

What is the difference between counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism?

Written by Simon Pratt

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SIMON PRATT, DEC 21 2010

'Counter-terrorism' and 'counter-insurgency' as they are popularly understood are rhetorically loaded concepts. Repression, military and paramilitary action, and systematic human rights abuses are often justified in their name. Yet they do hold more objective meaning as well, though the difference between the two can sometimes be confusing. Both counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency have often been used to describe similar state activities, but they are not interchangeable. A nuanced examination of what each term actually means shows that while closely related, they are nevertheless analytically discrete. The particular ways in which counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency are different, and also how they are related, become evident in a discussion of the phenomena of terrorism and insurgency themselves, and then what it means for a state to 'counter' them.

Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism

Any discussion of the concepts of 'counter-terrorism' and 'counter-insurgency' would be meaningless without first defining what terrorism and insurgency actually are. Yet this is easier said than done, especially with regard to the former. Academics have struggled to define terrorism for decades, reaching no significant consensus. Some academics have provided definitions that span dense paragraphs referencing over a dozen traits,[1] while others offer a minimalist definition of only a few words.[2] However, the majority view of most academics seems to be that terrorism is 'a politically motivated tactic involving the threat or use of force or violence in which the pursuit of publicity plays a significant role.'[3] For this short essay, I will use this definition. Furthermore, as the term 'counter-terrorism' implies actions taken by governments, I will focus on non-state actors as the primary agents of terrorism, as they are the relevant terrorists in this discussion.

As a strategic choice, terrorism follows a three-stage method: *disorientation*, *target response*, and *gaining legitimacy*:[4]

1. *Disorientation* seeks to sow within a population a general sense of insecurity and detract from the legitimacy of existing state structures, often through random acts of violence that prey upon the civilian population in general.[5]
2. *Target response* seeks to prompt a disproportionately harsh collective reprisal from a government, in order to radicalise the affected population and win international legitimacy, or to wrestle political concessions.[6]
3. *Gaining legitimacy* is where the terrorist group seeks to transfer legitimacy from the government to its own cause through skilful manipulation of the media, through grassroots social agitation, or through alternative media such as the internet. At this stage, ideology becomes crucial.[7]

Counter-terrorism consists of actions or strategies aimed at preventing terrorism from escalating, controlling the damage from terrorist attacks that do occur, and ultimately seeking to eradicate terrorism in a given context. Counter-terrorism can be classified according to four theoretical models: *Defensive*, *Reconciliatory*, *Criminal-Justice*, and *War*. Generally speaking, each model contains differences in threat perception, how to guard against that threat, how to frame terrorism in the law and constitution, and which agents effect counter-terrorism.

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A country's comprehensive counter-terrorist strategy is usually a combination of some or all of these models.

Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency

Insurgency is another difficult-to-define concept. Fundamentally, an insurgency is a civil war characterised by a power asymmetry between belligerent groups. The weaker of these groups constitutes the 'insurgent' party, while the stronger is the government. Through ideological and social manipulation of the general population, the insurgent party ultimately seeks to transfer political power from the government to itself.[8] Insurgent activities therefore may include violence, but are likely to involve a wider platform of ideological and social activism as well. A critical universal feature in any successful insurgency is the 'progressive attrition of [the insurgent party's] opponent's *political* [emphasis mine] capability to wage war.'[9]

David Galula, a French officer and veteran of conflicts in China, Indochina, Algeria, and Greece, wrote what is perhaps the most comprehensive and seminal manual on counter-insurgency (COIN): *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. Before an insurgency becomes characterised by widespread violence and open warfare—a 'Cold Insurgency'—Galula presents four general courses of action to the 'counterinsurgent':[10]

1. Direct action against the insurgent leadership
2. Action against the conditions that precipitate insurgency
3. Infiltration of the insurgent movement with the intent to render it ineffectual
4. Reinforcement of the state political machine

When the insurgency becomes 'hot,' the population will consist of a favourable minority, a neutral majority, and a hostile minority. The goal of COIN should then be to use the favourable minority to co-opt the neutral majority and in the process neutralise the threat posed by the hostile minority.[11] The counterinsurgent's options are limited: an area should be selected, cleared of guerrillas with minimal damage to the population, and kept peaceful by reassuring the population that neutrality will result in the cessation of military activity.[12]

Comparing Counter-Terrorism and Counter-Insurgency

There is a clear similarity between the goals of an insurgent and the goals of a terrorist. Both the insurgent and the terrorist employ violent action not as a direct means to compel but as a method of ideological communication. Both the insurgent and the terrorist struggle to gain legitimacy for their ideas in the minds of a target audience, and to detract from the legitimacy of a non-compliant government. Essentially, the difference between insurgency and terrorism is that the former is a situation of political grievance that escalates to violence while the latter is a violent strategy that those with political grievances may employ. Hence terrorism is one strategy available to those engaging in insurgency. Whether terrorism is possible outside a situation of insurgency depends on whether there is a threshold beyond which a minority group engaging in violent activism is sufficiently large to be called insurgent, and below which a group 'merely' comprises fringe radicals.

As terrorism is best understood as a strategy of insurgency, counter-terrorism is thus best understood as a

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component of counter-insurgency. All four counterterrorism models fit into one or several of Galula's COIN strategies for a Cold Insurgency. Activities that fall within the Defensive and Criminal-Justice models can be considered 'reinforcement of the state political machine' as both bolster institutional legitimacy and security. The War model describes 'direct action against insurgent leadership,' as might the Criminal-Justice model, depending on the action. Intelligence operations against terrorists, under either the War or Criminal-Justice models, constitute 'infiltration.' Actions taken under the Reconciliatory model comprise 'actions to address the conditions that precipitate insurgency,' When an insurgency becomes 'hot' and the counterinsurgent's strategy narrows in scope, it nevertheless includes security actions and political actions which, were they to counter a campaign of terrorism, would fit under the War and Defensive models.

Conclusion

The question 'What is the difference between counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism' may be interpreted as suggesting that the two are dichotomous, but as a closer look demonstrates, they are in fact closely linked. Terrorism, as an ideological strategy of psychological warfare by political violence, falls under the aegis of insurgency, which is a situation of violent political activism directed against a government by a rebellious minority. Counter-terrorism falls within four models: defensive, reconciliatory, criminal-justice, and war. Those models in turn fit into the broader categories of COIN identified by David Galula in his seminal book on the subject. The difference between counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency is simple: counter-terrorism focuses more narrowly on combating the tactics and strategy of terrorism and those who employ it, while counter-insurgency is a broader category of responses to political violence carried out by minority groups, both terroristic and otherwise. The latter subsumes the former.

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[1] Martha Crenshaw in Alex Schmid, 'Terrorism – The Definitional Problem,' *Case Western Reserve Journal of International Law*, 36(2-3) (2004), note 74;

[2] Edward S. Heyman in *Ibid.*, note 18.

[3] Leonard Weinberg, Ami Pedahzur, and Sivan Hirsch-Hoefler, 'The Challengers of

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Conceptualising Terrorism,' *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 16(4) (2010), pp. 782.

[4] Peter R. Neumann, and M.L.R Smith, *The Strategy of Terrorism: How it Works, and Why It Fails* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 32.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 33-39

[6] *Ibid.*, pp.40-46.

[7] *Ibid.*, pp.46-53.

[8] David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Security International, 1964), pp. 3-6

[9] Andrew Mack, "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict," *World Politics* 27(2) (1975), pp. 177.

[10] Galula, pp.44

[11] *Ibid.*, pp.53.

[12] *Ibid.*, pp.56.

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