

Insurgency-Related Conflict

Crisis Response Playbook no. 1

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July 23, 2026



Executive Summary

Over the first quarter of this century, the vast majority of violent conflicts worldwide have involved insurgent groups: organized groups engaged in armed struggle to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while expanding their own authority and resources. Some insurgencies seek to overthrow or replace existing power structures; others aim to change how power is exercised or distributed within a country. Some are fueled by secessionist movements or movements seeking self-determination from an existing state. Since around 2000, a significant number of such insurgent groups have aligned with transnational extremist organizations, namely al-Qaeda and the self-proclaimed Islamic State (also known as ISIS). Insurgent conflicts have threatened the safety and security of U.S. citizens, personnel, and facilities; sparked major humanitarian and refugee crises; and destabilized U.S. partner governments. More recently, an increasing number of such conflicts have become intertwined with regional and global rivalries, with insurgent groups leveraging greater state sponsorship to enhance their campaigns and lethality. In the years ahead, insurgent groups could pose even greater security threats by exploiting emerging technologies and disrupting global cyber networks and economic supply chains.

To respond effectively to such conflicts, policy planners should consider the U.S. government's strategic interests and orientation regarding the insurgency, along with related assumptions and benchmarks. The U.S. government has typically adopted a range of policies, including the following:

- **Monitor (or prepare):** Take a wait-and-see approach, avoiding decisive action while signaling concern through diplomatic channels and conducting contingency planning behind the scenes. Decision-makers typically adopt this stance when the crisis poses lower stakes for U.S. interests, situational dynamics are unclear, or other actors are better positioned to address the situation.
- **Contain:** Limit the scope and harm of the insurgency without directly intervening in its resolution, namely through engagement with regional partners and targeted measures to weaken the insurgency's reach. This orientation suits situations in which direct U.S. support to national counterinsurgency forces is undesirable or infeasible.
- **Defend (or restore):** Surge diplomatic, material, intelligence, or security assistance to the threatened government and work to isolate the insurgency from its external sources of support, with the aim of restoring the status quo ante. Leaders usually deploy this strategy when the crisis poses higher stakes

for U.S. interests and the United States has a strong relationship with and confidence in the government's counterinsurgency approach.

- **Transform:** Pursue changes in an untenable political or security situation, whether through support for negotiations, conditioning U.S. assistance on needed reforms, or, in limited cases, aiding insurgents. This orientation works best when decision-makers consider a return to the status quo ante untenable or when a more durable political settlement better serves long-term U.S. strategic interests.

This playbook is informed by U.S. and international responses to insurgencies in recent decades. Three lessons stand out:

- **Strive for deeper understanding.** Overly simplistic or formulaic analysis of insurgencies—often perpetuated by counterterrorism frameworks—can impede policy planning. Analysts should consider the political economy, goals, and resilience of insurgencies, including how they can serve local populations and provide supporters with a sense of belonging, meaning, and economic opportunity. They should also weigh the external sources of support that fuel insurgencies.
- **Beware of overly militarized approaches.** [Comparative studies](#) of insurgencies show that pure military suppression rarely succeeds and often exacerbates conflicts. Counterinsurgency forces' perceived legitimacy among the local population matters more than their capacity. Approaches that incorporate dialogue between conflict parties, encourage militia members to defect, and engage directly with local communities—while confronting external actors perpetuating the conflict—work better.
- **Think long-term.** Many modern insurgencies [last a decade](#) or more. Amid a crisis, policymakers should assess the likely long-term scenarios and the risks and opportunities they present for U.S. interests. Long-term thinking can help identify reforms needed for durable resolutions.

Effective policy planning requires equal attention to the mechanisms that enable implementation and foster adaptation. Policy planners should consider the leadership, staffing, and structures needed for implementation across the U.S. government and with partners. Proactive engagement with Congress and communication with the public are also essential to build consensus for needed policy, legal, and resource changes.

1.0 Situational Assessment

1.1 What is the Source of Concern?

This playbook addresses insurgent groups affiliated with transnational terrorist networks—namely, the self-proclaimed Islamic State and al-Qaeda—that seek influence and power in specific localities. It does not address those umbrella networks themselves, the transnational operations they carry out, or the counterterrorism strategies and tools used to combat them (e.g., terrorist watch lists, interdiction, and screening programs at ports of entry). Profit-motivated transnational criminal organizations—such as drug cartels in Mexico or piracy networks off the coast of Somalia—are similarly outside this playbook’s scope.

Intrastate or civil conflicts involving insurgent groups have been the dominant form of warfare globally in the first quarter of this century. According to the [Uppsala Conflict Data Program](#), more than twenty countries experienced such conflicts in 2024 alone. Major cases included conflicts involving the Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (Philippines), the Lord’s Resistance Army (Central Africa), the National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (Mali), Boko Haram (Nigeria), the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, the Tigray Defense Forces (Ethiopia), the Rapid Support Forces (Sudan), and the M23 Movement (Democratic Republic of Congo). Details on those cases and related lessons are available in the appendixes.

More insurgent groups today maintain connections to transnational extremist networks while engaging in illicit economic activity and accessing global markets to sustain their operations. They provide governance services in territories they control, [fostering a degree](#) of local legitimacy. Reflecting wider demographic shifts, insurgent operations have [expanded into urban spaces](#), where dense populations and complex terrain offer both cover and opportunity.

In an era of great power competition, many insurgencies have learned to cultivate and leverage foreign state sponsorship, functioning as proxies within broader geopolitical rivalries. With external support, modern insurgencies have become highly adept at exploiting digital and social media platforms to [shape the information environment](#), broaden recruitment, and [conduct intelligence gathering and targeting](#). Groups are [incorporating drones](#) and unmanned systems—both state-supplied and commercially adapted—into their [strategic and tactical](#) approaches. Exploiting autonomous weapons and other emerging technologies fueled by artificial intelligence (AI) could further expand their reach and lethality in the years ahead.

1.2 Anticipating and Preparing for Potential Crises

The U.S. government should seek a deeper understanding of the local dynamics surrounding a particular insurgency to improve early warning, prevention, and mitigation efforts. In many past cases, policymakers have not received clear warnings that insurgent groups were about to launch new offensives. Both before and during a crisis, the U.S. government should actively assess gaps in its intelligence, including those stemming from limited relationships or access to target areas.

The following table identifies essential and desirable information that policy planners could ask of the intelligence community to prepare for a future insurgency-related crisis and identify preventive options.

Essential Questions for Pre-Crisis Assessments and Planning

Insurgent group's strategy and motivations	Is the group focused on weakening or overthrowing the government, seeking self-determination, or controlling territory for economic exploitation? Is it making a specific appeal to religious, ethnic, or regional groups
Insurgency's political and military leadership, command-and-control	Who are the group's political and military leaders, and what are their personality profiles? What is the group's leadership structure, and how does it assert control over rank-and-file fighters?
Insurgency's internal support base	What is the insurgency's level of popular support and recruitment capacity within its area of operations, including any links to specific regions, identity groups, or political movements? How does the wider population view the insurgency? What resources does the group have through local extraction, gray and black-market activity, or taxation?
Insurgency's external support base	Does the insurgency have any external supporters, whether foreign states, private entities, or diaspora members? Is it receiving significant external financial or materiel support?

Insurgency's geographic reach and capacity	Where is the insurgency based, where can it operate with relative ease, and where is it seeking to expand? What is its capacity to launch wider attacks and assert territorial control, including proximity to capital cities or critical infrastructure?
Insurgency's weapons capacity	What is the group's assessed weapons arsenal (e.g., improvised explosive devices or man-portable air-defense systems)? Is the group using drones or expanding its use of them?
Government counterinsurgency posture	What is the likely calculus and response of government actors to insurgent attacks or gains? Do security forces have the legitimacy, capacity, and discipline for effective counterinsurgency efforts? What is the government's relationship with frontline communities, and what is its level of support from the overall population? Can and will the government address grievances and deliver basic services?
Government's external supporters	Who are the government's primary economic and security partners? Is the government aligned with a U.S. adversary or competitor in this regard?
Other national or local influencers	Are there other actors (e.g., religious organizations, alternate factions, etc.) with relationships to the insurgency or most affected populations who can serve as intermediaries in an escalating crisis?
Regional and international actors' contingency posture	Who are the most influential and capable actors in the wider region that could help contain the insurgency or shift their calculus? What is their disposition toward a potential crisis?

Preventive action often requires an earlier focus on undermining or containing insurgencies before they gain strength and more directly threaten regional security and stability. Local and international partners active in the region often have a more nuanced understanding of the context and can identify emerging risks and prevention opportunities.

1.3 Assessing Crisis Situations

A crisis in an insurgency-related conflict typically involves escalation, incursion, or disruption that significantly alters the situation, heightens threats or opportunities for U.S. interests, and commands senior policymakers' attention. It could include a high-profile attack, a significant troop movement, seizure of major infrastructure, or a leadership change that provides a potential influence opportunity. Once a crisis is underway, policymakers' focus should shift from anticipating events to managing an effective response. The following information is critical to assessing the scope of an insurgency-related crisis and refining U.S. response options, ideally building on the core information outlined above.

Essential Questions for Crisis Response Planning

Extent of insurgent activity and potential for escalation	How much and within what time frame could the insurgent activity expand in scope and reach? What is the insurgency's capacity to reach or target the capital or major regional centers, including critical government or economic infrastructure?
Insurgency's public statements and profile	What is the nature of public statements and propaganda by the insurgent group or supporters? How has that shifted since the crisis's onset?
Public perceptions	How does the wider public in the country/region perceive the crisis? How does it view the legitimacy of the insurgency and the responding government actors?
Potential spoilers	How might other influential actors, either internal or external, take advantage of instability caused by the crisis to advance their agendas?
Government stability and resilience	How stable is the government in the face of this crisis and potential further escalation? What is its immediate response and communicated priorities?

Other societal power brokers	Outside of government, who are the key societal power brokers who could shape the response to the crisis and mitigate its escalation?
Regional and international engagement	How are regional or international actors reacting to the crisis, how do they view the insurgency's legitimacy and prospects, and how willing are they to take steps to intervene?
Channels for engagement	What channels exist for fostering dialogue and communication between conflict parties to try to de-escalate the crisis (e.g., broker a ceasefire)? Who are viable intermediaries that both sides will engage?

Beyond tasking the intelligence community for information and assessments in these areas, policy planners should seek perspectives from the U.S. embassy, regional partners and allies, the United Nations and international actors, and nongovernmental organizations. Those organizations often have stronger connections to local networks in crisis areas and can help mitigate intelligence gaps and inform policy options.

2.0 Assessment of U.S. Interests

U.S. policy planners should assess the core U.S. interests that insurgency-related conflict could affect. This section outlines proximate concerns, broader strategic interests, and decision timelines for consideration.

2.1 Proximate U.S. Concerns

The following immediate concerns are relevant to virtually any insurgency-related crisis:

- **Safety and security of U.S. citizens.** Insurgents could target U.S. citizens and their families residing in crisis-affected areas, including through kidnappings.

- **Safety and security of U.S. governmental personnel and facilities.** Insurgencies could threaten the U.S. embassy or military bases and installations in crisis-affected areas.
- **Closure of ports of entry and major roads or lines of communication.** Insurgency-related crises could disrupt airports or seaports, roads, or access points needed to evacuate personnel and assets from the country.
- **Political instability undermining U.S. allies and partners.** Insurgency incursions or escalations can directly threaten the stability of existing governments at local or national levels—particularly when those governments are U.S. allies and partners.
- **Humanitarian and human rights crises.** Insurgency escalations and counterinsurgency responses could quickly lead to human rights abuses, mass atrocities, civilian displacement, or a surge in humanitarian needs.

2.2 Strategic Interests at Risk

Beyond the proximate concerns above, insurgency-related crises could implicate broader strategic U.S. interests in the following ways:

- **Critical minerals and resources.** Insurgents could block or disrupt critical mineral or energy supply chains and trade routes that serve U.S. business and economic interests.
- **Access to strategic weapons.** Insurgents could gain access to areas containing dangerous weapon stockpiles (e.g., biological or chemical weapons) or weapons-grade material (e.g., uranium).
- **Global strategic competition dynamics.** Insurgents could undermine partner governments cooperating with the United States (including on basing, access, and overflight agreements) and create openings for U.S. strategic adversaries to gain greater access and influence (e.g., Russian activity in Africa's Sahel region).
- **Transnational threats.** Insurgents could create space for transnational terrorist or criminal networks to operate freely, amass resources, and directly threaten the U.S. homeland or target U.S. persons and facilities.

- **Security cooperation and partnerships.** Insurgency-related crises, including counterinsurgency responses by security forces, could fuel human rights abuses that pose legal or reputation risks for sustained U.S. engagement in the country or region.
- **Migration and displacement.** Insurgency-related crises could fuel refugee outflows from the country or region that could create unanticipated migratory shocks directly affecting the United States (e.g., in the Western Hemisphere) or U.S. allies—adding to already record levels of worldwide conflict-related displacement.

Even if U.S. strategic interests are temporarily limited, how an insurgency adapts and morphs over time could exacerbate threats to U.S. interests over the longer term. Insurgencies can become more radicalized or entrenched, making crises harder to resolve.

2.3 Decision Timeline: Essential Tasks

Policy planners may need to make decisions about the safety and security of U.S. personnel and American citizens in the affected country or region within hours or days if the insurgent actions are far-reaching and pose direct threats, especially to major cities. Timelines for decisions about the broader U.S. strategy will depend on the speed and scope of the insurgency threat, its direct effects on U.S. economic or security interests, and the plans of national or regional partners. The following is a sample decision timeline.

- **0 to 24 Hours:** Assess the scope and nature of the crisis and its immediate harm to U.S. interests, especially any heightened threats to U.S. citizens, personnel, and facilities. Seek the embassy team's recommendations on initial responses to the crisis. Identify essential information requirements and gaps, and release any preliminary public messaging, including security alerts to U.S. citizens as needed.
- **24 to 72 Hours:** Convene interagency policy officials to review U.S. policy posture toward the situation, weighing interests, opportunities, and risks. Engage with the affected government or governments and regional and international partners to seek their assessments of the crisis and their possible responses. Consider lines of communication to the insurgency and any initial messages to deliver to them. Enhance security for U.S. personnel and facilities, connect with U.S. companies or institutions in the affected region, and initiate dialogue with relevant congressional committees and stakeholders.
- **72 Hours to 7 Days:** Continue interagency review of the situation and the U.S. strategy and policy response, and take stock of existing and needed resources and tools for the U.S. response, including

identifying any active programs to reconsider and any sanctions packages to develop. Deploy diplomatic, military, or intelligence personnel to the region as needed to enhance the embassy's engagement. Communicate with any potential external spoilers who may exacerbate the crisis; engage about the crisis with UN and multilateral forums; and update public messaging as appropriate.

- **7 to 30 Days:** Finalize near-term decisions about changes to U.S. strategy and policy response. Establish interagency structures to sustain robust implementation of policy responses, and conduct ongoing coordinated diplomacy with national, regional, and international partners. Initiate programmatic and resource changes and actions, continue collaboration with Congress, and expand strategic communications efforts to reinforce the policy response.
- **30+ Days:** Review and adapt the strategy and policy response in light of available information on the changing situation. Consult with Congress regarding additional authorities or funding to enhance the U.S. response to the insurgency-related crisis. Sustain diplomatic and negotiations support as needed, and launch any new targeted measures as appropriate. Convene and structure regional and international coalitions.

Insurgencies can go on for some time before an event or series of events demands the attention of U.S. policymakers. Ideally, the U.S. government will have already considered its policy approach and strategy toward that insurgency, including through tabletop exercises and war gaming. In response to a particular crisis, U.S. policymakers ultimately need to consider whether to adjust that approach and whether to change the scale and scope of engagement.

In crafting policy responses to insurgency-related conflicts, planners should consider relevant policy, operational, and legal guidance; major decision points; different types of strategy; and relevant resources and tools.

3.0 Policy Formulation

3.1 Relevant Policy, Operational, and Legal Guidance

U.S. government responses to insurgency-related crises will be informed by the U.S. National Security Strategy; strategies toward transnational actors likely linked to insurgencies (e.g., counterterrorism); and region-specific strategies and policies. As a general principle, the United States tends to oppose insurgencies that use force to achieve political change, including self-determination, in order to support national sovereignty and stability and avoid setting precedents. The United States has departed from this principle,

however, in cases where it has determined that insurgencies have popular support or align with U.S. interests.

The U.S. military has established and updated doctrine for responding to insurgencies, including the U.S. Army Field Manual 3-24 [PDF]. In January 2009, the Department of State and other departments and agencies developed and approved an interagency “U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide” [PDF], though it is no longer considered an active document. The Department of State, DOD, and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) also completed and approved a joint framework for stabilizing conflict-affected areas through the “Stabilization Assistance Review” [PDF] (SAR) in 2018. DOD included the SAR principles and framework in its doctrine under Directive 3000.05 on stability operations. NATO and other allied partners have similarly incorporated counterinsurgency principles into their own doctrine.

The following statutes may shape or constrain U.S. responses to insurgency-related crises:

- The War Powers Resolution [PDF] requires the president to notify Congress within forty-eight hours of introducing U.S. armed forces into combat situations abroad and to consult with Congress on seeking authorization for extended operations.
- DOD and State have certain authorities to provide lethal and nonlethal assistance for foreign security forces engaged in counterinsurgency operations, including 10 USC 127e for Special Forces support to counterterrorism operations and 10 USC 333 for capacity-building for a range of purposes.
- The DOD and State are subject to the Leahy law, which prohibits them from assisting units of foreign security forces credibly implicated in gross violations of human rights.
- Section 502(b) [PDF] of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, as amended, prohibits providing security assistance to any government with a consistent pattern of human rights violations.
- Congress may also impose country-specific restrictions on U.S. assistance or engagement, typically through appropriations law.

3.2 Policy Framework and Parameters

As a crisis involving an insurgency emerges, the most immediate U.S. policy decisions typically concern the security of U.S. persons and facilities in the affected country or region. Policy planners should also consider broader U.S. strategic interests and the parameters of the U.S. policy strategy toward the crisis, including the following:

- How much do the potential outcomes of this conflict matter for U.S. interests, and what are the most important risks or opportunities shaping U.S. engagement in this regard?
- How much can and will the U.S. government rely on regional or international partners to influence outcomes and mitigate harms?
- How willing is the U.S. government to commit resources to shaping the outcome, particularly support of the national government's current or expected response?
- To what extent does the U.S. government wish to convey legitimacy on the insurgency and its aims, including by promoting related political or economic changes?

3.3 Broad Strategic Options

U.S. policymakers can choose from a spectrum of strategies in responding to emerging or escalating insurgency-related crises. Four broad methods are available: monitor, contain, defend, or transform. These approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can be combined. With any decision to engage, policy planners should also consider pathways and timelines for eventually de-escalating and transitioning U.S. involvement.

Policy Options: Strategic Orientations

Monitor (or prepare)	Posture: The U.S. government takes a wait-and-see approach, avoiding decisive action while the crisis plays out. It could still signal concern to other actors and begin internal contingency planning but stops short of overcommitting and expanding engagement in the threatened country or region. Driving assumptions: The crisis poses low stakes for U.S. interests (including to U.S. persons and facilities); the U.S. government has limited ability to influence the situation; the affected government is closely aligned with a U.S. strategic competitor; the situational dynamics are unclear; the crisis is primarily subnational or subregional; other actors are better positioned to address the situation; or there are potential benefits to maintaining flexibility in the U.S. position (e.g., to be seen as a more neutral intermediary in the future). Theory of change: If the U.S. government limits its immediate engagement to tracking and assessing the crisis—while signaling concern through diplomatic channels and conducting internal contingency planning—then the United States will preserve its strategic flexibility, avoid premature overcommitment in a
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	highly uncertain situation, and position itself to intervene more effectively if and when the stakes become clearer or a more decisive moment for U.S. engagement presents itself. Trade-offs and risks: This approach would likely reduce prospects for prevention and could strain trust and the relationship with the affected national government if the U.S. government is perceived as unhelpful.
Contain	Posture: The U.S. government takes proactive steps to limit a crisis's scope, reach, and harm without directly intervening in its resolution. That posture could involve increased engagement with neighboring countries and regional actors who can influence the situation and secure borders if appropriate. For example, in response to Boko Haram's expanding violence, the United States adopted an outside-in strategy with countries neighboring Nigeria to contain the spread. Such a strategy could include targeted engagement with key partners or local government to secure strategic weapons stockpiles or guard against transnational threats (e.g., targeted strikes on terrorist leadership). Driving assumptions: The crisis poses low to medium stakes for U.S. interests; the U.S. government has limited ability to directly influence the situation; viable alternatives exist for containing the crisis's harm; the affected government is closely aligned with a U.S. strategic competitor; or the U.S. government has limited confidence that the national or local government can and will effectively counter the insurgency (including concerning their respect for human rights). Theory of change: If the U.S. government works proactively with neighboring states, regional organizations, and other partners to limit the crisis's geographic spread, resource flows, and humanitarian consequences—without directly intervening in its resolution—then it can mitigate the worst spillover effects on U.S. interests, strengthen regional partners, and maintain a degree of influence and credibility while avoiding the risks of deeper entanglement in a conflict it cannot directly resolve. Trade-offs and risks: Effective containment requires greater resourcing and commitment than the monitor option. The core crisis could still persist even if

	effectively contained, and this approach could strain trust and the relationship with the affected national government if perceived as unhelpful.
Defend (or restore)	Posture: The U.S. government takes actions to pressure the insurgency, defend the affected government, and restore the status quo ante, including by supporting the government's counterinsurgency measures and pursuing efforts to isolate the insurgency from regional and international support (e.g., terrorism designations and sanctions). This was largely the approach the United States took in response to FARC advances in Colombia, including through Plan Colombia. Driving assumptions: The crisis poses medium to high stakes for U.S. interests; the U.S. government has a strong and trusting relationship with the threatened government and confidence in its counterinsurgency will and capacity; the insurgency's ties to the population are assessed as mutable; or the insurgency's advance is directly antithetical to assessed U.S. interests. Theory of change: If the U.S. government surges diplomatic, material, intelligence, and security assistance to the threatened government and works to isolate the insurgency from its external sources of support, then it can reverse or arrest the insurgency's momentum, help stabilize and restore the threatened government to a position from which it can effectively govern and provide security, and preserve the broader U.S. strategic interests at stake—including partnerships, access, and regional stability. Trade-offs and risks: This approach could require significant resourcing and commitment. U.S. association with counterinsurgency forces implicated in abuses could create political and reputational risks, including the risk of becoming entangled in a prolonged conflict, being directly targeted by the insurgency, or compromising other U.S. policy goals.
Transform	Posture: The U.S. government could use the crisis as an opportunity to pursue broader conflict transformation, for example, by facilitating negotiations between the government and the insurgency or advocating for political or economic reforms. In some extraordinary cases, this could include limited U.S.

support for an insurgency in an effort to weaken an unfriendly government or prompt desired reforms (e.g., in Myanmar or Syria). Such support involves significant legal and practical complexities.

Driving assumptions: The situation poses medium to high stakes for U.S. interests; the U.S. government assesses that a primarily military solution to the situation is untenable or could exacerbate a potential crisis; the link between insurgency and population is strong and resilient; or there is an opportunity to shape a political solution that fosters more durable stability and advances U.S. strategic interests, including vis-à-vis geopolitical competitors.

Theory of change: If the U.S. government uses the leverage created by the crisis to press for meaningful political dialogue, a negotiated settlement, and structural reforms that address the underlying drivers of the conflict—while coordinating with regional and international partners to sustain that pressure—then a more durable and legitimate political settlement becomes achievable, reducing the long-term risk of conflict recurrence and producing a more stable environment that better serves enduring U.S. strategic interests than a purely military outcome would.

Trade-offs and risks: This approach could require significant resourcing and commitment. It could risk enabling the insurgency, create tensions with the national government or other regions and constituencies, or set a precedent for other armed groups seeking autonomy and power.

3.4 Tools and Resources

Which policy option appears feasible and attractive will depend greatly on the availability of specific tools and resources. The following are some key tools to consider and weigh in crafting the U.S. response to an insurgency-related crisis.

Diplomatic

- **U.S. embassy posture and influence.** U.S. embassy officials can engage with key government and nongovernmental interlocutors and seek to influence their approach to the crisis, including by facilitating backchannel dialogue. In some insecure environments, the U.S. embassy could have

limited or no in-country presence and little to no ability to travel to insurgency-affected areas, and would primarily work through partners or allies.

- **Engagement with stakeholders outside the region.** To influence actors in the crisis-affected country and build support for coordinated responses, the State Department can convene or engage regional or international partners; members of the diplomatic corps in Washington, DC; influential diaspora members; or other actors with ties to the country in crisis.
- **High-level engagement and signaling.** Phone calls, statements, and travel by senior State Department and administration officials can enhance U.S. diplomatic engagement on the crisis, including with regional and international stakeholders. In the highest-priority situations, this could also include the president issuing statements of concern and raising the crisis with regional and international counterparts in phone calls or at standing meetings (e.g., the Group of Seven [G7] summit).
- **Deployment of special envoys.** Designating and deploying special envoys can augment U.S. engagement on the crisis, including to facilitate negotiations or coordinate assistance. The United States needs to empower its envoys and coordinate their work with the existing bureaucracy to make them effective [PDF].
- **Coalition mobilization.** The United States can play a leading role in catalyzing or convening formal or informal coalitions to respond to the crisis, as with the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS or the quadrilateral security dialogue's effort to mitigate Sudan's civil war.
- **Military-to-military key leader engagement.** Senior military officials dealing diplomatically with their counterparts can significantly shape responses to insurgency-related crises, especially where strong relationships already exist.
- **Intelligence diplomacy.** Intelligence diplomacy involves the deliberate sharing of intelligence—either directly with a foreign government or publicly—to encourage engagement, collaboration, and potentially collective action.

Military and Intelligence

- **Intelligence, technical, and advisory support.** In some cases, the intelligence community can provide technical and advisory support to national or regional counterparts to help collect or analyze intelligence related to countering an insurgency threat and supporting related operations. In

extraordinary instances, the U.S. government could decide that providing intelligence support to insurgent actors, despite considerable sensitivities, serves its own interest.

- **Security-sector assistance.** The United States can launch or expand military or law enforcement training, provide equipment, and deploy advisors to enhance counterinsurgency responses. The speed with which it can mobilize security-sector assistance depends on whether existing programs and funds exist. New programs depend on available funding and can take months to activate due to contracting and congressional notification requirements. For the longer term, policy planners need to include augmented plans for security-sector assistance (e.g., Plan Colombia support to counter the FARC) into annual or supplemental budget requests to Congress.
- **Forced posture adjustments.** Moving U.S. military assets closer to the country or region of concern signals engagement and increases pressure and readiness—for example, the movement of U.S. naval assets toward Yemen in response to Houthi actions.
- **Advise-and-assist operations.** The United States can deploy forces to advise and assist national, regional, or international forces in their response to an insurgency-related crisis, such as when the United States deployed approximately one hundred Special Forces advisors in 2011 to assist African troops in their campaign to disarm the LRA. Such action is subject to the War Powers Resolution.
- **Direct military action.** In exceptional situations, the United States can undertake direct military action against insurgents determined to pose a threat to the United States: for example, against designated terrorist groups such as al-Shabaab in Somalia, under authorized uses of force for counterterrorism. Such action is subject to the War Powers Resolution.
- **Covert actions.** The U.S. government can also pursue covert action and clandestine activities using Title 50 authorities.

Economic

- **Sanctions.** Through authorities granted by executive orders or statutes, the Treasury's Office of Foreign Assets Control can issue economic sanctions against insurgency leaders, supporting entities, or other actors impeding crisis resolution. This could include external state actors fueling a crisis, such as U.S. sanctions against Eritrean entities in 2021 for their role in the northern Ethiopia crisis or financing terrorist networks. Treasury maintains the list of specially designated nationals: individuals or companies whose assets are blocked and with whom U.S. persons are prohibited from dealing. In

general, sanctions are most effective when coordinated multilaterally and oriented to support diplomatic objectives.

- **Development assistance and/or financing.** Commitments or changes to development support can increase pressure, address local grievances in vulnerable areas, or reinforce bids to advance a political resolution to the crisis. Providing an economic incentive package for peace helps create a pathway toward de-escalation and constructive dialogue.
- **International financial institutions engagement.** Treasury's engagement with the World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and other such institutions—whose level of financing to particular countries/regions usually far exceeds bilateral U.S. assistance—can shape how those institutions orient their financial leverage to support crisis prevention and resolution objectives. Those institutions are often reluctant to change their macroeconomic approaches in response to short-term political objectives, however.

Legal and Judicial

- **Terrorism designations.** The State Department can designate certain insurgent groups as foreign terrorist organizations, imposing sanctions and restrictions on their activities and pressuring their supporters. It also can designate governments determined to be supporting those groups as “state sponsors of terrorism.”
- **Sanctions enforcement.** The Department of Justice can robustly enforce sanctions related to the crisis to demonstrate U.S. commitment to a resolution and increase pressure.
- **International accountability mechanisms.** U.S. support for investigations by the International Criminal Court, other international judicial bodies, national courts, hybrid justice mechanisms, or UN human rights bodies into crimes related to insurgency-related crises can increase pressure toward resolution.
- **Disaster declaration.** A declaration of humanitarian need can help unlock and accelerate humanitarian relief, including by mobilizing support from other donors. The State Department can deploy disaster assistance response teams to help embassy staff coordinate humanitarian relief efforts and engage relevant partners.

Humanitarian

- **Humanitarian assistance.** U.S. humanitarian assistance can help relieve suffering in communities displaced or otherwise affected by an insurgency-related crisis. How quickly the United States can mobilize that assistance depends on overall funding availability, the security situation, access to affected populations, and whether UN and nongovernmental implementing partners are already on the ground.
- **Temporary protected status (TPS).** A TPS designation for a particular country, made by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and State, can enable qualified nationals from that country to remain in the United States until conditions in their home country improve, while signaling U.S. concern about the crisis.

3.5 Stakeholders and Partners

U.S. Stakeholders

Agency/actor	Role and equities in insurgency-related crisis response
National Security Council (NSC)	Lead interagency coordinator for shaping U.S. policy and strategy toward the crisis, via NSC interagency processes established by presidential memorandum
State Department	Lead diplomatic engagement with affected governments and regional actors to communicate and advance U.S. policy toward the crisis
U.S. embassy	Manage U.S. relations and country team-wide operations within a given country, including communications with the national government (e.g., delivering <i>démarches</i>), and provide reporting and analysis back to Washington, DC, to inform policy

U.S. Mission to the United Nations (or missions to relevant multilateral bodies)	Lead diplomatic engagement with the United Nations or other relevant multilateral bodies to shape their approaches toward a given crisis, including managing U.S. equities and voting at the organization as applicable
Department of Defense (DOD) (office of the secretary of defense, Joint Chiefs of Staff, Combatant Command)	Manage and execute military posture, programs, and operations in support of U.S. policy toward the crisis, including managing appropriate assets and personnel in the country/region
Treasury Department	Manage development and implementation of economic sanction packages regarding crisis-related actors, engagement with international financial institutions, and any related economic and financial matters involving the affected country/region
Office of Management and Budget	Manage request, allocation, or transfer of budget resources to support execution of U.S. policy toward the crisis
Development Finance Corporation and/or Export-Import Bank of the United States	Provide political risk insurance and other financing to enable private-sector activity and investments in a given country/region, to be aligned with U.S. policy toward a given crisis
Department of Justice	Manage investigations and prosecutions of any crisis-related support to sanctioned individuals/entities and provision of related technical assistance to affected governments

Department of Homeland Security	Manage U.S. handling of any refugee or migration flows related to the crisis, including screening and vetting as appropriate
Intelligence community (office of the director of national intelligence, CIA, Defense Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, National Counterterrorism Center)	Collect, analyze, and provide intelligence assessments on the insurgency-related crisis, to include satellite imagery on armed actor movements, military capacities, chokepoints, and damage to infrastructure
Department of Agriculture	Manage the provision of certain U.S. food assistance programs as part of a humanitarian response to a given crisis
U.S. trade representative and Department of Commerce	Manage the use of U.S. trade preferences and trade agreement mechanisms, and trade support incentives to reinforce U.S. policy toward a given country or region
Congress	Prompting, enhancing, or constraining executive branch efforts to address an insurgency-related crisis; conducting hearings and travelling to a particular region to highlight a crisis or influence U.S. policy responses; and, in some cases, channeling domestic support, expanding or limiting U.S. policy options toward a particular conflict—especially through budget appropriations

Non-U.S. Stakeholders and Partners

Foreign partner entities—beyond the national and local governments in the affected country or countries—can play critical roles in supporting and enabling U.S. policy responses to insurgency-related crises. They include the following:

- the United Nations
- NATO
- regional organizations, such as the African Union or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations
- the G7
- the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and other international financial institutions
- nongovernmental humanitarian organizations, such as the International Committee of the Red Cross or the International Rescue Committee
- nongovernmental mediation and dialogue organizations, such as the Center for Humanitarian Dialogue or the Community of Sant'Egidio
- key business leaders who can articulate the cost of conflict and the potential benefits of peace
- major foundations with relationships and programmatic reach that could expand near-term options as U.S. programming scales up

4.0 Implementation and Operational Considerations

Effective policy planning toward insurgency-related crises requires deliberate attention to operational mechanisms, coalition structures, and strategic communications.

4.1 Operational Design

Successfully implementing policy requires attentiveness to the operational structures that will carry it out. Policy planners should consider the questions in the following table:

Operations: Questions and Examples

Key operational question	Option/example
How is U.S. policy toward the crisis codified and communicated?	In 2023, in a new executive order, then-President Joe Biden <u>expanded the scope</u> [PDF] of the declaration of a national emergency in Sudan.
Who is in charge of leading and integrating implementation—in Washington and at the embassy level—	In 2014, the State Department appointed a former ambassador as coordinator for its <u>regional strategy</u> [PDF] to degrade Boko Haram.

and under what authority are they leading?	
What structures will foster coordinated, interagency implementation—in Washington and at the embassy level?	The State Department constituted an interagency Defeat ISIS task force to coordinate the response to that crisis, alongside the START platform [PDF] in the region that facilitated assistance into Syria.
Will the U.S. military designate a named operation to guide its engagement and support for crisis response?	DOD launched Operation Observant Compass with its deployment of U.S. Special Forces advisors to central Africa to help counter the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) from 2011 to 2017.
What steps are needed with Congress to enable policy implementation?	Budget requests, whether supplemental or through the regular process, are usually required to enable sustained U.S. support for crisis response, such as with Plan Colombia.

4.2 Coalitions and Partners

U.S. engagement with allies and partners—whether through existing collective action mechanisms (e.g., NATO); coalitions established to respond to specific crises (e.g., the [Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS](#)); or informal groupings (e.g., the Quad on Sudan)—can bolster responses to an insurgency-related crisis. Coalition approaches can marshal greater resources and increase pressure on key actors, including those who might seek to fuel or exploit such a crisis contrary to U.S. interests.

Early meetings among coalition partners should foster a shared understanding of the evolving crisis, its risks, and pathways for resolution, including considering options for facilitating backchannel dialogue and negotiations if needed. Joint assessments and intelligence sharing can help buttress cooperation. In some cases, the United States should consider establishing operational fusion centers to facilitate joint planning and implementation.

4.3 Strategic Communications

Strategic communications are a critical part of any effective response to an insurgency-related crisis, especially as insurgents and other actors increasingly seek to manipulate and weaponize the information environment. U.S. public statements, especially from senior officials, can shape regional and international perceptions of the crisis, the insurgency, and priorities for resolution. Some communications should aim to influence frontline populations who could play a critical role in shaping the evolving crisis, including by empowering and amplifying local messengers. Others could seek to influence the calculus of the relevant governments and insurgent actors, either directly or through key constituencies. Direct or indirect information operations can reinforce messaging in places where the United States is actively engaged or supporting partners.

At the same time, the executive branch should communicate with Congress and the American public to explain the evolving situation, the U.S. interests at stake, and the policy approach. That engagement, including with diaspora communities in the United States and other stakeholders with ties to the affected region, can help provide a more durable foundation for sustaining U.S. efforts over time. A decision support framework such as that offered in this playbook can provide a structured way for communicating to the American people—and ideally for winning their sustained support. Effective responses to insurgency-related conflicts require long-term consistency, which is generally only possible by building consensus across political parties, branches of government, and the public.

Appendixes

Appendix A: Illustrative Historical and Active Cases of Insurgency-Related Conflicts

Illustrative Case Studies

Sri Lanka: Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)	In the 1990s, the LTTE escalated a decades-long separatist war through suicide bombings, political assassinations, and control of significant territory in the north and east. The United States designated the LTTE a foreign terrorist organization in 1997, provided naval support and humanitarian assistance to help the Sri Lankan government contain the LTTE threat, and ultimately supported a Norwegian-led initiative to broker a ceasefire
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	agreement between the parties in 2002. (The Sri Lankan government later withdrew from the agreement and ultimately defeated the LTTE militarily.)
Colombia: FARC	FARC dramatically expanded territorial control across rural Colombia in the late 1990s through intensified offensives, kidnappings, and large-scale attacks that overwhelmed the Colombian military. (This included the murder of three U.S. missionaries in 1999.) The United States and Colombia developed Plan Colombia in 1999 and 2000, and the United States launched billions in military and counternarcotics assistance to help the Colombian government regain the initiative against the insurgency.
Philippines: Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF)	The MILF waged a persistent armed separatist campaign in the southern Philippines, clashing periodically with military forces and attacking civilians throughout the early 2000s—amid recurring rounds of peace talks. Starting in 2002, the U.S. deployed Special Forces [PDF] to advise and assist the Philippines in countering terrorist and insurgent groups. Over time, the United States provided diplomatic support for the peace process that eventually led to the 2014 Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro.
Central Africa: LRA	The LRA carried out high-profile civilian massacres and abductions across a widening regional area spanning the Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Uganda in 2008 and 2009. Backed by congressional legislation [PDF], the United States pursued a multifaceted strategy to help

	disarm the LRA, facilitate defections from the group, and enhance civilian protection. This included the deployment of U.S. Special Forces advisors to assist African Union–authorized forces.
Mali: National Movement for the Liberation of Azawad (MNLA)	In 2012, the MNLA, bolstered by arms and fighters returning from Libya, rapidly overran northern Mali and declared an independent state, before being partially eclipsed by allied jihadist groups. The United States supported regional efforts to contain the crisis and stop the insurgents from advancing, including through the provision of logistical, intelligence, and airlift support for the French-led Operation Serval and backing for the deployment of an African-led international support mission.
Nigeria: Boko Haram	In 2009, Boko Haram escalated from a domestic extremist movement into a full-scale insurgency, seizing significant territory in northeastern Nigeria, declaring a caliphate, and conducting mass atrocities—including the abduction of the Chibok schoolgirls that drew global attention. The United States deployed military advisors and provided intelligence and surveillance support to a multinational joint task force of regional and international partners in containing Boko Haram’s activity, while expanding programs to counter extremism in Nigeria.
Iraq and Syria: Self-Proclaimed Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)	The self-proclaimed Islamic State swept across large swaths of Iraq and Syria in 2013–14, capturing Raqqa and Mosul, committing horrifying war crimes, declaring a self-declared caliphate, threatening the collapse of the Iraqi state, and displacing millions of civilians. The United States led a broad international coalition that launched air strikes, deployed advisors and special operations

	forces, and partnered with Iraqi security forces and Syrian Kurdish forces to halt the Islamic State's expansion and begin the campaign to retake lost territory. The coalition used broad diplomatic and financial power to shut down the Islamic State's source of fighters, funding, and markets for its oil production, combining military and diplomatic pressure with global financial pressure to starve its push.
Ethiopia: Tigray Defense Forces (TDF)	The TDF launched a major counteroffensive in 2021 that pushed beyond Tigray, with forces advancing toward Addis Ababa and threatening the federal government before being rolled back. The United States applied diplomatic pressure on all parties, imposed targeted sanctions, and supported African Union-led mediation that eventually produced a cessation of hostilities agreement in November 2022.
Sudan: Rapid Support Forces (RSF)	Fighting between the Sudanese Armed Forces and the RSF, a paramilitary force, erupted in 2023 and rapidly engulfed Sudan, producing one of the world's worst humanitarian crises, with millions displaced and widespread atrocities. The United States deployed a special envoy, alongside Gulf partners, to broker a ceasefire and provided hundreds of millions in humanitarian assistance. Over time, the United States declared the RSF had committed genocide and began to impose wider sanctions on the warring parties.

Democratic Republic of Congo: March 23 Movement (M23)	M23 rebels, backed by Rwanda, seized significant territory in eastern Congo in 2012, including the key city of Goma, and re-emerged in 2022 with an even broader offensive that captured larger portions of territory and seized Goma again in 2025. The United States pressed Rwanda to withdraw support for M23 (including via sanctions), backed enhancements for UN peacekeeping efforts, and supported mediation efforts—first led by the region and then more recently, led by the United States—to broker a ceasefire.
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Appendix B: Major Lessons From the Illustrative Cases

The following summarizes key lessons from U.S. and international efforts to help partners manage insurgency-related crises over recent decades, based on a review of related academic and policy literature and expert consultations.

- **Limits of overly militarized approaches.** According to [comparative studies](#), pure military suppression strategies against insurgencies have a low success rate and often exacerbate conflicts over time. Combined approaches that seek to engage affected populations and reduce support for insurgencies are more likely to succeed.
- **Diplomatic engagement with nonstate armed groups.** Research and case studies consistently show that durable resolution of insurgency-related conflicts typically requires some form of direct or indirect dialogue with nonstate armed groups, even when those groups have been designated terrorist organizations.
- **Engagement is not the same as negotiation.** Seasoned [diplomats](#) and [mediators](#) highlight a distinction between opening a diplomatic channel to nonstate armed groups and actually negotiating with them. Conflating the two has caused policymakers to avoid even basic contact that could yield intelligence, reduce violence, or lay the groundwork for eventual political settlements.
- **Uniqueness of local dynamics.** Insurgencies are fundamentally local phenomena. Strategies that fail to account for community-level grievances, loyalties, and power structures frequently misdiagnose the nature of insurgencies and produce ineffective responses.
- **Accounting for insurgent governance roles.** In many environments, nonstate armed groups have moved well beyond purely military functions to provide governance services (e.g., security, dispute

resolution, and basic public goods) to local populations. Efforts to dislodge or dismantle such groups without a credible plan to fill the resulting governance vacuum risk deepening instability.

- **Insurgent cohesion and internal organization.** The internal structure and cohesion of an insurgent movement significantly shape its durability and behavior. In some cases, efforts to promote internal divisions and defections can make a significant difference in degrading insurgency capacity. But fragmented insurgencies can become harder to resolve through a negotiated settlement.
- **Governance and state legitimacy.** Insurgencies are more likely to emerge and persist where governments are perceived as corrupt, exclusionary, or incapable. Durable resolution typically requires improvements in governance, not just security conditions.
- **Information environment.** The perceived legitimacy of how national or regional actors respond to an insurgency and assert authority may be even more important than the response itself. Strategic communications and media engagement play a critical role in that regard. Such efforts need to be attentive and tailored to the freedom of the media environment.
- **Risks of overreliance on external support.** A recurring challenge in counterinsurgency efforts is that heavy or highly visible involvement by external actors can undermine the perceived legitimacy of the national government. External support is most effective when it is calibrated to strengthen and empower host-nation institutions rather than substitute for them, and when it is structured to preserve the national government's ownership and visibility.
- **Primacy of external support dynamics.** Insurgencies that have financial sponsorship or physical sanctuary provided by external state actors are more likely to persist and succeed. Accordingly, to be effective, efforts to mitigate insurgency-related crises must confront any external support dynamics.
- **Risks of fragmented command and coordination.** Counterinsurgency efforts that lack unity of effort across military, civilian, diplomatic, and development actors tend to work at cross-purposes. Integrated, interagency approaches consistently outperform siloed ones.
- **Planning for a longer-term duration.** Research suggests that insurgencies and insurgency-related conflicts usually last more than a decade, on average. Even amid a given crisis, policy planners should factor in longer-term scenarios, risks, and requirements.

Appendix C: Notable Studies and Sources of Relevant Open-Source Information

This playbook was informed by a review of the significant literature on insurgencies and counterinsurgency efforts over recent decades. This appendix highlights several materials for further reading as well as some valuable open-source resources.

Counterinsurgency Lessons

- “Paths to Victory: Lessons From Modern Insurgencies,” and “Paths to Victory: Detailed Insurgency Case Studies,” RAND Corporation, 2013.
- Kelly M. Greenhill and Paul Staniland, “Ten Ways to Lose at Counterinsurgency,” *Civil Wars* (2007).
- Elizabeth Radziszewski, “The Lessons of 20 Years of Counterinsurgency Research,” Irregular Warfare Initiative, 2023.
- “Government Responses to Asymmetric Threats: The State of the Literature on Counterinsurgency From 2002 to 2022,” Asymmetric Threats Analysis Center, START and University of Maryland’s Applied Research Lab for Intelligence and Security, 2023.
- Andrew Gawthorpe, “All Counterinsurgency Is Local: Counterinsurgency and Rebel Legitimacy,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* (2017).
- Karl W. Eikenberry, “The Limits of Counterinsurgency Doctrine in Afghanistan,” *Foreign Affairs* (2013).
- James F. Jeffrey, “Why Counterinsurgency Doesn’t Work,” *Foreign Affairs* (2015).

Analyzing Insurgencies

- Seth Jones, *Waging Insurgent Warfare: Lessons from the Vietcong to the Islamic State*, 2016.
- David H. Ucko, *The Insurgent’s Dilemma: A Struggle to Prevail*, 2022.
- David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One*, 2009.
- Paul Staniland, *Networks of Rebellion: Explaining Insurgent Cohesion and Collapse*, 2014.
- Daniel Byman, Peter Chalk, Bruce Hoffman, William Rosenau, and David Brannan, “Trends in Outside Support for Insurgent Movements,” RAND Corporation, 2001.
- Eric V. Larson, Derek Eaton, Brian Nichiporuk, and Thomas S. Szayna, “Assessing Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Intelligence Analysis,” RAND Corporation, 2008.
- “Guide to Analysis of Insurgency.” Central Intelligence Agency, originally published in 1980s, declassified in 2011.

Approaches to Nonstate Armed Groups

- “Engaging Non-state Armed Groups: Lessons Learned,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2026.

- *New Approaches to Nonstate Armed Groups*, edited by Kenneth H. Williams, Middle East Institute and Marine Corps University, 2012.
- “Engaging Non-State Armed Groups,” UN Institute for Disarmament Research, 2008.
- Payton Knopf, “Enhancing U.S. Diplomatic Engagement With Nonstate Armed Groups,” Council on Foreign Relations, 2011.
- Jeffrey Feltman, “UN Engagement With Nonstate Armed Groups for the Sake of Peace: Driving Without a Roadmap,” Brookings Institution, 2021.

Data and Analysis of Specific Insurgencies

- Mapping Militants Project (Stanford University)
- Small Arms Survey
- Crisis Group
- Uppsala Conflict Data Program
- Armed Conflict Location and Event Data
- Global Terrorism Database (University of Maryland, College Park)