

Book Review: What Went Wrong in Afghanistan? Understanding Counter-Insurgency Efforts in Tribalized Rural and Muslim Environments by Metin Gurcan

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Gurcan, Metin. *What Went Wrong in Afghanistan? Understanding Counter-Insurgency Efforts in Tribalized Rural and Muslim Environments*. West Midlands, UK: Helion & Company Limited, 2016. xxvii + 137 pages. Paperback, \$35.00.

Metin Gurcan served as a Turkish Special Forces officer with extensive experience as a military advisor and liaison officer, and he served on Turkish General Staff. Additionally, he earned a Master of Arts in Security Studies from the US Navy Postgraduate School and a doctorate from Bilkent University in Ankara. The title of Gurcan's book may suggest to the reader that it is a lengthy comprehensive analysis of politics, strategy, and tactics in what is now over sixteen years of combat by US and coalition forces in Afghanistan. Gurcan, like others who have been involved in establishing US strategy in Afghanistan, fails to define in concrete terms what victory or a positive end state in Afghanistan would look like. However, he begins by asking a very basic question, "Would you die for your backyard" (p. 29)?

Gurcan concentrates his analysis in three areas. First, he explains in detail the Tribalized Rural Muslim Environment (TRME), a unique combat environment. Second, he explains the geography of Afghanistan and its impact on the social, economic, and political cultures. Finally, he discusses counterinsurgency strategy (COIN), how it applies to Afghanistan, and briefly reviews COIN as the US and NATO have applied it.

After al-Qaeda's 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington, DC, the US government and the military lacked the comprehensive knowledge and understanding of the religious and tribal culture and society of Afghanistan. The few "experts" often applied generalities to a multi-faceted people. Gurcan points out that Westerners often fail to apply critical thinking and define any non-Western tradition as being 'abnormal' or 'peculiar,' and he further argues that "...what may appear 'abnormal' or 'peculiar' to an outsider may appear as self-evidently normal to a particular society" (p. 32). Gurcan takes this argument a step further when he explains that although the West often describes Afghanistan and similar areas as "ungoverned," they are not. Gurcan argues that TRMEs are not ungoverned, "In fact they have been governed territories for centuries, but with governance models different than state-centric" (p. 31).

Considering that counterinsurgency has played a major role in the US and NATO's military strategy in Afghanistan, it was surprising how little Gurcan devotes to the subject in his analysis. Gurcan briefly examines the works of COIN experts such as Australian Army Lt Col David Kilcullen, French COIN expert David Gulula and US Army Lt Col John Nagl. Nagl's dissertation, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, was later published and became the "must read" book for US military officers deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan and reportedly was also downloaded by the enemy. Under the guidance of General David Petraus, Nagl led an Army-Marine Corps team in rewriting the Army and Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual FM 3-24. Kilcullen, an advisor to coalition forces in Iraq and author of several books on the subject, became COIN advisor to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. French COIN expert David Gulula's *Counterinsurgency Theory and Practice* influenced COIN doctrine of numerous countries' military over the last several decades, including the rewriting of FM 3-24.

In 2009, President Barack Obama's administration debated the US's future strategy in Afghanistan which, under the Bush administration, had morphed from a small special-forces centric operation to a large-scale nation building effort. Gurcan argues for the use of a "conventional enemy-centric approach," which concentrates the military's efforts on increasing drone strikes and covert raids against high profile al-Qaeda targets in Pakistan (p. 94). He further states, "the best military tactic is the search and destroy mission" which he claims is easier to plan and can be statistically used to measure success (p. 95). The search and destroy missions, he explains, risk becoming the "hammer and nail analogy" for conventional forces and asks whether "...the officer corps and soldiers, who have trained or indoctrinated to fight against the search and destroy missions [would] be competent, cross-culturally well equipped, innovative, and long sighted enough to unchain themselves from their institutional indoctrination of appraising each case in the theater through the lenses of this conventional wisdom." (p. 96).

Gurcan approaches a complex conundrum from a wave top level which three US presidents and policy makers have faced for over sixteen years. He does not do a deep dive into specific political and military decisions, military operations, or the personalities of many leaders who have played a role in developing a strategy. It can be argued that the Afghanistan war is not a single war but multiple wars, as the strategy changed depending on other US commitments (like Iraq), changes in policy by the three presidents, and the list of generals who have rotated in and out of theater. Gurcan's discussion of the tribal and religious culture of rural Afghanistan presents an area that is often overlooked. However, it may be hard to accept that Westerners' misunderstanding of the treatment of women in Sharia Law is a major factor in the prosecution of the war. *What Went Wrong in Afghanistan* is a worthwhile read but does not answer the question the book's title poses.

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