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Is the War on Terrorism Over? Long Live Unconventional Warfare

By [*David S. Maxwell*](#)

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The debate is in full force: Is Al Qaeda no longer a threat? Is the War on Terrorism over? Should we no longer talk about global terrorism to satisfy partisan political desires? Should we relegate countering terrorism to law enforcement and intelligence agencies?

There seem to be two competing worldviews in the US today. On the one hand there are those who think that terrorism has declined, is not a threat, and is only a problem because of American foreign policies that are disliked by a vocal and violent minority of Islamic extremists around the world. On the other hand there are those that view terrorism as an existential threat to the US as evidenced by the attacks on September 11 and they believe we should invoke the so-called one percent doctrine to prevent any attacks by violent Islamic extremists in the future: e.g., if there is a one percent chance that a terrorist attack may occur we must treat it as a certainty that it will occur and plan accordingly by expending all necessary efforts to prevent it. These are of course the two extremes. The truth certainly resides somewhere in between.

I would take this stand in the debate and offer a third view: Focusing *solely* on terrorism is wrong. What we really need to understand is that major threats to the United States and our friends, partners, and allies are not focused solely on conducting terrorism but instead are executing a very sophisticated and so far effective unconventional warfare strategy. While the debate rages over whether the threat is best described by violent Islamic extremism or whether we should tie it or not tie it to a religion, perhaps if we focus on the functional application by the threat's employment of an unconventional warfare strategy we can develop an effective counter unconventional warfare strategy that will achieve our strategic objectives and protect our vital interests. It is not necessary to prove whether Islamic extremists call for unconventional warfare in their writings and doctrine. It is not necessary to prove that they are knowingly executing an unconventional warfare strategy. However, by examining their strategy through a lens of unconventional warfare their functional strategy may be revealed and it may not be necessary to focus on the religious controversies surround this conflict.

To understand why this is we must begin with the definition of unconventional warfare and describe its major objectives so that we can end the myopic focus on the tactics of terrorism and defend against and counter the most difficult threat we face today and will likely face in the foreseeable future.

Simply put unconventional warfare consists of "activities to enable a resistance or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power through and with an underground, auxiliary and guerrilla force in a denied area." While many will argue that this is an American centric view, in reality it applies to any nation or non- state actor seeking to achieve strategic objectives outside the realm of what most would call more traditional forms of warfare (although one could also make the case that

unconventional warfare is not new and has a long tradition and certainly has been conducted more than world wars – just ask the French in Spain, the Germans in Africa or the Turks in Arabia or the British in the American colonies).

A major element of unconventional warfare is subversion and it is described in this way: “an activity designed to undermine the military, economic, psychological, or political strength or morale of a regime or nation. All elements of the resistance organization contribute to the subversive effort, but the clandestine nature of subversion dictates that the underground elements perform the bulk of the activity.”

Traditional strategic unconventional warfare objectives may include the following:

- Undermining the domestic and international legitimacy of the target authority.
- Neutralizing the target authority’s power and shifting that power to the resistance organization.
- Destroying the confidence and will of the target authority’s leadership.
- Isolating the target authority from international diplomatic and material support while obtaining such support for the resistance organization.
- Obtaining the support or neutrality of the various segments of the society.

Even the most cursory analysis reveals that Al Qaeda has all the hallmarks of an organization conducting unconventional warfare through enabling various resistance organizations (such as Al Qaeda affiliates but also “lone wolf” operatives) to at least coerce and disrupt the US and in some cases by clearly trying to overthrow friends, partners, and allies of the US. Most importantly it is conducting a concerted campaign that includes subversion to achieve each of the strategic objectives outlined above. It of course executes this campaign through an underground that is the traditional subversive arm of any resistance organization. An underground is nothing more than a network that has been popularized in today’s counterterrorism terminology with such phrases as it “takes a network to defeat a network.” In actuality it takes a deep understanding of unconventional warfare by intelligence agencies, law enforcement and specific elements of the military to defeat an underground conducting subversion against the United States or its allies.

One of the most important aspects of unconventional warfare is that by nature it is both political and psychological. It can be summarized this way: “The intent of UW operations is to exploit a hostile power’s political, military, economic, and psychological vulnerabilities by advising, assisting, and sustaining resistance forces.” It is designed to achieve political effects and one of the ways it does so is through extensive psychological warfare efforts. One of the most concrete examples of this is Al Qaeda’s focus on radicalization throughout its target areas on virtually every continent of the world to include North America. In the case of the perpetrators of the Boston Marathon bombing whether they were indirectly self radicalized and acted on their own or were radicalized directly through contact with Al Qaeda or affiliates matters little because either situation shows the effects of Al Qaeda’s psychological warfare campaign.

While I strongly believe that Al Qaeda and our enemies are conducting unconventional warfare; I am not asserting that they are not conducting terrorist operations. They certainly are and will very likely continue to do so. Terrorism is an integral part of the political and psychological component of unconventional warfare and no one has described this better than Bruce Hoffman in his seminal work, *Inside Terrorism* with parts excerpted here:

“...define terrorism as the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change. All terrorist acts involve violence or the threat of violence. Terrorism is specifically designed to have far-reaching psychological effects beyond the immediate victim(s) or object of the terrorist attack. It is meant to instill fear within, and thereby intimidate, a wider ‘target audience’ that might include a rival ethnic or religious group, an entire country, a national government or political party, or public opinion in general. Terrorism is designed to create power where there is none or to consolidate power where there is very little. Through the publicity generated by their violence, terrorists seek to obtain the leverage, influence and power they otherwise lack to effect political change on either a local or an international scale.”

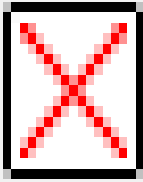
In sum we face a threat that is executing unconventional warfare against the US and its friends, partners and allies and because it is inherently political and psychological a major tactic employed includes terrorism.

Some will ask, so what? How does this help to defend the US and its interests? First a deep understanding of the threat and its methods allows a strategy to be developed to counter the enemy’s overall strategy and not solely on his use of terrorism to achieve his subversive political and psychological goals. As important as capturing and killing high value terrorist targets is, it is more important to be able to attack the enemy’s strategy because doing so not only can contribute to preventing terrorist acts but also will contribute to defending vulnerable people from radicalization as well as the general public from becoming disillusioned with the government and its agencies who are working hard to defeat the threats.

Second, by understanding the enemy’s strategy a *counter*-unconventional warfare strategy can be devised that will allow US law enforcement and homeland security agencies with intelligence support to locate and defeat the underground elements attempting to infiltrate, radicalize, and execute operations on US soil. Without an underground, effective terrorist operations cannot be conducted. Overseas, intelligence and military forces (with law enforcement support) who possess deep knowledge and understanding of unconventional warfare can advise and assist friends, partners and allies, to disrupt and defeat underground networks and deny sanctuary, resources, mobility, and popular support for the threat organizations.

For those who argue over whether the war on terrorism has been successful or not or whether we should or should not be waging a war against terrorism, I would say that we are having the wrong debate. We need to recognize that the threat, mostly in the form of Al Qaeda and its affiliates, exists and continues to operate. But more importantly we must understand that it is waging unconventional warfare and only using terrorism as one of the means of its strategy. In so doing we can then commence on developing a counter-unconventional warfare strategy and with that strategy employ the right means and ways to achieve our ends which must be the defeat of specified threats that are waging unconventional war.

About the Author



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