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The Royal Institute of International Affairs

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Author(s): David Martin Jones and MLR Smith

Source: *The World Today*, Vol. 65, No. 10 (October 2009), pp. 26-28

Published by: Royal Institute of International Affairs

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41548955>

Accessed: 24-07-2018 13:22 UTC

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David Martin Jones, SCHOOL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES, UNIVERSITY OF QUEENSLAND
MLR Smith, PROFESSOR OF STRATEGIC THEORY, DEPARTMENT OF WAR STUDIES, KING'S COLLEGE, LONDON.

COUNTER-INSURGENCY POLITICS Going Global



What motivates Islamic extremism? There can be few more significant questions since the answer helps shape security policy. But the lack of agreement on the key factors weakens domestic and international responses to violent threats.

THE INTRACTABLE PROBLEM OF PACIFYING POST-invasion Iraq and Afghanistan has produced a renaissance in counter-insurgency thinking. Traditionally regarded as a distraction from planning for big war, counter-insurgency has moved centre-stage in contemporary military thought. Classics like T E Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* have been dusted down, while campaigns such as the Malaya emergency have attracted much attention. This renewed military interest achieved its height with the publication of the United States Army/Marines Counterinsurgency Field Manual in 2007.

These developments, however, have not been uncontested. Classical thinking about counter-insurgency emerged from the experience of colonial policing after 1945, as European powers attempted to quell violent uprisings in their more unruly possessions. The traditional assumption, largely reflected in the Field Manual, suggests that an insurgency is something that originates abroad, and stays there. For critics this is anachronistic. They argue that confining counter-insurgency to external states of concern misreads the current situation where transnational connections produce a threat which is simultaneously both local and global.

Critics of classical counter-insurgency like John Mackinlay and David Kilcullen contend that a Maoist concept of insurgency, which assumes a struggle for control of a particular population in a given territorial space, misunderstands what is required today. By contrast, they believe the present global insurgency is not confined geographically, but is instead just that: global.

While praising the US military for abandoning its preoccupation with conventional war fighting, those who identify the conditions of global insurgency maintain that colonial era practice cannot help with transnational threats from de-territorialised jihadist groups.

Global counter-insurgency theory, as it has evolved since 2003, holds that counter-insurgent techniques should be applied on a much wider scale to prevent localised conflicts and jihadi groups – in Afghanistan, Egypt, Indonesia, the Philippines or European capitals – from being absorbed into the Al Qaeda network of global, anti-western, Islamist resistance.

As part of this de-linking process, global counter-insurgency maintains that a post-modernised version of the Malayan campaign can be usefully adapted internationally. Just as the traditional model asserts that addressing popular grievances can undermine local support for insurgencies, global counter-insurgency argues

that this grievance-settling approach can be projected internationally to remedy broader global Islamist discontent.

OPEN TO NEGOTIATION

On the surface, global counter-insurgency appears a more sophisticated policy for our times. Its premises are questionable, however, especially the idea that grievance-settling should be applied transnationally.

In Malaya, the ultimate centre-piece of British 'hearts and minds' policy was the offer of independence. However, projecting this territorially based grievance-settling approach globally is problematic. It implies that all western interests are open to negotiation to drain the transnational swamp of jihadist support. The policy also assumes that Islamist violence possesses degrees of legitimacy and that concessions can assuage it. It further concludes that such concessions would not imperil vital western interests.

Thus, global counter-insurgency evidently calmly contemplates that, for example, troop withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan, pressure on Israel to accept a Hamas brokered settlement for Palestine, or dialogue with Iran over its evolving nuclear capability, are legitimate topics for negotiation. Arguably, while redressing limited grievances may appear feasible at the local level, globally it risks looking like appeasement.

Reinforcing this perspective of counter-insurgency as appeasement, global counter-insurgency thinkers notably discount the role of religious motivation in jihadist activism. They assert instead that other factors like social networks, the psychological make-up of those drawn to jihadism, and patterns of radicalisation, are the essential elements in confronting the transnational threat.

Kilcullen dismisses Islamist ideology as a motivating factor in Islamist violence, arguing that theology 'has little functional relationship with violence'. He contends instead that contemporary threats may be traced to the sociological characteristics of immigrant populations.

From this perspective, global counter-insurgency requires the fine-tuning of public policy to deal with the problem of recruitment and radicalisation. Ultimately, sociology rather than force can, it seems, assuage an apparently monolithic Islamic community in its homelands and abroad.

To dismiss Islamist political religion as peripheral to jihadism is somewhat adventurous – the equivalent of suggesting that Che Guevara or the Red Brigades derived nothing but radical chic from Karl Marx and Mao Zedong.

Yet ideology in either its jihadist or other violent guises provides the inspiration to act. Concentrating on other factors misses the point.

In particular, both classic and contemporary revisionist counter-insurgency theorists are mistaken in viewing counter-insurgency as a technique rather than a strategy that relates operational means to political ends. In this respect, global counter-insurgency thinking conspicuously neglects the idea that war is, in essence, a political condition – the continuation of politics by other means – that involves competing values and ideologies.

This is especially so for the current complex security environment where external interventions – such as the military commitment in Afghanistan – connect directly to basic matters of internal security: the attempt to keep the forces of violent jihadism at bay. Consequently we end up in a much more politically sensitive situation because ideas of national security now relate clearly to struggles over domestic political values as well as foreign policy interests.

PRE-EMPTING PLANS

National security is increasingly politicised and controversial when it intrudes into the domestic sphere. In liberal democracies, internal security sits uneasily with civil liberties, fundamental rights and protection from arbitrary detention. Yet there is little public discussion of the type of national security necessary in an era of transnational anxiety and homegrown terror.

Peter Clarke, Head of Counter-Terrorism for the London Metropolitan Police, observes that counter-terrorist policing, or internal counter-insurgency if you like, has become more difficult as it has become more 'political'. It is more political because it has to pre-empt plots and target an identifiable urban population, while at the same time trying to maintain good community relations in a multicultural society.

It is this political dimension which global counter-insurgency fails to address, finding it easier to focus internally on issues like prisons, urban deprivation and family breakdown as sources of jihadist recruitment, while indulging in vague talk of global hearts and minds and grievance-settling externally. As a result, global counter-insurgency obscures and distorts a more mundane phenomenon: a domestic insurgency arising from the promulgation of a jihadist ideology in the Islamist diaspora.

BATTLE OF WILLS

Islamism's political religion may be global in reach, but its core presents a domestic challenge to the integrity of the modern liberal state. Thus, insurgency may be both global and local, but controlling it demands a state-based response that reasserts national security, and attends to core sovereignty concerns like securing state borders and sustaining an inclusive political identity.

Somewhat ironically, and contrary to the prevailing assumptions in global counter-insurgency thinking, the Maoist approach still applies. The state remains central to its citizens' security, and by providing it, necessarily contributes to the defeat of jihadism globally. We should not assume therefore that we have entered a new, post-Maoist world of global insurgency where state responses are inconsequential. On the contrary, the state remains crucial. For transnational threats will inevitably present themselves domestically and that is where they have to be combated.

In this context, global counter-insurgency distracts attention from the ideological issues that demand confrontation at the domestic level in order to defeat the forces of jihadism globally. Such issues inevitably entail contentious policy choices about how to address social breakdown, the retreat into ideological ghettos and the type of public morality necessary to maintain popular resilience.

Rather than the anodyne remedies of global counter-insurgency, analysts must recognise that insurgency has domestic implications, involving a battle of wills to maintain liberal and pluralistic societies against those who would seek to destroy them.

In any counter-insurgency, just as with politics generally, the most important issue is to understand that there is no end of history, and certainly not a pre-determined liberal one. The global disorder is what it always has been: one of conflict over interests and values. It may be peaceful or violent, but it will always involve struggle.



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