

Microinsurgency: Introducing and Defining a Distinct Category of Intrastate Conflict

Description

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Introduction

Microinsurgencies, small-scale armed conflicts over natural resources internal to one country, are not necessarily new. Although such conflicts involving natural resource wealth occurred in ancient times, little seems to have been studied and published about the interaction of these conditions and variables until the late 1900s. For example, the King Scorpion settled and united ancient Egypt in approximately 3150 BC, after centuries of fighting by dozens of independent chieftains over control of the [Nile River](#). Whoever controls the Nile still controls the wealth of modern Egypt today. Other examples from the distant past are those of Portugal and Spain with their avarice for gold, silver, precious stones, silks, and spices, even slavery and human trafficking. According to Charles Chasteen, the [Iberian invaders](#) came to [the Americas] seeking success in the terms dictated by their society: riches, the privilege of being served by others, and a claim to religious righteousness. Jasper Humphreys offers another example below.

The Portuguese adventurers often faced stiff local opposition to their gathering of the commodities they sought; to deal with this, the Portuguese frequently resorted to the tried-and-tested economics of capturing and ransoming local chiefs and notables. Sometimes these and other people were brought back to Portugal where they could make an economic contribution to the [costs of the expedition \[and resource exploitation\]](#) by being sold.

The article [Scarcity and Abundance Revisited: A Literature Review on Natural Resources and Conflict](#) explains, since the 1990s, the body of literature devoted to analyzing the relationship

between resources and conflict can be broadly divided into two groups: studies which focus on resource scarcity and conflict and studies that analyze the relationship between resource abundance and conflict.â?• The resource scarcity and conflict group has many more qualitative works using case studies. The resource abundance and conflict group instead overwhelmingly employs quantitative analysis and studies. Each of these groups has its own proponents and critics, but none identifies the unique category of microinsurgency.

Definitions

Intrastate Conflicts

The focus of research on microinsurgencies begs the initial task to define the categories and concepts of intrastate armed conflicts. A hierarchy of all categories of armed conflict is depicted in Figure 1 below. This hierarchy is defined in terms of the size, range, participants, and magnitude of the conflict in question. Microinsurgencies are at the left or lower end of this scale. At the higher and larger end of the conflict scale are civil wars and international conflict. Examples of most are provided in Figure 1 in parentheses.

Civil wars serve as the dividing line between intrastate and international armed conflicts, because they can be in either category more often than insurrections. The focus regarding microinsurgencies is within the realm of intrastate conflict. According to Nicholas Sambanis, â??most civil war lists [including insurrections] rely heavily on the [Correlates of War \(COW\) project](#).â?• Unfortunately, â??since the first COW list was published, there has been little peer review of [COW coding rules](#).â?• Furthermore, â??most projects do not conduct original historical research and depend heavily on [COW](#). For these reasons, and others outlined below, existing databases of conflicts are not reliable or sufficient for the analysis and research of smaller-scale armed conflicts because these are often excluded from those databases.â?•

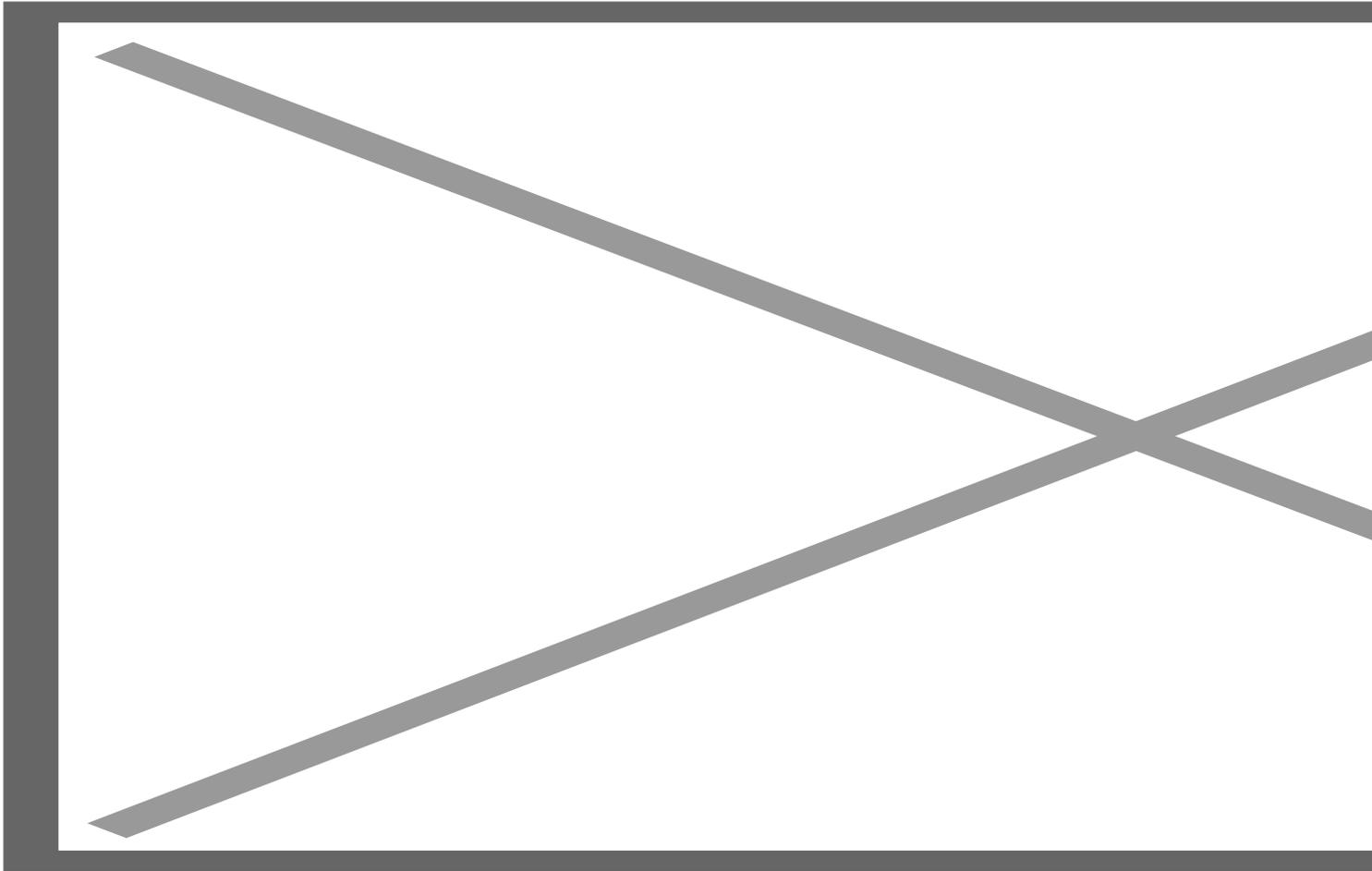


Figure 1: Hierarchy of Armed Conflict from Lower Violence and Size to Higher [\[1\]\[1\]](#) This hierarchy is not meant to be all-inclusive. Instead, it is used to illustrate where microinsurgencies fit within the scale of armed conflict in terms of size and violence. Additionally, this hierarchy does not dismiss the fact that smaller armed conflicts can have very violent actions and tactics, but in general, smaller armed conflicts do not meet the higher levels of violence observed and recorded in large-scale civil wars and international conflicts.

Karl DeRouen Jr. offers perhaps the best examinations of the concept of civil wars. In [An Introduction to Civil Wars](#), DeRouen presents many viewpoints and definitions, most of which require 1,000 battle related deaths in at least one year of the conflict, but he does not identify or define smaller-scale conflicts, such as microinsurgencies. Finally, in [“What Is Civil War?”](#)• Sambanis offers a definition

of civil war that is extremely long, in which he also outlines nine distinct aspects or characteristics of civil wars, but which are not applicable to microinsurgencies.

Microinsurgency

Neither the [DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms](#) nor [Operational Terms and Graphics \(FM1-02\)](#) provides a definition of microinsurgency, and no other sources identified or defined the concept or term microinsurgency. Consequently, the specific elements and an initial definition of microinsurgency are first offered here. In sum, a microinsurgency is a long-term intrastate conflict between an aggrieved minority and a recognized state or ruling authority. The conflict involves fighting over natural resources and has no appreciable or measurable international or external influences or support. The primary objective of the insurgents is an end state ranging in degree of autonomy from semiautonomous rule to complete secession.

All microinsurgencies are intrastate armed conflicts, in which no appreciable or measurable international or external influences contribute to the onset, duration, or outcome of the conflict. While many microinsurgencies might fit within various definitions of civil wars, most civil wars are not microinsurgencies. As explained below, the microinsurgency is also distinct from traditional insurrections.

The microinsurgency conflict is a dyad with one side being a government or ruling authority and the other an organized, armed opposition, typically an ethnic minority, to that authority or government. The duration of a microinsurgency is defined as [at least 10 years](#). One reason for the selection of the 10-year mark is that many studies of insurgency and counterinsurgency (COIN) identify that the average duration of post-World War II counterinsurgencies is over nine years.

The definition employed for this research uses no threshold for annual deaths or total deaths from conflicts, as do most of the accepted databases. Attempting to calculate annual or total battle deaths is often misleading and always skews results or makes for awkward lists and definitions of civil wars and insurrections, which otherwise, might not even be categorized as armed conflicts. Others have often categorized these microinsurgencies as civil wars, regular to full-blown insurrections, or neither, because they do not meet their thresholds of [battle related deaths](#). Consequently, these intrastate armed conflicts are frequently excluded from databases covering armed conflicts, even though microinsurgency durations are at least 10 years.

Seemingly, most intrastate conflicts have similar characteristics. However, the strategic objectives of microinsurgencies are distinct. The key objective of the insurgents is not to overtake or overthrow the

national-level government, but to attain some degree of local control, or a certain measure of separation within their traditional lands from the established government. Microinsurgencies can be large in terms of geography or population relative to the size of the country in which the conflict is fought, such as the Moro conflict in the Philippines. In this sense, the size of the insurgent organization does not matter, neither do the numbers of those killed, civilian or militant.

Civil wars, insurgencies, and microinsurgencies are the three primary types of intrastate armed conflict, even though there are other types, such as coups. Of these three, only microinsurgencies always fall within the definition of an intrastate conflict. Civil wars and insurrections can be internationalized or can become interstate conflicts. For example, ISIS and the current conflict in Yemen are international in nature and scope. Historically, the Spanish Civil War and Vietnam War are two large-scale and classic examples. However, microinsurgencies, even when misclassified as civil wars or insurrections, are never internationalized. This is another one of the key distinguishing features setting microinsurgencies apart from most other insurgencies and civil wars.

Civil wars and full-scale insurrections are generally larger in scale and range than microinsurgencies, larger in the sense of the number of participants and in the geographic area under conflict. Civil wars and traditional insurrections are concerned with which group or organization will govern and control the entire country, whereas microinsurgencies never have this objective. See Figure 2 below for a Venn diagram displaying the logical and set relationships among intrastate armed conflicts, including civil wars, insurgencies, and microinsurgencies.

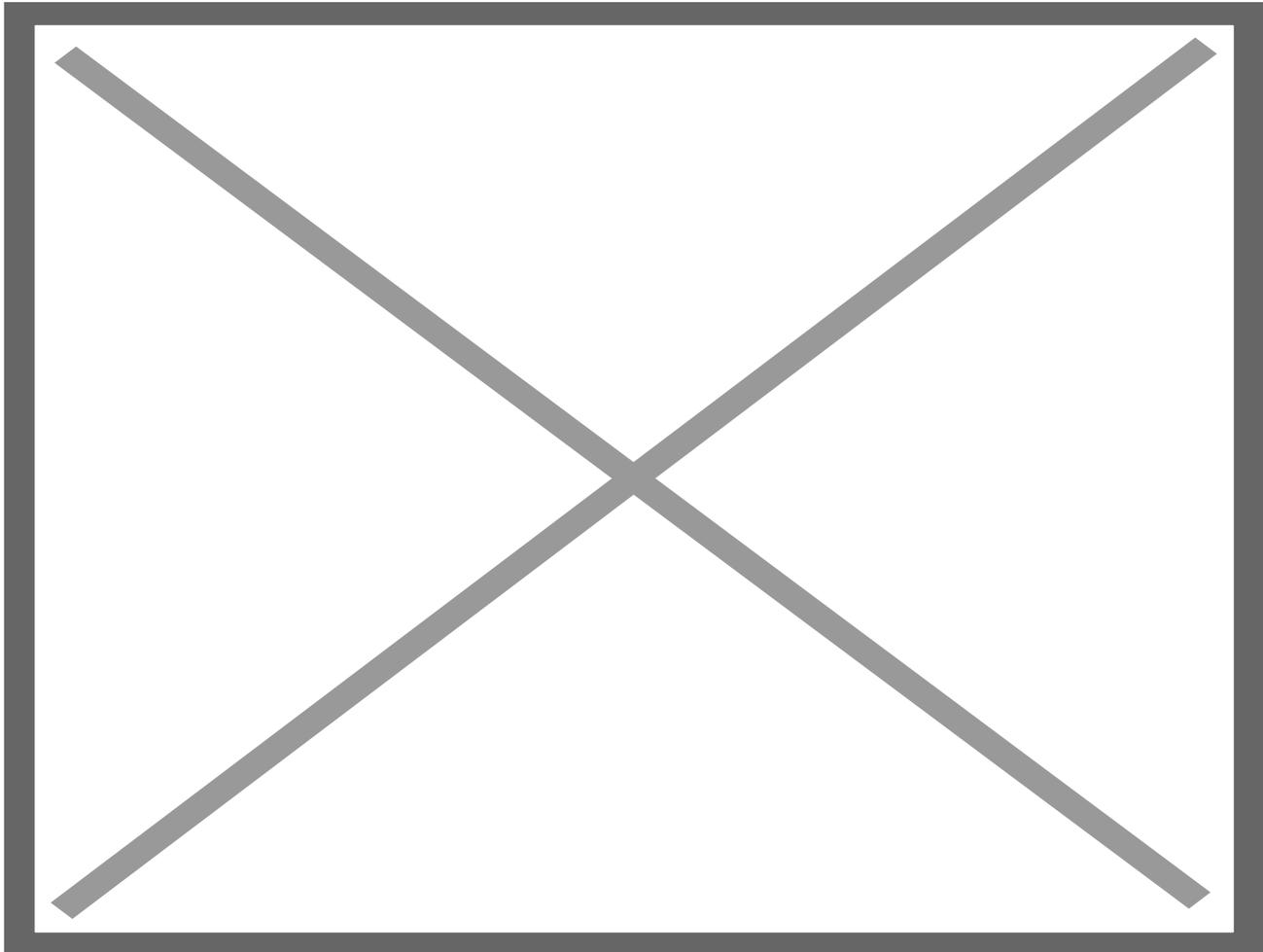


Figure 2: Microinsurgencies vs. Other Intrastate Conflicts. [\[2\]](#)

[\[2\]](#) This Venn Diagram displays the overlap among the three most significant intrastate conflicts: civil wars, insurgencies, and microinsurgencies. It also illustrates one of the key defining characteristics of microinsurgencies. They are always within the geographical boundaries of a single state, unlike many civil wars and larger insurrections, which often become international in scale and scope.

Although they are not about defeating national militaries, this does not prohibit the insurrectionists in a microinsurgency from attacking government facilities or forces in regions of the country other than contested areas. Attacks and fighting may often occur in capitals and other large urban areas in which

the insurgents have no chance of controlling. Examples of this include the [Southern Philippines](#), [Northern Ireland](#), and [Malaya](#). Importantly and more precisely, microinsurgencies are concerned with a range of issues and outcomes from various levels of local autonomy to complete secession from national-level governments.

Natural Resource Wealth

Microinsurgencies involve natural resources, actual or perceived, and conflict over them. [The research](#) has not identified any microinsurgency in which natural resources did not play a key role or motivating factor in the conflict. In microinsurgent conflicts, resource wealth may take the form of natural resources, such as petroleum, highly arable land, or precious gems and metals. These may be raw resources unique to a country or region used to produce something of high value, such as cocaine or opium. However, finished products, such as cocaine, heroin, furniture, etc., are not considered natural resource wealth. Additionally, resource wealth may also be derived from perceived, valuable resources, such as the [potential presence](#) of oil in the South China Sea or something as simple as traditional lands. Perceived resources must be believed or provable and feasibly exploitable in order to garner revenue and support. The relative distribution and exploitation of resources, regardless of what the resources are, contribute to the complexity and duration of microinsurgencies. Where these exploitable resources are relatively equally distributed between the two sides, microinsurgencies tend to be [longer in duration](#).

Finally, it is important to note that, similar to characterizing and defining intrastate civil wars, microinsurgencies do not fit within existing political theories, and no [international relations theory](#) even begins to address this type of conflict. Being small-scale, intrastate conflicts, microinsurgencies cannot be described or explained by any of the various forms of [realism](#). For similar reasons, the various forms of [liberalism](#) cannot adequately explain the phenomena of microinsurgencies either. In fact, microinsurgencies are not accounted for or explained by any [theories of international relations](#) or [foreign policy](#). There does not appear to be a single theory, source, or concept that addresses the various aspects of these small-scale, intrastate conflicts.

Cases of Microinsurgency

West Papua

West Papua, Indonesia is an example of an ongoing microinsurgency. The Dutch granted [independence to Indonesia in 1949](#). However, the Dutch first transferred Irian Jaya (West Papua, New Guinea) to the United Nations (UN) in 1962, and then the UN transferred it to [Indonesia in 1963](#).

Although the transfer was completed in 1963, it was thoroughly opposed by the indigenous population of [West Papua](#).

The resource wealth exploited in West Papua is actual and entirely beneficial to Indonesia. The West Papuans receive practically nothing from the copper, gold, and other resources taken out of their land and surrounding sea. The resource wealth lost by the [West Papuans](#) ensured their demise and contributed significantly to the Indonesian economy. Additionally, Indonesia has committed numerous human rights violations against the indigenous Christian population of West Papua, including [large numbers of murders](#).

Balochistan

The second example is that of Balochistan, an ongoing microinsurgency within the sovereign territory of Pakistan. The Province of Balochistan also borders Afghanistan and Iran. In 1876, the British established a treaty with Balochistan, known then as Kalat. As the British withdrew from the region immediately after World War II, Kalat sought independence, declaring so on [12 August 1947](#). However, Pakistan asserted its power and control over the region, which resulted in a backlash by the Baloch population. The conflict was short lived, with Pakistan gaining control over most of [Balochistan in 1948](#). From 1948 to present, Pakistan has faced at least [four other insurrections](#) in Balochistan, including the current conflict that began in 2005.

One of the primary causes of this longest insurgency in Balochistan is exploitation of resource wealth from the province by the state of Pakistan. For example, Balochistan contains the largest natural gas fields in Pakistan, which according to Maliha Tariq [account for nearly 36 percent of Pakistan's total gas production](#). Balochistan also produces more than 40 percent of Pakistan's primary energy consisting of [coal, oil, natural gas, and electricity](#). The province also has an abundance of copper, gold, silver, platinum, and uranium. However, it remains the [poorest of all Pakistan's provinces](#). Clearly, this is a motivating factor for the insurgents.

Southern Philippines

A third example covers the temporarily terminated microinsurgency in the Southern Philippines. The modern conflict with the Muslim Moros in the Southern Philippines began in the late 1800s when forces from the United States ousted the Spanish government in the [Philippines during the Spanish-American War](#). The United States forced the integration of Moros into the greater Philippine population, erasing centuries of voluntary segregation. After the United States granted independence to the Philippines on 4 July 1946, the Moros shifted their fight for autonomy against the Philippine government in part due to

forced migration of non-Muslims from other regions in the country to the traditional Moro lands (Information was obtained from in-person interviews of and emails with former [MILF fighter](#): 2019-2023).

In terms of intensity and grievances, this conflict has ebbed and flowed until today. The primary resources sought by the Moros are their traditional lands and any wealth produced from them. Of course, any marine resources would be included in these, as all their traditional lands are islands, or regions of large islands. The Philippine government does not receive much resource wealth from the traditional lands in which the Moros live. However, the perceived resource wealth by the Moros is tremendous, while that which is perceived by the national government is moderate (The author has conducted field research in and lives on [Mindanao Island](#) in the Southern Philippines). For example, the Philippine culture abounds in [rumors](#), such as large caches of gold left behind and hidden by the Japanese after their occupation of the Philippines during World War II and offshore oil fields yet to be located and identified, but claimed by many, including China.

Conclusion

To recap, a microinsurgency is a long-term intrastate conflict between an aggrieved minority and a recognized state or ruling authority. The conflict involves fighting over natural resources and has no appreciable or measurable international or external influences or support. The primary objective of the insurgents is an end state ranging in degree of autonomy from semiautonomous rule to complete secession.

No definition of microinsurgency has been identified in extant literature. An extensive review of the literature yielded little about small-scale intrastate conflict, while microinsurgencies are essentially ignored. This research fills gaps in the existing literature by defining and explaining the dynamics of microinsurgencies and associated resource wealth. Although this type of intrastate conflict is positioned on the low end of the conflict intensity scale, studying microinsurgencies is important for four reasons. First, findings about microinsurgencies can inform and clarify the understanding of small-scale, intrastate and ethnic conflict. Second, almost all larger-scale intrastate and many interstate conflicts began as smaller-scale conflicts, such as these. Third, more accurate understanding of microinsurgencies can permit accurate causal analysis and precise development of proper policies, strategies, and tactics for conflict termination. Through the identification of such root causes, counterinsurgency operations, policies, and solutions can be developed to sufficiently address grievances of ethnic groups forming the insurgency and to pressure national governments into reasonable conflict termination agreements, preferably before armed conflict begins or increases in duration, intensity, or scale. Civilian and military analysts, planners, and policymakers should be better

equipped to identify and understand these long-term conflicts and their associated grievances and issues. Finally, once identified, microinsurgencies can serve as an indication and warning of potential larger-scale conflicts, because almost all traditional insurrections began as microinsurgencies.

*[LTC Michael Trevett](#) served 30 years in three branches of the US military. He was an accredited diplomat in two countries and has worked with and trained intelligence, military, and police forces in dozens of countries. He earned a Ph.D. in International Development and Security Studies from the University of Southern Mississippi, an MS in Strategic Intelligence from the National Intelligence University, and an MA in Global History from American Military University and published the declassified book *Isolating the Guerrilla*.*

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