Marines clearing a house while searching for weapons caches and insurgents in the Thar Thar Lake area of Iraq

Al Qaeda as Insurgency

By M I C H A E L F. M O R R I S

The *National Strategy for Homeland Security* designates al Qaeda as "America's most immediate and serious threat." Conventional wisdom, reflected in news media, public opinion, and government studies such as the *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism*, characterizes the al Qaeda menace as one of transnational terrorism. Recently, however, some analysts have begun to challenge that conclusion. They argue that al Qaeda represents a new type of insurgency.[1] Assessing the nature of the enemy is a critical first step in crafting effective strategy. In the case of al Qaeda, one must answer three important questions to clarify the

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extent of the danger and further hone America's strategic response. First, does the movement actually represent an insurgency? If so, are there indeed new elements that make al Qaeda different than previous insurgencies? Finally, what implications do these answers have for the current war against Osama bin Laden's movement? The analysis that follows suggests that al Qaeda represents an emerging form of global Islamic insurgency, the inchoate strategy of which undermines its potential to achieve its revolutionary goals. Nonetheless, not unlike previous failed insurgencies, it possesses both durability and an immense capacity for destruction. These characteristics mandate a counterrevolutionary response at the strategic level that aims not only to destroy the organization but also to discredit its ideological underpinnings.

Terrorism or Insurgency

The distinction between *terrorism* and *insurgency* is not merely theoretical, as the appropriate responses to the two phenomena are very different. Before addressing preferred strategies to counter each, one should establish how they are alike and how they differ. Unfortunately, existing definitions do more to cloud than clarify the issues. Neither academic nor government experts agree on a suitable definition for terrorism.

The Department of Defense (DOD) *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* definition focuses on the type of violence employed (unlawful) toward specified ends (political, religious, or ideological).[2] This characterization fails to address the argument from moral relativity that "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter." In essence, this objection to a suitable definition submits that while violence may be "unlawful" in accordance with a victim's statutes, the cause served by those committing the acts may represent a positive good in the eyes of neutral observers. To escape this dilemma, the recently recommended (but not yet approved) United Nations (UN)

definition of terrorism focuses on the targets (civilians or noncombatants) of violence rather than on its legal nature or intended objective.[3] Still, the UN and DOD definitions both sidestep the notion of state-sponsored terrorism. The DOD definition cites only unlawful violence (thereby making the term *state terrorism* an oxymoron), whereas the UN definition excludes state-sponsored terrorism and deals with state

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violence against civilians as bona fide war crimes or crimes against humanity under the Geneva Convention. More importantly for a strategist trying to characterize the nature of the threat, neither definition conveys exactly what distinguishes the violence of terrorism from that of insurgency.

Definitions of *insurgency* have similar difficulties. DOD defines the term as "an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through use of subversion and armed conflict."[4] Terrorist organizations with revolutionary aspirations seem to meet that criterion, and thus the insurgent definition fails to help analysts differentiate one from another. Bard O'Neill comes closer to distinguishing the two phenomena by including an overtly political component in his definition of insurgency:

A struggle between a nonruling group and the ruling authorities in which the nonruling group consciously uses political resources (e.g., organizational expertise, propaganda, and demonstrations) and violence to destroy, reformulate, or sustain the basis of legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics.[5]

Thus, insurgencies combine violence with political programs in pursuit of revolutionary purposes in a way that terrorism cannot duplicate. Terrorists may pursue political, even rev-

olutionary, goals, but their violence replaces rather than complements a political program.

If definitions offer only a partial aid in discriminating between terrorism and insurgency, organizational traits have traditionally provided another means. Insurgencies normally field fighting forces that are orders of magnitude larger than those of terrorist organizations. Typically, insurgents organize their forces in military fashion as squads, platoons, and companies. Terrorist units are usually smaller and comprised of isolated teams not organized into a formal military chain of command. Insurgent forces are often more overt as well, especially in the sanctuaries or zones they dominate. Terrorist organizations, which tend toward extreme secrecy and compartmented cells to facilitate security, seldom replicate an insurgency's political structure.

One characteristic that does not distinguish terrorism from insurgency is the use of terror tactics. Terrorists and insurgents may employ exactly the same methods and utilize force or the threat thereof to coerce their target audiences and further the organizational agenda. Both groups may threaten, injure, or kill civilians or government employees using an array of similar means. Thus, the use of terror in itself does not equate to terrorism; the former is merely a tactical tool of the latter. Lawrence Freedman suggests that the terror of terrorists equates to "strategic" terrorism, because it is the primary means by which they pursue their agenda. However, the terror that insurgents employ is more tactical since it is but one of several violent tools such groups wield.[6] This parsing underscores the point that a variety of agents, including states, insurgents, and criminals, as well as terrorists, may employ the same techniques of terror.

Given the challenges of definition and the shared use of the same

tactical repertoire, it is hardly surprising that the terms *terrorism* and *insurgency* frequently appear synonymously. The Department of State register of terrorist organizations lists small, covert, cellular groups such as Abu Nidal and Greece's "Revolutionary Organization of 17 November;" it also lists larger organizations with shadow governments in established zones, strong political components, and well-defined military hierarchies, such as the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia and the New People's Army in the Philippines. Most analysts would characterize these organizations as insurgencies, although they employ strong doses of terror on both opponents and the surrounding populace. Not surprisingly, al Qaeda is on the State Department list of 37 foreign terrorist organizations. To determine if it belongs there, this article will employ a third analytical framework to supplement the insights offered by existing definitions and traditional organizational characteristics.

In the 1980s, the French sociologist Michel Wieviorka conducted research that determined that terrorists are estranged from both the social movements that spawned them and the societies they oppose. He uses the term *social antimovement* to describe the intermediate stage between legitimate social movements and terrorism. Antimovements may employ violence, but they maintain some association with the parent social movement. It is only when that linkage dissolves, a process Wieviorka calls *inversion*, that a militant becomes a terrorist. The violence of terrorist actors is no longer purposeful—in pursuit of a rational political goal—but replaces the parent social movement's ideology. This conclusion underscores a frequent contention in the literature on political violence, that terrorism is the domain of organizations, where the strategic repertoire of violence conflates means and ends.[7]

Wieviorka's construct does not provide a means upon which one can hang a consensus definition of terror-

ism. Instead, it offers another means to distinguish terrorism from insurgency. Specifically, this theory posits that the degree of linkage remaining between a given radical group and its parent social movement determines what Wieviorka refers to as *pure terrorism*. There is a connection between this notion and the broader political nature of insurgency, though it is not an angle Wieviorka himself examines. Organizations that have not yet inverted and that maintain connections to a significant segment of society represent not just social antimovements but potential insurgencies.[8]

The Terrorism-Insurgency Scale

Using the three analytical lenses—definitions, organizational traits, and Wieviorka's inversion theory—where does al Qaeda fall on the terrorism-insurgency scale? Certainly it meets the component tests of the various terrorism definitions: unlawful (a nonstate actor); political/religious/ideological in intent (fatwas calling for the removal of Islamic regimes guilty of religious heresies), and targeting civilians (for instance, the World Trade Center attacks). It also comprises "an organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through use of subversion and armed conflict" in accordance with the DOD insurgency definition. In terms of exhibiting a political component, some have called al Qaeda an armed political party and the extremist wing of a political religion. The group's political works include propaganda efforts such as the issuance of fatwas, protection and projection of Salafist religious infrastructure, and mobilization of grassroots sup-

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port through cooperation with Islamist parties as well as orchestration of favorable media coverage in the Islamic press. The al Qaeda training manual

underscores its commitment to both politics and violence as a mechanism for change:

Islamic governments have never been, and will never be, established through peaceful solutions and cooperative councils. They are established as they [always] *have been, by pen and gun, by word and bullet, by tongue and teeth.*[9]

Finally, the terror tactics employed in pursuit of al Qaeda's ideological goals qualify it for either insurgent or terrorist status.

In terms of traditional characteristics of classic terrorist and insurgent organizations, al Qaeda turns in a mixed score. It is relatively small (perhaps 100 hard-core adherents), but in Afghanistan it did train approximately 18,000 fighters, who have subsequently dispersed around the world in some 60 countries.[10] Of this small army (which is larger than 61 of the world's 161 armies), perhaps 3,000 are true al Qaeda troops, as opposed to mere beneficiaries of al Qaeda tactical training.[11] The small, relatively cellular structure of the hard core suggests a terrorist organization, while the scope and scale of its dedicated, deployed militants indicates a significant, if somewhat dispersed, insurgency. When al Qaeda enjoyed political space in which to operate unhindered in Afghanistan, it conducted its business in a relatively overt manner as insurgencies usually do. Under duress since 9/11, it has regressed to a more covert style in accordance with terrorist protocol.

Wieviorka's precepts suggest that al Qaeda has not yet inverted and transitioned to pure terrorism. Osama bin Laden's organization stemmed from the political tradition of the Muslim Brotherhood, which promised an Islamic alternative to capitalist and Marxist models of development. Normally, social movements such as that represented by the Muslim Brotherhood could compete effectively in an environment

AP/Wide World Photo (Abdul Kadir Sadi)

Insurgents fighting U.S. troops in Fallujah, Iraq

of democratic elections. In a Muslim landscape devoid of free elections, however, alternate ideological competitors either die out or become subversive to continue the political fight. Al Qaeda represents a version of the latter. While the group's methodology of martyrdom (reflecting the radical ideology of bin Laden's Palestinian spiritual mentor Abdallah Azzam) is apocalyptic from a Western perspective, it is in accord with at least a version of the Islamic religious tradition of jihad. Thus, it is not

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a complete departure from its own societal norms. Moreover such factors as bin Laden's popularity throughout the Muslim world, the fact that the popu-

lace among which he and his followers hide has delivered neither him nor his chief lieutenants despite the offer of large rewards, and the relative lack of condemnation of the group's activities by Islamic clerics suggest that al Qaeda has not severed its connection with significant segments of its social constituency.

This grassroots support indicates an organization still in the social antimovement phase rather than a terrorist group divorced from the population it claims to represent. Al Qaeda has radically disengaged itself politically (perhaps inevitable given the autocratic nature of the regimes it opposes), is hyper-aggressive toward those it perceives as responsible for its political weakness (Jews, Americans, and apostate Muslim leaders), and advocates

a utopian dream promising a powerful yet thoroughly isolated Islamic world. Such traits are symptomatic of a social antimovement. Pure terrorism, on the other hand, might exhibit the same radical goals and appalling acts but would result in far broader condemnation of al Qaeda's agenda than has occurred so far throughout the Muslim world. Analysts who conclude that bin Laden is winning the war of ideas between the radical and moderate Islamic religious traditions further reinforce the counterintuitive determination that al Qaeda is not yet a terrorist organization. Such evidence indicates a growing linkage between the purveyors of violence and the polity they claim to represent. Purposeful political violence committed on behalf of a sizable segment of society suggests insurgency. Importantly, the judgment

that al Qaeda has not descended into terrorism is not to sanction the group's horrific conduct or render support for its political objectives. Instead, it represents an effort to assess its current status, accurately portray its nature, and thereby help determine how best to combat it.

Combating terrorism and insurgency requires different strategies. Both pose significant threats to the United States. Terrorists, in an age of transnational cooperation and access to weapons of mass destruction, have the means to unleash catastrophic attacks on modern societies that dwarf even the blows of 9/11. But terrorism, however powerful in a destructive sense, remains the province of the politically weak. Terrorists are physically and psychologically removed from broad popular support. Because they remain isolated from the social movements from which they sprang and their political goals become more and more

bin Laden's attempts to communicate directly with and threaten the American people illustrate an effort to address his enemy's political vulnerabilities

divorced from reality over time, it is neither necessary nor possible to negotiate with them. They are a blight, like crime, that cannot be eliminated but that states must control to limit their impact on society. Of course, states must hunt terrorists possessing the means and will to conduct catastrophic attacks not only with national and international police resources, but also with all the diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments of national power.

However, states must handle insurgents differently, because they represent both a political and a military challenge. Insurgents combine an ideologically motivated leadership with an unsatisfied citizenry (the so-called "grievance guerrillas") in order to challenge existing governments. Only a

war of ideas can confront and defeat ideologies. An integrated counterinsurgency (COIN) program that enables the targeted government to offer more appealing opportunities than the insurgents' (doubtless utopian) vision must peel away popular support. Finally, a successful approach must identify and systematically neutralize the insurgent strategy's operational elements. Al Qaeda represents not terrorism, but an insurgency featuring a Salafist theology that sanctifies terror and appeals to significant portions of Muslim believers. The next section will explore whether the nascent insurgency has the strategic wherewithal to enact revolutionary change.

A Policy-Strategy Mismatch

Islamic insurgency is not a new phenomenon. Nevertheless, historically it has not been successful. Moreover, as Lawrence Freedman notes, revolutions that rely on terror as the primary means of political violence court strategic failure.[12] Does al Qaeda's methodology promise a different outcome? The movement's goals are revolutionary; they envision remaking society such that religious faith is foundational, social stratification is enforced, and the government is autocratic and controlled by clerics. The Islamist governments of Iran, the Taliban in Afghanistan, and the leadership in Sudan illustrate approaches to the ideal. Al Qaeda intends to establish like regimes in lieu of apostate Muslim governments such as those of Saudi Arabia and Pakistan. The new Salafist administrations would strictly enforce sharia law and block the military and cultural inroads of the West. Al Qaeda's political objective, then, remains unlimited vis-à-vis targeted Islamic regimes. It seeks to overthrow their form of government. With regard to the United States, the group's political objectives are more limited: to

coerce America to withdraw from the Middle East and abandon sponsorship of Israel,[13] although some argue that its long-term objective encompasses nothing less than the destruction of the United States and the West.

While it is important to classify an insurgency's type and understand its goals, the operative question is how the movement uses the means at its disposal to achieve desired ends—in other words, what strategy does it employ? It is not enough to have a guiding ideology and a susceptible body politic with significant, and potentially exploitable, grievances against the existing government. In the operational realm, something must connect the two. Without this linkage, ideologies may produce terrorists and grievances may spawn rebellions. But it is only when ideology and grievances combine that insurgencies result. Understanding how strategy effects that combination provides insight into the best ways to counter a particular insurgency. Current doctrine identifies two basic insurgent strategies: mass mobilization (best illustrated by Mao Tse-tung's people's war construct) and armed action (featuring either rural-based *foco* or urban warfare-oriented styles).[14]

Al Qaeda exhibits a blend of both insurgent strategies. Primarily, bin Laden's movement employs the urban warfare version of the armed action strategy. Certainly most of the group's activities have been military rather than political in nature. It has not sought to use rural-based military forces to court recruits and wage a systematic campaign of destruction against target governments. Instead, al Qaeda has employed violence against both government and civilian targets to create instability and undermine the confidence and political will of its enemies. Small, covert teams employing creative suicide techniques planned and executed its attacks against the USS *Cole*, the Khobar Tower barracks in Saudi Arabia, and the World Trade Center and Pentagon.

The movement has not adopted a

mass mobilization strategy, but it does employ some of Mao's key concepts. The Chinese Communist Party's carefully managed mass line finds its analog in the Islamic *madrassa*s, mosques, and media outlets. These forums publicize bin Laden's philosophy, echo the people's complaints, and conjoin the ideology and grievances in a perfect storm of revolutionary fervor. Islamic *madrassa*s, mosques, and media also provide a suitable venue for aspects of political warfare. Bin Laden's attempts to communicate directly with and threaten the American people have been neither sophisticated nor effective, but they do illustrate an effort to address his enemy's political vulnerabilities. Al Qaeda has also proven quite willing to cooperate, in a virtual united front, with a long list of otherwise dubious allies, including Shi'ite Hizballah, secular Ba'thist officials, and Chinese criminal syndicates. International support is important. Since the displacement of Afghanistan's ruling Taliban party, primary assistance comes from countries such as Iran and Syria as well as a host of like-minded state and regional insurgencies and terrorist organizations.

Mao's prescription for protracted war is also in keeping with al Qaeda's brand of Islamic revolutionary war. The mujahideen employed long-term guerrilla warfare in Afghanistan to drive out the Soviets; bin Laden looks to replicate that success in a similar protracted campaign against America. In addition to the small unit attacks characteristic of traditional guerrilla warfare, the larger operations conducted by thousands of al Qaeda-trained soldiers in Afghanistan against the Russians (and later the Northern Alliance) indicate that bin Laden does not oppose amassing and employing more conventional military power if time, resources, and political space permit. For example, his May 2001 communiqué calls for the formation of a 10,000-man army to liberate Saudi Arabia.[15]

When denied the opportunity to fight conventionally, al Qaeda is willing to fall back on more limited urban warfare. Such a strategy is in consonance with a protracted war timeline, if not the ponderous methodology of its Maoist antecedent. Urban warfare seeks only to disrupt, not to build a conventional force capable of challenging government forces in pitched battles. It subverts targeted governments in preparation for the day when military action may remove a greatly weakened regime. Regardless of which military strategy al Qaeda employs, it is apparent that bin Laden has the long view of history necessary to persevere in a protracted war. His religious faith is unperturbed by short-term setbacks or the lack of immediate progress in unseating target governments. Even death in combat is seen as motivational for those warriors who follow in the footsteps of the martyred mujahideen.

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While al Qaeda does not use the same mobilization techniques Mao's strategy employed, it nonetheless benefits from similar operational effects achieved in a different way. The purpose of covert infrastructure is to operationalize control of human terrain. The shadow government provides or controls education, tax collection, civil and military recruiting services, public works, economic infrastructure development and operation, police functions, and legal adjudication. While there is no evidence of an al Qaeda equivalent to a communist-style covert infrastructure as seen in China, Malaya, or Vietnam, the radical Islamic religious movement has developed a construct that militant ideologues could subvert and employ to attain the same ends. O'Neill notes that religious institutions may replicate the parallel hierarchies of covert infrastructure and that religious inducement is more compelling to potential recruits than secular ideology.[16]

The militant Islamist construct that illustrates such a parallel hierarchy is a virtual counterstate known as the *da'wa*.[17] Grassroots social programs comprise this alternate society, which is designed to prove the efficacy of fundamentalist policies and gradually build a mass base that will eventually translate into political power. The *da'wa* includes associations of middle-class professionals, Islamic welfare agencies, schools and student groups, nongovernmental humanitarian assistance organizations, clinics, and mosques. These venues advance political ideas and sometimes instigate mass protests. Though this overt nucleus of a parallel government has developed in nations such as Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, it has not yet attained the revolutionary capacity exhibited by Maoist people's war covert infrastructure. Opposition parties such as the Muslim Brotherhood have not been able to leverage this latent source of organizational strength into a successful challenge to sitting governments. Theodore Gurr observes that the existence of options for dissent like the da'wa sometimes bleed off revolutionary energy and make successful insurrection less likely rather than facilitating its advance.[18] The *da'wa*'s capacity as a conduit for Maoist-style political mobilization is nonetheless striking.

The strategy of al Qaeda is thus a blending of the more familiar mass mobilization and armed action strategies. Some of the factors that made Mao's people's war strategy effective are present in al Qaeda's twist on "making revolution." The religious foundation of al Qaeda's ideology and the devout nature of the societies it seeks to coopt create a novel dynamic with a potentially new way of connecting means to ends. So far this potential is unrealized. In the modern era, radical Muslims have applied the coercive social control consistent with bin Laden's brand of Islam only following the seizure of political power. In Iran, Afghanistan, and Sudan, the da'wa did not serve as a virtual counterstate as shadow govern-

ments did in Maoist people's wars. But in the future, al Qaeda may not have to replicate Mao's secular infrastructure because alternate mechanisms of control are already resident in the target societies. The challenge for Islamic insurgents is to transition the da'wa's capacity for social influence into one of alternate political control.

Whether or not such an evolution proves feasible, al Qaeda's armed action approach seeks to achieve its limited political objectives versus the United States through a military strategy of erosion. That is, additional strikes of sufficient magnitude could induce America to reconsider its policy options in the Middle East. In addition to the strategic intent of influencing enemy policy, these attacks also serve to mobilize the Muslim world; generate recruits, money, and prestige; demonstrate the global capacity to disrupt; and provide a forum for a kind of "performance violence" that symbolically underscores the righteousness of its cause. Failure to harness a more potent political component with its military erosion option, however, means that al Qaeda is less likely to overthrow targeted Islamic regimes. The unlimited political objective associated with

the constrained military means creates a fatal policy-strategy mismatch that dooms its insurgency to failure.[19]

Thus far, this article has established that al Qaeda's connection to the people in a number of Islamic countries means that its methodology is not terrorism but a kind of insurgency. The strategy of that insurgency, combining a variety of forms and styles in pursuit of both limited and unlimited political goals, demonstrates the ability to disrupt on a massive level, but with less likelihood of actually enacting revolutionary change. The final question is how to modify existing policies to better address the peculiar nature of the emerging al Qaeda threat.

Counterrevolutionary Implications

The insurgent nature of the al Qaeda threat suggests that the United States and its allies must counter the enemy's ideology, strategy, and the grievances he seeks to manipulate. The Army's October 2004 Interim Counterinsurgency Operations Field Manual, FMI 3–07.22, mentions all of these aspects of the struggle. Though the manual recognizes al Qaeda as an insurgency, it does not speak to the

unique challenges inherent in battling the first global insurgent movement. Some of the traditional COIN prescriptions are difficult to apply to a netted, transnational movement like al Qaeda. For example, "clear and hold" tactics do not work when the opponent disperses across 60 nations around the globe. Similarly, sanctuary is no longer a state or even a regional problem; with a global threat it becomes an international issue. The scope of the challenge increases vastly when potential sponsors include not only nations such as Iran, Sudan, and Syria, but also regions in turmoil such as Chechnya and failed states such as Somalia.

Unlike extant COIN doctrine, the *National Strategy for Combating Terrorism* does not recognize the insurgent nature of the threat. Instead the document characterizes al Qaeda as a multinational terrorist network. Nonetheless, the methodology laid out in the strategy incorporates a variety of COIN techniques to include winning the war of ideas, eliminating sanctuaries, interdicting external support, and diminishing underlying conditions. Interestingly, the National War College student report that inspired much of the war on terror strategy paper concluded that al Qaeda represented an evolution of terrorism that the authors dubbed *pansurgency*, defined as "an organized movement of nonstate actors aimed at the overthrow of values, cultures, or societies on a global level through the use of subversion and armed conflict, with the ultimate goal of establishing a new world order."[20] That conclusion was the most important idea in the study that did *not* make it into the National Security Council-approved war on terror strategy paper. Doubtless the council preferred the illegitimacy inherent in the terrorist label rather than the ambiguity associated with an insurgent status.

Greater emphasis on COIN methodology, however, would have improved the national counterterrorism strategy's prescriptions for addressing al Qaeda's ideology, strategy, and ex-

Vehicle loaded with explosives being destroyed by Marines in Karabilah, Iraq, Operation *Spear*

2d Marine Division Combat Camera (Jason D. Becksted)

ploitation of grievances. Addressing grievances is essentially a tactical response. The current strategy rightly indicates that championing market-based economies, good governance, and the rule of law mitigates the conditions that enemies exploit to recruit insurgents. But experience in Haiti, Somalia, Afghanistan, and Iraq indicates the overwhelming resource challenges inherent in such nationbuilding. "Draining the swamp" as a means of removing grievances based on poverty, lack of education, poor medical care, and culturally induced violence is a generational investment and is fiscally prohibitive even on a state level, much less regional. Thus, the most effective means to resolve grievances is not through development or repair of shattered infrastructure, but via reform of the targeted state's political process. Broadened opportunity to participate in the sine qua non of politics—the decisions about who gets what—undermines radical Islamic movements' protected status in much of the Muslim world as virtually the only available option through which to express dis-

al Qaeda exerts far less control over a targeted population because its strategy establishes no shadow government

sent. Al Qaeda is a religiously inspired revolutionary movement, but fundamentally it is political.[21] Thus, competitors offering different solutions for extant social, economic, and political grievances threaten the movement's political potential the most. In a largely nondemocratic Islamic world, however, a move to greater electoral participation is as revolutionary as the theocratic vision peddled by bin Laden and consequently remains a diplomatic hurdle of the highest order.

At the operational level, the war on terror strategy identifies a number of useful diplomatic, informational, military, and economic instruments for use against al Qaeda. The paper endorses a military strategy of annihi-

lation, but it does not identify a defeat mechanism. Against mass mobilization-style insurgencies, destruction of the covert infrastructure is the preferred defeat mechanism. Al Qaeda exerts far less control over a targeted population because its strategy establishes no shadow government, but the organization remains much more elusive as a result. Sir Robert Thompson recognized the dilemma posed by insurgencies without infrastructure, noting that either organization or causes are the vital factors behind insurgencies; whichever factor pertains dictates the appropriate strategic response.[22]

If Maoist people's war features organizational strength, then the American Revolution illustrates insurgency motivated by an idea. The colonies possessed a degree of local government, but they lacked the kind of pervasive organizational control that would ensure that citizens had to support the revolutionary movement. Instead, the glue that held the insurgency together was the popular idea of political independence. Similarly, al Qaeda's strength lies in the appeal of its Salafist/Wahhabian philosophy, suggesting that it has no structural center of gravity at the operational level. This verdict reflects the amorphous strategy the group has employed thus far and reflects its lack of success in either toppling Islamic governments or causing the West to withdraw from the Middle East. But it also underscores the tremendous potential energy possessed by a movement whose ideas powerfully appeal to a sizable minority throughout the Muslim world.

The Strategic Challenge

Such an assessment dictates a different kind of response at the strategic level. The conflict is between competing visions of Islam. Moderate Islam is willing and able to accommodate modernism; radical Islam insists that the religion return to the halcyon days of the 7th and 8th centuries. This is a kind

of civil war, and the West is poorly positioned to referee it or encourage its end. The contest is not the venue of an information operation writ large. Rather it is the age-old debate on religion's role in governance. Each people must make its own choice; Madison Avenue marketing and Western-style politics are neither necessary nor sufficient to sway the result. Instead, a sophisticated form of political warfare must support and encourage moderate governments that champion tolerant forms of the Islamic faith while opposing religious fascism. The *National Security* and *Combating Terrorism* strategies mention but do not stress this war of ideas. It deserves more emphasis and attention because failure in this arena will render moot even the destruction of al Qaeda. Osama bin Laden's movement is merely representative of the threat posed by Salafist theology. Other groups, though less well known, harbor similar political objectives and the conflict will continue until the underlying ideas are rejected by the Muslim *umma*. The threat posed by radical Islam today resembles that posed in 1917 by communism—a bad idea poised to justify the spread of totalitarianism.

The strategic challenge is to discredit a fascist religious ideology before victim states experience a century of social, economic and political oppression and recognize too late that Wahhabism is simply another failed philosophy of government. Key to meeting that challenge is to recognize threats as they are rather than as one wishes them to be. The present *National Security Strategy* fails this charge when it claims the enemy is terrorism rather than the ideology that justifies the terror. This analysis confuses the symptom for the disease. The real problem is a religiously inspired political ideology whose specified endstate is global hegemony. Al Qaeda exemplifies this ideology and represents an emerging danger that demands a clear policy response. Such a policy should promulgate a comprehensive new doctrine encompassing the following elements.

Image from Al-Arabiya television of hooded gunmen threatening to behead a Turkish hostage unless the United States releases all Iraqi prisoners

AP/Wide World Photo

The United States will:

■ oppose those nations whose governments embrace Salafist jihadist ideology[23]
■ seek to contain the spread of Salafist jihadist ideology
■ hold accountable those nations that host, sponsor, or support Salafist jihadist groups
■ support allies (or nations whose survival is considered vital to U.S. security) if Salafist jihadist nations or movements threaten their sovereignty.

A doctrine such as this, not unlike Cold War-era anticommunist policies, clarifies the national position, while enabling political leaders to protect American interests by selectively supporting authoritarian allies and/or encouraging political reform. This choice, reflecting the persistent foreign policy tension between idealism and realpolitik, remains the essence of effective diplomacy.

Choosing wisely between idealism and realism is vital because the militant Islamic threat that al Qaeda represents is not monolithic. Branches of al Qaeda as well as similar organizations may be different in important ways. In the early days of the Cold War, the West thought the communist threat was monolithic, but time and experience proved that it was not. Neither is the Salafist threat. All politics are local, even the politics of religion. COIN strategists must therefore evaluate each case on its own merits. While Islamic militants may cooperate in a global fashion, the program they craft to topple a particular government requires independent analysis and a counterrevolutionary strategy that

recognizes and leverages local conditions. Moreover, insurgency is only one way to enact social and/or political change. Revolutions also occur peacefully (as the Shah of Iran learned in 1979), via coup (as Lenin demonstrated in 1917), or by the ballot box (with the prospect of "one man, one vote, one time" should a totalitarian party win).

Al Qaeda is the most deadly of the more than 100 Islamic militant groups formed over the past 25 years. The danger it poses flows from its willingness to employ weapons of mass effect, its global reach, its focus on targeting America, and most importantly its revolutionary and expansionist ideology. The size of bin Laden's organization, its political goals, and its enduring relationship with a fundamentalist Islamic social movement provide strong evidence that it is not a terrorist group but an insurgency. Armed action is its primary strategy, but there are aspects of mass mobilization techniques that serve to strengthen its organizational impact and resiliency. Elements unique to its methodology include transnational networking and a multiethnic constituency. Together these factors comprise an evolving style of spiritually-based insurgency that differs from the Maoist people's war model that underwrites most COIN doctrine.

The disparate nature of the threat—in essence a global but somewhat leisurely-paced guerrilla war—makes it difficult to focus an effective strategic response. But al Qaeda's organizational and strategic choices also make it difficult for the movement to concentrate power in ways that achieve its political ends. Thus far no targeted Islamic government has fallen to al Qaeda-inspired violence, nor have its

attacks coerced America to alter its policies in the Middle East. The resulting contest of wills is classically asymmetric. Long-term success for the United States will require support for true political reform among autocratic Islamic governments—a revolutionary cause in itself. This path, though potentially destabilizing in the short term, holds more promise in the long run when radical Islamic insurgents are forced to compete with more moderate political rivals in the marketplace of ideas.

A clear policy that identifies Salafist ideology as the problem and enunciates America's opposition to the politics of jihad is essential. Victory also demands delegitimizing the radical Wahhabian strain of Islam that considers killing civilians not just a useful tactic but also a religious imperative. This goal, though beyond the means of a non-Muslim country to effect independently, is the crux of the issue. The rise of Islamic fascism, championed by groups such as al Qaeda, is the central strategic problem of the age. Only victory in the simmering campaign against the emerging global Islamic insurgency will prevent that challenge from evolving into a much longer and more brutal clash of civilizations. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] According to this school, much of what Ian Lesser et al. characterize as a new form of terrorism in their study *Countering the New Terrorism* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1999) is in fact a new version of insurgency. See, for example: Anonymous, *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 2002), xvii, 24, 279; Paul Rich, "Al Qaeda and the Radical Islamic Challenge to Western Strategy," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 46; Thomas R. Mockaitis, "Winning Hearts and Minds in the War on Terrorism," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 14, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 21, 37; James Risen, "Evolving Nature of Al Qaeda is Misunderstood, Critic Says," *The New York Times*, November 8, 2004, A18; Kimbra L. Fishel, "Challenging the Hegemon: Al Qaeda's Elevation of Asymmetric Insurgent Warfare onto the Global Arena,"

Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement 11(Winter 2002), 286, 290; John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, "Multi-Lateral Counter-Insurgency Networks," *Low Intensity Conflict & Law Enforcement* 11 (Winter 2002), 353, 364, 366; Rohan Gunaratna, "The Genealogy of Al Qaeda," *Gaiko Forum* 14 (Fall 2004), 16; Michael Vlahos, *Terror's Mask: Insurgency within Islam* (Laurel, MD: Johns Hopkins University Applied Physics Laboratory, 2002), 1–28. Only the last of these studies attempts to establish why the threat constitutes insurgency instead of terrorism. The others simply assert that insurgency is the issue and then prescribe various remedies.

[2] Terrorism is "the calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious, or ideological."

[3] The recommended UN definition reads: "any action, in addition to actions already specified by the existing conventions on aspects of terrorism, the Geneva Conventions and Security Council resolution 1566 (2004), that is intended to cause death or serious bodily harm to civilians or non-combatants, when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a Government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act." United Nations, *A More Secure World: Our Shared Responsibility*, Report of the Secretary General's High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change (New York: United Nations, 2004), 51–52.

[4] Department of Defense, *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 207.

[5] Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare* (Washington, DC: Brassey's, 1990), 13.

[6] Lawrence Freedman et al., "Terrorism and Strategy," in *Terrorism and International Order* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1986), 58.

[7] Michel Wieviorka, *The Making of Terrorism*, trans. David Gordon White (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), 3–41, 61–77. Wieviorka conducted a comparative analysis of four sets of terrorist groups. He determined that the relationship between a terrorist and his parent social movement has been destroyed. The social movement's radicalized terrorist descendant has abandoned his roots and the people whose message he claimed to champion. Over time, the violence of terrorism tends to become more nihilistic and its perpetrators less lucid.

[8] Wievorka, in fact, uses the term *insurgency* interchangeably with the term *terrorism* in his sociological analysis. The author is indebted to Thomas A. Marks for the insights that application of Wievorka's theory provide to differentiating terrorism and insurgency.

[9] Rohan Gunaratna, *Inside Al-Qaeda: Global Network of Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 5.

[10] Bruce Hoffman, "The Changing Face of Al Qaeda and the Global War on Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27 (November-December 2004), 552; Burke,10.

[11] Gunaratna, *Inside Al-Qaeda*, 8.

[12] Freedman et al., 65.

[13] Earl H. Tilford, "The War on Terror: World War IV," *ROA National Security Report* (Washington, DC: October 2004), 37–44.

[14] Each style exhibits strengths that make it dangerous and weaknesses that leave it vulnerable. Mass mobilization is best exemplified by the people's war waged by Mao Tse-Tung's Chinese Communist Party. Mao's experience and writings provided, in essence, a blueprint for insurgency that has been the most successful and thus most widely copied strategy. People's war emphasizes politics over military considerations. Accordingly, Mao's strategy is designed to build strength in a gradual fashion rather than seize power in a lightning strike. Mao's thoughts on his strategy may be found in Mao Tse-Tung, *Selected Military Writing of Mao Tse-Tung* (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1967). General overviews of Maoist strategy are available in John Ellis, *From the Barrel of a Gun: A History of Guerrilla, Revolutionary and Counter-Insurgency Warfare, from the Romans to the Present* (London: Greenhill Books, 1995), 177–199, and O'Neill, 34–41. The armed action option subordinates political to military considerations. Mobilization of the population and patient development of covert infrastructure do not play critical roles in this strategy. Subcategories of this approach include rural-based *foco* insurgencies and urban warfare insurgencies. *Foco* insurgencies are marked by a relatively small force that commences guerrilla operations and recruits members through the success of its military strikes. See O'Neill, 41–45; Regis Debray, *Revolution in the Revolution? Armed Struggle and Political Struggle in Latin America* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1967), 106. *Foco* strategies have not been particularly successful outside of Cuba; they lack the staying power that mass mobilization provides and have no reserve manpower to tap following catastrophic setbacks. Finally, the urban warfare variation of the armed action strategy features raids, bombings, assassinations, and sabotage against political and economic targets in the target country's leading cities. The goal is to create chaos and discredit the government in the eyes of its people. The population's loss of confidence in the government's ability to provide the first mandate of its charter—security for its citizens—may lead the citizenry to side with the insurgents. This strategy is clearly at work in contemporary Iraq. See O'Neill, 45–47; Walter Laqueur, *Guerrilla: A Historical and Critical Study* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 343–352.

[15] Jason Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 2003), 128. For al Qaeda's appreciation of the merits of conventional fighting, see *Through Our Enemies' Eyes: Osama Bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America*, 104–105.

[16] O'Neill, 77, 93.

[17] *Da'wa* is not to be confused with the Islamic al-*Da'wa* political party in Iraq (a descendant of an Iranian-backed Shiite revolutionary movement founded in 1958). Rather it is what Emmanuel Sivan calls "'re-Islamization from below,' the long-term infiltration into society's every nook and cranny as a way to gain eventual political control." See Emmanuel Sivan, "Why Radical Muslims Aren't Taking Over Governments," in *Revolutionaries and Reformers: Contemporary Islamist Movements in the Middle East* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2003), 4.

[18] Ted Robert Gurr, *Why Men Rebel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 354–355.

[19] Brad McAlister concludes that al Qaeda will fail for another reason: the inherent inefficiencies of its chosen networked organizational construct. Specifically, he posits that the group's size and complexity are disadvantages rather than virtues as usually assumed. See Brad McAllister, "Al Qaeda and the Innovative Firm: Demythologizing the Network," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 27 (July-August 2004), 297–319.

[20] National War College Student Task Force on Combating Terrorism, *Combating Terrorism in a Globalized World* (Washington, DC: National War College, 2002), 10.

[21] Thomas A. Marks, "Ideology of Insurgency: New Ethnic Focus or Old Cold War Distortions?" *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2004), 125.

[22] Robert Thompson, *Revolutionary War in World Strategy, 1945–1969* (New York: Taplinger Publishing Company, 1970), 8–9.

[23] "Salafist jihadists" is the term employed by General John Abizaid, USA, to describe the generic militant Islamic threat which al Qaeda exemplifies. See David Ignatius, "Achieving Real Victory Could Take Decades," *The Washington Post*, December 26, 2004, B1.