

Extremist Islam and Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq

Written by Jeffrey Haynes

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JEFFREY HAYNES, JUL 23 2012

Religion, Conflict, and Counterinsurgency

Muslim fundamentalism is at least as dangerous as communism once was. Please do not underestimate this risk ... at the conclusion of this age it is a serious threat, because it represents *terrorism, religious fanaticism and exploitation of social and economic justice*. (Willy Claes, Secretary General of NATO, 1995; emphases added)

Conflicts in recent years have highlighted how 'religion', along with culture and identity, can be an important component in understanding security issues, including counterinsurgency (COIN) efforts. Over the last 15 years, various al Qaeda-affiliated networks have posed serious threats to global order. There were multiple al Qaeda attacks against 'Western' targets in the 1990s and early 2000s, with bombings and multiple deaths in, *inter alia*, Bali, Dar es Salaam, Istanbul, Nairobi, New York, Washington, Madrid and London. These outrages raised the question about the ideological assumptions and goals of al Qaeda. Given that many of the dead in the attacks were not Jews or Christians, but Muslims, it raised the question of what the perpetrators were seeking to achieve. What were al Qaeda's ideological assumptions and goals? Al Qaeda first emerged in the late 1980s to challenge the incumbency and authority of rulers in various Middle Eastern countries, including Saudi Arabia, with the objective of replacing them with plausibly 'Islamic' leaders. Over time, however, a lack of success in achieving its domestic objectives led al Qaeda strategists to shift attention to regional and global goals. The result was a continuing 'anti-Western' war, which sought to utilise various 'weapons of terror'. Wider concerns included both specific religious concerns and a wider concern with a global balance of power between the West and the world of Islam. Over time, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as newer conflicts in Mali, Nigeria and elsewhere, indicate that religion, culture and identity are continuing concerns in a variety of conflict contexts.

In recent times, numerous specialist articles by strategists and historians have appeared, as well as commentary on weblogs from those actually fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. Many debate the merits of FM 3-24[1] and extant counterinsurgency theories and case studies. Reflecting such concerns, in 2008 the U.S. government established a dedicated website to document and discuss the question of counterinsurgency. The US focus on counterinsurgency, especially in the context of the country's continuing conflicts in two Muslim-majority countries, Iraq and Afghanistan, has led to a wider focus not only on counterinsurgency's rebirth in these Middle Eastern contexts, but also 'to see in it the answer to our challenge of defeating al-Qaeda globally' (Sloan and Gorka, 2009). Overall, the last few years have seen a continuing debate over how effectively a new approach to counterinsurgency would (1) serve America's national security interests in the post-September 11 ('9/11') strategic environment, and (2) how the counterinsurgency strategy might inform US policy worldwide in the context of what appears to be a growing threat from al Qaeda and its affiliates, despite the death of Osama bin Laden at the hand of the US in May 2011. In short, we need to address two fundamental questions. These are issues which go beyond the merits of any individual doctrinal document, including the various iterations of FM 3-24:

- To what extent do insurgency and counterinsurgency in Afghanistan and Iraq link to the US goal of waging global war against 'Islamist extremism/terrorism'?

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- To what extent is 'classical' – that is, domestic-focused – COIN theory applicable in the global struggle against al Qaeda-linked, religiously-informed terrorism?

In the Wake of 9/11

Certainly, the initial response of the US government to perceived attack from Islamist extremists was a simple one: kill the bad guys, and the good guys will take over. Consequently, the US government responded to the 9/11 attacks with an assault on both the then ruling Taliban regime in Afghanistan and, more generally, against al Qaeda. Following more than two decades of almost constant warfare, Afghanistan was a country in ruins, a 'failed' state, characterised by a shattered social and political structure, with numerous towns and cities reduced to rubble. According to Thüerer (1999: 731), failed states, such as Afghanistan, 'are invariably the product of a collapse of the power structures providing political support for law and order, a process generally triggered and accompanied by anarchic forms of internal violence'.

These circumstances facilitated al Qaeda's attempts to establish and develop its bases in Afghanistan, with the explicit agreement of the Taliban government. More generally, the circumstances of al Qaeda's development in Afghanistan in the 1990s highlight more generally that failed states are unstable states that may invite external military involvement, if circumstances are right for this to happen. In this context, external forces, acting alone or through the auspices of regional or international bodies, act in order to: (1) help prevent political violence spilling over to destabilise neighbouring countries, and (2) ensure that they do not become safe havens for terrorist groups, such as, al Qaeda.

Once the United States had fatally undermined and dispersed the leaders of the Taliban, it turned its focus to another problematic polity: the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq. Alleged – but unproven – links between Saddam's regime and al Qaeda were a stated reason for the US-led invasion in March 2003. However, despite the US efforts, the post-invasion situation in Iraq was characterised by a – so far – unsuccessful attempt to rebuild a viable state. This outcome was linked to the fact that Iraq had become a *cause célèbre* for numerous Islamist extremists, both indigenes and foreigners. Inspired by their 'victory' over the 'godless' Russian communists in Afghanistan in the late 1980s, hundreds of victorious *mujahedin* – many from Arab countries, such as Egypt, Libya and Saudi Arabia – redirected their efforts against their own 'un-Islamic' rulers, before turning their attentions from 2003 to the US-led invasion of Iraq.

Anti-Western and Anti-Shia Discontent

Ten years later, it is very difficult to assess levels of support for al Qaeda and its ideology among Muslims.[2] On the whole, however, it does seem clear that there was a high degree of anti-US resentment after 9/11 and widespread belief among many Muslims that the 'West' was opposed to 'Islam'. [3] Such a perception was fuelled not only by the 2003 invasion of Iraq [4] but also by the apparently uncritical support by consecutive US presidents (Bush and Obama) for Israel against the Palestinians.

In March, 2003, an audio tape was handed to the Associated Press agency purporting to be from the then leader of al Qaeda, Osama bin Laden. Bin Laden called on 'Arab and Muslim' citizens to rise up against their governments. Over the next few years, the Iraq conflict offered a significant opportunity for al Qaeda and its ideological allies – including, al *Qaeda in Iraq* (AQI), the popular name for the Iraqi 'franchise' of a transnational Salafi jihadi militant network – both to foment and encourage Iraqi dissatisfaction with the invasion, as well as exploiting hitherto-contained political and religious competition between Sunnis and Shias.[5] Evidence for the success of al Qaeda's strategy can be seen in the way that increasing numbers of Sunni Muslims in, for example, Iraq, Syria, and Bahrain, were drawn to anti-Shia behaviour in the decade following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. In this respect, Pelham (2004) gives the example of a mixed Sunni-Shia town, Abu Ghaib, 10 km from Baghdad, with an adult Sunni male population of about 20,000. After the invasion, around 4,000 Sunni men began to pray regularly at Wahhabi – that is, militantly anti-Shia – mosques in the town, compared to a much smaller number prior to the US invasion. The imams (preachers) were said to deliver anti-American, anti-Shia ideological messages. Such people were said to fear that a successful US invasion would result in Sunni submission to the *rafida* or 'rejectionists,' the Wahhabi term for Shias.

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Some Sunnis used the circumstances of the US invasion and its aftermath to attack Shias, with some Sunni mosques serving as local urban bases for *ihadis* hiding in the hills across the Iraq–Syria border. Foreigners – including Yemenis, Syrians and Iranians – were caught in several of Iraq’s cities, including Baghdad, while planning to launch attacks against both the US forces and the interim Iraqi government. [6] Attacks by Sunni Islamist extremists had both short-term tactical objectives – to impede the formation of Iraqi police and armed forces – and a longer-term strategic goal: to increase the West’s sense of vulnerability by demonstrating that America’s military presence was unable to protect its allies, while evidencing the religious faith of the *ihadis*.

The US-led conflicts in both Afghanistan and Iraq following 9/11 served to encourage support for al Qaeda among disgruntled Sunni Muslims in Iraq and elsewhere in two key ways: (1) generally to focus discontent against the ‘West’, and the United States in particular; and (2) to polarise often sensitive relations between Sunnis and Shias. Both goals were in line with al Qaeda’s ideological objectives.

Conclusions

US counterinsurgency activities in both Afghanistan and Iraq were seen by many Muslims as an anti-Islam strategy; while some regarded the US actions as part of a global ‘war’ against ‘Islam’. This made it very difficult – perhaps, ultimately, impossible – to win the conflict as there would be a ready supply of both domestic and foreign recruits to the anti-US insurgency.

Thus, the US government introduced in 2006 what is known as the Human Terrain System (HTS) (Hassner, 2011). HTS ‘is a program to create embedded teams tasked with providing “direct social-science support in the form of ethnographic and social science research, cultural information research, and social data analysis”.’ (Hassner, 2011: 703). Each team comprises both military and non-military personnel, and the goal is to create and develop a database with social, cultural and economic information which can be used to try to analyse the make-up, motivations and aspirations of those that the US military is fighting with in various contexts, including Afghanistan and Iraq. These teams might also be used to collect religious intelligence. However, while HTS has been active for six years, very little information has been made public which might enable us to gauge the success or failure of the initiative, and it is unclear “how much of this effort will be aimed at gathering, analyzing, or implementing information about religion’. (Hassner, 2011: 704)

In this context ‘classical’ COIN theory is not of great relevance in the global struggle against al Qaeda-linked religiously informed terrorism, as it is focused on a domestic conflict, while al Qaeda’s goal is to fight and win a transnational – ultimately global – battle. The question remains to what extent are individual conflict zones – such as, in Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Somalia – facets of a wider, transnational and international war which pits the ‘West’ (especially the USA) against al Qaeda and its affiliates? If the conflict is indeed a regional or global one, then the likelihood of success of classical COIN theory, which focuses on winning wars in individual countries, even with the addition of improved information from HTS activities, is likely to be partial at best. This is because, as extremist Islamist combatants have shown themselves ready, willing, and able to transfer their anti-Western activities to other emerging theatres of war – such as, currently, Mali -, then US COIN activities, even when bolstered by HTS activities, will always be playing catch up in a fast changing situation and chances of success are by no means ensured.

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(2009). His books are available from Amazon.

[1] In December 2007, the US Department of Defense issued a new field manual on counterinsurgency (COIN). During January 2008, the field manual – FM 3-24: *Counterinsurgency* – was downloaded more than 1.5 million times from Army and Marine Corps websites, discussed on extremist Salafi websites, and later discovered in Pakistan in centres of Taliban activity. Over the next few years, this unclassified document was a key source of engagement in what, since the 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review, has been known as “The Long War.” A second edition, FM 3-24.2: *Tactics in Counterinsurgency*, appeared in April 2009.

[2] A decade ago, Fox and Sandler (2004: 76) estimated that al Qaeda had thousands of members and associates, with cells in up to 60 countries.

[3] After 9/11, support for the United States generally dropped in much of the Muslim world. For example, in Morocco, public opinion surveys indicated support for the US fell from 77 per cent in 2000 to 27 per cent in the spring of 2003. In Jordan, it fell from 25 per cent in 2002 to 1 per cent in May 2003. In Saudi Arabia, it fell from 63 per cent in May of 2000 to 11 per cent in October 2003.

[4] A November 2011 opinion poll indicated that 30 per cent of Iraqis believe that their lives are better because of the downfall of Saddam and his regime. Forty two per cent think it is worse, 23% say it is the same, and 6% are ‘not sure’.

[5] Overall, Shias account for about half the population, while the Sunni Arabs, the traditional rulers of both Ottoman Iraq and of the modern state since its inception in 1920, account for around a quarter of Iraqis. Iraq’s population is divided along both racial and religious lines: about 75 per cent are Arabs, 18 per cent Kurds and the remainder (7 per cent) divided among Assyrians, Turcomans, Armenians and ‘Persians’. Around 90 per cent of the population is Muslim, and most of the remainder are Christians. Most Kurds are Sunnis, while the Arab Muslims belong to both Sunni and Shia sects.

[6] It is important, however, to note that only a small number of non-Iraqis were captured by US forces, suggesting that foreigners were not the main instigators of or participants in terrorist attacks, either against Shias or Americans. Of 9,000 prisoners, only 30 were non-Iraqis, suggesting that the Sunni Islamist movement in Iraq largely comprised indigenes (Pelham 2004).

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