

Counterinsurgency Center in Kansas to play crucial role in Mideast wars

By [Joel Mathis](#)

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Fort Leavenworth, Kan. — After a half-decade fighting guerrillas in Afghanistan — and another three years doing the same in Iraq — the U.S. military has decided to start some hard thinking about how to battle insurgencies.

This summer, the Army and Marines quietly created a joint Counterinsurgency Center at this northeast Kansas base. It's a four-person think tank that will help shape training and doctrine for forces headed to those Middle East hot spots.

"We've found, as adversaries have seen our capability to fight very well in a conventional sense, they've adapted. They've chosen to challenge us in another way," said Army Col. Peter Mansoor, the center's director.

"Until we prove that we can counter those methods — methods of the insurgents, irregular warfare and terrorism — we will continue to be challenged in that fashion."

Fort Leavenworth has increasingly been on a war footing in recent years, shifting its officer-training curricula from Cold War preparations to lessons about Middle East culture.

But experts welcomed creation of the new center.

"One might say it's overdue," said John Pike, director of GlobalSecurity.org, a Virginia-based Web site that covers defense matters. He added: "It's obviously worth doing because counterinsurgency is a different type of war."

Ray Finch, a former Army major who now works at Kansas University's Center for Russian, East European and Eurasian Studies, agreed. Some students at the center are officers based at Fort Leavenworth.

"They tell me the scuttlebutt is they're still five steps behind in getting the curriculum in line with what's going on in the field," Finch said. Creating the counterinsurgency center is "a step in the right direction. I think they finally realized the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact are no longer the enemy."

Big wars, small wars

Mansoor, the director, is a military historian who has a doctorate from The Ohio State University. He commanded an armored brigade in Iraq during the first year of the war there.

He said the U.S. military has fought insurgencies throughout its history — the American Revolution was an insurgency, he said — all the way through Vietnam.

But the Army mostly prepared to battle large forces sent forth by other nations, not small bands of guerrillas that can destabilize a nation.

"We used to say that if you could fight a big war, you could ramp down and fight a small war. And what we're finding out is that that's not necessarily the case," he said. "It really is a skill set that has to be trained and educated in its own right, not just as a subset of high-end combat."

Fighting insurgencies in Iraq and Afghanistan, center officials say, will take more than well-trained warriors.

“An insurgency lives because of a void in the political process,” said Marine Col. Mark Olson, the center’s deputy director.

Mansoor agreed.

“There’s a lot more weapons in counterinsurgency than bullets, and some of the best weapons don’t shoot,” he said.

“Money is an extremely important weapon. Jobs, which usually goes hand-in-hand with money. Different pieces of expertise like medical and dental care. The ability to reform a judicial system. All of these things are really, really important.”

That’s why Mansoor suggests that the entire U.S. government — not just the military — needs a playbook for building countries threatened by guerrilla warfare.

“Mao, Chairman Mao, who wrote a book on guerrilla war and knew something about it, said revolutionary war is 80 percent political and only 20 percent military,” Mansoor said. “He was right.”

No ‘magic fix’

The Army and Marines already have a number of institutions working to create ideas about how to fight insurgent wars — Fort Leavenworth alone is home to the Center for Army Lessons Learned and the center where the Army’s battle doctrine is written.

The new Counterinsurgency Center, Mansoor said, will look at the entire system, pointing out both gaps and redundancies in the work done by other organizations within the military.

“Have you ever seen those BASF commercials? ‘We don’t make the sunglasses, we make them darker. We don’t make the bridge, we make it stronger,’” he said. “That’s what we are in terms of the relation to counterinsurgency.”

Americans shouldn’t expect some magic fix to emerge from the new center. One key to fighting a successful counterinsurgency is patience.

“If you’ve looked at the history of insurgencies, counterinsurgencies, they tend to take a long time,” Mansoor said. “Decade is about average. It could take much less, it could take much more.”

That’s why, he said, “getting counterinsurgency right is now every bit as important to the Army as fighting conventional combat.”

But defining victory in such wars can be difficult. It’s not as easy as seeing the hill and taking the hill.

“You know, the people will let you know. The center of gravity in a counterinsurgency is the population,” Mansoor said.

“Back in 2003, when we first went into Iraq, there was a common sense that the people were a condition of the battlefield. But in fact, they’re the prize. They’re not an obstacle between you and the enemy. If you secure the population, you’re going to be able to eventually target the enemy, or he’s going to fade away — or he’s going to quit.”

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