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Gregg, Heather S.

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Setting a place at the table: ending insurgencies through the political process

Heather S. Gregg*

Defense Analysis, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, USA

This article argues that, under certain conditions, allowing insurgents into the political process – through elections or government posts – can be a useful tool in the peace process and can help end insurgencies. However, bringing insurgents into the political process is unlikely to end insurgencies on its own, particularly if insurgents, the government, or the population believes that force is still a viable means of defeating the opponent and changing the status quo. The article begins with a brief overview of the causes of insurgency and on conflict resolution for internal wars. The article then considers two examples of insurgents that have entered the political process – the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland and Hezbollah in Lebanon – and the differing degrees of success in transforming these insurgents to non-violent participants in the political process. It concludes by suggesting how insurgents can be brought into the political process as part of conflict resolution and the implications for Afghanistan.

Keywords: insurgency; counterinsurgency; conflict resolution; negotiations; IRA; Hezbollah; Iraq; Afghanistan

During an October 2006 trip to Afghanistan, then US Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist proposed bringing the Taliban into the political process in order to end the growing insurgency against the Afghan government and NATO forces. The controversial comment came nearly five years after the commencement of US-led military action aimed at deposing the Taliban from political power in Afghanistan. Again, in 2010, General Petraeus, as commander of the war in Afghanistan, argued that a necessary step for ending the country’s insurgency was to bring the Taliban into negotiations with the Afghan government and create conditions for their renunciation of violence and return to society. These discussions over what to do about persisting political violence in Afghanistan suggest a wider question about how governments can end insurgencies. Specifically: should insurgents be brought into the political process and, if so, under what conditions?

*Email: hsgregg@nps.edu
This article argues that, under certain conditions, allowing insurgents into the political process can be a viable strategy for ending insurgencies. Including insurgents in the government offers several benefits for ending internal wars: it gives those fighting the government an alternative means for changing the political status quo and offers them stakes in the political future of their country. Bringing insurgents into the political process also holds these groups accountable to their rhetoric and promises; if they do not deliver, they will most likely lose their constituents and positions of power. Furthermore, including insurgents in the political process draws otherwise clandestine groups out into the open and holds them accountable to a government’s rules and laws. Finally, including insurgents in the government may reduce the need for long-term third party guarantors. However, bringing insurgents into the political process alone is unlikely to end insurgencies, particularly if insurgents, the government, or the population believes that force is still a viable means of defeating the opponent and changing the status quo.

The article begins by examining two sets of literature: research on the causes of insurgencies and literature on conflict resolution. It then considers two cases of insurgents that have entered the political process with differing degrees of success in ending violence: the IRA in Northern Ireland, an insurgency that has largely come to an end, and the Lebanese Hezbollah, which still maintains an active armed struggle against the state of Israel. The article concludes by outlining the conditions under which bringing insurgents into the political process helps end violence against the state in general, and implications for the pursuit of peace and state-building in Afghanistan.

**What causes insurgencies? How do they end?**

In the years following the US-led invasions in Afghanistan and Iraq, policy and academic circles have focused on better understanding insurgent violence. Insurgency is not, however, a new phenomenon, and a useful body of literature exists on both its causes and strategies for its possible cure. This section begins by outlining the causes of insurgencies, emphasizing three points: that insurgency is violence aimed at changing the political status quo; that winning over populations, not eradicating insurgents, is the key to winning insurgencies; and that counter-insurgencies require a mix of military and non-military action. It then builds on this discussion by outlining arguments on civil conflict resolution, challenging three assumptions in the literature: the emphasis on sequential stages to resolution, including the need for disarmament early in the process; the necessity of international third party guarantors for conflict resolution; and the problem of ‘total spoilers’.

Literature on the causes of insurgency stresses that insurgency is politically motivated and violence is a means to political ends. For example, French scholar David Galula defines an insurgency as ‘a protracted struggle conducted methodically, step by step, in order to attain specific intermediate objectives, leading
finally to the overthrow of the existing order'.

Bard O’Neill’s definition proposes: ‘Insurgency may be defined as a struggle between a non-ruling group and the ruling authorities in which the non-ruling group consciously uses political resources (e.g. organization expertise, propaganda, and demonstrations) and violence to destroy, reformulate, or sustain the basis of legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics.’

In *Why Men Rebel*, Ted Robert Gurr’s argument for insurgency focuses on the role of what he calls ‘politicized discontent’ as a necessary condition for insurgency. Gurr asserts that discontent alone does not lead to violence but rather ‘politicized discontent is a necessary condition for the resort to violence in politics’; in other words, the state is blamed as the source of discontent and therefore becomes the target of violence.

Similarly, the 2006 US Army Counterinsurgency Manual defines an insurgency as an ‘organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict’. ‘Political power,’ it further argues, ‘is the central issue in an insurgency.’

Insurgency, therefore, to adjust Clausewitz’s maxim, is politics by other means.

Scholars of insurgency further assert that populations play a pivotal role in the conflict and that they are, in fact, the ‘center of gravity’, meaning that whichever side secures the loyalty of the population wins the conflict. Galula’s argument for what makes a successful insurgency hinges on the passive and active support of the population. He asserts:

If the insurgent manages to dissociate the population from the counterinsurgent [the government], to control it physically, to get its active support, he will win the war because, in the final analysis, the exercise of political power depends on the tacit or explicit agreement of the population or, at worst, on its submissiveness.

In order to win the population to its side, leaders of the insurgency require an ‘attractive cause’ that will draw in the largest number of supporters, keep them engaged in the conflict, and compel them to make sacrifices and suffer. Oftentimes, states become the *cause de guerre* and insurgents exploit popular grievances against the state. This puts the state at a disadvantage in the battle to win over the population. Robert Taber asserts: ‘The population . . . is the key to the entire struggle. Indeed, although Western analysts seem to dislike entertaining this idea, it is the population which is doing the struggling.’

O’Neill divides popular support between passive members of society and active, intellectual participants, stressing the unique and important role each plays in supporting an insurgency.

Counterinsurgency literature asserts that a successful counterinsurgency strategy cannot rely on military action alone. Galula argues that successful counterinsurgency strategies require marrying military and non-military action in order to create a holistic plan:

It is not enough for the government to set political goals, to determine how much military force is applicable, to enter into alliances or to break them; politics becomes an active instrument of operation. And so intricate is the interplay between the political and the military actions that they cannot be tidily separated; on the
contrary, every military move has to be weighed with regard to political effects, and vice versa.\textsuperscript{13}

He contrasts this to the insurgent’s position:

The insurgent, whose political establishment is a party and whose armed forces are the party’s forces, enjoys an obvious advantage over his opponent, whose political establishment man not be supported by a party or by a coalition of parties with their centrifugal tendencies, and whose army is the nation’s army, reflecting the consensus or the lack of consensus in the nation.\textsuperscript{14}

Galula acknowledges that the counterinsurgent has a preponderance of material resources, including military and economic assets, but that they have a tougher job of winning the people over than the insurgents because insurgents have the cause on their side; it is therefore crucial that the counterinsurgents’ actions not help fuel the cause.\textsuperscript{15} Military action alone can do precisely that by validating insurgent’s claims that the government is unjust and against the people.

The US Army Field Manual echoes these points, defining successful counterinsurgency (COIN) as ‘military, paramilitary, political, economic, psychological, and civic actions taken by a government to defeat insurgency’.\textsuperscript{16} The Manual further stresses: ‘Political and military leaders and planners should never underestimate \{COIN’s\} scale and complexity; moreover, they should recognized that the Armed Forces cannot succeed in COIN alone.’\textsuperscript{17}

Insurgencies, therefore, are inherently political, and violence is the means through which insurgents aim to change the political status quo. Populations are the battlefield over which insurgencies are won and lost, and the side that wins the support of the people wins the war. Finally, if popularly backed, military means alone cannot win an insurgency; a successful counterinsurgency is not marked by the defeat of the insurgents but, rather, is marked by the cessation of violence against the state.

Separate from the literature on causes of insurgency, but useful for considering how insurgencies end, is an extensive body of research on conflict resolution for internal wars. Three norms in the literature are of particular importance for political solutions to insurgencies: the emphasis on the need for disarmament early in the process; the necessity of international third party guarantors for conflict resolution; and the problem of ‘spoilers’, or insurgents that disrupt the peace process.

In theory and in practice, conflict resolution emphasizes the need for disarmament as a necessary step early on in the peace process. For example, the United Nations has stressed the need for disarmament in numerous Security Council Resolutions, including for Lebanon, Palestine, and Sudan, to name a few.\textsuperscript{18} Similarly, Kumar and de Zeeuw argue that disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) is the first step in conflict resolution, and that this necessary condition paves the way for economic transition (including macro-economic reforms, property rights, and the promotion of the private sector); and political transformation, specifically the creation of a democratic government.\textsuperscript{19}
The norm towards disarming early does not consider that, under certain conditions, weapons can serve as a defensive guarantee, and that disarmament may actually be militarily destabilizing and a stumbling block for conflict resolution.

Conflict resolution scholarship also tends to emphasize the importance of a third party – such as another state or an international organization – to act as a guarantor in the process and its implementation. Water’s argument, for example, hinges on this very point. She contends that the peace process breaks down not in negotiations or a settlement but in its implementation, and that successful implementations require a third party to act as a guarantor during this vulnerable stage of transition. Aggestam draws on Zartman and others to stress that power asymmetries in negotiations – which are typical in insurgencies – can cause talks to break down and that third parties can balance out asymmetries in negotiations. The contributors to *From Soldiers to Politicians* also focus on the role of international actors in civil conflicts, stressing outside actors’ importance both as contributors to conflict – through diasporic communities, funding, and cross-border meddling – and as factors that can contribute positively to the peace process. Stephen Stedman, in his influential article on managing spoilers in peace processes, also stresses the importance of a third party – what he calls ‘custodians’ – in resolving internal conflicts. He states: ‘Where international custodians have created and implemented coherent, effective strategies for protecting peace and managing spoilers, damage has been limited and peace has triumphed.’ The norm of including a third party to police the peace process does not adequately consider alternative means of ensuring lasting stability, particularly domestic arrangements.

Finally, several scholars note the problem of ‘spoilers’ in resolving internal conflicts. Stedman defines spoilers as ‘leaders and parties who believe that peace emerging from negotiations threatens their power, worldview, and interests, and use violence to undermine attempts to achieve it’. Newman and Richmond expand on this definition to include individuals and parties that use non-violent tactics, including the process itself, to derail a lasting peace. Stedman describes three different types of spoilers, ‘limited, greedy, and total’, noting that each requires different tactics to manage during the peace process: limited spoilers have negotiable goals, greedy spoilers’ goals change depending on opportunity, and the goals of total spoilers are non-negotiable. Stedman is quick to note, however, that spoilers can migrate from one category to another depending, in part, on how the peace process is realized. Spoons, regardless of their type, appear to be a perennial problem in conflict resolution; successful processes require strategies for minimizing their ability to derail the peace.

Combining the literature on causes of insurgency with the literature on conflict resolution yields important strategies for ending insurgencies. First, if insurgencies are politically motivated violence, then engaging insurgents in the political process may help end insurgencies. More recent scholarship explores the possibility of bringing insurgents into the political process by transforming these movements into political parties. *From Soldiers to Politicians* describes several
civil wars that have created lasting peace by transforming insurgents into politicians, including El Salvador, Mozambique, East Timor, and Liberia. However, the book focuses specifically on the period after the war. The following discussion will argue that bringing insurgents into the political process could, under certain circumstances, actually be part of the peace process.

Including popularly backed insurgents in the political process early on may be a useful means for transforming violent opposition to the government into a constructive voice for change. Including insurgents in the government offers those fighting the government an alternative means for changing the political status quo and gives them stakes in the political future of their country. Moreover, including insurgents in the political process through elections holds these groups accountable to their rhetoric and promises; if they do not deliver, they will most likely lose their constituents and their positions of power. Including insurgents in the political process also brings these otherwise clandestine groups out into the open and holds them accountable to a state’s laws and rules.

Moreover, bringing insurgents into the political process may be a viable substitute when third party guarantors are neither available nor willing to oversee the peace process over the long haul. One possible solution to the absence of a guarantor is to create incentives for insurgents, through political arrangements, that hold them accountable to their constituents and that remove them from power once they are no longer popularly backed or if they break the country’s laws. A democratic government, in theory, offers such a solution.

Spoilers may also be managed by bringing insurgents into the political process early on. Including insurgents in the political process may flesh out which spoilers are open to compromise and which are not. The ones that play by the rules can be accommodated, and the ones that do not can be dealt with by other means.

As the cases will show, bringing insurgents into the political process alone is unlikely to end the violence. Rather, there are certain conditions that make this a successful strategy for ending politically motivated conflict.

From bombs to the ballot box: the IRA in Northern Ireland

The current insurgent threats facing the US military in Afghanistan are not new; insurgencies also challenged the US and its allies during the Cold War, and these conflicts hold useful lessons for insurgents’ motives and possible counter-insurgency strategies. This section traces the insurgency in Northern Ireland, arguably the longest conflict of the twentieth century, and its move away from armed struggle to political engagement as a means of changing the status quo, including the process of bringing members of the IRA into the government.

The origins of tensions between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland can be traced back to the efforts of Britain’s King James I to create a loyal base in Ireland by settling Protestant Scots and English through land grants in the seventeenth century. These plantations, concentrated in the six Ulster counties
in the North, deposed the preexisting Catholic population there and sparked rebellions that eventually prompted King William of Orange to install a Protestant ruler on the island in 1690. Catholics challenged British rule of Ireland in the beginning of the 1900s under the Home Rule Movement. Following a failed revolt in 1916, Catholic insurgents regrouped and succeeded in negotiating independence for most of the island in 1920; the six northern counties, however, remained under British authority.

In 1968, Catholics in Northern Ireland, inspired by the US civil rights movement, began their own initiative aimed at gaining better rights within the existing political system. Initially, protests were non-violent but, under the threat of growing violence, Britain dispatched troops to Northern Ireland in 1969 to keep the peace. Disagreements broke out within Catholic circles over what actions to take against British policies, leading to a split within the IRA between the ‘officials’, who called for a Marxist-socialist based, non-violent campaign, and the ‘provisionals’, who advocated armed struggle. In 1971, the police and military interned hundreds of Catholics, fueling discontent in the general population and increasing momentum for the Provisional IRA.

In 1972, a demonstration resulted in the death of 14 Catholic protesters in what became known as ‘Bloody Sunday’. Amid increasing violence, the British dissolved the North Irish parliament and began direct rule from Westminster. This led to both Protestant and Catholics bolstering militias and political parties, the former to defend the status quo and the latter to fight for the end of British military occupation and rule. The Protestants or ‘Unionist’ organized the moderate Ulster Unionist Party, and the hard-line Democratic Unionist Party. The Unionist militias included the Ulster Defence Association and the Ulster Volunteer Force. Catholics or ‘Republicans’ organized around two main political parties, the moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), and the more hard-line Sinn Féin, whose militant arm was the IRA.

For nearly 30 years, Unionist militias (also known as Loyalists), British forces, and the IRA engaged in an armed struggle, neither side managing to achieve their military goals of defeating the other. In 1975, the IRA agreed to a ceasefire, believing that the British were preparing to withdraw their forces. However, sectors of the population did not support the ceasefire and took up the armed struggle outside the organized insurgency, leading to 216 civilian deaths. In 1976, the IRA reorganized its ranks, utilizing a cell-structure that allowed for tighter control of its cadre and its use of violence.

Political scientist Louise Richardson argues that, by the late 1970s, a military stalemate had settled over the conflict, all factions realizing that force alone would not change the status quo and, for the IRA, that the British would not be compelled into retreat. The IRA did not abandon force at this point but began to employ a mixture of political and military tactics aimed at changing the status quo.

The IRA undertook several non-violent initiatives in the 1980s that gave the organization further influence and increased its backing from the local population.
In 1980, IRA prisoners began a hunger strike with the aim of compelling the British government to recognize IRA detainees as prisoners of war instead of ‘special category prisoners’, a title that did not recognize the political nature of their actions. One of the strikers, Bobby Sands, ran for elections from prison, winning on 9 April 1981. He then died three weeks later, becoming the first of ten hunger strikers to die in protest. The campaign succeeded in boosting the IRA’s image domestically and internationally, and demonstrated that the militants were willing to suffer and die non-violently to change the political status quo. The hunger strikes and elections also showed the insurgency that means other than violence could be used to achieve their political goals. This realization prompted one leader in the movement to call for Republicans to fight with ‘an Armalite in one hand and a ballot box in the other’.

In 1983, Gerry Adams became the leader of Sinn Féin, the political arm of the IRA. Despite the political success of the hunger strikes and running in elections for the Republican movement, Sinn Féin and the IRA did not abandon the use of force at this time, but continued with bombing campaigns both in Britain and Northern Ireland. Britain also continued on a parallel track of politics and force, signing the Anglo-Irish Agreement in 1985, which granted the Republic of Ireland a consultative role on behalf of Catholics in the North. In 1987, an attack during a Remembrance Sunday event at Enniskillen killed 11 citizens, one of the most deadly attacks in years. Amid public outcry and international condemnation, Adams criticized the attack and claimed that it undermined the ‘legitimate use of force’.

In 1988, secret talks began between the two main Catholic political factions in the North, the SDLP, headed by David Hume, and Gerry Adams’s Sinn Féin. Although the talks did not yield immediate results, they marked an important process that moved the rival Republican factions towards a unified front. Sinn Féin took another step towards the use of politics over force in 1989, when Adams called for a non-armed political movement to work towards self-determination. The following year, the Northern Ireland secretary Peter Brooke stated that the IRA could not be defeated militarily and that talks could help promote an end to violence.

Talks between the British and Republicans began as early as 1972, but did not make significant progress until the 1990s. It was later revealed that secret negotiations began between the British government and Sinn Féin as early as 1990. In 1991, official ‘round table’ talks began between the government and militants, but Sinn Féin was excluded. In a 1993 joint statement, John Hume and Gerry Adams revealed their secret talks. That same year, in November, secret talks between London and the IRA were made public. Two weeks later, British Prime Minister John Major and Irish Prime Minister Albert Reynolds created the Downing Street Declaration, which accepted the right of Northern Ireland to self-determination, if that were the will of the people.

One month following the Downing Street Declaration, US President Bill Clinton granted Gerry Adams a visa to visit the United States, despite pressure
from the British government not to admit Adams. The trip gave Adams and Sinn Féin an enormous publicity boost, allowing the leader and his movement to circumvent the British media ban on mentioning the organization. Later that year, on 31 August, the IRA announced a complete cessation of military activities. The British government followed suit by lifting the media ban on the IRA and, in October, the Combined Loyalist Military Command announced a ceasefire.

These announcements set the stage for negotiations towards a peace deal. The process, however, was not without its setbacks. The IRA resumed military operations in 1996 in response to what it believed to be stonewalling from London and the Unionists, bombing sites in London and Manchester. Tensions also mounted around the annual Orange Order parades – Unionist celebrations of William of Orange’s victory over James II and the installation of Protestant rule in Ireland – which were a chronic flashpoint of violence between Catholics and Protestants in the North.

The primary sticking point in negotiations, however, became the decommissioning of the IRA’s weapons. Initially, London and the Unionists called for the IRA to relinquish its weapons first, followed by talks and the creation of a representative government in Northern Ireland. The IRA, however, was unwilling to make itself militarily vulnerable at the outset of the process. In 1996, a US delegation led by Senator George Mitchell proposed decommissioning weapons amid peace talks, allowing the process to resume. In 1997, the IRA announced the resumption of a ceasefire – a prerequisite to joining talks – and Sinn Féin declared that it was going to pursue political change through ‘exclusively peaceful means’; their inclusion, however, prompted several Unionist parties to boycott talks. Despite Unionist boycotts, Tony Blair met with Gerry Adams two months after the ceasefire and, in January 1998, Blair announced a formal inquiry into the ‘Bloody Sunday’ deaths as a goodwill gesture.

In April 1998, Britain, Ireland, and major factions in Northern Ireland signed a program for devolving British power and creating an independent assembly in Northern Ireland, which became known as the ‘Good Friday Accords’. A public referendum on the Accords was held in May, with the overwhelming majority of the population voting in favor of the terms. Following the signing of the Accords, a tiny faction emerged calling itself the ‘Real IRA’, which claimed responsibility for a bombing in Omagh that killed 29 people. Rather than sparking an outbreak of violence, the bombing unified the public against violence and gave new impetus to the peace process. Although the Good Friday Accords have not unfolded according to the original timeframe and there have been several setbacks, especially around disarmament, the political process has slowly moved forward. In 1999, the Belfast government devolved from Britain and the Republic of Ireland renounced its claims to the North. The new government included Unionist David Trimble as the first minister, Republican SDLP Seamus Mallon as his deputy, and Sinn Féin member Martin McGuinness as the minister of education.
The Irish conflict suggests several conditions under which insurgents can be brought into the political process as a means of ending insurgency. The first, and perhaps most important, necessary condition that allowed for insurgents in Ireland to enter the political process was that the British government and the core insurgents recognized that the conflict could not be resolved through military means alone. The recognition of a military stalemate opened the door for new avenues of changing the status quo through non-violent means. A military stalemate in Northern Ireland occurred after several waves of violence – and failed ceasefires – in which neither side could defeat the other; only then did negotiations and non-violent means of resolution begin to take hold.

Moreover, a military stalemate was evident not only to the insurgents and government, but also to the population. This condition, what could be called ‘war weariness’, overrode the actions of spoilers. In particular, the Real IRA’s attempt to upset the peace process through its 1998 Omagh bombing backfired; the attack horrified the population and renewed sentiments for peace. The result of this action was that the Real IRA was delegitimized in the eyes of the population and isolated from their support, making them vulnerable for attack by the government and mainstream IRA.

Second, the Irish case suggests that the status quo powers should not insist on disarming insurgents before negotiations. In the IRA’s case, negotiations broke down over disarmament but then resumed with the compromise of a strictly adhered to ceasefire. The IRA disarmed gradually over several years and entered the political process and held office while still armed. In this case, weapons served as a defensive guarantee, not necessarily an opportunity for further offensive action.

Third, the British needed to recognize the popular legitimacy of the insurgent’s cause and their leaders. The popular call for Republican self-rule persisted through generations of insurgents and revolts; attempting to eradicate the insurgents did not end the cause. Moreover, peace talks could not succeed without including popularly backed insurgent leaders. The 1991 peace talks in Northern Ireland excluded Gerry Adams and Sinn Féin, which led to their breakdown. It was only when the status quo officially invited Sinn Féin and the IRA to the table that negotiations moved forward. Recognizing the legitimacy of the insurgency’s leaders may also require the government to grant amnesties to leaders and prisoners of war. In the Northern Irish case, the governments created an amnesty program for the insurgents’ leaders and for members in prison. These programs were controversial and not without dissenters, but they also appear to have been a necessary step in moving negotiations forward.

In the Northern Irish case, the insurgents joined the government as part of the peace plan. Prior to the peace plan, the insurgents already had political parties, Sinn Féin in particular, that the government could include in the political process. It is interesting to note that, once the insurgents became active in the political process, they did not dominate the government; overall, the SDLP received a greater percentage of the votes in Northern Ireland than Sinn Féin. In more recent
elections, Sinn Féin won more seats than the SDLP, but this has not resulted in radical changes in government policies. The Irish case suggests that legitimizing insurgents and allowing them to participate in the political process does not mean they will take over the process.

The Irish case also echoes Stedman’s argument that negotiations create spoilers, and spoilers present challenges for making peace. Clearly spoilers were present in the Irish case. However, as the British gave insurgents a greater role in the political future of Northern Ireland, and as they compromised on disarmament, spoilers became fewer, more extreme, and less in line with the will of the population. By the time of the 1998 Omagh bombing, spoilers had lost their ability to derail the process.

Finally, the Northern Irish case points out the challenges posed by diversity within an insurgency attempting to change the political reality. The Northern Irish case involved military occupation, and the bid to end Britain’s presence on the island was a goal that united the Republicans. However, disagreements existed within the Republicans over how to achieve this goal and how much to compromise with the British, leading to the creation of several Republican organizations. These internal dynamics complicated negotiations because the insurgents were not operating as unified actors.

The disagreements within the Republican camp spilled over into elections when insurgents entered the political process. The democratic process was able to accommodate these conflicts, allowing leaders to compete for constituents non-violently through campaigns that encompassed differing visions for a political future. Allowing insurgents into the democratic process, therefore, has helped to end the insurgency not because it has unified the actors but because it has allowed for diversity to continue and to be negotiated through elections and the political process. Northern Ireland’s ability to manage tensions within insurgent groups speaks to the strength of its political and democratic institutions. Elections became a means for managing spoilers and not the occasion for them to capture the government through the political process.

God’s Party: the Lebanese Hezbollah

In his 1998 testimony before the US House of Representatives Committee on National Security, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency R. James Woolsey argued that the newly emerging terrorist threat to the United States includes groups that are not interested in negotiating a peaceful settlement. He testified: ‘Today there are unfortunately a number of terrorist groups, both domestic and foreign, who – for ideological or religious reasons – are not seeking a place at the table, but instead are seeking to blow up the table and kill everyone sitting there.’ Woolsey’s comment, echoing Stedman’s category of ‘total spoiler’, suggests that certain groups challenging the status quo are beyond dialogue and have no desire to work within the system for political change. Is the new generation of insurgents, especially Islamic insurgents, inherently
antithetical to joining the political process, or do they bear similarities to the previous generation of secular insurgencies like the IRA?

This section investigates the Lebanese Hezbollah, an insurgency group that has aimed to end Israeli occupation and create an Islamic nation in Lebanon. Despite its seemingly intractable religious goals, Hezbollah has run in Lebanon’s elections and held office. Hezbollah has also, at times, continued in an armed struggle and has refused to disarm. Does this case suggest that the goals of Islamic insurgents are ultimately incompatible with joining the political process, or do other factors explain the breakdown in its transformation from an insurgent movement to a political one?

Lebanon is perhaps the most religiously diverse country in the Middle East, hosting Christians, Sunni and Shi’a Muslims, and a significant Druze population. The country’s 1943 ‘National Pact’ reflects this diversity, enshrining a power-sharing arrangement between the country’s 17 recognized religious groups, including quotas in the parliament and cabinet appointments. The National Pact awarded the country’s three main religious groups – Maronite Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Shi’a Muslims – the presidency, premiership, and head of parliament, respectively. This power-sharing arrangement reflected the estimated numbers of each group, based on a 1932 census, and the influence of each religious group at the time of independence; the Shi’a were the poorest and the least politically mobilized and thus received a weak position in the government.

Following a brief civil war in 1958, Lebanon settled into a tentative peace that belied continued tensions between different groups in the country. Regional tensions also affected the viability of the state. In particular, the 1967 ‘Six-Day War’ produced an exodus of Palestinian refugees that settled in Lebanon, followed by another wave of Palestinians expelled from Jordan in 1971, which further complicated Lebanon’s demographic make-up. Tensions in Lebanon erupted into a second civil war in 1975, after Christian Phalangist militants opened fired on a bus in West Beirut, killing 27 of its Muslim passengers, most of whom were Palestinian. The event sparked sectarian-based violence, which plunged the country into protracted violence.

Lebanon’s neighboring countries quickly became involved in the civil war. In 1976, Syria sent forces into Lebanon which remained in the country until 2005. The PLO also became active in Lebanon, taking advantage of the failed state to set up a base from which to launch attacks on neighboring Israel. In March 1978, Israel invaded Lebanon with the aim of countering the growing PLO presence in the country. The United Nations stepped in to negotiate the withdrawal of Israeli forces and establish a peacekeeping force – the UN Interim Forces in Lebanon (UNIFIL) – which remains in the country to the present. In 1981, following the Israeli bombing of the PLO’s Beirut office, the United States intervened with the hopes of resolving the conflict among Israel, Syria, the PLO, and the Lebanese government, facilitating a ceasefire between the parties later that year. That ceasefire ended when Israel reinvaded in 1982. Israeli forces succeeded in briefly taking the capital, before they withdrew to the
Shi’a-dominated south, where they created and maintained a ‘security zone’ until 2000. Israel also helped create the Southern Lebanese Army, a force composed primarily of Lebanese Phalangist Christians, which it tasked with keeping the peace in the security zone.\textsuperscript{63}

It was within this milieu that the Lebanese Hezbollah emerged in 1982 as an armed Islamic resistance force that promised to oust the United States and Israel from Lebanon, liberate Palestine and Jerusalem from Israeli control, and establish an Islamic republic in Lebanon.\textsuperscript{64} It is widely agreed that Hezbollah works with and receives aid from Iran and possibly Syria. However, the exact nature of their relationship and the degree of control that Iran and Syria have over Hezbollah is debated.\textsuperscript{65} Prior to the creation of Hezbollah, other groups attempted to organize the Shi’a population, including AMAL – a secular-based Shi’a movement formed in the 1970s, later to become a non-violent political party – the Supreme Islamic Shi’i Council in Lebanon, and several other non-sectarian parties.\textsuperscript{66} Hezbollah, however, would become the most important Shi’a movement in Lebanon through its political, social, and military actions, and particularly through its resistance to Israel.

Hezbollah began its insurgency against occupying forces by launching a suicide attack on US and French barracks in Beirut on 23 October 1983, killing 297 troops and prompting the withdrawal of US forces from the country.\textsuperscript{67} Throughout the 1980s, Hezbollah continued a mixture of terrorist attacks against foreign targets in Lebanon – including kidnapping and assassinating several US citizens – bombings, and a plane hijacking.\textsuperscript{68} Hezbollah also engaged in guerilla operations against Israeli forces in the security zone.

In addition to terrorist and guerilla operations, Hezbollah functioned as a de facto government to the Shi’a populations concentrated in the south, the suburbs of Beirut, and to the north in the Bekka Valley. Hezbollah developed medical clinics, schools, welfare programs, and even a construction company to help families rebuild homes destroyed by fighting.\textsuperscript{69} Hezbollah also established a pension fund for families that lost members who fought within Hezbollah’s ranks.\textsuperscript{70} To inform and influence the public, the organization created a satellite channel, \textit{al Manar}, a radio station, and a politburo.\textsuperscript{71} These services gave Hezbollah a base of popular support, which, following the official end of the civil war in 1990, would aid its efforts to become a political party.

In 1989, internationally backed negotiations began with the aim of ending Lebanon’s 15-year civil war. The conflict officially ended in 1990 following the signing of the Charter of Lebanese National Reconciliation (Ta’if Accords), which reiterated political arrangements for Lebanon’s diverse religious population and amended its constitution.\textsuperscript{72} The Ta’if Accords called for all militias to disarm; Hezbollah, however refused to lay down its weapons. Israel remained in Lebanon (as did Syria), and Hezbollah continued to engage in attacks with the Israel Defense Forces. Israel also launched offensives aimed at defeating Hezbollah, particularly the 1996 operation ‘Grapes of Wrath’, which resulted in
the death of hundreds of refugees in the southern city of Qana and international condemnation for the offensive.\textsuperscript{73}

Following the official end of the civil war, Lebanon held parliamentary elections in 1992. Hezbollah ran in elections, securing eight seats.\textsuperscript{74} In 2005 elections, Hezbollah won 14 out of 128 seats in parliament and secured two ministries.\textsuperscript{75} Despite its initial goal of overthrowing the political system in Lebanon, Hezbollah saw elections as a new means – coupled with continued armed resistance – through which it could fight for change in the status quo. One of their 1996 election slogans proclaimed: ‘[Fighters] resist with their blood. Resist with your vote.’\textsuperscript{76}

In 2000, Israel unilaterally withdrew from Lebanon, following the election of Labor party candidate Ehud Barak to the premiership. Hezbollah heralded the withdrawal as a victory. However, despite its departure from Lebanon, Israel chose to maintain a hold over Shebaa Farms, a small piece of land that borders Israel, Lebanon, and Syria. Israel has also refused to release the Hezbollah leader Sheikh Abd-al-Karim Ubayd, whom they abducted in 1989, along with several other prisoners of war.\textsuperscript{77}

In 2004, the UN adopted resolution 1559, which calls for the ‘disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias’; Hezbollah has refused to disarm, however, claiming that it was an ‘armed resistance movement’, not a militia and citing its protracted battle with Israel over Shebaa Farms and the release of its prisoners as grounds for remaining armed.\textsuperscript{78}

On 12 July 2006, Hezbollah launched a raid across Israel’s border, abducting two IDF soldiers and killing another eight. The provocative act prompted Israel to launch an aggressive air campaign and ground invasion that lasted 33 days before a UN-negotiated ceasefire.\textsuperscript{79} During the war, Hezbollah demonstrated that it had a considerable arsenal of rockets including Iranian-made, medium-range Farj-5 and Farj-6 rockets along with long-range ZelZal rockets, which it launched against the Israeli city of Haifa.\textsuperscript{80} It appears that Israel invaded initially to free the captive soldiers, but then expanded its mission to include decimating Hezbollah’s military capabilities and turning popular sentiment against Hezbollah.\textsuperscript{81} On the last day before the ceasefire, however, Hezbollah launched more rockets than on any previous day, demonstrating that its military capacity had not been destroyed. It is also believed that Hezbollah is now more popular than ever for standing up to Israel.\textsuperscript{82}

More recently, Hezbollah has taken up arms against its own government, using force after the Lebanese government tried to crack down on Hezbollah’s internal telephone system and dismissed the pro-Hezbollah airport security chief following a cost-of-living strike that began on 7 May 2008.\textsuperscript{83} Tensions calmed after talks hosted by the Emir of Qatar, and the government backed down, but the confrontation showed that neither the government nor Hezbollah has accepted a military stalemate. The International Crisis Group argues that the confrontation ultimately revolved around ‘an existential struggle over Hizbollah’s arms’.\textsuperscript{84} The Crisis Group recommends de-escalating the conflict between Hezbollah and the
government by agreeing to ‘a new president and national unity government that accepts for now Hizbollah’s armed status while strictly constraining the ways in which its weapons can be used’. In 2011, Hezbollah succeeded in garnering enough votes in parliament to choose the country’s prime minister, placing Najib Miqati in power and raising regional concerns over Hezbollah’s political intentions.

The persisting Hezbollah-led insurgency in Lebanon suggests that, despite becoming part of the country’s legitimate political process and holding seats in parliament, a resolution to the conflict has not occurred; this appears to be for several reasons. Currently none of the sides in the Lebanese insurgency believes in a military stalemate. The latest round of violence between Hezbollah and Israel in July 2006 and current battles between Hezbollah and Lebanese forces suggest that all sides believed they could profit from military confrontation. In the 2006 conflict with Israel, both sides declared a victory, despite the fact that Israel did not get back its kidnapped soldiers and Hezbollah did not compel Israel to return their prisoners of war or Shebaa Farms. Furthermore, the Shi’as have rallied around Hezbollah and it is more militarized than before hostilities began. It even appears that Hezbollah’s support has extended beyond the Shi’as to other confessional groups, and the general Lebanese population has renewed hatred toward Israel in the wake of the massive destruction it caused on the country’s infrastructure. The May 2008 armed confrontations between Hezbollah and the Lebanese government may actually suggest that there is not a military stalemate and Hezbollah can change the status quo through force.

Second, unlike the Northern Irish case, Hezbollah has run in elections and held office independent of negotiations to end its fight with Israel. In this case, elections have not been a connected strategy for ending insurgency with Israel or for fully submitting to Lebanon’s laws. It is possible, although debatable with recent developments, that Hezbollah has begun the transformation from an illegitimate organization to a legitimate political player in the government, running in elections and holding seats in parliament. This organization’s willingness to participate in elections suggests that it wants a legitimate role in Lebanon’s political life. However, armed exchanges between Hezbollah and the Lebanese government also suggest that the insurgent group still sees violence as a primary tool for changing the status quo and that the Lebanese government is not strong enough, militarily and politically, to control Hezbollah and compel it to adhere to the country’s rule of law.

Third, Israel and international actors have insisted on disarmament as a first step in international recognition of Hezbollah’s legitimacy. One of Israel’s principal goals in the July 2006 war was to disarm Hezbollah through military action, suggesting that Israel also believes that Hezbollah can be defeated militarily. After 33 days of fighting, however, Hezbollah’s rocket arsenal and military capacity did not appear to have been significantly reduced. UN Resolution 1701, which ended hostilities, calls for Hezbollah’s disarmament, the militia’s subordination to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), and disbandment of its
While Hezbollah will eventually have to do these things, the Irish case suggests that insisting on disarming Hezbollah as a first step is unrealistic and could be destabilizing. Moreover, Hezbollah has no incentives to lay down its weapons; this is particularly true given Israel’s and Lebanon’s willingness to use force as a primary reaction to provocation, not as a last resort, as the July war demonstrated.

Fourth, Israel and most of the international community do not recognize the political legitimacy of Hezbollah. This is a problem because Hezbollah is a movement with a base of popular support, which is evident through its electoral successes in Lebanon’s political process. Ignoring the popularity of Hezbollah will not result in its disappearance from the political scene. If anything, it may actually fuel its popularity as a group that resists and defies international pressures.

Unlike the Irish case, the transformation of Hezbollah into a political party presents the unique problem of whether or not religious political parties can participate in a democracy. The conventional wisdom is that allowing Islamic groups, insurgents or otherwise, to form political parties will undoubtedly lead to disaster along the lines of the Iranian Revolution or the cancelled 1991 Algerian elections that plunged the country into civil war. However, other examples suggest that allowing religious political parties to participate in elections can occur without causing the system to collapse. For example, Jordan has allowed Islamic parties to run for seats in its House of Representatives, beginning in 1992. The elections resulted in a strong victory for Islamic political parties and the Muslim Brotherhood, which together won 34 of the 80 seats. When these parties failed to deliver on their promises, they suffered at the following elections in 1993 and won only 16 seats. Likewise, Israel has allowed religious parties to participate in its elections, beginning in 1956, and currently includes several parties, the strongest being Shas, which has held seats in the Knesset, the Israeli parliament, and cabinet positions.

Religious political parties, therefore, have participated in the political process without causing the collapse of the system. Hezbollah has shown that it can compromise on its religious goals; it no longer claims to be establishing an Islamic republic in Lebanon. Rather, Hezbollah has been problematic because of its continued use of force as a means of trying to change the political landscape, despite actually being part of the government. This problem is not unique to Hezbollah’s religiosity. It is a problem that plagues insurgencies that have not universally agreed to a military stalemate.

Conclusions and implications for Afghanistan

The insurgencies in Ireland and Lebanon suggest the following four conditions under which bringing insurgents into the political process can help end political violence. The first, and most important, necessary condition is that the government, insurgents, and the population all have to agree that the conflict
cannot be resolved militarily, which opens the door for alternative, political means for conflict resolution. If the insurgents, the government, or the population do not fully believe in a military stalemate, then it is unlikely that bringing insurgents into the political process alone will help end the insurgency. The Lebanon case clearly demonstrates the importance of all sides needing to believe that the conflict cannot be won through military means alone; without this necessary condition, one or more sides will be tempted to use force as a means of changing the status quo.

Second, in order to keep the military stalemate, the status quo powers should not insist on disarmament as a precondition for insurgents entering the political process. Under these conditions, weapons serve as a defensive guarantee, not necessarily an opportunity for offensive action. Rather than calling for insurgents to lay down their arms, both sides should agree to a ceasefire and clear conditions for participating in the government. As the IRA case has shown, full disarmament needs to come at the end of the negotiation process, not the beginning.

Third, the government and occupying forces need to recognize the popular legitimacy of the insurgency’s cause and its leaders; if the cause has a base of support, eradicating the insurgents will not end the insurgency. Allowing insurgents into the political process can be an important tool for accommodating the insurgency’s cause, holding them accountable to their constituents, and bringing them under the legal strictures of the state. Furthermore, insurgents rarely exist as unified actors and the government needs to recognize this diversity and to include the key players. Bringing different insurgent groups into the political process – especially through political parties – can help manage these internal disagreements by allowing leaders to compete for constituents non-violently through campaigning. In other words, allowing insurgents into the democratic process can help to end insurgencies not because it unifies the actors but because it allows for diversity to continue and to be negotiated through elections.

Fourth, the government’s institutions will need to be strong enough to manage the inclusion of insurgents in the political process. A culture of political debate and compromise is important for accommodating changes in the political agenda, which will undoubtedly be introduced by insurgents; for states that are emerging from a dictatorship or that do not have a culture of democracy, these practices will most likely not be present. Moreover, allowing insurgents into the political process requires rules and consequences for not adhering to the laws of the land. The country, therefore, will need rule of law and the ability to enforce it.

Finally, the government will most likely have to grant amnesties to insurgents and some of the leaders of the insurgency as one means of legitimizing their right to participate in the political process. These programs are controversial and often politically unpalatable because they do not bring the insurgents to justice for violent acts. Moreover, it is important that the population accepts an amnesty program and will not try to seek justice extra-judicially. Not all insurgents should get amnesty, however. For example, those that abused human rights should be
held accountable for their crimes. But an amnesty program will most likely be necessary to allow insurgents to lay down their weapons and legitimately join the political process.

Overall, if the insurgency has a base of support and cannot be defeated militarily, the government will have to make more concessions than the insurgents to create the conditions for lasting peace. Politically and emotionally, this is a significant demand to place on a country’s leaders.

What do these findings suggest for the insurgency in Afghanistan?

The current military conditions in Afghanistan suggest that there are several challenges for bringing insurgents into the political process. First, it appears that the insurgents, the government, occupying forces, and the populations in Afghanistan still believe that the conflict can be resolved through militarily means. In Afghanistan, the resurgence of the Taliban suggests that they have regrouped and are attempting to change the status quo through force. The initial reaction from the government and occupying forces to the Taliban’s challenge has been military confrontation. However, beginning in 2010, NATO-led International Security Assistance Forces (ISAF) and the Afghan government have initiated a more holistic strategy for ending the insurgency in Afghanistan, including talks with the Taliban. Despite this, it is unclear whether or not all sides believe in a military stalemate, or even if that is the case.

In addition to all sides still using force in attempts to end the conflict, Afghanistan has the added problem of being a fledgling democracy. Unlike Northern Ireland and Lebanon, Afghanistan does not have a history of democratic practices or civil institutions that are essential for a democracy to manage these challenges to the new political status quo successfully. Although both the Northern Irish and Lebanese governments have gone through periods of limited or suspended democracy in their histories, their politicians and populations have a basic understanding of the system’s rules – learned through multiple iterations of elections and rotation of leadership – and the importance of negotiation and compromise required in order for democracies to succeed. Afghanistan does not have this institutional development or practical experience that comes from decades of elections and the norms of shared power, which undoubtedly adds to their problems of dealing with insurgents politically.

Second – and following on the first point – disarming the insurgents is currently not an option in Afghanistan. The Taliban are not going to lay down their weapons voluntarily because they think they are winning the conflict militarily. Moreover, disarming the insurgents by force does not appear to be working. As the IRA and Hezbollah cases show, focusing on disarmament will likely backfire, giving insurgents a legitimate reason to stay armed as a means of defense against the threat posed by their government’s militaries or occupying forces. Rather than pushing for disarmament, status quo powers would do better to begin the dialogue process with the groups armed and move towards a political solution that renders force unnecessary.
Third, in Afghanistan, it appears that some of the insurgents – but not all – have a popular base of support. The conflict in Afghanistan has three main groups: the Taliban (which is not a unified actor), al-Qaeda, and drug lords connected with Afghanistan’s poppy production. Not all of these groups have a popular base of support, but it is possible that some do. It is doubtful, for example, that large numbers of the Afghan population back al-Qaeda. Afghanistan’s drug lords, however, may have some popular backing. The drug trade has seen a recent upsurge, with production reaching an all time high in 2007, suggesting that poppy farmers in the south are continuing to make a living through this form of agriculture and that drug lords are aiding in that process, perhaps giving them legitimacy with the local population. Some elements of the Taliban may also have popular backing. There is evidence to suggest that some post-US invasion Taliban leaders have actually created political campaigns and are reaching out to the population, hinting that they understand the importance of popular support for maintaining the fight against the government. Negotiations with the Taliban may be useful, but that depends on the extent of their popular support, and their willingness to work through the political system, not fight to overthrow it.

As an important precondition to bringing insurgents into the political process, the government in Afghanistan will most likely need amnesty programs in order to transition individuals involved in the insurgency into mainstream society and political life. These programs are controversial and often politically unpalatable because they do not bring the insurgents to justice for violent acts. In Afghanistan, the government initiated an amnesty program beginning in 2002 – Program-e Tahkim-e Sohl – aimed at encouraging Taliban members to defect from the organization and re-enter normal society. A reported 1,100 people took advantage of the program before it collapsed, including a man who later became the governor of Oruzgan Province. More recently, the Afghan government, in coordination with ISAF, has created a program that aims to flip low-level members of the Taliban by offering jobs and an opportunity to contribute to the betterment of their local communities. Amnesty, despite its unpopularity, is an important condition for ending hostilities.

Finally, it is important to consider that there may be ‘total spoilers’, insurgents who have no desire to work through the political system and whose primary objective is in fact to ‘blow the table up’. However, it is important to consider several possibilities about such groups. First, not all groups fit into this category; there are groups that want a place at the table. Second, as Stedman acknowledges, groups change over time and in response to domestic and international circumstances; therefore, a group’s posture at one point in time may not be their stance at another. Third, not all members may agree on the group’s stated policy vis-à-vis the means for achieving its political goals. Each of these caveats presents opportunities for counterinsurgency strategies including negotiations and bringing insurgents into the political process.
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Notes

1. ‘Frist Says Afghan War Can’t Be Won’; Dent, ‘Is it Time to Negotiate With the Taliban?’
5. Gurr, Why Men Rebel, 14.
7. Ibid.
8. This differs from conventional wars where the adversary’s military is the center of gravity. Victory is marked by the capitulation of one side’s military to the other.
10. Ibid., 7–8, 18–26.
11. Taber, War of the Flea, 11.
15. Ibid., 5–7.
17. Ibid.
18. For example, in 2004, the UN adopted resolution 1559, which calls for the disbanding and disarmament of all Lebanese and non-Lebanese militias. In 2006, the UN reiterated this requirement in UN Resolution 1701, following Hezbollah’s war with Israel. For more on these Resolutions, see: ‘UN Security Council Resolutions 1559’, and ‘UN Security Council Resolutions 1701’.
20. Walter, Committing to Peace, 19–32.
24. Ibid., 5. This point is also argued by McCormick’s and Owen’s observation that the heterodoxy of actors in civil wars makes negotiated settlements harder to reach. McCormick and Owen, ‘Factionalism, Violence and Bargaining in Civil Wars’, 361–90.
27. Ibid., 11–12.
29. Ibid., 3.
36. Ibid., 170.
41. Richardson, ‘A Spiral of Peace?’, 176; Cox, ‘Bringing in the “International”’, 684.
42. BBC, ‘Provisional IRA: War, Ceasefire, Endgame?’
44. Richardson, ‘A Spiral of Peace?’, 175; Cox, ‘Bringing in the “International”’, 674, 679.
49. BBC, ‘On This Day: 1996 Bomb Blast Destroys London Bus’.
50. Balz, ‘Blair has Historic Meeting with Leader of IRA Ally’.
51. BBC, ‘Q & A: The Bloody Sunday Inquiry’.
52. Reid and Balz, ‘The Irish Vote on Peace Accords’.
53. BBC, ‘Bomb Atrocity Rocks Northern Ireland’.
59. Ibid., 4.
60. US Department of State, ‘Background Note: Lebanon’.
62. Ibid., 6.
63. US Department of State, ‘Background Note: Lebanon’.
68. Council on Foreign Relations, ‘Hizbollah (a.k.a. Hizbollah, Hizbu’llah)’.
70. Ranstorp, Hizb’allah, 36.
72. The agreement raised the number of seats in Lebanon’s unicameral legislature, the National Assembly (Majlis Almuwab), to 128 and changed the previous ratio of six Christians to five Muslims to an even split between the two. CIA, ‘Lebanon’. US


74. Another three seats went to the Islamic Group and one to the Islamic Society of Philanthropic Projects. See: Hamzeh, ‘Lebanon’s Hizbullah: From Islamic Revolution to Parliamentary Accommodation’.


77. Ibid., 17.

78. UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, ‘Lebanon: The Many Hands and Faces of Hezbollah’.


84. Ibid., 1.

85. Ibid.

86. Shadid, ‘Hezbollah Chooses Lebanon’s Next Leader’.


90. Nasr, ‘Democracy and Islamic Revivalism’.


93. Ibid., 202.


96. Green, ‘The Taliban’s Political Program’.


98. Ignatius, ‘Afghan Tribes to the Rescue?’

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