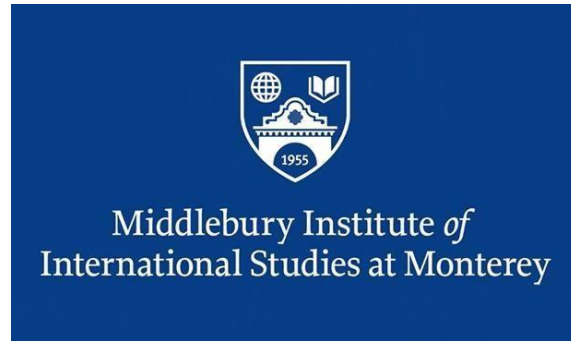




Center on Terrorism, Extremism, and Counterterrorism

**Deep Dive Policy Analysis of Cultural Miscommunication in the Middle East, Afghanistan,
&
the Western World**

The Michael Donnelly CTEC Research Fellowship Project

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August 2026

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1. Introduction: The Semiotic Battlefield

For two decades after September 11, Western governments used new financial warfare tools. Sanctions authorities grew stronger, and financial intelligence units became more professional. Still, in Iraq, Afghanistan, these tools often had mixed success. Common explanations blame poor intelligence or a lack of political will. These miss another failure: Western policymakers often misread how legitimacy, honor, and memory work in the environments they target.

The Western governance security structure is based on formal institutional governance and bureaucratic systems of authority. Stability is measured through data points such as security clearances, hierarchical systems of order, elections, and related indicators. This Western style system is often insufficiently questioned when applied across different cultural contexts and may assume that legitimacy established through its own systems is universal and transferable at will.

The Western style of intervention has frequently encountered significant challenges because the system itself misinterprets how legitimacy is established and how it operates. Eastern concepts of duty, honor, relational obligation, and historical memory are not only abstract cultural concepts, nor are they simply aspirational features of a society. They function as procedural, measurable indicators. The establishment of a government system in a land foreign to these concepts may struggle to gain legitimacy if it fails to account for local cultural realities. Foreign governments that impose their will without regard to local customs and traditions frequently risk undermining local legitimacy and creating structural instability.

Culture is a critical factor shaping whether a governing system and/or policy thrives or encounters resistance within the societies it seeks to govern. Culture, simply put, is not just background noise that can be muted and controlled; it is a fundamental determinant of how

governance is interpreted, accepted, or rejected by local populations.

In the two decades after 9/11, Western governments deployed new means to counter terrorism through financial and economic measures. These methods were unprecedented in their sophistication and significantly affected the political, economic, and social conditions of many targeted societies. Broad sanctions regimes often imposed substantial humanitarian costs on civilian populations alongside their intended security objectives. The sanctions authorities became a critical tool for Western governments to designate terrorist individuals and organizations and maintain order, although their humanitarian consequences frequently fell most heavily on civilian populations rather than political elites.¹

Western governments invested heavily in financial intelligence units tasked with disrupting terrorist financing and other forms of illicit finance. These professional units expanded the reach of law enforcement through innovative financial and investigative tools. However, across Iraq, Afghanistan, the record does not reflect the consistent effectiveness of these measures; at best, it demonstrates uneven results. These nonstate actors adapted to sanctions by developing alternative financial mechanisms and informal support networks.²

In many cases, they circumvented sanctions through informal financial systems, cross-border networks, and the assistance of sympathetic actors, allowing them to sustain their operations despite increasing financial pressure.

The standard story told about the failure of these financial intelligence units emphasizes the lack of a sufficient flow of credible, up to date intelligence and the deficiency of political will to allocate resources where needed. These explanations, in whole or in part, understate another important dimension of failure: the regular misinterpretation of the Eastern value system and the many philosophical ways of thinking and governance that base legitimacy on honor, duty, historical memory, and relational obligation.

¹Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976; new ed., 2017), 58-84.

²Jason Blazakis, *Terror Disrupted: Countering the Financing of Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2026), chaps. 1-2.

Within Western counterterrorism and intelligence, financial crime units follow a streamlined policy regularly adopted and often referred to as the "follow the money" approach. Falling into this habitual method of thinking does not separate hard policy from soft context. Western systems often rely on tools like sanctions and financial measures as their primary policy instruments. These approaches are frequently treated as objective, measurable techniques, largely separated from human emotional factors or cultural nuances such as historical memory, traditions, language, and attitudes.

The issue here is that these tools are well suited to measuring quantifiable financial activity but are less effective when it comes to understanding how illicit networks operate. They do not take into account how these systems not only survive but thrive and achieve sufficiency, not only in a financial sense but also through various forms of culture that protect them, powerful narratives of duty and dignity, loyalty to the cause, and a community that feels obligated to support them. Analyzing the human factor is essential to understanding how these financing networks thrive.

Following the money method has important analytical limitations. It can fail to capture the broader social and cultural dynamics that underpin illicit financial activity because it treats the issue as a simple circumstantial financial transaction. It focuses on the operations and logistics of the hawala system.

Tracking the money ignores the reason behind it. Sending a money transfer is often shaped by social obligation, family responsibility, and communal expectations. The "why" here is imperative to understanding the motivation behind the transfer. It is often not forced but a system of loyalty that binds the individual to the family unit and to society at large.³ Viewing this act as a mathematical, heartless transaction is reactive and fails every time.⁴ Policy needs to investigate the nonmonetary value and obligatory sense of the act to understand it. The

³Juan Zarate, *Treasury's War: The Unleashing of a New Era of Financial Warfare* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013), prologue and chap. 1.

⁴Edward Fishman, *Chokepoints: American Power in the Age of Economic Warfare* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2025), pt. II.

"Following the Money Method" is analytically shallow; it tells you how the hawala occurs, but the qualitative data is important to complete the story and explain the reasons behind it. Social bonds cannot be measured simply by technical tracking of money.⁵

Trust is the actual currency at play here; it is not solely hawala or a bank account. What motivates individuals to send money through trust-based systems? This is the real question. Willing donors acknowledge and participate in the transaction, knowingly supporting the cause. Most people feel obligated to send money back to their families because of religious teachings, family duties, and a teaching system that emphasizes the collective rather than the individual.⁶ Understanding both the financial transaction and the social relationships that underpin it is essential to explaining how the hawala system functions. Technical fixes are only temporary patches. Stopping the flow of money through the system will prompt the exploration of alternative methods, such as ISIS's use of cryptocurrency, MoneyGram transfers, or human couriers. The focus should be on why people are participating in this system. Trust is a missing variable here.

In May 2022, former President George W. Bush publicly condemned what he called a wholly unjustified and brutal invasion, before correcting himself from Iraq to Ukraine, and jokingly attributed the gaffe to his age. The moment went viral. However, in most of the Middle East, it was not treated as a slip of the tongue; it was understood as a confirmation of what had been clear all along. The statement seamlessly aligned with the policy of the previous twenty years toward the Middle East.

The gap between intentions and interpretation is not a segregated one. Research reflects patterns in which Western countries consistently underestimate the meaning across cultures between the two hemispheres. In various cultures, political systems shape language, which, in turn, shapes behavior and the way of life. In that diplomatic context, language often designed

⁵Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, 117-42. See also Kenneth Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979).

⁶Daniel L. Byman, *Deadly Connections: States that Sponsor Terrorism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 3-22

to be neutral carries a very different meaning than intended. When those meanings are translated out of context or altogether side stepped, the consequences are not merely symbolic. They are operational and, in many ways, lead toward death and destruction.

This paper asks a central question: how do seemingly minor linguistic and cultural differences shape relationships between East and West, and how do these differences become strategically significant in shaping countries' counterterrorism and diplomatic policies? The core thesis is that cultural insignificance is a myth. What appears minor from a Western policy standpoint most likely determines the validity or falsity of a system at the local level. These gaps are often used by non state actors to position themselves as more legitimate, authentic, and aligned with local values than foreign backed governments.⁷

I argue in this paper that the failures in the region and Afghanistan are not due to the lack of funding or execution. They are the result of semiotic misalignment. Where the Western mind focuses on spreading its goals through procedure rooted in logic and institutions, the local population most often views authority through relational concepts, duty, honor, and respect. When these systems collide, confusion spreads, and the legitimacy of both systems breaks down.

In order to prove this, I seek to recount in this paper the application of a framework that focuses on two different systems of authority: what might be called the "paperwork" approach, representing formal institutional legitimacy, and the "handshake" approach, which represents deep rooted trust and social obligation, fortified by a history of legitimacy and way of life.

This paper explores five points. First, it reviews existing literature on legitimacy translation between nations and disruption networks. Second, it outlines the approach used to understand case studies. Third, it examines cases of symbolic misalignment in Iraq and Afghanistan. Fourth, it analyzes how concepts of legitimacy and honor shaped and continue to inform

⁷Samuel Munzele Maimbo, *The Money Exchange Dealers of Kabul: A Study of the Hawala System in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2003).

logistical partnerships. Finally, fifth, it synthesizes findings into policy recommendations centered on cultural calibration.

The goal is not to argue that one system, East or West is inherently flawed, but that they are often misapplied in many ways and forms and that without a deeper understanding of how the meaning of words and gestures flows across contexts, even the best designed policy will fail continuously. The challenge is not simply to take action but to translate and to translate meaningfully.

Re entrenchment Strategy Vs. Current Policies Missing the Mark

To understand the recent developments shaping the Middle East security architecture, strategic analysis must move beyond the conventional framework of state versus state conflict. A sustainable and long term solution requires examining the deeper structural conditions that continue to reproduce instability across the region. The ongoing confrontation involving the United States, Israel, and Iran has increasingly evolved into a prolonged war of attrition. Yet the primary victims of this conflict are not governments or military institutions, but civilians across the Middle East attempting to sustain ordinary life amid economic collapse, insecurity, and social fragmentation. The true cost of modern conflict extends beyond battlefield calculations; it manifests in the destruction of livelihoods, institutions, public trust, and human dignity.⁸

I seek to evaluate how the current climate has been affected by this war, leading regional instability. I aim to explain how the destruction of the civil and state infrastructure leads to fertile conditions for recruitment like ISIS, which ultimately leads to a territorial pseudo state, leading to a very elusive venture of insurgency outside of the legislative state system.

My analysis of these dynamics is also informed by lived experience. Having witnessed

⁸Reuters, "I Mean Ukraine: Former U.S. President George Bush Calls Iraq Invasion Unjustified," May 19, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/i-mean-ukraine-former-us-president-george-bush-calls-iraq-invasion-unjustified-2022-05-19/>.

multiple wars throughout my lifetime, I have experienced the realities of statelessness, displacement, insecurity, and social fragmentation firsthand. War is not experienced solely through military campaigns or political declarations; it is experienced through the destruction of ordinary life itself. It is the loss of home, family, schools, markets, parks, and the everyday routines that shape identity and belonging. It is the collapse of civil society, the emergence of militias parallel to state institutions, and the absence of protection for vulnerable populations, particularly women and children.⁹

War is not only the destruction of infrastructure or governments; it is the destruction of ordinary life itself. It is the loss of family, home, loved ones, friends, schools, markets, football fields, parks, and the smallest mundane routines that shape one's identity and connection to place. It is the smell of burning in the air, the collapse of civil society, the emergence of militias parallel to the state, and the absence of protection and governance for the most vulnerable, especially women and children. It is the normalization of human trafficking, exploitation, and suffering.

War creates an atmosphere where fear itself becomes tangible. There is a constant uneasiness, a looming sense that something terrible is always about to happen. In these moments, misery becomes an opportunity for exploitation, where those already suffering become even more vulnerable to abuse and deprivation. The human cost becomes immeasurable, reduced to endless suffering, grief, and survival. At times, despair becomes so overwhelming that death itself appears as an escape from the misery. This is the reality of war, and the true scale of its human cost often remains unknown.

My lived experience with sanctions, economic deprivation, and prolonged instability has further reinforced the view that sustainable regional stability cannot be achieved through continuous military escalation, proxy warfare, or broad economic sanctions alone. Such approaches often deepen isolation, reinforce ideological hardening, and intensify perceptions

⁹L. Paul Bremer III, *My Year in Iraq* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 45-62. See also Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory* (New York: Times Books, 2005), 37-55.

of existential hostility between societies. Restrictive economic environments frequently undermine education, innovation, scientific advancement, and long term development while simultaneously contributing to social fragmentation and political radicalization.¹⁰

A sustainable regional security framework must instead prioritize long term peacebuilding initiatives, international cooperation, economic integration, and institutional reconstruction. Lasting security requires systems centered on human dignity, economic opportunity, governance capacity, and regional interdependence. Stability cannot emerge solely through coercive pressure; it must also be built through inclusive political and economic structures that allow societies to recover, participate, and thrive.

Historically, unilateral wartime policies and prolonged sanctions regimes have repeatedly contributed to regional destabilization, economic collapse, humanitarian suffering, and cycles of retaliatory escalation.¹¹ Rather than producing sustainable peace, such strategies frequently intensify fragmentation across the broader region.

Section One: Review of Existing Literature

It is widely reported and widely understood that strategic failures and missed opportunities were costly to these governments and their strategic goals. Many of these government failures occur because they analyze their failures from the perspective of institutional strength or weakness, or by focusing on security gaps. This paper builds on existing literature across the humanities and argues that to be legitimate is not simply to be constructed, but to be interpreted. The American political scientist and scholar Francis Fukuyama emphasizes the importance of established, formidable institutions and their role in a state's establishment and well being. He argues that governance depends on the development of effective bureaucratic structures. His approach, which explains how nations internally function, assumes that

¹⁰Nir Rosen, *In the Belly of the Green Bird: The Triumph of the Martyrs in Iraq* (New York: Free Press, 2006).

¹¹United Nations Security Council, *Thirty-Seventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Concerning ISIL (Da'esh), Al-Qaida and Associated Individuals and Entities*, S/2026/44 (January 2026).

situational legitimacy can be transferred across contexts.

Now, compare that with the anthropological approach, which holds that to understand a culture you must spend a year, four seasons, accompanying that culture in all of its life events. This approach highlights the relation between nature and authority. In many cultures, legitimacy is often associated with concepts such as morality, honor, and dignity. However, these concepts are very difficult to translate, especially in the arena of political language, and when they are used in distorted manners and symbolic gestures.¹² This lies within the core issue of the translation problem. From a Western perspective, legitimacy is defined by formal electoral systems and legal frameworks. Meanwhile, the local population evaluates authority on relational criteria, which produces semiotic friction.

Insurgents often exploit this friction. The disruption of network theory holds that nonstate actors often gain strength not only militarily but also in their ability to align with local narratives. They position themselves as the guardians of identity, tradition, faith, and community, while undermining the legitimacy of government actors. This could be evidently observed in Afghanistan, where an insurgent group presented itself as more in tune with the population's goals and needs and more legitimate than the government that was instituted, imposed, and fully supported by foreign powers.¹³ This is also evident in Iraq, where groups formed what local populations perceived as legitimate governments.¹⁴

My core focus in this paper is the "extreme significance" of the "insignificant" minuscule cultural differences, such as the interpretation of a word, behavior, or action, which can have a proportionate effect on policy outcomes. These perceived differences influence how we comprehend those actions, which, in turn, shape our day to day behavior.¹⁵ For example, the institution of a policy intended to promote stability may be understood as an act of control and

¹²Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 148-67

¹³Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 157-78. See also Blazakis, *Terror Disrupted*, chap. 3.

¹⁴Zarate, *Treasury's War*, chap. 9.

¹⁵Fawaz Gerges, *ISIS: A History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 60-91.

an exercise of authoritative injustice. A partnership instituted with a focus on strengthening security can be interpreted as a loss of sovereignty. While these interpretations are not irrational, they are shaped by historical experience, collective memory, and cultural context. Policy actions also function as signals: seemingly routine administrative decisions or institutional measures can communicate meanings far beyond their intended purpose, shaping how legitimacy, authority, and trust are understood by those affected. To understand this dynamic, we have to look beyond the lens of pure institutional governance. This requires recognizing that legitimacy does not arise from institutional structures alone, but from how policies, actions, and symbols are perceived, interpreted, and experienced by local populations¹⁶

Methodology & Background Context

This paper utilizes a qualitative case study methodology to examine how cultural miscommunication and misinterpretation influence policy outcomes in conflict and post conflict environments. The analysis focuses primarily on Iraq, Afghanistan, during the post 2000 era. These cases were selected because they represent distinct models of foreign intervention and security engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Afghanistan, international engagement largely reflected long term state building and counterinsurgency objectives. Iraq represents a model centered on regime change, reconstruction, and institutional restructuring following military intervention.

Despite their political and historical differences, both cases demonstrate recurring patterns of misalignment between external policy objectives and local cultural, political, and social interpretations.

The analysis draws on a combination of policy reports, historical accounts, academic

¹⁶ Kenneth Booth, *Strategy and Ethnocentrism* (London: Croom Helm, 1979); Robert Jervis, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976; new ed., 2017), 117- 42; Juan Zarate, *Treasury's War: The Unleashing of a New Era of Financial Warfare* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013), chap. 9.

secondary literature, and selected case events in which symbolism, historical memory, language, and cultural interpretation directly influenced political and strategic outcomes.¹⁷ Particular attention is given to moments where external actors misunderstood or underestimated the social, historical, and symbolic dimensions shaping local responses to policy implementation and foreign intervention.

The goal of this paper is not to provide an exhaustive historical account of each case study, but rather to identify critical moments of cultural miscommunication that significantly shaped strategic outcomes. By examining these historical episodes, the paper demonstrates how seemingly minor differences in meaning, interpretation, and perception can produce consequences with long term political, social, and security implications.

Case Study One: Symbolic Misalignment

In Iraq, we can observe one of the most significant examples of symbolic misalignment, especially after the 2003 US invasion. The 2003 invasion was framed as "Operation Iraqi Freedom." On television, Americans and the rest of the world were told that the American soldier would be hailed as a liberator of Iraq from the dictator Saddam Hussein and treated as such. In this framing, the intervention was simply presented as an act of liberation.¹⁸ The Americans believed that establishing a democratic era would promote stability and democracy. Astonishingly, the language used to describe this effort did not at all align with how locals perceived it. Although most of the population was oppressed, the American language was interpreted differently at the local Iraqi level.¹⁹

In Western societies, especially in the political arena, the word "liberation" carries various meanings depending on the context in which it is used. In Western societies, liberation implies

¹⁷Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), *The Role of Financial Information Sharing Partnerships in the Disruption of Crime* (October 2017).

¹⁸Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq: Winning the War, Losing the Peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 1-25.

¹⁹Vali Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat* (New York: Doubleday, 2013), 155-79.

the removal of oppressive regimes and/or dictators and the institution of freedom; however, in Iraq, that was not the case. The establishment of various political parties, the restructuring of political, civil, and governmental institutions, and the presence of foreign powers created a markedly different perception.

The restructuring of Iraq's governmental institutions, including the dissolution of the Iraqi Army by the Coalition Provisional Authority as part of broader state-building efforts, was viewed by many Iraqis, including members of Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish communities even those who had opposed the previous regime as a form of external intervention that weakened national institutions and undermined Iraq's sovereignty. Rather than being universally perceived as a step toward reconstruction, these measures deepened skepticism toward the new political order and contributed to growing public resentment. This decision created widespread political and social instability. Thousands of former soldiers suddenly found themselves unemployed, and many later provided fighters, military expertise, weapons, logistical support, and local knowledge to insurgent organizations, including Al-Qaeda in Iraq, laying important foundations for the insurgency that later evolved into ISIS. The restructuring was therefore not widely interpreted as liberation, but by many as a form of external control that appeared to prioritize the interests of foreign powers over local agency.²⁰

The insurgency in Iraq won twice; they gained legitimacy and support from the local population, not only through material and logistical means but also through legitimacy and cultural meaning, because Iraq was a failed state at the time of the invasion. The United States destroyed water and sanitation systems, the institutions that facilitated everyday life for the public, and in many cases looting of the banks was organized by opportunist foreign criminal actors and carried out by local criminal gangs.

²⁰Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2005), 37-55; Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 157-78; Ali Ansari, *Confronting Iran: The Failure of American Foreign Policy and the Next Great Conflict in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 82-101.

The collapse of public order following the 2003 invasion also created conditions for the widespread looting of Iraq's cultural heritage. Thousands of artifacts were stolen from the Iraq National Museum and archaeological sites across the country, representing one of the largest losses of cultural property in modern history. The absence of effective security allowed organized trafficking networks to move many of these antiquities into the international black market, where they were sold to collectors and dealers abroad. Beyond their historical and cultural significance, the looting symbolized the broader breakdown of state authority and deepened public perceptions that Iraq's national identity and heritage were being left unprotected during the occupation.²¹

The conflict and its aftermath severely damaged Iraq's critical infrastructure and public institutions. Electricity generation and distribution systems, transportation networks, bridges, hospitals, and other essential public services experienced widespread disruption, while years of sanctions and conflict had already weakened the country's healthcare system before the invasion. The deterioration of these institutions contributed to prolonged shortages of basic services, undermined public confidence in the emerging political order, and reinforced perceptions of state collapse during the occupation.²²

The deterioration of security and essential public services contributed to large-scale displacement across Iraq. Millions of Iraqis were forced to flee their homes, either seeking refuge in neighboring countries or becoming internally displaced within Iraq. This humanitarian crisis placed enormous social and economic pressures on both Iraq and the wider region while contributing to the loss of human capital necessary for long-term recovery.²³

The De-Ba'athification policy and dissolution of the Iraqi Army unintentionally created conditions that facilitated insurgent recruitment. Thousands of experienced military personnel

²¹ Lawrence Rothfield, *The Rape of Mesopotamia: Behind the Looting of the Iraq Museum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

²² L. Paul Bremer III, *My Year in Iraq: The Struggle to Build a Future of Hope* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 45-62; Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq* (New York: Times Books, 2005), 37-55.

²³ United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *UNHCR Starts Planning for Eventual Return of Iraqi Refugees*, April 25, 2003.

suddenly found themselves unemployed and politically marginalized, providing insurgent organizations with access to individuals possessing military training, organizational experience, and local knowledge. These developments contributed to the growth and operational capacity of insurgent groups during the post-invasion period.²⁴

The invasion united the country through unintended consequences, providing a symbolic rallying point for Sunni and Shia tribes alike. The midnight kicking down of doors, random arrests, forced disappearances, the collapse of political and economic stability, and the insanity of the security apparatus created conditions in which both communities found common cause. The Americans were viewed as responsible for bringing all these issues. The reality of life under occupation was deeply humiliating for the locals, as it gave them a reason to resist the oppression and injustice that had become values close and dear to their hearts, enforced by Sunni tribal honor codes and Shia religious symbolism of standing up to oppression at all costs. This feeling became a resource for recruiters. It was the driving force for many to stand up to the American presence to regain their country's honor and restore national pride.

Restoration of honor became a rallying cry. Al Qaeda recruiters used notions of honor and the glorious past as powerful tools for recruiting and uniting people. The insurgency was looked upon as the organization that would restore the dignity of the Iraqi people. The insurgency armed people with hope and gave them a sense of purpose, which, in turn, made them the de facto legitimate sovereign, despite the law of the land. This movement motivated many people, locals and people in surrounding countries to fund the fight and to regard funding it as a moral and religious duty to rid the occupation and heal the symbolic wounds it caused. The US Army and government did not intend these consequences to occur and completely missed the mark.

Later during the war, the US Army instituted a divide and conquer policy to reduce

²⁴Larry Diamond, *Squandered Victory: The American Occupation and the Bungled Effort to Bring Democracy to Iraq* (2005).

collaboration between Shia and Sunni factions, to sow violence in the community and direct some of the anger at the Shia population, and to take some pressure off the army from the suicide bombings, IEDs, and various other forms of violence.

The gap between intentionality and interpretation thus created a legitimacy crisis. Anything that formed out of this restructuring although in many cases positive, especially policies designed to promote social, political, and democratic stability was viewed by the locals with suspicion, making it all the more difficult to build trust and cooperation.

Parallel institutions were able to exploit this gap by framing themselves as the guardians of sovereignty and the defenders of identity. They aligned with how locals perceived themselves, thereby gaining massive support and undermining the authority of government actors.

This case demonstrates how symbolic misalignment produces tangible effects. When language and policy do not align with local interpretations, they produce outcomes that directly oppose their intended goals.

Case Study Two: Legitimacy & Honor in Afghanistan

In Afghanistan, concepts of honor, legitimacy, and social reputation have historically played a central role in shaping political authority and social stability. Authority within many Afghan communities is often tied not merely to formal institutional power, but to the ability of leaders to maintain respect, fulfill obligations, preserve communal trust, and uphold social honor.²⁵

Western intervention strategies in Afghanistan largely approached stability through a rational institutional framework focused on military training, financial incentives, counterinsurgency operations, and the construction of centralized state institutions. However, these approaches frequently underestimated the extent to which legitimacy in Afghan society is socially and culturally constructed rather than solely institutionally produced. Decisions within many local

²⁵Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

communities were not based exclusively on material incentives or formal governance structures, but were deeply influenced by questions of reputation, loyalty, kinship, and communal standing.

As a result, many security and governmental partnerships established during the intervention period struggled to gain enduring local legitimacy. Cooperation with foreign powers could at times provide strategic or economic benefits, yet simultaneously carried significant social and cultural costs within local communities. In many cases, association with foreign backed institutions risked undermining an individual's social credibility and communal standing. This created a persistent tension between externally designed policy objectives and local perceptions of legitimacy.²⁶

The long term consequence of this misalignment was the development of fragile institutions lacking deep societal cohesion and trust. Without a broadly shared sense of legitimacy connecting local populations to state institutions, many of the security structures built over two decades remained heavily dependent on foreign political, military, and financial support. The rapid collapse of Afghan security institutions following the withdrawal of the United States in 2021 demonstrated the extent to which institutional durability cannot be sustained through military and technical support alone without corresponding local legitimacy and social integration.²⁷

Synthesis and Policy Recommendations

Comparing these case studies reveals a highly consistent pattern. In each instance, policy failure was not primarily the result of insufficient resources, military capability, or political will. Rather, it stemmed from a mismatch between how a policy was designed and how it was ultimately interpreted by the local population. Across Iraq, and Afghanistan, strategic objectives were frequently evaluated through external assumptions while local communities

²⁶Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

²⁷Antonio Giustozzi, *Koran, Kalashnikov, and Laptop: The Neo-Taliban Insurgency in Afghanistan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

interpreted those same actions through their own historical experiences, cultural values, and collective memories.

First, policymakers must move beyond viewing culture as a secondary consideration and instead treat cultural understanding as a strategic capability. Effective policy design requires more than awareness of customs and traditions; it requires understanding how meaning, symbolism, legitimacy, and identity influence political behavior and public perception. Policies should be evaluated not only for what they are intended to accomplish, but also for how they are likely to be interpreted by the populations they affect.

Second, legitimacy cannot be imposed externally. The local population ultimately determines which institutions, leaders, and policies are considered legitimate. As demonstrated throughout these case studies, institutions that appear effective on paper may fail if they are not recognized as legitimate by the communities they are intended to serve. Understanding local perceptions of authority should therefore be considered a central component of policy development rather than an afterthought.

Third, professional training for diplomats, intelligence officers, military personnel, and policymakers should place greater emphasis on interpretation and contextual analysis. This extends beyond language proficiency and includes understanding historical memory, cultural symbolism, religious references, social norms, and local narratives. Effective communication requires not only transmitting a message, but also understanding how that message will be received and interpreted by different audiences.

Fourth, policymakers should establish stronger mechanisms for local consultation and feedback. Policies are often assessed according to whether they achieve intended objectives, but less attention is given to how they are perceived by those living under their effects. Continuous engagement with local communities can help identify misunderstandings, unintended consequences, and emerging grievances before they develop into larger sources of instability.

Finally, every policy must acknowledge the historical context in which it operates. Trust cannot be built without recognizing the impact of previous interventions, conflicts, and policy decisions on local populations. A willingness to openly acknowledge past mistakes does not weaken policy credibility; rather, it can strengthen legitimacy and create opportunities for dialogue, reconciliation, and cooperation. Sustainable peace requires more than security arrangements or political agreements. It requires the gradual rebuilding of trust between institutions and the communities they seek to serve.

Taken together, these findings suggest that future policy success will depend not only on material resources or military capability, but on the ability to understand how people construct meaning, legitimacy, and identity. Strategic success ultimately depends on whether policies make sense not only to those who design them, but also to those who must live with their consequences.

Conclusion

The central finding of this paper is that cultural miscommunication is not a secondary concern but a fundamental component of security, diplomacy, and statecraft. The cases examined throughout this study demonstrate how differences in interpretation, symbolism, historical memory, and social meaning can shape strategic outcomes as profoundly as military or economic factors. Policies designed without sufficient understanding of local perspectives often produce unintended consequences that undermine their original objectives. Future international engagement must therefore treat cultural fluency, local legitimacy, and historical awareness as strategic requirements rather than optional considerations.

The evidence presented across Afghanistan, and Iraq, suggests that sustainable peace cannot be achieved through military force alone. Long term stability depends on the ability of local populations to live with dignity, security, and economic opportunity. While military operations may achieve short term objectives, they rarely resolve the political, economic, and

social conditions that contribute to instability. Durable peace requires investment in institutions, human development, regional cooperation, and the economic well being of local communities.

The experiences examined in this paper also demonstrate that the destruction of state institutions and civil infrastructure often creates opportunities for extremist organizations and non state actors to expand their influence. Rather than eliminating these threats entirely, prolonged conflict can generate new grievances, weaken governance structures, and create environments in which radical movements are able to recruit, organize, and adapt. In many cases, instability itself becomes a strategic asset for such actors.

For this reason, future policy should place greater emphasis on peacebuilding, economic integration, education, institutional development, and regional cooperation. Security must be understood not only as the absence of violence but also as the presence of functioning institutions, economic opportunity, and public trust. Policies that strengthen human capital, encourage cooperation, and promote shared prosperity are more likely to produce lasting stability than approaches focused exclusively on coercion and military pressure.

Finally, meaningful progress requires honest reflection on both successes and failures. Lasting security cannot be built upon the erosion of sovereignty, the destruction of civilian infrastructure, or the exclusion of local populations from decisions that affect their future. The path forward requires sustained diplomacy, genuine partnership, and a commitment to understanding how policies are experienced and interpreted by those living with their consequences. Only through such an approach can trust be rebuilt, legitimacy restored, and a more stable and peaceful future achieved.

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