Insurgent vs terrorist

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The Accidental Guerrilla
Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One
By David Kilcullen
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In 2006, staff members from the US embassy, working on a road and hydroelectricity project in the Kummar Valley in Pakistan, not far from Tora Bora, were accosted by 40 Pashtu tribesmen, wearing vests laden with grenades, and four foreigners, possibly Arabs or Chechens, who looked hostile and said nothing. If the team didn't leave, the tribesmen warned, "we will kill you." Two days later, the Pakistani army responded with a two-battalion sweep of the area. They found nothing and returned to their bases. Left unprotected, the Americans departed, with the road project still on the drawing board.

According to David Kilcullen, a former Australian army officer who has served as senior counterinsurgency adviser to Gen. David Petraeus in Iraq and as chief counterterrorism strategist for the US State Department, the incident underscores the challenges of fighting small wars as part of the global "war on terrorism."

Drawing on his experiences in Iraq, Afghanistan, East Timor, Thailand and Pakistan, Kilcullen lays out a clear and compelling (if by now somewhat familiar) case for applying a 21st-century counterinsurgency strategy to conflicts in traditional societies that are partially sustained by transnational extremist groups. Where counterterrorism focuses on destroying the enemy, counterinsurgency builds relationships of trust (if not affection) with the local population.

The vast majority of insurgents, Kilcullen claims, are not jihadists. They are "accidental guerrillas," with limited aims and some legitimate grievances, fighting because they oppose forces of occupation or because they're afraid that they'll be killed by the terrorists in their neighborhood if they don't. The US, alas, has often lumped them together with ideologically-driven members of a worldwide network, who seek to bleed the "Great Satan" dry and provoke actions that will alienate millions of Muslims.

Counterinsurgents, then, should act globally and locally. They should use "soft power" to discredit the propaganda of global terrorists, disrupt their financial networks, destroy their cells and provide credible and legitimate initiatives to address festering problems, including the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. And the military should work closely with the local forces to convince at-risk populations to reject co-optation or intimidation.

Kilcullen maintains that the US invasion of Iraq was an "extremely serious strategic error" that generated an "accidental guerrilla syndrome run riot." With the Shi'ite-dominated government complicit in sectarian mayhem and murder, some Sunnis embraced an alliance with al-Qaida as the least worst option.
More than the surge, Kilcullen suggests, counterinsurgency has restored some semblance of stability to Iraq. Supplied by the Americans with food, fuel, weapons, logistical support and cash, tribal sheikhs organized neighborhood watch organizations and assumed authority over detention and amnesty. In Anbar Province and elsewhere levels of violence dropped dramatically. Al-Qaida is Iraq has been routed.

Kilcullen acknowledges the very real possibility that the process might produce armed Sunni groups outside the government's control, poised to resume a civil war as soon as American soldiers withdraw. Nonetheless he remains optimistic, perhaps excessively so. An armed Sunni population, he suggests, might create a balance of power in the country, deterring Shi'ite extremists. And the center of Iraqi politics might be expanded, he asserts rather abstractly, if former insurgents get no weapons until they link local institutions to the central government and forswear human rights abuses, and programs are developed about how and when to disarm, demobilize and reintegrate them into Iraqi society.

A similar approach, Kilcullen indicates, might succeed in Afghanistan as well. He attributes the Taliban's resurgence to Western inattention and ineptitude and not sympathy with Mullah Omar's precepts and policies. Coalition forces should help build a more legitimate and effective central government, disrupt insurgent safe havens in Pakistan, diminish drug trafficking and provide security for civilians. And they should work with tribal leaders to separate reconcilables from irreconcilables.

In the 21st century, Kilcullen asserts, provocatively and persuasively, the "doctrine" associated with Gen. Colin Powell has become obsolete. More often than not, deploying massive military force will not resolve sociopolitical problems. Nor is it feasible to design a plausible - and rapid - exit strategy. In fact, large-scale, high-profile invasions play into the terrorists' exhausted and bankrupt strategy, produce accidental guerrillas and jihadist recruits and undermine the authority of the affected government.

The US and other powerful nations should instead select "the least intrusive form of intervention" that will produce the desired result. An effective "war on terror," Kilcullen concludes, might allocate 80 percent of available resources to political, diplomatic, development, intelligence and information activity and only 20% to the military. Whether we choose to recognize it or not, he writes, "we are at the beginning of a very long road." One that will require fresh thinking, patience, proficiency and perseverance.

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