Terrorists and Terrorism:
The Cost of a Redundant State Media Strategy

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The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their right names.

-Ancient Chinese Proverb

If you wish to conduct offensive war you must know the men employed by the enemy. Are they wise or stupid, clever or clumsy? Having assessed their qualities, you prepare appropriate measures.

-Sun Tzu

Introduction

Former British PM Margaret Thatcher once said *Democratic nations must try to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend.*

Her choice of terminology reflects the traditional use of State media strategy to maintain popular support by de-legitimizing the causes of insurgent groups. This very strategy was employed by France during the unsuccessful Battle of Algiers, and continues today in the Coalition "War on Terror" despite radical changes in the nature of what many continue to refer to as "terrorism".

The world is in fact in the midst of a *global insurgency,* a worldwide revolutionary war the likes of which it has never before seen. The results of outdated strategy and its inherent terminology are of no small consequence. They range from operational planning problems at the tactical level, to a fundamental misalignment at the strategic level between the "Three Pillars of Counter-Insurgency": Governments, Security Agencies, and Economic actors.[1] Until this misalignment is addressed, it will be impossible to effectively counter global insurgent activity in a sustainable fashion. What is required with respect to both international and domestic matters is therefore nothing short of a wholesale re-think of government media strategy and the very terminology used to describe "terrorists" and "terrorism".

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[1] In present-day Iraq, General Petraeus has altered the terminology used to describe the Iraqi *insurgency* itself and the actors involved. The strategy is based on a holistic approach between security, politics and economics advocated by Dr Kilcullen in his 3 Pillars of Counter-Insurgency paradigm.

The Background to Present-Day "Counter-Terrorism" Media Strategy

Acts of terror had been on the increase well before the "Iron Lady" came to power in Britain in May, 1979. The deaths of Israeli athletes at the hands of Palestinian "terrorists" during the 1972 Munich Olympics brought the phenomena of asymmetrical warfare and armed insurrection to the international arena in a more public fashion than any previous event. Until this point, asymmetrical warfare carried out by armed, militant groups targeting combatants and non-combatants alike had been largely confined to intra-national; such as Algeria, and intra-regional conflicts; such as Israel/Palestine.

The international publicity of the "Munich Massacre" however led to both the global popularisation of the terms "terrorist" and "terrorism"; as well as to the immediate creation of "Counter-Terrorist" (CT) teams. Depending on the nation of origin, these were formed either through the introduction of CT as a core Special Operations Forces (SOF) competency and the formation of hand-picked teams from within existing SOF military units such as Britain's SAS, Australia's SASR, and the US Navy SEALs and SFOD-D; or the creation of Special Police units such as: Germany's GSG 9, Austria's GEK (now EKO Cobra), Italy's GIS, and the GIGN from France.

Only a few years later in 1976, GIGN would successfully liberate 30 schoolchildren held hostage on a bus in Djibouti, Somalia; and with SAS support GSG 9 would successfully eliminate 3 Palestinian "terrorists" in 1977 from a highjacked Lufthansa aircraft in Mogadishu, Somalia- freeing 86 hostages. Despite their significance, both incidents were resolved relatively quietly in terms of the world stage.

In April 1980, just less than a year into Thatcher's leadership however, an Iranian militant group took control of the Iranian Embassy along with 26 hostages at Princes Gate in central London. Despite the until-then deeply covert nature of SAS operations, the British Government actually encouraged the media to attend the siege on the pretence of garnering public support for any SAS action that *might* be required.[2] As a result, hundreds of media personnel were present when the black-clad and gas-masked SAS operators proceeded to eliminate the "terrorists" and liberate the hostages. Operation Nimrod kicked off with many of the operators abseiling down the sides of the building before exploding frame charges against the windows and storming the embassy with their MP5 assault rifles at the ready. To a soundtrack of gunfire and flash-bang discharges, these thrilling images were beamed live to television sets around Britain in a 45-minute newsflash, and shortly thereafter, around the globe. On a tactical level, Operation Nimrod was almost a complete success and would unlikely have gone differently without media involvement.[3]

This was a particularly significant event in light of Thatcher's above-mentioned supposition. If publicity is the oxygen of "terrorism"; Thatchers government pioneered the use of this very same oxygen as a key component of their "counter-terrorism" strategy. A strategy that included: The control of the media agenda; the occupation of the available media space; and the framing of individual media pieces through carefully selected language. The same formula is currently applied to present-day media strategy with respect to countering "terrorism" in any Western nation.

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[2]McNab, Dr. C. 2002. *The SAS Training Manual*, London: Motorbooks International.
3 One hostage was executed by the "terrorists" before the assaulters could reach them

Understanding Agendas, Framing, and the Political Contest Model

Wolfsfeld's political contest model defines the media arena in finite terms, with battles for access occurring between the established elite and any challengers.[4] By occupying this space with images of the SAS during the Prince's Gate siege, the British government, along with many others before and after, have been able to avoid any potential coverage detailing the aims of "terrorists". Manipulation of the media is never carried out solely through occupation however, but through the careful setting of the media agenda.

A media agenda doesn't so much direct us as to *what to think*- that role belongs to *framing*. The media agenda is infinitely more powerful in that it directs us what to think *about*.[5] Whilst the media themselves may set the agenda on many matters, on matters of foreign policy, including military operations, it is widely accepted among media academics that the State sets the agenda. [6] [7]

Once the agenda and its inherent limitations have been set, it is then possible to influence the population through the careful framing of individual stories. It is here that language and terminology come to bear: they are the key components in framing the piece and thereby in influencing the perception of the audience.

What's in a Name?

In order to discuss the perceived advantages of utilising terminology such as "terrorist", "terrorism" and "counter-terrorism" it is interesting to look at their definitions and those of alternative terms. In his seminal work on the topic- *Counter-Insurgency: Theory and Practice*, Galula first defines insurgency by paraphrasing Clausewitz: *Insurgency is the pursuit of the policy of a party, inside a country, by every means.* He then adds his own definition: *a protracted struggle conducted methodically, step by step, in order to attain specific intermediate objectives leading finally to the overthrow of the existing order ...it can no more be predicted than a revolution; its beginnings are so vague that to determine exactly when an insurgency starts is a difficult legal, political, and historical problem.*[8] Galula later defines *acts of terrorism*, whether blind or selective, as simply one of the many tools in the trade of an *insurgent* who is following the shortcut strategy of insurgency- his so-called Bourgeois-Nationalist pattern.

As famously noted by Sir Templer during arguably the most successful counter-insurgency campaign to date- that of Britain in post WW2 Malaya; the burden of seizing objectives and controlling land is actually avoided by insurgents, rather it is

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[4] According to Wolfsfeld, the political process is more likely to have an influence on the news media than the news media are on the political process given that media is a reactionary outlet. Wolfsfeld, Gadi. 1997. *The Media and Political Conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

[5] Lukes' 3 Dimensions of Power paradigm defines agenda setting as the highest form of the three, with the lowest being decision making, and the second being exerting influence over decisions. Lukes, Steven. Power a Radical View. 1975. London: Macmillan.

[6] Protess, L, et al. 1991. 'The Impact of Investigative Reporting on Public Opinion and Policymaking: Targeting Toxic Waste', in Protess, D, McCombs, M, *Agenda Setting: Readings on Media, Public Opinion, and Policymaking*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

[7] Gandy, O, 'Beyond Agenda-Setting', in Protess, D, McCombs, M. 1991. *Agenda Setting: Readings on Media, Public Opinion, and Policymaking*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

[8] Galula, David. 1964. *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. Westport: Praeger (2006)

the *hearts and minds* of the very *population* that become the battlefield. Hence in an insurgency/counter-insurgency (COIN) situation, the key lies in the perceived legitimacy of the challenger compared to that of the authority.

Both insurgency and COIN are however an 80% political endeavour with only 20% military action.[9] Rather than hearts and minds, Galula simply refers to the goal of the authority during any counter-insurgency operation as the submission of the entire population.

Although insurgent, insurgency and COIN are terms that can be well defined, the terms "terrorist" and "terrorism" are not. Schmid and Jongman cited 109 different definitions in their 2005 study; most with little correlation other than mentioning violence and force. Despite this lack of clear definition, these terms are in use far more widely than insurgent, militant or insurgency except in cases relating specifically to foreign military action.[10]

Similarly, no plausible reason exists for the particular phrases- Counter-Terrorism or Counter-Terrorist given that all associated missions are covered under other SOF mission profiles, and could likewise be better defined in those nations where such activities fall under the jurisdiction of federal police units.[11]

The reasons Governments (and the media as a result of Government media strategy) quite deliberately utilise confusing and overly-emotive terminology such as "terrorist" and "terrorism" is simple: Tying the "terrorist" to his/her act prevents any possibility of understanding and thereby de-legitimizes the insurgent group's aims by removing the topic from the agenda completely. Preventing understanding is however, quite the double-edged sword.

Separate the Action from the Person and Know your Enemy

Fisher and Ury quote *separating the action from the person* as the Number 1 rule in negotiation because it ensures that human emotions are removed from the negotiation equation and thereby guarantees that actions and appropriate solutions remain the focus. However, such terms as "terrorist" are used by Governments and media to make it effectively impossible for the population to separate the protagonist from his or her often utterly heinous acts.

This strategy however makes it difficult at best to devise sustainable solutions as it makes understanding the actor her/himself almost impossible. A valid example may be seen in the effects caused by whether one sees a shaheed (martyr) or a suicide-bomber in the carefully framed pieces aired on Western television or in our newspapers regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. To think of the suicide-bomber as nothing more than a deranged lunatic bent on speeding his rendezvous with a few dozen virgins in the afterlife may be convenient if not realistic; however such ignorance is hardly constructive from a strategic perspective. For example, dealing

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[9] Galula, David. 1964. *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*. Westport: Praeger (2006)

[10] Schmid, A & Jongman, A. 2005. *Political Terrorism*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.

[11] SOF mission profiles already include Direct Action (DA), Special Reconnaissance (SR), Unconventional Warfare (UW), Foreign Internal Defence (FID), Psychological Operations (PSYOP), and Civil Affairs (CA) and may also include theatre Search and Rescue (SAR), and Humanitarian Assistance (HA).

with suicide-bombers may be somewhat achievable *tactically*, however long-term solutions are impossible without first investigating the reasons and mindset behind one choosing to commit what one believes to be genuine martyrdom. Only once these reasons, underlying motivations and belief-systems are understood, can effective long-term strategy be devised. Terminology and the resulting perception are therefore the key; both in this instance and the larger issue of "terrorists" and "terrorism".

The importance of terminology was further highlighted in 2004, when ex-CIA Bin Laden Issue station chief, Mike Scheuer cited the key problem facing US and Allied forces with respect to al-Qa'ida as the simple fact that they had been defined as an Islamic *terrorist* organisation rather than as *insurgents*. In September 2002, a full year after the attacks on the Twin Towers, the defence-issues website Stratfor.com stated:

> *Al Quaeda is a globally distributed irregular army waging a low-grade unconventional war. Washington has no clear initial order-of-battle for Al-Quaeda, no measure of disruption caused U.S. counter-measures since Sept. 11, no gauge of the group's regeneration rate, and no reliable account of its casualties.*[12]

Scheuer went on to note that an order-of-battle was still lacking at the time of his book's print in 2004 and put this down to the *law enforcement mentality that infects U.S. conduct in the war on terror*. On al-Ansar.com, al Qa'ida themselves stated publicly in 2004 that *the traditional view of jihad groups would not assist the US and their allies in understanding this new generation.*[13]

To address just this issue, General Petraeus has taken steps regarding terminology used to describe the actors in the current Iraq insurgency. October 2007 Fox news coverage illustrates this shift in terminology regarding *reconciling enemies*- both Sunni and Shi'ite, whilst targeting the *irreconcilables*- foreign extremists including al-Qa'ida. [14]

A clear disconnect between government and military terminology exists however in many nations, both in respect to domestic and foreign matters. This was well illustrated by Ambassador Eric Edelman, US Undersecretary of Defence for Policy in his March 2007 speech delivered in Munich. Speaking on the topic of Afghanistan, Mr. Edelman repeatedly referred to the Taliban as "terrorists" despite the fact that they previously governed the country. He went on to categorically claim that their actions were not legitimate military actions, preferring to label them a *campaign of terror*. [15] Although Mr. Edelman eventually alluded to the merits of a unified approach by referencing the three pillars of counter-insurgency, he actually apologised for using the terms insurgency and counter-insurgency. [16] His own opinion of the term was made obvious through the following statement: *So if I slip during the course of my remarks and say "counterinsurgency," please just pretend that you heard "comprehensive approach*

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[12] Scheuer, Mike. *Imperial Hubris: Why the west is losing the war on terror*. 2004. Dulles: Brassey's, Inc.

[13] Cited by Scheuer, Mike. *Imperial Hubris: Why the west is losing the war on terror*. 2004. Dulles: Brassey's, Inc.

[14] http://www.brightcove.tv/title.jsp?title=1243495016

[15] Edelman, E. Personal Speech. Munich, Germany 27 March, 2007

[16] originally postulated by Kilcullen Kilcullen, Dr. David. 2006. 3 Pillars of Counter-Insurgency.

Conclusion

Current media strategy employed by Western states is based on the antiquated idea that *the masses are asses* and need to be told not only what to think, but what to think about.

At both the tactical and strategic level, current SOF and Special Police units are well-versed in their respective roles, both domestically and internationally. However Galula's theory that COIN is an 80% political and economic endeavour, with only 20% military responsibility, was categorically proven through the British experience with the "hearts and minds" of the Malayan population.

The present lack of unity among Kilcullen's Three Pillars of Counter-Insurgency - the Political, Security and Economic actors therefore rests primarily in the political sphere and can be directly attributed to the inherent terminology of an outmoded State media strategy.

If the nations of the world are to succeed in countering what is truly a *global insurgency*; governments and their respective militaries, domestic security agencies, economic actors and national media, must first unite in with certain areas of the military and a select few academies in abandoning the out-of-date rhetoric of "terrorists", "terrorism" and "counter-terrorism". Rather, we should begin to call things by their right names: *Criminals or organised-criminals* depending on the action and/or presence of an organised network; *insurgents* or *militants* if these perpetrators have political aims; <u>*acts* of terror or terrorism</u> *(*interchangeable*),* but preferably *unconventional warfare*, *asymmetrical warfare*, *insurgency* or acts thereof to describe the phenomenon or an individual act,; and *counter-insurgency* (or its specific components *Direct Action, Special Reconnaissance, Unconventional Warfare, Civil Military Cooperation, or Psychological Operations*) respectively- regardless of if we are speaking about domestic locations or abroad.

Irrespective of the terms chosen, the emphasis of language should be to clinically describe combatants and their acts separately, rather than tying them together.

Once the emotion-laden language has been discarded and the actions of global insurgency have been separated from the people behind them, a true understanding of the enemy and their way of thinking may be possible. Such understanding is vital if appropriate and unified strategy is to be formulated among governments, their security agencies, military forces and economic actors. It is however, vital to the support of the global population.

Without their hearts and minds for the long term, countering a global insurgency in a sustainable manner will be impossible.