A Globalist Fallacy? The Limits of Global Counterinsurgency

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In discerning the reasons for Donald Trump's victory in the presidential election of 2016, it is plausible to contend that in part it represented a rejection of America's foreign wars. For many people the long, costly and inconclusive engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq, along with the destabilization of some of the more secular regimes across North Africa and the Middle East, from Libya to Syria, has undoubtedly been deracinating.[1]

A pattern of U.S. military intervention had been established in the decade after the end of the Cold War, with American armed power being deployed in Kuwait, Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, and Kosovo. The scale of U.S. external intervention reached its height in the post-9/11 era with the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet, Trump's victory in 2016 signaled a population disenchanted with paying the price for policing the world's bad neighborhoods, and a refutation of both the Democrat and Republican establishments that in some respects only promised more of the same.[2]

The principal cause of disenchantment, it may be surmised, was not the interventions themselves *per se* but that they often became protracted. The swift overthrow of the regimes in Afghanistan in 2001 and Iraq in 2003, gave way to the violent fragmentation of these post-invasion societies. The resulting problems of occupation, and the development of the means to stabilize these countries, gave rise to what commentators after 2004 termed an era counterinsurgency (COIN). This era saw the surge in U.S. forces in theater and the development of a multiplicity of tactics in an attempt to restore order. The relative success of COIN techniques in Iraq established both a media and quasi-official narrative that held the "lessons" derived from the experience could have wider applicability to future conflicts.

The broadest definition of counterinsurgency is that it represents the attempt to combat an armed challenge to the authority of an existing state. But in considering the foreign interventions in which the U.S. has been involved, it is interesting to note it was not the U.S. government's authority that was being defied. In the main, the U.S. was delivering assistance to the "host

nation."[3] The U.S. was providing governments elsewhere with the support they needed to resist their own internal challenges.

A Different Kind of Threat

Whether policing the world's trouble spots and assisting other nations in their own struggles has been worth the human and financial cost has been a more or less continuous debate in U.S. foreign policy since the beginning of the twentieth century. It reached its nadir, of course, during the Vietnam War in the late 1960s. What, precisely, people asked were the benefits to U.S. national security of intervening in such a far away conflict? The question was answered in the negative then, but after the events of September 11, 2001, the view that stabilizing key areas abroad also helped to secure the homeland became the linchpin of an argument that presented itself in the guise of a movement within defense circles, which came to be known as "global counterinsurgency."

The notion of global counterinsurgency arose from the understanding that the threat confronting the U.S. was totalizing and transnational. The 9/11 attacks were a dramatic demonstration that a deterritorialized and deeply ideological version of Islam was explicitly seeking a violent showdown with western modernity far beyond the confines of the Middle East. For some commentators, this globalizing Islamist style demanded a response that went beyond orthodox counterinsurgency approaches that, hitherto, had focused efforts primarily within the state.

For one analyst of counterinsurgency, John Mackinlay, writing in the aftermath of 9/11, standard state-based practices of counterinsurgency to counteract this new force in global politics were unlikely to be adequate. They would be unable to contend with the networks and connections that sustained al-Qaeda's long-term vision for a restored caliphate. This vision might appear unrealistic, he maintained, but it appealed to and animated a global constituency. "Whether positively or negatively," Mackinlay maintained, "the 11 September attacks gripped our attention and changed our lives in a way that justifies [al-Qaeda's] military concept from an insurgent's point of view."[4] In this regard, those like Mackinlay were identifying the phenomenon of a global insurgent movement that transcended the confines of the state, which required the application of a new global counterinsurgency technique.

The understanding that al-Qaeda, and its subsequent variants, like Islamic State, epitomized a different kind of threat to the international order found its way into the U.S. Army/Marines' *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*. Published in 2007, the manual exemplified the apotheosis of evolving American thinking on the subject. "Today's operational environment," the manual declared, "also includes a new kind of insurgency, one that seeks to impose revolutionary change worldwide. Al Qaeda is a well-known example of such an insurgency." The manual observed that al-Qaeda linked affiliates were able to exploit "communications and technology," to couple local conflicts with the broader objective of recreating a new, purified Islamic caliphate. "Defeating such enemies," the manual went on, "requires a global strategic response – one that addresses the array of linked resources and conflicts that sustain these movements while tactically addressing the local grievances that feed them."[5]

….Requires a Different Kind of Response

What, however, did such a "global strategic response" entail? According to David Kilcullen, the Australian counterinsurgency guru who rose to become an advisor to General David Petraeus in Iraq, global counterinsurgency required a strategy of "disaggregation" that should aim to constrain al-Qaeda's "ability to influence regional and local players – by cutting off their communications, discrediting their ideological authority, and global operations to keep them off balance. At the regional level, disaggregation would isolate theatre-level actors from global sponsors, local populations and local insurgent groups they might seek to exploit in support of the *jihad*."[6] Among other things this would include "attacking the 'intricate web of dependency', which allow[s] the jihad to function effectively." It also requires "interdicting links between theaters of operation within the global insurgency," and "denying the ability of regional and global actors to link and exploit local actors." Disaggregation also meant, "interdicting flows of information, personal finance and technology (including WMD technology) between and within jihad theaters," and "denying sanctuary areas (including failed and failing states, and states that support terrorism)."[7]

So, a global counterinsurgency strategy involves disrupting the transnational linkages that sustain the deterritorialized jihad. That might be the general goal but what does it mean in practice? It is in addressing this question that the limits of the "global COIN" thesis begin to reveal themselves. Beyond general statements of intent, the proponents of the global COIN position, like David Kilcullen, were often equivocal. To the extent that they offered any prescriptions they focused on recondite debates on the organizational and psychological make up of "terrorists," examining social networks, and patterns of recruitment. Such elements might be important to a degree but they hardly distinguished a unique "global insurgency" concept. The lack of clarity about what a global counterinsurgency program specifically requires remains its constituting weakness.

In fact, when it came to offering solid solutions, what was particularly notable about the global COIN thesis was that it was internally contradictory. While it professed to hold a more considered understanding of the jihadist threat it also downplayed the factor which made the threat so dangerous, namely, the ideology – or political religion – of Islamism. For David Kilcullen, it was the "sociological characteristics of immigrant communities," which better explained "contemporary threats rather than Islamic theology." "It's not about theology," he maintained. "The Islamic bit is secondary. This is human behaviour in an Islamic setting. It is not 'Islamic behaviour'." "People don't get pushed into rebellion by their ideology," he asserted, "They get pushed pulled into it by their social networks."[8]

Negating the role of ideology/religion is curious because it defies all the evidence to the contrary. An individual's willingness to resort to violence in pursuit of a cause might be a complex amalgam of impulses, reasons and stimuli, but to relegate to a secondary concern the most obvious interlinking fact that they exhibit a common commitment to a belief system is somewhat curious. Whatever else they may be it is clearly the case that jihadists commit Islamist acts in a global setting. The paradox of global COIN thinking, therefore, is that it recognizes the transnational danger posed by jihadism, but at one and the same time discounts the ideology of Islamism that makes the threat global in the first place.

“Liberal Interjectionism”

A symptom of this cognitive dissonance is that global COIN advocates develop a line of thought that might be termed “liberal interjectionism.” Instead of accepting at face value what jihadists explicitly say is motivating them, and have been saying for years – as expressed for example in an article in the Islamic State magazine, *Dabiq*, entitled “Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You”[9] – they interject their own explanation of why they do what they do. In other words, those like Kilcullen seek to rationalize religious motivation, reducing it to, at most, a subordinate enabler of violence. This Olympian, almost gnostic, position claims, in effect, to know the jihadist mind more than the actual jihadist. When they state that they are inspired to act by their religious belief system, Kilcullen and others suggest they do not really mean it. They are merely acting out, and religion is simply the pretext.

The irony of being averse to examining the globalizing element in jihadist activism, speaks to global COIN’s broader conceptual failings, which are reluctant to confront the difficult issues of politics and the defense of social values that are inherent in the contemporary conflict between western modernity and militant Islam. The global counterinsurgency advocacy is therefore most comfortable in addressing the threat in the terms not of political values but of managerial technique. Global COIN avoids the political necessity of defeating Islamism’s appeal within the modern western state in favor of apolitical and abstruse operational concepts and aspirational declarations: what Lawrence Freedman has called “vague talk of hearts and minds.”[10]

We might deduce, therefore, that global COIN’s political equivocation reflects the unwillingness of the post-national, rationalist, secular liberal mind to comprehend or accept that people in this day and age can still be motivated by matters of theological principle rather than material conditions.[11] Thus, liberal interjectionism engages in a material-cause and material-effect analysis to explain away jihadist violence, by claiming that violent acts must be “regarded as representative of deeper issues or grievances within society.” The interjection here is that Islamist “insurgents” are amenable to a rationalist discourse that will enable their hearts and minds to be won over through “a process of compromise and negotiation.”[12]

Consequently, in terms of a counter-strategy, what global COIN adds up to is a syllogism, which holds – in the words of Mackinlay – that insurgent violence “usually has legitimate grievances;” this requires a plan that “removes the pressure of the grievance;” and removing the grievance will “remove a substantial element of popular support from the insurgent.”[13] For Kilcullen, likewise, global counterinsurgency asserts the need to “counter the grievances on which insurgencies feed, denying their energy to their recruiting and propaganda subsystems, and ultimately marginalizing them.”[14] All of which is an elaborate way of stating that the forces of Islamism should be soothed, conciliated and eventually becalmed because although they may proclaim to be acting on religious impulses, their actual motivations are driven by an “unbearable sense of grievance.”[15]

Under the global COIN understanding, then, the complexity of the Islamist challenge to the western secular liberal order is reduced to a simple binary. According to Kilcullen, for many Muslims there is “no middle way: only a stark choice between jihad and acceptance of permanent second-class citizenship in a world order dominated by the West and apparently

infused with anti-Islamic values." Hence, for "many self-respecting Muslims, the choice of jihad rather than surrender is both logical and honorable."[16] From this perspective, violent Islamist actions are symptomatic of a form of global resistance against the depredations of the modern western capitalist order.[17]

An approach that asserts grievance removal as the solution and which refuses to challenge Islamism's ideological worldview gives rise to policy assumptions that believe the ends of violent jihadism to be amenable to real world solutions, without asking whether that really is the case, or even if it is, what is the price to be paid for conciliation? Global COIN theorists are notably ambiguous in their answers to such questions. When they have been prepared to engage with them at all, they reveal a propensity towards radical utopianism, empathy with the "other," and a faith in communicative dialogue. For Mackinlay, Islamist inspired violence as a consequence "cannot be arrested by a democratic, free market society." A solution must therefore be premised on the profound transformation in the global order. Thus, "disarming the hatred of the disaffected Islamic communities," at a minimum necessitates "a new U.S. foreign policy on Israel and in the long term, for the U.S. to learn to talk to insurgents."[18]

The logical fallacy of the global counterinsurgency thesis is that it rejects political religion as the driver of jihadist activism whilst at the same time claiming to know the real causes of Muslim disaffection, namely, western sociocultural and economic oppression. The Global COIN thesis thereby invokes the logic of appeasement without asking the awkward question as to whether global jihadism is capable of being appeased.

Getting Beyond the State?

What the preceding assessment illustrates is the central paradox that demarcates the limits of global counterinsurgency as a convincing explanatory framework: namely, that it asserts a post-state understanding of the problem but operationally it simply cannot get beyond the state. Even if one accepts the premises of the global COIN thesis about the need to focus on all sorts of second order drivers of Islamist activism, the need to practice grievance reduction, and a policy of "disaggregation" that aims at "de-linking local issues from the global insurgent system," does not alter the fact that the any counter strategy is always going to be prosecuted primarily within the spatial confines of the state. No doubt there will be a need for states themselves to seek forms of international cooperation in the intelligence, policing and legal realms, but the principal domain in which an insurgency – be it global in nature or otherwise – is going to be within a given territory, almost certainly delineated by state control.

In itself, this understanding returns us to fundamental issues of political philosophy about the necessary condition of sovereignty being the ability to guarantee the security of citizens within any territorial unit. Contributing to the defeat of a global Islamist conspiracy obliges the sovereign state, first and foremost, to confront the threat locally, within the state. Yet the global COIN thesis obfuscates this dimension. Its focus is on subordinate issues such as social networks, prisons, urban deprivation, family breakdown and a plethora of other unfalsifiable reasoning to the exclusion of the illiberal ideology of ideologized Islam. This reflects a reluctance to engage in the contestation of political values at home, which is where the very essence of the struggle is taking place. It is the contest over values at the state level that renders

the conflict political (and global) in nature, raising as it does all sorts of domestic-level dilemmas involving, among other things, civil liberties, surveillance, multiculturalism, and public morality. Yet, rather than face these dilemmas, global COIN evades them through “vague talk” of hearts and minds, and grandiose ideas about the transformation of the world order.

A Globalist Paradox: Open Borders Lead to Internal Borders

Despite global COIN’s attempt to gain insight into the complexity of the challenge presented by the de-terroritorialized threat of violent jihadism, it fails to answer the key questions its own thesis raises. Foremost amongst these is: How should the threat be addressed? Any sustained scrutiny seems to reveals that while the insurgent threat may be transnational it nevertheless will still largely have to be fought by, and prosecuted within, the state.

In that regard, the limitations of the global counterinsurgency thesis call attention to the puzzles inherent in notions of globalization more generally. Global economic and social forces may be pushing towards certain forms of conformity, openness, and borderlessness. However, as the world becomes more connected it does not necessarily lead to harmonious convergence. As a phenomenon globalization therefore bulges with paradox. As well as integration it also leads to fragmentation. For example, in so far as globalization has presaged more open borders and facilitated greater mobility of labor, information, trade and capital, the more internal borders within states have proliferated. These may be observed in any number of ways: gated housing communities, physical barriers on bridges and in front of public buildings, enhanced security at airports, and other installations from concert venues to shopping malls and university campuses, as well as rising suspicion, tension and hostility among different ethno-religious groups.

Conclusion

“Borders?” The Norwegian explorer Thor Heyerdahl once remarked, “I have never seen one. But I believe they exist in the minds of some people.” His statement, made after his famous trans-Pacific expedition in the *Kon-Tiki* in 1947, was in a sense an early intimation of the aspirations of many globalist thinkers. They conceived states, and their borders, as merely artificial constructs and aspired, as a consequence, to a borderless world. However, the supreme irony of globalization is that it often erects borders of the mind and creates divisions within societies. The fact that many populations in developed states have to live in a world of increased surveillance, ever more restrictions on freedoms of thought and expression, as well as encounter greater physical impediments designed to protect them from internal attack, is perhaps one of the few manifestations of what a global counterinsurgency program actually looks like in practice. Few people, one imagines, find this an enticing long-term prospect. For that reason, if we are to return to the beginning of this story, we can see why President Trump’s willingness to build walls, restrict immigration, and refrain from foreign entanglements contains the appeal it does. It is an appeal to secure the state from internal and external threats.

That is why global counterinsurgency is ultimately an illusion. Like globalization more broadly, it implies transcendence of the state at one level but ends up reinforcing the state at another. In

that respect, the very term global counterinsurgency – like so many fashionable expressions – ultimately tells us more about ourselves, and our own confused condition, than it does about any objective reality.

[1]. Fraser Nelson, "America is Tired of Being the World's Protector. We Have Been Warned," *Daily Telegraph*, June 2, 2016, at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/06/02/america-is-tired-of-being-the-worlds-protector-we-have-been-warn/ (accessed December 7, 2017).

. Damian Paletta, "Clinton vs. Trump: Where They Stand on Foreign Policy Issues," *Wall Street Journal* (n.d., circa 2016), at: http://graphics.wsj.com/elections/2016/donald-trump-hillary-clinton-on-foreign-policy/ (accessed December 11, 2017).

[3]. See U.S. Army/Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), pp. 37-50.

[4]. John Mackinlay, "Tackling Bin Laden: Lessons from History," *The Observer*, October 28, 2001, at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2001/oct/28/afghanistan.religion (accessed December 11, 2017).

[5]. U.S. Army/Marines, *Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, p. 8.

[6]. David Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (2005), p. 609.

[7]. Ibid., p. 610.

[8]. Quoted in George Packer, "Knowing the Enemy: Can Social Scientists Redfine the 'War on Terror'?" *New Yorker*, December 18, 2006.

[9]. "Why we Hate You and Why we Fight You," *Dabiq*, No. 15 (1437 Shawwal – circa. July 2016), pp. 30-33.

[10]. Lawrence Freedman, "Globalisation and the War Against Terrorism," in Christopher Ankerson, ed., *Understanding Global Terror* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2007), p. 227.

[11]. See David Martin Jones and M.L.R. Smith, *Sacred Violence: Political Religion in a Secular Age* (London: Palgrave/Macmillan, 2014), pp. 41-48.

[12]. Kilcullen, "Countering the Global Insurgency," pp. 606-607.

[13]. John Mackinlay, *Globalisation and Insurgency*, Adelphi Paper no. 352 (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2002), p. 33.

[14]. Kilcullen, "Countering the Global Insurgency," pp. 611-612.

[15]. Mackinlay, "Tackling Bin Laden."

[16]. Kilcullen, "Countering the Global Insurgency," pp. 612.

[17]. See for example, Ken Booth, "The Human Faces of Terror: Reflections in a Cracked Looking Glass," *Critical Studies on Terrorism*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (2008), p. 75; Tarak Barkawi and Mark Laffey, "The Post-Colonial Moment in Security Studies," *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2006), p. 329; Tarak Barkawi, "On the Pedagogy of 'Small Wars'," *International Affairs*, Vol. 80, No. 1 (2004), p. 28.

[18]. Mackinlay, "Tackling Bin Laden."