

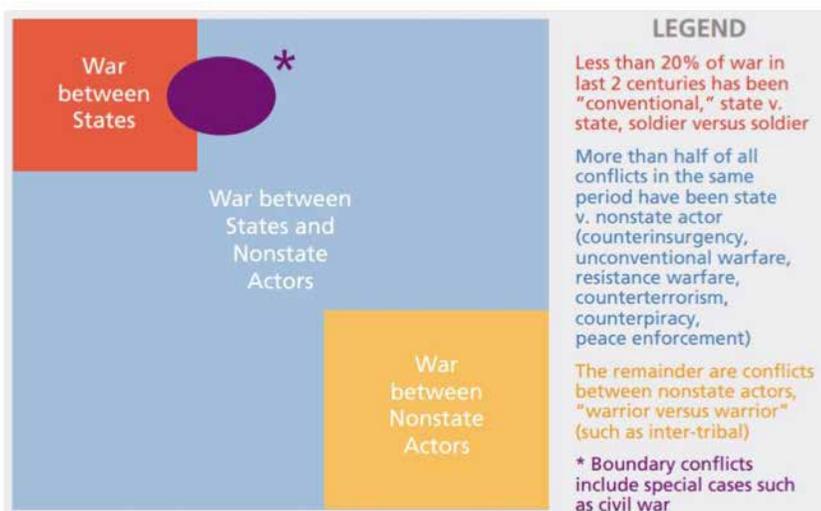
Adapting to Today's Battlefield: The Islamic State and Irregular War as the "New Normal"

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Clausewitz was, of course, correct: the first responsibility of any commander is to understand the nature of the war he is about to engage in. What is the reality of America's wars today, and how must we prepare for the future? How does the war with the Islamic State (IS) change our understanding of today's threats and those of tomorrow?

The Correlates of War Project at the Pennsylvania State University contains data from every war since the Napoleonic wars of 1815, to include Operation *Enduring Freedom* (OEF) and Operation *Iraqi Freedom* (OIF), and operations against IS today. David Kilcullen and I used this database for an article on America's experience of war in the post-9/11 world, to categorize the nature of war, and see how it has changed over the last two centuries.¹ The database declares any conflict in which there have been more than 1,000 casualties to be a "war;" as such, the dataset contains 460 wars in the last 200 years. We divided these wars into two categories: conventional war, characterized by state-on-state violence, versus irregular warfare or unconventional warfare, where at least one of the actors was a nonstate entity.

Figure 16.1. Typology of Conflict: The Reality of War



The findings from our research (see Figure 16.1) shatter the common perspective of conflict in the 21st century. According to the empirical data, less than 20 percent of all wars, according to the Correlates of War Project, have been state-on-state, or what is deemed “conventional,” such as World Wars I and II or Iran/Iraq, in which regular military units fought the regular military units of another nation or nations.

More than 80 percent of all wars since Napoleon—380 out of 460—fall into the “irregular” domain. The largest category of conflict in the last 200 years consists of instances where regular forces of one nation were fighting nonstate threat groups. This pattern is not driven purely by recent military endeavors, as both the U.S. Marines fighting the Barbary pirates off the shores of Tripoli over two centuries ago and Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC) elements today fighting against the Islamic State in Iraq or Syria are examples of such conflicts.

What that means is that the labels used inside the Pentagon, for doctrine and for analysis of the threat, are all diametrically opposed to reality on the battlefield. This prevents the United States from accurately assessing the threats we face and determining how best to defeat them. What we call “conventional” warfare should be considered anomalous given the relative scarcity of these conflicts throughout history. What we call “irregular warfare” (IW), which has been relegated to the purview of Fort Bragg and other special units, is really what war is all about. War is most often messy and nasty, without easily identified front lines. As a nation, we must admit sooner rather than later, that in the last 15 years, OEF and OIF are not the exceptions, but the rule and that “irregular war is war.”

As a nation, we must move beyond outdated and Clausewitzian understandings of war as solely a functional operation of the nation-state. This is not to denigrate the Prussian’s genius. However, his description of war as a continuation of politics by other means was an idealized description of state-on-state war and as such is fit fine for describing and understanding World War II or the Gulf War, but definitively lacking when we face groups that are not motivated by politics as we understand them, like al-Qaeda or IS. Whether fighting Shaka Zulu in Africa in the 19th century, the Taliban in Afghanistan, or IS today, our adversaries do not play by the Clausewitzian rule book. His concepts of friction and fog still apply, but the idea that our enemies make rational cost-benefit analyses about the reasons for going to war in ways that serve the *raison d’etat* really does not apply in the irregular domain, especially one in which our main enemy is transcendently and apocalyptically motivated.

The primary conclusion that follows from this realization is that we must go beyond Westphalian and Clausewitzian understandings of war as they apply to the most prevalent form of armed conflict, which is undeniably what has been called “irregular.” This demands adaptation not only for our armed services and our warfighters, but also for the way we think as a nation about war itself—what its purpose is and how our enemies will attempt to achieve their objectives in “unconventional” ways.

A secondary, and related conclusion, is that the defense community must help redefine IW as a core strategic function, not just an operational, tactical mission. To quote

the former deputy director of Special Operations from the Pentagon, Major General Mike Nagata, all too often, the decisionmakers in D.C. look at our indirect options and at our special forces capabilities as the “easy button.”² When a crisis strikes, our policymakers often default to an attitude of “Call Bragg, call Virginia Beach, and they’ll sort it out.” This is an utterly astrategic understanding of IW. Special Operations and Special Forces assets are, by their very nature, small-footprint investments that are meant to return strategic effects. Using them as a tactical hammer in an endless cycle of “whack-a-mole” denies the actual nature and purpose of such assets. It is our duty as national security professionals to convince the policymakers that “irregular war is war,” and that our Special Forces and Special Operations units need to be understood as strategic assets rather than as a “quick fix” application for brush fires that break out in distant parts of the world.

The third significant conclusion from my research is that while America has, in the last 15 years, demonstrated that we are peerless in our capacity to apply kinetic force on target, the truth is that the victory in this current conflict will not come exclusively, or even primarily, through the use of force or kinetic solutions. It will come from identifying threats before they appear kinetically and deterring their full expression, neutralizing them in other indirect and unconventional ways, most especially in the counter-ideological domain.

That is not to say that applying violence to groups like IS is pointless. If we are relentlessly targeting their leaders, it makes it hard for them to think and act strategically. But counting Reaper hits against jihadi high-value targets is just as bad a metric of victory today as counting Viet Cong body bags was during the Vietnam War. Nonkinetic metrics will be the ultimate expression of victory in the sorts of conflicts that we face now and in the future. This does not mean that “Jobs for Jihadis,” other programs focused on economic solutions, or nation-building are the solution.³ Only a counter-ideological campaign will lead to ultimate victory. Along with our Sunni allies, we have to take down the ideology of global jihadism that has become far too appealing today, from the streets of Paris to Mosul, from Brussels to our very own San Bernardino. We have to undermine the ideology of jihadism just as we did with Communism during the Cold War.⁴ Unfortunately, the bad news is that, in the last 15 years, the United States has not even begun to scratch the surface of the counter-ideological campaign for various reasons that can be the subject of another study.⁵

How Our New Enemy is Different and What This Means for the Prosecution of Future War

IS is much, much more dangerous than al-Qaeda for four major reasons, and these have severe ramifications for how America should wage war today and what it has to do to defeat similar enemies in the future.

Firstly, IS is the world’s first transnational and multiregional insurgency, as opposed to al-Qaeda, which was just an international terrorist group. After 9/11, al-Qaeda only really functioned as a terrorist organization. In those theaters where there was an insurgency, al-Qaeda was actually a parasitic organization that attached itself to a preexisting insurgent force. Whether in Somalia, where it attached itself to al-Shabaab, or in Afghanistan, where

al-Qaeda very deftly wormed its way into the Taliban and piggybacked its structure on top of the preexisting entity. Al-Qaeda never generated its own mass base of support, which is the mark of a true insurgency. Even where it supported insurgencies, al-Qaeda never generated its own cadre to populate a local insurgency. And, of course, the one key metric separating an insurgency from a terrorist organization is that an insurgency holds territory in daylight, thanks to the mass base of support it has successfully recruited.

IS, in contrast to al-Qaeda, is a full-fledged insurgency which has not had to exploit anybody else or piggyback on top of another indigenous fighting force to establish itself as such. Under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, IS has generated its own cadre, its own mass base of support across a number of countries. In fact, it has recruited tens of thousands of fighters.

Another crucial difference is that IS is a transnational insurgency. Every insurgency in modern history that was successful had some kind of international context, whether it was armed from the outside or had a place to rest and reorganize external to the battlefield. The international lines of effort for insurgencies are well-founded, but IS is not just international—it is transnational and multiregional.

Every insurgency of any merit in the last century, whether it was Mao in China or the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), had, as its strategic objective, the removal of the local government. Their strategic end state was always the same: capturing one nation-state's polity. IS is different; it is not interested in just capturing one nation's government and replacing it. It is interested in a global caliphate. Right now, IS holds territory in multiple countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), including Iraq, Syria, and Libya, and has affiliates in another dozen countries. Not only that, it now has a fully integrated affiliate in West Africa since Boko Haram's pledge of *bayat* was accepted by Baghdadi, after which Boko Haram actually changed its name to "The West Africa Province of the Islamic State."

We have never seen in modern insurgent history a threat group that not only spans several nations in one region, but also has a significant presence in multiple regions. That, by itself, makes IS more important and much more dangerous than al-Qaeda ever was, and more importantly, than previous insurgencies or sundry irregular threats.

Moving beyond the unique qualities of the IS insurgency, the second metric is, very simply, wealth. As Jessica Stern documents in her contribution to this book, IS is the richest threat group of its kind in human history. The illicit oil sales through Turkey, the racketeering and kidnapping monies that are being raised by the new Caliphate, and even the sale of antiquities on the black market generated \$500 million for IS in 2014. Even without these sources of funding, the group would still be incredibly wealthy. In the past three years, IS raided the Iraqi National Bank twice, netting \$823 million in cash from the raids. To put that sort of financial power into perspective, consider that the 9/11 Commission Report estimated that al-Qaeda paid \$500,000 to execute their 2001 attacks—the most destructive terrorist attack in our country's history.⁶ That means that just from those two raids, IS netted enough to finance 1,600 attacks of the scale we experienced in September 2001. Of course, it will first have to consolidate its hold over the territory it

has declared as the “New Caliphate” before it could consider sending sizeable teams to the United States to execute more attacks akin to 9/11, the Boston Bombing, or the San Bernardino massacre, but it has all the prerequisites: manpower, money, and the necessary skill sets.

Thirdly, and most obvious of all, comes their recruiting capability. The idea that IS—without piggybacking onto any other preexisting insurgent organization, has recruited at least 35,000 Syrians and Iraqis, and in the first 9 months of its renewed operations in Iraq, recruited more than 19,000 foreign fighters—is staggering. The United Nations’ own estimate is that in the first year of renewed operations IS recruited 22,000 foreign fighters, including British, Americans, and Germans. To put that into perspective, before it became al-Qaeda in the 1980s, its predecessor was run by Abdullah Azzam under the name “The Arab Services Bureau for Mujahidin” (or the MAK in Arabic). For the whole decade of the Afghan War, from 1979 to 1989, the MAK recruited just 55,000 foreign fighters—IS has recruited 22,000 foreign fighters in just 12 months. IS’s ability to attract supporters is what really makes al-Qaeda the “JV team,” to use an analogy that President Obama most erroneously applied to IS.

The fourth and final metric is the one we really do not discuss adequately or fully understand within government circles: how IS has used religion to recruit and mobilize insurgents and terrorists in the Middle East, America, and elsewhere.

American policymakers still struggle to understand the strategic and tactical implications of Baghdadi climbing up to the pulpit of the Grand Mosque in Mosul in June 2014, dressed in the cloak of the religious authorities of Islam, declaring the reestablishment of the Caliphate, the theocratic empire of Islam, and declaring himself the new Caliph after nine decades of absence of the empire. The putative legitimacy of these claims is what makes the now “Islamic State” much more dangerous than any jihadi group we have seen in recent years.

Here we have to remember that the Caliphate is not just some idea of crazed extremists hiding out in remote parts of Central or South Asia; it was a real entity. The theocratic empire of Islam existed for more than a thousand years; first headquartered in Mecca, then in Damascus, then in Baghdad. And most importantly, less than a hundred years ago, the Caliphate still existed, though it was headquartered in Istanbul and run by Turks and not Arabs. The Ottoman Empire was the last formal version of the Caliphate, but was dissolved by then President Mustafa Kemal Atatürk after World War I, as he established and secularized the new Turkish Republic. When he formally dissolved the theocratic empire of Islam and “retired” the last Caliph in 1924, Atatürk unwittingly catalyzed a religiopolitical movement across the globe which has been demanding the reestablishment of the Caliphate ever since. Whether it was the original Muslim Brotherhood established in Egypt, or later organizations like al-Qaeda, the Islamists of this decentralized movement all believed that Atatürk had no authority to dissolve the Islamic empire, that within a caliphate is the only way for Muslims to live, and that Muslims must fight to see it rise again.

For 90 years, fundamentalists have been preaching for this to happen, political Islamists have been campaigning and conspiring to make it happen, and the most radical and dedicated members of this movement have been using terrorism to accomplish their shared goal. But Baghdadi did not talk about achieving the Caliphate, run for political office like the Brotherhood, or use disparate terrorist attacks to establish a caliphate—he simply went ahead and did it. He captured Mosul, the second largest city in Iraq, a city that Coalition soldiers and U.S. Marines used to patrol, and he declared the empire reborn with himself as its new head. This event should be understood as a watershed in modern IW for all the reasons mentioned above, and because IS is a fundamentally un-Clausewitzian enemy which typifies how the worldwide movement of violent actors who follow the ideology of “global jihad” understand war.

But the challenge for America is not simply one of understanding and dealing with different appreciations of war or strategy. We are also stymied by our legacy attitudes and our propensity to focus on that which is irrelevant and ignore or fail to appreciate that which is actually very important. And this is especially true in the U.S. intelligence community (IC).

For example, how many IC analysts or strategists can answer the question as to why did Osama bin Laden—or today, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current head of al-Qaeda—not ever declare a caliphate, given that al-Qaeda was the brand leader of the international jihadi movement?

This, too, has to do with how war is “returning to type” and the way our enemies are motivated to fight in ways informed by pre-Clausewitzian mores. Here, one has to understand the history of Islam. Over the last 1,400 years, there have been two fundamental requirements before anyone could declare themselves the emperor of the Islamic State. The first is that the individual actually capture and hold territory, which, of course, is now the case for IS in Syria, Libya, and Iraq. The second requirement is that traditionally one cannot be the Caliph unless they belong to the same tribe as Mohammad, the founder of Islam. To bring about a revival of the Caliphate, you need to be of the tribe of Quresh. Neither bin Laden nor Zawahiri could claim to be Qureshis, but Baghdadi has managed to convince the populations of the territories under his control that he is a Qureshi. Not only has Baghdadi demonstrated his capacity to capture and hold the territory for a caliphate, he has marketed himself as meeting the Islamic criteria to do so. This has very little to do with Clausewitzian appreciations of war.

The Secret of the Success of the Islamic State: Realizing a Religious War

The question remains, however, how has IS so rapidly dethroned al-Qaeda and what does that mean for future IW campaigns involving America? The answer to this crucial question has to do with how Baghdadi has taken the concept of holy war, jihad, and given it a burning eschatological immanence.

IS is masterful in its understanding of psychological warfare and information operations (IO) in ways that al-Qaeda never was. IS controls more than 20,000 social

media platforms and on average posts more than 50,000 pieces of propaganda for global consumption each and every day. These social media push the narrative of “global jihad” around the world 24/7, demanding a response from the United States that is simply not there. However, before the requisite response to IS IO can be designed and deployed, we must first understand what it is about their message that is so resonant and effective in recruiting both fighters to the theater and terrorists in the United States and elsewhere.

In the last two years in Washington, there has been a childish argument over what to call the threat. Some call it “ISIS,” the Islamic State of Iraq in Syria. Others, like the president of the United States, call it “ISIL,” the acronym for the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Many commentators have criticized the Commander in Chief for this choice, saying that he uses ISIL because he wants to avoid referring to Syria and so remind audiences of the “red lines” he drew there and which were egregiously flouted by the Assad regime.

This is a churlish political debate because both of those names for our enemy are wrong. Both acronyms, from the point of view of rigorous intelligence preparation of the battlefield (IPB) are incorrect. Whenever you prepare for war what is the first thing you must do? Understand the enemy on his terms. We do not invent labels for them. We start by reading their statements, reading their doctrine, using their labels for themselves as the starting point for what we should call them.

We called the Soviet Union “the USSR” for a reason. We used the term “Third Reich” for a reason—not because we believed in Hitler’s vision of a “thousand-year Aryan Empire,” but because that is what they called themselves. Let us apply that to the threat we face today. Originally, of course, this group was al-Qaeda in Iraq—AQI, or the Iraqi franchise of al-Qaeda—which had been built up by the Jordanian thug, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. After the pronouncement in June 2014 by Baghdadi of the reestablishment of the Caliphate, the correct designator for this threat is not ISIS, ISIL, or AQI. It is IS, or the Islamic State. They call themselves “the Caliphate,” or “the Islamic State,” and that is what we should call them.

But most importantly, we must appreciate what the group called themselves in the intervening years between being AQI and becoming IS, and what the evolution of their moniker tells us. As Baghdadi took his forces into Syria as the nation was collapsing and Nouri al-Maliki was ratcheting up his persecution of the Sunnis in Iraq, the group called themselves the “Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham.” (This is also the source of the derogatory name “DAESH,” the Arabic acronym for the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, which sounds much like the Arabic word, “to tread or step on,” an act of disrespect in local culture and, thus, a slur to IS). This choice of name is a crucially important moment in the evolution of our enemy, because al-Sham is not simply a geographic designator; in Arabic, “al-Sham” can mean the “land that rises from the sea,” which roughly equates in our terminology to Greater Syria or the Levant but, more importantly, it is a word associated directly with the End of Days, with the theology and eschatology of the religion of Islam.

Al-Sham is an extremely important concept in Islam. Like other religions, be it Buddhism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, or Judaism, Islam has its own eschatology—a vision of how the world will end. For Christians, on the basis of tradition and the Book of Revelation, there is the expectation that there will be mighty battles before Judgment Day between the last true believers and the forces of the Antichrist, culminating on the plains of Megiddo in Northern Israel. In fact, the term “Armageddon” is derived from the town of Megiddo, the site of the last war between the believers and the nonbelievers before the end of the world.

Al-Sham is exactly that for Muslims; it is the Islamic Megiddo. All educated Muslims are taught that before the end of the world, there will come an earthly devil-like figure who will lead the forces of the *kuffar*, the infidels, in the last holy war, the final jihad, against the last true Muslim believers. According to Islam, this holy war will occur on al-Sham, according to the *sunna* of Islam.

This is a very powerful concept which goes to the heart of the staggering mobilizational capabilities of the IS. Baghdadi has not only named his organization after the territory that Muslims expect will be the site of the last holy war against the infidel, but he has also proceeded to capture said territory. Every time IS tweets, every time they put something on Snapchat, Telegram, or Facebook, they are sending a very clear and motivational message around the world. Each tweet or post can have a most powerful effect on teenage Muslims looking for a sense of purpose in life, for meaning in an increasingly vacuous and meaningless modern world. The message is: “If you want to save your soul, if you want to fight for the sovereignty of Allah, if you want to become a Mujahideen, this is your last chance. If you wish to cleanse your soul, if you wish to go to paradise, there will be no more jihads after this one. Just look at where we are fighting and that the Caliph is finally back. This is the very last pre-Judgment Day jihad, so buy that plane ticket to Turkey and walk across the border. We have initiated End Times. Just look at where we are: Al Sham!”

This leveraging of eschatological concepts is the only way to explain how IS has recruited over 35,000 foreign fighters in just months, with 6,000 of those, at least, being westerners from the United States and its partner or allied nations. Yet in our policy debates and national security analyses, we downplay the relevance of faith to our enemy, with top-level members of the administration going so far as to deny any relevance of religion to the actions of the IS.

Adapting to Understand Our New/Old Enemy

At this point we can conclude that:

- IW is back, and with a vengeance.
- IS is more dangerous and effective than all its predecessors.

As a result, we must reassess whether our legacy concepts about war, and our legacy capabilities, are applicable to the current and future threat environment. To do this we must follow the oft-quoted axiom of Sun Tzu, and understand properly the enemy we currently face.

When it comes to the *Art of War*, we in the West have our own strategic heavyweights, we study our Clausewitzes, our Mackinders, our Boyds, and so on. The enemy also has their own strategic powerhouses. Today's jihadists do not simply improvise their strategies; they are not random or capricious in their appreciation and application of war. They follow a plan based upon the strategic works of their most important authors. Everyone in the American national security establishment needs to be familiar with these jihadi strategists in order to understand the game plan of the enemies we face today, as well as tomorrow's threat groups, because IS will eventually be replaced by another, perhaps even more dangerous, Islamist threat group in the foreseeable future.

The first of the three most important grand strategic minds informing groups like IS today is Sayyed Qutb. Qutb is the most important strategic thinker of the Muslim Brotherhood. Qutb's book, *Milestones*, should be understood as the Field Manual (FM) of "global jihad." It is a book that has been found on high-value targets in every theater to which the United States has deployed in recent years. In this slim text, which has informed jihadi operations across the globe, including in America, Qutb is explicit on more than 20 occasions, when he writes that Muslims should understand that Islam is much more than a religion. For Qutb, and all salafists such as al-Qaeda and IS, Islam is, in fact, a supremacist political movement with a global mandate to reestablish the Caliphate for the greater glory of Allah. And all Muslims have a role to play in its glorious recreation.⁷

Second in importance to Qutb is bin Laden's former spiritual guide, Azzam. As he was creating the original al-Qaeda, Azzam wrote a 25-page *fatwa* called "Defense of Muslim Lands." That document was the most important call to jihad, the most important mobilizational document of international jihad in the 20th century, until IS declared its own caliphate after the fall of Mosul. Written after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, this *fatwa* declared jihad to be *fard 'ayn*, an individual and universal obligation for all Muslims. Azzam argued that since an infidel superpower had invaded historically Islamic territory, there must be a holy war—a jihad—in response. Yet, the Muslims of the world were waiting for a formal declaration of jihad; they were waiting to see if "deployment orders" would land in their letterboxes. But that would never happen, thanks to Atatürk's actions after World War I. After he retired the Caliph and dissolved the Caliphate, there was no one left to declare war or order Muslims into battle. As a result, it is now incumbent upon all believers, without waiting for orders, to deploy themselves, to grab a weapon and become mujahideen. This *fatwa* would become the most mobilizational document in international jihad until Baghdadi declared the Caliphate reborn in the summer of 2014 and himself the new defender of the faith.⁸

Most recently, another Abu Bakr, this time, Abu Bakr Naji (Mohammad Hasan Khalil al-Hakim), contributed to the operational strategy of IS through the e-book, *The Management of Savagery*. Naji was an Egyptian jihadi killed in Pakistan in 2008. Shortly before he died, he wrote the most practical guide on how to build the Caliphate today. This book represents the anti-FM 3-24 of the jihadi movement, if you will, their response to our own counterinsurgency (COIN) manual. The baseline of Naji's text is that the

Caliphate cannot be created through political reform. It must be achieved through violence, but this must be strategically exploited violence and savagery, and eventually the use of violence must lead to the capturing of territory which then must be governed effectively. This pragmatic approach to building the Caliphate should follow three distinct phases, according to Naji's book.⁹

The primary phase, which he calls the "vexation phase," is aimed at distracting and exhausting the infidel enemy and his allies by using dramatic operations, especially terrorist attacks. These attacks need not be on the scale of 9/11, but they need to sufficiently dramatic to prepare the battlefield for Phase Two, the "spreading of savagery." In this phase, the jihadis move to coordinated and synchronized attacks on a large scale, with the intent to dislodge governments from their capacity to actually govern their own territory. IS entered this stage two years ago. If the reports are true, that over 200 synchronized vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIED) were detonated on the day Ramadi fell, this means that IS has already gone through Phase Two. If they can actually use 200 VBIEDs in one day, they are following the Naji playbook and have already graduated to the last phase, which is called the "administer, consolidate, and expansion of savagery phase."

Here, just as in FM 3-24, the insurgent wants to stabilize held areas and to then unite the local populations into a fighting force. Simultaneously, this stage involves the implementation of governance in the form of shariah law and the use of this new stable area as a giant Forward Operating Base, a launching platform from which more Phase One and Two operations can be executed in new territories. This results in a "hybrid caliphate" contrasting strongly with the previous jihadi strategists who were purists when it came to how the Caliphate should be established and the role of force. Their earlier efforts relied on an almost automatic jump from violence to the emergence of a caliphate following the dislodging of infidel governments. Naji understood that regime decapitation does not lead by itself to a caliphate and that violence is only a means to an end. He outlined the importance of creating a quasi-nation-state base area before transmuting it into the final reality of the new Caliphate. It is his pragmatic approach to the quasi-nation-state, which would have been rejected by other strategists as a heretical, albeit temporary, aping of the West, that truly marks Naji apart. And unfortunately, this novel approach to creating a 21st-century caliphate is paying great dividends today for IS.

Lastly, the most important author and book of all is Brigadier S.K. Malik and his *Quranic Concept of War*. In this work, the Pakistani general officer effects an utter repudiation of Clausewitz and the Western way of war. In it, Malik states that jihad is something that all Muslims must do and that the only purpose for war is the reestablishment of the Caliphate—period. War has nothing at all to do with politics or *raison d'état*, with the Clausewitzian need of a national government. War's sole purpose is the reestablishment of the theocratic empire of Islam, so Allah's writ can once again be sovereign here on earth.

Additionally, Malik writes, that the only center of gravity in war is not a physical target, but the soul of the *kuffar*, the infidel. The infidel must be made to convert to "the one true faith" or be killed. And he concludes, since the soul of the infidel is the only target

that matters in war, if you wish to break his will to fight, the most effective mode of war is IW, most specifically, terror. If Islam is to be victorious, then the modes of attack preferred by groups such as al-Qaeda and IS, from the 9/11 hijackings to the pressure-cooker bombs of the Boston attack and the crucifixions and decapitations of the Caliphate today—that is the way to fight. This work is the “bible” of the global jihadist movement and must be read by anyone who works in the national security field, or who simply is concerned about the rise of threats like IS.¹⁰

To conclude, IS has been far more successful than al-Qaeda for identifiable reasons. Firstly, it has a correct understanding of IW. It realizes, as Mao did in China after World War II, that violence is but an instrument, not an end in itself. IS has set out to capture territory, declare the new empire and govern its population. Secondly, it has been highly effective in exploiting an extremely resonant and mobilizing “end times ideology” that the West has not even begun to counter at the strategic level. Because of that mobilizational ideology’s resonance, in the long term, IO and psychological warfare will be the primary strategic weapons in this war, until IS and the broader global jihadist movement can be delegitimized with the help of our allies and Sunni Muslim partners.

As a result of these realities, the enemy threat doctrine of global jihadism must be built into our intelligence cycle and our IPB. We must study it and we must not allow politics into our intelligence preparations. Unfortunately, this does not seem to be the case at present.

Former U.S. military intelligence officer, Rick Francona, has written that there are now pressures upon intelligence analysts to not write reports wherein the attacks against IS are portrayed as being less than effective.¹¹ There appears to be censorship inside the system, with the Department of Defense actually launching an Inspector General investigation into the reports that show IS as resilient and growing, assessments that did not fit into a preapproved White House narrative of how IS is weak and “losing;” such reports have been doctored, censored, or lost.¹² Apparently we have allowed ideology or politics into the intelligence cycle and which has undermined our ability to understand our adversary. This will make winning the war against our new irregular enemy nigh impossible. It is impossible to cure a disease if you are not allowed to diagnose it objectively because facts become “inconvenient.”

If we move beyond IS and look to the broader question of how America should respond to such IW now and in the future, we must address the issue of COIN’s future. In recent years, this debate has boiled down to an unsophisticated standoff between the “pro-COIN cabal,” often individuals personally connected to General David Petraeus and those involved in the rewriting of FM 3-24, versus the anti-COIN clique who wishes our armed services to return to the principles of fire and maneuver and so-called “conventional war” skills. However, both sides are wrong. COIN is a fundamentally un-American practice built on British and French colonial practices not applicable or even desirable today, and conventional warfare is the least likely scenario we face as a nation today or tomorrow, even when we look at nations like China or Russia, which clearly prefer unconventional

and irregular warfare in the face of an overwhelming and conventionally defined military force such as America's.

America's Future Wars: What is to Be Done?

When it comes to defeating irregular threats, we should return to the beginning, to the types of missions and skills Army Special Forces were originally designed to hone and execute. The United States has historically excelled, and relied upon, Foreign Internal Defense (FID) as opposed to COIN when engaged in theaters where an insurgent force threatened our interests, or endangered the survival of our allies or partners. But FID has two non-negotiable requirements that we ignore at our peril. Number one, the indigenous government assisted by our trainers and advisors has to have a modicum of legitimacy with the local civilian population. They may not all love the government in power, but it must be understood by the local civilian population to be the government. You cannot do FID in a context where America's support of the regime makes the host government appear more illegitimate (as was the case with the Hamid Karzai government of Afghanistan). The second requirement is that the host nation's forces have to possess the capacity to absorb our support. If they do not, as was the case in both Afghanistan and Iraq, America is either wasting its money and expertise in a fruitless exercise, or worse, training cadres to fight more effectively, but most likely to fight against us or our allies, once they have learned what they wanted to learn from our trainers—about how to be a more effective fighting force, before abandoning the government to reinforce their own militias or tribes.

In addition to favoring FID-type missions over large-footprint COIN operations, we must have a strategic-level counter to the ideology of global jihadism, one that incorporates legitimate, moderate, local Muslim voices and authorities. America is not going to defeat IS acting unilaterally. U.S. taxpayers will not permit Washington to deploy troops at the levels needed to destroy IS unless there is a mass casualty attack on U.S. soil that is operationally linked to Baghdadi. As a result, it has to be the Iraqis, the Kurds, the Jordanians, and the Egyptians that close with and destroy IS forces on the ground. For multiple reasons, it has to be people like Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who have the manpower, and leaders such as King Abdullah II of Jordan, who have the historic and lineage-based credentials, who must be the faces of this fight to take back the territory that needs to be recaptured from the insurgents.

The last part of the puzzle is the counter-ideological battlefield. Remember, Sun Tzu said the art of war is not to destroy the enemy's units—but to destroy the enemy's strategy. In order to defeat IS, we have to target their strategy, and that means countering the ideology of global jihad.¹³

The United States, in conjunction with our Sunni Muslim allies, must focus on those who have paid the greatest price in this war. The White House and politicians throughout the region should emphasize the number of Sunni Muslims killed in IS offensives—by demonstrating the toll that the ideology of jihad is having on Sunni Muslims in the region, we can begin to chip away the claim of authenticity made by Baghdadi and his murderous cohorts.

Ultimately, it will, however, have to be local actors that take the military fight to IS units; but they must have our support in this endeavor. No significant initiative is likely to be undertaken by the Sunni nations of the region unless they genuinely feel they have American support. And we must be a part of a global counter-ideological campaign, just as we were during the struggle against Communism in the Cold War.

Our Role in the War of Ideas

Any extremist ideology is most vulnerable in the delta between what it says is true and what the ground truth is. When the Soviet Union asserted that it was building a “workers’ paradise” in which everyone will be equal—while Politburo members rode in limousines and the average Soviet citizen had to wait eight hours in line for a loaf of bread—they introduced a vulnerability into their ideological construct. Illuminating this delta is a critical part of countering ideologically motivated enemies.

In the speech he gave in June 2014, Baghdadi said he is the sword of Allah and the shield of Islam; our response should be to highlight that he is crucifying and immolating Sunni Muslims. Doing so will require incorporating discussions about religion at the highest policy levels in American national security circles. Additionally, we must commit ourselves to amplifying the voices of moderate Muslims without reducing their legitimacy in the eyes of local populations. The Muslims already using their own blogs, websites, and private organizations to counter the jihadi ideology of IS and the like, should be the tip of the nonkinetic spear, but they lack American support. We shy away from religious topics to our own detriment. If we do not lend support in the same way that we helped *Solidarnosc* (Solidarity) during the 1980s in Poland, then the United States will still be playing jihadi “whack-a-mole” a hundred years from now and we will be doomed to this kinetic approach as the threat continues to expand.

Both the Bush and Obama Administrations have argued that the United States cannot support the reformers, because American support will undermine them. I argue that this is lazy thinking; these reformers are already apostates in the eyes of the fundamentalists. Not lending them support merely reduces their capacity to spread a more tolerant Islamic message. And, of course, not all of our support need be overt. During the Cold War, the United States provided support to our ideological allies. Presidents made speeches about democracy and human rights in Poland and Hungary, and at the same time, there was enormous covert support provided to the dissidents best able to ideologically damage our totalitarian foe.¹⁴

If we do not send a message to the world that we are behind Egypt’s President Sisi, that we are fully committed to the success of King Abdullah II of Jordan, they and the millions of peaceful Muslims they represent will not win this war against the “new totalitarians.” Regardless of whether or not the United States lends it full-throated support, these groups and actors already have a target on their backs. We have to strengthen their hand so the modern, West-friendly versions of Islam can exorcise the fundamentalist and ultra-violent 7th-century version, which is currently in ascendance across the globe.

Public diplomacy must be a critical part of our IW strategy; we must engage in full-on strategic communications and IO at the national strategic-level, coupled with an aggressive covert counterpropaganda campaign amplifying local moderates. This will require us to have the capacity to map local communities in a nuanced and comprehensive manner, but right now we do not have these capabilities. They must be aggressively developed, along with a de-emphasis on technological modes of intelligence gathering, favoring instead more human intelligence.

Finally, we have to jettison the idea that there are good Islamists and bad Islamists. If you believe in a caliphate—whether you want to create the Caliphate by decapitating people or through the ballot box, as former President Mohammed Morsi tried in Egypt—you are ultimately desirous of a theocratic state that is defined as the antithesis of everything that Western civilization holds dear, including freedom of religion, sexual equality, and minority rights.

And when it comes to the most dangerous jihadist threat today, we must understand that Baghdadi skillfully exploited the contingencies of the theater with the rising corruption of the Maliki regime, the collapse of Syria, and the execution of more than 200 unarmed Sunnis to create his insurgency. But removing Baghdadi will not solve this problem. Drone strikes only make sense if there is a limited pool of recruits to replace those that are killed and the enemy cannot replace them. We are not certain who is in the wings to replace Baghdadi—it may be someone with even greater organizational capacity than the current “Caliph.” The limits of the kinetic application of force have to be internalized and we must work to actually make it less attractive for people to sign onto the global jihadist movement at all.

Conclusion: Back to the Future

Today’s wars and tomorrow’s campaigns can be understood as war returning to its normal state. The data is clear: IW is the most common form of war. John Keegan was right when he wrote that war is most often a social or cultural activity, as opposed to a cold and clinical activity done for “objective” reasons of the state.¹⁵ If we realize that IS is but the expression of the most prevalent form of war, we will have taken the first step in being able to better win our current campaigns and future wars. But to do this, we will need to also:

- rebuild our national-level capabilities for IO and psychological warfare;
- invest in understanding the enemy threat doctrines much more than we do now;
- favor FID over COIN in our doctrine and policy; and
- remove politics and ideology from our intelligence analysis.

The West has demonstrated a capacity to do all these things individually at different times. In the 20th-century struggle against both fascism and communism, we built very effective counterpropaganda capabilities within both the IC and at the strategic level of national policy. During the Cold War, we invested heavily across both the government

and private sectors to understand the political, economic, and military threat posed by the Soviet Union and so put our nation in a better place to win that confrontation. In both El Salvador and Colombia, we found a way to use very small numbers of U.S. forces to successfully strengthen the local host nation against an insurgent foe. And when we were at our best and the nation most secure, politics was not allowed to infect the intelligence function so as to distort reporting so that it comport with the preconceived expectations of the political elite. The question is, do we as a nation have the vision to see that we are once again faced with a new existential and totalitarian threat in the 21st century, and will we find the leadership, the courage, and the commitment to put all these pieces together? When the above short list becomes possible—which is really only a question of leadership—then we will be able to effectively assist our allies, defeat our shared enemies, and secure the Republic once more.

Notes

¹ Sebastian Gorka and David Kilcullen, “An Actor-centric Theory of War: Understanding the Difference Between *COIN* and *Counterinsurgency*,” *Joint Force Quarterly* 60, no. 1 (2011).

² Comment made to the author, September 2014.

³ A concept made famous by Maria Harf, Deputy Spokesperson of the Department of State in an interview on national television.

⁴ For a detailed analysis of how to do this, see Katharine Gorka and Patrick Sookhdeo, ed. *Fighting the Ideological War: Winning Strategies from Communism to Islamism* (Three Rivers, MI: Isaac Publishing, 2012).

⁵ For a preliminary analysis of the strategic reasons for our failure as nation to engage in the counter-ideological war after 9/11, see Katharine Gorka, *The Flawed Science Behind U.S. Counterterrorism Strategy*, Council on Global Security White Paper (McLean, VA: The Council on Global Security, October 2014), available at <<http://councilonglobalsecurity.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/Flawed-Science-Behind-US-CT-Strategy.pdf>>.

⁶ This estimate covers everything from flight schools to safe houses.

⁷ Sayyed Qutb, *Milestones* (electronic version from *Kalamullah*), available at <<http://www.kalamullah.com/Books/MILESTONES.pdf>>

⁸ Abdullah Azzam, “Defense of Muslim Lands,” available at <https://archive.org/details/Defense_of_the_Muslim_Lands>

⁹ Abu Bakr Naji, *The Management of Savagery*, available at <<https://azelin.files.wordpress.com/2010/08/abu-bakr-naji-the-management-of-savagery-the-most-critical-stage-through-which-the-umma-will-pass.pdf>>

¹⁰ Unclassified English-language translations of all of the key jihadi strategic texts I have just summarized can be found at my personal website, TheGorkaBriefing.com. Detailed summaries of the works of the key jihadi strategists can also be found in my article: “Understanding Today’s Enemy - The Grand Strategists of Modern Jihad,” *Military Review* (May/June 2016): 32-39, available at <http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20160630_art001.pdf>.

¹¹ Lieutenant Colonel Rick Francona (Ret.), “Is your government lying to you about the war against ISIS?” *Middle East Perspectives by Rick Francona*, August 27, 2015, available at <<http://francona.blogspot.co.uk/2015/08/is-your-government-lying-to-you-about.html>>.

¹² Forty percent of USCENTCOM analysts recently answered “yes” to the question: “During the past year, do you believe that anyone attempted to distort or suppress analysis on which you were working in the face of persuasive evidence?” See Deb Riechmann, “House chairman: Military files, emails deleted amid ISIS intel assessment probe,” *Military Times*, February 25, 2016, available at <<http://www.militarytimes.com/story/military/capitol-hill/2016/02/25/house-chairman-military-files-emails-deleted-amid-isis-intel-assessment-probe/80933942/>>.

¹³ For our full report on the role of Information Operations in this and future wars, see the USASOC-sponsored report, Threat Knowledge Group, *The Islamic State and Information Warfare: Defeating ISIS and the Broader Global Jihadist Movement* (Threat Knowledge Group, January 2015), available at <<http://threat-knowledge.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/TKG-Report-ISIS-Info-Warfare.pdf>>.

¹⁴ For a full exploration of how to win this war and the lessons we can use from the last conflict we won against a totalitarian foe, see my new book, Sebastian Gorka, *Defeating Jihad: The Winnable War* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2016).

¹⁵ John Keegan, *A History of Warfare* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 1993).