

Nonmilitary strategies against Terrorism

Excerpt from David Cortright and Rachel Fairhurst, "Winning Without War: Evaluating Military and Nonmilitary Strategies for Countering Terrorism," in *Drones and the Future of Armed Conflict*, edited by David Cortright, Rachel Fairhurst and Kristen Wall (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2015).

Empirical evidence confirms that war is not the most common or effective means of countering terrorist groups. A 2008 RAND Corporation study, *How Terrorist Groups End*, shows that terrorist groups usually cease violent operations because of political integration and effective law enforcement, not the use of force. An examination of 268 terrorist organizations that ended during a forty-year period finds that the primary factors accounting for their demise were participation in political processes (43 percent) and effective policing (40 percent). The use of military force accounted for the end of terrorist groups in only 7 percent of cases.¹ Terrorist groups end most often when they decide to forgo violent means and join a political process in which they gain greater power and address their grievances through conventional rather than military means. An example of this is the peace process in Northern Ireland, in which the Irish Republican Army abandoned armed struggle in exchange for political representation of the Republican community in government and security forces.

Terrorist groups also end through local law enforcement agencies.² Policing works better than war because law enforcement officials are rooted in local communities. They are closer to the ground and can gain the knowledge and trust of residents that enable them to learn about suspicious activities and penetrate terrorist networks. The head of the Crown Prosecution Service in the United Kingdom said, "the fight against terrorism on the streets of Britain

is not a war. It is the prevention of crime, the enforcement of laws and the winning of justice for those damaged by their infringement.”³ The most successful means of thwarting transnational terrorist plots are international police cooperation and intelligence sharing.

Policy approaches that emphasize political accommodation and law enforcement work most effectively with militant groups that have local rather than global agendas. While Islamist terror groups often have nonnegotiable, millennial political pretensions like restoring the caliphate, many of the groups that use terror methods in various countries are motivated primarily by local political agendas. They seek to redress grievances and imbalances of power locally. Many of these insurgent groups may be open to political solutions that achieve their objectives by other means. Groups that refuse political accommodation and continue violent methods may then become more isolated in their communities and more vulnerable to effective law enforcement efforts.

Terrorism and insurgency

Because insurgencies frequently resort to terror methods—bombings, assassinations, and the killing of civilians—it is natural to associate terrorism with insurgency. The United States made this assumption explicit in its strategy of equating al-Qaeda with the Taliban and attacking both. The linkages between insurgency and terrorism are especially strong in settings where rebel groups resort to asymmetric warfare in the face of heavily armed national armies or foreign forces. Terrorist groups and insurgencies often have similar political objectives in seeking to destabilize local regimes and resist foreign intervention.

Significant differences exist, however.⁴ The archetypical insurgency is linked to a mass movement and depends upon the support of surrounding communities. In Mao’s famous analogy, guerrilla fighters are like fish swimming in the sea, sustained by the people around them. Terrorist groups disconnected from an insurgency are different. In most cases they do not have public support and cannot afford to expose themselves for risk of being

killed or captured. While some insurgencies have employed terrorist tactics, others have not. Broadly based insurgencies have a strategic interest in avoiding civilian casualties. They cannot afford to alienate their social support base through indiscriminate killing and heavy-handed tactics. When al-Qaeda attempted to dominate the Sunni insurgency against the US invasion of Iraq in 2005–2006, tribal leaders broke with al-Qaeda and created the Awakening Movement that sided with the American military, turning the tide of the war.

Counterinsurgency operations (COIN) are related to the challenges of counterterrorism. Both require an understanding of the grievances and conditions that give rise to armed militancy and a strategy for encouraging aggrieved groups and communities to seek solutions through political rather than military means. A 2008 study on COIN by the RAND Corporation, *War by Other Means*, identifies the core factors that account for the success or failure of COIN and the conditions that produce the strongest insurgencies.⁵ The four most significant statistical predictors of successful insurgency are the following.

- Populations excluded from politics and estranged from the state;
- Authoritarian, unresponsive, inept, and corrupt government;
- Armed groups committed to destroying such government; and
- Significant popular sympathy for armed groups.⁶

Strategic specialists have long recognized that COIN is primarily a political task. David Galula's classic study, reprinted in 2006, calls for a struggle that is 80 percent nonmilitary.⁷ The US Army's 2006 COIN field manual, coauthored by General David Petraeus, echoes this emphasis on prioritizing civilian efforts and states that political factors are primary in the struggle against violent extremists.⁸ According to the official US government COIN guide, successful COIN requires political efforts to improve the quality of governance and address legitimate political grievances. "The political function is the key function, providing a framework of political reconciliation,

and reform of governance around which all other COIN activities are organized. In general, a COIN strategy is only as good as the political plan at its heart.”⁹

Successful COIN depends upon an effective political strategy for building inclusive, representative, and accountable governance in the communities affected by violence. The most enduring lesson of previous COIN campaigns is the necessity for effective indigenous political leadership.¹⁰ Also important are efforts to provide support for the building of quality public institutions.¹¹ These are the decisive factors in assuring good governance and establishing political systems that are responsive to the public will. They are vital to the goal of reducing corruption and abuse and empowering people to elect leaders who govern in the public interest.¹² These are not tasks that can be accomplished by drone strikes or the intervention of foreign military forces. No amount of military force can compensate for the absence of responsible governance.

According to the RAND study, *War by Other Means*,

The greatest weakness in the struggle with Islamic insurgency is not U.S. firepower but the ineptitude and illegitimacy of the very regimes that are meant to be the alternative to religious tyranny—the ones tagged and targeted as Western puppets by jihad. Success thus hinges on improving the performance and accountability of governments in the Muslim world. This is the essence of classical counterinsurgency.¹³

The absence of representative governance is a principal source of violent extremism. Alan Krueger and other researchers show that terrorists and insurgents are most likely to come from countries lacking human rights and basic freedoms.¹⁴ Populations that are excluded from politics and that face repression from authoritarian and corrupt governments are more likely to support insurgents committed to destroying such regimes. Marginalized communities are often a source of popular support for insurgents. If governments are unable or unwilling to provide safety and deliver public

services for these communities, people will search elsewhere for the help they need.

Despite the evidence supporting a political approach, US policy has emphasized military solutions. A March 2011 Congressional Research Service study reported that some 94 percent of all US funds for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were spent by the Pentagon, with only 5 percent devoted to foreign aid and diplomatic operations.¹⁵ This continued reliance on military solutions reflects both the dominance of the War on Terror paradigm in Washington and a lack of strategic vision in developing political means for undermining terrorism.

Eroding the support base

The struggle against the so-called Islamic State and associated groups requires a multidimensional, long-term strategy for diminishing the political support that sustains extremist groups. The strategic framework requires a two-level approach: (1) coordinated international police and intelligence efforts to protect against terrorist attacks and drive terror networks out of business and (2) a parallel series of preventive measures and international policies that ameliorate the grievances and conditions that give rise to violent extremism.

An effective strategy begins with an assessment of local conflict dynamics and requires differentiating among target groups. Two broad categories can be distinguished: (1) hard-core militants; and (2) potential sympathizers, supporters, and recruits. Dan Benjamin and Steve Simon offer the image of “two concentric circles, one very small, one very large.”¹⁶ In the inner circle are those who actually commit terrorist acts or actively support them. The outer circle consists of the much larger universe of people who sympathize with the declared objectives of the militants and under the right circumstances might be induced to provide active support. The strategic challenge is to employ methods that diminish the inner circle without driving those on the outside to join the inner core, while simultaneously providing governance alternatives that encourage potential sympathizers in the outer

circle to participate in legitimate politics. An excessive emphasis on the use of force and military pressures may drive people in the outer circle into the central core. The use of military force “too often ensures that the ratio of those captured and killed to those galvanized and recruited is the opposite of what is intended.”¹⁷ The goal instead should be to encourage those in the outer circle to turn away from the militants and perhaps even support police efforts to suppress them.

John Paul Lederach emphasizes the importance of understanding the social relationships that prevail in areas where militant groups operate. A social spectrum exists, with those who actively support or participate in militancy on one end and those who have no connection with the insurgent or terrorist movements on the other. In between is what Lederach calls the gray area, which is composed of people and organizations that may have some form of minimal contact, connection, or affiliation with militants but are not active sympathizers or supporters. The connections people in the middle may have with militant groups are often not by choice but simply because of living in a particular area, sharing a common religious background, or having extended-family links. As Lederach writes, “After considerable years of experience in many of these settings, my own view is that this grey area may be much larger and harder to define than we understand. Yet in terms of violence prevention and stable peace *the grey area is both strategic and contested*.”¹⁸

Sociological studies indicate that as conflict escalates and polarization sharpens, social pressures increase significantly for people to join one side or the other, reducing the middle ground. External threats create greater social cohesion within affected communities and reduce opportunities for contact and interaction with outsiders who may have differing perspectives. As Lederach describes, “Tolerance for and exploration of ambiguity reduces sharply in terms of group views. Little or no room exists for questions or the expression of alternative views.”¹⁹ These dynamics have direct impact on what may be the most important metric for measuring the effectiveness of violence prevention efforts—“whether a particular strategy of change increased or decreased the ability of leadership to recruit active followers and

bring them into acts of violence.”²⁰ By this standard, the strategy of isolation and military pressure often fails.

Effective strategies against violent extremism require approaches that vary with the intended target. Against the cadre in the inner circle, defensive measures are the priority. The emphasis is on protection of the civilian population and police and intelligence operations to identify and arrest those who plot and engage in violent attacks. For the much larger and strategically more important gray area of potential sympathizers and recruits, different approaches are needed. Coercive security measures may be counterproductive and could drive third parties toward militancy. The goal instead is to isolate hard-core elements and separate them from their potential support base. This requires a political approach that addresses deeply felt grievances, promotes democratic governance, and supports sustainable economic development. The creative application and interplay of these various approaches, directed strategically toward the right targets, can erode the social foundations of terrorist and insurgency groups and cut them off from vital sources of political and economic support.

Shibley Telhami describes this emphasis on reducing support for militant groups as addressing the “demand side” of terrorism.²¹ It requires understanding the political and social dynamics within local communities that allow terrorist organizers to mobilize support. As Audrey Kurth Cronin notes, terrorist groups “cannot exist without the availability of broader sources of active or passive sympathy, resources, and support” within the societies where they operate. Understanding these “avenues of sustenance” is the “proverbial center of gravity” for responding to the terrorist threat.²² Telhami adds, “It is difficult to envision how one can address the terrorism phenomenon without addressing the central issues that create the fertile grounds for breeding terrorism and that are exploited by organizers.”²³ To isolate and suppress militant groups, it is necessary to ameliorate political grievances and oppressive conditions and thereby reduce the social “demand” for armed violence.²⁴ The goal is to dry up flows of recruits, money, and support that sustain militant groups.

Isolating hard-core militants and reducing the legitimacy of terrorist methods requires a strategy of conflict transformation: recognizing the injustices that terrorist groups exploit and engaging with affected parties to resolve grievances through political rather than military means. When contending groups are involved in dialogue and political power-sharing arrangements, they are less likely to resort to violence. This is the essence of peacemaking—encouraging the resolution of political differences and transforming disputes into more manageable forms. Conflict transformation strategies provide means of addressing the conditions that give rise to terrorism and removing the political foundations of extremist groups.

¹ Seth G. Jones and Martin C. Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End: Lessons for Countering al Qa'ida* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), 18–19.

² Jones and Libicki, *How Terrorist Groups End*, 22–23, 42–43.

³ Clare Dyer, “There Is No War on Terror,” *Guardian* (UK), January 24, 2007.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2007/jan/24/uk.terrorism>.

⁴ See the analysis produced by the Terrorism Research Center. <http://www.terrorism-research.com/insurgency/>.

⁵ David C. Gompert and John Gordon IV, with Adam Grissom et al., *War by Other Means: Building Complete and Balanced COIN Capabilities* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008), xxv, xlviii.
http://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/2008/RAND_MG595.2.pdf.

⁶ Gompert and Gordon, *War by Other Means*, xxv..

⁷ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (1964; reprint Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2006), 63.

⁸ Department of the Army, FM 3-24 MCWP 3-33.5, *Counterinsurgency 2-1* (2006).
<http://www.fas.org/irp/doddir/army/fm3-24.pdf>
<http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army/fm3-24.pdf>.

⁹ United States Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative, *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, January 2009), 3.
<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/119629.pdf>.

¹⁰ Andrew J. Enterline and Joseph Magagnoli, “Reversal of Fortune? Strategy Change and Counterinsurgency Success by Foreign Powers in the Twentieth Century,”
<http://www.psci.unt.edu/enterline/em-freshlook-v58-identified.pdf>.

¹¹ Barbara F. Walter, “Conflict Relapse and the Sustainability of Post-conflict Peace,” World Development Report 2011 Background Paper (World Bank, September 2010), 21.

¹² United States Interagency Counterinsurgency Initiative, *U.S. Government Counterinsurgency Guide* (Washington, DC: Bureau of Political-Military Affairs, January 2009), 23.
<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/119629.pdf>.

¹³ Gompert and Gordon, *War by Other Means*, xxiv–xxv.

¹⁴ Alan B. Krueger and Jitka Malesckova, “Seeking the Roots of Terrorism,” *Chronicle of Higher Education* 49, no. 39 (2003): b10; see also Andreas Feldman and Maftu Peraelae, “Reassessing the Causes of Non-governmental Terrorism in Latin America,” *American Politics and Society* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 120.

¹⁵ Amy Belasco, "The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan and Other Global War on Terror Operations," Congressional Research Service, May 15, 2009. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/RL33110.pdf>.

¹⁶ Dan Benjamin and Steve Simon, *The Next Attack: The Failure of the War on Terror and a Strategy for Getting It Right* (New York: Times Books, 2005), 126.

¹⁷ Benjamin and Simon, *The Next Attack*, 198.

¹⁸ John Paul Lederach, "Addressing Terrorism: A Theory of Change Approach," in John Paul Lederach et al., *Somalia: Creating Space for Fresh Approaches to Peacebuilding* (Life and Peace Institute, 2011), 10–11. Emphasis in original.[AU: provide the location of publication.]

¹⁹ Lederach, "Addressing Terrorism," 14.

²⁰ Lederach, "Addressing Terrorism," 15.

²¹ Shibley Telhami, *The Stakes: America in the Middle East: The Consequences of Power and the Choice of Peace* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2004), 13–14.

²² Audrey Kurth Cronin, "Transnational Terrorism and Security," in *Grave New World: Security Challenges in the Twenty-first Century*, edited by Michael E. Brown (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2003), 297.

²³ Telhami, *The Stakes*, 14.

²⁴ Telhami, *The Stakes*, 16.