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Countering the Islamist Insurgency

by Jonathan Carroll

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On the cover: Philippine National Police (PNP) Maritime Group members detain a Joint Interagency Task Force West training liaison officer as he roleplays the part of a drug trafficker during a direct action training scenario. SOURCE: U.S. AIR FORCE STAFF SGT. CHRISTOPHER HUBENTHAL.

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Prior to his USSOCOM assignment, Mr. Carroll served as the director of the sensitive special operations division, office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence, where he performed DOD-level management and oversight of sensitive special operations and intelligence activities, selected special access programs, and the Defense Cover program. He routinely briefed senior DOD leadership, members of Congress, and senior interagency leaders on USSOCOM sensitive activities, and was the Secretary of Defense's primary conduit for sensitive activities reporting to DOD, Congress, and the White House. Throughout his career, Mr. Carroll held a number of special forces command and key staff positions, including duty with 3rd Special Forces Group (Airborne), assignments at the Pentagon, Special Operations Command Pacific, and U.S. embassies abroad.

Mr. Carroll earned a master of management degree in defense studies from the University of Canberra in Australia. He also attended U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Australian Command and Staff College, and the Joint and Combined Warfighting School, where he earned the distinction of master joint planner.

Countering the Islamist Insurgency

> It is a fundamental mistake to see the enemy as a set of targets. The enemy in war is a group of people. Some of them will have to be killed. Others will have to be captured or driven into hiding. The overwhelming majority, however, have to be persuaded.[1]

Political violence, radicalization, terrorism, and insurgency are arguably some of the greatest security challenges the United States and its allies face today. Despite the fact that the United States Government (USG) has developed an exceptional counterterrorism (CT) capability to find and neutralize terrorists, it seems to be no closer to solving these problems than it was 12 September 2001. In fact, the problems only seem to be getting worse, with more and more attacks happening in the United States and Western Europe, and groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al-Qaeda recruiting thousands across the globe. Why is it that, with all of the knowledge, experience, and capability the USG has, the U.S. and its allies cannot rid the world of this scourge? The author believes there are three main reasons for this. First, most policymakers fail to truly appreciate the nature of the problem. Second, in many cases the contemporary USG CT approach is flawed. Finally, the USG should rethink how it employs Special Operations Forces (SOF) in security assistance, CT, and counterinsurgency (COIN) operations to maximize their effectiveness against these irregular threats.

Appreciating the Threat as a Global Radical Islamist Insurgency

To combat a threat, the USG must first appreciate the threat for what it is and acknowledge it. For the past several years, there has been a raging debate in the U.S. over what to call the threat from groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda. In 2001, during the President George W. Bush administration, the U.S. embarked on the global war on terrorism, and Americans often heard the terms "radical Islamic terrorists" or "Islamic radicalism" used when describing the threat. Although critics charge that these terms incite animosity in the Muslim world, they were used frequently by the Bush administration along with public statements explaining that the U.S. was not at war with Islam, but rather with "radical Islam."[2] During the President Barack Obama administration however, the terminology used by the USG changed markedly. As of March 2009, the USG was no longer fighting a "global war on terror," but conducting "overseas contingency operations."[3] When questioned about why he did not use the term "radical Islamic terrorism," President Obama explained that he believed it necessary not to "lump these murderers into the billion Muslims that exist around the world, including in this country,

1. Frederick W. Kagan, "War and Aftermath," *Policy Review*, no. 120 (August & September 2003): 27.
2. For an example of the Bush administration's approach to the al-Qaeda threat, see: George W. Bush, "President Discusses War on Terror at National Endowment for Democracy" (remarks at the National Endowment for Democracy, Washington, D.C., 6 October 2005), https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2005/10/20051006-3.html.
3. Scott Wilson and Al Kamen, "Global War on Terror Is Given New Name," *Washington Post*, 25 March 2009, accessed 21 March 2017, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/24/AR2009032402818.html?wprss=rss_politics/administration.

who are peaceful."[4] While both administrations had good intentions in how they characterized the threat, they both missed the mark in properly identifying it—the first step to combating it.

The primary threat to the Western world today is not the radicalization of Muslims, nor is it terrorism. These are only symptoms of the real problem. What the world faces today with ISIS and al-Qaeda is a global radical Islamist insurgency, not simply radical Islamic terrorism. ISIS and al-Qaeda use terrorism as an asymmetric tactic because they cannot defeat U.S. military forces or those of its allies in a conventional force-on-force battle to achieve their political aims. These radical groups have a political agenda, which is to eject Western powers from their holy lands and establish a caliphate. They are not conducting terrorist attacks for the sake of conducting terrorist attacks, or because they dislike Westerners. ISIS and al-Qaeda are conducting global Islamic insurgencies.[5] Once the USG appreciates the threat for what it is, it can then develop an appropriate strategy—a COIN strategy—to destroy these radical groups and dismantle their support networks (see fig. 1).

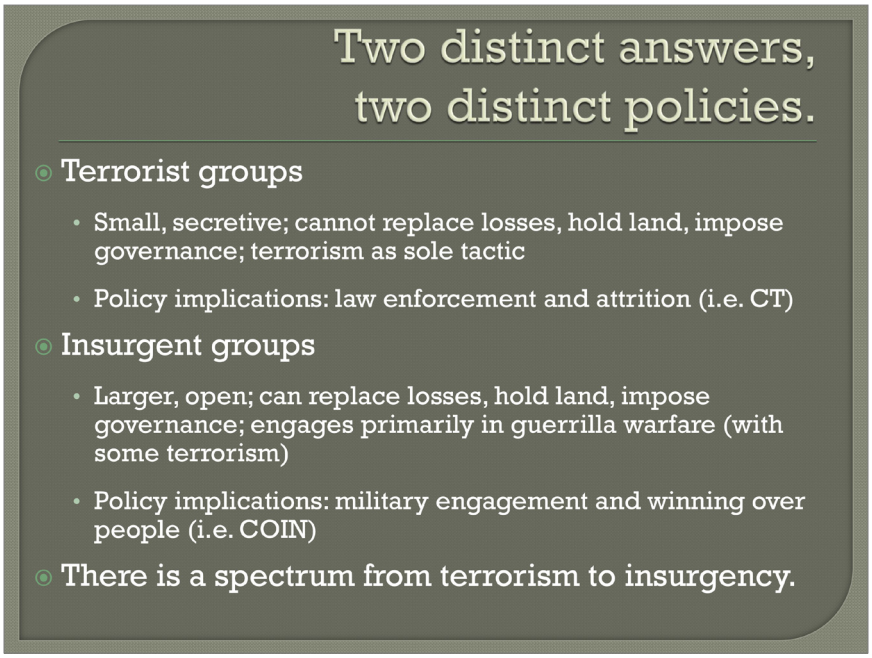

Figure 1. The basic difference between terrorism and insurgency. SOURCE: DR. MARY HABECK.[6]

The term "Islamist," or some other similar descriptive term, is absolutely necessary in order to properly characterize the threat posed by ISIS and al-Qaeda. Acknowledging that this terminology remains somewhat controversial, including the term "Islamist" or "Islamic" in the threat statement,

4. Daniella Diaz, "Obama: Why I Won't Say Islamic Terrorism," *CNN Town Hall*, 29 September 2016, accessed 21 March 2017, http://www.cnn.com/2016/09/28/politics/obama-radical-islamic-terrorism-cnn-town-hall/.
5. Mary Habeck, "Understanding Al Qaida and the Islamic State" (presentation, Joint Special Operations University, MacDill AFB, FL, 14 March 2017).
6. Mary Habeck, "Even When Successful, How to Prevent Re-emergence?" (keynote address, Countering Transregional Terrorism symposium, Joint Special Operations University, MacDill AFB, FL, 14 June 2017).

ensures policymakers recognize that the insurgent threats posed by ISIS and al-Qaeda are inextricably linked to their ultimate political goal to establish a caliphate according to their radical jihadi-Salafist ideology, similar to how the West characterized Maoist or Communist insurgencies during the Cold War. Again, the USG must first appreciate the threat for what it truly is in order to develop an effective strategy to counter it. Simply calling the threat "terrorism," "violent extremism," or "radical Islam" is insufficient to properly define the threat posed by ISIS and al-Qaeda.

A Violent Resistance or Insurgency Is a "Wicked Problem"

According to the Department of Defense (DOD), a resistance movement is: "An organized effort by some portion of the civil population of a country to resist the legally established government or an occupying power and to disrupt civil order and stability."[7] Similarly, DOD defines an insurgency as: "The organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region. Insurgency can also refer to the group itself."[8] The big difference in these two definitions is the term "violence." Once a resistance movement turns from a peaceful effort to a violent insurgency, one could argue that the resistance movement has become "radicalized." There are a multitude of very complex factors that influence whether a resistance movement remains nonviolent (e.g., the Otpor uprising in 2000 against Slobodan Milosevic, then president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) or transforms to a violent resistance or insurgency (e.g., the outbreak of civil war in Syria in 2011).[9]

There have been many research efforts that offer insights into the causes of radicalization and insurgency. One study, sponsored by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 2010, identified four main factors in predicting political instability, both violent and nonviolent, with an 80 percent success rate: (1) infant mortality rate/lack of development; (2) history of armed conflict in bordering states; (3) regime type; and (4) presence of state-led discrimination.[10] A series of studies, the Assessing Revolutionary and Insurgent Strategies (ARIS) studies sponsored by the United States Army Special Operations Command in 2013, identified eight risk factors for political violence: (1) economic deprivation; (2) poor governance; (3) lack of government legitimacy; (4) marginalization or persecution of identity groups; (5) history of conflict in the country or nearby countries; (6) demographic youth bulge; (7) presence of an exploitable primary commodity resource; and (8) type of terrain. In addition to these factors, the ARIS studies highlight the importance of organizational structure, a strategy aligned to the

7 U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Publication 1-02, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Chiefs of Staff, March 2017), accessed 10 March 2017, http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/new_pubs/jp1_02.pdf.

8. Ibid.

9. There are many ways of characterizing the use of violence to achieve political goals. Many use the terms "terrorism" or "violent extremism." The DOD, particularly the SOF community, tends to use the terms "terrorism," "violent resistance movement," or "insurgency." All three of these terms have similar definitions and are often used interchangeably. However, it is important to note that terrorism is only a tactic, an operational approach that serves as a means to an end. On the other hand, resistance movement and insurgency refer to a campaign (or the group that is executing it) and are therefore more appropriate terms to refer to the threat.

10. Jack A. Goldstone et al., "A Global Model for Forecasting Political Instability," *American Journal of Political Science* 54, no. 1 (Jan 2010): 190–208.

structure, group dynamics, affiliative factors (sense of belonging), and effective leadership as critical to the success of an insurgency.[11.]

While the CIA and ARIS studies, and many others, provide a basic understanding as to why a particular insurgency exists and is likely to succeed, academic studies alone cannot provide all of the answers to allow the USG to template radicalization or insurgency, nor does U.S. military doctrine provide such answers. The reason that analyzing and countering insurgencies is so difficult is because of the nature of the problem itself. Insurgencies are what Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber called a "wicked problem" in their 1973 article "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning."[12.] That is, unlike a "tame" scientific problem—a calculus equation or a chess match—there are no black-and-white answers. Due to the fact that there is an almost unlimited number of variables in a wicked problem, particularly those the military calls the "human factors,"[13.] there can be no universally accepted right or wrong way to either diagnose or completely solve a wicked problem like a violent resistance movement or insurgency. In short, wicked problems can be reduced and managed, but never completely eliminated due to the human factors involved.

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As Rittel and Webber outline in their 1973 article, an analyst's worldview is often the strongest determining factor in their explanation of a wicked problem and, therefore, in developing their solution to that problem. For example, depending on one's perspective, one may argue that the cause of crime in a city is due to a lack of police presence, a breakdown in the family structure, poverty, lack of job opportunities, or a societal decrease in respect for authority. Ultimately, whatever one's diagnosis of the problem is will affect the solutions developed to address that problem. Unfortunately, solutions to wicked problems are not that simple. Wicked problems are incredibly complex problems involving a multitude of human and environmental factors, and are substantially influenced by individuals' political views, values, and perceptions. Consequently, given the emergence of a multitude of political groups and subcultures within our society, the causes of and solutions to wicked problems, whether they be poverty, education, crime, illegal immigration, or insurgency, depend greatly upon a particular group's values and perspective on the problem. What may be an ideal solution to one group (e.g., those who advocate for harsh prison sentences for all criminals) may be abhorrent to another (e.g., those who believe harsh prison sentences are inhumane and counterproductive).[14.]

11. Nathan Bos, ed., *Human Factors Considerations of Undergrounds in Insurgencies*, 2nd ed. (Fort Bragg, NC: United States Army Special Operations Command, 25 January 2013), 15–28.
12. Horst W. J. Rittel and Melvin M. Webber, "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," *Policy Sciences* 4, no. 2 (June 1973): 155–169.
13. Bos, *Human Factors*, 3; Director of Central Intelligence Directive (DCID) 7/3, *Information Operations and Intelligence Community Related Activities*, updated 5 June 2003, https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/dcid7-3.pdf. According to DCID 7/3, human factors is defined as: "The psychological, cultural, behavioral, and other human attributes that influence decision making, the flow of information, and the interpretation of information by individuals and groups at any level in any state or organization."
14. Rittel and Webber, "Dilemmas," 160–169.

There is a particularly relevant example of the tragic results that can occur when the USG fails to truly appreciate a problem and then applies an incorrect strategy, causing a relatively peaceful resistance movement to turn violent. After the initial invasion of Iraq in 2003, the U.S. policy of de-Baathification of the Iraqi government and military was a complete disaster. In a well-intentioned, but ill-informed attempt to remove all traces of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party from the government, the USG in fact created an angry, frustrated, and hopeless group of several hundred thousand well-armed former soldiers whose country was controlled and occupied by foreigners, and who had no jobs, no means to support their families, and no voice in their government. Is it any wonder that many of them joined the growing insurgency to fight the U.S. 'occupiers'? Furthermore, once the insurgency began to take shape, the USG refused to recognize it as such and continued to pursue a strategy for the next couple of years that only exacerbated the problem.

Learning to Appreciate the Problem as an Insurgency

Given that the U.S. is the world's lone superpower, its adversaries, such as ISIS, al-Qaeda, Iran, and even Russia and China, will not attempt to defeat the U.S. in a head-to-head military contest they know they cannot win. These adversaries have employed (and will continue to employ) asymmetric means, such as terrorism or hybrid warfare tactics, to avoid U.S. strengths and exploit U.S. weaknesses. A good example of this is Saddam Hussein's differing approaches to the defense of Iraq during the first Gulf War (Operation DESERT STORM) and the second Gulf War (Operation IRAQI FREEDOM). In the first, he fielded a massive conventional army that was rapidly defeated in 100 hours. In the second, he learned from his 1991 defeat and relied primarily upon irregular warfare forces such as the Fedayeen Saddam to resist the U.S.-led invasion, which lasted several weeks. Even after Saddam was captured and executed, a bloody insurgency emerged and raged until the U.S. strategy changed (the troop surge, coupled with the Sunni Awakening), which eventually enabled U.S. and Iraqi forces to reduce the violence to a somewhat manageable level. As this episode clearly demonstrates, the asymmetric threats the U.S. will face in the foreseeable future require something different than a large-scale conventional military response based on outdated military doctrine.

Throughout history, there have been many successful COIN campaigns: the British against the communist insurgents in Malaysia; the Philippine government against the Huks, and later the Abu Sayyaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah; and Colombian government efforts against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Columbia. There have also been many failures: the French and U.S. militaries in Vietnam; the French government in Algeria; the Rhodesian government against the Zimbabwe African National Union Patriotic Front.[15.] However, the solution to an insurgency problem cannot be found by simply following a

However, the solution to an insurgency problem cannot be found by simply following a template of what worked in one part of the world with a certain insurgent group.

15. For a comprehensive history of insurgencies, to include both successful and unsuccessful insurgencies, see: Max Boot, *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2013).

template of what worked in one part of the world with a certain insurgent group. There are too many variables—in particular, the human factors, which influence the motivation, tactics, and strategy of various insurgent groups. So, what is required to properly analyze an insurgency in order to understand it and develop a strategy to defeat it? Military doctrine is a good starting point for initial planning, training, and organizing forces, but doctrine alone cannot be the template for analyzing and solving a wicked problem like an insurgency in the modern era.

Properly analyzing and appreciating an insurgency requires first and foremost, expert knowledge of the people, cultures, and terrain involved—a clear understanding of the human and environmental factors that affect the insurgents, the government, and the populace, both positively and negatively. While research and in-depth study are very important in gaining this appreciation, they are not enough. To gain a true appreciation of the human factors and environment of a country, one must be on the ground for a substantial period of time, living, working, and interacting with the indigenous population and government. There is simply no substitute for this, particularly on the ground outside the major cities and government facilities.

Unfortunately, many U.S. diplomats, intelligence officers, non-governmental organization aid workers, and military personnel deployed overseas tend to spend most of their time in exclusive circles, living in Western hotels or embassy compounds in major cities, shopping in Western shopping malls, and socializing with other Westerners or a few select government officials. In many instances, this lack of USG presence is understandable due to valid personal security concerns. However, to truly understand a culture and identify the factors that fuel insurgencies, USG civilian and military personnel must be willing to get out of their comfort zone in the big cities and interact with the local populace. They have to be willing to establish long-term personal relationships with indigenous partners. They have to be willing to listen to and empathize with all parties, not just those they agree with. Finally, the USG has to be willing to build bilateral, multilateral, and unilateral intelligence capabilities to include clandestine human intelligence capabilities to obtain the information that governments or adversaries will not willingly share. Only then can the USG begin to gain a true appreciation of the human and environmental factors that fuel radicalization and insurgency in a particular place.

What to Do About It: A Whole of Government Approach to COIN

David Kilcullen, former chief strategist in the Office of the Coordinator for Counterterrorism, U.S. Department of State (DOS), argued as early as 2006 that modern COIN requires a new approach that differs from classical COIN models:

> Today's insurgencies differ significantly from those of the 1960s. Insurgents may not be seeking to overthrow the state, may have no coherent strategy or may pursue a faith-based approach difficult to counter with traditional methods. There may be numerous competing insurgencies in one theater, meaning that the counterinsurgent must control the overall environment rather than defeat a specific enemy. The actions of individuals and the propaganda effect of a subjective "single narrative" may far outweigh practical

> progress, rendering counterinsurgency even more non-linear and unpredictable than before. The counterinsurgent, not the insurgent, may initiate the conflict and represent the forces of revolutionary change. The economic relationship between insurgent and population may be diametrically opposed to classical theory. And insurgent tactics, based on exploiting the propaganda effects of urban bombing, may invalidate some classical tactics and render others, like patrolling, counterproductive under some circumstances. Thus, field evidence suggests, classical theory is necessary but not sufficient for success against contemporary insurgencies.[16.]

Kilcullen points out that modern insurgencies involve not only complex human dynamics, but also the impact of global communications, the Internet, globally dispersed sanctuaries as opposed to geographical sanctuaries, modern financial systems, and pervasive media just to name a few. Therefore, the methodology of a modern COIN campaign cannot be fixed, but must evolve in response to changes in the insurgency. There is no constant set of operational techniques in COIN; rather, this is a form of "counter warfare" that applies to all elements of national power against insurrection. As insurrection changes, so must COIN.[17.]

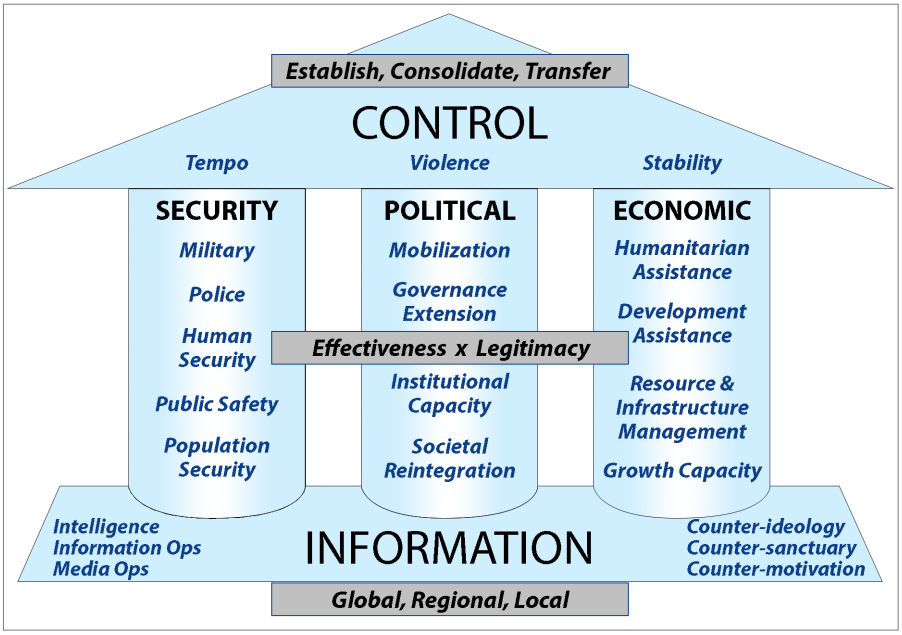

Figure 2. The counterinsurgency framework. SOURCE: DAVID KILCULLEN.[18]

History proves that diplomatic, economic, or military activities alone cannot provide long-term solutions to an insurgency problem. One need only recall the failed militaristic approach we took in the early days of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, or the failed diplomatic approach we took in the early days of the Syrian civil war, to understand this. In addition, due to a multitude of cultural and organizational factors, the USG has found that it is exceptionally difficult to convince diverse USG agencies and foreign partners to work together in a transparent and synchronized manner to do anything, much less cooperate in

16. David Kilcullen, Counterinsurgency Redux, posted on *Small Wars Journal* website, accessed 2 Jan 2016, http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/kilcullen1.pdf.
17. Ibid.
18 David Kilcullen, "Three Pillars of Counterinsurgency" (remarks delivered at the U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Conference, Washington, D.C., 28 September 2006).

a long-term COIN campaign. Given these challenges, Kilcullen's Three Pillars of Counterinsurgency may offer some ideas on how to approach a COIN effort (see fig. 2).

Kilcullen stresses that this model is a framework, not a template. It helps various stakeholders see where their efforts fit into an overall campaign, rather than telling them what to do in a given situation. It provides a basis for measuring progress and is an aid for collaboration rather than an operational plan.[19] With information as the foundation for the framework, it has three equally important pillars: security, political, and economic. It is notable that "military" is but one small part of one pillar in the overall COIN effort. These three pillars must be developed and executed in parallel, and remain in the proper balance, for the counterinsurgent to establish and maintain control over the resistance movement.[20]

While Kilcullen's framework is an extremely useful model in conceptualizing the causes and solutions to an insurgency, it lacks one major element to make it useful to COIN planners and practitioners: leadership. Without appropriate strategic and operational level leadership, as well as associated coordination and deconfliction mechanisms, it does little good for the various USG agencies, U.S. embassies, partner nations, and allies to plan and execute their COIN activities. These efforts will likely fail in the long term because they are not synchronized with one another, and may even work counter to one another—a case of the left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing. While this idea may seem blatantly obvious to many, this is the main problem with many of the USG CT efforts in the past several years. Despite the fact that the USG has very talented, knowledgeable, and dedicated people at DOS, DOD, the CIA, Department of Treasury, and others involved in CT and COIN efforts, at the national level it has lacked the strategic guidance, leadership, and synchronization of efforts to allow (or force) these agencies to work effectively as part of a coherent strategy. Until the USG solves this problem, no amount of money, number of troops on the ground, or diplomatic engagement will solve the problem of the global radical Islamist insurgency.

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Operation Enduring Freedom-Philippines (OEF-P) offers a good example of Kilcullen's approach for an effective COIN campaign on a regional level, as opposed to the CT-centric approach the USG used in Iraq from 2003 to 2011. Beginning in 2002, U.S. SOF deployed to the Philippines to support the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippines National Police (PNP) in their fight against the Abu Sayyaf Group and Jemaah Islamiyah—two al-Qaeda-linked groups operating primarily in the southern Philippines. Since the Philippine constitution prohibited foreign combat troops in the country, U.S. forces provided only training, advice, and support to Philippine military and police forces, and did not engage in direct combat. There existed a very close working relationship between

19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.

the U.S. Joint Special Operations Task Force-Philippines (JSOTF-P), the U.S. Embassy in Manila, the Government of the Philippines, the AFP, and the PNP.

Since the Philippines was not a combat zone for U.S. forces, it was understood that the U.S. ambassador was the lead U.S. representative in the country, and therefore, the U.S. military task force sought the ambassador's concurrence (not approval, which can only be granted by the military chain of command) for all U.S. military activities. However, no one doubted who was in charge of the overall effort. The U.S. military task force leadership met routinely with the U.S. ambassador and Philippine government officials, and had a liaison element located in the embassy on a constant basis. This allowed the U.S. ambassador to remain completely informed on everything the U.S. military was doing in support of the AFP and PNP, and ensured those efforts supported the overall USG effort in the Philippines. Finally, the U.S. Embassy, JSOTF-P, and the government of the Philippines understood that the COIN effort was a long-term campaign. Although the AFP and PNP were poorly equipped and progress was slow, U.S. leaders resisted the urge to deploy large numbers of U.S. forces, employ sophisticated U.S. strike aircraft, or conduct U.S. ground combat operations. Eventually, with low-visibility U.S. SOF assistance, Philippine security forces developed the capability and capacity necessary to control their own territory, and by 2015, JSOTF-P was deactivated. While the U.S. military still maintains a small footprint in the Philippines, the slow and deliberate approach of JSOTF-P, working closely with the U.S. embassy, enabled the government of the Philippines to implement an effective COIN strategy and dramatically reduce the insurgent threat to a manageable level.[21.]

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U.S. SOF' Role in COIN

In the post-9/11 era, the U.S. military has created a very effective "industrial strength counterterrorism machine."[22.] The U.S. CT forces have become incredibly proficient in prosecuting terrorist targets through the process known as find, fix, finish, exploit, analyze, and disseminate. During the surge in Iraq from 2006 to 2009, Task Force 714 conducted up to 300 operations per month and essentially broke the back of al-Qaeda in Iraq.[23.] U.S. SOF continue to conduct direct action (DA) missions like these in a number of countries today with CT forces unmatched by any in the world.

However, the special operations community has come to realize that a superb DA capability to find and stifle terrorists and insurgents is only a partial solution to the military component of combatting

21. For a more detailed description of the U.S. military approach to OEF-P, see: David P. Fridovich and Fred T. Krawchuk, "Winning in the Pacific: The Special Operations Forces Indirect Approach," *Joint Forces Quarterly*, no. 44 (1st Quarter 2007): 24–27.
22. Richard Shultz, *Military Innovation in War: It Takes a Learning Organization: A Case Study of Task Force 714 in Iraq* (MacDIll AFB, FL: JSOU Press, 2016), 2–5.
23. Ibid.

an insurgency. Despite crushing al-Qaeda in Iraq, al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan, and al-Shabaab in Somalia—the insurgencies in these regions have not gone away. In fact, they have gotten worse, as evidenced by the emergence of ISIS in Iraq and Syria in 2014, as well as the ongoing violence in Afghanistan and Somalia. The U.S. SOF community and the rest of the USG must realize that while DA or "surgical strike" capabilities are essential in combatting an insurgency, these activities are rarely decisive and serve only to buy time for indirect action or "special warfare"[24.] capabilities, such as foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare, in conjunction with non-military efforts, to provide long-term stability and security to an affected country or region.[25.] In the USSOCOM Posture Statement to Congress for 2012, then USSOCOM Commander Navy Admiral William H. McRaven wrote:

> The direct approach is characterized by technologically-enabled small-unit precision lethality, focused intelligence, and interagency cooperation integrated on a digitally networked battlefield. ... The direct approach alone is not the solution to the challenges our Nation faces today, as it ultimately only buys time and space for the indirect approach and broader governmental elements to take effect. Less well known but decisive in importance, the indirect approach is the complementary element that can counter the systemic components of the threat. The indirect approach includes empowering host nation forces, providing appropriate assistance to humanitarian agencies, and engaging key populations. These long-term efforts increase partner capabilities to generate sufficient security and rule of law, address local needs, and advance ideas that discredit and defeat the appeal of violent extremism. ... One way SOF achieves this goal through the indirect approach is through forward and persistent engagement of key countries. Small in scale by design, this engagement directly supports the Country Teams' and GCCs' [geographic combatant commands'] theater plans to counter threats to stability.[26.]

24. U.S. Army, Army Doctrinal Publication 3-05, *Special Operations* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters, Department of the Army, August 2012), Glossary-7. ADP 3-05 defines surgical strike as: "The execution of activities in a precise manner that employ special operations forces in hostile, denied, or politically sensitive environments to seize, destroy, capture, exploit, recover or damage designated targets, or influence threats." It defines special warfare as "The execution of activities that involve a combination of lethal and nonlethal actions taken by a specially trained and educated force that has a deep understanding of cultures and foreign language, proficiency in small-unit tactics, and the ability to build and fight alongside indigenous combat formations in a permissive, uncertain, or hostile environment.

25. U.S. Army, ADP 3-05, Glossary-5. ADP 3-05 defines foreign internal defense as: "Participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in any of the action programs taken by another government or other designated organization to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to its security." It defines Unconventional Warfare as "Activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area."

26. *Posture Statement of Admiral William H. McRaven, USN Commander, United States Special Operations Command Before the 112th Congress, Senate Armed Services Committee, March 6, 2012*, statement of Admiral William McRaven, commander, USSOCOM, https://fas.org/irp/congress/2012_hr/030612mcraven.pdf.

Rethinking the Employment of SOF

Given that an insurgency is a wicked problem, and military operations should be but one small part of an effective COIN strategy, what does this mean for U.S. SOF in the future? There are a number of steps our senior leaders and the SOF community should take to more effectively contribute to the USG's CT and COIN efforts.

First, decision makers must understand that terrorism, political violence, or whatever one wishes to call it, is only a symptom of a very complex wicked problem. The USG must ensure it is 'doing the right things' versus 'doing things right.' In this problem, groups and individuals—whether they are radical Islamist extremists, transnational criminals, or insurgents attempting to overthrow a country—use violence to achieve their political or economic ends. Therefore, in most cases, simply killing terrorists or insurgents will not solve the problem in the long-term. Leaders can and will be replaced and the underlying causes of the insurgency will remain unresolved. Long-term success in these operations depends on building the indigenous institutions and security forces required to address the underlying causes of the insurgency; and that is essentially a human endeavor based upon enduring relationships built on trust. While surgical strike capabilities are very important to buy time and space for other efforts to work, the SOF community must place more emphasis on and invest more resources in developing special warfare capabilities to achieve lasting results. The USG simply cannot kill its way to victory in an insurgency.

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Second, military commanders must ensure their operations are synchronized with and support the U.S. Embassy country team's strategic plan. DOD and SOF commanders must understand and accept that they are, in most cases, only a small part of a much larger USG effort; and, outside of declared theaters of active armed conflict, DOD is not the lead agency; the military is not in charge. This means military leaders must know and understand U.S. foreign policy and the U.S. Embassy country team's strategic plan, and accept that military forces play a supporting role to the U.S. ambassador's overall effort. This also means, as demonstrated in OEF-P, being transparent with the ambassador and keeping him/her and key members of the country team (e.g., regional security officer, CIA station chief, the senior defense official) well informed of current and planned military activities (including clandestine activities) to ensure military activities are synchronized with and support the overall USG effort.

Third, U.S. SOF leaders and military services must review the employment and career models for SOF personnel and determine how to establish long-term persistent SOF presence in critical regions, similar to the models used by DOS and some U.S. intelligence agencies. The military must determine how to better balance: SOF personnel deployment tempo, the need to establish long-term persistent SOF presence in critical regions, and the need to grow SOF subject matter experts in the regions in which they may be required to operate. For the past 16 years, SOF have been called upon repeatedly to deploy overseas and these repeated deployments have adversely affected operators and their families. To minimize these effects, SOF operators now routinely deploy overseas on short 4- to 6-month deployments, rotate home for a few months, and deploy again, often to a another location

to perform a different mission. While this employment model of short deployments reduces stress on SOF operators and their families to some degree, it limits SOF operators' ability to build trusting relationships with the indigenous forces, hinders their ability to grow subject matter expertise on indigenous cultures, and disrupts SOF' relationships with U.S. Embassy country teams.

Fourth, policymakers must reexamine the authorities for and limitations to SOF operating with indigenous forces in high-threat areas based on a sensible risk versus gain analysis, not purely political risks. For decades, the USG has employed SOF when seeking a limited liability military option short of war or a major military presence. In such situations, policymakers' commitment to an objective is often strong enough to deploy U.S. SOF in order to show that they have done something to address the problem without getting the U.S. involved in another war. However, their resolve quickly erodes when something negative happens. Such was the case in Somalia in 1993 with the "Blackhawk Down" incident.[27] To prevent this from happening, policymakers often restrict deployed SOF to "train, advise, and assist" roles and prohibit U.S. SOF from accompanying indigenous forces on combat operations. While this limits personal risks to SOF and political risks to politicians, these restrictions also significantly limit the effectiveness of SOF conducting special warfare activities. It hampers SOF' ability to establish trusting relationships with their indigenous partner forces, limits their ability to gain ground truth for commanders and policymakers, and limits their (and as a result, the USG's) ability to prevent or at least identify human rights abuses by indigenous forces.[28] While there are situations where the USG should limit SOF to noncombat, "train, advise, and assist" roles (e.g., Philippines, Colombia), there are others where the President and Secretary of Defense should authorize SOF to accompany indigenous forces on combat operations based on a sensible risk versus gain analysis.

Finally, the USG must learn operational patience. Just because the U.S. can do something, does not necessarily mean it should do it. While U.S. policymakers and the American public often want instant results, COIN is not a quick process. Furthermore, when conducting COIN, how the U.S. military accomplishes a task is usually more important than how fast or how efficiently it is completed. A good example of this idea is the U.S. operation in Afghanistan from late 2001 to early 2002. The USG accomplished the initial objectives of this operation with around 100 CIA paramilitary officers, a few hundred U.S. SOF personnel, U.S. airpower, and several thousand indigenous fighters. Those initial operations were successful in large part because, rather than deploying a large U.S. invasion force, the U.S. deployed a small military force working with and through indigenous militias to completely rout the Taliban and al-Qaeda over a period of a few months. Early on, at least, the Afghans viewed the U.S. as partners rather than occupiers. However, once the massive buildup of U.S. and NATO forces began, U.S. commanders began to see a negative reaction throughout the country and a growing insurgency just as the British did in the 1840s and the Soviets in the 1980s.

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27. Austin Long, "The Limits of Special Operations Forces", *PRISM* 6, no. 3 (7 December 2016): 38.
28. Ibid, 38–39.

Conclusion

The threat the U.S. faces today from ISIS and al-Qaeda is not a terrorism problem, or a Muslim radicalization problem. These are only symptoms of the real problem, which is a global radical Islamist insurgency. Only by appreciating the true problem can the USG hope to develop and implement an effective strategy to counter it.

An insurgency is not just a military problem, a law enforcement problem, an economic problem, a political problem, or a religious problem. It cannot be solved by diplomacy, economic development, military operations, or social programs alone. An insurgency is an incredibly complex wicked problem that materializes from a unique set of circumstances within each group or subgroup involved, and can therefore only be defeated with a carefully crafted and cooperatively implemented interdepartmental and intergovernmental effort.

COIN requires clear U.S. policy objectives and the resolve to make difficult decisions to employ elements of national power based on a careful analysis of the specific environment, rather than basing decisions on ideology or political expediency. Otherwise, the USG risks employing its national power in an ad hoc fashion and may make the situation worse (e.g., Iraq after the December 2011 drawdown). This is exactly the situation Horst and Rittel identified: allowing the analyst's (or policymaker's) worldview to be the primary determining factor in developing a solution to the problem.

Finally, there are steps the USG can take to better utilize SOF as part of a comprehensive interagency and intergovernmental strategy against ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other asymmetric threats. These steps can either: (1) help prevent a resistance movement from manifesting itself as an insurgency, or (2) in the case where an insurgency already exists, support the implementation of a COIN strategy to transform the insurgency into a peaceful opposition movement. These steps include: investing more in special warfare capabilities; ensuring military operations are synchronized with and support the U.S. Embassy country teams' strategic plans; reviewing employment and career models for SOF and determining how to establish long-term persistent SOF presence in critical regions; reexamining the authorities for and limitations to SOF operating with indigenous forces in high-threat areas based on a sensible risk versus gain analysis; and, accepting that COIN is not a quick process and must be undertaken as a long-term campaign. Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan have clearly demonstrated the USG must rethink how it employs SOF to achieve maximum effectiveness against irregular threats.



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