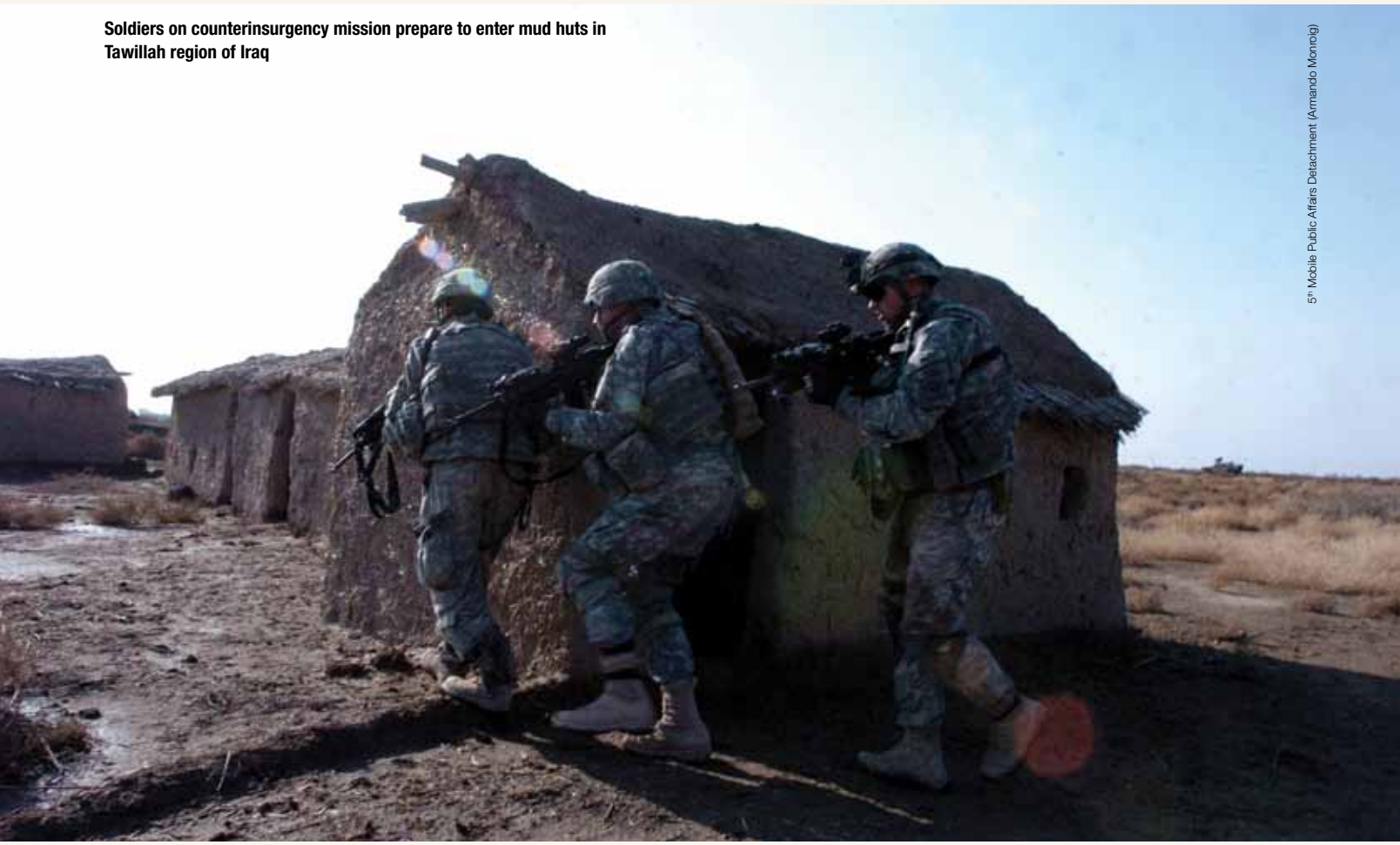
THE DANGERS OF MISTAKING

Coherence for Capability

By MICHAEL W. MOSSER

The purported global insurgency that al Qaeda is claimed to represent is nicely captured by the language of the 2006 *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, which considers radical groups to be united by a fundamentalist ideology, posing a clear and present danger to the Nation. In the words of the strategy, the war on terror is a Manichean struggle of good and evil, a war of opposing philosophies:

From the beginning, the War on Terror has been both a battle of arms and a battle of ideas—a fight against the terrorists and against their murderous ideology. In the short run, the fight involves using military force and other instruments of national power to kill or capture the terrorists; deny them safe haven or control of any nation; prevent them from gaining access to [weapons of mass destruction]; *and cut off their sources of support.*



Soldiers on counterinsurgency mission prepare to enter mud huts in Tawillah region of Iraq

5th Mobile Public Affairs Detachment (Armando Monroig)

In the long run, winning the War on Terror means winning the battle of ideas, for it is ideas that can turn the disenchanted into murderers willing to kill innocent victims.[1]

It is no secret that the war on terror is a war only if we conflate *tactics* with *ideology*.[2] Insofar as the tactics employed by terrorists since time immemorial have been as much psychological as military, this might be acceptable. But is there really a deeper ideology behind those tactics? It is true that armed insurgencies exist in many parts of the world, but are they united in a way that makes them *global*?

This article argues that there is no truly unified global insurgency centered around al Qaeda and that to make a case that there is risks reifying what is only an accidental similarity. The aggregation of localized insurgencies into a global insurgency by both thinkers and practitioners misses a fundamental distinction of the *scope conditions* of insurgency, or the setting in which an insurgency takes place. Put another way, imputing a global nature to a collection of distinct insurgencies adds artificial coherence to what is better seen as a fundamentally incoherent phenomenon.

In support of this argument, the article makes three main points. First, it posits that the United States has fundamentally mischaracterized the nature of the challenge posed by al Qaeda and other "global" insurgencies. Second, it contends that we may be pursuing counterproductive strategies in what was formerly known as the "war on terror." Finally, it asserts that we have an overly simplistic view of the causes of global violence. In a complex, increasingly globalized world in which we are one actor among many, assuming that we are the targets of insurgent violence merely because we exist risks creating a self-fulfilling prophecy via our actions to counter this latent, not overt, threat.

To make this case, it is helpful to draw an analogy from astronomy and the study of asteroids. Scientists have discovered two major categories of asteroid: aggregate (or "gravel pile") and coherent (or "monolithic"). This is not idle science, as many asteroids have the potential to impact the Earth and cause catastrophic damage. Knowing which type of asteroid is on a collision course with Earth will dictate appropriate mitigation or defeat strategies. The question, as it relates to insurgencies, is similar: how do we counter the threat posed to our way of life—to the social system in which we operate?

Much as the mitigation strategy for dealing with Earth-impacting asteroids is determined by their internal consistency, a sound understanding of the internal structure of the insurgency is key to developing an effective response. Fortunately, insurgencies take place on Earth, not out in space. Unfortunately, insurgencies are not easy, or even possible, to fully counter. The best-case scenario may be one of managing rather than solving the insurgency. We may need to see the insurgencies we face as complex puzzles more than as simple problems. To do so, we need to understand the nature of insurgent groups, and of insurgency more generally.

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Coherence versus Incoherence

To what ends and for what purpose are insurgent groups operating? These are the proper questions to ask when attempting to unpack so-called global insurgencies. Together, they comprise a necessary expansion of an overly simplistic question, which is usually phrased along the lines of, "Why do they hate us?" This question presupposes its answer. Worse, it demands a *universal* answer to a phenomenon that is better understood as a series of local events.

A useful example of a fundamental shift in perspective gained by asking the right question in the right way is to examine the case of the Palestinian unrest in Israel's occupied territories. Scholars of the Palestinian intifada (which, directly translated from the Arabic, means "shaking off" rather than its more common translation as "rebellion" or "uprising") note that the uprising against the Israelis is, at its heart, a conflict based on *grievance* rather than one based on *ideology*. As the Palestinians see it, the intifada is an attempt to shake off what the community perceives as the heavy-handed yoke of Israeli occupation. The conflict is thus almost entirely localized rather than globalized.

Hamas, the duly elected government of Gaza, has cleverly acted to leverage Palestinian anger at Israel into support at the polls. For its part, Hizballah in Lebanon has seemingly put aside traditional Sunni/Shia rivalries and collaborated with Hamas in support of its struggle. But by misinterpreting the conflict as a rebellion not only against Israel but also against Western ideology, the United States has made the mistake of *aggregating* grievances from local to global, giving it legitimacy as a foe worthy of fighting. This is not an isolated case, nor is it surprising when put in the context of an intersubjective understanding of the "Other." To justify the scale of the reaction, we must make the Other a vaunted adversary, one with capabilities that, while not equal to ours, nonetheless poses a significant existential risk to our physical security (for example, weapons of mass destruction), our identity, or our way of life.

We see the same universalizing of the problem once we scale the Palestinian case to the alleged global insurgency represented by al Qaeda. Despite the fact that numerous recent authors have identified the fractured nature of the global insurgency that we face, especially with respect to al Qaeda and patterns that might emerge through analysis, the National Security Strategy and the policies and strategies that flow from it continue to link terrorism and insurgency. What is more, robust scholarly attempts to understand al Qaeda and its motivations have proven quite problematic.[3]

For those scholars who see insurgency from a sociological or constructivist point of view, where identities are fluid and intersubjective rather than fixed and objective, the key facet is *mischaracterization*. While it would be naive to suggest that al Qaeda and its ilk are only a problem if we make them one, it is possible that the nature of the problem changes as we impose our particular problemsolving mentality on it. Following from the lessons imputed from constructivism and even from poststructuralism, both of which seemingly deny the presence of objective identity, it may be that our interactions with al Qaeda will change our interpretation of it, and vice versa.

For example, perhaps al Qaeda is truly only an aggregator of local grievances, and that various al Qaeda "franchises" are as much about the redress of perceived local injustice as any globally coherent ideology. A good case of the franchise model providing benefits without cost is al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM). After the end of the Algerian civil war, the state effectively lost its monopoly on internal violence, giving al

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Qaeda an opportunity to exploit the situation and assert control. To this point, the story fits the accepted model of al Qaeda expansion. But it appears the group that became AQIM shares little of the Salafist ideology of the main branch, showing that AQIM may be merely using the al Qaeda "brand" to redress local grievances and has little interest in expanding its activities elsewhere.[4] If the evidence proves this to be the case, then a potentially successful U.S. and allied strategy would be to *disaggregate* the grievances, addressing them from the point of view of local citizens and cutting AQIM out of the grievance cycle.[5]

The "Puzzle/Problem" Split

Insurgencies, at their heart, are social systems.[6] Unlike a physical system, a social system is highly complex. The system continuously interacts with its environment in a series of positive and negative feedback loops. Inputs do not necessarily lead to predictable outputs. Moreover, in a process known to social scientists as *path dependence*, small changes to initial conditions may lead to major changes in outputs.[7]

As opposed to the material coherence of physical systems, insurgencies exhibit varying degrees of *ideological* coherence. If an insurgency is ideologically coherent to the point of rigidity (as is argued is the case with Salafist strains of Islam), its very strength may be used against it. The armed forces of a nation or a coalition can find the center of gravity, apply enough force, and shatter it into pieces to be dealt with more easily. If, on the other hand, the insurgency is ideologically *in*coherent, and only loosely held together by some ideological attractor, the strategy for mitigating the threat becomes less clear. The binding effect of the attractor may be transient, and attacking it may do little to affect the outlying elements. Following the logic of path dependence, an initial misread of the entity may make the effects of early mistakes much harder to counter later on.

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An example of an initial misread that harmed counterinsurgency efforts can be found in the case of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) in Northern Ireland. Because the IRA was as much a social construct as a physical entity, any attempt to counter it had to recognize the degree of factionalism that existed within it. The IRA, as it turned out, was an incoherent insurgency. In effect, the "Irish Republican Army" construct oversimplified the actual dynamics of the insurgency and missed the impact of splinter groups such as the Provisional IRA on the overall peace process. Only when the British government recognized the essential incoherence of the movement and changed tactics to deal with the "legitimate" members of the insurgency and isolate the "illegitimate" members was progress made in the negotiations.[8] This dimension of incoherence within insurgencies is vital to understand. Just as important, however, is the dimension of *systemic* coherence—that is, the degree to which various insurgent groups' grievances transcend the parochial and bind them to other groups. Internally incoherent actors will find it difficult to create systemic coherent movements.

With this in mind, it is clear that the supposed global insurgency faced by the United States and its allies is in fact not one coherent entity, but rather an incoherent agglomeration of grievances held together by nothing more than the most ephemeral ties, in what could be termed "ideological gravity." In this conceptualization, the major insurgent groups the United States claims are united by a single ideological vision are better understood as playing the role of an ideological consolidator. Like massive stellar bodies that gather material around them, these ideological consolidators have a central core of true believers around which can be found a nebulous collection of members with varying commitment levels. Al Qaeda is the most successful of these consolidators, but it is by no means the only one. While al Qaeda has the most global reach of the ideological aggregators, Hamas, Hizballah, Abu Sayeff, and other purportedly Islamist insurgencies all serve the same function on smaller scales. They aggregate the complaints of legitimate domestic pressure groups into a quasi-coherent philosophy, wrapped in a particular ideological vision. This vision is not necessarily beneficial to the groups that the aggregators represent. Indeed, it may not even be factually accurate (or "true," the word on which Western strategic communication fixates). But because no other domestic pressure group has been willing or able to serve as a counterconsolidator to the insurgency, its vision remains preeminent.

Paradoxically, the ability of al Qaeda to serve as a global ideological consolidator is strengthened by the decisionmaking apparatus and mode of thought of its sworn enemy, the United States. In America, as in most modern nation-states, policymakers spend their careers looking for solutions to real or perceived problems. They ask simple questions: How do I solve the problem in front of me? What resources do I need to apply to this problem to arrive at the best possible solution? Contrast that model with the puzzle-solving model favored by scholars. When confronted with the issue of whether there exists a global insurgency, scholars change the "How do I solve the problem in front of me?" question to "Is there a problem? How do we know there is a problem?"

For policymakers, answers to their questions often come in the form of problem-set typologies, heuristics that give them the ability to react more quickly than otherwise would be possible. This is exactly what has happened in the war on terror. The U.S. policy community has mistakenly classified al Qaeda as a highly coherent *and highly capable* actor, one more akin to the Soviet Union or China than to a terrorist entity. Due almost entirely to its spectacular attacks perpetrated on U.S. citizens, al Qaeda's ideological coherence and its capacity have become conflated. This explains why, at a public diplomacy level, the strategy that the United States has tried so far is to engage in counterinformation operations or counterstrategic communications, in effect attempting to show that the "errors" that al Qaeda makes in its interpretation of Islam undermine its message and weaken its legitimacy.

The danger in such a strategy is that, in this case, policymakers' problem-set typology conflates *coherent* with *capable*. We mistake al Qaeda for a monolith, when in fact it is more of a gravel pile. To be sure, its internal coherence is weaker, but there is still some external force keeping the whole assemblage together. In the case of the asteroid, that force is gravity caused by the accumulated mass of the individual pieces of the gravel pile. In the case of al Qaeda, it is the strong psychological defense mechanism of the reaction to oppression. But is that enough? Will a reactive strategy allow the movement to prosper? In other

words, is al Qaeda as *capable* an entity as we believe it to be?

Evidence to the contrary is strong and growing. Apparently, al Qaeda is facing a serious internal split in its reaction to the Barack Obama administration.[9] Even before Obama's election, however, al Qaeda had three fundamental issues. First and foremost is the *distance* from its major enemy, the United States. While undoubtedly there are sleeper cells in developed countries around the world, not least in Western Europe and the United States, the core of al Qaeda leadership remains isolated in the tribal areas of Pakistan. Al Qaeda's own actions have caused it to be forcibly removed from previously friendly (and centrally located) areas such as Sudan and western Iraq. In effect, al Qaeda's lines of communication are stretched thin.

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The second problem, directly related to the first, is *coordination*. With modern means of communication such as the Internet and satellite phones monitored and tracked by superior Western technological means, al Qaeda has to coordinate many of its activities via courier and physical interactions. This leads to serious problems, not only in the tactical sense, but also ideologically, as the actions of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi showed in Iraq in 2006. There, al Qaeda lost tactical and ideological control of its operational commanders. This fact, coupled with increasing realization on the part of erstwhile insurgents that actions taken in the name of al Qaeda were no longer bringing benefits (the franchise model) but only punishment from U.S. forces, tarnished the al Qaeda brand and led to a backlash against the movement by local sheikhs. This loss of ideological control gave the United States and its allies a much-needed opening to enable the Anbar Awakening to flourish.

The third problem al Qaeda faces is *security*, which paradoxically is both harmful and helpful to the movement. Much like the Viet Cong insurgency in Vietnam, al Qaeda confronts a severe security problem in that it does not have the means to go toe-to-toe with traditional national armies. Its forces would be soundly defeated, as was shown in Afghanistan in the few instances where al Qaeda forces mounted a sustained offensive against coalition troops. On the other hand, precisely because al Qaeda cannot fight symmetrically, it can use the power differential to its advantage via public relations and propaganda. But if it is unable to project a coherent message, its advantage is diluted or even lost entirely. Because of these problems, al Qaeda must operate in the spaces and shadows of the international system. It is not a member of the international community, except perhaps in the *negative* sense (much as organized crime syndicates are members, however dysfunctional, of domestic society). These problems, as profound as they are for al Qaeda, are not insurmountable. But they are real, and they are forcing the movement into a defensive posture. In the end, al Qaeda is not as capable as it would like the world to believe.

Despite the evidence that al Qaeda today is both less coherent and less capable than it once was, many U.S. and allied policymakers still see it as just the opposite, as the locus of a universalized insurgency bent on Islamist domination. Clearly, al Qaeda would be easier to defeat were it a monolithic entity such as Nazi Germany or fascist Japan, the last real monolithic enemies we faced. But it is not. It is a gravel pile that may or may not fracture on its own. We cannot ignore it and hope for this fracturing to take place. But we should not attack the right problem with the wrong solutions. Our actions to mitigate the perceived monolithic threat posed by what may turn out to be a less-than-capable ideological aggregator may splinter the insurgency but not dissuade the constituent elements from pursuing separately destructive paths. The actions we take without a clear understanding of the nature of the threat posed to us (or even whether there is a threat) may be creating the reality we wish to avoid. We mistake coherence for capability at our peril. **JFQ**

NOTES

[1] *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2006), section III.

[2] John Lehman, "We're Not Winning This War," *The Washington Post*, August 31, 2006.

[3] See, for instance, Victor Asal, Brian Nussbaum, and D. William Harrington, "Terrorism as Transnational Advocacy: An Organizational and Tactical Examination," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 30, no. 1 (January 2007), 15–39; Victor Asal and Jonathan David Farley, "Breaking Al-Qaeda Cells: A Mathematical Analysis of Counterterrorism Operations (A Guide for Risk Assessment and Decision Making)," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 26, no. 6 (November 2003), 399–411; Bruce Hoffman, "Al-Qaeda, Trends in Terrorism, and Future Potentialities: An Assessment," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 26, no. 6 (November 2003), 429–442; David Martin Jones, Michael L.R. Smith, and Mark Weeding, "Looking for the Pattern: Al-Qaeda in Southeast Asia—The Genealogy of a Terror Network," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 26, no. 6 (November 2003), 443–457; and Xavier Raufer, "Al-Qaeda: A Different Diagnosis," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 26, no. 6 (November 2003), 391–398.

[4] See Jean-Luc Marret, "Al-Qaeda in Islamic Maghreb: A 'Glocal' Organization," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* 31, no. 6 (June 2008), 541–552. This argument admittedly goes against the conventional wisdom. A typical counterargument can be found in David H. Gray and Erik Stockham, "Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb: the evolution from Algerian Islamism to transnational terror," *African Journal of Political Science and International Relations* 2, no. 4 (December 2008), 91–97.

[5] There are a number of issues with this prescription, however. The primary problem, from the point of view of the U.S. security establishment (both civilian and military), is that al Qaeda's aggregation of grievances takes the form of injuring or killing U.S. citizens and troops. The United States does not stand idly by while its citizens or troops suffer at the hands of an enemy, however ill defined. Another major problem is the lack of will on the part of allies (especially those in the region) to adequately address the grievances of their disaffected citizenry.

[6] In his most recent work, Marc Sageman makes the case that al Qaeda is more of a social *network* than a social *system*, but the key point is similar. See Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

[7] See W. Bryan Arthur, *Increasing Returns and Path Dependence in the Economy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007) and *The Nature of Technology: What It Is and How It Evolves* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); and Arthur, Steven Durlauf, and David Lane, eds., *The Economy as an Evolving Complex System II* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997). See also Paul Pierson, *Path Dependence, Increasing Returns, and the Study of Politics* (Cambridge, MA: Center for European Studies, Harvard University, 1997); and Pierson, "Increasing Returns, Path Dependence, and the Study of Politics," *American Political Science Review* 94, no. 2 (2000), 251–267.

[8] See John Clark, "Northern Ireland: A Balanced Approach to Amnesty, Reconciliation, and Reintegration," *Military Review* (January-February 2008), 37–49.

[9] See "The growing, and mysterious, irrelevance of al-Qaeda," *The Economist*, January 26, 2009, available at <www.economist.com/world/international/displaystory.cfm?story_id=12972613>.