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Counterinsurgency versus Counterterrorism (WP)**

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Al-Qaeda and Afghanistan in Strategic Context: Counterinsurgency versus Counterterrorism (WP)

*Sebastian L. v. Gorka**

Twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union and more than eight years after the 9/11 attacks, the West is still groping for strategic and doctrinal clarity. From its very beginnings in 1947-49, the basic nature of the Cold War was understood by those who needed to understand it. The doctrinal and strategic issues were settled early on by the likes of George Kennan, Harry Truman and George Marshall. Their prescriptions for fighting the Cold War, set by 1949, remained fundamentally unchanged for 40 years and eventually brought victory. This is all too easy to forget.

Not only did the West win that ideological conflict, but it did so in the way that Sun Tzu described as the ultimate form of conquest: victory without fighting.¹ Unfortunately, the lack of a conventional form of victory, such as that at the end of World War II –and all that such a victory entails– allowed us to muddle through the following decade with a distinct lack of understanding of what the post-Cold War world held in store. What were armies for after the collapse of the USSR and the Warsaw Pact? Yes, numerous theories were crafted to help explain the post-Cold War world, from Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* to Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. But none of these addressed the fundamental question of what national security now meant, and what armies were for in an age of 'post-industrial' war.²

The challenges were numerous: from how to respond to ethnic cleansing in Europe's backyard to the explosion of organised crime and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Yet nothing was done, in any radical sense, to reassess the nature of the threat environment and match capabilities to challenges. In fact, the first Gulf War simply reinforced core aspects of industrial war and our belief in large-scale fire and manoeuvre warfare. After 10 years of this malaise and 'lurching for the snooze button', 11 September 2001 arrived.

Almost immediately after 9/11, members of the Bush White House and the coterie of so-called neoconservative thinkers in and around Washington declared that the geopolitics of the new century were now clear. To quote Charles Krauthammer, al-Qaeda and similar

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¹ Sun Tzu, *On the Art of War*, translated by Lionel Giles, El Paso Norte Press, El Paso TX, 2005, p. 125.

² For an influential discussion on the difference between industrial and post-industrial war see Rupert Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, Penguin Books, New York, 2006.

forms of Islamist terror posed a new 'existential threat' to America and the West.³ America subsequently declared a *Global War on Terrorism*, and initiated regime changes in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Yet not everyone agreed with this core assessment. There are those who today argue that while al-Qaeda is a murderous and deadly organisation, it does not pose an overarching threat to the community of democratic Western nations.⁴ To these people, two points must be made. Not only is al-Qaeda the most powerful terrorist group of the modern age, killing thousands in a matter of minutes, but it achieved something the Soviet Union never did: the mass murder of Americans (and other nationals) on US soil –and later in Spain, the UK and elsewhere–. While this mutation of the Arab mujahidin movement of the 1980s does not possess regiments of T-80 tanks or batteries of SS-20 missiles, it is more disturbing than the USSR was in one key respect. For although Khrushchev may have rhetorically promised to 'bury us', he and his Kremlin successors never took the step of initiating conflict against America and its allies, since he and his administration were fundamentally rational actors constrained and deterred by the thought of nuclear retaliation. Osama bin Laden is wholly different. He has declared repeatedly that he intends to use weapons of mass destruction as soon as he can acquire them. Against him and his ilk deterrence policy has no effect.

This paper discusses how the US failed to adequately identify the nature of the conflict it was embarking upon in response to the 9/11 attacks, our flawed understanding of the enemy and the fact that today we are just beginning to appreciate the central role of religious ideology in this war. Should we continue to misunderstand these three realities of the post-9/11 world, success in Afghanistan and Pakistan will not be achievable.

The Aftermath of September 11

Given how horrific the attacks against Washington, New York and Flight 93 were, it is reasonable to state that America's post-9/11 sphere of mobility was truly enormous. There are few theoretical response scenarios that would have been out of the question given the sentiments felt around the world as televised images of the attacks were broadcast globally again and again. And as the nation's political elite declared the threat to be existential, it was reasonable to expect a large-scale response. Since three-quarters of the 9/11 hijackers came from Saudi Arabia, as did bin Laden, and given that some of the highest members of the Saudi government had been known to fund al-Qaeda, logically a response targeting Saudi Arabia in some way would have been justified.

³ Charles Krauthammer, 'This is Not Crime, This is War', *Washington Post*, 12/IX/2001.

⁴ For example, Chris Preble of the Cato Institute and Peter Beinart writing in *Time*. See Chris Preble, 'Countering Terrorism', *The Cato Handbook for Policymakers* (Cato Institute, Washington DC, 7th ed., 2009); Peter Beinart, 'Amid the Hysteria, a Look at What al-Qaeda Can't Do' *Time*, 18/I/2010. Even Fareed Zakaria has declared that the greatest threat is our overreaction to al-Qaeda: see Fareed Zakaria, 'Don't Panic', *Newsweek*, 9/I/2010.

However, instead, the Bush Administration chose to move first against al-Qaeda's headquarters in Afghanistan. This was also justified, especially in terms of operationally disrupting the organisation's capabilities and neutralising key figures, and the operation was very successful in doing just that. But to posit that a lasting blow would be struck against Salafist terrorism without cutting off the financial, logistic and ideological support of Saudi Arabia was, to say the least, wrongheaded. Instead, the choice was made to invade Iraq and effect regime-change there.

With respect to the invasion of Iraq, one point must be made clear. Whatever one's political leaning, and whatever one's attitude towards international affairs, it is incontestable that Saddam Hussein ranks with Joseph Stalin and Pol Pot as one of the most heinous and murderous leaders in all of history. He was and remains the only leader in history to have used weapons of mass destruction against his own people. He was responsible for the slaughter of Kurds, Iranians and Kuwaitis, and for the torture and death of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.

Despite this, the case for war against Iraq was badly argued by the Administration and badly prepared –or rather, the post-war game plan was badly prepared–. On the question of how the war was justified, the need to locate Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction should have been understood as irrelevant. The facts are incontrovertible: at the end of the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein admitted to coalition forces and the United Nations that he had manufactured and stockpiled literally tons of chemical weapons. In refusing to provide proof of their destruction, as the UN repeatedly requested, he was technically in breach of the ceasefire for the period between 1991 and 2003. As a result, the use of force was legal by the standards of international law.⁵

The details of the invasion are well known and are being evermore precisely detailed.⁶ The question for us is: what are the consequences of the invasion and the situation that followed? In reality, from the operational point of view, the situation is not that dark, since once again we have witnessed the immeasurable ability of the US fighting man to adapt to new and challenging conditions. The problem is less one of operational flexibility and adaptability than one of perceptions, of the US having lost its pole position.

During the Cold War, America truly did represent the values that were behind its foreign policy rhetoric. It did not have to convince the oppressed peoples of the Communist bloc of the veracity of the American dream. This convincing has to be undertaken in a completely different cultural milieu. That is why the old tools of strategic communication

⁵ For background on relevant aspects of international law, see the excellent monograph by Michael N. Schmitt, *Counter-Terrorism and the Use of Force in International Law*, Marshall Center Paper nr 5, November 2002.

⁶ The most detailed of recent accounts is Michael R. Gordon & Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq*, Knopf Publishing Group, New York, 2006.

must be reassessed. The various plans for alternative Arab radio and TV channels do not take into account the fact that Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were broadcast to members of the same cultural and civilisational group as ourselves.

Global Insurgency or Not?

As we await the Obama Administration's new National Security Strategy, discussion in Washington revolves around the question of whether or not the conflict we are currently in is to be understood as a global insurgency, and how much prior lessons of counterinsurgency can help us to fight al-Qaeda. I would like to echo on this point the significant work done by David Kilcullen, formerly of the State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism and adviser to General Petraeus.⁷ To paraphrase Kilcullen, what we are doing today is not exactly counterinsurgency, but counterinsurgency is the closest model we have to the situation we face. As a result, the principles of counterinsurgency are most useful. Nevertheless, we have to understand that we are not limited strictly to a counterinsurgency scenario since al-Qaeda is not interested in changing the political reality in just one country –for example, as the Muslim Brotherhood originally was in Egypt–.⁸

Additionally, it is not simply a question of insurgency and classic counterinsurgency, since it is not a fight for national legitimacy as is always the case with such conflicts. The US has already lost the fight of perceptions in this regard thanks to the almost universally immature political environments in the Middle East, Central Asia and elsewhere, and thanks also to the thriving influence of conspiracy theories in countries where democracy is weak. We are not responsible for the individuals in these countries in the same way previous counterinsurgent governments have been responsible for the people that suffer from the violence of insurgency on their own territory. As a result, legitimacy in the narrow nation-state related political sense is not the goal today as it was in previous counterinsurgency campaigns that Western nations were involved with in past decades.⁹

⁷ See David Kilcullen, 'Countering Global Insurgency', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 2005.

⁸ The issue of how concepts of nation-state relate to Muslim fundamentalism and pan-Arabism is a crucial aspect in understanding the evolution and mindset of actors such as bin Laden. However, this is beyond the scope of the current paper.

⁹ For a full examination of problems that the concept of Global Counterinsurgency brings with it, see Stephen Sloan & Sebastian Gorka, 'Contextualizing Counterinsurgency', *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, nr 16, Spring 2009, p. 41-48.

At the same time, if we look to the official definition of what an insurgency is, we see that in most cases it is said to involve an 'organised movement'.¹⁰ It is not possible to devote adequate space in this chapter to a discussion of what exactly al-Qaeda is,¹¹ but it is important in relationship to the question of counter-strategies to know what al-Qaeda is not.

Al-Qaeda is no longer the unitary organisation it was originally. It is not –despite what the media would have us believe– a global network, at least not in the sense of a network through which bin Laden is capable of exercising command and control as he did prior to US operations in Afghanistan. We must be wary of using words that carry with them intellectual 'baggage' that can influence threat assessments in subjective ways. When those used to functioning in a Westphalian, state-driven milieu use the word 'network,' it connotes some element of master control. The network of Nazi agents uncovered and turned as a whole by British intelligence during WWII is a perfect example. This 'network' was recruited, trained and deployed by Hitler's intelligence apparatus in Berlin. Then, thanks to British code-breakers, it was broken and turned to serve the unified purposes of London. Subsequently, when we use the word 'network' for al-Qaeda and its affiliates, we at least infer that bin Laden or al-Zawahiri train, recruit and task groups as diverse as al-Shabaab and Abu Sayyaf. Such an inference is not substantiated by reality, especially after 2001.

Nor is al-Qaeda an ideology in the sense that we are used to, since it is largely informed by religion and faith is not something we typically associate with ideology. And lastly, it is misleading to portray al-Qaeda as some sort of franchise organisation akin to a McDonald's –which, no matter where you are, provides you with the same Big Mac–.¹² To truly be such a franchise it would need a functioning headquarters, a universally accepted end-state for all its members, and each unit would have to have exactly the same skill sets.

Al-Qaeda proper is today a remnant of its former self which has connected to several groups around the world who self-associate with the image and rhetoric of al-Qaeda but most often as a result of some local and far more limited goal they wish to achieve. This heterogeneous aspect of what we today misleadingly term al-Qaeda is important. Let me illustrate this with one brief anecdote. During a DoD-sponsored course on

¹⁰ See US Department of Defense Joint Publication 102.

¹¹ For more details, see Sebestyén Gorka, 'Al Qaeda's Next Generation', *Terrorism Monitor*, Jamestown Foundation, 29/VI/2004, http://www.jamestown.org/programs/gta/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=26674&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=179&no_cache=1. See also F. Reinares, 'Global Terrorism: a Polymorphous Phenomenon', Elcano Royal Institute, http://www.realinstitutoelcano.org/wps/portal/ri/elcano_eng/Content?WCM_GLOBAL_CONTEXT=/elcano/elcano_in/zonas_in/international+terrorism/ari65-2009.

¹² This argument is explicitly made in Richard Engel, "'Al-Qaida Franchises' – Ticking Time Bombs", *MSNBC*, 7/VI/2007; see also Sharmine Narwani, 'Looking Under My Bed for al Qaeda', *Huffington Post*, 27/I/2010.

counterterrorism, it was pointed out to me by a colonel from Pakistani military intelligence that the most popular boy's name in his country in the past 12 months had been Osama. To this astonishing fact I responded by asking whether this means that bin Laden enjoys the popular support of most Pakistanis. The colonel replied 'of course not': there is hardly anyone in his country who would in their right mind wish to live in a 'caliphate' under the leadership of Osama bin Laden. Yet while the strategic aims bin Laden espouses and the tools he uses are anathema to most Pakistanis, when he refers to issues such as the freedom of Palestine or the sanctity of Mecca and Medina, many Pakistanis sympathise. It is this kind of cognitive dissonance that makes our understanding of al-Qaeda so difficult, and which differentiates it from the unified and centralised ideologies of the past such as Nazism, Fascism and Communism.

What then is the model that will help us to understand and defeat al-Qaeda? I agree with the writings of Fred Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute, who advises us to compare the al-Qaeda of today with the Bolsheviks of the early 1900s prior to the Russian Revolution of 1917.¹³ I think the analogy is a useful one given that we can reasonably portray Communism as a secular religion instigated by a tiny minority without the support of the millions of people on whose behalf the Bolsheviks claimed to act. But instead of comparing al-Qaeda with the pre-Revolutionary Bolsheviks, I see it as more informative to understand our enemy as the equivalent of that 'vanguard' group of extremists at a point after 1917, after a *failed* revolution: to see al-Qaeda as totalitarian merchants of political violence who are now in hiding, who enjoy the permissive yet uninformed support of many more, and whose significance or apparent size seems to increase as more and more local actors and groups self-associate with their ideas or beliefs.

Unfortunately, the similarities of this ideological conflict to the previous one that shaped world affairs for most of the 20th century have been oversimplified, or missed entirely. Instead, the debate on how to provide for America's security in a post-Cold War and post-9/11 world has stubbornly remained at a very superficial level.

COIN Versus CT

Since President Obama took office there has developed at the highest levels a debate concerning Afghanistan as to whether our focus should be counterinsurgency (COIN), which is favoured by the McChrystal camp, or counterterrorism (CT), which is favoured by the Biden camp.

While it is true that an insurgent can use terrorist tactics, the differences between the two types of actors are significant. To begin with, insurgency has as its goal changing the

¹³ See Fred Kagan, 'The New Bolsheviks: Understanding Al Qaeda', *National Security Outlook*, American Enterprise Institute, November 2005, http://www.aei.org/docLib/20051116_19253NSONovg.pdf.

whole regime which it targets, and has the capacity to do so thanks to mass mobilisation. In contrast, terrorism is a weapon of weaker or more marginal groups, and usually tries to force an alteration in just one element of a regime, in just perhaps one policy (for example the Provisional IRA and autonomy for Northern Ireland). In other words, insurgencies wish to (and often can) become the government, while terrorists more often wish to affect the behaviour of governments because they do not have the ability to build a 'counter-state'.¹⁴

Al-Qaeda and Associated Movements (AQAM) fit neither category easily. With his violence bin Laden has targeted specific policies of numerous governments, from the US deployment on the Arabian peninsula to Spain's troop deployments in Iraq. But AQAM also wishes to encourage the use of force to remove 'apostate' heads of Arab regimes, and its declared goal is to create a 'glorious caliphate'. Subsequently, positioning the enemy as either an insurgent or a terrorist seems simplistic. Whether we are looking at the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the Taliban in Afghanistan or Abu Sayyaf in the Philippines, these groups are inextricably linked to a broader narrative that melds classic political terrorism with ideas of theocratic world domination.¹⁵

Since terrorism and insurgency are both forms of unconventional conflict, it may be worthwhile at this point to refer to the work of the master strategist Colin Gray and his understanding of irregular warfare.¹⁶ For Gray, warfare is the same in its fundamental aspects whatever its outward guise, whether the conflict is counterinsurgency or inter-bloc thermonuclear war. Both are forms of war. Subsequently, it is important to bear in mind Carl von Clausewitz's warning: war is simple, but it is not easy.¹⁷ This holds for interstate war just as much for counterinsurgency or counterterrorism. Additionally, we should remind ourselves that knowledge does not equal operational success. One may have read all the works from Sun Tzu to Clausewitz and TE Lawrence and beyond, and internalised all the truths they contain, but this in no way guarantees the skill or ability to implement that knowledge. The gulf between theory and practice in warfare is huge since

¹⁴ Full a full discussion of how a threat group –insurgent or terrorist– evolves, how to analyse an irregular campaign, and plan an appropriate response see Thomas A. Marks, Sebastian L. v. Gorka & Robert Sharp, 'Getting the Next War Right: Beyond Population-Centric Warfare', PRISM, vol. 1, nr 3, National Defense University, June 2010 (forthcoming). For an even deeper examination of irregular warfare and the role within it of the counter-state, see Thomas A. Marks's seminal *Maoist People's War in Post-Vietnam Asia*, White Lotus, Bangkok, 2007.

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion of the important difference between classic, politically-motivated terrorism and the religious type and relevant policy implications, see the author's chapter 'International Cooperation as a Tool in Counterterrorism', in Andrew N. Pratt, Sebastian Gorka & Christopher C. Harmon (Eds.), *Toward a Grand Strategy Against Terrorism*, McGraw Hill, New York, June 2010 (Forthcoming). For a seminal work on Jihadi terrorism, see Patrick Sookhdeo's *Global Jihad*, Isaac Publishing, McLean, VA, 2007.

¹⁶ See Colin S. Gray, 'Irregular Enemies and the Essence of Strategy: Can the American Way of War Adapt?', Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, Carlisle PA., March 2006.

¹⁷ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, book I, ch. VII.

it is not a hard science and since it concerns the activities, wills and intentions of human beings, not machines or ineluctable forces of nature.

It has been pointed out that in past counterinsurgency campaigns, after the application of brute military force came the period of winning hearts and minds (WHAM). The US has done very little in the past eight years on the ideational front of this war. In fact, the government has often undermined itself by allowing political correctness and unreasonable sensitivity to religion to facilitate the domination of the strategic communications agenda by the enemy. While the operational focus should include the obvious requirement of attacking both the capability and motivation of the enemy,¹⁸ one must understand that the latter is a product of ideology that must be neutralised by a counter-ideology.¹⁹

In counterinsurgency it is said that the battle is won when the government demonstrates that it is more capable of providing for the security of its citizens than the insurgent is. This cannot be America's goal in this conflict. It is not the job of the US to provide for the security of Muslims everywhere. What can be done instead is to take the war to individual groups and terrorist leaders and win over those potential non-Western allies who already have the ability to work in cultural areas where our expertise is minimal, who can penetrate fundamentalist networks, those governments that can in fact address issues of legitimacy and bear the responsibility for providing security for their own citizens.

Shaping the Discourse

Additionally, one needs to be realistic about what can be achieved through public diplomacy and information policies, and understand the true target audience of such campaigns. The job of American 'strategic communicators' and diplomats, when addressing populations that are potentially in agreement with bin Laden, or who are simply indifferent, should not in the first instance be to make America look good. It is more urgent to make Osama bin Laden and his killing of innocents look bad. In the past, especially during World War II under the OSS, America was much clearer on how important it is to effectively communicate to the world that the enemy should be understood as an outsider, as someone to be shunned by all.

¹⁸ On this crucial aspect of successful CT policy, see Boaz Ganor, *The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle: A Guide for Decision Makers*, Transaction Books, New Brunswick, 2005.

¹⁹ For an introduction to Strategic Communications in the current context of global terrorism see Sebastian Gorka & David Kilcullen, 'Who's Winning the Battle for Narrative: Al-Qaida versus the United States and its Allies', in James J.F. Forest (Ed.), *Influence Warfare*, Praeger Security International, Westport, 2009, p. 229-240. For a masterful treatise of what we have done wrong in the war of ideas since 9/11 and what we should do now, see former VOA Director Robert R. Reilly's 'Ideas Matter – Restoring the Content of Public Diplomacy', B. Kenneth Simon Center for American Studies, The Heritage Foundation, 2009.

The trouble today is in part a product of bin Laden's ability in the space of a few short years to dominate the agenda of strategic communications and public discourse. If we mention the word 'caliphate' to a lay-person, the first and perhaps only individual who will come to mind is bin Laden. On the other hand, if we say the word 'democracy' or 'liberty' it is no longer, unfortunately, the US, a vision of the Statue of Liberty, or a Western leader that comes to mind. But it should be.

This second association can only be achieved by making bin Laden the outlaw and by repositioning America and its allies as the representatives perhaps not of democracy – with all the cultural specificity that the term entails– but certainly representatives of concepts such as liberty. We need a valid counter-doctrine to disarm the venomous myths al-Qaeda has perpetrated.

What America needs today is that small group of wise men who were prepared to suggest and implement radical ideas at the end of World War II, to arrive at a theory of victory instead of what we are reduced to today, which is a 'strategy' of sequential tactics. We need to not only learn the lessons of previous insurgencies and terrorist campaigns but to practice what we have learnt from them. Most importantly, we need to return to the basics and understand in its marrow the core principle that Clausewitz left for us. When he discussed the connection between war and politics he did not mean it to be understood as it so often is today, that war is some isolated activity which occurs when politics runs out of options. No. Clausewitz's most famous sentence –war is the continuation of politics by other means²⁰– was nothing more than an illumination of the unity of both activities. While it may be trite to say that politics is war, what Clausewitz meant to emphasise is that war is politics, and as such victory will only come if we are clear with respect to the political goals we wish to achieve. We will only achieve those goals if all the tools of politics, not just force, are deployed to that end. The application of these tools, military or otherwise, must be informed by a clear understanding of the enemy and its recent trajectory.

Al-Qaeda and the Taliban

Sun Tzu advised us that if we wish to guarantee victory, we must know two things: who we are, and who the enemy is.²¹ In regard to the Taliban and al-Qaeda, the latter question is muddled by the scores of talking heads and self-anointed military experts who have swarmed the North American media since 9/11. Far too many bandy about the terms Taliban and al-Qaeda with abandon, never taking a moment to define what they mean or to discuss the relevant links involved.

²⁰ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Michael Howard & Peter Paret (Eds.), Princeton University Press, Princeton NJ, 1976; see also John E. Sheppard, Jr., 'On War: Is Clausewitz Still Relevant?', *Parameters*, September 1990, p. 85-99, and Martin van Creveld, *The Transformation of War*, The Free Press, New York, 1991, p. 33-62.

²¹ Sun Tzu, *On the Art of War*, p. 125.

Words matter, even –or especially– when bullets are flying. The question of who the enemy is has become all the more important since the arrival of a new US Administration: whatever the strategy that replaces George W. Bush’s *Global War on Terrorism*, its architects must first define the nature of the enemy and the nature of the conflict we are in.

The Taliban are not al-Qaeda and al-Qaeda is not the Taliban. Yes, the Taliban provided a haven to Osama bin Laden and his organisation after he was expelled from the Sudan in 1996. Yes, members of al-Qaeda and even bin Laden’s own family have intermarried within Taliban power-groups, including the so-called Quetta Shura. But the Taliban must be understood as a heterogeneous group of warlords with variegated pasts and disparate interests. Some are former members of the governing regime that was dislodged after 9/11. Some are primarily narcotraffickers, while others are tribally-defined and established masters of regions that have proved impossible to domesticate for centuries. The only meaningful way in which the collective noun ‘Taliban’ –and this is how the word should be understood– must be used, is as a descriptor for those individuals and forces who either subscribe to the fundamentalist totalitarianism that characterised Afghanistan before October 2001, or who exploit this ideology to protect vested interests.

Al-Qaeda is even harder for sophisticated Western minds to comprehend clearly and realistically. Al-Qaeda, the organisation, was not destroyed by the military and counterterrorism actions that followed 9/11, but its command-and-control capabilities have been severely degraded. It is of course linked to the Madrid and London attacks, among others, but it is no longer capable of doing the ‘start-to-finish’ of globally orchestrated synchronised multiple attacks, which was its trademark attack method.

That is the good news. But conversely, while al-Qaeda’s operational capability has decreased, its ideological significance has grown. It is in this less tangible arena that the historical significance of Osama bin Laden and his organization lies, because al-Qaeda represents a successful re-definition of the concept of Jihad. Building on the theological and ideological arguments of such Salafists as Sayyid Qutb, Hassan al-Banna (founder of the Muslim Brotherhood) and Abul A’la Maududi, bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri have successfully given the concept of jihad a new content. In the past, jihad was used to refer to a wide range of acts that included the inner struggle of the faithful, war against apostate leaders, and even guerrilla warfare against the forces of a godless enemy (the USSR in Afghanistan, for instance). With events such as 9/11, Madrid and London, al-Qaeda has managed to provide a new meaning to jihad: killing civilians.²²

²² See Sebastian L. v. Gorka, ‘Understanding History’s Seven Stages of Jihad’, *CTC Sentinel*, vol. 2, nr 10, October 2009, p. 15-17, Combating Terrorism Center, West Point.

Al-Qaeda and the Ideological War

Assumptions about al-Qaeda have a bad tendency to turn out wrong. Too many US security analysts underestimated the group before the 9/11 attacks, and then, not surprisingly, perhaps overestimated it afterwards. In recent years, inside and outside the US government, there was a new reigning assumption about al-Qaeda: that the appeal of its Salafi-jihadi ideology would decline as its ability to conduct terrorist attacks was eroded by intelligence, law enforcement and military operations. Amid what appeared to be a rising backlash against bin Laden's outfit among Muslims worldwide –seen most vividly in the Sunni rebellion in Iraq and the denunciation of al-Qaeda by high-profile former Salafist ideologues such as Sayyid Imam al-Sharif, alias Dr Fadl–, the assumption that al-Qaeda was growing operationally weak and ideologically moribund seemed sound.

It now seems that this assumption was quite wrong. In a closed session of international intelligence and counterterrorism officials held in 2009, a very high-ranking US intelligence officer provided a simple, counterintuitive observation. Bin Laden may now be making infrequent filmed statements instead of planning and executing attacks, but those statements and the ideology behind them have grown in importance. Consequently, the US intelligence community is starting to see the ideological threat as potentially a greater danger to US interests than actual al-Qaeda killers.

If true, this thesis renders moot a rather unseemly debate that continues to rage within the counterterrorism community. On one side is Marc Sageman, a forensic psychiatrist and former CIA case officer, and on the other Bruce Hoffman, a professor in the Security Studies Program at Georgetown University. These two came to theoretical blows in 2008 over their assessments of the state of al-Qaeda. Sageman argues that the phenomenon of 'leaderless jihad', wherein individuals and groups become radicalised and commit terrorism with no al-Qaeda guidance at all, has supplanted the group itself as a threat.²³ Hoffman argues, to the contrary, that bin Laden and company still pose the gravest of threats, that the operational core of al-Qaeda retains high levels of command and control, and that leaderless jihad is but a myth.²⁴

It now seems that both were mistaken. Open-source information, along with the US intelligence community's recent assessment, paints a different picture: al-Qaeda is operationally degraded but ideologically ascendant, with 'al-Qaeda Central' continuing to exercise a significant degree of control over the shaping and dissemination of its Salafi-Jihadi message, and with the coordinated acts of violence against civilians that it does manage to carry out continuing to play an important role. Al-Qaeda does not possess the

²³ For an analytic summary of the debate, see John Picarelli, 'The Future of Terrorism', *National Institute of Justice Journal*, 29/X/2009.

²⁴ Bruce Hoffman, 'The Myth of Grass Roots Terrorism', *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2008.

organisational strength it had eight years ago, but its ideology is not waning. On the contrary, its 'propaganda by the deed' continues to inspire new recruits and terrorist attacks, particularly outside the Arab world.

Recent nongovernmental data support this view of al-Qaeda. Salafi terrorism of the sort that al-Qaeda inspires and directs has reared its head thousands of miles from Iraq and Israel, in places such as the Philippines, Russia, Somalia and Pakistan. According to figures reported by The American Security Project, the annual number of Islamist terror attacks trebled between 2004 and 2008, to nearly 600 incidents.²⁵ Indeed, if attacks in Afghanistan, Iraq and Israel are removed from the total, the trend over the same four-year period is even more startling, showing a quadrupling of Salafi-inspired attacks.²⁶ And if you go back even further –back before 9/11, the Bush Presidency, and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq– the picture is shocking: a tenfold increase in annual terrorist attacks over the past decade.²⁷

It also appears that al-Qaeda's ideology is winning converts even among Muslims who do not become foot-soldiers in the extremist cause. It may seem absurd to someone sitting in Washington when bin Laden says the West is 'at war with Islam', but in Pakistan, Egypt and elsewhere in the Muslim world a disturbingly large percentage of the population believes this is what drives US counterterrorism operations. As one Pakistani officer told this author during a visit to the Middle East in the summer of 2009: 'We've had enough of all the Americans in Pakistan'.

The huge increase in terrorist violence and the broader sympathy for al-Qaeda's aims has occurred under the terrorist group's unique ideological banner. In the attacks that brought pandemonium to Mumbai in November 2008, though the terrorists also went after Hindus, it is clear by their active search for US and British citizens and their targeting of a Jewish community centre that the terrorists were dutifully following the call to jihad 'against the Jews and Crusaders', as declared by Osama bin Laden in 1996. But this obvious ideological connection is less interesting than the ways in which the religious ideology of the Salafi Jihad has influenced other parts of the world where Islamist violence was previously unknown. The best example is Chechnya, and to a lesser extent its neighbouring Dagestan.

The Islam of the Caucasus was always heavily influenced by a brand of Sufism that arrived in the region only in the 18th century, and which would be tempered by totalitarianism.²⁸ Despite the 1991 Dudayev coup and Chechen leader Aslan Maskhadov's

²⁵ Bernard I. Finale & Christine Dehn, 'Are We Winning?', *ASP Perspectives*, Spring 2009.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ See Zeyno Baran *et al.*, 'Islamic Radicalism in Central Asia and the Caucasus', *Central Asia-Caucasus Institute and Silk Road Studies Program*, Sweden, 2006.

decision to embrace Islam as a state ideology, this version of Islam was never close historically to the extreme version of Wahhabi-inspired terrorism. Yet it became such for mujahidin fighters in the Caucasus, as testified by the bodies of 156 children in the Beslan massacre. What had been a distinctly political fight for independence from Russia thus fell victim to al-Qaeda's philosophy of Salafi Jihad.

A similar ideological injection has occurred and is occurring in a completely different part of the world. But in this case we understand it even less despite it demonstrating the trend perfectly. Again, a Sufi-influenced culture is concerned, but this time in Africa. With a Muslim faith traditionally based upon the mysticism of the nomadic *wadad*, or holy man, the Islam of Somalia has survived many trials, including all-out regional war and the international Islamic revivalist movement of the 1960s and 1970s. However, it too has followed the Caucasus model towards a more extreme practice. The Islamic Courts Union and its offspring al-Shabaab –built up and formerly led by Aden Hashi Ayro, who received military training at an al-Qaeda camp in Afghanistan– have succeeded where famine and civil war failed.²⁹ The recent arrests in Melbourne, Australia, of a Somali terrorist cell and al-Shabaab's declaration that it wishes to become an al-Qaeda affiliate signal that the US's involvement with Somalia is far from over. Not only will AFRICOM's forces be fighting piracy and trying to stabilise a country that really does not exist institutionally, but they will be attempting with other US agencies to ensure that Somalia's diaspora does not pose an imminent threat to domestic US interests.

Conclusion

What does all this mean for the conflict formerly known as the *Global War on Terror*? It means, to begin with, that the 'surge' in Afghanistan will distract us from what the US should really be doing to defeat al-Qaeda. American boots on the ground will do little to defeat al-Qaeda's ideology. Attempts to reach out to fence-sitters and those who can be won over are important, but speeches such as the one President Obama made in Cairo are simply not enough.

The US needs to go on the ideological offensive. In the culture of Islam the question of a leader's authenticity is paramount. Bin Laden and those who follow his worldview must be de-legitimised. After the debacle that was strategic communications under the last Administration, Washington must formulate a marginalisation policy. A lead agency must be empowered by the White House, and it must coordinate a whole-of-government message that focuses primarily on the vast number of Muslim victims of al-Qaeda's brand of terrorism. The US should focus less on concepts such as democracy, and more upon the bloody reality that results from al-Qaeda's ideology.³⁰

²⁹ For an overview of how Islamic militancy developed in Somalia, see Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, 'The Strategic Challenge of Somalia's al-Shabaab', *Middle East Quarterly*, Fall 2009.

³⁰ See Sebastian Gorka, 'The One Surge that Could Defeat al Qaeda', *Foreign policy.com*, 10/VIII/2009,

Additionally, the realities on the ground must be recognised for what they are: centuries-old political, social and economic truths. Afghanistan has never functioned as a modern nation-state based on one coherent national identity. Moreover, the Soviets and the British before them, despite huge resources and a complete lack of stultifying political correctness, proved entirely incapable of securing the Durand Line. Therefore, as we delegitimise al-Qaeda, the Taliban and other terror groups through an active and sophisticated propaganda campaign, Washington and Kabul must recognise the legitimacy of the only political structures that have ever successfully exercised sovereignty in the area: the tribes.³¹

In exchange for their *de facto* authority being recognised trilaterally by the US, the Afghan government and Islamabad, the tribes must guarantee that their territory will never again be used by extremist forces to launch attacks on the US, Kabul or Pakistan. This is one feasible strategy that can stabilise the region and deny it to our enemies.

Additionally, Washington must step beyond the 'COIN versus counterterrorism' debate. With foes as variegated and multifaceted as AQAM and the Taleban one cannot take an 'either/or' approach. At the highest strategic level, the decision-makers who deploy our troops and operatives must recognise how fundamentally the shape of war has changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union and especially after 11 September 2001. It is no exaggeration to state that irregular warfare is now the regular way of applying violence for both us and our enemies. We need not prepare in the short or even medium terms for conventional warfare between nation-states, using tanks and aircraft carriers. For the foreseeable future our enemies will be non-state actors –with or without state sponsorship– using irregular means against us.³² The sooner this reality is reflected in the way we educate, train and utilise our forces, the sooner our new enemies will be defeated.

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http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2009/08/10/the_one_surge_that_could_defeat_al_qaeda.

³¹ For more details see Richard Miniter & Sebastian Gorka, 'To Tackle the Taliban, Try the Tribes', *The New York Post*, 9/XII/2009,

http://www.nypost.com/p/news/opinion/opedcolumnists/to_tackle_the_taliban_try_the_tribes_zE60Z7XfbU8CtCnvisvYQP.

³² For a full discussion of the ramifications of the rise in irregular threats for how we should understand war, see S.L. v. Gorka, 'The Age of Irregular Warfare – So What?', *Joint Forces Quarterly*, Fall 2010 (forthcoming).