



*Image credit: Photo by Staff Sgt. Gary Witte via Flickr
Coalition Forces Defend Village From Insurgent Attack During Joint Patrol in Kunar Province, Afghanistan*

Countering Islamist Insurgents

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Introduction

Islamist insurgents are becoming a powerful force in international relations, and increasingly a major threat to global security. From Iraq and Syria to Kenya and Nigeria, violent Salafi-Jihadi movements are growing in strength, scale and frequency of attacks. Often, national and transnational security efforts apply the same approaches for countering nationalist and other secular movements to Islamist insurgents, in futility.

Monica Duffy Toft and Yuri Zhukov undertook a study of insurgency in Russia's North Caucasus, which suggests that it is essential to distinguish between nationalist and Islamist insurgents in order to formulate the most appropriate and effective counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism strategies.

Toft and Zhukov examined all violence from 2000 to 2012, including 9,405 incidents of rebel-initiated violence and 22,573 incidents of government-initiated violence. They identified key differences between types of rebel movements on the basis of their support base, in how they operate and importantly, and in how they respond to government coercion. Their research shows that the boundaries between the two types of insurgencies, especially where they operate simultaneously, are often fluid, but the policy responses they call for are markedly different.

Although the study focuses on Russia's Caucasus from 2000-2012, the findings are relevant to the countries and regions confronted with a mix of different kinds of insurgents.

This research insight represents the views and recommendations of the author(s). They are not necessarily held or endorsed by the Blavatnik School of Government.

Key Findings

The central question of the study was: Are Islamist insurgencies more difficult for governments to coerce than nationalist ones? The authors approached this by examining whether Salafi-Jihadi rebels behaved differently on the battlefield and were more resilient in the face of government coercion. Three findings emerged:

- **Islamist and nationalist rebels respond differently to government coercion.**
While selective tactics outperform indiscriminate ones in eliciting compliance from nationalist rebels, the type of government violence has little effect on the resolve and capabilities of Islamists. The authors attribute this finding to the differential structure of rebel social bases, particularly their relative dependence on local versus external sources of support. By offsetting local support with revenue and manpower from elsewhere, Islamists can continue fighting even where the population faces heavy penalties for supporting them. This is not the case for nationalist insurgents.
- **The nature of violence is different for nationalist and Islamist insurgents.**
Compared to violence by nationalist forces, Islamist violence is more geographically dispersed, ebbs and flows with key dates on the Islamic calendar, and more closely mirrors international trends in jihadist violence. Otherwise, the determinants of Islamist and nationalist violence are largely the same.
- **Islamist violence makes up only up a small proportion of violence.**
Even under the most expansive definition Islamist violence represents only a minor share of violence in the Caucasus (3 to 19 percent). Even if selective violence were ineffective against Islamists, it is dangerous to extrapolate the same lesson to the region. If the overwhelming majority of a government's armed opponents are not jihadists, indiscriminate tactics will make it more difficult to persuade insurgents to lay down their arms.

Key Recommendations

Given these findings, the authors conclude with five recommendations:

- **It is important for stakeholders to clearly understand, the nature, motivations and affiliations of the insurgents they confront.**
Empirically, nationalist and Islamist movements require different counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism strategies, although the boundaries between the two can often be fluid, especially in places where the two operate simultaneously.
- **Selective coercion is largely ineffective in deterring Islamist violence; so too is indiscriminate violence.**
This is because both approaches are insufficient and incapable of degrading Islamists' support and resource base that is not reliant on the local population, is geographically dispersed and often transnational in scope. Consequently, conventional coercion may not be effective against Islamists, given their willingness to die for their cause.
- **The externalisation of their support and resource base implies that Islamists do not require, and often barely depend on, local support.**
It is critical for national governments to acknowledge this, in order to abandon unpopular and brutal indiscriminate coercion that targets the local population, and may end up radicalising them.
- **Governments and other stakeholders should instead focus on degrading, blocking and eroding Islamists external support base.**
This includes crippling access to financial resources accessed through licit and illicit channels and selective coercion targeted at external networks of leaders and financiers.
- **Targeting this external resource and support base could be costlier than both selective and indiscriminate coercion, particularly for developing countries with limited resources and challenges to their state capacity.**
Regional and transnational efforts could be effective in mitigating against these local institutional constraints.

This research insight is based on the article, Monica Duffy Toft and Yuri Zhukov, "Islamists and Nationalists: Rebel Motivation and Counterinsurgency in Russia's North Caucasus," *American Political Science Review*, 2015.