



## Will Washington Betray Anti-Regime Iranians?

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When it comes to a state fighting a nonstate enemy, there is a widespread impression the state is doomed to fail.

In 1968, [Robert F. Kennedy](#) concluded that victory in Vietnam was "probably beyond our grasp," and called for a peaceful settlement. In 1983, the analyst [Shahram Chubin](#) wrote that the Soviets in Afghanistan were embroiled in an "unwinnable war." In 1992, [U.S. officials](#) shied away from involvement in Bosnia, fearing entanglement in a centuries-old conflict. In 2002, retired U.S. general [Wesley Clark](#) portrayed the American effort in Afghanistan as unwinnable. In 2004, President [George W. Bush](#) said of the war on terror, "I don't think you can win it." In 2007, the [Winograd Commission](#) deemed Israel's war against Hizbullah unwinnable.

More than any other recent war, the allied forces' effort in Iraq was seen as a certain defeat, especially in the 2004-06 period. Former secretary of state [Henry A. Kissinger](#), former British minister [Tony Benn](#), and former U.S. special envoy [James Dobbins](#) all called it unwinnable. The Baker-Hamilton [Iraq Study Group Report](#) echoed this view. Military analyst [David Hackworth](#), among others, explicitly compared Iraq to Vietnam: "As with Vietnam, the Iraqi tar pit was oh-so-easy to sink into, but appears to be just as tough to exit."

The list of "unwinnable wars" goes on and includes, for example, the counterinsurgencies in [Sri Lanka](#) and [Nepal](#). "Underlying all these analyses," notes Yaakov Amidror, a retired Israeli major general, is the assumption "that counterinsurgency

campaigns necessarily turn into protracted conflicts that will inevitably lose political support."

Amidror, however, disagrees with this assessment. In a recent study published by the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, [Winning Counterinsurgency War: The Israeli Experience](#), he convincingly argues that states can beat non-state actors.

This debate has the greatest significance, for if the pessimists are right, Western powers are doomed to lose every current and future conflict not involving conventional forces (meaning planes, ships, and tanks). The future would look bleak, with the prospect of successful insurgencies around the world and even within the West itself. One can only shudder at the prospect of an Israeli-style intifada in, say, the [United States](#). Coincidentally, news came from [Australia](#) last week of an Islamist group calling for a "forest jihad" of massive fires in that country.

Victory over insurgencies is possible, Amidror argues, but it does not come easily. Unlike the emphasis on size of forces and arsenals in traditional wars, he postulates four conditions of a mostly political nature required to defeat insurgencies. Two of them concern the state, where the national leadership must:

- Understand and accept the political and public relations challenge involved in battling insurgents.
- Appreciate the vital role of intelligence, invest in it, and require the military to use it effectively.

Another two conditions concern counterterrorist operations, which must:

- Isolate terrorists from the non-terrorist civilian population.
- Control and isolate the territories where terrorists live and fight.

If these guidelines are successfully followed, the result will not be a signing ceremony and a victory parade but something more subtle – what Amidror calls "sufficient victory" but I would call "[sufficient control](#)." By this, he means a result "that does not produce many years of tranquility, but rather achieves only a 'repressed quiet,' requiring the investment of continuous effort to preserve it." As examples, Amidror offers the British achievement in Northern Ireland and the Spanish one vis-à-vis the Basques.

After these conditions have been met, Amidror argues, begins "the difficult, complex, crushing, dull war, without flags and trumpets." That war entails "fitting together bits of intelligence information, drawing conclusions, putting into operation small forces under difficult conditions within a mixed populace of terrorists and innocent civilians in a densely-populated urban center or isolated village, and small tactical victories."

Following these basic precepts does lead to success, and Western states over the past century have in fact enjoyed an impressive run of victories over insurgents. Twice U.S. forces defeated insurgents in the Philippines (1899-1902 and 1946-54), as did the British in Palestine (1936-39),

Malaya (1952-57), and Oman (1964-75), the Israelis in the West Bank (Operation Defensive Shield, 2002), and most recently the U.S. surge in Iraq.

Counterinsurgency wars are winnable, but they have their own imperatives, ones very distinct from those of conventional warfare.