

The Global Relevance of Classical Counterinsurgency Strategy

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SETH CARROLL, OCT 4 2012

The notion of 'global insurgency', as commonly defined, is one of separate transnational Jihadist insurgencies spread throughout the world, but able to communicate and coordinate through modern communications and advancements in technology. This idea of global jihadist insurgency implies that the nature of insurgency, and as such counterinsurgency, has been significantly changed by globalization and borderless networks.[1] If so, then do the classical principles of counterinsurgency still have relevance and utility? Yes. All insurgencies are at heart founded as local conflicts. Regardless of the regional, religious, or cultural commonalities that insurgencies share they still have their roots in a local political failing, and as such, are susceptible to the correct application of classical counterinsurgency principles. In examining how this policy can defeat global political subversion and its insurgency, the principles as defined by Sir Robert Thompson[2] are the most appropriate, as they were fashioned from the generally accepted British counterinsurgency success in the Malayan Emergency of 1948-1960. Applied successfully to a modern insurgency or component parts of the 'global insurgency', classical counterinsurgency principles can defuse the global link of an insurgency[3] and focus on the underlying political failure. Doing this forces the narrative of an insurgency to move from a global to local focus and reframes the issues in conflict from a 'globalized insurgency' to correcting the grievance that gave rise to the insurgency. Without a grievance, insurgency dies. Without disparate local links, a global insurgency retreats in nature until it becomes a separate local conflicts, susceptible to classical counterinsurgency principles.

The idea of 'global insurgency' strongly suggests that there is a general macro-Islamic movement against the status quo.[4] However, when examined from a local perspective, the issues that cause an insurgent uprising are local in character. When attempting to address global counterinsurgency, the issue of whether a global insurgency against the established world order truly exists ought to be examined, but it is outside of the scope of this essay and as such we shall assume it does. Following the Maoist model, even if an insurgency has a unifying theme or support from geographically separate groups, it is still initiated due to a local governmental failing. Precedents exist, prior to modern communications networks, with the Cold War insurgencies in Cuba, Vietnam, and Northern Ireland.[5] All had local issues as the foundation of their respective insurgencies and shared a common cause in an ideological turn to Marxism, and attempted to share resources as best they could. These campaigns, and other ideological insurgencies during the Cold War era, also could be also characterized as a global insurgency against 'The West', even though they are commonly termed Classical or Maoist insurgencies. The campaigns currently taking place in the broader 'War on Terror' are all located in areas where legitimate governmental grievance's existed prior to their respective insurgencies maturation. In Afghanistan and Iraq the roots of their insurgencies lie in perceived illegitimacy of government along with entrenched ethnic, tribal and religious differences, whilst in Yemen and the Philippines insurgents are attempting to transform government along religious and cultural lines. Even when looking beyond the Western 'War on Terror' regions to the insurgencies in Chechnya and Xinjiang, which also have transnational insurgent links[6], local governance grievances are still at the heart of their respective conflicts.

A global insurgency becomes a classical insurgency, as recognized by classical rules, when separated into its disparate parts. The particular Islamist focus of what is described as a 'global insurgency' still has its local roots in political failings common to Maoist classical insurgency. While it is not a Maoist insurgency bound by common specific shared political grievance, '[the] globalized jihadi network is best understood as an insurgency'.[7] Thus,

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global insurgency is just that, a series of insurgencies that do not recognize the legitimacy of their present governance, seek to change it through violence, and are linked together through modern communications by Islam and its counter narrative to the current world order.[8] While modern Islamist ideological movements have their roots in the 'rejection of ... nationalist ideologies of the ruling cliques'[9], they have only been recognized as a globalized insurgency against the modern Western world since the attacks of 11 September, 2001.[10]

The counterinsurgency principles put forth by Thompson directly attack the root political cause of an insurgency and are based on his experience in Malaya and subsequent study of the U.S. campaign in Vietnam. These principles are as follows:

1. The government must have a clear political aim: to establish and maintain a free, independent and united country which is politically and economically stable and viable.
2. The government must function in accordance with the law
3. The government must have an overall plan
4. The government must give priority to defeating the political subversion, not guerrillas
5. In the guerrilla phase of an insurgency, a government must secure its base areas first.

Nagl, (2005), *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, p. 29

When applied to disparate groups Thompson's principles set the conditions necessary for that local insurgent grievance to be weakened, thus weakening the hold of the global network.[11] 'All politics are local' is a phrase commonly used in American politics, but which applies broadly regardless of location. Insurgency is the consummate example of this. Al Qaeda, as the primary example and benefactor of the 'global insurgency', has become a decentralized network that only expands when a local grievance allows that areas political subversives to take up the AQ banner in support of their local, non-global jihadist cause.[12] Because these principles were developed within a time and notion of the nation-state as the only legitimate form of government structure, do they then still hold relevance in a global insurgency? Yes. As the current structure of the world is still predicated on the Westphalian Nation-State, it is through this construct that political counter-subversion corrections are applied. Even if the specific political subversion does not recognize the state, as the global jihadist insurgency does not, the state itself still has the powerful precedence of its generally accepted existence[13] as part of an established and proven alternative narrative to that of the insurgent.

While this manner of applying classical counterinsurgency practice is similar to Kilcullen's theory of 'disaggregation'[14], one important modification is necessary. Whereas Kilcullen proposes to attack the networks, by focusing classical counterinsurgency practices on the individual insurgencies themselves, not their networks, individual insurgencies can be detached from any global or transnational connections. This would attack the local political failure that brought about the development of the insurgency and its support networks in the first place. Without a grievance to attach itself to, the network will end.[15] This is the most relevant application of classical counterinsurgency strategy to the modern problem of a global insurgency. Attempting to solve every insurgency at once in this manner is of course impossible; however it is a model for a government attempting to eliminate itself as a target of the 'global jihadist insurgency'. Applying the classical principles of counterinsurgency in this way would end up breaking off that part of the global jihadist insurgency, and causing the 'global network' to collapse locally due to the disappearance of the political subversion that had brought it in the first place.

The principles set out by Thompson rightly focus on the political failing that causes the recognized government to lose legitimacy in the eyes of the local population. Political failure is at the heart of the mythology of the Taliban's founding[16], the founding of Lebanese Hezbollah[17], and the loss of control and legitimacy in Iraq following the downfall of the Ba'ath regime[18]. A local political failing is common to all generally accepted 'fronts' in the global 'War on Terror'. While the nature of globalization has affected all segments of society and created an environment where either un-empowered or alienated individuals can unite with common cause and for action, it is the local grievance that initially causes them to delegitimize their government or social system.[19] Precedents abound from the first movements of the Taliban under Mullah Omar and his Saudi financial supporters[20] to the UK citizens who engineered the 7/7 attack's in London[21].

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The narrative of the founding of the Taliban in 1994 concerns the absolute loss of local control and governance in Afghanistan, as witnessed and acted upon by Mullah Omar.[22] This was a local governmental, and ultimately fatal, failing of the utmost order. However, the putative notion of the Taliban and Al-Qaeda firmly enmeshed together in Afghanistan, with Afghanistan serving as the current center of the global jihadist insurgency, is simply not the case. Indeed, 'while the Taliban wish Al-Qaeda well, there is a strong expert consensus that their ambitions are wholly Afghan, and that they would be willing to exclude Al-Qaeda as part of an Afghan settlement'[23]. Local issues trump this notion of global insurgency even in Afghanistan.[24] In this case, the principles of classical counterinsurgency, when applied properly, have relevance, albeit with the proper modification for local territorial and cultural conditions. In this case the principles as proposed by Thompson, which are focused on winning the local support of the people[25], are ideally suited to separate the global insurgent, Al-Qaeda, from the population while focusing on the subversion that sustains the insurgency.

The legally recognized government in Afghanistan has the potential to realize all of Thompson's rules in its struggle for legitimacy. First, the government of Afghanistan has a more favorable political narrative for the future that it can promulgate. Currently even the narrative of the corrupt and hopeless[26] Karzi government is preferable by the majority of the host country populace to the regime style that the Taliban would implement, and have implemented.[27] The government's narrative for the future of Afghanistan has the potential to divide hard core Taliban members from the mass of the population and drain the insurgent fish from the sea.

The government also has a potential base area in the north due to the ethnic disposition of Afghanistan. Even though ethnic Pashtuns in the south have previously rejected an Uzbek, Tajik or northern dominated government, the fact remains that a working government is still preferable to the Taliban.[28] In this environment the need for truly national coalition, as opposed to a potential return of Taliban rule if it fails, would grant the southern tribes significant leverage to use in securing their own interest. Since a working government coalition would have to include substantial minority rights and guarantees due to the ethnic makeup of the country, a potential future grievance with non coalition tribes of Afghanistan could also be avoided.[29] Additionally, due to the relationship of the Afghan Government with NATO, and more specifically the United States, following Thompson's tenet to act in accordance with the law is required due to the nature and predilections of those institutions. A recent example of this in action was the decision made by NATO-ISAF to yield to the government in Kabul and suspend its nighttime Special Forces raids.

Additional examples of classical counterinsurgency combating 'Global Insurgency', with appropriate local modification, are available from Operation Iraqi Freedom. The insurgency that began in early 2004 also had its roots in a governance failure. When the Anbar Awakening began in mid 2006, essentially in the effective center of the global jihadist insurgency[30] due to a governance failure on the part of the Al-Qaeda led insurgents, American forces acting in accordance with Thompson's rule to defeat the subversion and not the insurgents, united with the local population to defeat the Al-Qaeda led groups. They had, however, previously acquired ample evidence for legal arrests of insurgents with Iraqi warrants, following Thompson's dictum to remain within the law, but chose instead to attack the source of the subversion, and not the recently turned Iraqi insurgents. This necessitated ignoring lawful warrants and becoming allies with the recently turned Iraqi locals against foreign Al-Qaeda led insurgents.[31] These same insurgents soon lost the support of the population and the legitimacy of their governance ideology throughout Iraq. In this, the then 'hub of global jihad', the center of gravity remained the population, which was even acknowledged prior to the awakening by those same foreign Al-Qaeda fighters.[32] The inclusion of foreign fighters and foreign support globalized the perception of the conflict[33], but at its heart, as demonstrated by the Iraqi popular revolt against Al-Qaeda's attempt to impose outside rule and ideology, it was the issue of local control which determined the outcome.

The application of successful global counterinsurgency practices according to classical doctrine nonetheless has several fundamental weaknesses'. First and foremost there is no plan to counter global political subversion. And what is 'global political subversion'? And by whom would it be defined and against what standard of 'non-subversive' behavior? The closest recognized institution with standing to do this would be the United Nations, but it has member countries with large populations that sympathize and support the 'Global Jihad'.[34] Furthermore, a global counterinsurgency plan would require idealized Nation-States or alliances with the goal of 'defeating 'political subversion', vice acting in what an individual state may perceive to be its best interest.[35] Looking objectively at

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Operation Enduring Freedom as an example of an alliance fighting a global insurgency component, it can be successfully argued that until recently there was no overall plan for Afghanistan, that the emphasis was on the insurgents and not the insurgency, that the Afghan government was ignoring its own laws, and that no unified counterinsurgency strategy existed.[36] And these failings occurred despite a rediscovery and update of U.S. counterinsurgency doctrine and practices in Iraq.[37] Further, a 'global counterinsurgency strategy' would assume that when an insurgency is identified, classical counterinsurgency methods would be used. In the recent 'global insurgencies' in Iraq and Afghanistan this has not been the case[38] until late in those conflicts, whereas currently in Yemen it is not being applied.

Further complicating and transforming classical counterinsurgency strategy has been the development and effects of modern communications and a globalized society. The development of truly worldwide and unfettered communications has fundamentally changed what constitutes sanctuary. [39] While not a principle specifically espoused by Thompson, the ability to cut off an insurgency from outside support and replenishment has proven, if not essential, then highly desirable in the prosecution of insurgent political subversion. Globalization has allowed for technology to provide an uncontrollable and limitless source of communication, propaganda, media attention, moral and financial support to the modern insurgent. However, globalization can also take away this same support from the counterinsurgent. The role of the counterinsurgent public as a center of gravity in a distant counterinsurgency, as developed during the Vietnam War in relation to the United States, bears witness to this. Whereas the modern conflicts between Israel and both Hamas Hezbollah are prime contemporary examples of this change.[40] The forces of globalization, when combined with a safe haven, make the implementation of a successful classical counterinsurgency campaign very difficult, if not practically impossible for current Western governments. We need look no further than the non-physical support that Al Qaeda and the Taliban have received from Saudi Arabia when combined with the physical space provided by the Pakistani Federally Administered Tribal Areas to witness the degree of difficulty brought about by a global world.

The globalized insurgencies in the Maghreb, Somalia, Philippines, Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, and Lebanon all have local issues as the root cause of their respective insurgencies.[41] This is not unlike the classical insurgencies of Mao in China, Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam, the IRA in Northern Ireland, FARC in Columbia, and MLRA in Malaya. Applying classical counterinsurgency strategy frames a globalized insurgency, and thence the narrative of that particular conflict, in a local and nation-state way, rather than of a global war against the West. Also, framing it in a national format sets the approach for dealing with it the only way that a nation-state can, as a nation-state. Knowing this does not presuppose that all of these campaigns will be successful or that they should be undertaken at all, after all even Caldwell described it as a dirty and unrewarding business. But the foundations of these insurgencies, global in location whilst united through technology and a perceived shared cause, all have local roots. As such, properly applied classical counterinsurgency principles, when correctly employed, can dry up the local seas in which the globalized insurgent swims.

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