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Addressing the Zawahirist Outsurgency

James Q. Roberts

We can debate whether we are at war with Al Qaeda, but rest assured Al Qaeda is at war with us. The targets, methods, diversity, geographic dispersion, and lethality or near lethality of the recent series of Al Qaeda inspired attacks should cause us to reassess the very nature of this conflict.

Attacks in the last few months include a shooting spree by U.S. Army Major Dr. Nidal Hasan, at Fort Hood; an attempted aircraft bombing by Abdulmuttalab, a Nigerian, over Detroit; an axe attack by Muhamed Geele, a Somali, in Denmark; and a precision suicide bombing by Dr. al-Bawali, a Jordanian, in Khost, Afghanistan. Only al-Balawi had ever been to Afghanistan or Pakistan; and he was apparently sent there by the Jordanian intelligence service, perhaps with help or urging by our Central Intelligence Agency.

These events show that Al Qaeda franchisees are operating without need of direction from the corporate headquarters. Al Qaeda today is a flat, dispersed, multi-celled structure which executes on “commander’s intent” not waiting for orders from above. Actors self radicalize, seek out and connect with inspirational figures like Al Aulaqi in Yemen, and execute plots independent of commands from senior leaders.

This paper proposes a change in our approach. It argues that Al Qaeda is conducting an “outsurgency”- similar to, but different from - an insurgency. Furthermore, that this movement is underpinned by virulent and violent Zawahirist ideology, and that containment (as in the context of the Cold War) and counterinsurgency doctrines might be adapted to form the basis of an improved U.S. national strategy to combat Al Qaeda.

Al Qaeda is not just a terrorist group, or a network, or a network of networks. It is the base for a narrow but powerful political, cultural, religious, and military movement. The movement is inspired by an ideology epitomized and propagated by Dr. Ayman al Zawahiri’s version of the role of jihad in modern Islam.

Bin Laden, Zawahiri, and dozens of other Al Qaeda leaders bed down in well documented ungoverned spaces – of the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region, the Maghreb, Yemen, and Somalia. Recruits come to them for inspiration, training and equipment. They are waging a new form of asymmetric war, one to which we have not adapted. Terrorism is just their most convenient and efficient tool, to date.

Strategists should take a page from Sun Tsu. “Know your enemy.” Since 9/11 we have construed Al Qaeda as “terrorists”, first a group, then a network, then a network of networks. We have sought to capture, kill, dismantle, or destroy them. Regrettably, this approach is not working – in fact it may be contributing to their recruiting. Our attacks have certainly led to their dispersal, and the flattening of their organizational structure. The failed Christmas attempt over Detroit shows us that attacks continue.

Zawahiri’s Movement

We need to see this movement for what it is. The movement uses terrorism as a primary tool – because it is effective and efficient – and one of the few current means to bring the fight to American soil (or interests). Terror permits a handful of men to publicly bloody the nose of the great Satan. Such images inspire and attract more recruits, eager to be part of the same glory.

But make no mistake, if they had tanks, they would attack us with tanks, and if they had nuclear weapons they would use them against us, too. Focusing on “terrorism” diverts our attention from the core “ism” underpinning this movement – Zawahirism.

Zawahiri, more than any other Al Qaeda senior, has formulated and preached this doctrine. He is this movement’s lead ideologue, core proponent, and key propagator. By focusing on his ideology, we can address the core of this threat, while differentiating it from the rest of Islam. And such differentiation is crucial, for without it we risk playing right into one the basic planks of his narrative, i.e., that the West is waging war on Islam.

The West needs to start afresh. We should address the movement as an outsurgency - a dispersed, flat, loosely conglomerated series of franchises, and single actors, inspired by an ideology, and enabled by modern media and the Internet.

Al Qaeda is a violent, dangerous, religious/political/military movement with adherents in many corners of the globe. It seeks to grow new organizations, inspire individuals and groups, and spawn new martyrs every day. It uses indirect approaches whenever possible – subversion, double agents, coercion, cooption, propaganda, and criminal activities.

It exploits other illegal, clandestine trafficking networks whenever convenient. It seeks out and moves to hospitable environments continually. It broadcasts 12th Century ideas using 21st Century technologies, such as the Internet, YouTube, My Space, and social networking sites. It proselytizes 24/7/365.

The Outsurgency

What is an “outsurgency?” Similar to an insurgency in its tactics, it focuses on developing followers, even believers, to expand the footprint of its legitimacy by one person or one village at a time. As in an insurgency, its recruits carry out the war; but, the overall goal of the outsurgency is somewhat different.

An insurgency is generally focused on gaining political control over a limited geographic space. One commonality to both is that the in and the outsurgers operate clandestinely in the shadows, like Mao's "fish in the sea." The Zawahirist outsurgency is focused on mobilizing the Ummah to carry out its campaign to reestablish Islam as the major political, religious, and military force in the world.

In pursuit of these goals, the leaders of the outsurgency seek to inspire and mobilize Muslims, where ever they are. The objectives are to expel the Western infidels from Muslim lands and reestablish the Caliphate. Their campaign provides vision, inspiration and hope to Muslims around the globe. At this time, the West, and more importantly moderate Muslim regimes, fail to compete.

The architects of this outsurgency have created a master narrative that has been embraced by aspiring extremists. According to this narrative, the far enemy has attacked and plundered Islamic lands since Napoleon struck into the heart of the Caliphate, with his excursion into Egypt in 1789.

According to their narrative, reestablishing Islam's supremacy is to be accomplished by attacking the near enemy (apostate Muslim regimes that collaborate with the West) and the far enemy (the US, UK, Danish Cartoonists, and other Western Powers). Civilians are legitimate targets, in both near and far enemy camps. Mass casualties are encouraged and celebrated.

Some operations emanate from central leadership nodes. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula provided Abdulmuttalab the tools and training to attack the Northwest Airline flight, after he sought them out. The movement also has become adept at stimulating spontaneous acts by followers – with marginal to no contact from central leadership. Major Hasan at Fort Hood apparently had only sporadic e-mail contact with Al Aulaqi in Yemen. Of course, Al Aulaqi was quick to praise Hasan's action afterwards – it fits the pattern of a true believer, and confirms the narrative.

The outsurgency will continue to accrue recruits as long as the appeal of its ideology rings true. Some adherents are active supporters. Many others are passive, but silently sympathetic, unwilling to provide information or other support to us, the enemies of the movement. A tiny minority become so enflamed with the call to arms that they willingly use themselves as precision guided munitions to attack Islam's enemies.

Men and women are proud to become martyrs for their cause, and are celebrated as heroes by their fellow "soldiers." Al Balawi has been declared a hero by both his wife and his father. Many other potential soldiers applaud their courage in mosques, madrassas, and on the Internet. Young aspiring jihadists watch the attack films with great pride, and the farewell videos, with awe and reverence.

The outsurgency is not terrain dependent. It seeks to gain terrain as a foothold for the reconstruction of the Caliphate, but holding terrain is not crucial to its ability to survive and continue to attack us. If we were to stabilize Afghanistan and Pakistan tomorrow, the outsurgency would merely move to some other ungoverned (e.g., Somalia), under governed (e.g.,

Yemen), or even over governed (e.g., Pakistani neighborhoods on the outskirts of London) safe haven.

The core of the movement is its ideology, not its terrain, its foot soldiers, or even its generals. Left unchecked the ideology will survive long after the current Al Qaeda leaders are dead. Killing Bin Laden and Zawahiri tomorrow would make us feel good – avenging the September 11 attacks. Their deaths would not eliminate the threat, though.

This is not just “The Long War.” It will be a generational, if not centuries’ long fight. We will suffer significant attacks abroad, and more importantly, in the homeland. And Americans are not immune to the ideology.

Carlos Bledsoe (who shot up the Armed Forces Recruiting Station in Little Rock, Arkansas) and Major Hasan (both US citizens) conducted successful operations inside the U.S. Yet we hesitate to define them as part of the same enterprise. It is perhaps too uncomfortable to believe our citizens could turn against us so easily.

The Christmas attempt over Detroit, similar aircraft bombing efforts, and other plots will be repeated for many, many years to come. Our defense has to be lucky every time, our attackers, only once. Sometimes, they will be lucky.

So, if this assessment of our enemy is accurate, what should we do? A broad outline for a new strategy follows.

Develop Bi-Partisan Resilience

We need to recognize that sooner or later attacks will succeed. This recognition must be integrated into our strategy. The American people need to be told now, that our defenses, no matter how dedicated, will be unable to thwart every attack.

Not if, but when, attacks succeed we need to be resilient, and not recriminate. Americans must display strength, and show our attackers that we are in this for the long haul. Showing fear, over reacting, and lashing out play right into the narrative that the Zawahirists espouse. They are terrorizing us – to their pleasure, and I would venture to the bemusement of their senior leaders.

Developing a sense of national resilience will also permit us to stop the current partisan sniping that is perhaps more detrimental to our national identity and defense than the terrorists themselves. The idea that protecting Americans from these threats is a zero defect business is silly and self defeating. We must develop a bi-partisan consensus that sooner or later attacks will succeed.

While our U.S. governments (federal, state, and local) must always do all in their power to prevent attacks, our public and politicians must recognize that some attacks will be successful. When it happens will be a time for strength, not whining – an opportunity to show a united front, and not play the political blame game.

Finally, taking a new approach that recognizes our vulnerabilities and braces our population for attacks will make each attack less traumatic – not to its immediate victims, but to the fabric of our society.

We can choose as a society to stop being “terrorized.” We can stop being surprised by the ferocity and inhumanity of the attacks Zawahirism inspires. We can choose to acknowledge Zawahirists will attack us. Our leaders should stop adamantly claiming to stamp out terror, and simultaneously hoping a successful attack doesn’t come.

Adapt Containment

We should all reread NSC-68. There are many lessons to be taken from the Cold War concept of containment, and reformatted to address this outsurgency. Most important among them is the Cold War’s focus on ideology and how to combat it. The Caliphate is not the Soviet Union, and Zawahiri is not Stalin. But our Cold War strategy sought to contain the spread of a virulent and dangerous ideology, while we waited and pushed for the collapse of Communism from within. The same strategic vision may pertain.

Containment would require a retooling – to focus on a flat, non-state actor outsurgency vice a monolithic state actor regime. But the requirement to undermine and discredit the enemy’s ideology is common to both fights. Of course, one glaring difference is that during the Cold War, our way of life and our economic success were the foundations of the West’s counter narrative.

For the Zawahirist conflict we, the West, cannot develop the counter narrative. We must work with Muslim thought leaders and political/religious elites to encourage and enable them to develop and disseminate the message. Within Islam ours is not a credible voice. So, it is about empowering those who are credible, not messaging about ourselves. Islam must create the counter narrative. Until it does, the fight can’t be joined in a meaningful way.

Enable the New Narrative

Since the West can not develop the narrative on our own, we should design policies that enable Muslims to develop it. Our foreign policy should make it clear that we expect friends and allies in the Muslim world to condemn Zawahirist ideology, propaganda, and attacks. Muslim friends should also stand in support of Islamic thought leaders who seek to marginalize the Al Qaeda brand of Islam.

Our State Department could work with Muslim nations and universities to sponsor events which bring Muslim scholars together in forums to design the narrative. Our policies should seek to encourage education, pluralism, and tolerance across the Muslim world.

We should push hard to get the Saudis to cease the export of Wahabism. The polarizing views it contains may often lay the ground work for future Zawahirist ideology to take root. Instead Saudi Arabia should be playing a constructive role in the development and propagation of the

positive narrative. Achieving this change in Saudi education and behavior should be the focus of a major bi-partisan diplomatic initiative.

The U.S. Agency for International Development should be funded and staffed to sponsor research by Muslims who are willing to explore the components of a new narrative. Whenever possible these events should be co-sponsored by a Muslim research, academic, or religious institution. This would help ensure that products are seen as legitimate in Muslim world circles.

Our goal should be to engender and support a debate within Islam. The desired end-state would be the emergence of a new line of thinking which would condemn Zawahirism, and would counter the Al Qaeda narrative with one which applauds Islam's past, current, and future contributions to a world of peace and opportunity.

Reinvent Counterinsurgency

There are also key components of counterinsurgency doctrine that should be adapted and applied to the counter insurgency effort. Again, we would need to adjust our approach from a geographic focus to countering a global movement. In traditional counterinsurgency the population of the nation at risk is designated "green." The insurgents are "red" and the host nation government is "blue."

Both blue and red conduct activities (political, military, social, economic, informational, legal, etc) inside green, with the goal of convincing green of red or blue's political/social/cultural legitimacy. The theory is that said legitimacy, over time, will draw the great majority of green to one side or the other. This is usually a village by village campaign, for both parties.

To address Zawahirism we must re-designate the actors. Green is the entire Ummah, dispersed globally, yet bound together in its possession of an Islamic identity. Blue would be the leaders and voices within Islam who reject Zawahiri's call to arms against both the near and far enemies. Red is the Al Qaeda movement, the ideology that underpins it, and the narrative that mobilizes its followers. The prize is the allegiance of the Ummah to one of the visions, either red's or blue's.

Red already has a compelling narrative. Blue must develop one. Blue's narrative must provide hope, inspiration, and pride to Muslims from across the Ummah. This is a tall order. Most of the Muslim nations, out of which we expect this message to come, have great challenges in establishing their legitimacy, even among their own populations. Appealing to the dispersed and disenfranchised diaspora of the Ummah will be very difficult, but it must be done.

Build Strategic Patience

As in any counter insurgency campaign patience is a key determinant in a counter insurgency effort. Our foes recognize that our timelines are short. For the Zawahirists time is on their side. They bring an apocalyptic vision to the conflict. It is their religious destiny to be victorious. We will need to develop and maintain a long term and steadfast political solidarity, inside the U.S.,

with allies and partners, and with Muslim leaders inside “blue” to confront this movement over the decades to come.

Attack Leadership

We should continue to attack the leadership of the movement. But, we must recognize this is tactical work. Killing leaders will not end the threat. New leaders invariably step in to continue the fight. Still, surgically killing them does temporarily disrupt the organization and may unravel a current plot.

New leaders will emerge, but keeping them off balance helps our defense. As we conduct this campaign it is crucial that “collateral damage” be avoided. In a counter insurgency, as in a counter insurgency, the goal is to continually decrease the numbers of “irreconcilables” in the enemy camp.

Striking civilian targets when attempting to hit leaders increases the pool of irreconcilables. This can move us farther from, rather than closer to, the strategic goal.

Enable Partners

Another key component of the campaign should be to build partner capacity. Over time we must enable friends to conduct strikes against insurgent leaders and organizations, rather than do so ourselves.

When we conduct the strike, we confirm the Zawahirist narrative that America is attacking the Ummah. When Muslim partner states conduct the strikes, they can state they are affirming their sovereignty, protecting their populations, and acting in their self interests.

Develop New Tools

We have intentionally constructed our society with a wide gap between our authorities for domestic law enforcement and for foreign intelligence. The attacks on 9/11 exploited that seam. In the aftermath of the Christmas bombing attempt we can see that more work is still needed in this area. As long as we see the enemy as “terrorists” our vision is constrained.

On the other hand, addressing Al Qaeda as an insurgency may encourage us to develop new national and international authorities for law enforcement, defense, intelligence, and information mechanisms. We should study how other democratic societies have arranged their tool sets, especially those who have been fighting clandestine political movements for a long time.

Conclusion

America should change its view of this enemy, and implement a new strategy which addresses not terrorism, but the “ism” which mobilizes the enemy. Unless we do, we are condemned to continue on the path of the last eight years. Our current approach has resulted in the Director of

National Intelligence telling us that another significant attack is “virtually certain” within the next six months. It also brought us a very near miss on Christmas day.

Taking a lesson from our counter insurgency campaigns, we should know by now that we can’t shoot our way out of this challenge. Without a change, plots to attack us will continue to flourish, with no end in sight. We can do better.

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These are his personal observations, and do not represent OSD, DoD, or USG policy.

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