents. Beginning in early 2005, the Department of Defense initiated a new language training program giving more individuals within the armed forces the skills necessary to "comprehend, read and converse in more world languages" in the hope that the cultural aptitude of the troops would grow (Gharib, 2009, p. 31-32). In 2005, the Marine Corps adopted and has grown a new cultural training plan for the middle east, focusing on "Islam, History, the Arab culture, Cross Cultural Communication and Tactical Application" (Gharib, 2009, p. 31-37). Additionally, prior to deployments, ground forces are able to receive hands-on training in a 'Arab culture simulator' taking place in a mock-up village with actors

pretending to be civilians (Gharib, 2009, p. 37-38). This allows pre-deployment forces to practice different situations they may come across in the field and be evaluated by instructors on their performance and effectiveness in decision making along cultural lines.

Following the start and implementation of the new language and culture program in the Department of Defense (DoD), the United States has yet to witness another incident as damaging as Abu Ghraib, though over the course of the past 15 years, smaller incidents have occurred between American coalition troops and the Iraqi and Afghan populations. However, one can argue that with the rise of the Taliban after 2005 and its reemergence during negotiations in 2019, growth of al-Qaeda, and the emergence of the Islamic State in 2014, it appears the cultural programs initiated by the DoD have not been successful in their mission to eliminate cultural grievances, as there has been a surge of individuals joining these terrorist organizations in an effort to drive out western influence within the region. These programs have provided greater situational awareness among coalition troops and have implanted individuals with added knowledge of culture and language into frontline units, in an attempt to decrease the likelihood of cultural incidents to take place in the future.

Throughout this paper, the impact of cultural differences and insensitivities was discussed and was supplemented by data showing a plausible correlation, but not causation. Cultural differences and insensitivities discussed include lack of knowledge with Islamic practices, cultural taboos associated with the Arab culture, negligent use of translators, and abuses by American soldiers on Iraqi and Afghani prisoners. These differences and insensitivities caused grievances to build and "exacerbate[d] tensions and ha[d] negative consequences" with the local populations (Greene et al., 2011, p. 959). The cases listed in this paper are catalysts for the grievance theory of terrorism, and when looking at yearly statistics of terrorist attacks, there is a significant increase in terrorist attacks around the timeframe of those cases. When looking at the larger picture, these cases could have directly contributed to the failure of the US counterterrorism and counterinsurgency missions in Iraq and Afghanistan through increased resistance to Allied forces in the region. As a result, the implementation of a cultural program by the DoD is expected to help reduce incidents revolving around culture and language by providing training to individuals and units who are forward deployed in areas where large amounts of interaction are expected.

This expectation, however, has not been successful on the large scale. According to Gharib, "[t]he evidence in the current training demonstrates that not only are the present systems of training inadequate, but also that the post-op briefing for cultural and language use simply does not exist" (2009, p. 44). Studies suggest that in Iraq, peace-keeping missions have led to an increase in conflict due to coalition forces not being taught "the intricacies of the various cultures and behaviors of" the local population (Gharib, 2009, p. 69). In response, the United States and its coalition partners must revisit their cultural training programs and target specific communities that military units will be deployed to, instead of giving broad-scale training.

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