



## **AL QAEDA AND VON CLAUSEWITZ REDISCOVERING THE ART OF WAR**

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Fifteen years after the collapse of the USSR and five years after the attacks of September the 11<sup>th</sup>, the West is still groping for strategic and doctrinal clarity. From its very beginnings in 1947-1949, the basic nature of the Cold War was understood by those who needed to understand it. The doctrinal and strategic issues were settled very early on by the likes of George Kennan, Henry Truman and George Marshall. Their prescriptions for fighting the Cold War, set early by 1949, remained fundamentally unchanged for forty years and eventually brought victory. And this fact is all too easy to forget. Not only did the West win, but we did so in the way that Sun Tsu described as the ultimate form of conquest: victory without fighting. Unfortunately, the lack of a conventional form of victory, such as that at the end of WWII, and all that such a victory entails, allowed us to muddle our way through the following decade with a distinct lack of understanding as to what the world we were living in truly held in store for us and what the purpose of war should be. What were armies for after the collapse of the USSR and Warsaw Pact? Yes, numerous theories were born to help explain the post-Cold War world, from Fukuyama's *End of History*, to Huntington's influential *Clash of Civilizations*, but none of these addressed the fundamental question of what national security now meant and what armies are for in an age of “post-industrial” war.

The challenges were numerous: from how to respond to ethnic cleansing in the backyard of Europe, to the explosion of organised crime and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and related know-how. Yet nothing was done, in any radical sense, to reassess the nature of the threat and match capabilities to challenges. In fact, the first Gulf War simply reinforced core aspects of industrial war and our belief in large-scale fire and manoeuvre warfare. Then after ten years of this malaise and “lurching for the snooze button” September 11<sup>th</sup> (9/11) arrived. Almost immediately after 9/11 members of the Bush White House and the coterie of so-called neoconservative thinkers in and around Washington declared that the geopolitics of the new century were now clear. To quote Charles Krauthammer, al Qaeda and similar forms of Islamist terror posed the new “existential threat” to America and to the West.

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America subsequently declared a Global War on Terrorism, and initiated two militarily forced regime-changes in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet not everyone agrees with the core assessment. There are those who would argue that whilst al Qaeda is a murderous and deadly organisation, it does not pose an overarching threat to the community of Western, democratic nations. To these people, two points must be made. Not only is al Qaeda the most powerful terrorist group of the modern age, killing thousands in a matter of minutes, al Qaeda achieved something that the Soviet Union never did: the mass-murder of Americans (and other nationals) on the soil of the United States, and later Spain and the UK. And yes, whilst this mutation of the Mujahedeen movement of the 1980s does not possess regiments of T-82 tanks or batteries of SS-20 missiles, it is more disturbing than the USSR was in one key respect. For although Khrushchev may have rhetorically promised to “bury us”, he and his Kremlin successors never did in fact take the step against America and its allies of initiating conflict, since he and his administration were fundamentally rational actors constrained and deterred by the thought of nuclear retaliation. Osama bin Laden is wholly different. He has declared repeatedly that he has the intention to use WMD as soon as he can acquire them. Against his ilk deterrence policy has no hold.

#### THE AFTERMATH OF SEPTEMBER 11<sup>TH</sup>

Given how horrific the attacks against Washington, New York and Flight 93 were, it is reasonable to state that America’s post-9/11 sphere of mobility was truly enormous. There are few theoretical response scenarios that would have been out of the question, given the sentiments felt around the world as the televised images of the attacks were broadcast globally again and again. And as the political elite of the nation had declared the threat to be existential, it was reasonable to expect a large-scale response. Given the fact that almost two-thirds of the 9/11 hijackers came from Saudi Arabia, as did bin Laden, and that the highest members of that country’s regime had been known to fund al Qaeda, logically a response targeting Saudi Arabia in some way would have been more than justified. In addition to Saudi Arabia, there was (and is) another obvious candidate. If there is one nation in the world that has undoubtedly sponsored international terrorism from the Middle East to the Balkans over the last twenty plus years, that country is Iran. In fact, the whole development of a modern form of terrorism that is Islamist is rooted in Iran and its theocratic revolution of 1979. Even a most restrictive interpretation of national security should have made the targeting of Iran an obvious choice.

However, instead of addressing these two threats, the Bush administration chose to move first against al Qaeda’s headquarters in Afghanistan. This was also justified, especially in terms of operationally disrupting the organisation’s capabilities and neutralising key figures; and the operation was very successful in doing just that. But to posit that a lasting blow would be struck against Salafist terrorism without cutting off the financial, logistical and ideological support of Saudi Arabia and Iran, was, to say the least, wrongheaded. Instead, the choice was made to invade Iraq and effect regime-change there.

With regard to the invasion of Iraq, one point must be made clear. Whatever one's political leaning and whatever one's attitude to international issues, one fact is incontestable: Saddam Hussein ranks with Joseph Stalin and Pol Pot as one of the most heinous and murderous leaders in of all history: he was and is the only leader in history to use weapons of mass destruction against his own people. He was responsible for the slaughter of Kurds, Iranians and Kuwaitis and for the torture and death of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis.

Despite all this, the case for war against Iraq was badly argued by the administration and badly prepared—or rather, the post war game plan was badly prepared. On the question of how the war was justified, the need to locate Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction should have been understood as totally irrelevant to the justification itself. The facts are incontrovertible: at the end of the Gulf War, Saddam Hussein admitted to Coalition Forces and the United Nations that he had manufactured and stockpiled literally tons of chemical weapons. In refusing to provide proof of their destruction, he was technically in breach of ceasefire for the whole period between 1991 and 2003 and as a result, the use of force was legal. The mistake was in linking his regime with al Qaeda. For whilst one can reasonably make an argument that low level connections existed between the two, these pale by comparison to the organic connection between Saudi Arabia and al Qaeda and the responsibility of Iran in supporting fundamentalist terrorism for decades.

The details of the invasion are quite well known and being evermore precisely detailed. The question for us is what are the consequences of the invasion and the situation that followed. In reality, from the operational point of view, the situation is not that dark, since once again we have witnessed the immeasurable ability of the U.S. fighting man to adapt to new and challenging conditions on the go after having been deployed to theater. The problem is less one of operational flexibility and adaptability than one of perceptions, of the United States having lost its pole position. For during the Cold War, America truly did represent the values that were behind its foreign policy rhetoric. It did not have to convince the oppressed peoples of the Communist block of the veracity of the American dream. That is exactly why the old tools of strategic communication are not relevant today. There is convincing to be done and it has to be done in a completely different cultural milieu. The likes of Karen Hughes and the various plans for alternative Arab radio and TV channels does not take into account the fact that Radio Free Europe and Radio Liberty were broadcast to members of the same cultural and civilizational group as ourselves.

Despite all the talk of how unilateral American foreign policy has damaged relations with Washington's partners in Europe, the truth is far less bleak. If one talks to the professionals, the operators and threat analysts of European agencies it is clear that they share a threat perception very close to that of their American counterparts. It is at the political level that their masters refuse to reflect these judgments and act on them –

usually for domestic reasons - and as a result the tension between Washington and Europe is often an artificial one, self-generated by the political elite of Europe.

Our discussions here today revolve around the question of whether or not the conflict we are currently in is to be understood as a global insurgency and how much prior lessons of counter-insurgency can help us to fight al Qaeda. I would like to echo on this point the significant work done by David Kilcullen of the State Department's Office of the Coordinator for Counter-Terrorism. To paraphrase David, what we are doing today is not exactly counter-insurgency but counter-insurgency is the closest model we have to the situation we are in fact facing. As a result, the principles of counter-insurgency are most useful. Nevertheless we have to understand that we are not limited strictly to a counter-insurgency scenario since al Qaeda is not limited to the nation-state envelop, in other words, it is not interested in changing the political reality in just one country<sup>[2]</sup>, for example, as the Muslim Brotherhood was in Egypt.

Additionally, it is not just simply a question of insurgency and classic counter-insurgency since it is not a fight for legitimacy as is always the case with such conflicts. The United States has already lost the fight of perceptions in this regard thanks to the almost universally immature political environments in the Middle East, Central Asia and elsewhere and thanks also to the thriving influence of conspiracy theories in all those countries where democracy is weak. We are not responsible for the individuals in these countries in the same way as previous governments have been responsible for the people that suffer from the violence of insurgency in their own territory. As a result, legitimacy in the narrow nation-state related political sense is not the goal today as it was in the prior counter-insurgency campaigns that Western nations were involved with in past decades. At the same time, if we look to the official definition of what an insurgency is, we see that in most cases it is said to involve an "organized movement."<sup>[3]</sup> It is not possible to devote adequate space in this paper to a discussion of what exactly al Qaeda is<sup>[4]</sup>, but it is important in relationship to the question of counter-strategies to know what al Qaeda is not.

Al Qaeda It is no longer a unitary organization; it is not - despite what the media would have us believe - a global network; and it is not an ideology in the sense of ideology that we are used to since it is largely informed by religion, which is not something we associate with ideology and because its adherents are far too heterogeneous in the beliefs that they hold; and lastly, it is misleading to portray it as some commentators have as some sort of franchise organization akin to a McDonalds which, no matter where you are, provides you with the same *Big Mac* (to truly be such a franchise it would need a functioning headquarters, a universally accepted end-state for all its members and each unit would have to have exactly the same skill-sets).

Now al Qaeda proper is a tiny minority of a minority which has connected to it several groups around the world who self-associate with the image and rhetoric of al Qaeda but most often as a result of some local and far more limited goal they wish to achieve. This heterogeneous aspect of what we today misleadingly term al Qaeda is important. Let me illustrate this with one brief anecdote. Last year it was pointed out to me by a colonel

from Pakistani military intelligence that the most popular boys' name in his country in the past twelve months was Osama. To this astonishing fact I responded by asking does this mean that bin Laden enjoys the popular support of most Pakistanis? The colonel replied of course not, there is hardly anyone in his country who would in their right mind wish to live in a 'Caliphate' under the leadership of Osama bin Laden. Yet whilst the strategic aims that he espouses and the tools he uses are anathema to them, when bin Laden refers to issues such as the freedom of Palestine or the sanctity of Mecca and Medina, many many Pakistanis find these sentiments to be sympathetic. It is this form of cognitive dissonance that makes our understanding of al Qaeda so difficult and which differentiates it from the unified and centralized ideologies of the past such as Nazism, Fascism and Communism.

What then is the model which will help us to understand and then defeat al Qaeda? I agree with the recent writings of Fred Kagan of the American Enterprise Institute who advises us to compare the al Qaeda of today with the Bolsheviks of the early 1900s prior to the Russian Revolution of 1917<sup>[5]</sup>. I think the analogy is a useful one given the fact that we can reasonably portray Communism as a secular religion instigated by a tiny minority without the support of the millions of people the Bolsheviks said they were acting on behalf of. But instead of comparing al Qaeda with the pre-Revolutionary Bolsheviks, I see it as more informative to understand our enemy as the equivalent of that tiny group of extremists but at a point after 1917, after a failed revolution. totalitarian merchants of political violence who are now in hiding, who enjoy the permissive yet uninformed support of many more, and whose significance or apparent size seems to increase as more and more local actors and groups self-associate with some of their ideas or beliefs.

I have been asked today to discuss the question also of the differences between counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism and how those differences affect our battle with al Qaeda. Now whilst it is true to say an insurgent can use terrorist tactics and vice versa, what I would like to discuss is the difference between the purest forms of both. To begin with, insurgency has as its goal changing the whole regime which it is targeting. By contrast, terrorism, a weapon of weaker or more marginal groups, is most usually targeted towards forcing an alteration in just one element of a regime, in just perhaps one policy. Insurgencies wish to change governments, terrorists more often wish to affect the behaviour of governments.

It may be worthwhile at this point referring to the work of Colin Gray and his understanding of irregular warfare. For Gray, war is most definitely not the same as irregular warfare; but the differences between the two are not critical differences. In other words, warfare is the same in its fundamental aspects whatever its outward guise, whether the conflict is counter-insurgency or inter-bloc thermonuclear war. Both are forms of war. Subsequently it is important to remind ourselves of von Clausewitz's warning—war is simple, but it is not easy. This holds for inter-state war just as much for counter-insurgency or counter-terrorism. Additionally we should remind ourselves that knowledge does not equal operational success. One may have read all the works from Sun-Tsu to von Clausewitz and beyond and internalized all the truths that they contain

but this in no way means that we therefore have the skill or the ability to implement the knowledge we have attained. The gulf between theory and practice in warfare is huge since it is not a hard science and since it concerns the activities, wills and intentions of human beings.

What are the further differences between counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency? It has been pointed out in that past campaigns, after the application of brute military force came the period of winning hearts and minds, yet today, we are in a war for the hearts and souls of the populations concerned. Perhaps this is right. Perhaps our targets are hearts and souls, the souls of the moderate Muslim community. But unlike counter-insurgency, where it really was the task of the government concerned to win over a permissive or disinterested population, today it will not be primarily the job of the West, of the non-Muslim community, to convince Muslims and Arabs everywhere of the evil of bin Laden. It makes little point for a white-skinned Christian to quote the passages of the Koran that forbid terrorism. That is the job of those clerics and Arab leaders who understand that the conflict involves their future as well. Our focus should remain the classic tenet of terrorism: attack both the capability and the motivation of the enemy.

In counter-insurgency it is said that the battle is won when the government demonstrates that it is more capable of providing for the security of its citizens than the insurgent is. This cannot be our goal in this conflict. It is not our job to provide for the security of Muslims and Arabs everywhere. What we can and should do is not declare war on terrorism, which is of course a tactic, but to declare war on individual groups and terrorist leaders and to win over those non-Western allies who already have the ability to work in those cultural areas where our expertise is minimal, who can penetrate fundamentalist networks, those governments that can in fact address issues of legitimacy and bear the political responsibility for the provision of security for their own citizens.

Additionally we need to be realistic about what can be achieved through public diplomacy and information policies as well as understanding exactly who the target audience of such campaigns truly are. The job of the people such as Karen Hughes, when addressing the populations that are potentially in agreement with bin Laden, or who are simply indifferent, should not in the first instance be to make America look good. It is far more urgent to make Osama bin Laden and the killing of innocents look bad. In the past, especially during World War II under the OSS, we were much more clear on how important it is to effectively communicate to the world that the enemy should be understood as an outsider, as someone to be shunned by all. The trouble today is in part a product of bin Laden's ability in the space of a few short years to dominate the agenda of strategic communications and public discourse. If we mention the word 'Caliphate' to a lay person, the first and perhaps only individual who will come to mind is bin Laden, thanks to his persistent information campaign.

On the other hand, if say the word 'democracy' or 'liberty' it is no longer, unfortunately, the United States, a Western leader, or even a vision of the statue of Liberty that comes to mind, but it should be. This can only be achieved by making bin Laden the outlaw and by repositioning America and its allies as the representatives perhaps not of democracy -

with all the cultural specificity that that term entails - but certainly with the concepts of both justice and liberty. We need a valid counter-doctrine to disarm the venomous myths al Qaeda has perpetrated and keeps alive.

What we need today is that very small group of wise men who were prepared to suggest and implement radical ideas at the end of World War II, to arrive at a theory of victory instead of a what we are reduced to relying on today, which is a strategy of tactics.<sup>[6]</sup> We need to not only learn the lessons of prior insurgencies and terrorist campaigns but we need to practice what we have learned from those prior campaigns, most importantly, we need to return to the basics and understand in its marrow the core principle that von Clausewitz left for us. When he discussed the connection between war and politics he did not mean it to be understood as it so often is today, that war is some isolated activity which occurs when politics runs out of options. No. Clausewitz's most famous sentence was nothing more than an illumination of the unity of both activities: while it may be trite to say that politics is war, what the General really meant to emphasize is that war is politics and as such victory will only come if we are clear with regards to what the political goal is we wish to achieve and we will only achieve that goal if all the tools of politics, not just force, are deployed to that end.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup> The whole issue of how concepts of nation-state relate to Arab/Muslim fundamentalism and Pan-Arabism is a crucial aspect in our understanding the evolution and mind-set of actors such as bin Laden. However, this is beyond the scope of the current paper.

<sup>3</sup> See U.S. Dept. of Defense Joint Publication 102.

<sup>4</sup> For more details, see Sebestyén Gorka: "*Al Qaeda's Next Generation*", Jamestown Foundation, Terrorism Monitor, Vol. II, Issue 15, June 29 2004, [http://chechnya.jamestown.org/images/pdf/ter\\_002\\_015.pdf](http://chechnya.jamestown.org/images/pdf/ter_002_015.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> See Fred Kagan: "*The New Bolsheviks: Understanding Al Qaeda*", National Security Outlook, American Enterprise Institute, November 16, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> A phrase used by Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr.: "*The Army and Vietnam*", Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1986.

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