

The STRUGGLE

Against Global Insurgency

By DANIEL G. COX

Soldier en route to capture insurgents and locate weapons caches in Baqubah, Iraq

Since 9/11, it has become commonplace for scholars, politicians, and military thinkers to refer to current U.S. military and diplomatic actions as being part of a larger “war on terror.” This is an extremely imprecise characterization of the current conflict. What the United States and, in fact, the world are facing is more properly dubbed a global insurgent movement that emanates from al Qaeda at the international level and that slowly seeps into legitimate (and illegitimate) national secessionist movements around the world. What follows is an argument in support of the claim that al Qaeda is essentially the world’s first attempt at a global insurgency.

According to General Wayne Downing, USA (Ret.), “terrorism is a tactic used by Salafist insurgents to attain their strategic goals, which are political in nature.”¹ Indeed, terrorism is a *tactic*—and one cannot wage war on a tactic. Though this is a correct but

superficial criticism, it has never led to any meaningful discussion regarding the implications of this point or what it is that the U.S. military is actually combating. Only a few authors have asserted that al Qaeda is an insurgency, and even fewer have made the connection between al Qaeda’s terror tactics and a larger global insurgency movement.

Audrey Kurth Cronin was one of the first scholars to hint that al Qaeda is a global insurgency, writing soon after 9/11 that it was aiming not so much at the World Trade Center or the Pentagon or even the United States, but was instead aiming to destroy the U.S.-led global system.² David Kilcullen claims that the West is facing a “global jihad,” which is much more akin to a global insurgency and has as its chief aim the imposition of a worldwide Islamic caliphate.³ One of the newest entries into this field of argumentation is Dan Roper, who is not only one of a new breed of scholars who clearly sees the

folly of declaring war against a tactic, but also one of the few to argue that the U.S. Government and military are facing a global insurgency and to provide some concrete policy recommendations.⁴

This article seeks to expand on this embryonic line of argumentation, but in order to establish al Qaeda as the first global insurgency, a review of the definition of insurgency and its link to terrorism must be conducted. Next, al Qaeda’s rhetoric and demands are briefly examined. The article concludes with an analysis of al Qaeda’s strategy for fomenting global insurgency through its exploitation of failed and failing states and of (often legitimate) domestic insurgencies around the world.

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Insurgency and Terrorism

David Galula, in his seminal work *Counterinsurgency Warfare*, defines *insurgency* as “a protracted struggle conducted methodically, step by step, in order to attain specific intermediate objectives leading finally to the overthrow of the existing order.”⁵ Field Manual 3–24, *Counterinsurgency*, defines an insurgency along similar lines as “an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict.” Frank Kitson expands on these notions, emphasizing that the successful insurgent generally starts with little power but a strong cause, while the counterinsurgent has a near monopoly of power but a weak cause or reason for holding that power, which the insurgent levers against the counterinsurgent over time until those in power are ousted.⁶ Bard O’Neill adds three

some view terrorism as an indicator of failed insurgency in its last death throes, while others deem it an essential first step toward gaining momentum. Galula views “blind,” or indiscriminate, terrorism as the first step in “bourgeois-nationalist” insurgencies where a fledgling movement is seeking to gain notoriety for its cause.⁸ This is followed by a second stage of “selective” terrorism in which an insurgency gaining strength seeks to target counterinsurgents and isolate them from the people.⁹ Sometimes terrorism is seen as the only viable tactic for an insurgent facing a severe asymmetry in the balance of military force. In this case, terrorism becomes one of the feasible forms of “lesser violence” that can be implemented against a superior conventional force.¹⁰ But not all agree that terrorism is a tactic that can be employed successfully by insurgents. Anthony Joes, for instance, came

That terrorism is the tactic of choice for insurgencies facing overwhelming conventional threats does not conclusively indicate weakness or future failure. In fact, in a recent study for the RAND National Defense Research Institute, Daniel Byman found that while not all terrorist groups are insurgencies, it does appear that “almost every insurgent group uses terrorism.”¹²

Demands from al Qaeda

Establishing that terrorism and insurgency are closely linked and that many national insurgencies have used terrorism both to draw attention to a cause and later to isolate counterinsurgents from the people is insufficient to substantiate the claim that al Qaeda is an insurgency. An examination of al Qaeda’s own words and deeds is necessary to close the correlative link.

Cronin argues generally that the Western world has been slow to recognize that terrorist activity has increased in response to U.S.-led globalization, or what is being termed “Western imperialism.”¹³ This is an important point; it is this backlash against globalization that al Qaeda is tapping into in fomenting its own global insurgency. Al Qaeda leaders have referenced the intrusion of Western nations as colonial oppressors, military bullies, and economic exploiters.

Al Qaeda’s brand of insurgency against perceived imperial intrusion is grounded in the work of the 12th-century Islamic thinker Ibn Taymiyya, who grew up experiencing a brutal Mongol invasion and oppressive occupation. This created a problem, as the invading Mongols were also Islamic; hence, Taymiyya had to devise a way around Koranic law, which specifically forbade the killing of any Muslim by another, to justify killing fellow Muslims. He had to expand the notion of what it is to be Muslim and differentiate between “good” and “bad” Muslims. Obviously, since the Mongols were an invading people, they had to kill Muslims to achieve their goals, and this fact, coupled with their horrible treatment of conquered Muslims, allowed Taymiyya to make a convincing argument that invading Mongols were “bad” Muslims. The road became clear when he declared that the invading Mongols and the rulers who bowed down to them were apostates. Now distinctions could be drawn between self-professed and real Muslims, and some could be determined to be enemies of Islam and were, therefore, subject to death.¹⁴



Soldiers photograph and identify man during operation to track and arrest Iraqi insurgents

U.S. Navy (Robert Whelan)

types of insurgency, which he dubs “anarchist,” those wishing to overthrow government but not replace it; “egalitarian,” those attempting to replace the current government with one that emphasizes distributional equality; and “traditionalist,” those bent on replacing corrupt modern society with a mythologized distant past that emphasizes traditional values often rooted in fundamental interpretations of religion.⁷

The relationship between insurgency and terrorism is not without controversy. While most scholars see the two as related,

to the conclusion that terrorism is antithetical to the waging of successful guerrilla warfare after examining modern insurgency movements. He notes that in all but one of the insurgent cases, terrorism was employed as a last resort by “insurgencies that were losing, or that eventually lost.”¹¹

While one could certainly conclude that terrorism is the tactic of choice for the weak, the evidence for the assertion that it is a tactic of failed insurgencies is unconvincing. Galula’s argument that terrorism is the initial stage of an insurgency seems more plausible.

The reason this is so monumentally important to al Qaeda is that Taymiyya's revolutionary shifting of targets allows al Qaeda free rein to conduct its terror attacks against a much broader group of infidels. Not only are apostate Muslims fair targets, but so are infidel women and children. In fact, al Qaeda has a written directive in a seized training manual that specifies that "apostate rulers" presiding over predominantly Islamic nations are more of a threat than past colonial oppressors.¹⁵ The link to Taymiyya is clear, for as one author writes, "Islamic radicals everywhere see the United States as the neo-Mongol power lurking behind the apostate governments that they seek to topple."¹⁶ According to al Qaeda theologian Faris Al Shuwayl, Shia Muslims are portrayed as polytheists and worthy only of death. Christians and Jews can obey sharia law and

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Islamic theological directives or be expunged. The broadening of enemies of Islam initiated by Taymiyya, expanded by Wahhabi, and carried into modern times by al Qaeda serves as the foundation for terror attacks aimed at overthrowing Western dominance, capitalism, globalization, and modernization, which currently define the world system.

While apostate rulers within *Dar al Islam* are singled out as the prime targets of al Qaeda's global insurgency, al Qaeda has made it clear that Western powers, especially the United States, are not off the hook. The demands from al Qaeda regarding Western powers are instructive, as they have the flavor of demands made by many domestic insurgent groups. Osama bin Laden has on several occasions demanded that the United States withdraw all support for Israel and remove all presence from Saudi Arabia, especially military presence.¹⁷ A slightly expanded version of these demands was offered in a letter sent to the *New York Times* by al Qaeda propagandist Nidal Ayyad the day after the 9/11 attacks. In this directive, al Qaeda demanded that the United States cut economic and military aid

to Israel and cease interference in all domestic affairs within any Middle Eastern state.¹⁸

In the final analysis, al Qaeda's demands that Western imperialists leave the Middle East and refrain from interfering with domestic Arabian politics, that apostate rulers in Arabia step down, and that illegal Israeli colonizers give up their claim to Israel are strikingly similar to demands from the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka or the Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia, both of which demand autonomy from unfair and abusive state rule. The only significant difference is that al Qaeda's claims stretch across multiple Islamic countries instead of being confined to a specific region in a recognized nation-state. O'Neill's characterization of a traditional insurgency seems appropriate when attempting to categorize al Qaeda. He writes, "Within the category of traditionalist insurgents, one also finds zealous groups seeking to reestablish an ancient political system that they idealize as a golden age."¹⁹

Dune Insurgency

Shaul Mishal and Maoz Rosenthal offer an interesting reinterpretation of al Qaeda as an organization. Instead of classifying it as a hierarchical (almost no one claims this anymore) or a networked organization, Mishal and Rosenthal perceive al Qaeda as being "Dune-like." According to these authors, a Dune organization "relies on a process of vacillation between territorial presence and a mode of disappearance. The perception of territorial presence is associated with stable territorial formations:

nation-states, global markets, or ethnic communities."²⁰ Like sand dunes, Mishal and Rosenthal see a temporary network attaching and detaching and "moving onward after changing the environment in which it has acted."²¹ This analogy seems to depict al Qaeda accurately and explains why direct confrontation is so difficult. Mishal and Rosenthal argue that Dune movement is "almost random,"²² but this assertion is debatable since al Qaeda seems to be spreading and growing in strength.

The Dune analogy captures the movement and actions of al Qaeda and helps illustrate how a complex and adaptive global insurgency works. Combating a Dune insurgency is difficult because once one tries to stamp a sand dune with his foot, he is likely to find either the wind has blown most of the sand to a different area or his foot is now stuck in the sand. Worse still, successfully dislodged sand can blow back into an area that was previously cleared.

This certainly appears to be the modus operandi with al Qaeda's global insurgency. From the movement's humble birth in the late 1980s as a successful mujahideen insurgency against Soviet invaders in Afghanistan, bin Laden and al Qaeda constructed their first significant Dune in Sudan. Al Qaeda built a close relationship with the Sudanese government, developing joint business enterprises in exchange for a safe haven and, on at least one occasion, securing hundreds of Sudanese passports for al Qaeda operatives to use for travel.²³ While in Sudan, al Qaeda branched out, meddling in any regional problem that



Soldier with interpreter questions local resident about suspected insurgent activities during air assault mission in Afghanistan

contained an Islamic component. In Somalia, 18 U.S. Army Rangers were killed in a particularly brutal battle on October 3, 1993, by Somali fighters trained by al Qaeda operatives in Sudan.²⁴ Eventually, the United States continued to apply diplomatic and economic pressure on the Islamic-dominated government of Sudan, and in 1996, bin Laden and his organization had to seek refuge in Afghanistan.²⁵ But once again, al Qaeda is regaining influence in both Sudan and Somalia. The dislodged sand is accumulating once more. J. Stephen Morrison argues that this should be expected as “both states are highly porous, fractured, and weak (or wrecked) states; both welcomed al-Qaeda in the past and retain linkages to it today.”²⁶

After Sudan, al Qaeda set up shop in its old haunt, Afghanistan. But Afghanistan was by no means the only base of operations. Al Qaeda had learned in Africa to spread its operations and to foment violent radicalism wherever possible. While it was only able to operate freely in Afghanistan under fundamental Taliban rule from 1996 until the government itself was removed from power by coalition forces in 2002, al Qaeda grew in strength and complexity not only by continuing to perpetrate successful attacks against the United States but also through linking itself and its Salafist cause to many domestic insurgencies and secessionist movements throughout the world.

What is most interesting during this period is that al Qaeda seemed to ramp up its emphasis on global insurgency. Southeast Asia became a target of choice and remains

one of the group’s most prominent fixations. There are several reasons why the region is a good fit for its brand of insurgency. Zachary Abuza argues that Southeast Asia is perfect for al Qaeda and other terror organizations because of widespread poverty, lack of equal education, lax border controls (due to many states being reliant on tourism), and the spread of Wahhabist and Salafist Islam.²⁷ Another enticement for al Qaeda is that there is already a fairly well-established regional terrorist organization, Jemaah Islamiyah, which espouses the grand goal of establishing a caliphate encompassing all Southeast Asian states.²⁸ Finally, there are numerous Islamic secessionist movements looking for support. The Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia, multiple Islamic secessionist groups in the Philippines, and recent secessionist movement in southern Thailand all provide fertile grounds for al Qaeda to infiltrate.

Al Qaeda began laying the seeds of insurgency in Southeast Asia while headquartered in Sudan. Ramsey Youssef, a chief architect of the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, was one of the main actors managing al Qaeda’s growing regional network in Southeast Asia. Youssef regularly visited the Philippines and consulted with the Abu Sayyaf group and coordinated cooperation between it and al Qaeda.²⁹

Al Qaeda continued to expand this initial cooperation while in Afghanistan, supporting secessionist movements and regional insurgent movements in Southeast Asia, which allowed it to gain a strong foothold and a networked base of operations there. In fact,

by 2002, it is estimated that nearly 20 percent of all of al Qaeda’s organizational strength was in Southeast Asia.³⁰

Simultaneously with the infiltration in Southeast Asia, al Qaeda began to align itself with a strengthening fundamental Islamic movement in Pakistan. Islamic fundamentalism sprang up, in part, due to the Pakistani government’s decision to back the fundamental Taliban regime against Soviet invaders. When the Taliban mujahideen succeeded in resisting Soviet occupation, an explosion of fundamentalism occurred in Pakistan. The number of fundamentalist madrassas there increased tenfold in the decade after the Soviet Union was unceremoniously expelled from Afghanistan, and these religious schools began training insurgents who would become influential leaders of radical terror organizations in Southeast Asia.³¹

Al Qaeda grew as an organization, and the sand dune that was seemingly dislodged from Sudan reappeared in Afghanistan. While in Afghanistan, al Qaeda gained a strong foothold in Southeast Asia that it largely retains today. In 2002, coalition forces would kick the sand again and al Qaeda would relocate to the nearby Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP) in Pakistan.

Many pundits, political leaders, and high-ranking members of the military quickly proclaimed that al Qaeda was severely damaged when its operations were forcefully dislodged from Afghanistan, that it could no longer operate as it used to, and that bin Laden and his whole organization were hopelessly on the run. But these proclamations were soon proven premature as al Qaeda continued to perpetrate, or at least inspire, major attacks against Spain and Great Britain. Al Qaeda also continued to infiltrate Southeast Asia and revisit old haunts in North Africa. In fact, U.S. intelligence agencies reported in 2007 that al Qaeda had actually become stronger and more dangerous almost 6 years after coalition forces dislodged it from Afghanistan.³² The organization has also continued to strengthen in Sudan and is actively supporting the Islamic Courts movement in Somalia.

Al Qaeda consistently calls for an Islamic caliphate and the destruction of Western imperialist interveners in Islamic affairs. It persists in demanding the dissolution of the state of Israel. It continues to grow in strength and arguably in scope even though successful efforts dislodged the organization from two separate nation-states that it

Soldiers search for explosives in Iraq’s Diyala River Valley to disrupt al Qaeda networks



U. S. Army (Bobby L. Allen, Jr.)

was using as its main bases of operations. Al Qaeda is acting like a Dune insurgency, and forceful attempts to disrupt this organization are meeting with what appears to be short-term success but long-term failure.

Implications

Al Qaeda appears to be using terrorism as an early-stage tactic to draw attention to its insurgent cause and to separate the people in multiple nation-states from the counter-insurgents just the way Galula predicted. It also shows the characteristics of being what O'Neill describes as a traditionalist insurgency attempting to rail against global forces and return at least the Muslim world to a mythologized caliphate emphasizing traditional, fundamental Islam. Finally, al Qaeda appears to be perpetrating a successful Dune insurgency, transitioning nimbly between short periods of territorial presence and then seemingly disappearing until it becomes evident that it has set up shop elsewhere, perhaps even in multiple locations.

If the above analysis proves true, then combating a complex Dune insurgency will be problematic. Successfully countering al Qaeda in Iraq and Afghanistan, while vital, does not necessarily encompass all that needs to be done to counter a global insurgency. Unfortunately, the old counterinsurgency mantra "clear, hold, build" now applies to almost everywhere there is an exploitable instability. Kinetic options will likely meet with limited success as the main course of action, as the al Qaeda movement has spread deeply into multiple states and regions, and no coalition force could hope to intervene militarily in all of these places simultaneously. What really needs to be combated is instability and fundamentalism, as al Qaeda thrives off of these two features. Instability provides a perfect environment for al Qaeda to step into. Groups with sometimes legitimate secessionist demands provide potential allies, because poverty and human rights abuses provide causes that al Qaeda organizers can latch on to and use to leverage popular support for their larger global cause. One of the great ironies of the al Qaeda insurgency is that it could unintentionally unite the industrialized world in the first genuine, concerted effort to eradicate poverty and human rights abuses in the developing world. Stability operations performed by the military take on prime importance in such a struggle.

Finally, strategic communication will be a key in managing the al Qaeda problem. Industrial powers will need not only to foster stability in the developing world but also to broadcast the benefits of modernization and freedom to a large and diverse body of people that is largely wary of outsiders and that has been exploited by European colonizers. None of these tasks will be easy, but the sooner it is accepted that al Qaeda is a complex, adaptive global insurgency, the sooner real debate and discussion regarding these and broader, more global initiatives can occur.

But one must also take caution when combating al Qaeda's global insurgent movement. Kinetic options are necessary to take out irreconcilables, but widespread kinetic operations can actually feed the movement and serve to coalesce disparate groups around the al Qaeda banner. One must always bear in mind that the implication of an attempted global insurgency is that al Qaeda has declared war against the world, and the sheer magnitude, and perhaps hubris, of such an undertaking might mean that it is doomed to fall under the weight of its own ambitions. **JFQ**

NOTES

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² Audrey Kurth Cronin, "Behind the Curve: Globalization and International Terrorism," *International Security* 27, no. 3 (Winter 2002/2003), 38.

³ David J. Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 4 (August 2005), 598, 603–604.

⁴ Daniel S. Roper, "Global Insurgency: Strategic Clarity for the Long War," *Parameters* 37, no. 3 (Autumn 2008).

⁵ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Praeger, 1968), 4, emphasis in original.

⁶ Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, and Peacekeeping* (Saint Petersburg, FL: Hailer, 1973), 29.

⁷ Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse*, 2^d ed. (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005), 20–21.

⁸ Galula, 58–59.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ O'Neill, 57.

¹¹ Anthony James Joes, *Resisting Rebellion: The History and Politics of Counterinsurgency* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004), 20.

¹² Daniel Byman, *Understanding Proto-Insurgencies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2007).

¹³ Cronin, 34.

¹⁴ See Michael Doran, "The Pragmatic Fanaticism of al-Qaeda: An Anatomy of Extremism in Middle Eastern Politics," *Political Science Quarterly* 117, no. 2 (Summer 2002), 179; and Daniel Benjamin and Steven Simon, *The Age of Sacred Terror* (New York: Random House, 2002), for a more complete accounting of Taymiyya and his influence on al Qaeda.

¹⁵ Doran, 180.

¹⁶ Ibid., 183.

¹⁷ Barry R. Posen, "The Struggle Against Terrorism: Grand Strategy, Strategy, and Tactics," *International Security* 26, no. 3 (Winter 2001/2002), 40.

¹⁸ Benjamin and Simon, 12–13.

¹⁹ O'Neill, 21.

²⁰ Shaul Mishal and Maoz Rosenthal, "Al-Qaeda as a Dune Organization: Toward a Typology of Islamic Terrorist Organizations," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 28 (2005), 282.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Benjamin and Simon, 112.

²⁴ Ruth Wedgewood, "Al-Qaeda, Military Commissions, and American Self-Defense," *Political Science Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (Autumn 2002), 358.

²⁵ Benjamin and Simon, 133.

²⁶ J. Stephen Morrison, "Somalia's and Sudan's Race to the Fore in Africa," *Washington Quarterly* 25, no. 2 (Spring 2002), 192.

²⁷ Zachary Abuza, "Tentacles of Terror: Al-Qaeda's Southeast Asian Network," *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 24, no. 3 (December 2002), 428.

²⁸ Mishal and Rosenthal, 280.

²⁹ Wedgewood, 359.

³⁰ Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al-Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York: Berkley Books, 2002).

³¹ Irm Haleem, "Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia: Recruiting Grounds for Terrorism?" in *Democratic Development and Political Terrorism*, ed. William Crotty (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2005), 146.

³² Mary Louise Kelly, "Is Al Qaida Stronger Six Years after Sept. 11?" Transcript from National Public Radio, *Morning Edition*, September 11, 2007, available at <<http://current.com/10i9e4c>>.