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# TESTIMONY

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## The Future of Irregular Warfare

SETH G. JONES

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Testimony presented before the House Committee on Armed Services,  
Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities on March 27, 2012

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**Seth G. Jones<sup>1</sup>**  
**The RAND Corporation**

***The Future of Irregular Warfare*<sup>2</sup>**

**Before the Committee on Armed Services  
Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities  
United States House of Representatives**

**March 27, 2012**

Over the past decade, the United States has faced considerable irregular warfare challenges. Take Afghanistan. By early 2012, there were approximately 432,000 counterinsurgency forces in Afghanistan – approximately 90,000 U.S. soldiers, 30,000 NATO soldiers, 300,000 Afghan National Security Forces, and 12,000 Afghan Local Police.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the United States spent over \$100 billion per year and deployed a range of sophisticated platforms and systems.<sup>4</sup> The Taliban, on the other hand, deployed between 20,000 and 40,000 forces (a ratio of nearly 11 to 1 in favor of counterinsurgents) and had revenues of \$100-\$200 million per year (a ratio of 500 to 1 in favor of counterinsurgents). In addition, Afghan insurgent groups focused on a range of asymmetric strategies and tactics, from tribal engagement to the use of improvised explosive devices and the Internet. Yet the Taliban's ability to utilize limited resources and sustain a prolonged insurgency highlight some of America's irregular warfare challenges. Consequently, this testimony focuses on three questions:

- What types of irregular warfare challenges is the United States likely to face in the future?
- What strategies are best suited to deal with future challenges?
- What are existing examples or models to support these strategies and effectively manage irregular warfare challenges?

Much like with terrorism and insurgency, there are a range of definitions for irregular warfare. In practical terms, irregular warfare is a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over a specific population. Irregular threats include actors who employ methods such as guerrilla warfare, terrorism, sabotage, subversion, criminal activities, and

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<sup>1</sup> The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

<sup>2</sup> This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT374.html>.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Report on Progress and Stability in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, October 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Amy Belasco, *The Cost of Iraq, Afghanistan, and Other Global War on Terror Operations Since 9/11* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 29, 2011).

insurgency.<sup>5</sup> This testimony begins with a brief discussion of irregular warfare challenges, including the threat from state and non-state actors. Next, it outlines irregular warfare strategies for situations in which the United States supports both counterinsurgents *and* insurgents. It then discusses the Village Stability Operations program in Afghanistan as a useful model.

## I. IRREGULAR WARFARE CHALLENGES

What types of irregular warfare challenges is the United States likely to face in the future? Over the next decade, the United States will likely face a range of irregular warfare challenges. They include threats from non-state actors like terrorist groups (such as al Qa'ida and Hezbollah), drug-trafficking organizations (such as Mexican cartels), and violent global activists (such as anarchist groups). The United States will also face threats from states that generate irregular warfare challenges purposefully (such as Iran) and from those who do so inadvertently because of weak governance (such as instability in Mexico). These threats are increasingly networked, adaptable, and empowered by cyberspace to find new ways to recruit, collect intelligence, train, distribute propaganda, finance, and operate.

To illustrate future threats, it is useful to highlight al Qa'ida and its affiliates, who some skeptics dismiss as being significantly weakened. The future threat from al Qa'ida and its affiliates will likely depend on several factors: the survival of a leadership structure; weak governments in North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia; and some support from local cells. Based on current trends, it appears likely that al Qa'ida will retain key leaders (though not necessarily in Pakistan), some governments will remain weak, and al Qa'ida will enjoy local support in some countries. Its objectives will likely remain fairly consistent: overthrowing multiple regimes to establish a pan-Islamic caliphate (the near enemy, or *al-Adou al-Qareeb*), and fighting the United States and its allies who support them (the far enemy, or *al-Adou al-Baeed*). But how these trends develop is unclear. For instance, al Qa'ida may become increasingly decentralized as a global movement, with central al Qa'ida in Pakistan becoming less relevant as power devolves to its affiliates in Iraq (al Qa'ida in Iraq), Yemen (al Qa'ida in the Arabian Peninsula), Somalia (al Shabaab), North Africa (al Qa'ida in the Islamic Maghreb), or other locations. This decentralization would lead al Qa'ida down a path envisioned by the Syrian strategist Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, who encouraged Muslims to become involved in "individual jihad" and "small cell terrorism."<sup>6</sup>

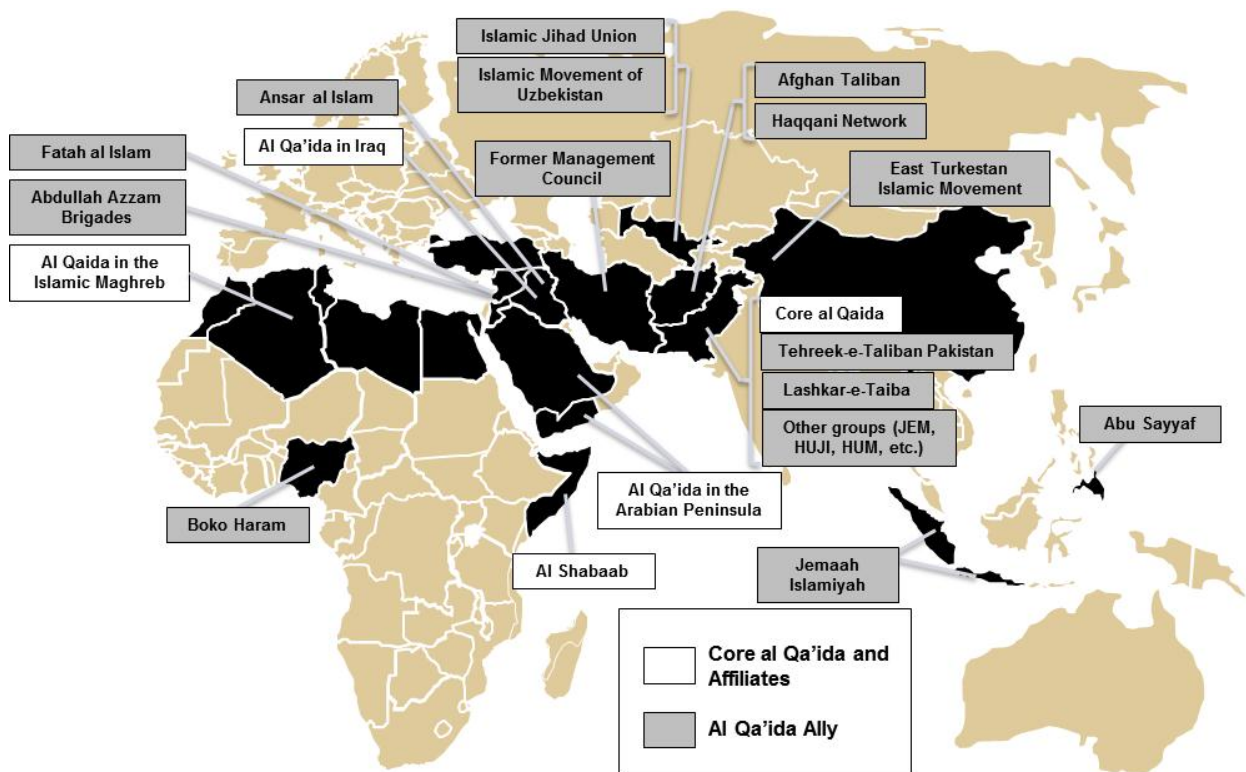
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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, U.S. Department of Defense, *Irregular Warfare: Countering Irregular Threats* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, May 2010).

<sup>6</sup> Abu Mus'ab al-Suri, "The Jihadi Experiences: The Schools of Jihad," *Inspire*, Summer 1431, 2010, p. 49.

Still, al Qa'ida's pan-Islamic movement suggests that the United States will need to counter its support in multiple regions.<sup>7</sup> Figure 1 shows al Qa'ida's affiliates (groups whose emirs have sworn *bay'at* to al Qa'ida's leaders) and allies across the globe. The map highlights countries in which al Qa'ida may aid insurgent groups in the future. In some of these countries, such as Saudi Arabia, it has already tried – and failed – to initiate an insurgency, but could try again.<sup>8</sup> In others, such as Yemen and Iraq, it is already assisting insurgent groups. Countries shaded in black represent those with a current presence where al Qa'ida could support – or continue to support – insurgencies. Of particular note are countries in Africa (such as Nigeria and Egypt) and the Middle East (such as Jordan and Iran) where al Qa'ida could provide aid to insurgencies if there is an opportunity.

Figure 1: Potential Areas Impacted by Al Qa'ida and its Affiliates



<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Thomas Hegghammer, "The Rise of Muslim Foreign Fighters: Islam and the Globalization of Jihad," *International Security*, Vol. 35, No. 3, Winter 2010/11, pp. 53-94.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hegghamer, *Jihad in Saudi Arabia: Violence and Pan-Islamism since 1979* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

In addition to these threats, there are a range of challenges that may impact the future of U.S. irregular warfare efforts. Examples include:

- **Inter-Agency Cooperation:** Inter-agency cooperation appears to have improved between some organizations, such as U.S. Special Operations and the Central Intelligence Agency. But it has been mixed between other organizations, such as the Department of Defense and civilian agencies like the Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development. These challenges have, at times, strained relations between military and civilian agencies at the strategic, operational, and tactical levels from Afghanistan to Yemen.
- **Vietnam War Syndrome:** There is also a possibility that the challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan – as well as the prospect of conventional conflict in such areas as North Korea and Taiwan – will tempt some in the U.S. military to dismiss the importance of irregular warfare in the future. As John Nagl concluded in his study of counterinsurgency warfare, referring to the post-Vietnam era: “Rather than squarely face up to the fact that army counterinsurgency doctrine had failed in Vietnam, the army decided that the United States should no longer involve itself in counterinsurgency operations.”<sup>9</sup> Not only will irregular warfare remain important for the foreseeable future, but there is a growing body of useful analysis on topics like how insurgencies end that needs to be preserved.<sup>10</sup>
- **Health of U.S. Forces:** More than a decade of combat has taxed U.S. forces involved in irregular warfare. Soldiers have had to deal with considerable stress on their families, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), battle wounds, and numerous other challenges.
- **Technological Changes:** Insurgent and terrorist groups will increasingly utilize the Internet and social media forums to communicate, distribute propaganda, recruit individuals, and accomplish other tasks in the future.<sup>11</sup> Figure 2 highlights trends in global Internet Protocol (IP) traffic through 2015. Overall, IP traffic is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 32 percent through 2015, which suggests that the number of devices connected to IP networks could be twice as high as the global

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<sup>9</sup> John A. Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya to Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), p. 207.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Ben Connable and Martin C. Libicki, *How Insurgencies End* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010); Christopher Paul, Colin P. Clarke, and Beth Grill, *Victory Has a Thousand Fathers: Sources of Success in Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010); Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson III, “Rage Against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars,” *International Organization*, Vol. 63, Winter 2009, pp. 67-106.

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Rid and Marc Hecker, *War 2.0: Irregular Warfare in the Information Age* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009).

population in 2015.<sup>12</sup> By 2015, Wi-Fi and mobile devices could account for as much as 54 percent of IP traffic, while wired devices could account for 46 percent of IP traffic. This growth will not just occur in the West, but may grow at the fastest rates in Latin America, the Middle East, and Africa.<sup>13</sup> These developments will likely have a notable impact on insurgent operations and tactics, making it easier for insurgents to recruit, distribute propaganda, and communicate.

Figure 2: Global IP Traffic, 2010-2015<sup>14</sup>

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	CAGR 2010-2015
<b>By Type (Petabytes Per Month)<sup>15</sup></b>							
Fixed Internet	14,955	20,650	27,434	35,879	46,290	59,354	32%
Managed IP	4,989	6,839	9,014	11,352	13,189	14,848	24%
Mobile Data	237	546	1,163	2,198	3,806	6,254	92%
<b>By Segment (Petabytes Per Month)</b>							
Consumer	16,221	23,130	31,592	42,063	54,270	70,045	34%
Business	3,930	4,894	6,011	7,357	8,997	10,410	22%
<b>By Geography (Petabytes Per Month)</b>							
North America	6,998	9,947	12,978	16,116	18,848	22,274	26%
Western Europe	4,776	6,496	8,819	11,774	15,187	18,858	32%
Asia Pacific	5,368	7,317	9,847	13,341	18,060	24,150	35%
Japan	1,414	1,923	2,540	3,283	4,019	4,762	27%
Latin America	665	993	1,465	2,158	3,238	4,681	48%
Central and Eastern Europe	708	1,004	1,413	1,955	2,700	3,713	39%
Middle East and Africa	253	366	550	802	1,235	2,019	52%
<b>Total (Petabytes Per Month)</b>							
Total IP Traffic	20,151	28,023	37,603	49,420	63,267	80,456	32%

## II. STRATEGIES

What strategies are best suited to deal with future challenges? The U.S. Department of Defense's 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review and 2012 Strategic Review briefly mention irregular warfare.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> The compound annual growth rate measures the rate of return for an investment over an investment period, such as 5 or 10 years. It is also called a "smoothed" rate of return because it measures the growth of an investment as if it had grown at a steady rate on an annually compounded basis.

<sup>13</sup> Cisco Systems, *Cisco Visual Networking Index: Forecast and Methodology, 2010-2015* (San Jose, CA: Cisco, 2011); Cisco Systems, *Cisco Visual Networking Index: Global Mobile Data Traffic Forecast Update, 2011-2016* (San Jose, CA: Cisco, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Cisco Systems, *Cisco Visual Networking Index: Forecast and Methodology, 2010-2015* (San Jose, CA: Cisco, 2011), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> A petabyte is a unit of information equal to one quadrillion bytes, or 1,000 terabytes.



But these documents do not outline irregular warfare strategies if, by “strategy,” we mean a plan for using armed forces and other instruments to achieve military and political goals. The U.S. Department of Defense’s publication *Irregular Warfare: Countering Irregular Threats* deals more substantively with irregular warfare, yet it focuses on how U.S. military forces are expected to conduct joint *operations* within a military campaign in the future – not on strategies.<sup>17</sup> In the absence of irregular warfare strategies in these assessments, we must look elsewhere. Below I outline several examples.

## A. Counterinsurgency

There are two main counterinsurgency strategies for irregular warfare applicable to the United States.<sup>18</sup>

**Population-centric:** The first is the population-centric strategy outlined in Field Manual 3-24 and other sources.<sup>19</sup> FM 3-24 drew many of its best practices from such cases as the British in Malaya and the French in Algeria. In these and a range of other cases, the counterinsurgent was also the government. However, in most current cases, it is more difficult for outside powers to force local governments to make necessary political changes. As the U.S. experienced in Vietnam and Afghanistan, an outside power cannot force a local government to be legitimate.<sup>20</sup> In addition, deploying large numbers of outside forces – as some advocates of this strategy insist – has not always been successful.

**Indirect:** In some cases a better approach may be an indirect strategy that focuses on advising, equipping, and supporting local regular and irregular forces and actors. This type of assistance – which includes foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare – has historically been performed by U.S. Special Operations Forces and intelligence agencies. U.S. efforts to assist the Philippines in 1950s and again since 2001, Thailand in the 1960s, and Colombia against its insurgents in the 1990s and 2000s were relatively successful in weakening or defeating insurgent groups. In each case, the United States used an indirect approach rather than a direct approach. The indirect approach meant that U.S. personnel provided advice and support to host nation

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<sup>16</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2010); U.S. Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership: Priorities for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Defense* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, January 2012)

<sup>17</sup> U.S. Department of Defense, *Irregular Warfare*.

<sup>18</sup> There are several other strategies, including ones that involve large-scale brutality against a local population, that are not applicable to the United States today.

<sup>19</sup> U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps, *Counterinsurgency*, FM 3-24, MCWP 3-33.5 (Washington, DC: Headquarters Department of the Army and Headquarters Marine Corps Combat Development Command (December 2006). On other work, see Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*.

<sup>20</sup> T.X. Hammes, “Counterinsurgency Isn’t a Strategy – But it Is a Necessary Capability,” Draft Paper, February 2012, pp. 5-6.

forces as those nations did the fighting. While this support at times even included tactical leadership, the focus was always on assisting the host nation and not on U.S. elements engaging the enemy.<sup>21</sup>

## **B. Insurgency**

At other times, the United States may be involved in supporting insurgent groups and will likely have to choose between one of two strategies.

**Maoist insurgent strategy:** First is the traditional Maoist-style strategy of guerrilla warfare, which the United States supported against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. It involves organizing a portion of a state's population to impose exorbitant costs on the government.<sup>22</sup> Although a Maoist strategy targets opposing armed forces and their support networks, its goal is to destroy the *will* of the attacker, not necessarily its capacity to fight. It is not a strategy aimed at securing a quick government defeat. As Mao notes, it aims to exhaust the enemy into submission: "When guerrillas engage a stronger enemy, they withdraw when he advances; harass him when he stops; strike him when he is weary; pursue him when he withdraws. In guerrilla strategy, the enemy's rear, flanks, and other vulnerable spots are his vital points, and there he must be harassed, attacked, dispersed, exhausted and annihilated."<sup>23</sup>

A Maoist strategy consists of three sequential but overlapping phases. The first involves organizing insurgent political and military structures from among the population. As Mao concluded: "A primary feature of guerrilla operations is their dependence upon the *people* themselves to organize battalions and other units."<sup>24</sup> One of the primary objectives during the first phase is to persuade as many people as possible – by co-opting or coercing them – to commit to the movement. While a Maoist strategy has generally been implemented in rural insurgencies, and was conceived by Mao for that purpose, it has also been adapted to urban insurgencies. If the insurgents can gradually gain support and achieve initial military successes, they enter the second and longest phase, which is characterized by guerrilla warfare and progressive expansion. Further victories, if they occur, may lead to demoralization, lethargy, and defections from the government. This leads to a third phase, which involves destruction of the enemy.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>22</sup> Mao Tse-Tung, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, trans. Samuel B. Griffith II (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Ivan Arreguín-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars: A Theory of Asymmetric Conflict* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 32-33.

<sup>23</sup> Mao, *On Guerrilla Warfare*, p. 46.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 51. Emphasis added.

Insurgents shift to mobile conventional attacks on a large scale with the hope of government collapse.<sup>25</sup>

**Conventional insurgent strategy:** The second is a conventional strategy, which the United States supported against the Taliban in 2001.<sup>26</sup> It involves skipping Mao's first two stages and focusing on conventional military action against the government. This strategy includes the use of armed forces to capture or destroy the adversary's armed forces, thereby gaining control of its values – population, territory, cities, or vital industrial and communications centers. The goal is to win the war in a decisive engagement or a series of engagements by destroying the adversary's physical capacity to resist. Insurgent forces may, for example, advance to capture a defender's values or strategic assets – like a capital city, communications center, or base – and the defender moves to thwart that effort. A battle or series of battles then follows until one side admits defeat or there is a political settlement.<sup>27</sup>

### III. USEFUL MODELS

One of the most useful – and recent – models has been the development of Village Stability Operations (VSO) and Afghan Local Police (ALP), indirect programs that supplement direct action and civilian efforts in Afghanistan. They have been developed over the last three years by Special Operations Forces in a range of rural villages. Their goals are to help Afghans stand up for themselves and re-empower their traditional institutions of security, economic development, and informal governance in step with Afghan history and culture. VSO and ALP are joint and inter-agency in nature. Since 2009, VSO and ALP have involved deploying Afghan and U.S. forces to Afghan villages to help local communities provide security, governance, and development – and better connect them to the central government. VSO and ALP sites quickly multiplied across the country and have been successful in regaining territory from the Taliban.

### IV. CONCLUSION

Based on America's recent experience in irregular warfare and future threats, there are several issues that should be considered:

- **Organization:** Based on current threats and challenges, U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) should play the frontline Department of Defense role in countering terrorist, insurgent, and other irregular warfare threats. Despite the

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<sup>25</sup> Bard E. O'Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse*, Second Edition (Washington, DC: Potomac Books, 2005), p. 50.

<sup>26</sup> Walter Lacquer, *Guerrilla Warfare: A Historical and Critical Study* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998); Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>27</sup> Arreguin-Toft, *How the Weak Win Wars*, pp. 30-31.

austere economic environment, it would be wise to continue – if not increase – funds for a range of programs in the future, such as 1208 and the Village Stability Operations / Afghan Local Police programs (the latter which are paid for using Afghanistan Security Force Funds).

- **Health of U.S. Forces:** U.S. soldiers and their families have dealt with enormous stress because of irregular warfare deployments. The likely continuation of these threats – and deployments – suggests that the U.S. Department of Defense needs to continue improving its physical and mental health programs for soldiers and their families. Incidents such as the March 2012 alleged killing of civilians in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan by a U.S. soldier have a negative strategic impact on U.S. irregular warfare operations – and U.S. foreign policy more broadly.
- **Training and Education:** U.S. irregular warfare training has been ad hoc, especially for conventional U.S. forces. Education at core U.S. military institutions, such as the U.S. Army War College, has been better. But there is a danger that irregular warfare training and funding will be cut because some services and institutions may view it as antiquated. Much like after the Vietnam War, this would be a serious mistake.
- **Inter-Agency Cooperation:** Congress may consider supporting an assessment of inter-agency “lessons learned” during irregular warfare campaigns, as it has done for inter-agency teams conducting counterterrorism operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Inter-agency cooperation has not been as effective as it should be, and it may be worth considering an objective, analytical evaluation.

The irregular warfare struggle will be a long one. The battlefield remains a global one, stretching from the great shores of America and the United Kingdom to the rugged peaks of Yemen and Pakistan. This struggle will be measured in decades, not months or years – a concept that doesn’t come easy easily to most Westerners.