I. Articles

Say Terrorist, Think Insurgent:
Labeling and Analyzing Contemporary Terrorist Actors

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Abstract

Terrorist groups are commonly understood to be groups that carry out acts of terrorism, and their actions viewed as terrorist campaigns. Yet, recent events are a reminder that the activities of even the most violent terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda or the Islamic State extend beyond the use of terrorist tactics. These actors usually employ classic guerrilla tactics as well, and their overall strategy combines both violent and political means. Furthermore, these acts of political violence do not merely constitute isolated campaigns of terrorism, but are usually part of a broader conflict such as an insurgency or civil war. The purpose of the present article is twofold. The first is to offer some empirical evidence in support of our claim that most major contemporary terrorist groups also employ other, non-terrorist, modes of warfare, notably guerrilla tactics. In the second part, we offer our reflections of these findings for theory and policy. Our main recommendation is for governments to adopt an approach that separates the official labeling of these groups from the analysis of their origins, conduct, and threat potential. While official policy statements might continue to label actors involved in terrorism as terrorist groups, we argue that the policy analysis informing these governments' pronouncements and decisions should adopt greater nuance by regarding most of these actors as insurgent groups. Such an approach can help policy analysts adopt and employ a broader array of intellectual tools to understand the complex nature of the threat posed by these groups, and arrive at more adequate, comprehensive, and longer-term solutions to the problems they pose.

Keywords: *terrorism; terrorist groups; guerrilla; insurgency; counterinsurgency.*

Introduction

When does an organization merit the name "terrorist group"? The answer might seem obvious at first: terrorist groups are groups that carry out acts of terrorism. What, however, if that group specializes in forms of political violence other than terrorism and uses terrorism only sporadically? This question has implications beyond theory and seems to apply to an ever growing number of terrorist groups. In the summer of 2014 in the Middle East alone, at least three prominent groups commonly classified as terrorist organizations have been engaged in significant combat operations that posed challenges to their enemies far exceeding the capabilities traditionally ascribed to these types of actors. The Islamic State (formerly known as the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria, or ISIS) has been able to extend its stronghold in Iraq and create an imposing presence over large swaths of territory in both Syria and Iraq, while threatening other neighboring countries such as Jordan. The Lebanese Hizballah, dubbed by some analysts as "among the most skilled light infantry on the planet," [1] continues to amass significant battlefield experience through its ongoing involvement in the Syrian civil war on behalf of the incumbent Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad. Finally, in the Gaza Strip, the militant Islamist group Hamas, which since 2006 is the elected governing party in that territory, has posed formidable challenges to Israeli military forces and civilians using a combination of insurgent tactics.

These trends have applied to other geographic areas and even to the movement perhaps most widely acknowledged as a "terrorist group." As a recent article by jihadism scholar J.M. Berger argued, even Al

Qaeda, broadly defined, conducts terrorism only "on the side." Its primary focus at present is to fight wars and insurgencies.[2]

The above mentioned trends beg a series of questions. To earn the "terrorist" label, do groups have to rely exclusively on terrorist tactics? Might they use a variety of tactics as long as terrorism is the dominant form of violence? What if a group uses terrorism only rarely, when compared to other forms of political violence? Does the "terrorist" label then continue to have merit? If so, when and how should that label be employed? If not, what terms and concepts may be used that more accurately portray the nature of these groups' activities?

The aim of this article is twofold. The first is to provide empirical evidence—based on data drawn from the Global Terrorism Database of the University of Maryland (GTD)—showing that nearly all terrorist groups listed in the GTD database use classic acts of terrorism only part of the time. According to the GTD, between 2002 and 2012 only a single outfit—the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA)—limited its attacks to civilian targets, rendering that group a "terrorist group" in the strictest sense of the word. [3] All other groups aimed their attacks not only at civilians but also at government, police, and military targets—a modus operandi generally associated with guerrilla tactics.[4]

Our second aim is to then reflect on the merits of using the term "terrorist group." Our finding that acts of terrorism constitute only a portion of these groups' overall activities suggests that the common usage of the term "terrorist groups" to describe these actors is, technically speaking, only partially accurate. Such imprecise labeling could even lead to counterproductive policy choices if, by fixating on only one activity in these actors' repertoire, counterterrorism scholars and practitioners de-emphasize or ignore other critical activities of these groups.

While other labels, especially the concept of "insurgent group," offer a technically more accurate description of these groups' activities, this article stops short of calling for the abandonment of the term terrorist groups, for three reasons. First, the authors accept the notion that, once a militant group decides to engage in indiscriminate violence against civilians for political ends, it crosses a certain moral threshold that sets it apart from other groups.[5] Secondly, "naming and shaming" such groups for their brutal and indiscriminate acts of violence can serve the important goal of undermining their ability to obtain popular support. Third, the use of the terrorism moniker to describe these groups can abet the curtailing of financial and material support they receive, and therefore help undermine their capacity to inflict harm.

That said, we believe that concepts drawn from insurgency and counterinsurgency (COIN) theory, and from the study of civil wars, can make significant contributions to the scholarly analysis of terrorism and the groups that utilize this tactic.[6] Closer correspondence and cross-fertilization between terrorism studies, the study of insurgency and counter-insurgency, as well as the literature on civil wars can offer a more lucid and dispassionate conceptualization of these groups; of the full range of their activities; and of the broader context in which they tend to operate. Such an approach, in turn, can improve policies to address the threat posed by these violent non-state actors.

The remainder of this article begins with a review of the existing literature on the relationship between terrorism, guerrilla warfare, and insurgency. We then provide some empirical analysis in support of our claim that the label of "terrorist group" lacks technical accuracy. Next, we discuss the potential harm to policy-making that can result from using the terrorism label as the sole frame of reference to understand the nature of these groups. We conclude that despite the technical inaccuracy of the "terrorist group" label, governments should continue to use the term in their policy pronouncements due to the moral and legal implications that have become associated with this label. At the same time, as far as the policy analysis

informing these pronouncements is concerned, we argue that it is imperative that policy analysts adopt a more nuanced approach in framing this problem set. Adopting concepts and practices from insurgency and counterinsurgency theory—including the term insurgent group as the framework of analysis—serves this goal. Such an approach can help policy analysts adopt and employ a broader array of intellectual tools to understand the complex nature of the threat posed by such groups, and arrive at more adequate, comprehensive, and longer-term solutions to this problem.

The Connectivity between Terrorism, Guerrilla, and Insurgency

The extant scholarship on the definition of terrorism suggests that terrorism is a phenomenon that is distinct from other types of political violence. The distinguishing features include such elements as the targeting of unarmed civilians, the use of extra-normal violence, the desire by the terrorists to instill fear in the target population, or the intent to influence a broader audience beyond the immediate victims of the terrorist attack. [7] Problematically, however, none of these attributions appear to be sufficient for the production of a consistent and clear definition of terrorist groups.

In order to approximate a more precise label, it is necessary first to acknowledge that on the ground, terrorism is usually entrenched in the broader context of violent political conflict. Consequently, a contextualized framework for understanding terrorism is likely to provide a more comprehensive theoretical perspective of the issue and could contribute to more effective policy design.

In particular, discussing the interrelationship between terrorism and insurgency can provide a more detailed picture of actors who utilize different forms of political violence, including terrorism. Common definitions of insurgency describe it as a struggle between a non-ruling group and a ruling government or authority, where the former uses a combination of political and military means to challenge governmental power and legitimacy, while striving to obtain or maintain control over a particular area.[8] Terrorism is usually mentioned as one of the tactics of insurgency, together with propaganda, demonstrations, political mobilization of constituencies, subversion, insurrection, guerrilla warfare, and conventional warfare.[9]

As far as definitions of the actor (terrorist groups/organizations vs. insurgents), as opposed to the action (terrorism vs. insurgency), are concerned, attempts to draw distinctions are generally made on the basis of the following features: Insurgents are usually described as using mixed violent/nonviolent methods; seeking high levels of popular support; enjoying a broader supply of manpower and often a richer resource base; and being capable of controlling territory, among other characteristics. Terrorist groups, in contrast, are said to function in a conspiratorial fashion. They tend to be smaller in size and to employ uncompromising violence. Conventional wisdom holds that the secret nature and small size of terrorist organizations generally prevents them from holding territory, while their focus on extreme violence prevents them from enjoying much popular support.[10] Bruce Hoffman, a leading authority in the field, thus states that terrorists "do not function in the open as armed units, generally do not attempt to seize or hold territory, deliberately avoid engaging enemy military forces in combat, are constrained both numerically and logistically from undertaking concerted mass political mobilization efforts, and exercise no direct control or governance over a populace at either the local or the national level."[11]

Complicating this discussion is the fact that there is no consensus as to which of the various features that characterize either insurgent or terrorist groups prevails. Consequently, a group can simultaneously be categorized as a terrorist group based, for example, on the scale of violence it uses, and as an insurgent group based, for instance, on its ability to capture and hold territory.

Furthermore, some scholars argue that the qualitative differences between terrorist and insurgent actors may be due to uneven access to resources, as opposed to differences by design. Daniel Byman thus argues that the majority of the groups that do not hold territory and lack popular support, yet use terrorism as a tactic, can still be considered proto-insurgencies. These groups, Byman believes, are simply unable to attain the other features of insurgency due to numerical inferiority or lack of resources.[12] Along similar lines, Steven Metz states that "pure" terrorist movements are those that are simply incapable of exploiting the complete strategy of insurgency, so they have to resort to terrorism as a tactic in order to attract attention and galvanize potential supporters.[13]

We may infer from the analysis above that the quest for a comprehensive, thorough, and accurate label for groups utilizing terrorism—one that appreciates its multidimensional nature—requires considerations of the complex realities on the ground. A look at the Al Qaeda network exemplifies this complexity because Al Qaeda—the entity probably most widely regarded as a "terrorist group"—increasingly employs a variety of tactics, terrorist or otherwise. In a widely circulated essay published in February 2014 in *Foreign Policy*, jihadism scholar J.M. Berger argued that the present Al Qaeda movement conducts activities that go beyond acts of terrorism. The current Al Qaeda movement, Berger argued, is more akin to a "wide-ranging fighting movement" involved in numerous insurgencies. To that end, it raises funds while mobilizing local, regional, and foreign fighters in a variety of theaters. To be sure, the movement continues to carry out horrific acts of terrorism, but that effort is "secondary in al-Qaʿida's portfolio." Although terrorism made Al Qaeda what it is today, and continues to matter, "it is no longer the main line of business".[14]

Berger's point is well taken. From Africa across the Middle East and all the way to South Asia, Al Qaeda and its affiliates are busy fighting local regimes. Without a doubt, their self-described jihad features classic terrorist activities—acts of extra-normal violence against civilians or noncombatants in the service of political ends, designed to create fear and thereby influence a broader audience.[15]

"Terrorist groups," however, regularly carry out guerrilla operations as well. Guerrilla attacks typically emphasize extended campaigns of assassination, sabotage, and hit-and-run attacks carried out by small and highly mobile paramilitary units. Like the tactics of terrorism, guerrilla warfare is described in the literature as a "weapon of the weak" designed to harass the enemy and gradually erode his will. Yet where terrorism is in essence an act of psychological warfare used in the hope of turning the targeted population against its own government, guerrilla operations primarily target their enemy's capabilities.[16] Functioning as "small armies," potent guerrilla forces are large and strong enough to seize and hold territory. Moreover, guerrilla tactics differ from terrorist tactics in terms of its main targets. While the prime targets of guerrilla fighters are the enemy's armed forces, police, or support units, as well as general government and economic targets, the targets of terrorist groups are usually understood to be civilians and, at most, noncombatants.[17] As Alex Schmid notes in his magisterial *Handbook of Terrorism Research*, "in the dominant understanding among experts, the victims [of terrorism] are predominantly not members of an armed force."[18]

Whereas terrorist groups have traditionally been considered as distinct from guerrilla organizations, many contemporary militant groups apply both terrorist and guerrilla tactics. As Robert Scales and Douglas Ollivant argue, a growing array of Islamist "terrorists" have turned into "skilled soldiers" who increasingly use a blend of traditional terrorist tactics and modern war-fighting techniques.[19] Contemporary militants continue to use terrorist tactics to intimidate potential supporters and enemies alike, but their modus operandi has evolved into skills that can pose considerable challenges to states and their populations. They now "maneuver in reasonably disciplined formations… and employ mortars and rockets in deadly barrages." They rely on ambushes, roadside bombings, sniper fire, and other tactics that in places such as Iraq and Afghanistan have imposed considerable challenges and losses to U.S. forces. Groups such as the Islamic State,

Hizballah, and Hamas are able to handle second generation weapons such as Russian RPG-29 and possibly wire-guided anti-tank missiles, and build sophisticated underground tunnel systems.[20]

The above trends, which are highlighted by knowledgeable observers, indicate that in recent years a growing number of actors traditionally labeled "terrorist groups" are increasingly relying on a combination of tactics that fall squarely within the predominant understanding of both terrorism and guerrilla tactics.[21] In fact, these groups employ both tactics concurrently, sometimes on the same day.[22] The inescapable conclusion is that for a growing number of such militant groups, the terrorist and guerrilla labels apply equally well; these groups are terrorist and guerrilla actors at one and the same time.

The Targets of "Terrorist" Groups: An Empirical Analysis

In order to examine the extent to which the combined use of terrorist and guerrilla tactics applies to a broader array of contemporary "terrorist groups," the authors conducted an empirical analysis. To that end, we examined one criterion by which to measure the growing crossover of terrorism and guerrilla tactics, namely the choice of targets. Specifically, our analysis examined the targeting choices of groups defined as "terrorist groups" by the Global Terrorism Database of START at the University of Maryland, one of the most extensive and widely employed databases available for the subject under consideration here. The authors examined all groups in the period between 2002 and 2012 that carried out at least six attacks—the minimum required to render the statistical analysis meaningful.[23] 2012 is the last year for which GTD data were available at the time of this writing, and we examined a period of more than ten years because a shorter period would have significantly lowered the number of groups that would have reached the set minimum of 6 attacks. Furthermore, focusing on this time period allows for the analysis of contemporary militant actors, thereby rendering our study more policy relevant. These scope parameters left us with 119 groups to analyze. For each group, we recorded the total number of attacks during that period and examined the distribution of target types, with a focus on attacks against civilians, general and diplomatic government targets, military targets, and attacks against the police.[24] We expected a sizeable portion of the targets of these organizations to be military, government, or police targets—a finding that would lend credence to our hypothesis that terrorist groups use a variety of tactics.

As the following analysis shows, the data strongly suggest that groups labeled terrorist indeed use a combination of guerrilla and terrorist tactics. Nevertheless, due to conceptual inconclusiveness on the one hand, and limitations inherent in the data on the other hand, our empirical analysis is of suggestive nature only. The first problem is conceptual: attacks against government and police targets can be plausibly regarded as either terrorist or guerrilla attacks. The second problem relates to issues inherent in the coding of GTD data. Problematically, the GTD's definition of military targets includes attacks against both combatant and non-combatant military targets, with no possibility of ascertaining whether the military target was struck in a combatant or non-combatant context. Theoretically, therefore, if all military targets hit by a particular organization would be non-combatant targets, our assumption would lack empirical support. In our opinion, however, it is unreasonable to believe that all attacks against military targets carried out by the organizations included in this analysis were attacks against military forces in non-combatant situations. Most importantly, our aim in this article is relatively modest: to cast reasonable doubt on the claim that terrorist groups carry out terrorist attacks only. Hence, we believe that the empirical analysis provides qualified support for this article's claim that terrorism is only a portion—and often a small portion—of these groups' overall activities. [25]

The analysis first focused on data for the universe of groups active in that decade. For these 119 groups,

the average percentage of attacks against civilians is 32% (with a median of 28.6%). As Chart 1 shows, on average civilians are the favored target for these groups, but such attacks account for no more than a third of all attacks. A total of 16% of the attacks were aimed at military targets, 15.3% against government targets, and 13.4% against police targets. When combined, those targets generally considered typical for guerrilla operations—such as military, government, and police targets—are targeted in 44.7% of the cases—a significantly higher figure than that for civilians, the classic target of terrorism.
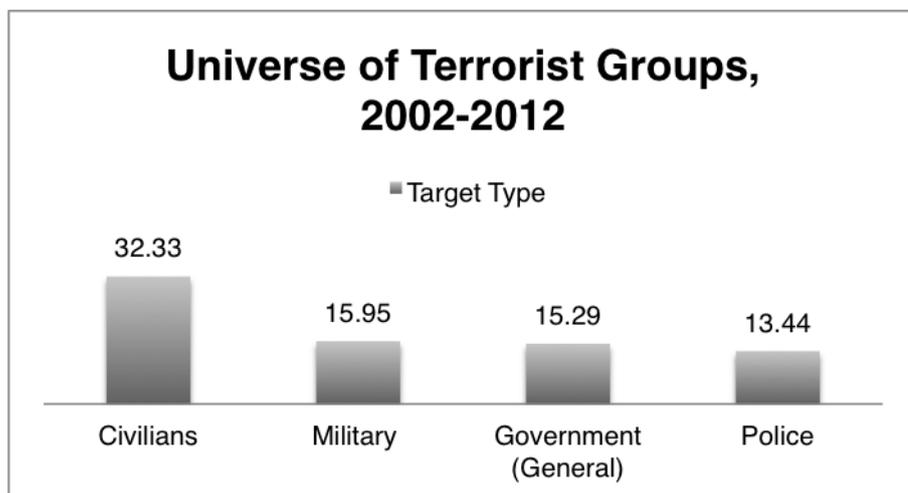

Chart # 1: Average Distribution by Target type, All (Source: GTD)

The analysis then focused on the ten most active jihadist groups of that period.[26] As the empirical analysis indicates, these groups do not appear to rely exclusively on terrorism either, and frequently appear to rely predominantly on guerrilla tactics. Still, the majority (6 out of 10) target civilians more than any other category, although only Lashkar-i-Tayyiba (LeT) does so in more than half of its attacks. Three of these jihadist groups target military targets more than any other, including civilian targets. For example, 45% of AQAP's attacks were aimed at military targets. The GSPC and AQIM also targeted military targets more than any other targets (33.7% and 32.3%, respectively). On average, these ten groups target civilians 30.2% of the time, military targets 21.5%, government targets 13.3%, and police targets 19.2% of the time. The median for these attacks shows a similar tendency. The median for attacks against civilian targets is 28%, for military 18.1%, for government 12.5% and for police targets 20%. Once again, the empirical evidence gathered for the period under review suggests that while civilian targets are the highest on average, non-civilian targets still comprise in total the most attacks with a combined average of 54.4% of the attacks.

While these figures seem to provide empirical support for Berger's hypotheses vis-à-vis Al Qaeda and its cohorts, the authors of the present article expanded the inquiry to non-jihadist groups as well. Of the 10 most active non-jihadist groups in the examined period [27], the authors surprisingly found that they targeted civilians more often, on average, than jihadist groups. Two of the groups, the LRA and the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, do so in more than 50% of their attacks (83.6% and 56.7%, respectively). Two of these groups targeted military targets more than any other targets (New People's Army with 24.6% and the PKK with 33.1%) and one group favored police targets more than any other target (ETA, with 19.6%).
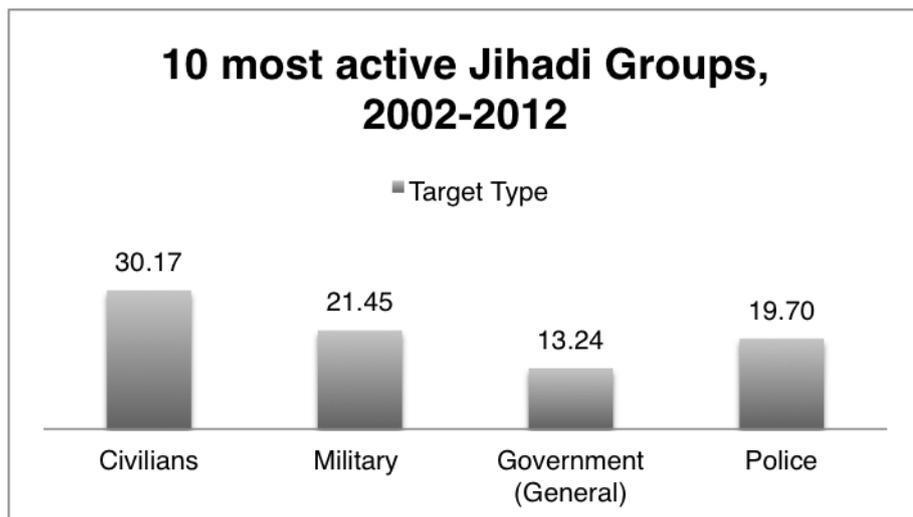
Chart # 2: Average Distribution by Target Type, Jihadi (Source: GTD)

On average, the combined attacks of all groups in this category targeted civilians 38%, military targets 14.2%, government targets 9.8%, and police targets 13.6% of the time.[28] As the data show, non-jihadist movements actually target civilians more than all the other targets combined, with 38% targeting civilians compared to a combined average of 37.7% of all the other targets studied. Nevertheless, it is clear that even in this case, civilians are still targeted less than 50% of the time and that these groups employ terrorist and guerrilla tactics almost evenly.
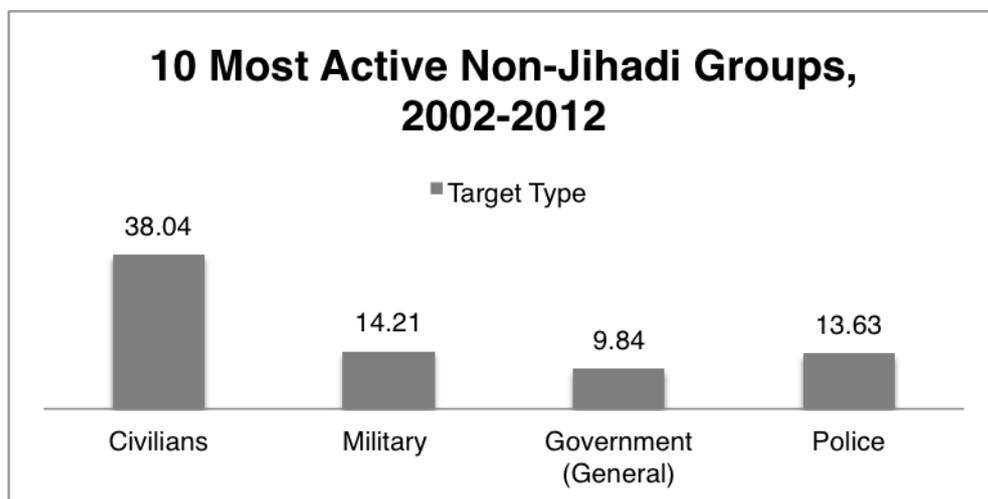

Chart # 3: Average Distribution by Target Type, non-jihadi (Source: GTD)

In conclusion, the empirical evidence strongly suggests that if terrorist attacks are defined as attacks against civilian targets only, the common labeling of these groups as "terrorist groups" is, strictly speaking, only partially accurate. If that is the case, however, what explains the prominence and perseverance of a label that refers to only a portion of a given group's activity?

The widespread use of the "terrorist group" label is likely due to a combination of psychological and instrumental factors. Psychologically, the use of this label provides a certain degree of emotional satisfaction to societies targeted by terrorism. Terrorism evokes repugnance and fear, thereby stoking an unequivocal rejection of terrorism's means and agents alike.[29] Populations have been trained to reject compromise with terrorists, and want to believe that terrorists are unique in their "evilness," therefore deserving a category of

their own. This explains not only why governments and societies targeted by political violence cling to the terrorism label, but also why they often fail to view "terrorism" as part of a broader violent conflict.

Instrumentally, a strong case can be made that "naming and shaming" groups that rely on the most brutal acts of violence can serve a number of goals designed to weaken these actors. Such labels can assist efforts of building an international coalition designed to oppose these groups through legal, political, economic, or militarily efforts. Moreover, repeated emphasis of the most unacceptably violent behavior of such groups can arguably serve the goal of curtailing public support for these groups among their potential constituents. For the purpose of policy pronouncements, therefore, the terrorism label has certain advantages. Despite this value, we argue that policy analysis—including those that directly affect policy formulation and strategic messaging—must adopt a more complex view that better accounts for the evolving nature of terrorist groups and their complex interaction with other tactics and modes of warfare, as well as their interaction with broader conflicts such as insurgency and civil wars.

"Insurgent Groups": The Least Inaccurate Framework for Analysis

The trends emerging out of our data analysis confirm not only our own intuition, but also that of a growing number of other scholars that have begun to appreciate that terrorism is not a sui generis phenomenon. Scholars of terrorism, insurgency, and civil wars increasingly recognize not only that terrorism is a tactic frequently used in conjunction with other tactics, but that these violent tactics are employed as part of a broader spectrum of political activities. Boaz Ganor and Eitan Azani, for example, have developed useful models of "hybrid terrorist organizations" that describe the fact that groups such as Lebanese Hizballah or Hamas engage in terrorism and politics concurrently.[30] Cognizant of the challenges in differentiating between terrorist, insurgent, and rebel groups, scholars in the broader field of conflict studies have adopted alternative terms such as "violent non-state actors" or "armed groups."[31]

We argue that an existing concept, that of the insurgent group, is most useful in describing the predominant contextual realities of terrorism.[32] The concept accounts for the generally observable interplay between violent and nonviolent (i.e., political) means of struggle; for these groups' reliance on either single or multiple tactics; and for the fact that terrorism most often emerges in the context of a broader armed conflict such as civil wars.

The U.S. Army/ U.S. Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual offers a definition of insurgency that synthesizes the dominant view among insurgency and counter-insurgency (COIN) theorists. It describes insurgency as "an organized, protracted politico-military struggle designed to weaken the control and legitimacy of an established government, occupying power, or other political authority while increasing insurgent control."[33] Subversion and armed conflict—the interplay of political and violent means—are the two main ways in which insurgents seek to attain their goals. The concept of insurgency can help overcome the conceptual difficulties regarding the proper labeling of many contemporary militant groups because theorists of insurgency have long argued that insurgents typically rely on several modes of warfare at once. Although theoretically these modes of warfare do not have to include acts of terrorism–insurgents can rely, for example, on a combination of conventional and guerrilla tactics–they almost always do. Ariel Merari, for instance, observed that "whenever possible, insurgents use concurrently a variety of strategies of struggle. Terrorism, which is the easiest form of insurgency, is practically always one of these modes."[34]

Viewing terrorist groups as insurgent groups should not be seen as an attempt to play down the fact that these groups frequently commit acts of indiscriminate violence. Yet it does help place these acts in a broader context of a more complex reality. Based on this understanding, even the most violent groups using the most

despicable tactics are likely to spend some or most of their time and energy doing something other than killing civilians—fighting regular troops and government forces and subverting their enemies by means of propaganda and other political means.

Of course, as the late terrorism scholar Paul Wilkinson noted, "it is possible to engage in acts of terrorism without mounting a full-scale insurgency."[35] Self-standing campaigns of terrorism detached from broader conflicts, however, are becoming increasingly rare, and have always been the exception. According to Wilkinson, historically, acts of terrorism have been used as "part of a wider repertoire of struggle."[36] Recent research on the interplay between terrorism and civil wars—the dominant type of warfare since World War II—confirms the ongoing relevance of Wilkinson's assessment. According to data assembled and analyzed by Michael Findley and Joseph K. Young, most incidents of terrorism "take place in the geographic regions where civil war is occurring and during the ongoing war."[37]

Implications for Theory and Policy

Analyzing the militant actors described above as insurgents while continuing to publicly refer to them as "terrorist groups" will allow governments to enjoy the benefits associated with the use of the terror label while significantly reducing the possible costs of this approach by avoiding some of the blind spots and pitfalls that often accompany the use of the terrorism moniker.

Considering violent, politically motivated groups that commit acts of terrorism within a broader framework of insurgency provides a more comprehensive perspective for the analysis of the goals, the means, and the context of the violent political struggle waged by these groups, with important implications for countering these actors.

Employing the "insurgency" lens, analysts can gain a better appreciation of the goals that the group is trying to attain by carrying out terrorist attacks, but also of the broader political objectives pursued by the group using alternate means. This approach will place terror attacks within the broader strategic framework of insurgency and can help avoid confusion between means (use of uncompromised violence to cause high level of destruction and human casualties) and ends (e.g., challenging governmental authority). In other words, the adoption of "insurgent groups" as an analytical framework can improve a government's ability to recognize that these groups use terrorism as a means to actively try to engage governments in a competition aimed at the redistribution of power.[38]

Adopting the concept of insurgency also sharpens the analysis of the means of struggle in an additional way: It provides an opportunity to analyze the insurgent group in its early developmental stage, and to trace the process by which it adopts particular violent tactics of struggle, including terrorism. Moreover, considering terrorism as one of several possible tactics that insurgent groups can adopt can help governments to reach conclusions regarding the conditions that lead militant groups to choose certain tactics over others.

In terms of context, counterinsurgency studies can shed some light on the influence of political, economic and social conditions on the emergence and development of politically motivated groups that adopt insurgency as a strategy, and terrorism as a tactic to reach their goals. Specifically, embracing the "insurgent group" concept emphasizes that governments and violent, politically motivated non-state actors are engaged in dynamic relationships in the course of which governmental actions influence the patterns of the opponent's political behavior—including his selection of tactics.[39]

Finally, considering the use of terrorism in the context of insurgency provides a clearer picture by considering

the role of other relevant actors that may have an influence on the conflict dynamics, including the local civilian population, armed gangs, oligarchs, clerics, and educational institutions, among others.[40]

Policy Implications

Adopting the framework of "insurgent groups" can shift the analytical focus away from an enemy-centric approach and towards a condition-centric approach. Such a shift is likely to have a tangible impact on policy making by expanding the scope of policy efforts; changing policymakers' assessments of threats and opportunities; and granting more flexibility to governments in following a course of action. These three aspects will be discussed in turn.

On the issue of policy interest, as Metz has argued, American strategic culture has traditionally adopted an enemy-centric orientation. This approach implies that the conflict is caused by malicious challengers, and can be resolved by destroying the adversary's military capabilities and eroding his will to fight. This focus, Metz believes, has substantially complicated all policy aspects regarding counterinsurgency. In particular, the enemy-centric approach has limited the U.S. security community's ability to gauge the threat in a systematic way and to go beyond the perception that the conflict is induced by "evil people,"[41] and not by a broader set of conditions. That view implies that the physical defeat of the enemy is a main goal of operations, while political, social, and cultural aspects of insurgency are placed lower on the list of priorities.

In this respect, considering terrorism within the contextual framework of insurgency can help foresee complications and foster the formulation of governmental strategies in accordance with the complex nature of violent challengers. In particular, seeing terror as a tactic used as part of a broader insurgency requires resources to be allocated to population-centric activities aimed at separating the civilian population from the insurgent group and its infrastructure. This approach will aid the goal of undermining the recruitment networks and reducing the likelihood of new terrorist and other violent attacks.[42]

By conceiving of its opponents as insurgent groups, governments can also widen the scope of their policy efforts. Besides aiming at the tactical defeat of the adversary using military means, the insurgency framework highlights the necessity of simultaneously focusing on reestablishing governmental credibility and gaining popular support in problematic areas. In this regard, addressing the social grievances upon which the insurgents' political agenda is based should move to the top of the policy agenda.[43] In other words, a strong case can be made that counterterrorism efforts should be subordinated to classical COIN concerns of winning the hearts and minds of the local civilians, while marginalizing the violent elements.

As far as the discussion of threats and opportunities is concerned, we argue that considering the rival as an insurgent group can uncover certain threats and opportunities that governments focusing primarily on combating terrorism might otherwise overlook. While terrorism is primarily perceived as a security threat, the threats posed by insurgencies are usually assessed more broadly. Well-organized and sustained insurgencies are considered to pose not only tactical security challenges, but broader strategic challenges such as attempts to undermine governmental legitimacy, power, and authority. Adopting the insurgency framework of analysis will lead policy analysts to better assess the potential strategic challenges posed by these groups, and therefore place certain groups–for example, those seeking to establish an alternative authority in particular areas–more prominently in governmental threat assessments.

Even in cases when the establishment of an actual alternative authority is not a major concern of the insurgents, popular support and mobilization may have significant ramifications for the government's legitimacy and ability to enforce security.[44] By ignoring this strategic aspect of competition, governments

risk finding themselves waging an exhausting struggle to address more urgent, immediate threats, while losing focus on the political developments of their adversaries. At worst, the insurgents may not only control certain territories, but also gain broader public support for their cause in the local and international arena, and successfully delegitimize governmental counterterrorism efforts.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the evolution of Palestinian militant groups into politico-military actors highlight the costs of governmental neglect of the non-kinetic aspects of these groups' activities. Thus, while Israel's focus on battling urgent security threats in the course of the Al-Aqsa Intifada and the subsequent years resulted in a number of tactically successful military engagements, Israel failed to properly trace and manage the political deployment of Palestinian insurgent groups.[45]

In terms of opportunities, regarding an opponent as an insurgent group may broaden the range of governmental means of political influence over the challenger and his support base. Such strategies may include the delegitimization of the opponent's political cause (as opposed to the mere neutralization of the tactical military threat he poses); undermining the channels of legal and financial support to the insurgent; disruption of the enemy's educational networks; or the prevention of insurgent alliance formation with third parties. Alternatively, regarding the other side as an insurgency also provides opportunities for negotiating with moderate members of the group, including applying reassurance strategies for those who are willing to cooperate, and dealing with the provision of goods and services to the local population.[46] In addition, viewing the nature of the terrorist threat through the perspective of "insurgent groups" may help to foresee the possible impact of governmental actions on the nature of politically motivated violence adopted by insurgent groups—and thereby may help to avoid possible counterproductive policies from being enacted. Conceptualizing these groups as terrorist groups, in contrast, is likely to limit the perception of threats and opportunities to "hard security" domains.

Lastly, the increasingly complex nature of the adversary requires a more comprehensive and tailored policy toolkit on the part of governments. Viewing the terrorist threat as one emanating from "terrorist groups" can limit governmental actions to law-enforcement and military efforts. Adopting the "insurgent group" concept for the purpose of analysis, in contrast, broadens governments' flexibility in dealing with these challenges. [47] Such policies can be better used to address broader, but arguably no less important challenges, such as cutting popular support for these groups, reducing calls for revenge among the constituencies, decreasing the salience of the insurgents' political agenda, and ultimately hampering these groups' recruitment and fundraising capabilities.[48] Conceiving of these groups as insurgencies, in other words, can prevent governments from playing into these groups' hands by responding to their attempts of provocation with an overreaction that will ultimately backfire on the government.[49] In addition, conceiving of the enemy as an "insurgent group" will allow governments to apply carefully adjusted strategies to each type of primary and secondary conflict actor in order to reach a long-term sustainable solution.

It is also important to note that seeing terrorism as an insurgency-related phenomenon will require governments to adjust their counterterrorism policies to better handle the cultural peculiarities of insurgencies. For instance, the analysis of religious, ethnic and cultural underpinnings of insurgency may be crucial for formulating efficient policy options vis-à-vis global insurgencies in order to prevent terror attacks by applying deterrence, assurance or de-legitimization strategies.

Conclusion

In sum, the official use by governments of the "terrorist group" label to describe groups adopting terrorism as a tactic continues to be an important element in the struggle against terrorism. It can help delegitimize

the use of terrorist violence; reduce public support; and undercut financial and material support for terrorist entities.

At the same time, the use of this label must not obscure a far more nuanced reality that acknowledges a number of important caveats: First, terrorist groups use, almost without exception, terrorism in conjunction with other tactics, notably guerrilla warfare. Second, terrorist groups are becoming more sophisticated political actors, with some attempting to provide basic services to the population in an attempt to win over hearts and minds. Third, terrorism is rarely a self-standing phenomenon. Instead, most terrorism occurs in the context of broader armed conflict, typically an insurgency and/or a civil war.

We argue that governments should strive to preserve the benefits of applying the terrorism label while avoiding the label's potential entrapments. Perhaps the most dangerous potential pitfall is for governments to fall victim to their own rhetoric. At worst, such a rhetorical entrapment can lead governments to focus on policies designed to address only the specific threat of terrorism posed by these groups. As the above discussion has shown, however, the dangers emanating from these actors are far more variegated. A government policy that not only *labels*, but whose policy analysts also *examine* these actors through the narrow lens of "terrorist groups" loses sight of the overall challenges posed by these groups, thereby failing to enact the most adequate policy responses.

For that reason, we argue for an approach that separates the way in which these militant actors are referred to in official statements from the way in which they are examined by specialists and analysts–including those directly informing the government. Official policy statements, we believe, should continue to label actors involved in terrorism as terrorist groups. At the same time, policy analysis informing the government's policy pronouncements and decisions should adopt greater nuance when examining and conceptualizing these militant groups. We believe that in most cases, these groups are best understood as insurgent groups, and hence propose this label for analytical purposes as the most nuanced framework.

The analytical employment of the "insurgent group" concept can contribute to a deeper theoretical understanding of the power distribution challenge that insurgent groups pose to governments by using terror. In addition, the suggested label can be useful in explaining the adoption of both violent (including terrorism) and nonviolent means of political struggle, based on the present political, economic and social conditions on the ground. Furthermore, utilization of the label "insurgent groups" allows for a more comprehensive perspective on the dynamic relations between politically motivated violent actors that use terrorism as a tactic, governments, and other relevant actors. Finally, in terms of policy, the use of the suggested framework will provide a broader perspective of the insurgents' political development, a better grasp of its network of contacts and supporters, and it may also grant considerable flexibility to policy decision-making.

Theoretically, our conclusions also call for closer intellectual interactions between the terrorism and insurgency studies fields, as well as the study of civil wars. Closer correspondence between these related fields can help shed more light onto the political aspects of the campaigns in which terrorism occurs. There are already a number of promising examples of fruitful interdisciplinary efforts, such as the increasing prominence of "conflict studies" as a field that combines scholarship from the civil wars, social movement, insurgency, terrorism, and other related sub-disciplines; research centers dedicated to international security issues that offer fellowships to conflict scholars from a range of disciplines; or journals such as *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* or *Terrorism and Political Violence* that encourage submissions from terrorism, insurgency, and civil war scholars alike. These efforts are commendable, but disciplinary insularity is still the prevailing norm. Future steps towards intellectual plurality could include government research grants that encourage cross-disciplinary approaches to the study of international conflicts, or international conferences

devoted to the examination of contemporary political violence from multiple disciplinary angles.

Viewing terrorism as a phenomenon closely related to insurgencies and civil wars will allow analysts to pool the insights and best practices from academic fields that have thus far been treated separately. The study of terrorism, insurgency, and civil wars do not only suffer from a disconnect as far as the analysis of their causes are concerned; analyses of how these different phenomena might end are similarly compartmentalized. Insights from the study of the termination of civil wars and insurgencies, for example, are likely to inform future studies of the decline and demise of groups heavily reliant on terrorism, and vice versa.

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Notes

[1] Scales, Robert H., and Douglas Ollivant. "Terrorist Armies Fight Smarter and Deadlier than Ever." *Washington Post* (August 1 2014). http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/terrorist-armies-are-fighting-smarter-and-deadlier-than-ever/2014/08/01/3998ae00-18db-11e4-9e3b-7f2f110c6265_story.html?wpmk=MK0000200 (accessed August 6 2014).

[2] Berger, J. M. "War on Error." *Foreign* Policy (February 5, 2014), http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2014/02/04/war_on_error_al_qaeda terrorism (accessed July 24 2014).

[3] According to the GTD, UNITA carried out six attacks in that period, all against civilian targets.

[4] The targeting of civilians is generally considered a key aspect of terrorism. On this point, see especially Ganor, Boaz. *The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle: A Guide for Decision Makers* Transaction Publishers, 2005, 1-24. Most scholars, however, expand that category of victims to civilians as well as non-combatants. See Schmid, Alex P.(Ed.). *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*. London and New York: Routledge, 2013, 39-157. For a recent discussion of guerrilla tactics targeting primarily government targets and armed forces, see Boot, Max. *Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present*. WW Norton & Company, 2013, xxii-xxiv. For a classic treatment of the topic, see Laqueur, Walter. *Guerrilla Warfare: A Historical and Critical Study*. Transaction Publishers, 1976.

[5] Boaz Ganor, interview with the authors, Herzliya, Israel, 12 February 2014.

[6] See, for example, Khalil, James. "Know Your Enemy: On the Futility of Distinguishing between Terrorists and Insurgents." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 5 (2013): 419-430; and Findley, Michael G., and Joseph K. Young. "Terrorism and civil war: A spatial and temporal approach to a conceptual problem." *Perspectives on* Politics 10, no. 02 (2012): 285-305, 286.

[7] See Schmid, A.P. (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*; Hoffman, Bruce. *Inside Terrorism* Columbia University Press, 2013; on approaches to definition of terrorist groups see Phillips, Brian J. "What is a Terrorist Group? Conceptual Issues and Empirical Implications." *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2014): 1-18; De la Calle, Luis and Ignacio Sanchez-Cuenca. "In Search of the Core of Terrorism." Chap. 3, In *Killing Civilians Or Holding Territory? how to Think about Terrorism*, edited by Victor Asal, Luis De la Calle, Michael Findley and Joseph Young. Vol. 14, 475-497: Wiley Online Library, 2012.

[8] See O'Neill, Bard E., *Insurgency & Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare.* Washington DC: Brassey's, 1990, 13; Kilcullen, David. "Countering Global Insurgency." *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 4 (2005): 597-617; Morris, Michael F. "Al-Qaeda as Insurgency.", U.S. Army War College Carlisle Barracks (2005); Byman, Daniel. "Understanding Proto-Insurgencies." *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 2 (2008): 165-200.

[9] See O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare*, 23-27; Kilcullen, "Countering global insurgency," 603; Metz, Steven. "Rethinking Insurgency." In The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency. Edited by Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn. London: Routledge, 2012, 38.

[10] See Khalil, "Know Your Enemy: On the Futility of Distinguishing between Terrorists and Insurgents." For a traditional description of terrorist groups, see Crenshaw, Martha. "An Organizational Approach to the Analysis of Political Terrorism." *Orbis-a Journal of World Affairs* 29, no. 3 (1985): 465-489; See also Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, Chapter 1.

[11] Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 35.

[12] Byman, "Understanding Proto-Insurgencies," 170.

[13] Metz, "Rethinking Insurgency," 38.

[14] Berger, "War on Error."

[15] Compare the definitions in Schmid, A.P. (Ed). *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research*; and Hoffman, Bruce. *Inside Terrorism, revised and expanded edition*. Columbia University Press, 2006.

[16] For classic doctrinal formulations of guerrilla warfare, see Griffith, Samuel B., and Zedong Mao. *Mao Tse-Tung on Guerrilla Warfare.* Anchor Press, 1978; Che Guevara, Ernesto. *Guerrilla Warfare*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. See also: Taber, Robert. *The War of the Flea: A Study of Guerrilla Warfare Theory and Practice*. London: Paladin, 1970.

[17] For a comparison of terrorism and guerrilla strategies, see O'Neill, Bard E. *Insurgency and Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse*. 2nd ed. Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005; Laqueur, *Guerrilla Warfare*; Boot, *Invisible Armies*; and Merari, Ariel. "Terrorism as a Strategy of Insurgency." *Terrorism and Political Violence* 5, no. 4 (1993): 213-251.

[18] Schmid, Alex P. and Albert J. Jongman. *Political Terrorism. A Research Guide to Concepts, Theories, Databases and Literature*. Amsterdam and New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1988.

[19] Scales and Ollivant, "Terrorist Armies Fight Smarter and Deadlier than Ever."

[20] Scales, Ibid.

[21] Berger, "War on Error."

[22] On 31 December 2012, for example, Al Qaeda in Iraq carried out 16 attacks. Of these, three were directed against government targets, five against police forces, seven against civilians and private property, and one against military forces.

[23] The GTD database distinguishes between a large number of target types, but five of these were of particular significance to this project: civilians, diplomatic, government, military, and police targets. We chose a minimum of six attacks because if a group listed in the GTD database attacked each one of the target types included in the database, setting six attacks as the minimum would ensure that at least one target type was targeted more than the others. A lower cut off point would render the statistical analysis less meaningful.

[24] As stated earlier, the GTD provides information about many other target types. However, these are of less importance to this project. Additionally, we eventually excluded one of the target types—attacks on (diplomatic) government targets—from our charts and the final analysis as this type of target was rarely struck when compared to the other target types; not used by most groups; the category lacked sufficient weight for the empirical analysis.

[25] By using data that was collected, coded and reported by others, we have no control over the quality, validity and reliability of the data. Nonetheless, we find the data reported by the GTD to be valid and reliable enough for the purposes of this analysis.

[26] The most active of the ten groups were the Taliban, with 2,431 attacks between 2002 and 2012. The least active was Lashkar-i-Tayyiba, with 90 attacks. The

other eight groups in that category, in descending order of activity, are Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, Boko Haram, al-Shabab, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), the Salafist Group for Call and Combat (GSPC), and the Islamic State of Iraq (ISI).

[27] In descending order of activity, as measured by numbers of attacks, this category includes the following groups: Communist Party of India (CPI), Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), New People's Army in the Philippines, Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), Hamas, Lord's Resistance Army (LRA), Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, and Basque Fatherland and Freedom (ETA). It is important to mention that for all groups examined in this study, we did not confine the attacks to domestic ones, but considered all attacks, both domestic and international.

[28] The corresponding medians are 36 for civilians, 13.3 for military, 10.9 for government and 14.9 for police.

[29] See, for example, Silke, Andrew. "Cheshire-cat logic: The recurring theme of terrorist abnormality in psychological research." *Psychology, Crime and Law* 4, no. 1 (1998): 51-69.

[30] Boaz Ganor, presentation delivered at the "Terrorism and Governance" conference, Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, 12 February 2014; and Azani, Eitan. "The Hybrid Terrorist Organization: Hezbollah as a Case Study." *Studies in Conflict &* Terrorism 36, no. 11 (2013): 899-916; See also Berti, Benedetta. *Armed Political Organizations: From Conflict to Integration.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013.

[31] We believe that the terms "violent non-state actors" (VNSA) or "armed groups," despite some benefits, are no panacea to the problem of labeling these militant group because they fail to account for terrorism's key characteristic as a form of political violence. Strictly speaking VNSAs or armed groups could be criminal organizations guided purely by greed, with little connection to actors driven by political motives.

[32] We are not the first authors to do so. For similar arguments, see for example Merari, "Terrorism as a Strategy of Insurgency," David Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," and Khalil, "Know your enemy: On the Futility of Distinguishing between Terrorists and Insurgents."

[33] United States. Department of the Army. *The US Army/Marine Corps Counterinsurgency Field Manual: US Army Field Manual No. 3-24: Marine Corps Warfighting* Publication No. 3-33.5. University of Chicago Press, 2007; This definition is similar to the definition in other classic texts on insurgency. Compare, for example., O'Neill*, Terrorism and Insurgency*; Galula, David. *Counter-Insurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. New York: Frederick Praeger, 1964; Nagl, John A. *Learning to eat soup with a knife: counterinsurgency lessons from Malaya and Vietnam*. University of Chicago Press, 2009.

[34] Merari, Ariel. "Terrorism as a Strategy of Insurgency." For a similar view, see also D. Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency."

[35] Wilkinson, Paul. *Terrorism Versus Democracy: The Liberal State Response.* 3rd ed. Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2011, 10.

[36] Wilkinson, Ibid.

[37] Findley and Young, "Terrorism and Civil War," 286.

[38] See O'Neill, *Insurgency & Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare;* D. Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency".

[39] See O'Neill, Bard E. *Insurgency & Terrorism: Inside Modern Revolutionary Warfare*; D.Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency."

[40] Cassidy, Robert M. *Counterinsurgency and the Global War on Terror: Military Culture and Irregular War.* Greenwood Publishing Group, 2006, 13.

[41] Metz, "Rethinking Insurgency," 35.

[42] It is worth noting here that in some cases, "winning the hearts and minds" is not likely to be applicable due to cultural, ethnic and religious reasons. See Galula, *Counter-Insurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*; Fitzsimmons, Michael. "Hard Hearts and Open Minds? Governance, Identity and the Intellectual Foundations of Counterinsurgency Strategy." *The Journal of Strategic Studies* 31, no. 3 (2008): 337-365.

[43] Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," 612.

[44] Kilcullen, David. "Counterinsurgency: The State of Controversial Art." In *The Routledge Handbook of Insurgency and Counterinsurgency.* Edited by Paul B. Rich and Isabelle Duyvesteyn. London: Routledge, 2012, 144.

[45] See Catignani, Sergio. "The Strategic Impasse in Low-Intensity Conflicts: The Gap between Israeli Counter-Insurgency Strategy and Tactics during the Al-Aqsa Intifada." *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, no. 1 (2005): 57-75; and Catignani, Sergio. "The Israel Defense Forces and the Al-Aqsa Intifada: When Tactical Virtuosity Meets Strategic Disappointment." Fiesole FI, Italy: European University Institute (2008).

[46] See, for example, Kruglanski, Arie W., Michele Gelfand, and Rohan Gunaratna. "Detainee Deradicalization: A Challenge for Psychological Science." *APS Observer* 23, (2010): 1-3; De Mesquita, Ethan Bueno. "Conciliation, Counterterrorism, and Patterns of Terrorist Violence." *International Organization* 59, no. 1

(2005): 145-176; Ross, Jeffrey Ian and Ted Robert Gurr. "Why Terrorism Subsides: A Comparative Study of Canada and the United States." *Comparative Politics* (1989): 405-426.

[47] See Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," 605; Boyle, Michael J. "Do Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency Go Together?" *International Affairs* 86, No. 2 (2010), 343.

[48] Byman, Daniel. "Understanding Proto-Insurgencies,"192; On popular backlash see: Boyle, "Do Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency Go Together?", 343.

[49] Kilcullen, David. *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One.* Oxford: University Press, 2009, 30.