

# **The People Are the Key:**

---

## **Irregular Warfare Success Story in the Philippines**

Steve Lewis





# **The People Are the Key: Irregular Warfare Success Story in the Philippines**

Steve Lewis

This article was initially presented as a paper at the Post-9/11 Irregular Warfare Lessons Learned Conference in Annapolis, Maryland from September 17-18, 2024. The conference was sponsored by FPRI's Center for the Study of Intelligence and Nontraditional Warfare and the Department of Defense's Irregular Warfare Center.

All rights reserved. Printed in the United States of America. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

The views expressed in this report are those of the author alone and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Foreign Policy Research Institute, a non-partisan organization that seeks to publish well-argued, policy-oriented articles on American foreign policy and national security priorities.

© 2025 by the Foreign Policy Research Institute

April 2025

# Center for the Study of Intelligence and Irregular Warfare

**Mission:** To facilitate the study of intelligence activities and nontraditional warfare to help educate and explore how they best support national security.

**Vision:** The Center's scholarly research of intelligence, and irregular warfare and political warfare combined as nontraditional warfare, aims to facilitate understanding by the general public, as well as government and academic specialists, on how these specialties provide for the nation's security, caveats in their application, and lessons learned from past actions to inform future policy decisions. It will do this via two methods:

**Educate to help others navigate:** The Center will conduct scholarly research of the past to help educate the general public on intelligence and nontraditional warfare, and why they are important to U.S. national security. It will also assist practitioners with lessons learned from history to guide them in their current duties.

**Trailblaze new paths:** The Center will investigate current challenges in the fields of intelligence and nontraditional warfare and recommend possible solutions to these challenges, with an emphasis towards the unorthodox or the revolutionary. It will also explore the horizon for both oncoming challenges and threats to America's ability to conduct these operations.

# About the Author

**Steve Lewis** is a retired US Army officer with over 30 years of enlisted and commissioned service. He served for 17 years as an US Army Civil Affairs officer in both special operations and conventional units. His assignments include deployments to Asia and Latin America. His last assignment before retirement was as the chief of US Southern Command's Civil Affairs Planning Division.

Steve is a graduate of Arizona State University with a BS in Economics and the Naval Postgraduate School with an MS in Special Operations/Low Intensity Conflict.

Steve is currently serving as a humanitarian operational planner with the US Agency for International Development's Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance. As an operational planner he is focused on complex crises in Europe and Africa.



# Key Findings

After decades of conflict and instability, the US government helped the government of the Republic of the Philippines defeat the Abu Sayyaf Group. This was accomplished through a combination of military and development assistance focused on building local legitimacy and protecting the population.

The Abu Sayyaf Group was a terrorist and insurgency group active in Southeast Asia. They were aligned with al Qaeda and sought to create a sharia state in the southern Philippines.

The challenge of separating the Abu Sayyaf Group from the populations is a hallmark of irregular warfare. In irregular warfare, the *human terrain is the key terrain for success*.

In this conflict, providing legitimate governance and protecting the population was a far more successful strategy than hunting down individual terrorists. This article describes how this was done in the Philippines and provides specific lessons learned from that operation.

# Introduction

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, “turned the international order upside down”<sup>1</sup> by showing the world that a small non-state group can have a disastrous impact on a superpower. For years before 9/11, al Qaeda and similar terrorist groups were taking advantage of weak governments to build their networks and sow global instability, but the United States government did not understand the significance of these actions. On September 11, 2001, the United States was tragically reintroduced to *irregular warfare*.

After the 9/11 attacks, the United States government faced a threat posed by not just one terrorist group but by a global network of associated groups. America’s response was the Global War on Terror (GWOT), which was designed to disrupt and destroy the global network of terrorist and extremist organizations.<sup>2</sup> The US military also quickly learned that this was not a “conventional” struggle with organized armies meeting on an open battlefield; instead, it was irregular warfare, fought for “legitimacy and influence over relevant populations.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, the GWOT was designed to be a balanced approach combining direct and indirect methods, working closely with partner nations to help them defeat terrorist networks, and building legitimacy to create an environment inhospitable to terrorist and extremist ideology. In other words, the US military was to help its partners to engage with and protect the population.<sup>4</sup> This was essential because in

irregular warfare, the *human terrain* is the key terrain.

Even before 9/11, Southeast Asia had its own terror network of violent Salafist extremists, which was connected to al Qaeda and focused on overthrowing secular governments and creating a sharia-based state. The danger of this network quickly became apparent after the Bali bombing in 2002 and the Philippines Superferry bombing in 2004 killed 202<sup>5</sup> and 116<sup>6</sup> civilians, respectively. As part of the GWOT, the US military developed Operations Enduring Freedom-Philippines (OEF-P), an operational plan specifically designed for the threat and environment found in the Philippines, and created the Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P) to execute OEF-P.

This article will examine the lessons the JSOTF-P learned about engaging the *human terrain*—the civil society, political, and cultural aspects of OEF-P. As the world continues to change, and competition between the superpowers is now a focus of the United States government, these lessons are more important than ever.<sup>7</sup> This article is intended to assist future irregular warfare practitioners in grasping the importance of understanding human terrain by using a successful operation in the Philippines as a template for lessons learned and approaches that can be tried again.

**Background.** The Republic of the Philippines is a nation of approximately 118 million people located in over 7,000 islands in Southeast Asia. There are three main island groups: Luzon in the north contains the capital of Manila, the Visayas lie in the center, and the Mindanao island group (which includes the Sulu Archipelago) is in the south. The Philippines is a majority Christian country (79% Roman Catholic) with a minority Muslim population (6.4% Muslim), who primarily reside in the southern island group of Mindanao.<sup>8</sup> Muslim traders brought Islam to the southern Philippines around 1450, which led to the establishment of a formal Islamic ruling body and a flourishing Islamic society. The *datus*, or traditional leaders associated with Islamic society, continue to influence the southern Philippines.

The United States gained possession of the Philippines from Spain in 1899 as a result of the Spanish American war. As part of the United States management of its new colony it fought the bloody Moro rebellion from 1902-1913. The Muslim tribes in the southern Philippines, called Moros by the Spanish, sought to carve out an independent Islamic state. General John “Blackjack” Pershing, (a captain at the time) was one well known commander of US forces. General Pershing and his soldiers successfully defeated the Moros and stabilized the region through a combination of fierce combat, understanding of the indigenous culture, and skillful negotiation.<sup>9</sup>

The Republic of the Philippines gained its independence in 1946 after 300 years as a Spanish colony and about 50 years

as a colony of the United States.<sup>10</sup> Since independence, the government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Armed Forces of the Philippines have fought against a communist insurgency throughout the country<sup>11</sup> and an Islamic separatist movement in the Muslim south.<sup>12</sup>

By the 1970s, the continued desire for a separate Islamic state in the southern Philippines, empowered by international support from Libya, led to the creation of the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) and later the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF). These groups achieved some success with a limited autonomy agreement with the GRP in 1996. In the 1980s, smaller insurgent groups with connections to the MNLF and MILF began developing connections to foreign terrorist organizations. One such group was the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), which sent members to fight the Soviet Army in Afghanistan and developed connections with the al Qaeda network and later Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), an Indonesian terrorist group.<sup>13</sup>

In the early 2000s, the ASG/JI increased its terrorist operations, expanded its deliberate attacks on the Armed Forces of the Philippines, and targeted US service members.<sup>14</sup> The 9/11 terrorist attacks and increased ASG/JI terrorist activities prompted the United States Indo-Pacific Command, in cooperation with the GRP, to establish the JSOTF-P and expand the goal and scope of US military cooperation with the Armed Forces of the Philippines.<sup>15,16</sup>

**Problem.** The island group of Mindanao, which includes the Sulu Archipelago, was an under-governed space in which the GRP had a limited presence and provided few services. The Armed Forces of the Philippines was an isolated “besieged” force that perceived the entire Muslim population as a threat.<sup>17</sup> The Muslim population generally perceived the GRP as illegitimate and the Armed Forces of the Philippines as a hostile occupying force. Local governments were often perceived as corrupt or simply absent by the local population and distrusted by the national government in Manila.<sup>18</sup>

Traditional leaders and longstanding separatist groups, such as the MNLF and MILF, held far more influence and legitimacy with the local population. The population was generally sympathetic to the ASG, as many members had familial connections with the Mindanao community or were former members of the MNLF.<sup>19</sup> This combination created a safe, hospitable environment for the ASG/JI to operate.<sup>20</sup>

**Approach.** The strategic goal of OEF-P was to ensure that the Philippine government was fully able to exercise sovereignty in the southern Philippines. To achieve that goal, the JSOTF-P established the objectives of ending the existence of ungoverned space, building the GRP’s legitimacy and influence with the Muslim population, and building the Armed Forces of the Philippines’ capacity to conduct counterinsurgency and counter-terrorism operations.<sup>21</sup> The JSOTF-P adopted a balanced approach to achieving these objectives in line with the GWOT global

campaign plan. It would train and advise the Armed Forces of the Philippines on military skills, including combat techniques, intelligence management, logistics, and planning. To balance this direct approach, the JSOTF-P was to help the Armed Forces of the Philippines engage positively with the population and assist the GRP in providing good governance to the disaffected population, thus building the GRP/Armed Forces of the Philippines legitimacy and positive presence. The Armed Forces of the Philippines established Joint Task Force Comet (JTF Comet) to manage its military operations in the Sulu Archipelago<sup>22</sup> and to coordinate with the JSOTF-P elements in Sulu.<sup>23</sup>

**Outcome.** American counterterrorism operations in the Philippines lasted from 2002 to 2017 and were determined successful. The JSOTF-P met its strategic objectives, as the Armed Forces of the Philippines significantly increased its legitimacy in the eyes of the population in the south.<sup>24</sup> The GRP had greater control of its territory and was providing significantly better governance in partnership with local governments. The Armed Forces of the Philippines significantly improved its counterinsurgency/counter-terrorism capabilities as well as its civil-military operations structure and effectiveness.<sup>25</sup> The ASG/JI was not eliminated, but its effectiveness, legitimacy, and influence on the populations were severely diminished.<sup>26</sup>

A 2016 Rand study stated that OEF-P can be considered a textbook example of how to conduct foreign internal defense, specifically through the synergistic application of diverse

special operations capabilities as well as the appropriate use of assessments.<sup>27</sup> This report assessed that OEF-P and the JSOTF-P mission was a success based on 1) a reduction in enemy attacks, 2) a decrease in the size of the enemy (terrorist/insurgent) organizations, and 3) declining popular support for the threat groups and increased satisfaction with government forces.<sup>28</sup>

## Lessons Learned

### The Nature of the Conflict

*If we must fight, with two thousand years of experience behind us, there are no excuses for not fighting well.*<sup>29</sup>  
—T.E. Lawrence

**Background.** The JSOTF-P's operations hold many valuable lessons for the conduct of irregular warfare, especially within the human terrain. The task force's leadership understood from the beginning that the human terrain would be the key terrain. Building the GRP's legitimacy and improving the Armed Forces of the Philippines' ability to engage the population were all activities aimed at influencing the human terrain.

The JSOTF-P also started on a good foundation.<sup>30</sup> Many members were already familiar with the rich history of counterinsurgency. Insurgents and counterinsurgents, such as T. E. Lawrence, Mao Tse-tung, David Galula, Ed Lansdale, and David Kilcullen, authored valuable records of their experiences. The challenge was to adapt and apply these lessons to the current conflict.

## Lessons Learned

1. *In irregular warfare, the human terrain is the key terrain.*
2. *The history of counterinsurgency and foreign internal defense holds many rich lessons. New practitioners must learn their history and adapt these lessons to new conflicts and environments.*

### Building Legitimacy

*The strongest is never strong enough to be master, unless he transforms strength into right and obedience into duty.* —Rousseau<sup>31</sup>

**Background.** One of the strategic objectives of OEF-P was to build the legitimacy of the GRP and the Armed Forces of the Philippines in Mindanao. According to Professor Bruce Gilley:

*Legitimacy is the right to rule. It is an acceptance by citizens that the political institutions and leaders who wield sovereign power over them have gained that power and are using it in a way that is consistent with the rules, laws, ethics, norms, and values of the political community, and enjoy their explicit consent.*<sup>32</sup>

A population usually accepts its government as legitimate when it acts according to established rules and traditional norms and values, it delivers services as expected, it has some measure of political accountability, and it appears competent in keeping its citizens



safe.<sup>33</sup> This is the academic answer, but the JSOTF-P learned from their Armed Forces of the Philippines counterparts' lessons fighting the communist insurgency that it also requires daily positive interaction. In other words, legitimacy was not a binary yes or no but a *process that required a consistent investment of time*.<sup>34</sup> The Armed Forces of the Philippines demonstrated that frequent positive interaction with the population helped them be seen as legitimate in the communist-contested areas.<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, at the start of OEF-P, the GRP and Armed Forces of the Philippines' approach toward the Muslim population was distinctly different from that toward its Christian populations. The Armed Forces of the Philippines employed a balanced approach in the anti-communist operations, seeking to improve government services while isolating guerillas from the population. They created specialized teams to work with and live amongst the population.<sup>36</sup> During counterinsurgency or counter-terrorism operations in predominately Muslim areas, the Armed Forces of the Philippines favored direct combat operations and generally considered all Muslims as part of the insurgency or terrorist threat. Their relationship with the Muslim population was intentionally bad.<sup>37</sup> One senior Philippine Army general admitted, "We treated Muslims like second-class citizens."<sup>38</sup>

During a JSOTF-P/Armed Forces of the Philippines medical civic action project in a Muslim community in the Zamboanga Del Sur province, the author observed an Armed Forces of the Philippines noncommissioned

officer intentionally treating Muslim children disrespectfully. The author challenged the noncommissioned officer on his behavior, and he stated that it was encouraged by his chain of command.<sup>39</sup>

With the JSOTF-P's encouragement and support, the GRP/Armed Forces of the Philippines reconsidered how to engage the Muslim population and how best to build legitimacy in southern Mindanao. JTF Comet increased its investment in civil-military operations projects, and its Civil-military operations teams took greater care when engaging Muslim communities. It also set up specialized teams, equivalent to the teams the Armed Forces of the Philippines used in communist-dominated areas, called Special Advocacy on Literacy/Livelihood and Advancement for Muslims (SALAAM) teams. The SALAAM name was chosen as it means "peace" in Arabic and as a way for the government to show the Islamic population that they were serious about building a peaceful relationship by which the government would better understand and address the specific concerns of the Muslims communities. SALAAM teams are multifunctional teams consisting of psychological operations, civil affairs, and security personnel, all with expertise in the religion and culture of the southern Philippines.<sup>40</sup> The SALAAM teams conducted civil-military operations projects, established literacy and education programs, helped organize community volunteer organizations, and helped local governments better access GRP resources.<sup>41</sup>

Just as important as building the legitimacy of the GRP and Armed Forces of the Philippines was exposing the illegitimate actions of the ASG/JI, which sought to share in the umbrella of legitimacy provided by the MNLF and local traditional leaders. Many MNLF leaders were reluctant to repudiate the ASG/JI due to family connections or their perception of the ASG/JI's influence on the population. American advisors helped JTF Comet/GRP engage with the MNLF and the *datus* to encourage them to renounce the criminal behavior of the ASG/JI.

One example of this cooperation was during an ASG/JI bombing of a market in Jolo City. The ASG/JI bombed a market and killed innocent civilians, including women and children, to extort money from the vendors.<sup>42</sup> The JSOTF-P helped JTF Comet develop a messaging campaign that incorporated the MNLF and local *datus* publicly renouncing the ASG/JI for terrorism and criminal behavior.<sup>43</sup>

## Lessons Learned

**3. Helping a partner build its own legitimacy is possible. However, it takes patience, relationship-building, and arranging a series of daily positive interactions to build trust and confidence with both the population and the local armed forces.**

**4. Highlight the illegitimate acts of the terrorists and encourage other traditional organizations to speak out against these criminal actions. Do not let terrorists try to gain legitimacy through their relationship with traditional leaders. Challenge the terrorist group legitimacy through messaging and engagement.**

## Role of Civil-Military Operations

*The civic action program was one of the most successful aspects of the mission and reflected great credit on the governments of the Philippines and the United States.*<sup>44</sup>

—Col. David Maxwell, Commander, Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines 2006–2007

**Background.** The importance of civil-military operations was quickly recognized at the start of OEF-P.<sup>45</sup> Civil-military operations was a core element of the “Basilan model,” which was the basis for the task force’s success in Basilan at the start of OEF-P.<sup>46</sup> However, as successful as civil-military operations were at the start of OEF-P, the ability of the JSOTF-P/JTF Comet’s civil-military operations practitioners matured considerably over the course of the campaign. By 2006, the US Army Special Operations Command had assigned a full civil affairs company to the JSOTF-P, including a company headquarters integrated into the JSOTF-P staff and personnel to staff the combined JSOTF-P/JTF Comet Humanitarian Assistance Coordination Center at Camp Bautista on Jolo Island. As the JSOTF-P/JTF Comet’s civil-military operations organization matured, so did its ability to tailor specific projects to specific communities for specific objectives.

Civil-military operations projects helped the JSOTF-P/JTF Comet gain access to Muslim communities and start the process of mutual understanding; however, the initial focus was on quick project completion. The JSOTF-P civil-military operations leadership learned from the Armed Forces of the Philippines’ experience in communist areas that small

projects with local input, coordination, and resources help build relationships and trust between the community and the Armed Forces of the Philippines. Such projects (locally-led development) had the most impact in building legitimacy and influencing the population because they required daily interaction for coordination and planning and input or “sweat equity” from the community. Communities that mobilized to support their own development were less likely to support the ASG/JI.<sup>47</sup> The JSOTF-P learned that the building process, even more than the physical structure, was the true measure of successful Civil-military operations.<sup>48</sup>

Larger, technical, contractor-managed projects, such as building roads or constructing major buildings, were valuable but could be counterproductive, as outside contractors sometimes had negative interactions with the local population. A rude contractor could give a community the impression that the GRP did not care about the local population. In those cases, American and Filipino civil-military operations teams acted as intermediaries to keep friction under control.

Funding for civil-military operations projects came primarily from the Department of Defense Overseas Humanitarian, Disaster, and Civic Aid (OHDACA) program. The OHDACA is a Defense Security Cooperation Agency program managed by the combatant command (the United States Indo-Pacific Command) responsible for US military engagement in the Philippines. The OHDACA is designed for peacetime environments; the program managers usually prefer large,

contractor-executed projects coordinated with partner nation senior officials, which are easier to monitor and evaluate.<sup>49</sup> In contrast, the OHDACA is not designed for semi-permissive irregular war environments, and the mismatch of design and requirements caused continuous friction between American civil-military operations teams and the United States Indo-Pacific Command’s OHDACA office. Both teams worked very hard to get the JSOTF-P the resources it needed, but there were often legal or bureaucratic hurdles that could not be overcome.

## Lessons Learned

**5. Civil-military operations can be an extremely effective tool, but they must be tailored to a specific community and adjusted for particular objectives. Smaller projects, led by partners with thorough local coordination and participation, are best for building legitimacy and influence. Time, more than money, is the required resource for success.**

**6. The US military is not optimized to conduct small-scale, locally led, tailored civil-military operations projects in an irregular warfare environment. Its mechanism needs updating to support civil-military operations under such circumstances.**

## Advising Partners

*Do not try to do too much with your own hands. Better the Arabs do it tolerably than you do it perfectly. It is their war, and you are to help, not win it for them. Actually, also under the very odd conditions of Arabia, your practical work will not be as good as, perhaps, you think it is.*<sup>50</sup>—T.E. Lawrence

**Background.** One of OEF-P's strategic objectives was to build the Armed Forces of the Philippines' irregular warfare capacity, including its ability to engage with the civil population and conduct civil-military operations. The JSOTF-P civil-military operations teams quickly learned that they had as much to learn from the Armed Forces of the Philippines as they had to teach them.

The Armed Forces of the Philippines has a long history of successfully engaging, understanding, and influencing the human terrain through its anti-communist counterinsurgency campaigns.<sup>51</sup> As mentioned earlier, the Armed Forces of the Philippines developed specialized teams to embed in communist-influenced communities, and these teams helped reconnect the community to the GRP. The Armed Forces of the Philippines has a methodical process for understanding a community, discussing their grievances and challenges, soliciting local input for solutions, and ensuring community willingness to support potential projects. It also helps organize community groups and associations, some to support development projects and others to help defend the community.<sup>52</sup> Many of these processes are superior to the current US military's civil-military operations doctrine. Thus, the JSOTF-P civil-military operations

teams learned valuable lessons from their Armed Forces of the Philippines counterparts. The challenge for the predominantly Catholic Armed Forces of the Philippines was a cultural bias that limited their engagement with Muslim communities.

As US civil-military operations teams recognized the obvious advantage of the Armed Forces of the Philippines' approach in communist-influenced areas, they encouraged the Armed Forces of the Philippines to adopt the same approach in Muslim communities. This was initially met with significant resistance. Even when individual Armed Forces of the Philippines officers wanted to try a more engaging approach in Muslim communities, it's organizational culture prevented this. However, as all levels of the JSOTF-P leadership continued to work with Philippine military leaders every day, their relationships eventually led to enough trust for the Armed Forces of the Philippines' units to try this approach. This led to the eventual establishment of SALAAM teams in JTF Comet.

## Lessons Learned

**7. As an outside observer/advisor, you may observe problems in the partners' systems/approaches; however, your advice will not be effective until you build a trusted relationship that can facilitate hard discussions.**

**8. You can learn as much or more from your partner than you teach him. Just because the US has more money/equipment does not mean we know how best to do everything within the local context.**

## Engaging Civil Society

*Fellowship is life and lack of fellowship is death, but in hell there is no brotherhood but every man for himself.*<sup>53</sup>

—John Ball, English priest and community organizer during the Peasants' Revolt in 1381

**Background.** US and Filipino civil-military operations teams found that some communities initially did not support civil-military operations projects. This was puzzling, as the mayors and local government officials were enthusiastic supporters, but the people did not seem to care. As it turns out, many communities felt their mayor was corrupt or simply derelict in their responsibilities, so they turned to local informal leaders with more legitimacy and influence. In Muslim villages in the southern Philippines, there are multiple layers within civil society: local government, informal leaders, religious leaders,<sup>54</sup> sharia judicial organizations,<sup>55</sup> and local organizations and associations,<sup>56</sup> all with varying degrees of influence. In some communities, the mayor was almost completely absent, and a local informal leader made most of the decisions. The challenge for the civil-military operations teams was to identify these informal leaders and get their cooperation. Mapping the true sources of influence within a community requires patient methodical engagement. Some civil-military operations projects simply served as a platform to allow the civil-military operations teams to identify and engage with local informal leaders.

A second observation that civil-military operations teams made regarding civil society was that the ASG/JI terrorist group preyed

on mistrust within communities. Communities that were isolated from the government and mistrusted their fellow citizens had much less resilience and could be easily manipulated and intimidated. However, those communities that had internal trust (social capital) were more resilient and better able to resist the ASG/JI's threats and intimidation.

One successful example of building a resilient community is the development of the Jolo Emergency Response Network. In the aftermath of the Jolo City market bombing, community members observed that the city had no emergency response system. Local firefighters and police did not have any first aid training or equipment, and there was no system to transport casualties to the hospital. These citizens asked the civil affairs teams for help. With the JSOTF-P/JTF Comet's assistance, the Jolo community organized the Jolo Emergency Response Network, a team of local volunteers willing to respond to emergencies. The JSOTF-P provided medical training and coordinated with nongovernment organizations to provide equipment; it also got the local government to pass a resolution to codify the organization formally and protect its equipment.<sup>57</sup>

## Lessons Learned

**9. To succeed, one must engage civil society at multiple levels. The local government may not have the ability, interest, or influence to facilitate change. Multilayer engagement is necessary to develop understanding and build influence.**

**10. Communities with strong social capital are more resilient to the malign influence**



**of terrorist and criminal organizations. Understanding and building social capital is crucial to effectively waging irregular warfare.**

## **Operation Ultimatum**

**Background.** By the start of 2006, US and Filipino military leaders assessed that a direct-action operation was necessary to displace ASG/JI fighters from their remote safe havens in the mountainous interior of Jolo Island. Operations of this type had been unsuccessful in the past, so the JTF Comet/JSOTF-P leadership determined that several conditions must be met for a successful operation. First, JTF Comet must successfully convince the local population not to support the ASG/JI. Next, the MNLF must not interfere, nor must it support the ASG/JI. The JTF-Comet and the GRP must also have a plan to protect civilians and provide humanitarian assistance as needed. Finally, JTF Comet must have a post-conflict plan for reconstruction, stabilization, and security for each village liberated from ASG/JI control. Leaving the population insecure and vulnerable would only invite the ASG/JI to make a quick return.

Throughout 2006, the JTF Comet/JSOTF-P leadership worked to refine their plan and create the necessary conditions for a successful operation. Operation Ultimatum, direct action combat operations to capture or kill ASG/JI terrorists, was launched in August of 2006 and lasted until October 2007. It successfully occupied ASG/JI safe havens, captured or killed ASG/JI leadership, and secured villages and towns formerly under ASG/JI control.<sup>58</sup>

Operation Ultimatum was a success due to:

**Setting conditions.** US and Filipino military forces focused their Civil-military operations resources on communities adjacent to ASG/JI camps to build GRP legitimacy and decrease the population's support for the ASG.<sup>59</sup> The Armed Forces of the Philippines formally designated a brigadier general as the liaison to the MNLF to ensure that they would not provide support or a safe haven to the ASG/JI.<sup>60</sup> JTF Comet also conducted media engagements with the MNLF leadership, going on radio programs together to discuss their agreements and vision for a peaceful Jolo.<sup>61</sup>

### **Protecting and supporting the population.**

JTF Comet/JSOTF-P provided resources and designated locations to support internally displaced persons. Once the operation started, JTF Comet facilitated GRP civilian support to internally displaced persons. It continued to use local media to discuss the operations and highlight dangerous off-limits areas while maintaining daily communication with the MNLF leadership.

**Post-conflict stabilization.** Once an area was cleared of ASG/JI, JTF Comet established local security, started rebuilding and repairing any damaged infrastructure, and facilitated the reestablishment of government services. It facilitated the return of internally displaced persons and provided food and shelter during the rebuilding process. It also helped organize community partnerships to ensure long-term development and security.

## Lessons Learned

**11. Setting the human terrain conditions before an operation is essential. Civilians must understand why the operation is taking place and be protected.**

**12. A follow-up plan is crucial to ensure continued citizen security and development. Never leave a gap for terror groups to exploit.**

## Conclusion

US counterterrorism operations in the Philippines were successful because its members understood that human terrain was the key terrain in irregular warfare. That success in human terrain came by patiently building trusted relationships. The JSOTF-P helped the GRP/Armed Forces of the Philippines build legitimacy by assisting them in building relationships with the population while highlighting the illegitimate actions of the ASG/JI and isolating them from the population. These operations provided numerous lessons learned as this article has listed. Possibly the greatest lesson learned is that future success for the United States in irregular warfare will come through investing the time to build and maintain relationships with partner forces and local populations.

- 1 National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, "9/11 Commission Report," July 22, 2004; <https://9-11commission.gov/report/>.
- 2 Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, *National Military Strategic Plan for the War on Terrorism*, February 2006, <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/15230/2005-01-25-Strategic-Plan22.pdf>.
- 3 United States Department of Defense. "Irregular Warfare: Countering Irregular Threats," May 17, 2010, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joc\\_iw\\_v2.pdf?ver=2017-12-28-162021-510](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/concepts/joc_iw_v2.pdf?ver=2017-12-28-162021-510).
- 4 Eric T. Olson, "Remarks to the Washington Institute for Near East Policy," Washington Institute, September 17, 2009, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/5896>.
- 5 David Martin Jones and M.L.R. Smith, *Sacred Violence: Political Religion in a Secular Age* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 105–130.
- 6 Human Rights Watch, "Lives Destroyed: Attacks Against Civilians in the Philippines," July 2007, [https://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/philippines0707/philippines\\_lives\\_destroyed.pdf](https://www.hrw.org/reports/2007/philippines0707/philippines_lives_destroyed.pdf).
- 7 US Department of Defense, "Summary of the Irregular Warfare Annex to the National Defense Strategy for 2020," 2020, <https://media.defense.gov/2020/Oct/02/2002510472/-1/-1/0/Irregular-Warfare-Annex-to-the-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.PDF>.
- 8 CIA World Factbook, "Philippines," July 24, 2024, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/philippines/>.
- 9 Vic Hurley, *Swish of the Kris: The Story of the Moros* (Boston, MA: E.P. Dutton & Company, 1936), 118–126.
- 10 Luis H. Francia, *A History of the Philippines: From Indians to Filipinos* (New York, NY: The Overlook Press, 2014).
- 11 Lawrence M. Greenburg, *The Hukbalahap Insurrection: A Case Study of a Successful Anti-Insurgency Operation in the Philippines—1946–1955* (Washington D.C: US Army Center of Military History, 2001), 149.
- 12 Francia, *A History of the Philippines*, 36; Armed Forces of the Philippines, *SALAAM Manual, FM 3-5-2*, undated (given to the author in July 2006), 4.
- 13 Zachary Abuza, *Militant Islam Southeast Asia: Crucible of Terror* (Boulder, CO: Lynee Rienner Publishers, 2003).
- 14 This includes the tragic death of Sergeant First Class Mark Jackson, a Special Forces noncommissioned officer and advisor for the Armed Forces of the Philippines, in October 2002. US Army Special Operations Command, "SFC Mark W. Jackson," accessed July 12, 2024, [https://arsof-history.org/fallen/2002\\_jackson\\_mark.html#:~:text=A%20native%20of%20Michigan%2C%20Sergeant,as%20a%20Motor%20Transport%20Operator](https://arsof-history.org/fallen/2002_jackson_mark.html#:~:text=A%20native%20of%20Michigan%2C%20Sergeant,as%20a%20Motor%20Transport%20Operator).
- 15 Linda Robinson, Patrick B. Johnson, and Gillian S. Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines, 2001–2014* (Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation, 2016).
- 16 Abuza, *Militant Islam*.
- 17 Stentiford, *Success in the Shadows*, 1, 47, 98, 103.
- 18 Author's direct observation, Jolo Island 2005 and 2006.
- 19 David S. Maxwell, "Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines: What Would Sun Tzu Say?" *Military Review* (May–June 2004): 20–23.
- 20 Barry M. Stentiford, *Success in the Shadows: Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines and the Global War on Terror, 2002–2015* (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2018), 1, 98, 103, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/combat-studies-institute/csi-books/success-in-the-shadows.pdf>.
- 21 Stentiford, *Success in the Shadows*, 8–9.
- 22 The islands of Basilan, Jolo, and Tawi-Tawi make up the Sulu Archipelago.
- 23 Stentiford, *Success in the Shadows*.
- 24 Colonel Gregory Wilson, "Anatomy of a Successful COIN Operation: OEF-Philippines and the Indirect Approach," *Military Review*, November–December 2006, 3–4.
- 25 Stentiford, *Success in the Shadows*, 8–9.
- 26 Zachary Abuza, "The Demise of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Southern Philippines," *CTC Sentinel* 1, no. 7 (June 2008), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/Vol1Iss7-Art4.pdf>
- 27 Robinson, Johnson, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines*, xxvii.
- 28 Robinson, Johnson, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines*, 5.
- 29 Rob Johnson, "Lawrence of Arabia on War: How the Past Haunts the Present," Englesberg Ideas, June 29, 2020, <https://engelsbergideas.com/essays/lawrence-of-arabia-on-war-how-the-past-haunts-the-present/>.
- 30 Members of the leadership were primarily drawn from the Special Operations Command-Pacific and the 1st Special Forces Group.
- 31 David Beetham, *The Legitimation of Power* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013)
- 32 Bruce Gilley, "Putting State Legitimacy at the Center of Foreign Operations and Assistance," *Prism* 4, No. 4 (2014): 67–85, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26549753>.
- 33 Center for American Progress, "State Legitimacy, Fragile States, and U.S. National Security," September 2016, 8–11, <https://www.americanprogress.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2016/09/StateLegitimacy-report.pdf>
- 34 See, for example, Dr. Joseph Long's guerilla leadership theory—a leader must display competence and connectedness to build legitimacy and influence. Joseph E. Long, *The Guerilla Leader Theory: Maximizing the Strategic Impact of Leading with Competence and*

*Connectedness in Counterinsurgency Operations* (PhD thesis, University of Charleston, 2019), [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330913923\\_Long2019-The\\_Guerrilla\\_Leader\\_Theory](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/330913923_Long2019-The_Guerrilla_Leader_Theory).

35 Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York, NY: Liveright Publishing Co., 2018).

36 Armed Forces of the Philippines, *SALA'AM Manual*, 26–31.

37 Armed Forces of the Philippines, *SALA'AM Manual*, 2.

38 Robinson, Johnson, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines*, 51.

39 Author's direct experience during a 2005 medical project in Zamboanga del Sur.

40 Armed Forces of the Philippines, *SALA'AM Manual*.

41 Author's direct observation in Zamboanga del Sur in 2005 and Jolo in 2006.

42 Associated Press, "Bombing Kills 9 on Philippine Island," *The Denver Post*, March 27, 2006, <https://www.denverpost.com/2006/03/27/bombing-kills-9-on-philippine-island/>.

43 Jonathan P. Hastings and Krishnamurti Mortela, "The Strategy-Legitimacy Paradigm: Getting It Right in the Philippines" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2008), 85–91, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA493812>.

44 Maxwell, "Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines," 20–23, referring to the original Basilan mission in 2002.

45 Stentiford, *Success in the Shadows*, 47.

46 Robinson, Johnson, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines*, 59.

47 Robinson, Johnson, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines*, 29.

48 See Herb Daniels's excellent article on small-scale projects. Herb Daniels, "Keeping COIN Simple: The Outhouse Strategy for Security Development," 2008, Defense Technical Information Center, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA495399.pdf>.

49 Defense Security Cooperation Agency, "Security Assistance Management Manual Chapter 12," accessed July 27, 2024, <https://samm.dsca.mil/chapter/chapter-12>.

50 T. E. Lawrence, *27 Articles* (1917; repr., New York NY: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

51 Delilah Ruth Russell, "Civil Military Operations (CMO) in the Philippines: Examining Battlespace Management in the Past and the Present" (PhD thesis, Graduate School of Asia-Pacific Studies, Waseda University, 2013). <https://waseda.repo.nii.ac.jp/record/24836/files/Honbun-6419.pdf>.

52 Armed Forces of the Philippines, *SALA'AM Manual*.

53 Michael Edwards, *Civil Society*, 3rd ed. (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2014).

54 Arnel P. David, "Civil Society Engagement in the Sulu Archipelago: Mobilizing Vibrant Networks to Win the Peace" (master's thesis, US Command and General Staff College, 2013), 6, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/ADA589736.pdf>

55 Ellie Aben, "Supreme Court Reaffirms Role of Shariah in Philippine Judicial System," *Arab News*, November 23, 2023, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2413906/world>.

56 One example is Senator Santanina Rasul, the first Muslim woman senator in the Philippines senate. She had retired by 2006 but remained very influential in her community. The Muslim 500, "Santanina Tillah Rasul," accessed June 27, 2024, <https://themuslim500.com/profiles/santanina-tillah-rasul/>.

57 Jolo Emergency Network, Facebook, accessed June 12, 2024, <https://www.facebook.com/p/JOLO-EMERGENCY-RESCUE-NETWORKInc-100064704480762/>.

58 Robinson, Johnson, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines*, 45–62.

59 Jonathan P. Hastings and Krishnamurti Mortela, "The Strategy-Legitimacy Paradigm: Getting It Right in the Philippines" (master's thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2008), 91, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA493812>.

60 Hastings and Mortela, "The Strategy-Legitimacy Paradigm," 85.

61 Robinson, Johnson, and Oak, *U.S. Special Operations Forces in the Philippines*, 54–55.





# BEHIND THE FRONT

NOW ON  substack

Subscribe on [behindthefront.substack.com](https://behindthefront.substack.com) or the Substack iOS app

The United States faces a myriad of challenges, ranging from an antiquated defense contracting process to the inability to build and procure new military platforms quickly and efficiently. For the past three decades, American power went largely unchallenged.

The rise of China, coupled with the return of revanchist Russia, requires new thinking about the future of American and global security. The United States has serious shortcomings, linked to deindustrialization after the Cold War and assumptions about US military supremacy, that require urgent thinking to address.

The Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI)'s new project, Behind the Front, will analyze current and future national security challenges with a focus on:

- The Defense Industrial Base
- Military procurement
- Lessons learned from ongoing conflicts
- Challenges and opportunities in the technology and space sector

For more from the Foreign Policy Research Institute please visit [www.fpri.org](https://www.fpri.org).

Follow along on X @FPRI.





The Foreign Policy Research Institute (FPRI) is a nonpartisan Philadelphia-based think tank dedicated to strengthening US national security and improving American foreign policy.

Established in 1955 by the noted 20th century geopolitical strategist, Ambassador Robert Strausz-Hupé, FPRI was founded on the premise that an informed and educated citizenry is essential for the United States to understand complex international issues and formulate foreign policy. FPRI remains committed to this principle and strives to inform both policymakers and the general public through FPRI research and educational programs.

FPRI is a nonpartisan 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and takes no institutional positions on issues andt conducts no advocacy. The organization has four main research programs, covering US National Security, Eurasia, Asia, and Africa. Each program produces reports, articles, public events, and private briefings for policymakers, FPRI members, and the general public.

© 2025 Foreign Policy Research Institute

## Join the Conversation

123 S Broad St, Suite 1920,  
Philadelphia, PA 19109  
215.732.3774 | [fpri.org](https://fpri.org) | [f](#) [v](#) [in](#) [X](#)@FPRI

### FPRI Editorial Team

#### **Center for Intelligence and Non-Traditional Warfare Director**

Philip Wasielewski

#### **Editing**

Lisa Yambrick

#### **Layout and Design**

Natalia Kopytnik

#### **Cover**

Image Credits:

US Special Operations Command  
Pacific/Sgt. Jose E. Castellon



