HEADQUARTERS
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FOR The Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen, Marines, and Civilians of NATO ISAF and US Forces-Afghanistan

SUBJECT: COMISAF's Counterinsurgency Guidance

Team, here is my guidance for the conduct of counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan. In keeping with the admonition in this guidance to "learn and adapt," I will update this document periodically in the months ahead. Indeed, this edition is my first update, as I received useful feedback on the initial draft from Afghan partners and also received advice from elders and Special Forces teams in Herat Province's Zericho Valley. I welcome further feedback.

As I noted during my assumption of command remarks, it is a privilege to serve with each of you in this hugely important endeavor. And I appreciate all that you will do in helping to turn this guidance into reality on the ground.

Secure and serve the population. The decisive terrain is the human terrain. The people are the center of gravity. Only by providing them security and earning their trust and confidence can the Afghan government and ISAF prevail.

Live among the people. We can't commute to the fight. Position joint bases and combat outposts as close to those we're seeking to secure as is feasible. Decide on locations with input from our partners and after consultation with local citizens and informed by intelligence and security assessments.

Help confront the culture of impunity. The Taliban are not the only enemy of the people. The people are also threatened by inadequate governance, corruption, and abuse of power – recruiters for the Taliban. President Karzai has forthrightly committed to combat these threats. Work with our Afghan partners to help turn his words into reality and to help our partners protect the people from malign actors as well as from terrorists.

Help Afghans build accountable governance. Afghanistan has a long history of representative self-government at all levels, from the village shura to the government in Kabul. Help the government and the people revive those traditions and help them develop checks and balances to prevent abuses.

Pursue the enemy relentlessly. Together with our Afghan partners, get our teeth into the insurgents and don't let go. When the extremists fight, make them pay. Seek out and eliminate those who threaten the population. Don't let them intimidate the innocent. Target the whole network, not just individuals.

Fight hard and fight with discipline. Hunt the enemy aggressively, but use only the firepower needed to win a fight. We can't win without fighting, but we also cannot kill or capture our way to victory. Moreover, if we kill civilians or damage their property in the course of our operations, we will create more enemies than our operations eliminate. That's exactly what the Taliban want. Don't fall into their trap. We must continue our efforts to reduce civilian casualties to an absolute minimum.

Identify corrupt officials. President Karzai has said, "My government is committed to fighting corruption with all means possible." Help the government achieve that aim. Make sure the people we work with work for the people. If they don't, work with partners to enable action, or we will appear to be part of the problem. Bring networks of malign actors to the attention of trusted Afghan partners and your chain of command. Act with your Afghan partners to confront, isolate, pressure, and defund malign actors – and, where appropriate, to refer malign actors for prosecution.

Hold what we secure. Together with our Afghan partners, develop the plan to hold an area (and to build in it) before starting to clear or secure it. The people need to know that we will not abandon them. Prioritize population security over short-duration disruption operations. And when we begin to transition to Afghan lead, thin out rather than handing off and withdrawing, maintaining headquarters even as we reduce combat elements.

Foster lasting solutions. Help our Afghans partners create good governance and enduring security. Avoid compromises with malign actors that achieve short-term gains at the expense of long-term stability. Think hard before pursuing initiatives that may not be sustainable in the long run. When it comes to projects, small is often beautiful.

Money is ammunition; don't put it in the wrong hands. Institute "COIN contracting." Pay close attention to the impact of our spending and understand who benefits from it. And remember, we are who we fund. How we spend is often more important than how much we spend.

Be a good guest. Treat the Afghan people and their property with respect. Think about how we drive, how we patrol, how we relate to people, and how we help the community. View our actions through the eyes of the Afghans and, together with our partners, consult with elders before pursuing new initiatives and operations.

Consult and build relationships, but not just with those who seek us out. Earn the people's trust, talk to them, ask them questions, and learn about their lives. Inquire about social dynamics, frictions, local histories, and grievances. Hear what they say. Be aware of others in the room and how their presence may affect the answers you get. Cross-check information and make sure you have the full story. Avoid knee-jerk responses based on first impressions. Don't be a pawn in someone else's game. Spend time, listen, consult, and drink lots of tea.

Walk. Stop by, don't drive by. Patrol on foot whenever possible and engage the population. Take off your sunglasses. Situational awareness can only be gained by interacting face-to-face, not separated by ballistic glass or Oakleys.

Act as one team. Work closely with our international and Afghan partners, civilian as well as military. Treat them as brothers-in-arms. Unity of effort and cooperation are not optional.

Partner with the ANSF. Live, eat, train, plan, and operate together. Depend on one another. Hold each other accountable at all echelons down to trooper level. Help our ANSF partners achieve excellence. Respect them and listen to them. Be a good role model.

Promote local reintegration. Together with our Afghan partners, identify and separate the "reconcilables" from the "irreconcilables." Identify and report obstacles to reintegration. Help our partners address grievances and strive to make the reconcilables part of the local solution, even as we work with our partners to identify and kill, capture, drive out, or "turn" the irreconcilables.

Be first with the truth. Beat the insurgents and malign actors to the headlines. Preempt rumors. Get accurate information to the chain of command, to Afghan leaders, to the people, and to the press as soon as possible. Integrity is critical to this fight. Avoid spinning, and don't try to "dress up" an ugly situation. Acknowledge setbacks and failures, including civilian casualties, and then state how we'll respond and what we've learned.

Fight the information war aggressively. Challenge disinformation. Turn our enemies' extremist ideologies, oppressive practices, and indiscriminate violence against them. Hang their barbaric actions like millstones around their necks.

Manage expectations. Avoid premature declarations of success. Note what has been accomplished and what still needs to be done. Strive to under-promise and over-deliver.

Live our values. Stay true to the values we hold dear. This is what distinguishes us from our enemies. We are engaged in a tough endeavor. It is often brutal, physically demanding, and frustrating. All of us experience moments of anger, but we must not give in to dark impulses or tolerate unacceptable actions by others.

Maintain continuity through unit transitions. From day one, start building the information you'll provide to your successors. Share information and understanding in the months before transitions. Strive to maintain operational tempo and local relationships throughout transitions to avoid giving insurgents and malign actors a rest.

Empower subordinates. Resource to enable decentralized action. Push assets and authorities down to those who most need them and can actually use them. Flatten reporting chains (while maintaining hierarchical decision chains). Remember that it is those at tactical levels – the so-called "strategic sergeants" and "strategic captains" – who turn big ideas in counterinsurgency operations into reality on the ground.

Win the battle of wits. Learn and adapt more quickly than the enemy. Be cunning. Outsmart the insurgents. Share best practices and lessons learned. Create and exploit opportunities.

Exercise initiative. In the absence of guidance or orders, figure out what the orders should have been and execute them aggressively.

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