

# THE WAR ON TERROR - A GLOBAL COUNTERINSURGENCY CAMPAIGN ?

Essay

by

Martin N. Ségur-Cabanac

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Counterinsurgency operations have a long standing history in national struggles such as revolutionary or civil war, as well as a part of conventional warfare. When, after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, U.S. President George W. Bush declared war on terror, application of counterinsurgency doctrine was soon to follow in Afghanistan and later Iraq. But how effective is this doctrine in the global war on terror, and how big of a part should its military aspect play? Are the counterinsurgency campaigns now taking place in those countries the real and legitimate face of the war on terror, or are there alternative routes to the eradication of the kind of international threat *al Qaeda* and its peers pose to Western democracies today? And what role would counterinsurgency doctrine play in those alternative scenarios?

The strategy of the U.S. and its allies in their global war on terror has been defined as one in which an old model of interstate military conflicts has been applied to the fight against terrorist organisations that do not hold or respect borders. Furthermore, even though it is proposed that pre-emptive strikes help to avoid further terrorist attacks and possibly completely eradicate terrorists in the long run, the true root causes of terrorism have not been sufficiently addressed by both governments and the Fourth Estate – the media – partly through the failure or unwillingness to define what the threat is the world is facing at the outset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Concentration on the post-invasive aspect of the global war on terror has led to an acceptance of current strategies instead of the development and broad discussion of alternative scenarios, one of which will be presented here.

The phenomenon of terrorism, of course, was not born on 11 September 2001. Terrorism has a long history and indeed, one could argue that all war is terror. In every war, the aim of one side is in part to instil fear in the civilian population of its enemy. The doctrine of nuclear deterrence finds its very base in the fear from complete annihilation. However, the term *terrorism* today is used to describe a specific form of unconventional, irregular warfare. An early example might be Guy Fawkes attempting to blow up the British Houses of Parliament in 1605. And then there were Italy's *Brigate Rosse*, Germany's *Rote Armee Fraktion*, Colombia's *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, and Peru's *Shining Path* to name but a few.

Yet, with all those terrorist groups and their attacks, there exists, to this day, no internationally agreed legal definition of the term *terrorism*. The United States of America, acting as prime proponent and initiator of this ongoing global campaign, currently subscribes to the following definition as set forth in Title 22 of the United States Code, Section 2656f(d):

The term terrorism means premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience.<sup>1</sup>

It is noteworthy to understand that this definition exempts any acts committed by a government or government agency and, taken literally, also religiously motivated acts, from falling into the category of terrorism. However, in its *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, the White House does recognise “religious conflict” as one underlying condition “for terrorists to exploit.”<sup>2</sup>

Martha Crenshaw, Professor of Government at Wesleyan University, invokes Mao Tse-tung's principles of insurgency when she sees “revolutionary terrorism” as “part of insurgent strategy in the context of internal warfare or revolution.”<sup>3</sup> And Robert Thompson agrees that terrorist acts are one tactic within the organisational and strategic framework primarily of a first “defensive” phase of revolutionary war.<sup>4</sup> Considering the U.S. response, the same analysis can be applied to the kind of international terrorism *al Quida* practised in their 9/11 attacks. When, in response, the U.S. and its allies invaded Afghanistan to eliminate the Taliban regime and launch a new government founded on

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1 *Patterns of Global Terrorism 2003* (Washington, D.C.: United States Department of State, 2004), p. xii.

2 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* (Washington, D.C.: The White House, 2003), p.6.

3 Martha Crenshaw Hutchinson, “The Concept of Revolutionary Terrorism”, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, September 1972.

4 Robert Thompson, *Revolutionary War in World Strategy*. (London: Martin Secker & Warburg Ltd., 1970) p. 4-7.

democratic principles, they subsequently faced – and still face – what can be described as a classic insurgency. The same holds true for Iraq today. Even though the resistance fighters in those two countries often claim allegiance to *al Qaeda*, they are not actively engaged in international terrorism but in internal, national conflicts. And the U.S. (and its allies') response to it are counterinsurgency operations.

The American Heritage Dictionary defines counterinsurgency as “political and military strategy or action intended to oppose and forcefully suppress insurgency.”<sup>5</sup> Even though this definition encompasses more than military operations, it still falls short of entailing equally important and potentially quite successful actions in form of economic sanctions and/or incentives, psychological operations, and legal prosecution. A consummate doctrine of counterinsurgency therefore would combine all these elements to bring about the fall of the insurgent organisation. This, to some extent, is currently being pursued by the U.S. and its allies in Afghanistan and, with considerably more media attention, Iraq. However, the military aspect of these limited conflicts has taken centre-stage in the continuing war on terrorism so much so that the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research published a report stating that,

These guerrilla conflicts have become, to no small extent, the operational reality that defines the global war on terror. [...] Shock-and-awe campaigns, it seems, are only the price of admission to the war on terror; the counterinsurgencies that follow are the main show.<sup>6</sup>

This is a dangerous sentiment. Concentrating solely on the military post-invasive aspect of the global war on terror, as it is being perpetrated by most of the media, keeps much needed focus from the broader perspective: the various other areas and disciplines intricate to this international struggle. Through broad military action, the U.S. and its (gradually diminishing) allies act as the surgeon removing the cancer-infected organ while leaving the cancer cells behind to attack the next organ: it is a fight against the symptoms and consequences of terrorism rather than the cause.

This is not to mean the symptoms are not worth being fought. Terrorists, just as insurgents, need at least one base to operate from. This base (or cell) need not act as centre of (global) command to the terrorist network – indeed, a more decentralised, distributed structure seems to be

<sup>5</sup> *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Donnelly and Vance Serchuk, *Fighting a Global Counterinsurgency*. (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 2003), p. 1-2.

the preferred *modus operandi* of *al Qaeda* and its peers. Bruce Hoffman of RAND Corporation refers to this as *netwar*, “a concept of warfare involving flatter, more linear networks rather than the pyramidal hierarchies and command and control systems [...] that have governed traditional insurgent organisations.”<sup>7</sup> Military action in the form of counterinsurgency operations can achieve much in terms of disrupting even a decentralised command system by consistently destroying the physical manifestation of cells: training camps, weapons and ammunition storages, etc. as well as killing or capturing terrorists.

But what about the root causes of terrorism? Political correctness and sensibility often come in the way of defining what is the biggest terrorist threat the world is facing today: an Islamic militant insurgency. Terrorism is its means to an end – a tactic – not itself an enemy. The U.S., in a worthy attempt to not offend the vast international Islamic population, declared the enemy of the global war on terror to be “certainly [...] not a religion.”<sup>8</sup> And it is not. Leading figures of the global Islamic population have declared – and continue to declare – that Islam does not offer a universal call for terrorism aimed at Western democracies, but rather that certain extremist figures 'hijacked' the Islamic faith for their political goals. However, as Major David E. Brigham of the Naval War College, agreeing with the theory of an Islamic militant insurgency, suggests, if the U.S. continues

to maintain that this is a war on terrorism, [it is] placing [itself] on the losing team from the start as [it does] not have the means or soldiers to continue to fight bloody battles at the tactical level as long as terrorism continues to be a viable, asymmetric means of warfare.<sup>9</sup>

According to Carl von Clausewitz, “the first task [...] in planning for a war is to identify the enemy's centres of gravity, and if possible trace them back to a single one.”<sup>10</sup> And Mao Tse-tung finds the insurgents to be the fish swimming in the sea of the general population. An Islamic militant insurgency, just like any other insurgency, needs the support of at least a significant part of the population – of the majority at best – to ultimately succeed. This support need not be active, heartfelt approval with the goals and policies of the insurgents – a certain passivity and lack of caring, along with a contempt of the Western world (justified or not), may often be enough. Whether this support is

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7 Bruce Hoffman, *Insurgency and Counterinsurgency in Iraq* (Santa Monica: RAND National Security Research Division, 2004) p. 17.

8 *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, p. 1.

9 David E. Brigham, *The Global War on Terrorism: War or Counterinsurgency?* (Newport: Naval War College, 2004) p. 4.

10 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984) p. 619.

born out of shared beliefs and goals, or manufactured through fear and oppression, is also of minor importance in the early stages of insurgency. Therefore, whatever the final goal of this global militant insurgency (the fall of the West, an Islamic caliphate or super-state, the end of Western dominance and influence in the Arabic world, world domination, etc.), the hearts and minds of the international Islamic population is its strategic centre of gravity.

The U.S. government currently identifies four fronts on which to act on:

- “defeat terrorist organisations of global reach by attacking their sanctuaries; leadership; command, control, and communications; material support; and finances”,
- “deny further sponsorship, support, and sanctuary to terrorists” from other states,
- “diminish the underlying conditions that terrorist[s] seek to exploit by enlisting the international community to focus its efforts and resources on the areas most at risk”,  
and
- “defend the United States [...] by both proactively protecting [its] homeland and extending [its] defenses.”<sup>11</sup>

The current international efforts to combat terrorism have concentrated almost entirely on the first two fronts, while the U.S. has, of course, taken its own steps advancing the fourth front (and the EU and many countries around the world have since 9/11 acted on various policies to take care of their national security against terrorism). Unfortunately, the most pressing and long-term objective of fighting those underlying conditions for terrorists to exploit, such as poverty, corruption, political instability, racial hatred, ethnic strife, and religious extremism, has been severely neglected. As long as these conditions exist no military offensive of any scale will be able to sufficiently diminish the number of terrorists as more and more new recruits are enlisted to their cause. As suggested earlier, it is in part the media's responsibility to produce what Piers Robinson calls the “CNN Effect”: accrument of public pressure on governments to act on this issue simply by making it *news*.<sup>12</sup>

Even though one might jump to the conclusion that this front against the underlying conditions has to be fought economically and politically – through education, financial help, and better diplomatic relations – but not militarily, this latter aspect of counterinsurgency doctrine can indeed play a vital

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<sup>11</sup> *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, p. 11-12.

<sup>12</sup> Piers Robinson, *The CNN Effect: The myth of news, foreign policy and intervention* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 2.

part. The U.S., perceiving itself to be the world's police and exporter of democracy, fails to recognise that, because its international influence and power is at the nerve centre of what this Islamic insurgency sees as its enemy, it cannot play a leading role militarily. Doing so just enhances the global dominance and hegemony – the vision of a *Pax Americana* – *al Qaeda* tries so desperately to fight. Instead, the U.S. should redefine its role in the global war on terror as that of a military advisor and observer, training and giving financial and technological aid to those nations willing but unable to fight against terrorist strongholds within their own borders. Doing so would show the world a new America, one that does not seek world domination, but truly wishes for global peace and stability and victory against international terrorism. With this new-found image it could build up again that unprecedented international coalition that followed the 9/11 attacks. And with this broad coalition, unwilling countries could be driven – diplomatically – to take up the fight against terrorism as well. And those national fights against terrorists would then be fought either as counterinsurgency campaigns within each state's borders (and in coordination with its neighbours) were necessary, or in the form of legal prosecution through police forces and judicial procedures were feasible.

However, in order for such a coalition not to be perceived as religious fronts – the (predominately Christian) West against Islam – the U.S. might not be the best choice to lead it. Great Britain, being America's closest ally, would not be a viable candidate either. Therefore, considering the strategic centre of gravity identified earlier, the most logical leader of a global alliance against the Islamic militant insurgency would be a state whose population is predominately Muslim. As Major Brigham points out, more than half of the world's Muslims can be found in South and Southeast Asia: Indonesia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Nigeria.<sup>13</sup> It would, of course, be an enormously difficult undertaking to get those states to commit to a common policy and task force against terrorism, and no single one would be able to lead the entire group of nations. But persistent diplomatic relations efforts, combined with extensive economic incentives as well as military aid, may be able to achieve the goal of a broad Islamic coalition overseen and advised – but not ruled by – the United Nations. Again, the strategic centre of gravity – the Islamic population – is the key to the long-term abolition of Islamic extremist terrorism.

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<sup>13</sup> Brigham, op. cit., p. 10.

Counterinsurgency doctrine as a military strategy plays a leading role in the global war on terror as it is fought today. In the alternative scenario presented here, it would continue to be a vital ingredient. The major difference would be the players. Today, the U.S. and its allies fight their own counterinsurgency campaigns within foreign borders. A much more legitimate and therefore ultimately more successful force would be comprised of national military forces under financial aid and training by the West. This, unfortunately, would not have been achievable in the former Afghanistan and Iraq, as their leaders would never have joined a global war on terror declared and led by the U.S. However, the sole superpower would do well to reconsider the effectiveness and sustainability of large-scale invasive campaigns to export democracy in the name of a global war on terror in their future engagements with Iran, North Korea, Syria, and other countries.

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