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Training Foreign Police: A Missing Aspect of U.S. Security Assistance to Counterinsurgency

WALTER C. LADWIG III

Merton College, University of Oxford
Oxford, United Kingdom

The lack of an institutional capacity and a legal authority to train foreign police forces is undercutting U.S. security assistance in the war on terror. From Iraq to Afghanistan to the Philippines, effective police forces are a key component of efforts to combat insurgency. This article discusses the importance of effective policing to counterinsurgency, briefly explores the history of American police assistance during the Cold War, and proposes a means by which, for a fraction of what it spends annually on military assistance programs, the United States can leverage domestic police academies to provide high-quality support and assistance to foreign law enforcement agencies.

Introduction

In prosecuting what has come to be known as the “long war” against extremism, American strategy has emphasized the development of allied security forces to combat insurgents and terrorists abroad. The *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq*, issued in November 2005, identifies the building of Iraqi security forces as a key step to defeating the insurgency there. The March 2006 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* emphasizes the need to work with allies to develop capable indigenous security forces to combat terrorist and insurgent threats. Recognizing the significant role that security assistance can play in the contemporary security environment, the Department of Defense’s 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) states that, “helping others help themselves is critical to winning the long war.”¹ In line with that thinking, the QDR proposes an expansion of U.S. Special Operations Forces to advise and train foreign counterinsurgency forces.² Yet there is a major hole in this strategy: The inability of the U.S. to effectively train and develop local police forces in allied countries.

Domestic police are one of the most important points of contact between a government and its citizens. As a result, they are often the first line of defense against subversive and insurgent groups. However, due to a Congressional ban on most forms of foreign police assistance, and the lack of coordination among the programs that do exist, the United States has only been able to provide ad hoc support to the police forces of allied nations.

The lack of a standing institutional capacity to provide assistance to the development of foreign police forces is undercutting America’s ability to achieve important foreign policy goals. In Iraq, for example, developing proficient police forces is central to the current U.S. exit strategy. Yet according to *The New York Times*, after three years of American aid and support, “A 2006 internal police survey conducted northeast of Baghdad found that 75 percent of Iraqis did not trust the police enough to tip them off to insurgent activity.”³

Significant changes must take place in Washington to enhance America’s ability to train police in allied nations to combat subversion and insurgency. What are they and why did Congress limit such activities? Before attempting to answer those questions, let’s examine

more closely the importance of indigenous police forces to successful counterinsurgency campaigns.

Insurgents and Police

It is a well-known principal of counterinsurgency that in the battle between the government and insurgents, the civilian population is the key to victory. To offset the material and administrative strengths of the government, insurgents often hide among the populace of a given area, from where they draw support, money, and new recruits. While popular support is a key element in Maoist theories of guerrilla war, even those Islamic insurgents who appear less interested in establishing a political base require at least a passive population within which to operate.

Insurgents ensure their ability to operate within a given population by persuasion or force. Persuasive techniques may include appeals to nationalism, patriotism, or ethnic solidarity; exploitation of grievances against the government; or promises of reward once the insurgents have taken over the country. This approach can be effective, but time-consuming to implement. Taking inspiration from Machiavelli's dictum that it is better to be feared than to be loved, some insurgents use violence to ensure their ability to operate unhindered. The targeted assassination of government officials, "collaborators," or those who simply decline to aid the insurgents can send a clear message throughout the population: "We are here and the government cannot protect you."

A host of insurgencies have featured terrorist attacks on the civilian population in an effort to secure the insurgents' support base as a precursor to more widespread insurgent activity. Reflecting on the tactics employed by the National Liberation Front (FLN) during the Algerian War of Independence, French counterinsurgency practitioner Roger Trinquier noted: "A few brutalities, such as savagely executed preventive assassinations in the surrounding villages, will cow the inhabitants into providing for the maintenance of the [insurgents] and will discourage them from giving useful information to the authorities."⁴

An insurgency can thrive and prosper with only a small base of support, provided that the majority of the population is apathetic or fearful. As T. E. Lawrence wrote, "Rebellions can be made by 2 per cent active in a striking force, and 98 per cent passively sympathetic."⁵ This parallels the analysis of British counterinsurgency scholar and practitioner Julian Paget who argues, "The actual insurgent element of the population is nearly always very small, less than 10 per cent but it succeeds in instilling such a fear into the majority of the people that the remaining 90 per cent almost invariably side passively, if not actively, with the insurgent cause."⁶

In a government's counterinsurgency efforts, the armed forces, police, and auxiliary units that make up a state's security forces play a dual role: they are the sword and the shield of the state. On the one hand, they employ force to disrupt and harry the insurgents. On the other hand, they protect the populace and produce a space in which the political, economic, and social programs of the government can take root. This latter role is arguably the more important of the two. Without adequate security and protection of the population, the longer term efforts to win popular support will fail. As Paget points out:

Firstly, the Government must demonstrate its determination and its ability to defeat the insurgents, for no one likes backing a loser, particularly in an insurgency. Secondly, the Government must convince the population that it can and will protect its supporters against the insurgents, for no one likes being shot as a reward for loyalty.⁷

Security of the populace is the most fundamental requirement for legitimate governance. Without security, there is no foundation on which to build societal allegiance. Under such circumstances, human rights, rule of law, and civil liberties remain a pipe dream.

The government agency best suited to disrupt insurgent networks while protecting the population is the local police. Detecting and severing the links between insurgent groups and the civilian supporters they rely on for shelter, transport, and information requires solid investigatory police work. The police are a part of normal civil society in a way that the military is not: They live and work among the local population and interact with civilians on a regular basis. As a result, their local knowledge and connections are a key source of the human intelligence so critical for successful counterinsurgency operations. As Kalev Sepp, an unconventional warfare specialist at the Naval Postgraduate School, has noted: “Intelligence operations that help detect terrorist insurgents for arrest and prosecution are the single most important practice to protect a population from threats to its security. Honest, trained, robust police forces responsible for security can gather intelligence at the community level.”⁸ The local knowledge that members of a police force possess can help them distinguish between innocents and insurgents. Furthermore, they have experience in regularly dealing with civilians as well as achieving their missions using the minimum amount of necessary force—which the regular military does not. That makes them less likely to alienate the public when carrying out internal security duties.

Contemporary Challenges

Turning to the case of Iraq, the *National Strategy for Victory in Iraq* advocates a “Clear, Hold, Build” approach to defeating the insurgency there. U.S. military forces have demonstrated that they are capable of “clearing” areas of insurgents. However, that effort is productive only if local security forces can then “hold” the cleared area so the “building” of local government institutions can take place. A well-trained local police force—one that can prevent insurgents from reinfiltrating “cleared” areas—is essential for conducting such “hold” operations. Unfortunately, after several years in Iraq, U.S. police assistance efforts have yet to produce satisfactory results.

In a recent monograph, James Corum, a professor at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, examined the British counterinsurgency success during the Malayan Emergency, 1948–1960, and their corresponding failure to defeat the National Organization of Cypriot Fighters (EOKA) insurgents in Cyprus, 1955–1959.⁹ As in Iraq, both conflicts featured sectarian insurgent movements that primarily fought in small units and received aid and support from disaffected elements within the population. The primary challenge for the British in both cases was finding the insurgents rather than defeating them in open battle.

In Corum’s estimation, the key difference between the two cases was the quality of the training and leadership of the indigenous police forces. Both insurgencies required the governments to rapidly increase the size of the police in order to stabilize the situation. The result was the deployment of large numbers of minimally trained officers. In Malaya, after the initial expansion, a comprehensive program was undertaken to train the police officers to a high standard—with the best candidates being sent back to the UK for a year-long police college course. Although it was expensive and required removing large numbers of police officers from active duty for months at a time, the end result was an effective professional force that was able to obtain significant intelligence from the civilian population.

By contrast, in Cyprus little attempt was made to provide organized training to the expanded police force after the start of the insurgency. The result, in Corum’s words, was

“a corrupt, abusive, and largely ineffective police force that further alienated the civilian population.”¹⁰

Unfortunately, the present situation in Iraq appears much more like Cyprus than Malaya. Under Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi police were known for their corruption and general ineffectiveness. The reorganized Iraqi police forces have incorporated many of the same personnel into their ranks. The brief ad hoc training courses provided to recycled Saddam-era police officers and the eight weeks of training for new recruits have done little to develop strong leadership or change the fundamental culture of the police force. As a result, the Iraq police are failing to make a significant contribution to the counterinsurgency mission.

The United States currently lacks the capability and legal authority to train and develop indigenous police forces on a significant scale, yet clearly there is a need. The challenge of policing and counterinsurgency extends beyond Iraq. The U.S. is currently struggling to develop the Afghan National Police after the Germans failed to build an effective police force for Afghanistan.¹¹ In Southeast Asia, another focal point of Islamic insurgency, local police capacity is quite lacking. In one famous incident in the Philippines in 2003, Fathur Rohman al-Ghozi, a top bomb maker for Jemaah Islamiyah, and his two Abu Sayyaf cell mates walked out of the maximum security prison that was holding them. Official inquiry into how one of the most wanted men in Southeast Asia managed to escape from the country’s “most heavily guarded police fortress” laconically concluded that the officers on duty at the time had been “negligent.”¹² In Thailand, another major non-NATO ally facing an Islamic insurgency, the police are often the source of more harm than good. Many in the Muslim-dominated south blame police corruption and brutality for alienating large portions of the civilian population as well as increasing support for the Islamic-separatist insurgency that has raged there since 2004.¹³

It is almost axiomatic that any government beset by an armed insurgency has insufficient police capacity. If the police were fully effective, it is likely that the subversive groups would have been detected and defeated before they gained sufficient strength to initiate armed violence. Clearly, the development of effective indigenous police forces should be an important component of U.S. strategy, not only in Iraq, but also in the broader effort to defeat Islamic extremism worldwide. To understand why the United States lacks the institutional capability to train foreign police forces, and why that was not always the case, it is necessary to review some Cold War history.

The Office of Public Safety and the Ban on Police Assistance

During the early years of the Cold War, when communist subversion and insurgency were pressing concerns, international police training was a key part of the U.S. strategy of containment. In 1962, in the wake of the Cuban Revolution, the Kennedy administration created the Office of Public Safety (OPS) within the Agency for International Development (AID). Its mission was to promote the development of effective civilian police forces and provide specific instruction in antisubversion and counterinsurgency measures for countries threatened by Communist movements. To further that goal, the International Police Academy opened in Washington, D.C., in 1963. According to AID, it was the “West Point for police of the non-Communist World.”¹⁴

In its twelve years of operation, the Office of Public Safety provided training to law enforcement agencies around the globe. At its peak in 1968, OPS had a budget of \$60 million and employed 458 police advisors working in 34 different countries. According to one historical account, in its lifetime the Office of Public Safety provided more than \$300 million in training, equipment, and technical assistance to police agencies in 52 countries. An

estimated 5,000 police officers from 77 different countries graduated from the International Police Academy while another 3,600 attended shorter, specialized courses there. In addition, tens of thousands of foreign police officers received in-country training from OPS advisors.¹⁵ A similar capability is desperately needed today.

The work of the Office of Public Safety came to an end in 1974, when Congress adopted Section 660 of the Foreign Assistance Act, which significantly restricts the use of U.S. government funds to assist foreign law enforcement agencies. “Counterinsurgency fatigue,” resulting from the nation’s twenty-year commitment in Vietnam, combined with Congressional concerns about the lack of clear policy guidance for foreign law enforcement assistance to governments accused of human rights abuses led to passage of that legislation.

Since then, Congress has authorized several exemptions that allow police assistance in certain narrowly defined areas. The result is a system that is more chaotic and lacking in clear guidance than at any time under the Office of Public Safety. At present, the Departments of Justice, State, Treasury, Transportation, and Defense all conduct some form of foreign police training. None of these programs are centrally coordinated, and no agency has been assigned a lead role for foreign law enforcement assistance. As one analyst has noted, as a result of the lack of synchronization, “training is often duplicated or inappropriate for the police in a particular country.”¹⁶ According to Dr. David Bayley, a former dean of the School of Criminal Justice at the State University of New York at Albany, these foreign law enforcement assistance programs are so disconnected that it is difficult even to figure out how much the U.S. government spends annually on police assistance.¹⁷

Creating an Institutional Capacity to Train Foreign Police

In Iraq, the Pentagon is currently the *de facto* lead agency for police training, deploying 3,000 police trainers across the country.¹⁸ However, assigning the job of developing foreign police forces to the Department of Defense is not a long-term solution. Military police can provide basic training to foreign security forces, but they lack the specialized expertise of civilian law enforcement agencies. Furthermore, there is a legitimate concern in some circles that civilian police agencies trained by military personnel could become overly militarized. Concrete police assistance, including the kinds of advanced policing skills such as criminal investigation and police intelligence operations that are required in countersubversion and counterinsurgency situations, can only be provided by civilian agencies that possess these skills.

To be effective, such an undertaking would require interagency coordination to draw on the policing expertise located in a variety of agencies across the U.S. government. The Department of State should be the agency to determine how police assistance fits into overall U.S. foreign policy goals for a given country. However, the State Department does not possess the capability to provide such specialized assistance. For that, it should turn to the Department of Justice.

While all aspects of the Office of Public Safety need not be recreated, the basic approach remains sound. To be most effective, U.S. police training efforts should include a combination of in-country training by civilian police advisors as well as more in-depth training for select police officers in academies located in the United States.

Existing Department of Justice programs could be expanded to provide the necessary in-country training capability. A number of exemptions already have been made to the congressional prohibition on police training conducted abroad. Principal among these is the International Criminal Investigative Training Assistance Program, which deploys trainers to enhance the investigative and forensic capabilities of existing police organizations

in emerging democracies. Training abroad could also take place at the International Law Enforcement Academies, which are a joint effort between the State Department, the Justice Department, and the Treasury. The four academies—situated in Budapest; Bangkok; Gaborone, Botswana; and San Jose, Costa Rica—provide eight-week basic policing training as well as specialized short courses. In addition, advanced police skills are taught in short courses at the International Law Enforcement Academy in Roswell, New Mexico.

These in-country and regional training efforts are a productive way of reaching a large number of students at a reasonable cost. However, as Corum's research indicates, depth of training is more important than breadth in developing effective indigenous police forces. As the Office of Public Safety recognized, raising professional standards in foreign police forces, particularly those with as corrupt and dysfunctional a culture as the Iraqi police, requires long-term instruction. The level of competence imparted in an eight-week basic training course in Baghdad or even Budapest cannot compare to the *eight months* of instruction received by every single cadet at the Los Angeles Police Academy.

Developing this longer-term domestic training capability does not mean that the U.S. needs to make the investment to create a new International Police Academy—these training goals can be accomplished using existing facilities. In addition to the FBI Academy at Quantico, a number of larger U.S. metropolitan areas have high-quality police academies. The International Military Education and Training (IMET) program is a model for a program that can allow the Departments of State and Justice to jointly tap into the police training capability of state and local institutions. A collaboration between the State Department and the Department of Defense, IMET annually sends nearly 12,000 foreign military personnel to approximately 150 U.S. military schools and training institutions throughout the United States. The funds for IMET training are provided by the State Department, while the actual training programs are supplied by the Defense Department. National training plans and goals for a given country are jointly determined by State and Defense personnel working at the local embassy. This allows the State Department to provide policy guidance and to make certain that IMET training is in line with broader U.S. foreign policy goals for the country in question.

A similar U.S.-based police training program would allow the most promising police officers and new recruits from Iraq, Afghanistan, or any other designated allied country to attend American police academies alongside regular cadets. An initial pilot program might seek to train between 400–500 foreign officers per year, expanding to several thousand in the near term. Such a program would ensure that the trainees receive the highest quality instruction in modern policing techniques. Moreover, they would gain first-hand insight into the role that a professional police force plays in a democratic country and exposure to such democratic values as belief in the rule of law and respect for individual rights. Once trained, these foreign police officers could begin to form a cadre of truly professional police leaders in their home countries.

The idea of taking existing police officers or new recruits off the job for up to eight months at a time is bound to raise objections in some quarters—particularly in countries like Iraq that are struggling against an active insurgency. Others may balk at the expense involved in bringing several thousand foreign police officers to the United States every year while deploying a large number of police trainers abroad. Although understandable, such objections are short-sighted—it is a question of trading short-term pain for long-term gain.

In the face of escalating insurgent violence, there are pressures to deploy the maximum number of police in the field, which usually requires a major expansion of the force in a short period of time. That often results in lowered recruitment standards and deployment of minimally trained police officers. These falling police standards occur precisely when a

higher-than-normal quality of police force is required to effectively steward the extraordinary powers likely to be granted to the police in order to respond to the insurgent threat. If lower-quality recruits abuse their authority, the government could find itself alienating the very people it is seeking to protect. As one police specialist with counterinsurgency experience notes, “Should police operations become brutal, dishonest or incompetent, the support of the people will be lost.”¹⁹

Corum’s study of Malaya and Cyprus indicated that trading quality for quantity is at best only a stop-gap measure. Smaller numbers of highly trained police have greater value in counterinsurgency than larger numbers of ill-trained security personnel. Once poorly trained police officers are deployed, it is difficult to develop them professionally through on-the-job training. By one estimate, reducing basic police training by 50 percent “can produce a professional cripple for half a decade.”²⁰ Clearly, in the long term, it is better to invest time in the proper development of a police force, even if that means having to “muddle through” for a period with an undermanned force, than it is to quickly put large numbers of semitrained police in the field.

Those who object to increased spending on foreign security assistance need to keep in perspective the fact that enhanced aid to foreign law enforcement agencies would be a drop in the bucket compared to the annual spending on military assistance. IMET alone had a budget of \$92 million in 2004, while total annual expenditures on various foreign military training programs exceeds \$400 million per year.²¹ Given the importance of domestic law enforcement agencies to countersubversion and counterinsurgency missions, some form of rebalancing the priorities of military assistance vis-à-vis law enforcement assistance could be in order. That would allow enhanced law enforcement assistance programs without requiring additional expenditure.

What Should be Done

Implementing a coherent centralized capacity to train foreign police for counterinsurgency missions will require action by a number of different agencies as well as Congress. The prohibition on foreign law enforcement assistance embodied in Section 660 must be lifted. Effective police assistance to partner countries is too important a part of current U.S. strategy and goals to remain handicapped this way. This is not to dismiss Congressional concerns about human rights and the lack of sufficient policy guidance that motivated the initial ban. While repealing Section 660, Congress should simultaneously issue clear guidance on human rights that would direct future law enforcement assistance efforts. Congress can address the lack of policy guidance and overall lack of central coordination of current training efforts by appointing a lead agency for foreign law enforcement assistance.

The necessity of ensuring that foreign law enforcement assistance supports broader U.S. foreign policy goals suggests that the Department of State should be the lead policy-making agency, with the Department of Justice and other agencies providing training and technical assistance. Combining policy formulation and funding for foreign police training in the same agency would contribute to Congress’s goal of ensuring sufficient policy guidance for such operations. From a practical standpoint, the State Department acting as the lead agency also makes sense because funds for these activities would most likely be appropriated by Congress via the international operations “150” account. In coordination with the Department of Justice and other agencies with police training programs, the State Department could then assume the role of lead federal agency for international law enforcement assistance—filling an important gap in the United States’ current counterinsurgency assistance capability.

To effectively manage and coordinate this increased international law enforcement assistance, the Department of Justice would require some change as well. The DOJ currently has no international division. The department's overseas activities currently are scattered throughout various agencies. Creation of an international division under the direction of a dedicated Assistant Attorney General for International Affairs could consolidate the department's international law enforcement assistance programs.

As with every proposal for a new program, one of the first questions asked is inevitably "How do you intend to pay for this?" As already mentioned, by redirecting some of the funds that are currently going to military assistance programs Congress can appropriate funds for enhanced police training programs without increasing overall government spending. Military aid to countries that are currently facing a subversive or insurgent threat certainly delivers an important benefit. However, if combating insurgency remains a priority for the United States, then security assistance funds need to flow to those agencies that are most effective in the fight against insurgents. In many cases, that will mean foreign law enforcement agencies. The initial goals of expanding police training abroad while sending 500 foreign students to domestic police academies, as outlined above, can be achieved with a budget of \$45 million.²² That would allow the United States to achieve a substantial impact while redirecting into law enforcement assistance efforts only a little more than 10 percent of the nation's current \$400 million annual expenditure for foreign military training. That is a small price to pay for effective security assistance.

Furthermore, the development of a standing institutional capacity to assist the development of foreign police forces has utility beyond the realm of counterinsurgency. A host of 1990s-era nation-building efforts ranging from Haiti to Bosnia to East Timor required the (re)construction of legitimate police forces. There is every reason to believe that this capability will be required in future stability operations.

Conclusion

Assistance to foreign law enforcement agencies has been described as "the most underappreciated aspect of our foreign policy and our foreign assistance in existence today."²³ Current U.S. security strategy is focused on the development of effective indigenous security forces in allied countries in order to assist them in resisting subversion and insurgency. However, the United States lacks the ability and the legal basis to effectively train the most important component of a state's counterinsurgency force: the domestic police.

The development of effective indigenous police forces is too important to current counterinsurgency efforts to leave to the uncoordinated half-measures of the interagency process or the well-intentioned improvisation of troops in the field. The United States must develop a comprehensive program for training foreign police to help ensure that struggling government officials in Iraq and elsewhere have the competent police forces needed to defeat insurgencies that are determined to undermine attempts to establish stable democratic regimes.

Notes

1. *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: Office of the Secretary of Defense, 2006), p. 11.

2. For a discussion of this point, see Fredrick Kagan, "A Strategy for Heroes: What's Wrong with the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review," *The Weekly Standard*, vol. 11, no. 22 (February 20, 2006).

3. Michael Moss, "How Iraqi Police Reform Became Casualty of War," *The New York Times*, May 22, 2006.
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10. Corum, *Training Indigenous Forces in Counterinsurgency*, p. 38.
11. Vance Serchuk, "Cop Out: Why Afghanistan Has No Police," *The Weekly Standard*, July 17, 2006.
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16. Dana R. Dillion, "The War on Terrorism in Southeast Asia: Developing Law Enforcement" (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, January 22, 2004), p. 4.
17. David Bayley, *Police Building in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Beyond: Successes, Failures, and Lessons Learned* (panel discussion, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC, May 25, 2006).
18. Moss, "How Iraqi Police Reform Became Casualty of War."
19. David G. Epstein, "The Police Role in Counterinsurgency Efforts," *The Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology and Political Science*, vol. 59, no. 1 (1968): 150.
20. *Ibid.*
21. IMET figures come from Lincoln Bloomfield, "Improving Lives: Military Humanitarian and Assistance Programs," *Foreign Policy Agenda*, November 2004, <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itps/1104/ijpe/ijpe1104.pdf> (accessed on June 5, 2006.) In fiscal year 2004, "about 50,000 individuals from 152 countries participated in training worth a total value of approximately \$412M." U.S. State Department, *Foreign Military Training: Joint Report to Congress, Fiscal Years 2004 and 2005* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, April 2005), Executive Summary.
22. According to the Los Angeles Police Department's "Schedule of Repayment and Reimbursement for Training Costs," for fiscal year 2006–2007 it costs approximately \$60,000 to send a single recruit through the police academy.
23. Dick Mayer, *Police Building in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Beyond: Successes, Failures, and Lessons Learned* (panel discussion, American Enterprise Institute, Washington, DC, May 25, 2006).