

Counterterrorism as an Irregular Warfare Activity

Irregular warfare is characterized by competition below the threshold of conventional warfare. It is indirect, asymmetric, and often unacknowledged. Terrorism is exactly fitted into this concept. The objective of terrorist organizations is not to win in a conventional open battle, but to cause a psychological impact, gain political leverage and control the narrative. The violence they inflict is by definition of a symbolic nature.

Counterterrorism then goes beyond simply killing or capturing terrorists. It denotes the efforts to cripple the enemy's ability to intimidate populations, affect politics, and impose legitimacy through fear. This aspect bears the political nature of counterterrorism in the first place. It coexists with the strategies of insurgency, subversion, and influence operations. Viewing this as merely an execution or criminal law issue has always been a misjudgment.

There are times in history when counterterrorism has been on the mark, it has been part and parcel of wider efforts in irregular warfare, which have also been focused on ideology, governance, and population security besides direct actions. On the other hand, in the unsuccessful cases, it has been something isolated and reactive, with a focus too much on tactics rather than a strategy to win.





Terrorism's Enduring Logic

Terrorism persists because it works, at least often enough to keep being copied. It requires minimal resources. It bypasses conventional military superiority. It forces states into visible overreaction or paralysis. Most importantly, it exploits the open nature of democratic societies.

Groups like al-Qaeda understood this early. The attacks of September 11, 2001, were not designed to defeat the United States militarily. They were designed to provoke it, draw it into prolonged conflict, and fracture its alliances. In many ways, that strategy succeeded beyond expectations.

Later, the rise of ISIS demonstrated how terrorism could evolve into something even more dangerous. By combining insurgency, state building, propaganda, and global terrorism, ISIS blurred the lines between local conflict and transnational threat. Even after its territorial defeat, its ideology and network survived, morphing into franchises and lone actor inspiration across multiple regions.

The lesson is simple. Terrorism adapts. It sheds forms when pressured and reemerges in others. It does not require sanctuary in the traditional sense. It can exist in online spaces, criminal networks, diaspora communities, and ungoverned digital terrain.

The Post-9/11 Counterterrorism Era

With its dominant power, the United States faced the aftermath of 9/11 through sheer force, intelligence reform, and with the

establishment of global partnerships. Counterterrorism continued to be the cornerstone of national security in the following years. Remarkable tactical achievements were made by special operations, intel agencies, and partner forces. Leadership nodes were scuttled. Plots were thwarted. Networks were crippled.

However, this idea of success bore a price. Counterterrorism was negatively associated too much with raids, drones, and kill capture metrics, thus overly rationalizing these things. The strategy became more focused. The political dimensions of irregular warfare were given less weight than was the case with the tactical ones. In some war zones, terrorist recruitment was restrained, yet in other areas, it was accelerated as grievances increased.

This made all of us tired. After a 20-year course, offices required closure. The departure from Afghanistan was the emblem of such a will to set the ball rolling. Nevertheless, terrorism was not eradicated. It moved, expanded, and embedded into weak states, crime syndicates, and the online pipeline of radicalization.

Why the U.S. Wants to Move On

The impulse to move beyond counterterrorism is understandable. Resources are finite. China and Russia pose systemic challenges. Terrorism rarely threatens the survival of the state. It drains attention while offering no clear end state.

There is also a psychological dimension. Counterterrorism is a war without parades.

Its victories are quiet. Its failures are spectacular. It is easier to pivot to peer competition, where deterrence models feel familiar and outcomes appear more predictable.

But this logic misunderstands terrorism's role. Terrorism is not an alternative to great power competition. It is often one of its tools. **State and nonstate actors alike exploit terrorist violence to destabilize regions, distract rivals, and weaken legitimacy without crossing thresholds that would trigger a conventional response.**

The Future Terrorism Landscape

The future of terrorism will likely be less centralized and more entangled with other forms of irregular activity. Depending on the trend, terrorist actors will also be more involved with transnational crime, cyber operations, and influence campaigns. The distinction between sources of funding will be vague. Theories will take on new formats.

The larger part of the technology in the future will be used not in the form of lethal weapons, but in the tasks of coordination, propaganda and recruitment. Artificial intelligence will be the amplifier of disinformation. Encrypted platforms will be the vehicles to sustain the networks. Instead of being the instigator, the lone actor will be an inspiration to others.

In spite of everything, terrorism will still remain the matter of an individual. Grievance, identity, humiliation, and belonging are the factors that will trigger radicalization. No amount of technical surveillance can ever outdo the cultural

understanding, human intelligence, and political engagement issues that must be dealt with.

Counterterrorism's Place Going Forward

Counterterrorism does not need to dominate national security strategy, but it cannot be abandoned. It needs to shift its paradigm from being a temporal campaign to a persistent irregular warfare function. This predicates an understanding that there will not be a time when terrorism is not in existence, either it will be just managed, contained, or marginalized.

Anticipating the future, counterterrorism might be the proper navigator primarily to avoid further escalation of such conflicts. Instead of looking at them as individuals forming a network of terrorists, the future counterterrorism should mainly concern the whole networks of terrorists. It is only a matter of which side could be more legitimate rather than more lethal.

The success would not be evaluated by the number of heads taken out, but rather through the people's actions promoting the anti-terrorist narrative. Hence, it really means the institutionalization of this attitude. A firm hand such as force can never really get rid of the problem of terrorism. On the other hand, endurance is what it's really all about: **keeping the pressure on, not giving sanctuary, and not letting terrorism dictate the strategy.**

Conclusion

Counterterrorism remains an essential component of irregular warfare because terrorism itself is an enduring feature of political conflict. The United States may wish to move on, but history suggests that doing so invites surprise, not relief.

Terrorism adapts to neglect as easily as it adapts to pressure. It thrives in the seams between war and peace, order and disorder, attention and fatigue. Treating counterterrorism as yesterday's mission misunderstands both the nature of irregular warfare and the character of the threat.

The challenge ahead is not choosing between counterterrorism and great power competition. It is learning how to manage both simultaneously, with discipline, restraint, and strategic clarity. Terrorism will not define American national security but ignoring it has defined failure before.



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