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From the Editor

Mariupol. Kharkiv. Bucha. Donbas. We've all quickly, unintentionally become experts on Ukrainian geography, tutored by a relentless barrage of news stories and videos detailing the Russian assault. After months of ferocious battle, what's the endgame: victory? Stalemate? Partition? Who knows? Even Vladimir Putin, venting his rage against Ukraine's intransigent bid to be European while yanking his own country from authoritarian kleptocracy into neo-fascist totalitarianism, appears to be flailing for an answer.

In 2013, Russian General Valery Gerasimov described a concept of cyber-enhanced hybrid war that came to bear his name. The "Gerasimov Doctrine" may have originated more as a conspiracy theory about the West than as military guidance, and much of what it describes may not actually be new, but its cogent analysis of how irregular, cyber, and special warfare can be combined with covert influence operations to undermine a society's institutions and lead to a government's downfall struck a nerve—or rang a bell—everywhere.¹ Russia had already tested several of the tactics in Georgia, but the tightly orchestrated 2014 invasion of Crimea and seeding of insurrection in Ukraine's Donbas region served as proofs of concept. Many observers are now struggling to redefine warfare itself. If, as Gerasimov warned, "the very 'rules of war' have changed" and the actual declaration of war has apparently become passé, how do we know when we're at war?² Should the atrocities attributed to Russian soldiers in Ukraine fall under the trending rubric of "terrorism," as some declare, or are they just the same old war crimes the Geneva Conventions were meant to control a hundred years ago? Is it a brave new world we live in, or Groundhog Day?

Whatever answer we may choose to believe, the reality is that hybrid/irregular warfare is now the norm because it works. The United States just extricated itself from its second 20-year quagmire against a much weaker but unconventional, and ultimately victorious, adversary in a little over half a century. The French are pulling their forces out of Mali in the face of an extremist insurgency they can't control. And Gerasimov's ideas are defeating his army in parts of Ukraine.

Our first feature article, by Dr. Siamak Naficy, delves into what he terms "delinquency," the edge of the political space where grievance is radicalized into alienation and, often, violence. For those who take pride in posing as antagonistic outsiders in opposition to the larger society, the ends of moral and political

rectification can justify whatever means are needed to get society there, regardless of what is destroyed in the process.

The next article looks through the lens of the 2012-2013 Malian Civil War to evaluate the effectiveness of irregular warfare tactics against a conventional opponent. Major Ryan Hess demonstrates how al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) made a serious strategic error when it shifted from cultivating popular support and using hit-and-run attacks against the Malian army to controlling territory by force and establishing a line of battle.

The final feature article is a story about terrorism with a twist. Lieutenant Commander Nikolaj Lindberg describes a fictional terrorist attack in Mali that uses a heretofore unknown and horrifyingly effective chemical agent. Told from the point of view of the former French Minister of Defense, Florence Parly, the author guides us through the exhausting, often frustrating work of trying to figure out what happened, how it happened, who did it, and how to stop it from happening again.

The *CTX* Interview brings you two conversations between Dr. John Arquilla and Ali Nazary, Head of Foreign Relations for the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF). They spoke for the first time on 8 September 2021, shortly after the US withdrawal from Afghanistan, as NRF forces were defending positions in the Panjshir Valley from Taliban attacks. The second conversation took place on 29 January 2022, as the Taliban were consolidating their control over the country.

We have two book reviews in this issue. First, Dr. Craig Whiteside discusses *Irregular Soldiers and Rebellious States: Small-Scale U.S. Interventions Abroad*, in which author Michael P. Noonan examines US irregular warfare practice and the implications of changes in warfighting strategy for the future. Major Timothy Bettis reviews *Head of the Mossad: In Pursuit of a Safe and Secure Israel* by Shabtai Shavit. Shavit discusses the Mossad's activities in the context of Israel's modern history, geopolitical position, and policy making from the point of view of someone deeply invested in a secure future for his country.

Be sure to read about *Outsourcing Duty: The Moral Exploitation of the American Soldier*, the latest book from Drs. Michael J. Robillard and Bradley J. Strawser, in the Publication Announcements.

Our mission is to bring you stories, essays, research, and ideas that will inspire and encourage you as you pursue your mission of countering threats to security wherever they arise. Do you have a story or comment that you would like to share with the community? What ideas do you have to make *CTX* even better? Write to us at CTXeditor@globalecco.org and follow Global ECCO on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/GlobalECCO/>.

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NOTES

1. Mark Galeotti, "The Gerasimov Doctrine," *Berlin Policy Journal* (May/June 2020): <https://berlinpolicyjournal.com/the-gerasimov-doctrine/>
2. Molly K. McKew, "The Gerasimov Doctrine," *Politico*, September/October 2017: <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/09/05/gerasimov-doctrine-russia-foreign-policy-215538/>

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THE CTX INTERVIEW

Ali Maisam Nazary, Head of Foreign Relations, National Resistance Front of Afghanistan

Interviewed by Dr. John Arquilla, US Naval Postgraduate School, retired

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Dr. Craig Whiteside is an associate professor of national security affairs in the US Naval War College resident program at NPS, and a former US Army officer.



COVER PHOTO

French soldiers patrol the streets of Gao, Mali, on 4 December 2021.
(Photo by Thomas COEX / AFP)

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FEARED & REVERED

Dr. Siamak Naficy, US Naval Postgraduate School

“The best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

—W.B. Yeats, *The Second Coming*

HOW COULD 75,000 TALIBAN sweep Afghan cities from 300,000 well-trained, better-equipped government forces—forces that mostly folded and fled? Various explanations have been offered, from naïve, racist, and orientalist notions that Afghans are wholly different people with a primitive culture, to more nuanced but incomplete ideas about how the Taliban promise at least stability in a sea of chaos and corruption, but each explanation avoids probing Taliban fighters’ readiness to die as “martyrs,” and to do so even outside the battlespace.

The argument that these fundamentalist fighters think they will enter heaven upon death fails to untangle belief in the sense of an intellectual insight (“I will go to heaven”) from belief as a discursive practice of engagement. Once collective or religious zealotry enters into a violent and existential conflict, we each subjectivize or individualize our group ideology and make it part of us. And objective truth just doesn’t motivate like wartime subjective truth.

The scientific and positivist notion of knowledge in the liberal capitalist West as an “objective” approach to reality presupposes a horizon with unbiased experts at one end and self-interested consumers—“rational” actors—at the other. It is from this viewpoint of universal expertism and atomized self-serving that behaviors that decrease survival, such as suicide bombing or going unvaccinated, are seen as wholly irrational.

The Taliban are not some primitive bunch of pre-modern thinkers. It is a mistake to think their society has not experienced the kind of individualism that Westerners believe is a natural stage of societal advancement. To understand what motivates groups like the Taliban, we must understand the material power of an ideology that is



Afghan evacuees board a US Air Force plane at Hamid Karzai International Airport, Kabul, Afghanistan, 22 August 2021.

not simply about the strength of conviction itself. We have to acknowledge how our beliefs make our identity. Their inseparability is what creates the invincible persona of the Taliban, which the opposition largely lacks.

It’s no puzzle if we consider it. Why do so many people of the Third World, people who felt the sting of colonial humiliation, and economic and political exploitation, seem to attack most fiercely the arguably best part of Western Enlightenment’s legacy: the questioning of any authority that restricts our individual freedoms? Is it hard to see that much of the anger comes from the sense of hypocrisy on display? Since the end of WWII, the self-styled “liberal” West has violently dominated and exploited vulnerable regions while presenting that domination as a vehicle for freedom and democracy.

It may be that objective and comparatively lackluster ideologies will need substantially greater appeal to overcome the specific subjectivized ideologies of fighters, martyrs,



Berkeley fans cheer on the Golden Bears during a game against UC Davis at Memorial Stadium.

and tribes. The Taliban have the edge of a subjective existential belief. The coalition-trained forces had only the unexciting and objective consumerist ideology of the West. The vague and abstract notions of “freedom” (in what context?), “democracy” (often conflated as simply being a client of the United States), and consumption (subject to globalization and its cheap, mass-produced goods) do not always have the appeal that Americans believe they have. In other words, the occupation forces weren’t able to subjectivize the American vision or tailor it to the relevant peoples of Afghanistan.

This is to suggest that anti-capitalist or anti-liberal state goals that feel “impossible” to those who have already been persuaded by American ideology and who embrace the idea that history really “ought to be over” are by no means necessarily such.¹ Liberal ideology holds that beliefs and opinions are up for dialogue and discussion: there’s a free market of ideas and none of them is a matter of life or death. But that’s not true for many other ideologies. An *agonistic* identity—a war-fighting mindset defined in opposition to the mainstream—can make it seem like “we, the people” can do anything. In other words, belief systems like the Taliban’s are totalitarian in the sense that they can be totalizing. Such belief is not just a “perspective”; it gives one a reason to live, a reason to die.

An agonistic identity—a war-fighting mindset defined in opposition to the mainstream—can make it seem like “we, the people” can do anything.

The question, then, is how many Americans would be willing to lay down their lives to preserve liberal democracy in the United States? What if former Vice President Mike Pence had refused to certify the 2020 election and President Donald Trump remained in office indefinitely? I’m

not so sure that there are very many Americans so committed to liberal democracy that they’d be willing to give their lives to overthrow Trump. I fear we’d find more people willing to die for Trump than willing to die to protect Congress.

Like most solutions to the world’s environmental crises, there is a need for a fundamental paradigm shift in our approach to violent, anti-democratic ideologies. While one certainly can overstate the similarity of “American Taliban” to Afghanistan’s Taliban with regard to their subjective claims to truth and their anti-liberalism, anti-positivism, anti-cosmopolitanism, and so on, it is pretty clear how both are global “anti-globalist” movements.² Perhaps the best way to push back against them, then, is not through paradigms of self-interested consumerism, but rather in collective moral action.

Agon, Violence, and Victory

One of the indulgences of being a sports fan is that it can provide one with a certain kind of faith. This is, of course, implicit in the word “fan,” which comes from the Latin *fanaticus*, meaning “a worshipper.” On match days, a person can become, temporarily at least, a fundamentalist—what the writer Tim Parks calls “a weekend Taliban.”³ Good and bad are—momentarily—absolutely clear, as distinguishable as the color of the jersey players wear.

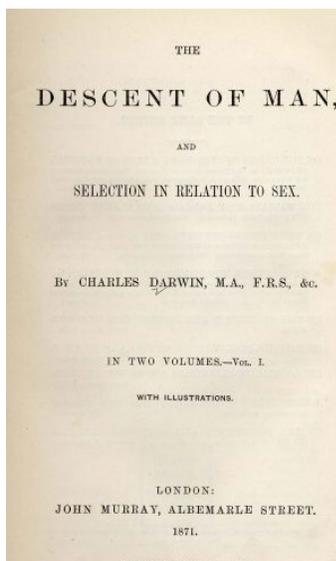
In association football (aka soccer), for example, fans can participate in a marvelously binary Manichaean theater: two teams, two goals, and two halves. If we humans cannot completely overcome our natural agonistic impulses, through sports we can, for a time, find a way to indulge them in a safe, usually harmless manner.⁴ Sporting tribalism, in the best way, allows its adherents to invest much meaning in something that is, basically, meaningless. In this globalized world, where fundamentalist religion and political idealism seem more risky than helpful, extreme devotion to a sports team seems to offer a powerfully

counterintuitive way of forming community and engaging with the sacred.

Whether the devotion is to a sports team (red or blue, AS Roma or SS Lazio, Giants or Dodgers) or a political party (labor or elite, liberal or conservative), tribalism itself can still evoke a great deal of visceral feeling.⁵

Another answer to the need for meaning—a proximate one, it must be said—is that tribalism can also help alleviate the boredom that is a common-enough side effect of modernity. Being fanatically devoted to a team of some kind can make life interesting again. It also provides us with “plug and play” narratives and ready-made adversaries. Identity is the stuff of purest meaning; belonging with others who share our sense of self is central to the meaning of identity. *We are us, together*, and being together now and connected together through time makes our sufferings and our sorrows, as well as our triumphs, stories to be celebrated.

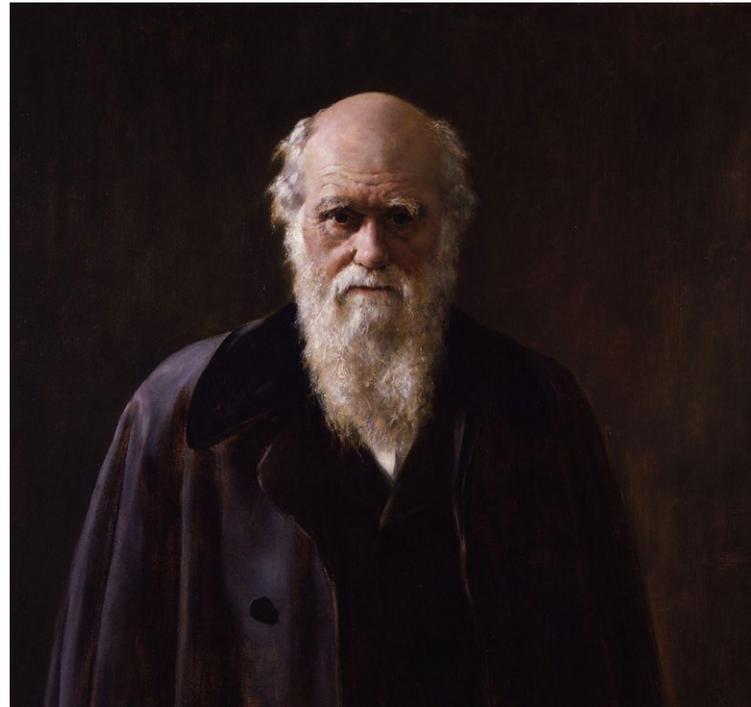
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Such emotionalism may have been adaptive in our distant past: early groups of humans who imagined an “us” through the observance of sacred principles that connected and bound them together (*religio* is Latin for “re-connect”) would have had an advantage over those who did not. This idea would have particular importance for survival, when the community of “us” was on the losing side of an existential conflict. In

On the Origin of the Species, Charles Darwin wrestled with the question of why people would ever be willing to risk themselves to help strangers.⁶ Only in 1871, in *The Descent of Man*, did Darwin find an answer: Societies that include brave people in their population would have an advantage when faced with *hopeless causes*—situations in which the brave act without regard for self-preservation or personal esteem in the event of success.⁷ In other words, particularly

in existential conflicts when losses against a superior competing group could mean genetic or cultural extinction, solidarity and moral commitments to group loyalty, sacrifice, and heroism would have been consequential.⁸ The experience of conflict against such an aggressor can also foster a greater appetite for punitive violence. In this way, a



Charles Robert Darwin, by John Collier, 1883.

sense of an existential conflict can both help build solidarity among local identities and adversely affect chances for diplomatic solutions.⁹ Like any other adaptation applied outside of the context for which it was developed, then, parochial attitudes and internecine behaviors can be maladaptive and cause us much harm in the present day.

Friedrich Nietzsche characterized the world of the ancient Greeks as one in which adversarial rivalries and joy in victory were accepted and even celebrated; from this worldview the Greeks derived early ethical concepts. When no wars were to be had, they arranged physical contests between opposing city-states. For Nietzsche, this embrace of contestation, rivalry, and discord ensured that the Greeks lived an agonistic form of life, but he emphasized that to them, “the aim of the agonistic education was the welfare of the whole, of the civic society.”¹⁰

Any appreciation of Nietzsche’s notorious views about power requires an analysis of the *agon*, or contest, since this guiding interest organized the central areas of his

philosophy.¹¹ While life, as seen through Nietzsche’s fixation on agon, is replete with struggle and always ends in death, it is the agon itself that can provide value and significance. The concept of agon was the North Star that led Nietzsche from his focus on the works of Homer, Socrates, and St. Paul to his one-time friendship with Richard Wagner—from aesthetics to metaphysics to ethics and psychology. According to him, the distance between modernity and the Classical world resides here; while the ancient Greeks found Homer’s scenes of vengeful combat in the *Iliad* thrilling and inspiring, we tend to find them unsettling and troubling. Living in a time of perennial peace, something that is held up as an ideal today, would not have been preferred by the Greeks, because rivalry, sacrifice, and victory helped to give their lives meaning. Reflecting on this gulf of emotional difference caused Nietzsche to posit that “forms of life” are distinguished by their conception of violence and victory, and that the ethics of the Classical world came from such models as the *Iliad*.¹²

Agonistic behavior needs equal and worthy rivals; for the Greeks, mere sporting rivalry was not enough. True heroic courage required not challengers but real, hateful foes. Importantly, the meaning of these rivalries did not lie in the annihilation of such an enemy, but rather in the engagement itself. Nietzsche explained that agonists must compete to elevate their own status, and also to elevate the status of their group, whether familial, tribal, racial, or political, thereby increasing the likelihood of generational continuity. In this way, the contest could be symbolic, but the *dominance* of the home group over the rival’s, and thus the long-term vitality of the agonist’s community and culture, were thought to depend on the engagement.¹³



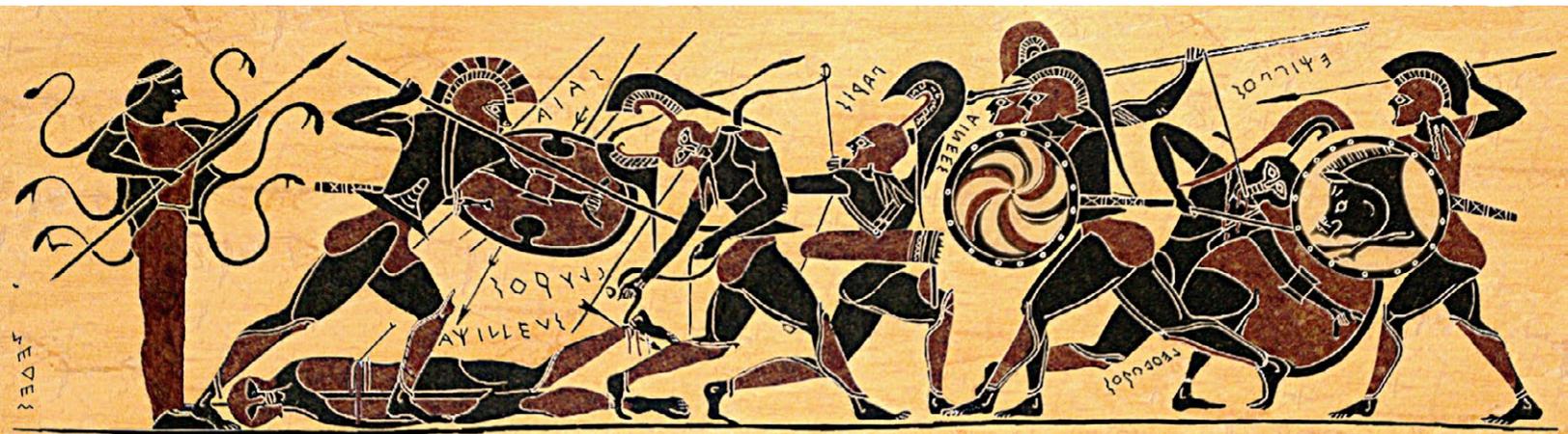
Scene from the *Iliad*, drawing by Michael Martin Drölling, 1815.

Like the Maori with their *haka* battle cry, the Greeks regarded *alala* as “the personified spirit (*daimona*) of the war cry.”¹⁴ Similar to a contest of ritual shouts on the battlefield, nearly all contemporary online “debates” on social media follow patterns of agonistic ritual; the quality of the facts or content matter little in these exchanges, because the goal is not really persuasion or the elevation of truth. Rather, such exchanges are the simulation of debate, whose real goals are simply *esprit de corps*—the confirmation of tribal identities, group honor, loyalty—and the disheartenment of the enemy.

Similar to a contest of ritual shouts

on the battlefield, nearly all contemporary online “debates” on social media follow patterns of agonistic ritual.

Viewed from within this particular framework, when a modern group of right-wing extremists, for example,



engages a particularly hated (and *necessary*) enemy such as civil rights activists, then even if there is no literal intent to murder, there will still be violence. What is a “patriot militia” but a well-armed gang with a sense of moral righteousness that barrio gangs rarely aspire to?

Defining *Delinquency*

Societies create delinquents. The very stability and order that an established society offers its population as communal goods to be cherished, nurtured, and defended invariably inspire some members of that society to rebel against the sacrifice of a degree of personal autonomy that a stable community requires. In a society where a concept of absolute personal autonomy comes to be fetishized over the existence of the society itself, delinquency can quickly mutate from a personal or political statement to an existential threat.

By *delinquent*, I don’t mean simply an alternative to the status quo but, rather, an alternative ethics. For the delinquent, the real or imaginary mainstream of the bourgeois liberal life—and its pull—is seen as a moral danger, such that much of a delinquent’s social life is centered around containing and rejecting its temptations. When delinquent institutions form and maintain themselves in the face of the state, this is usually referred to in revolutionary terms as a “dual power” situation. Since most states have not had the power to quell and crush every kind of resistance they face, nearly all of human history has actually been characterized by dual power.

If this were a purely theoretical work, I would explain that all this suggests an interesting way of synthesizing theories of value and theories of resistance. For present purposes, however, it is perhaps enough to say that the typical delinquent is part of a “counter-power” or “anti-power” movement, one within a collection of social institutions set in opposition to the state and its institutions: from deliberately autonomous communities to radical labor unions to denizens of temporary communities like Burning Man to “sovereign citizens” and extra-legal militias. By this measure, not only Salafism, Falun Gong, and the Amish, but many more mainstream religious faiths, such as Roman Catholicism, could also be “delinquent” in their relationship to state power. There are, again, many forms of resistance, which is why a universal, cookie-cutter approach to engaging with delinquent individuals and groups is bound to fail. What is necessary is a real anthropological engagement with these groups, where possible.

In his short work, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology*, the late anthropologist David Graeber showed that, by

“Delinquents”

here, then, refers to folks who wish to bring into the world something that is useless to the State, its economic base, and the prevailing status quo.

looking past the normative break between “pre-modern” and “modern” societies, we can form a much richer understanding of how alternative forms of resistance may work.¹⁵ He suggested that counter-power, at least in the most primordial sense, *already* existed in pre-modern egalitarian societies where the institutions of state and market were not present. Rather than being embodied in popular institutions that pose themselves against the power of chiefs, nobles, or plutocrats, resistance in these early societies was embodied in institutions whose purpose was to ensure that such hierarchies never came about in the first place. What these institutional forces “countered,” then, was the potential for the establishment of those hierarchies necessary for the formation of the state itself.

This viewpoint would help explain an otherwise peculiar fact: it is often the more egalitarian societies that are torn by rough inner politics, or at a minimum, by extreme forms of symbolic violence.¹⁶ Of course, all societies are to some degree at war with themselves. There are always clashes between competing interests, values, factions, clans, and the like. In more egalitarian societies, however, with their greater focus on crafting and sustaining communal consensus and harmony, this conflict often requires the creation of spectral enemies to stand in for real rivals within the group. Monsters, witches, vampires, werewolves, and the like become the fall guys for more human antagonists. Nowadays, of course, it’s communists, terrorists, Muslims, immigrants, scientists, or really any “outsider” to the aggrieved group.

In this way, the rubric “delinquent” can refer to those of the far right/alt-right who invaded the US Capitol

on 6 January 2021, but can as easily address the radical left: anarchists, communists, and the various modernist-aesthetic groups that have carved out their own intentional “delinquent spaces” in global modernity. “Delinquents” here, then, refers to folks who wish to bring into the world something that is useless to the State, its economic base, and the prevailing status quo.

which can be read as a kind of hyper- or total-performance (in the tradition of a Wagnerian *gesamtkunstwerk*, or “total work of art”), the Burning Man participants perform themselves into being.

Although Bowditch argues that Burning Man embodies a revival of values of anticorporatism and the premodern,



The Temple at Burning Man

My approach appreciates Antonio Gramsci’s position that arguably all aspects of human experience are political and involve the creation of knowledges (narratives) and counter-knowledges.¹⁷ In this way, even the so-called “apolitical” cultural or “nonviolent” entertainment events of our time can be considered along the spectrum of the delinquent.

One easy example of such a delinquency is the annual cultural event of Burning Man.¹⁸ There have already been numerous major academic studies published about the notorious, rich, and varied performance culture of the Burning Man festival that is annually staged in northwestern Nevada.¹⁹ Each year (pandemics permitting), some 35,000 souls make the pilgrimage to Black Rock City, the temporary urban entity constructed to host Burning Man on a vast dry lake bed. In her expansive work on the temporary cultural space of Burning Man, *On the Edge of Utopia*, Rachel Bowditch demonstrates that the culture of Burning Man, which is presented by its organizers as a utopian escape from “the default world” or the conventional “real” world, is often further expanded and replicated by its participants in the larger cultural realm.²⁰ In this way, through the performance culture of the event,

participatory community, she also admits that such endeavors are riddled with hypocrisy and contradiction. So, although it can be easily claimed that Burning Man’s participants fail to *not* support the market—i.e., corporatist consumer culture—materially, it can also be argued that they do succeed in constructing an annual temporary hypercommunity: as Bowditch suggests, “a complete symbolic system” from which they practice a logic different from and in some ways adverse to the broad market culture.²¹

Burning Man, however, is but one point of delinquency along the spectrum. Other contenders would include the various intentional communities of those seeking alternative lifestyles and/or alternatives to the state. In other words, resistance can take many forms. This points to the need for a true anthropology of delinquency—one that seeks to understand and address the needs of those who occupy the most radical and critical edges of modernity in rejection of the states and capitalists that seek deterritorialization, eradication of local particularism, and the homogenization of human diversity. Such work would seek to examine how phenomena such as extreme politics, habitualized violence, and physiological transformation

(“tats” and “dreads,” beard styles and clothing) promote the creation of intentional communities and spaces of delinquency against the state.

Perhaps the most visible aspect of delinquents is their various ritualized behaviors relating to their temporarily autonomous zones, like Burning Man as temporary autonomous city, or in the spectacle of the televised news media, where group identity is refashioned by, and is in part dependent upon, the gaze of the camera seeing delinquents as protestors, there in the temporary autonomous protest site. Like Burning Man participants, delinquents at such gatherings can also perform themselves into being. This is equally true of black-clad “antifa” delinquents on the left, finding their identity in part by the very presence of the riot police opposing them (who feel the same pull of identity), and the gun-toting, camo-gear “patriot” militias of the right, festooned with ethno-state imagery. Each typically can be found displaying homemade banners with various messages intended for their political/identity opponents, contiguous allies, and the broader general public.

But understanding the delinquent phenomenon in aesthetic terms of carnival protest, ritual, and performance is, even at best, partial, and leaves us wondering how to explain the full set of behaviors witnessed on the afternoon of 6 January 2021, when a mob supporting then-US President Donald Trump, who hoped to overturn his 2020 presidential election defeat, stormed the US Capitol in a violent attack directed at the 117th Congress.²² In the end, their actions led to a temporary suspension of government and the deaths of five people.

We focus so much on the liberation of the autonomous individual

that we come to see the world in almost completely political terms. This itself may be able to help explain the madness of American society today.

The details of the event reveal that the violence that was directed against the state but also, paradoxically, in the name of the state on 6 January, was not perpetrated without a political conscience or motivation. One of the consequences of the modern liberal order, especially in the United States, with its emphasis on self-definition and self-fulfillment, is that it places so much consequence on politics, on seeing life through a political lens. The state becomes the means to ensure the success of the individual



Protesters supporting US President Donald Trump break into the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 in Washington, DC.

and, in this way, the success of our lives comes through the achievement of certain goals in the pursuit of political ends. We focus so much on the liberation of the autonomous individual that we come to see the world in almost completely political terms. This itself may be able to help explain the madness of American society today, especially when it comes to questions of politics. Politics can never bear the weight, the pressure, and the expectations we’ve come to place on it over the past half century.

Actual mob and political violence aside, what we must try to understand is how these politicized delinquents use their respective ideologies to create, maintain, and elevate their rivalries and social life.

Culture and Ideology

Culture is reality’s playbook: it is a pattern of shared basic assumptions and norms learned by a group as it solves problems of external adaptation and internal integration. It is also “ideology,” in the sense that our own cultural lens relies on core notions, reflexive suppositions, assumed beliefs, and implicit expectations about the world and our place in it. It is the “unknown knowns”—the necessary fourth variable if we allow that “there are things that are known and things that are unknown.” It is what former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld left out in the initial articulation of his infamous theory of knowledge.²³ Culture is the things we know implicitly—the things we assume are true.

“Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.” So, to understand people, we must understand these “webs.”

This is why traveling to a foreign country can leave us feeling—pleasurably or uncomfortably—disoriented. Of course, even within a culture, there is meaningful variation, nor is it usually confined to specific territorial boundaries such as nation-states. Any attempt to categorize cultures must therefore consider and appreciate not just cultural variation and contradiction, but culture as a force of both continuity *and* change.

It is from within this perspective that I utilize the term “ideology,” as part of a particular lexicon to describe the culture and manner in which the delinquents I portray understand and interact with the world. Anthropology has helped develop a number of strategies for shedding light on the complex nature of the relationship between humans as cultural animals and their environment, broadly understood. Ideology has generally been the most popular way of designating a system of assumptions and logic that then crashes in some particular way upon reality.

Paul Kroskrity uses the term “ideology” to clarify the “language ideologies” that “represent the perception of language and discourse that is constructed in the interest of a specific social or cultural group.” He goes on to say that this includes “notions of what is ‘true,’ ‘morally good,’ or ‘aesthetically pleasing.’”²⁴ What he refers to, then, is a kind of methodology that explains and unpacks the link between knowledge and perceptions of reality. Biologist James Danielli used ideology in a reference to “the discursive practices which institute each human society’s field of consciousness.”²⁵

People’s behavior can’t be understood just through economic ideas like a rational cost-benefit analysis, or through studying how they are governed, or through an analysis of the means of production, or by assuming that philosophy

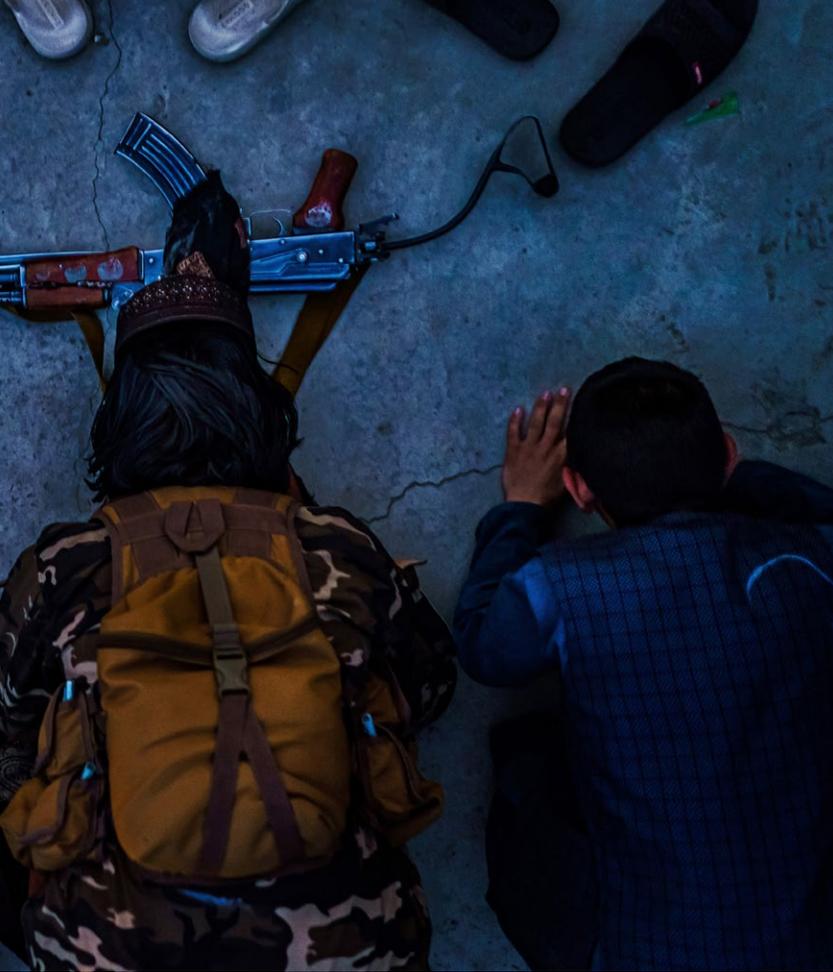


Taliban fighters pray outside a local mosque in Kabul on 26 August 2021.

meant the same for someone in eighteenth-century France as it does for someone in, say, modern-day Bali.²⁶ There are, in fact, no final definitions or supreme theories of cultural interpretation, but Clifford Geertz put it this way: “Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun.”²⁷ So, to understand people, we must understand these “webs.”

To make a facile example, extraterrestrial aliens wouldn’t understand millennial American culture just by watching the film *Fight Club* and translating the dialogue for analysis.²⁸ They’d have to understand the interconnecting themes between human biology, sexual selection, politics, twentieth-century ideas of masculinity, the various waves of feminism, and the history of marketing and advertisement, not to mention the history of Hollywood—things even Americans can have a hard time understanding. In this way, then, culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed, but instead a context within which these things can be intelligibly and richly described.

In this web of belief about the world and one’s place in it, every strand depends upon every other strand. But the cultural web is not an external structure in which we are



enclosed. It is the texture of our thought, and it is quite hard to accept that what we think is wrong. Nevertheless, these beliefs are not absolutely set; instead, they are variable and fluctuating, to allow for different situations and permit empirical observation and even doubts.

As delinquents construct what I will describe as an agonistic form of life, in which seemingly all social relations reflect a resolve to opposition and difference, they also develop an *emic* (in terms of an internal framework of understanding) disposition that delights in the creation of distance between themselves and others.²⁹ In this way, for many delinquents, myth (as well as agonism) is their testimony, witness, and evidence of holding an agenda that is greater than that of mere “delinquency.” Similar to the way anthropologists use the term “culture,” agonism can be fashioned into a guiding structural principle. Again, like culture itself, this kind of delinquency is the stuff of their reality, but delinquency differs from culture by deliberately setting itself in agonistic opposition to the conventional, prevailing culture.

The Centrality of Myth

Myth is central to beliefs. The miracle of our social lives, as well as our political culture, depends on beliefs, which in turn are based on myth. Saint Augustine described consciousness as an integration of “expectation, attention, and memory”: “the future, which [the mind] expects,

passes through the present, to which it attends, into the past, which it remembers.”³⁰ As Kirsten Hastrup has articulated, we use cultural symbols and institutions to create a bridge between the memory of our past and the anticipation of our future. In this way, it is in our present that action and experience join.³¹

How myth is used lends itself to being studied from the perspectives of the anthropological giants on myth: Durkheim, Malinowski, and Levi-Strauss. Emile Durkheim noted that myth, by way of ritual and ritualized institutional behavior, marks the norms of social order and, in this way, strengthens the social cohesion and unity of groups.³² Later, Bronislaw Malinowski connected the importance of myth in particular as an instrument in the legitimization of specific social structures, and in this way observed the link between myth, power, morality, and social mores.³³ Meanwhile, Claude Levi-Strauss focused on the meanings of myths, not in their narratives but in their subconscious structure, and in this way regarded myth as a tool for an objective, universal mode of thought.³⁴ Together, these three approaches can advance our understanding of the function, use, and aim of myths among radical and extremist groups. Because myths are cohesive and help form the basis of difference between groups, hold privileged links to morality and the legitimization of distinctive social structures, and can operate as self-standing phenomena, they are particularly valuable for a discussion of delinquency.

Delinquents live as what British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner called “social anti-structures.”³⁵ Many varieties of delinquents have withdrawn symbolically, and in some cases actually, from the larger community in order to fully embrace what Turner calls their “signal mark of identity.”³⁶ The “sovereign citizen” movement and neo-fascist militias that have proliferated in the United States over the past half century exemplify Turner’s characterization, as do radical Islamist organizations like al-Qaeda and ISIS; such groups often withdraw from the larger community to stand against the very state in which they operate.

While such extremists may be conscious of who they are (or are purported to be) politically and/or culturally, their political interest remains largely ritual and cultish. Politics of this kind are focused on transforming society, but on doing so only within the conditions of the constellation of myths that support the extremist phenomenon in question. This interest in political transformation from the perspective of the symbolic challenges the notion of a division between the interests of the “real”—as in material, power-oriented—elements of a group, and the interests of

the more symbolic, sign-driven, “language”-based-identity elements. To the contrary, we may better understand the aspirations of these groups along a continuum of change and action that simultaneously engages their emotions as well as their stated goals.

Remember that rapture and frenzy are always and perennially enemies of the state.

Remember that rapture and frenzy are always and perennially enemies of the state. It is true that the myths of the delinquent present a dystopian fall from purity—*it is a time of darkness* tropes—but they also offer ecstatic hope in good news, positivity and, in the case of QAnon or religious fundamentalism, a one true messiah.

Radicals, whether left, right, religious, or political, often believe that they and they alone hold the salvation for humanity, even if the way humanity may be speciated can vary. The constellation of myths that radicals orbit purport that they are the only remaining bastions of purity in a corrupted world, and that they are the “keepers of the faith,” the “fully lived humans” on guard against the victory of self-absorbed cosmopolitans. For example, American radicals’ myths at both ends of the political spectrum motivate them to critique bourgeois consumerism as a purpose for living and, more important, to seek to establish or maintain structures, in the form of both extremist groups and political organizations, that undermine the democratic and—in the case of the far right—the egalitarian foundations of the liberal state. What is important is how such a narrative operates as an ideal against modern liberal market-driven understandings and expectations of what it means to be human.

Perhaps because a different economic system seems unimaginable for most twenty-first-century humans, all that may be left is myth. Myth plays to feelings, to the emotions, in a way similar to advertising. There is strong utopian mythologizing by delinquent groups on both the far left and the far right that blames institutions for modern woes, as if they weren’t created by humans or were just created by the wrong kind of humans. Both sides tend to rest their arguments for radical change on the assumption that people will magically become honest, ethical, and reliable if only we could start over and do things the correct way: their way.

Friedrich Nietzsche urged the pursuit of a life in which myth acted to counter modernity’s “common-currency

humans” and the dearth of mystery. Nietzsche raged against the defeat of the heroic life spent in creative and dangerous pursuits of honor and nobility at the hands



A “Blue Lives Matter” flag, US Capitol, 6 January 2021.

The constellation of myths that radicals orbit purport that they are the only remaining bastions of purity in a corrupted world.

of modern life’s careerism and the utilitarian pursuit of money.³⁷ We see this embrace of noble suffering reflected clearly in ISIS’s use of Hollywood-style structures of individual personal glory and, particularly, the heroic martyr narrative, which uses narrative forms that are familiar to Western audiences and promises personal redemption.³⁸

Meanwhile, demagogic leaders around the world likewise rhetorically use not just absolutist framings and threat narratives, emphasizing non-negotiable boundaries, moral outrage at the supposed transgression of those boundaries, and a rejection of the political establishment generally, but also hold forth a promise of salvation in the hands

When the state and media become perceived as legitimate targets of agon and violence, this hostility in turn serves to assert and affirm the identity of the delinquents as they see themselves.

of heroic patriots who will help a true leader deliver the nation back to its rightful glory.³⁹

Georges Sorel understood myth as a “supra-ordinate goal,” the foundation of motivation and action.⁴⁰ He regarded the decline of myth as a motivator of behavior in the modern world to be a main contributor to the victory of a limited and shallow historical outlook that has no belief in *glory*, along with an atomistic individualism that has no understanding of or desire for collective greatness.⁴¹ Consider how George Orwell, in his 1940 review of *Mein Kampf*, understood the heart of the problem:

Hitler, because in his own joyless mind he feels it with exceptional strength, knows that human beings *don't* only want comfort, safety, short working-hours, hygiene, birth-control and, in general, common sense; they also, at least intermittently, want struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags, and loyalty parades. . . . Whereas Socialism, and even capitalism in a more grudging way, have said to people “I offer you a good time,” Hitler has said to them “I offer you struggle, danger and death,” and as a result a whole nation flings itself at his feet.⁴²

We need to recognize and understand myth, as Nietzsche and Sorel did, as a goal and a motivating force for a very particular way of life that is aggressive, violent, and martial.

Protest Sites and (Other) Delinquent Spaces Within the State

Writing in 1953, Julius Evola, Italian philosopher, anti-Semite, occultist, and a leading philosopher of Europe's neofascist movement, argued, “What is needed is a new radical front with clear boundaries between friend and foe. The future does not belong to those of crumbling and hybrid ideas but those of radicalism—the radicalism of absolute negations and majestic affirmations.”⁴³

Reflecting this assertion, it must be noted again that the delinquent's self-understanding is produced by an ever-present system of antagonisms. Rivalries between in-group members and those on the out—antagonisms in the name of city, state, region, geopolitical boundary, political affiliation, religion, and “race”—are crucial to the basis of the delinquent identity.

If agonism towards outgroups—particularly local outgroups—is a natural position of delinquency, it may follow that we can understand the hostility that delinquents on both the right and left express for the media and the state as a kind of “meta-natural.” If the delinquent is marked in part through agonism towards the conventional, mainstream culture, then the state and its perceived complicit servant of narratives, the media, both of which are in a position to define and describe delinquency as they wish, can become entangled as legitimate targets of agon. Note that such perception and behavior can be markedly contradictory. After all, on 6 January in Washington, DC, rioters beat police officers with poles carrying “Blue Lives Matter” flags.⁴⁴ When the state and media become perceived as legitimate targets of agon and violence, this hostility in turn serves to assert and affirm the identity of the delinquents as they see themselves.

According to Max Weber, “a State is a human community that (successfully) claims *the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force* within a given territory [emphasis in original].”⁴⁵ Weber then adds, “The State is considered the sole source of the ‘right’ to use violence,” and in this way it follows that force and violence must be restricted to only those authorized to use them by the state.⁴⁶ Sorel, distinguishing between the violence of a dissident outsider and violence done in the name of the state, notes the aptitude for, and function of, both intellectuals and bureaucrats in their service to state-sanctioned violence. He asserts, however, that, due to unfamiliarity with the martial, or perhaps disdain for direct violent action, these civil servants do their service mainly through the manipulation of an ethos and morality that condemn violence generally while justifying it for the state. In this way, Sorel asserts, morality itself is an instrument wielded by the state and its servants

against any disruptions to the stability of the liberal order and the modern marketplace.⁴⁷ Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, writing in the late twentieth century, goes yet further in describing a relationship between the state's monopoly on legitimate violence and the assimilation of the modern political subject into a system of protected happiness. The modern state, he suggests, "assumes and integrates the care of the natural life of individuals into its very center" and yet "subjectivization [will] bring the individual to bind himself to his own identity and consciousness and, at the same time, to an external power."⁴⁸ In this way, Agamben argues, the state is able to transform all of the human "objects" that dwell within the state's confines to "subjects" only by enforcing their obedience and conformity to the state's morality and its particular inclusionary/exclusionary model of humanity.⁴⁹

In order to produce social control, the state must create spatial control. However, if we momentarily conceive of the modern state's territory as a metaphor for zones of inclusion and exclusion, there are also marginal spaces for those who can find cracks in the order and craft critiques of its functioning and systemic completeness.⁵⁰ These are the spaces I refer to as *delinquent*: spaces that are within the state's geo-spatial coordinates, but are so unorthodox that they cannot be brought to heel within the state's system of conventionality. Of course, in post-industrial societies like the United States, transnational corporations compete with the state in defining people's values, particularly in the self-regulating digital "spaces" of social media. The emergence of digital delinquent spaces and the generation of collective violence between groups will likely be systematically affected by the communication patterns created through different communication technologies. This is primarily because collective violence calls for the crafting and propagation of narratives, beliefs, and "memes" justifying and legitimizing collective violence. In this way, while the emergence of increasing connectivity will nurture greater group solidarity and political moderation, increasing connectivity that flows along segregated networks will further fragmentation and political extremism.

In thinking of the relationship between the state and extremists, it is also helpful to note how the protest site can serve as the potential location of a delinquent space. The mythic narratives, pageantry, agonism, and liminality of the spectacle of a protest can become features of the hyperreal (a condition in which what is real and what is fiction are seamlessly blended together so that there is no clear distinction between where one ends and the other begins), intentionally pushing at the boundaries of what is acceptable and what is

Studies of radical Islamist groups show that their interventionist programs, promoting charity (*dawah*) and social services within communities, gain them greater popularity and support than their calls for violence and opposition.

deplorable, while undermining the conventional norms of the state and its society along the way.⁵¹

What is to be Done?

How can we—modern, democratic, pluralistic society—hope to reject, out-compete, and prevail over these increasing countercultural pressures of our day? It seems to me that no countervailing message spreads in a social vacuum, in the abstract space of ideology or counter-narrative alone. We must understand that the means of *engagement*—not



Community gardening in Montreal



Serving the Black Lives Matter Community

mere narrative—are critical, requiring close knowledge of those communities at risk of sliding into extremism. What sorts of issues are they concerned with? What are their real or perceived grievances, and what are the problems driving them to rage? How can society at large honestly acknowledge such problems and offer better solutions, and thus co-opt these communities before they’re seduced by competitors with other, possibly dangerous, agendas? And crucially, in what kinds of networks do these issues rise?

The literature is quite consistent.⁵² Most often, people join radical groups after being exposed to an extremist message by someone in their existing social network. This clustering suggests that a significant portion of recruitment does not take place primarily via direct appeals or through individual exposure to social media, as might be supposed. Rather, recruiting often involves enlisting family, friends, and fellow travelers from specific locales, such as neighborhoods, online chats, forums such as 4Chan and 8Chan, universities, prisons, and so on.⁵³ Think Pashtun fighters and the concept of *andiwali* (shared experiences, comradeship), which is a good predictor of whether a particular fellow will pick up his rifle. Relationships are a feature of the human condition. We are social animals. Long before the development of modern social psychology, Aristotle understood this well, describing it in his best work on ethics, the *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁵⁴ He gave particular attention to deep relationships, which he termed *philia*, a label he used to describe all meaningful relationships that one can

develop with others. It is through such relationships that all things real exist for us.

Preventing or reversing radicalization isn’t easy. Without engagement between disparate groups, oppositional identities, rivalry, and violence will continue to spread through social networks. Noted criminologist David Kennedy has demonstrated that intimate social engagement and community work can help turn young people away from local gangs.⁵⁵ His “Operation Ceasefire” program drew on the understanding that offenders within communities operate in groups, so he sought to bring them into contact with respected community members and social services, along with law enforcement officials. However, it should be noted that such means of informal social control can work only in communities in which people know each other and care about their reputations and how they are perceived within the group.

Another strategy can be gleaned from studies of radical Islamist groups that show that their interventionist programs, promoting charity (*dawah*) and social services within communities, gain them greater popularity and support than their calls for violence and opposition. At the very least, we need a kind of “delinquency-focused” anthropology, one that seeks to address and understand the particular needs and real or imagined grievances of specific communities—including their all-too-human need for belonging—through community engagement work. Such an anthropology, especially focused on the young people who are and will be the most vulnerable “at risk” population for extremist recruitment, can become a way of beating radical groups at their own game.

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NOTES

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Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, Operation Serval, and the Value of **Irregular Warfare**

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BETWEEN 2012 AND EARLY 2013, THE forces of the jihadist organization known as al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) and its allies came within a hair's breadth of entirely conquering the country of Mali. Riding on a wave of civil discontent within the Malian government, the jihadist forces were able to hijack an ethnically based rebellion, capitalize on a fractured government, and bring nearly two-thirds of the country under their control. Years before the more publicized rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, an al-Qaeda affiliate came alarmingly close to establishing a Salafi-jihadist caliphate in West Africa. Only a last-minute intervention by the French military was sufficient to halt the advance on Bamako, Mali's capital city.

This conflict, generally referred to as the Malian Civil War, or simply the Mali War, has much to teach about the effectiveness of irregular warfare, particularly against a stronger military opponent. The primary and most obvious reason for the defeat of AQIM and its forces in 2013 was the overwhelming military advantage of the French response. However, I argue that a second aspect of this conflict played a significant role in the speed and decisiveness of AQIM's loss: the group made a strategic error when it abandoned the irregular warfare tactics that had led to its initial successes and attempted to engage in a more conventional style of war.

AQIM changed its tactics to be more conventional in three distinct ways. First, it focused on manning and controlling contested territory. Controlling land—whether by establishing a base or by a continuous military presence—is largely a conventional tactic, whereas irregular war primarily focuses on gaining influence over populations.¹ Second, AQIM allowed the creation and utilization of “front lines.” While this development was likely originally unintended, AQIM still attempted to maintain a forward line of battle. However, “one of the key characteristics of asymmetric [irregular] civil war is the absence of clearly defined front lines.”² Third, AQIM erred when it shifted away from a population-centric approach, because “attaining civilians’ cooperation is perhaps the most important objective for those fighting irregular wars.”³ As it became the principal belligerent in the war, AQIM no longer focused on gaining and maintaining popular support. The group focused instead on military prowess, ignoring the foundational importance in irregular war of influence and control of the population.

Not only did AQIM's change in tactics lead to a swift and decisive French victory, it was also a driving factor in France's decision to intervene in the first place. AQIM's shift toward conventional tactics, and its eventual turn back again to irregular warfare as the French gained advantage, may provide some lessons to explain why, in the years following the French intervention, and despite French counterterrorism forces remaining in the area, AQIM has been able to execute a violent resurrection.

Irregular War vs. Conventional War

As this article's central argument rests on the idea that AQIM abandoned irregular warfare tactics for conventional ones, it is necessary to provide some definition of those terms. Since the end of the Second World War, modern conflicts have largely ceased to be conventional. One could even make the argument that most conflict since the eighteenth century has been of an irregular nature, and only in the extremes has the world seen conventional wars like the First and Second World Wars. There is likely a myriad of reasons why this should be the case and, indeed, no shortage of ink has been spilled to explain the phenomenon. The simplest explanation, however, is that irregular warfare tactics are the most effective—and perhaps the singular—method by which a weaker non-state actor can stand up to a larger state entity.

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Though not perfect, the record of non-state actors credibly opposing, and in some cases even being victorious over, the state by using irregular warfare tactics is long and diverse. Most recently, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan from the US-backed central government provides a stark example, but there have been dozens of others going back centuries. The American Civil War, the Boer Wars, the Chinese Civil War, Vietnam, Iraq, and even the current war raging in Ukraine all provide examples of irregular tactics being used with great effectiveness against a much stronger opponent. While the result has not always been victory, the irregular forces have been able to do significant damage to the larger state force in nearly every instance.

For the purposes of this analysis, conventional war will be defined as an open confrontation between two or more states using traditional military tactics wherein, broadly speaking, the combatants are well-defined and both sides attempt to target military assets or entities. As defined by US Army Field Manual 3-05.130, “conventional warfare is focused on the direct military confrontation between nation-states, in which the desired effect is to influence an adversary’s government through the defeat of the adversary’s military.”⁴

Conversely, there is irregular warfare, a broad concept that can cover a much wider and more abstract set of conflict “types.” US Department of Defense Joint Publication 1-02



Irregular warfare in, from top, South Africa, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Ukraine.

defines irregular warfare as “a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s).”⁵ It can, however, include styles of conflict as diverse as cyber warfare, the use of organized crime, terrorism, and even propaganda and psychological warfare. What is central, nonetheless, and what differentiates irregular from conventional warfare, is the focus on popular support, influence, and legitimacy as opposed to targeting the military and strictly applying force and violence.⁶

It is rare that a conflict is entirely irregular or wholly conventional, as most violent engagements have elements of both. When evaluating such a conflict, one should imagine a “sliding scale” between the purely irregular and the purely conventional on which any violent event would land. Moreover, any conflict or belligerent force may slide closer to or farther from the ends of this scale, even over the course of the conflict. This article will demonstrate that most of the tactics and methods used during the 2012 and 2013 events in Mali fall far closer to the “irregular war” side of the scale. Even though the jihadist forces shifted to more conventional tactics during one phase of the conflict, the war overall would still be considered an irregular conflict. The premise is not that AQIM’s forces entirely converted into a conventional force, but merely that they adopted certain specific tactics that slid them closer to the conventional end of the scale and weakened their overall effectiveness as a fighting force.

In this article, I will first provide some context for the 2012-2013 Malian Civil War; then I will separate the conflict into three phases, with a fourth (post-civil war) phase covering the period between the end of the war and the present day. In each phase, I will discuss some of the irregular warfare tactics that AQIM used and benefited from, and compare them to the conventional tactics that it attempted unsuccessfully to apply. By abandoning some of the irregular war concepts that had brought it success early in the fighting, AQIM lost the advantages it had against the Malian government and, eventually, against the French.

Background to War

Despite eventually being a principal belligerent in the conflict and thus the primary focus of this article, AQIM did not start the Malian Civil War that began in 2012. One can arguably trace the war’s root causes centuries into the past. Both before and after colonization, the territory that is today the Malian state has been home to a kaleidoscope of ethnic, cultural, and tribal groups who for generations competed and worked together for power, resources, and



prestige.⁷ Though differences and tensions between ethnic groups existed, it was colonization that would dramatically intensify them.

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It could be argued that French colonization in West Africa began in 1885, when the colonial powers divided up control of Africa among themselves. However, France did not take over Mali (then called French Sudan) until 1892.⁸ Among the myriad depredations of colonial rule, one that would be highly detrimental to Mali's ability to govern itself in the future was France's deliberate marginalization of ethnic groups, particularly the Tuareg, who occupied the northern parts of what is today Mali. Ethnic tensions between the various groups within the country existed prior to French colonization, but it "exacerbated these resentment [sic]. This is due to the attitude of the French during the colonial period, when they decided to educate a ruling class almost exclusively composed of majority black southerners [in lieu of groups from the north such as the Tuareg]."⁹ Through their deliberately divisive management, the French ensured that, while under colonial rule, the leadership of Mali was too weak to resist. However, this also ensured that the leadership of post-colonial Mali was too weak to govern.

By the time Mali gained independence in 1960, the "Northern Problem" of ethnic conflict with the Tuareg was one of the most pressing issues for the nascent, ineffective Malian government. "Since 1960, the Tuareg and the Arab populations have never succeeded in fitting within the new Malian state model and have been regularly marginalised from positions of power."¹⁰ These tensions were the root cause of three significant Tuareg rebellions prior to 2012—in 1963, 1990, and 2006—wherein armed Tuareg rebels sought to establish their own independent nation-state in a region called the Azawad, comprising the northern two-thirds of Mali (see figure 1).

The 2012 Malian Civil War was, at least in the initial stages, largely motivated by the same Tuareg discontent and desire for Azawad independence that had ignited the previous uprisings. The 2012 war would likely have been similarly short, and suppressed in similar fashion, had it not been for the Libyan Civil War and the subsequent collapse of the Qaddafi regime. This additional element of



instability intensified the situation to a dramatic degree, and likely bore a level of indirect responsibility for the Malian Civil War and the initial success of the rebel forces.

For decades, disenfranchised Tuareg fighters who felt that they had no real opportunities in Mali became mercenaries in the service of Libyan dictator Muammar al-Qaddafi. They acted as his personal paramilitary corps for a significant part of his reign. When Qaddafi was toppled and executed in 2011 during the Libyan Civil War, those Tuareg fighters returned to Mali. "Estimates of the number

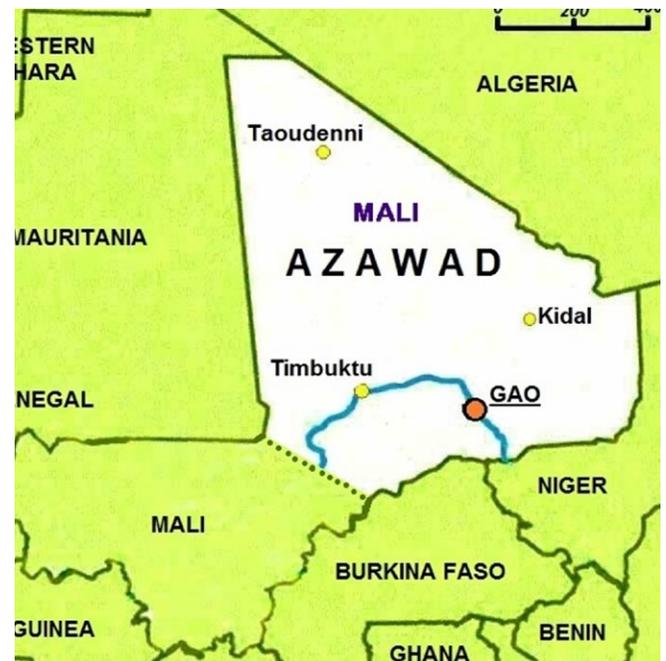


Figure 1: The Region of Mali Claimed by the Tuareg as the "Azawad."¹¹

of returning Tuareg mercenaries ran as high as 4,000. . . . [T]hese fighters brought arms and military experience with them and by late 2011, had reignited the Tuareg separatist movement.”¹² The influx of trained fighters with revolutionary fervor and ambitions of freedom sparked the separatist movement in the Tuareg communities for a fourth time and gave the ever-smoldering ethnic conflict within Mali a reason to re-ignite.

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Phase I: Tuareg Rebellion

The rebellion began when the Mouvement National pour la Libération de l’Azawad (MNLA), a secular coalition of Tuareg militias, attacked Malian army outposts in early 2012. Though the MNLA was supported by jihadists under the banner of AQIM, the original impetus of the attacks was to establish an independent and secular Tuareg state. With jihadist assistance, the Tuareg separatist militias were able to quickly push the Malian Army out of several major bases in northern Mali. By March 2012, outposts in or near the cities of Kidal and Gao had fallen, and the city of Timbuktu was soon to follow.

It is important to note here that, for the purposes of clarity and simplicity, this article will generally refer to the jihadist elements within this civil war as AQIM. However, the reality was far more complex: AQIM was—and still is—but one of a web of allied and subordinate jihadist groups operating in Mali and neighboring countries. That said, most of these organizations, such as the Movement for Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), Ansar Dine, and al-Mulathameen, all either fell below AQIM in the chain of command or were closely allied with the group.¹³ Putting all these groups under the AQIM umbrella also differentiates the jihadists from the Tuareg rebels who, though allied with AQIM in early 2012, were a separate entity that was mostly concerned with secular and political gains.

By eliminating the Malian Army presence in the northern cities and towns, the Tuareg rebels were able to claim that they had taken those cities. However, the reality was that most of the violence was directed against the Malian military and other government entities. Though information from that time is not entirely clear or reliable, the civilian populations of the northern towns were usually not the primary targets of MNLA operations (although



Muammar al-Qaddafi, 2009

there were occasionally minor deviations from this), since most of the civilians in the north were Tuareg themselves and supported the Tuareg cause. Even when surrounding Timbuktu, the MNLA claimed that its objective was only “to dislodge what remains of the Malian political administration and military there.”¹⁴

The group benefitted from being an irregular force with widespread public support. Because of that support and their local familiarity, “controlling” a city or region required far less in the way of manpower and resources for the MNLA than it would have for a conventional force of outsiders, as many of the regional inhabitants considered themselves and the MNLA to be of the same group. As previously explained, “the guerrilla strategy of denial does not aim at control over territory. Instead, hit-and-run operations and ambushes are carried out to loosen state control over territory and population. . . . The guerrilla’s goal is to impose costs on the adversary in terms of loss of soldiers, supplies, infrastructure, peace of mind, and most importantly, time.”¹⁵ In some ways, the first phase of the war can be viewed not as a rebellion by Tuareg separatists, but rather as an operation to eject “occupying” Malian forces from traditional Tuareg lands.

Moreover, the MNLA didn’t need to hold territory for an extended period of time. Only four months after hostilities commenced, the MNLA declared independence for the Azawad, an area encompassing 800,000 square kilometers of Mali and 10 percent of the population. There was no need to establish battle lines, because although the borders



Tuareg rebels join forces in northern Mali.

of the Azawad were notional, they were understood by those who mattered: the Tuareg people.

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In April of 2012, when the MNLA declared the Azawad's independence from Mali, neither local nor foreign intervention seemed likely. The government in Mali's capital, Bamako, was in disarray following a coup d'état (itself a reaction to perceived mismanagement of the Tuareg rebellion). Though neighboring countries denounced the MNLA's action, they demonstrated little will to intervene militarily. In France, politicians were focused on the upcoming presidential elections, and since international affairs would not be the primary focus for any winning candidate, there was little political will to get involved there, either.¹⁶ Had these conditions persisted, it is likely France would have remained on the sidelines and possible that the Azawad would have remained independent far longer, but Phase II of the conflict was about to begin.

Phase II: AQIM takeover

Had the Tuareg and their allies ceased the conflict in mid-2012, things might have turned out very differently. However, once AQIM's leaders realized that the Tuareg were prepared to end the war with only the gains that had been made to that point, they began to hijack the rebellion for their own ends. Even before the declaration of Azawad independence, the jihadists had acted as something of a parasitic ally, allowing the MNLA to do the fighting, then coming in on its heels and attempting to usurp the leadership of the city or town that the MNLA had won.¹⁷

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However, in April, AQIM and its jihadist allies "ended their collective alliances with the MNLA, because the MNLA's objective, to establish a secular and independent state in northern Mali, strongly contradicted Ansar Dine, AQIM and MUJAO's aims to create a united Malian state governed by Shariah law."¹⁸ In the end, the Tuareg cause and MNLA fighters simply were not willing to go far enough to satisfy AQIM's objective to form an Islamic caliphate.

It is here that we see the first shift in focus from the irregular methods employed by the MNLA—which had little need to maintain a garrison or permanent military presence in majority Tuareg towns—to the more conventional strategy used by AQIM, which relied heavily on controlling and guarding territory. Because this new tactic required increased manpower, both for future combat operations and to maintain control of those territories already under its sway, AQIM prioritized the recruitment of foreign fighters. Hundreds of jihadists, from other African countries such as Niger and Sudan but also from as far afield as Pakistan, arrived in Mali to take part in the fighting.¹⁹ The effort to maintain control over fixed positions and cities was costly in terms of manpower and exertion, using resources that may very well have been more effectively spent in upcoming military operations.

Not only was this shift costly in terms of manpower, but it was also a drain on AQIM's political capital. The arrival of foreign fighters caused friction with local populations, who saw the Tuareg-majority MNLA sidelined in favor of AQIM personnel. Moreover, it soon became clear that AQIM rejected the original Tuareg goal of independence and instead sought to continue military operations beyond



Mao Zedong in 1963.

the Azawad. Most damaging to AQIM's popular support, however, was its move to institute its extreme brand of shari'a in the towns it now controlled. Women were forced to cover up, corporal punishment was allowed, and smoking, drinking, and even football were outlawed. The locals immediately began to chafe under the new extremist government system and support for AQIM plummeted.²⁰

Eventually, through its heavy-handed and overbearing tactics, AQIM so completely alienated the MNLA and other Tuareg groups that they turned on the jihadists. "The first clashes between the MNLA and Ansar Dine reportedly occurred on 8 June 2012, in the surroundings of Kidal, triggering a parallel [non-international armed conflict] between Tuareg and Islamist rebels. By the end of the month, Ansar Dine, MUJAO and AQIM expelled the MNLA from major cities in the north."²¹ Many MNLA fighters would eventually go so far as to join the Malian and French forces and fight against the same jihadists with whom they had begun the war.²² Though AQIM succeeded in usurping the MNLA's position and taking

control of the rebellion, by focusing on territorial control rather than cultivating the support of the local population, it expended valuable resources, losing allies as well as a significant measure of local backing.

This was not the only drain on political capital to which AQIM would commit itself. As previously stated, popular support is central to any irregular or guerilla war effort. According to Mao Zedong, whose book, *On Guerilla Warfare*, has defined irregular war for generations, "because guerilla warfare basically derives from the masses and is supported by them, it can neither exist nor flourish if it separates itself from their sympathies and cooperation."²³ At a basic level, the jihadists sought to build an Islamic caliphate by conquering the whole of Mali, while the Tuareg simply sought a free, Tuareg-led Azawad. This disagreement over final objectives was undoubtedly a primary cause of friction. The progressive exclusion of the MNLA and other Tuareg forces certainly exacerbated the problem.²⁴

However, the jihadists' greatest loss of public support and cooperation was caused by their insistence on the



Flag of al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb

implementation of strict shari'a law. In June, after wresting control of the Azawad from Tuareg leaders, AQIM began to institute shari'a law in Timbuktu. In mere weeks, the practices spread to Gao, Kidal, and all of the larger towns in northern Mali. The Tuareg people, who made up most of the population in these areas, chafed under the strict

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interpretation of Islamic law and, in some cases, began to actively resist. A few AQIM leaders recognized the detrimental effect that shari'a was having on the populace, but their warnings went unheeded. Thus, as AQIM forces began to prepare to push farther into Malian territory, they simultaneously eliminated what should have been their primary sources of safe haven and aid.

northeast, AQIM staged its forces for its push southwest, where its true prize—the capital city of Bamako—was defended only by an enfeebled Malian Army that was still reeling from an internal coup.

Tactically, AQIM's first goal was to take the strategic city of Konna, just across the river. With Konna secured, the jihadists could then move on to Mopti, sixty miles to the south, and thereby control the airfield at Sevare. In the first

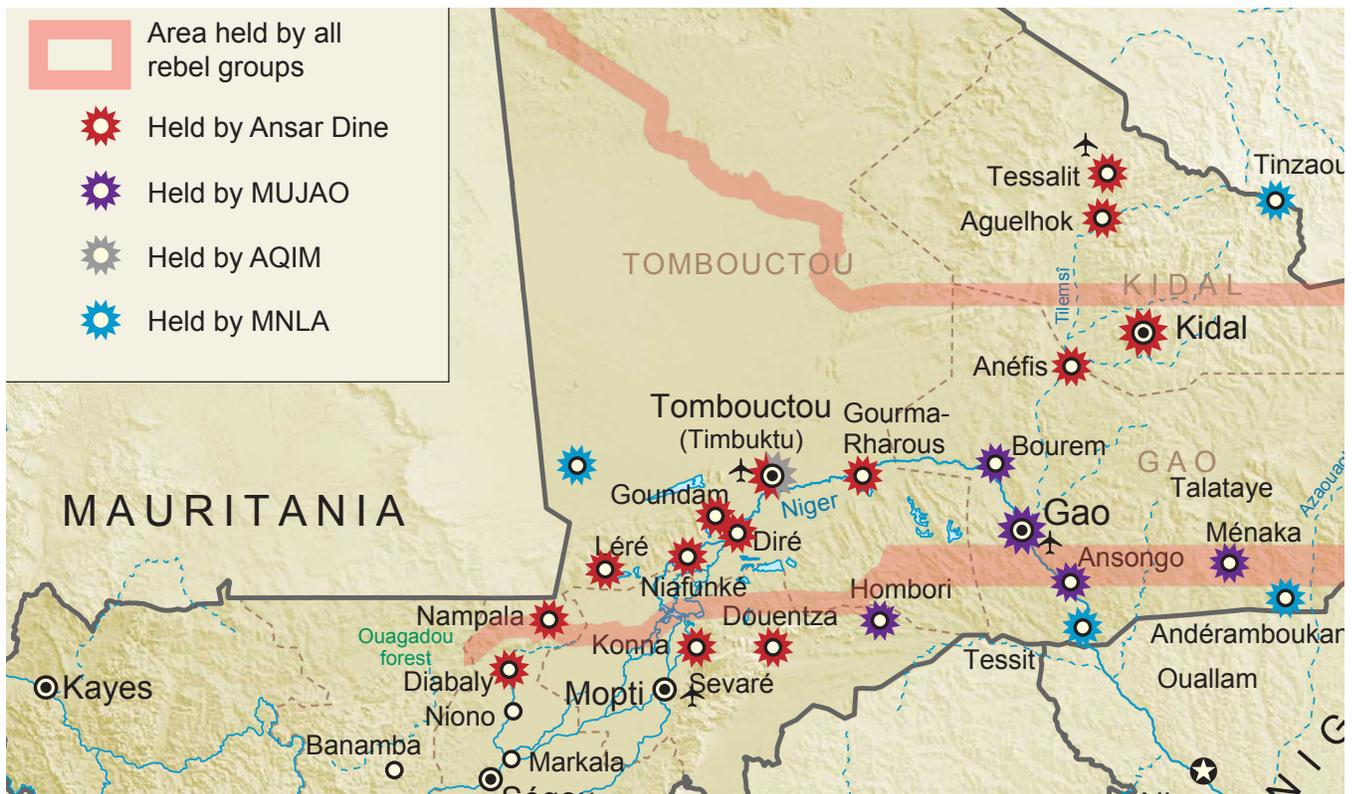


Figure 2: The farthest extent of rebel-held territory as of January 2013.²⁶

The final conventional tactic that AQIM adopted was the formation of something akin to battle lines. Unlike the refocus on territory and on the implementation of shari'a at the cost of popular support, it is probable that creating a "front line" was not a deliberate tactic. The Niger River formed a natural border between the lands claimed by the Tuareg as part of the Azawad and the rest of Mali. Therefore, the river also served as a de facto front line. To the

days of 2013, both the Malian government and the French military watched events unfold and understood that, were AQIM to cross the Niger River, it would signal not just the start of an offensive on Konna but the first stages of a strategy to eventually capture Bamako. The Niger River had become AQIM's Rubicon, and crossing it meant that the war was no longer about Azawad independence.²⁵

By defining its front lines, whether intentionally or not, AQIM provided the French with two key advantages: one tactical, one strategic, both conventional. Tactically, the French now knew exactly where the jihadist forces were. Thus, when the French military intervention began, it was much easier for French forces to find, fix, and target AQIM. In a guerilla war, the enemy hides within the population “like a fish in the ocean.”²⁷ But AQIM forces were out in the open and separate from the civilian populations in which they might have hidden. For their part, the French understood this to be an error and also recognized how the terrain was affecting AQIM’s order of battle, making it easier to strike the insurgents with airpower and standoff weapons.²⁸ Through its actions along the Niger River, AQIM negated one of the most significant advantages of irregular warfare.

Strategically, by concentrating its forces on one side of the line, AQIM dramatically simplified the political decision-making of the French government. Prior to the force posturing on the river, “French policy was to avoid unilateral intervention and instead work through international organizations.”²⁹ Then-French President François Hollande would have had to decide whether to undertake a risky foreign intervention on the side of an unstable Malian government, or to wait until a combined force of soldiers from other African states and the UN could be organized. By building up its forces along the Niger River, AQIM changed that calculus: if the jihadists crossed the river, a French intervention would become far more necessary and, simultaneously, far more politically palatable.³⁰ Subsequently, when its forces did cross the line (both literally and figuratively), AQIM gave France the justification to intervene directly. On 11 January 2013, Operation Serval began.

Phase 3: Operation Serval

As announced by President Hollande on 11 January, the French objectives were three-fold: first, stop the “terrorist” aggression southward; second, secure the country by recapturing those cities taken during the first phases of the

war; and third, expel any remaining AQIM forces into the deserts of northern Mali, and even into Algeria, in order to restore Mali’s territorial integrity.³¹ To accomplish this, the French would have to rely on speed, overwhelming military force, and accurate intelligence regarding the location of jihadist forces, to ensure that those forces didn’t escape by dispersing into the population. But having separated

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Once French boots hit the ground in Mali, one of the first objectives was to secure Bamako by stopping the advance of the AQIM forces. “In the afternoon [of 11 January 2013], Gazelle helicopters strafed the advancing enemy vehicles. That evening, Mirage 2000 fighter jets based approximately 2,000 km away in Chad carried out numerous attacks.”³² With the primary threat to the capital neutralized, French Marines were able to secure the city and airport within eight hours of receiving their orders. Less than two weeks later, the French installed their headquarters in a secure capital city.³³ The French military had accomplished the first of its objectives only days after AQIM began its southward push.



The next notable operation aimed at AQIM’s de facto front lines with the intent to take control of the area known as the Niger Bend, where the river turns toward the southeast, and where Timbuktu and Gao, two of the most strategically vital cities in Mali, are located.³⁴ Operation Oryx commenced on 15 January, when French ground forces, along with allies from Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, and Canada, began their push northward. While Timbuktu fell

without a fight, Gao had the potential to be a much harder battle. However, as mentioned previously, AQIM had lost the support of significant swathes of the population. In fact, the French were joined by Tuareg militia members in Gao, including members of the MNLA. “The Tuareg

contingents involved in French operations were small, but they played important roles as guides, scouts, and interpreters. . . . Their involvement may have helped secure for France local buy-in and popular support.”³⁵ Though it is unlikely that Tuareg support was decisive to the eventual French victory in Operation Serval, it almost certainly made that victory easier. It may very well have saved lives in the process, and came with the added benefit of costing AQIM time and freedom of movement.

It can be tempting to go into the tactical minutia of individual battles and troop movements throughout Operation Serval, but the reality is that, once committed, the French military was in a position of overwhelming advantage. Thus, in many ways, the analysis of irregular versus conventional tactics becomes less important once the French intervention began. Inasmuch as the outcome of Operation Serval was a French military victory, by adopting a more conventional way of war (albeit still irregular compared to the French), AQIM didn’t change the result of the French intervention. What it did do, however, was to spur France to action and ensure that the already massive power differential was amplified dramatically, resulting in a faster, more decisive, and more efficient operation by French forces.

By March 2013, the French had retaken most of the cities and towns that the Tuareg and AQIM had occupied in 2012, pushed AQIM into the mountains to the northwest of Mali, and killed AQIM leader Abu Zeid. Operation Serval continued until 18 June 2014, when the Malian government and the MNLA, along with other Tuareg rebel groups, signed the Ouagadougou Accord, which imposed a ceasefire and, on 15 July 2014, officially ended the Tuareg rebellion. With this success, the French were ready to draw down their forces, expecting them to be replaced by UN and African forces and, eventually, it was to be hoped, the Malian military as well.

Phase 4: Operation Barkhane

Unfortunately, AQIM had no obligation or intention to sign on to the ceasefire. Despite having been dealt a grievous blow during Operation Serval, AQIM remained active. Within weeks of the investiture of the new Malian government, AQIM began carrying out attacks across Mali. In addition to jeopardizing the nascent peace, the attacks showed that AQIM was no longer intending to fight anywhere near the conventional end of the scale, but

rather had returned to its old tactics of hit-and-run attacks, car bombs, and kidnappings. In other words, AQIM was again an irregular guerilla force.

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In early 2014, partially in response to the continued threat posed by AQIM, the French government decided to transition Operation Serval into a counterterrorism operation named Barkhane. The change was “intended to allow for the most rapid response possible against the remaining jihadists.”³⁶ The goal was to “clear up” the remaining threats from AQIM and its allies, and ensure that Mali had the best possible chance to emerge strong and prosperous from the civil war.

Eight years later, Operation Barkhane continues, but with questionable results. Though French counterterrorism forces have met with some success in killing or capturing members of AQIM—or its rebranded umbrella group, Jama’at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM)—Mali and the surrounding region have experienced the most rapid increase in jihadist violence of any region in Africa in recent years.³⁷ The similarities between Operation Barkhane and US counterterrorism operations in Iraq and Afghanistan are disappointingly evident. In all three areas, superior military force has consistently resulted in tactical successes, but those tactical wins rarely translate

into strategic success. Direct action against terrorist or insurgent forces is, in general, more straightforward and easier to quantify and, subsequently, easier to mark as a success. Tactical success is often demonstrated using metrics such as enemy killed in action (EKIA) or military accessibility, that have nothing to do with strategic progress. Though this approach appears effective on paper, irregular warfare necessitates a population-centric approach; in Mali, such an approach would seek to convince the people to

cease supporting the jihadists, and to demonstrate that the population would be better off siding with the government or French forces.³⁸



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As evidenced by recent protests against France's military presence, Operation Barkhane, unfortunately, has largely failed to enact a population-centric approach.³⁹ Though the numbers of jihadist EKIA are impressive, terrorist attacks and other violent events in the region have doubled every year since 2015.⁴⁰ Barkhane has proven so ineffective, in fact, that France has been forced to announce a complete military withdrawal from Mali in 2022.⁴¹ This resurgence by AQIM and its allies undoubtedly has a myriad of social, political, and religious causes, but one must ask the question: how is this happening while the same French forces that decimated AQIM during Operation Serval remain in place with the same primary mission of finding and eliminating AQIM wherever possible?

As with any question regarding military conflict, the answer is, inevitably, highly complex. However, one of the primary reasons AQIM has been able to accomplish its violent resurgence with such success is that it has returned to the tactics and strategies of irregular war. It has deprioritized controlling terrain, making its positions impermanent and its movements nearly impossible to track. It can operate out of some of the towns and cities in the north not only because it controls them militarily, but also because it is accepted and supported by the relevant populations. Finally, it has not created anything that could be construed as a front line. All of these tactical changes make AQIM, once again, far more difficult for largely conventional forces like the French to fight. AQIM's move toward conventionality in 2012 and 2013, however slight, was a disaster for the group, and likely cost it its dream of an Islamic caliphate in Mali. But now, its return to irregular warfare, coupled with the government's inability to stop it with conventional efforts, may precipitate the collapse of the Malian state.

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An aerial photograph of a city, likely Copenhagen, showing a dense urban grid, a winding river, and a prominent bridge. The image is overlaid with a blue tint and serves as the background for the text.

THE FOG

Part One: Scimitar of the Prophet

Lieutenant Commander Nikolaj Lindberg, Danish Special Operations Command

“ Know your enemy and know yourself, in a hundred battles you will never be in peril.”

—Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*

French Embassy, Washington, DC
[early morning, 6 October]

The noise cuts through the darkness like a knife—insisting and incessant. I wake, utterly confused. A strange dream slowly dissipates. For a second, I am unsure of where I am, until recollection begins to manifest. The embassy in Washington. Is my alarm clock ringing? I scan for it in the darkness. It reads 4:47 a.m., more than an hour before my wake-up call. My telephone. I reach for it on the table and sit up. Not that one, either. I look around. Across the room, my secure phone is ringing. Pain stirs in the pit of my stomach. I cast the covers aside and stumble out of bed, crossing the room in three strides. I kick the briefcase I'd left by the side of the desk, sending it flying. I manage to find the light switch by the desk, turn the light on, and grab the ringing telephone. The screen reads Unknown Caller. I pick up. “Yes?”

My voice is grainy. The speaker on the other end is not. His voice is stern and composed, his accent slightly northern. “Pardon, Madame Minister, I must be waking you up. It is General Lecointre.”

The pain in my stomach turns into a cold knot. “No need to apologize, General. What is wrong?”

This is a work of fiction. Although the characters are based on actual people, the events are imagined and the action does not reflect actual policies or procedures of the French government or any other official agency.

List of Abbreviations Used in the Story

AFSOC

Air Force Special Operations Command

BRGE

Brigade de Renseignement

CBRN

Chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear

CCP

Chinese Communist Party

CNOOC

China National Offshore Oil Company

COM FST

Commandement des Forces Spéciales Terre

DGSE

Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure

DGSI

Direction Générale de la Sécurité Intérieure

DRM

Direction du Renseignement Militaire

ISWAP

Islamic State West Africa Province

JCPOA

Joint comprehensive plan of action

MINUSMA

Mission Multidimensionnelle Intégrée des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation au Mali

QRF

Quick reaction force

UNIMAID

University of Maiduguri

WMD

Weapons of mass destruction

There is a moment of hesitation before he answers. “We have lost five men in Mali this morning, Madame Minister.”

The knot in my stomach turns into a cold shiver that washes down my back. I exhale slowly, compose my breathing, and calm myself. I sit down. “Go on.”

General Lecointre continues. “A suicide bomber detonated his bomb at a checkpoint close to the village of Tassiga in Gao Province.¹ I have only just been notified. It has not hit the news yet, but it will soon enough. I thought it best that you hear it from me.”

I exhale heavily again. Five men. Five soldiers in one enemy action! My mind is racing. The news media will be all over it. There will be political consultations, discussions on the necessity and validity of our mission in Mali, hundreds of questions on the standards of the army’s equipment. And, my God, the families. “I am sorry. That’s terrible news, General. Have we notified the families?”

“Not yet, Madame Minister. The men are from three different places in the country: Paris, Toulouse, and Rouen. We are putting teams together to go and make the notifications. We will make sure they have completed their mission before we release the names of the fallen to the press.”

“Right. Make sure you do. I have full confidence that you will handle this with appropriate discretion and honor, General. Have army staff begin the preparations for the repatriation of their remains. If you forward me the details you have at this hour on the secure net, I will begin preparing a statement immediately . . .”

He cuts me off. “Madame Minister. Please do not worry about repatriations or statements. We will handle that. You need to come home.”

I frown at his abruptness. “Come home? I have a meeting with Secretary Mattis in four hours.”

“I know,” he answers, a little more quietly. “I know, Madame, I am sorry. There’s . . .”

I interrupt him in turn. “General, I realize the severity of the situation, but the meeting with Secretary Mattis is to discuss our common goals and align our efforts as the president intends. I will, of course, explain the circumstances and skip the meetings with the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I will come home tomorrow evening.”

“Blister gas?”

I stutter. “But how?”

Horrendous images from photos of World War I flicker past my mind’s eye, images of men with red, running eyes and terrible swollen boils.

He hesitates for a second. “Madame Minister. There is something else. There are more than 30 confirmed civilian deaths and almost 100 injured, including 3 of our soldiers.”

“What?” I exclaim. “How big was the bomb?”

“Sizeable, Madame Minister, but that is not the issue. There are clear indications that the bomb contained some kind of chemical agent. Probably a blister gas of sorts. We can’t say for sure before our CBRN teams have assessed the site.”

“Blister gas?” I stutter. “But how?” Horrendous images from photos of World War I flicker past my mind’s eye, images of men with red, running eyes and terrible swollen boils.

There are another few seconds of silence before General Lecointre speaks again. “We don’t know for sure, Madame Minister. There are many unknowns at this hour, but we must address the situation. You need to come home.”

It feels like the walls are creeping in on me. I am on my feet without consciously realizing it. “I’ll be home as quickly as possible. Thank you, General.” I hang up without waiting for his reply. I take another two deep breaths to calm myself before dialing Captain Bernard. He picks up the phone immediately; only his voice gives away that he has been fast asleep.



Malian Red Cross in Gao after a terrorist attack.

“Madame Minister,” he says. “How can I be of assistance?”

“I am sorry to wake you, Sebastian,” I say. “This is a matter of the highest priority and utmost urgency. Wake and scramble my staff for a short meeting in my suite in 30 minutes. Please alert Ambassador Araud. He needs to be part of this meeting; we’ll have to cancel our appointments with the Pentagon. Get hold of our pilots and have them prepare for departure immediately. We’ll have wheels up for Paris in two hours.”

Ministry of Defence,
Paris [early evening, 6
October]

It is raining in Paris and completely overcast. Somewhere beyond the gray clouds, the sun is slowly setting. The dull light reflects on the wet surfaces. There is a grayness to our romantic capital this evening that does not belong, something ominous. From up here, it looks like some other city. It could be German or Scandinavian. Gothic, almost. It feels like a foreshadowing of the coming briefing. Beyond the quiet of my headset, the rotor blades of the helicopter are beating a noisy circle. Rain is streaking sideways across the windows. My eyes hurt. It feels like I haven’t closed them for two nights. A whole day of endless meetings before going to the United States, no sleep on the flight, a few hours’ rest at the embassy, and now back home to this without sleeping again. I feel fit to keel over. I lean back and close my eyes, hoping to pass out for just a few minutes. It doesn’t work. A hundred thoughts immediately cloud my mind. Disturbing images

of gassed civilians, endless concerns about the coming hearings, decisions to be made, briefing of the president. To his credit, Secretary Mattis was an absolute gentleman about the cancellation of the planned meetings in Washington, even going so far as to extend a pledge of absolute solidarity with France.

“Two minutes, Madame Minister.” The pilot’s voice crackles over the intercom. I open my eyes and immediately regret having tried to sleep. It feels like grains of sand are grating on my retinas. Captain Bernard is sitting next to me, his uniform spotless. The look on his face reveals nothing, but I know that he is contemplating the situation same as I. Time and time again he has proven to be an invaluable resource. He may be a junior officer, but he understands the political game and knows his way around military planning and lingo. He is foresightful and effective. As an aide-de-camp, he is everything I could have wished for.

The helicopter lands on the road in front of the Hexagone Balard. The Gendarmerie have closed off the road. The co-pilot gives me the thumbs up. Captain Bernard is out before I manage to open the door on my side. He helps me

We move in silence through several security doors, handing over every electronic item we have on us before arriving at the conference room.

out and we run in an awkward crouch under the rotors to meet the four waiting officials. General Lecointre is one of them. We hurry inside, out of the rain, and make our way to the elevator. The general does not waste time with formalities and jumps to it.

“Welcome back, Madame Minister,” he says. “I am sorry to inform you that another of our soldiers has succumbed to his injuries while you were in transit. We expect this was a result of the chemical agent he was exposed to, but we’ll have to wait for the pathologist’s report to be certain. The family has been notified.” I nod; the elevator doors open. “We have just received notice that ISWAP have claimed responsibility for the attack.”

“Pray do begin, General,” I say. “Do not spare any details. Start at the beginning and tell me everything you know.”

ISWAP: Islamic State West Africa Province. I nod again but do not reply. He, too, falls quiet. The elevator stops at the top floor. We move in silence through several security doors, handing over every electronic item we have on us before arriving at the conference room. It is small and has heavily insulated walls. The acoustics are like that of a sound studio. We are closed off from the outside world. Captain Bernard holds out the chair at the end of the table for me. He grabs a thermos from a serving table and pours me a cup of coffee. The general hands him a folder marked “Top Secret,” from which he pulls out two stacks of files and pictures and places them in front of me. He then turns towards General Lecointre, stands to attention, and leaves. I take a sip of the steaming hot coffee and lean back. The general’s otherwise handsome features are crisscrossed with wrinkles. He doesn’t just look tired; he looks like he is struggling against a deep weariness. He may well be a war hero, but he is under an extreme amount of pressure. I can absolutely sympathize.

“Pray do begin, General,” I say. “Do not spare any details. Start at the beginning and tell me everything you know.”

Élysée Palace [morning, 7 October]

The president hands General Lecointre the report back, leans forward, and looks at me.

I begin. “The attack was carried out at exactly 7:52 a.m. on Wednesday, 6th of October, Monsieur President. The attack itself was uncomplicated in nature. We believe that a single suicide bomber detonated somewhere between 25 and 40 kilos of homemade explosives at a checkpoint on the road leading into the village of Tassiga in Gao Province. The suicide bomber likely carried the device disguised as a sack of rice. The bomb also contained what we now believe to be a sulfur-mustard chemical agent. We do not know exactly how much, Monsieur President, maybe as much as 25 liters. An infantry platoon of soldiers from 1^e Compagnie, 1^e Bataillon, 27^e Brigade d’Infanterie, 4^e Régiment de Chasseurs was on operations in the area and had established checkpoints north and south of the village



as part of a larger security operation intended to instill confidence in our presence.”

The president raises an eyebrow slightly at my last remark, as an almost unnoticeable comment on the lack of confidence the local population must be feeling at this hour. I continue without hesitation.

“The force of the explosion immediately killed 5 soldiers and 17 civilians and wounded another 2 soldiers and 13 civilians. Several of the farmers nearby were also doused in an unknown liquid, which we now suspect was the sulfur-mustard agent. Those who had been exposed soon began forming blisters, and 4 died from asphyxiation. The explosion also caused a cloud of the suspected agent to rise into the air, from where it soon descended on the village and the surrounding area, injuring another of our soldiers from the northern checkpoint and 192 civilians.”

The president grimaces in sympathy.

“Of those civilians, an additional 14 succumbed to the effects of the gas, also reportedly dying from asphyxiation. The surviving members of the infantry platoon immediately radioed for assistance and began performing first aid to the best of their abilities. Their actions may well have saved many lives. The company commander, Captain Dubois, arrived at the scene 54 minutes after the blast with the rest of his company and established an effective cordon around Tassiga to prevent other civilians from entering the area. Medical Evacuation arrived at 9:10 a.m. and evacuated our injured men and some of the most severely affected civilians. Over the past 24 hours, we have cordoned the area off completely and moved in a

“We know that ISIS have had their eyes on the Sahel now that their perverse Caliphate is coming to a definitive end.”

battalion to secure the scene. We have established a mobile surgical hospital to treat the wounded on site. Our CBRN teams are presently collecting and analyzing the suspected chemical agent and are decontaminating the village to prevent further casualties. The remains of our fallen will be brought home tomorrow—as soon as we can guarantee that they are uncontaminated and safe to release to our pathologists for autopsy.”

The president nods but says nothing. I continue: “As you were briefed, Islamic State West Africa Province claimed responsibility for this atrocious action several hours ago. We are still unable to determine whether they actually are behind it, and if they are, where they got these chemical agents from. Whether ISWAP were behind it or not, I would recommend that we align with the recommendations of the chief of the defense staff. Thus, I agree that we should suspend operations in Mali pending the distribution of better CBRN-protection equipment to our units and further knowledge of the chemical agents.”

I look to General Lecointre, who nods in confirmation. President Macron steepled his hands in front of his face and taps his lips, looking from me to General Lecointre. He is silent for a few long seconds before he nods. “I concur with the recommendation. Suspend operations for all regular units but double-time the effort to bring better CBRN equipment to our troops. We need to get operations back up and running. I will not have France cowed by a band of ragtag fundamentalists. Extend our recommendation to MINUSMA, our international partners in Operation Barkhane, and to the G5 Sahel.” He looks at the general. “What do you think, François? Could they be behind it?”

General Lecointre takes a deep breath. “Yes, Monsieur President. They most certainly could. But I doubt they were alone in doing so. The US-led actions in Iraq and Syria have set ISIS back on their heels. Their chemists have

been known to dabble in weaponizing chlorine gas and have supposedly attempted to make stronger and more lethal chemical concoctions. They’ve mostly used them in combination with off-the-shelf drones or small grenade-type weapons. We know that ISIS have had their eyes on the Sahel now that their perverse Caliphate is coming to a definitive end. That said, I have read no reports from the DGSE that describe anything even remotely as potent as this, and I would venture that ISWAP did not do this on their own.”

President Macron nods to himself. “So, what do you think? Does ISIS have a sponsor? A state sponsor, I mean?”

General Lecointre looks at me. There is, understandably, some apprehension there. “Speak your mind, General Lecointre,” I say. “We appreciate your experience and would hear your concerns.”

“All right,” he answers with a nod. “Yes, Monsieur President and Madame Minister. I would not go on record with this at the present hour, because I cannot substantiate this fear as much more than a gut feeling, but if I were a betting man, I would put my money on a state actor being involved. We know a lot about sulfur-based mustard agents. They were widely used in the First World War. They are very incapacitating indeed. They cause massive blistering and damage to the eyes, sometimes causing the victim to go blind. They cause irritation to or even rupture of the mucus membranes, and in very severe cases, asphyxiation. That said, when these weapons were used during the First World War, only about 5 percent of the contaminated soldiers died from exposure, and many of those died because proper treatment wasn’t readily available. Also, mustard gas evaporates fairly quickly in heat, which makes it less effective in Mali than it would have been on the Western Front. For a mustard gas to kill as many people as fast as we just saw in Gao, it would have had to be a refined substance. It would have to be a modern-age, military-grade chemical weapon. A weapon of mass destruction, if you will. I simply don’t believe that ISWAP could cook up a modern chemical agent in the desert of Mali without someone else’s help.”

Ministry of Defense [late night, 7 October]

The Hexagone Balard is bustling with activity, even in the middle of the night. General Lecointre, Captain Bernard, and I enter the secure department and head straight for Briefing Room 3. Five men and a woman are waiting for us and stand as we enter. I already know two of them: Bernard Émié, the director of DGSE, and General Jean-François Ferlet, the director of DRM. Bernard Émié is



The Hexagone Balard, Paris

a white-haired gentleman in his late fifties and a former diplomat. Though he is new to the job as director of DGSE, he is a very competent case handler and a man who immediately instills confidence. General Ferlet, though also extremely competent, is almost his exact opposite: a dark-haired introvert who smiles rarely and reluctantly. Although he is also new as head of his agency, his reputation speaks volumes. A former head of joint operations for Operation Barkhane, he has firsthand knowledge of the Sahel. I am happy to see him. We are introduced to Colonel Martín, Director of Field Operations; Monsieur Christoph Bisset and Madame Julia Paquet, two of DGSE's finest analysts; and Lieutenant Colonel Jerome LeBlanc from DRM's Mali Department.

I take the time to shake hands with everyone in turn, thanking them for their continued service. As we sit down, Director Émié turns grave. "Madame Minister, as you were informed, ISWAP released a video statement just over two hours ago. Our cyber warfare teams in the BRGE are working in close cooperation with our colleagues in the CIA, the NSA, and MI6 to limit the spread of the message. Presently no conventional search engines show it, although Monsieur Bisset has informed me that several dark websites continue to relay it. The released material appears to be a planned follow-up to ISWAP's claim of responsibility

A video begins on the flat screen on the back wall. The quality is noticeably low compared to the productions of the Middle Eastern branch of ISIS, but the message is equally disturbing.

for Wednesday's attack in Gao. I will courteously warn you that the new material contains several serious claims as well as some disturbing footage, the exact meaning of which our team will help elucidate."

He taps a remote-control unit in the desk and a video begins on the flat screen on the back wall. The quality is noticeably low compared to the productions of the

Middle Eastern branch of ISIS, but the message is equally disturbing. A masked but clearly African man in a khaki military uniform speaks to the camera in French with the black flag of ISIS in the background. He drones in a curious, almost prayer-like fashion. His accent sounds Malian or maybe Nigerien to me, but his vocabulary is very good.

“We are the Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihād. We are the loyal children of the Islamic State West Africa Province. For too long have we endured the involvement of colonialist France and her allies, the cowardly and heathen governments of the Sahel. We will endure them no more. Today we declare ourselves a state unto the world. To the cowards in Bamako, in Niamey, in Ouagadougou and Abuja, take heed of my words. We claim the lands of Timbuktu, Taoudenni, Gao, Kidal, and Menaka from what used to be Mali. We claim northern Tahoua, southern Agadez, and Diffa from what used to be Niger. We claim Nord, Sahel, and Est from what used to be Burkina Faso, and we claim all of Borno from

what used to be Nigeria. These lands are now the new Caliphate, the lands of the chosen of the Prophet, alayhi as-salām. As Caliph, we name the truest faithful among us, the most righteous and noble Sheikh Abu Mohammed Abubakar bin Mohammad al-Sheikawi. Surely, there are those amongst you who will say, ‘Why should we bow and be humbled?’ I will give you the answer. Islam is submission to Allah as ordered by the Prophet, alayhi as-salām. You should bow because He commands it. We now hold the weapon. We hold the wrath and retribution of Allah in our hand, and already we have graced the infidels with His judgment. We are the Ummah in Medina and you the Quraysh in Mecca. We are coming. We have declared the Caliphate and like the Quraysh, you would be wise to accept it without objection, lest you face His judgment. Allahu Akbar.”

The image fades and changes to that of a crying African man, tied to a chair. He appears to have been beaten. He is sitting in a poorly lit room with a similar black flag in the background. He squirms and struggles in vain as two men

in hazmat suits approach him holding an unmarked metal canister. General Lecointre reaches over and pauses the video. “Is it necessary to see what happens next?” he asks in the direction of the two analysts.

Madame Paquet shakes her head. “No, General, it is not, but allow me to explain. The two men in the hazmat suits spray the victim with what has now been confirmed as a sulfur-mustard agent. Not surprisingly, it kills him. What is interesting is the speed with which the aerosols first cause blistering, then cause rupturing of the mucus membranes, and lastly cause the victim to choke to death. There is a speed and effectiveness to the agent that is not previously known in sulfur-mustard gas. Administered in the amount shown in the video, a common blister agent of this type wouldn’t cause symptoms to appear immediately. Even if



Colonel, do you believe that it is unlikely that they will be able to carry out another attack, before we can find and destroy their operation?” I ask. “They have given us only a week.”

ingested, symptoms typically wouldn’t manifest before fifteen minutes. In this video, the victim begins to develop visible blisters in less than a minute, and the other symptoms follow soon thereafter. He dies from asphyxiation in less than eight minutes, most likely from profuse bleeding in the lower lungs.”

I look from Madame Paquet to Director Émié. He nods and continues. “Yes, Madame Minister. The effects are extremely fast as compared to previously known versions of sulfur-mustard agents. Our CBRN laboratories are attempting to work out precisely in what way the agents produce the effects so quickly, but are presently unable to ascertain exactly how. Naturally, the point of this videoed murder is to demonstrate the effectiveness of the agent and to prove that ISWAP’s claim of responsibility in Gao is valid.” He clicks the remote control a few times to fast forward to a different scene. “You need to see the last part of the clip.”

The same masked man reappears. “Behold the Weapon of the Ummah; behold the Sword of Allah. We, the Jamā’at Ahl as-Sunnah lid-Da’wah wa’l-Jihād, claim lordship of the Caliphate. Under pain of death, we warn you, colonialists and heathens. Respect our borders and withdraw from our lands or we will let sing the Scimitar of the Prophet, alayhi as-salām. We will decimate your ranks. We will scythe through the populations of the infidels. We will shell your cities and villages in all the provinces where you remain, and we will bleed the capitals of your nations. We give you one week to obey. Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar!”

A plethora of voices joins in with his chanting. The video zooms out, showing a whole company of similarly dressed men standing in lines around two artillery pieces, before fading to a waving black flag, with Arabic-style music playing in the background.

“If you will allow, there are a few things to notice, Madame Minister,” Colonel LeBlanc continues. “The hazmat suits in the middle clip are heavy PVC suits with a self-contained breathing apparatus. They are specifically made to handle chemicals but are for civilian use. They could have been purchased on the open market or stolen from a laboratory. The two artillery pieces are old Soviet M/46 howitzers. They were captured from the Nigerian Army in Borno in a surprise attack by ISWAP in 2016, but they are believed to have been smuggled out of Nigeria. Despite the implied threat of being able to deliver a chemical payload by means of artillery, we do not believe they possess this capacity . . . yet. In fact, we have no reports to confirm that the two howitzers have ever been used. As Wednesday’s means of delivery was a suicide bomber, it is very likely that a suicide attack is the only viable means by which ISWAP can deliver the agent and be sure to hit their targets. This limits their capacity to attack. Storing and transportation of such a volatile and potent sulfur-mustard agent is not easy, which also limits the scope of their options. Therefore, their implied threat of an attack with sulfur-mustard gas in France is not presently considered likely. From the accent of the speaker, the look and accent of the victim, and the color of the sand in the last frames, we believe this to have been filmed in eastern Mali or western Niger, and we estimate it is likely that the chemical production facility is there as well. We are presently intensifying HUMINT collection operations across Mali in order to zero in on its exact location. We have extended a request to our US counterparts to do the same, which they have agreed to do, of course. I might add that they have significantly better outreach in Niger than we do.”

“Colonel, do you believe that it is unlikely that they will be able to carry out another attack, before we can find and destroy their operation?” I ask. “They have given us only a week.”

Before Colonel LeBlanc answers, Colonel Martín from the DGSE interjects. “That is simply impossible to say, Madame Minister. We will naturally do everything in our power to achieve that goal, but there is an unaddressed dark horse in all of this. We do not agree with all the DRM’s conclusions for one reason. The DGSE does not believe that ISWAP have developed the means to produce and refine chemical agents on their own. It seems more than likely that they have received outside assistance. With that assistance could also come other skills, such as weaponization, or foreign investments in equipment and hardware, which changes the picture in its entirety.”

He opens a file in front of him and pushes it across the table to me. It contains personnel files with pictures of three distinctly Asian-looking men. “These three gentlemen are Zhang Yuanbo, Liu Mingjie, and Wei Te Dan. They are Chinese chemical engineers working for China’s CNOOC, a government-owned oil and natural gas company operating in the Gulf of Guinea. The three of them were reported kidnapped in September 2016 from their oil platform in the Usan Field some 90 kilometers offshore from the Nigerian coast. There had been a series of similar attacks in the Egina Field just a few weeks prior. The Egina Field is even farther out to sea, so we were surprised to hear that the Chinese security was lax enough for kidnappers to board the platform undetected, let alone successfully get the men off the platform. Nigeria’s attempts to recover the three of them have failed. Their kidnappers disappeared into the depths of the Niger Delta, where the government has almost no influence. For a while we tracked the negotiations for their release, but as Chinese government negotiators generally show little interest in the fate of their citizens in Africa, we didn’t give the case much attention before now.” He points almost demonstratively to a series of titles at the bottom of the files. “These three gentlemen are not only exceptionally skilled chemical engineers. They are also two majors and a lieutenant colonel in the reserves of the People’s Liberation Army. They have worked both in the military and for the Chinese government for decades. They specialize in chemical warfare.”

[Stay tuned for Part Two in the Fall issue of CTX.](#)

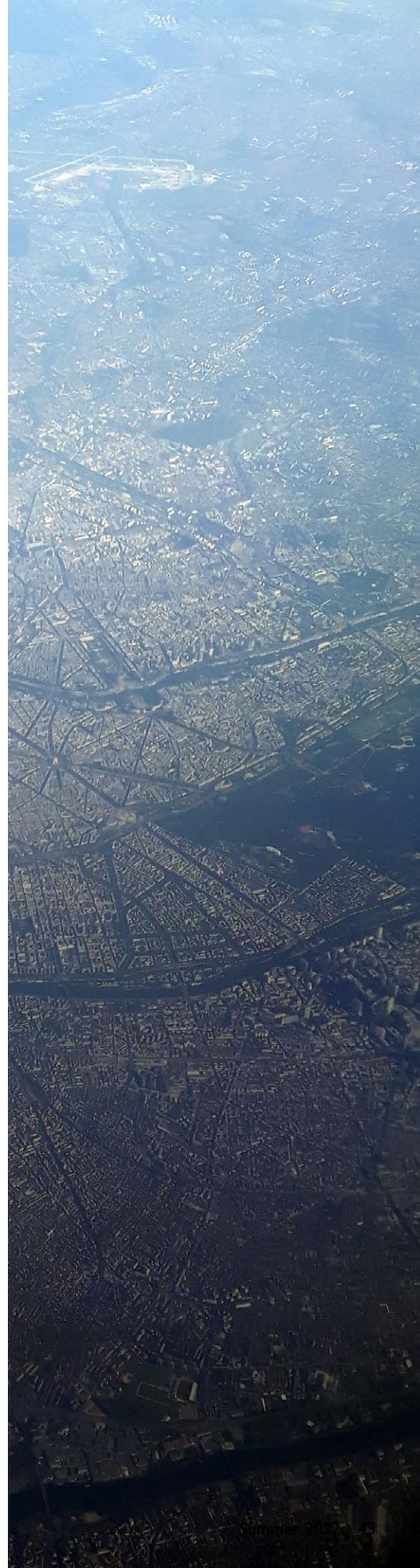
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LIEUTENANT COMMANDER NIKOLAJ LINDBERG serves in the Danish Special Operations Command.

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NOTES

1. You can read the author's earlier story, "At the Very End, I Smiled," about a Nigerian boy who becomes radicalized by Islamist militants, in *CTX* 11, no. 2: <https://nps.edu/web/ecco/ctx-vol-11-no-2-july-2021>



THE CTX INTERVIEW

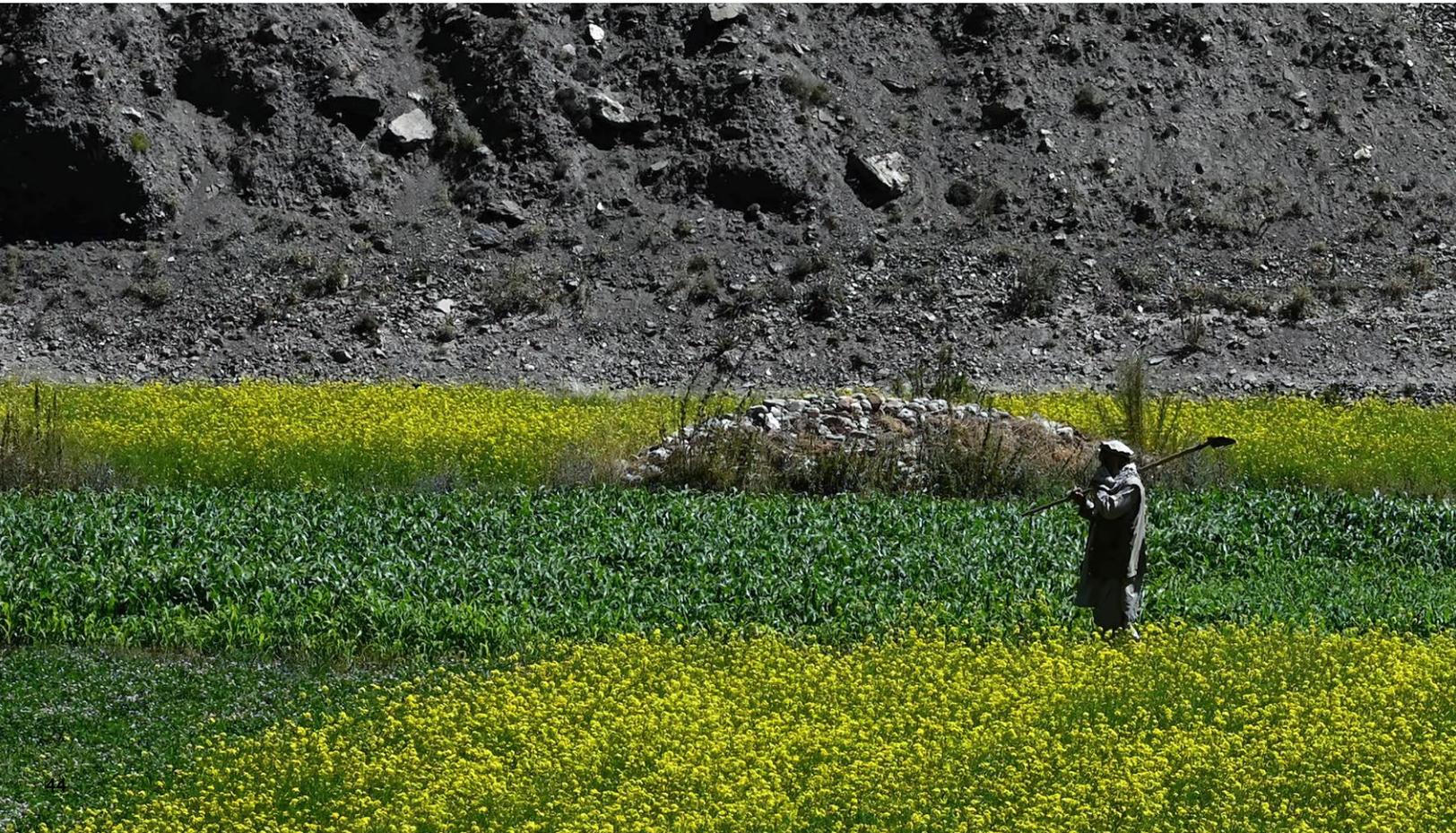
Ali Maisam Nazary, National Resistance Front of Afghanistan

*Interviewed by Dr. John Arquilla,
US Naval Postgraduate School, retired*

Part One: 8 September 2021

On 8 September 2021, Ali Maisam Nazary, the Head of Foreign Relations for the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan (NRF), sat for an online interview with John Arquilla, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Defense Analysis at the US Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) in Monterey, California. This interview took place shortly after the withdrawal of US forces from Afghanistan, while the leader of the NRF, Ahmad Massoud, and his forces were defending their positions in the Panjshir Valley against Taliban attacks.¹

John ARQUILLA: I'd like to begin with special thanks to Mr. Nazary for taking time to visit with us during this very difficult time. Mr. Nazary is speaking in an official capacity for NRF as their Head of Foreign Relations. I think one of the first things we would like to do is get an update from you. We know that the Taliban have seized significant parts



of Panjshir, but we also know the resistance continues in that area.

Ali NAZARY: Thank you very much, Dr. Arquilla. For the past few days, the Taliban's propaganda machine has been claiming that the group is in control of the Panjshir Valley. However, the Taliban basically only control the main road that goes from the southern to the northern part of the valley. Along that road are the provincial buildings and the governor's office, which they took and hoisted their flag on. But Panjshir has more than 15 sub-valleys from the north to the south. All of these sub-valleys are outside of the Taliban's control. They are controlled by the National Resistance Front. Most people have taken refuge in these sub-valleys. These strategic positions from the south to the north are still in our possession, and the Taliban do not control the mountains or any villages that are on the slopes. They are at a disadvantage, facing the same situation the Soviets faced when they were in Panjshir. The Soviets would enter Panjshir and the late commander Ahmad Shah Massoud [father of NRF Commander Ahmad Massoud] and his forces would retreat into the sub-valleys, and after the Soviets would get comfortable after a few days, Massoud's forces would launch a counter-offensive, forcing the Soviets to leave.

The current retreat was tactical because we were unable to sustain a conventional war: there were limited supplies, and we were facing an army that is heavily armed with US equipment, arms, and ammunition, and is assisted by al-Qaeda fighters and by Pakistan. The ISI [Inter-Services Intelligence, Pakistan's military intelligence agency] was there, especially the last night of the offensive, before our forces retreated. People were seeing helicopters and drones, and the Pakistanis brought in drones to assist the Taliban in Panjshir. Based on the intel we have from the Taliban side, there were more than 500 Arab fighters who participated in the battle against the NRF. So this was the situation for the past few days. Unfortunately, they started massacring civilians in a few villages last night. They have been attacking civilians—men, women, and children—to create fear in order to weaken the resistance, and they are committing war crimes.

ARQUILLA: By definition, these are acts of terrorism as well, and presumably the American government wants to continue the counterterrorism campaign in Afghanistan.

NAZARY: Oh, yes. I am in Washington, DC, right now, and I am having these arguments on a daily basis here. Unfortunately, the people I talk to are unable to provide



Their Prime Minister-designate, Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund, was the one who gave the order to destroy the Buddhas of Bamyan. He is someone who is still blacklisted.

the type of counterterrorism assistance that we want to use against the Taliban. But we will get more into that later on.

ARQUILLA: It appears that a number of members of the newly announced Taliban government are on America's Most Wanted List as terrorists. Doesn't one of them have a \$10 million bounty on his head?

NAZARY: Yes. Sirajuddin Haqqani is their Interior Minister and in charge of controlling security. Their Prime Minister-designate, Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund, was the one who gave the order to destroy the Buddhas of Bamyan. He is someone who is still blacklisted.

ARQUILLA: Talk about cultural terrorism.

NAZARY: Mullah Akhund has engaged in both cultural and physical terrorism. He is someone who is very close with the ISI; in fact, he was appointed by [ISI Director General] Faiz Hameed himself when he was in Kabul for a few days. I received reports yesterday from one of my friends who was a director at the NDS [the National Directorate of Security, Afghanistan's intelligence service from 2002 until the US withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021]. He took many of the databases out with him and he is in the region at the moment, so he passed along some valuable information about this individual who became prime minister. Mullah Akhund is a very brutal individual who has committed crimes for the past 20 to 25 years, and he is now heading their government. There are other terrorists who are ministers now, who are deputies, and it is just absurd when I hear that some people believe that the Taliban will help with combating ISIS. They might have their differences with ISIS, but at the end of the day, they are two sides of the same coin.

ARQUILLA: US policy is supposed to be against terrorism, whether perpetrated by ISIS or anyone else, and it seems to me that if we wanted terrorists in a government, it would be a bit of a contradiction to our policy. There are other points that trouble me, and I say this as someone

who has known and worked off and on for 30 years with Dr. Zalmay Khalilzad, who led the US delegation at the negotiations in Doha [between the Taliban and the government of Afghanistan prior to the US withdrawal from Afghanistan]. Promises were made for an inclusive governing council if the war were to be brought to an end. They included a clear promise to cease violence as soon as the American forces left. Since none of these promises have been honored, we need to ask what this implies about the agreement reached in Doha, which President Biden says he is following. Don't those violations by the Taliban justify the armed resistance that is being mounted against their rule? What are your thoughts on the manner in which the Taliban have abrogated key provisions of the Doha agreement?



US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad (left) and Taliban representative Abdul Ghani Baradar (right) sign an agreement in Doha, Qatar, on 29 February 2020.

NAZARY: From the beginning of the peace process, our side was constantly warning Ambassador Khalilzad that this path wasn't going to bring lasting peace in Afghanistan. First, a unilateral peace process between the US and the Taliban is going to take away all of the legitimacy that the Republic has. Once the Taliban sign an agreement with the US, then they won't negotiate with anyone else, because if they have negotiated with the US, why should they sit with the government in Kabul? Their narrative is



Mullah Mohammad Hasan Akhund,
Prime Minister of Afghanistan

that the Doha agreement of February 2020 was a terms of surrender, meaning that the US would surrender Afghanistan to the Taliban. It wasn't an agreement that would create the conditions for a peace process through negotiations between the government in Kabul and the Taliban.

Unfortunately, the Taliban violated the agreement from Day One. The Doha agreement gave them too many concessions, and they did not compromise or make any concessions themselves. They promised a reduction of violence, which is very vague. We conveyed this to Ambassador Khalilzad from Day One. I was present in every meeting that we had with him. We would tell him that this is very ambiguous. What does a reduction of violence mean? It is not a cessation of hostilities. It was incomprehensible for us and he didn't give any clear answers. He said, "They won't attack anyone in the cities; they won't commit suicide attacks." But then, we saw much worse happening. Targeted assassinations started happening. Some attacks happened under the banner of ISIS, but we doubt that ISIS had a hand in many of them. So, the Doha agreement was violated from the start. There was no punishment. No one held the Taliban accountable and they became more emboldened as time passed. That agreement was problematic.

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The Taliban started giving different reasons about why they were not going to negotiate with the Afghan government's team. Their main reason was that it wasn't a high-profile delegation. What they said was that they wanted to reach a political settlement with a high-level delegation, similar to the Bonn Conference in 2001. So the Istanbul process started after the inauguration of President Biden, and it took off in late February 2021. We met Mr. Khalilzad again after that and he gave us a draft of a structure for an interim government. One of their conditions was that the interim or transitional government would have to come into being, and then we will negotiate on a final political settlement.

ARQUILLA: But even that initial government was supposed to be inclusive of other ethnic groups, yes?

NAZARY: Yes, so it was a mixture of both the Taliban and other political forces, and no one was supposed to be dominating the interim transitional government.

ARQUILLA: Clearly, that has been violated by the Taliban government that was just announced, which is all Pashtuns.

NAZARY: Right now, 92 percent of their cabinet belongs to one ethnic group. You only have one Tajik, Qari Fasihuddin, who is Chief of Staff of their Armed Forces, and he lacks popular support even in his own village. Then there are two Uzbeks. To the Taliban, it is the most inclusive government that Afghanistan has ever had. But the reality is that it is the most ethnocentric, religio-centric, fanatic government that Afghanistan has ever seen. As you stated before, there are terrorists in their government.

When we met Ambassador Khalilzad last spring, he gave us a draft of the structure of the interim government. One council that he added in this structure was a Council for Islamic Jurisdiction. This wasn't from the Taliban; it was added by Ambassador Khalilzad himself. So we asked the Ambassador, why is this structure added? This is a carbon copy of what the Islamic Republic of Iran has. And you are going to create a filter that will take freedom of speech and other rights and freedoms from the citizens. He said that the Council doesn't have any executive authority. We told him that, in the early days of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the Guardianship Council was also only a symbolic council. They wouldn't make decisions; they would only consult the government. But over time, they grew powerful. So we would be just repeating what happened in Iran after 1979. He denied it. So if a transitional government were to come into being, that would've been the system. However the Istanbul process failed because a few days



before the start of the conference, President Biden announced the withdrawal. The moment President Biden announced the withdrawal, the Taliban said, “Well, why should we prepare to negotiate in Istanbul when the Americans are leaving?” So that also ended without any results.

ARQUILLA: Your point about religious jurisprudence is very important here. The new government has said very clearly that the laws of the country will all fall under shari’a. So it seems like the process of mullahs becoming the central power in the country is going to happen a lot faster in Afghanistan than it did in Iran.

NAZARY: Yes. The Islamic Republic in Iran was not formed by an insurgency; it was formed by a revolution. So it had more legitimacy compared to the Taliban. Iran’s bureaucracy was intact after the Shah left. Right now, the Taliban basically don’t have a bureaucracy; they have no professional army; they are unable to deliver services to the general population. We do not know what direction this force is going toward. They are unwilling to give or share power with others.

ARQUILLA: Clearly not. Speaking on this point about sharing power, I would like you to comment a little bit on some of the views of Commander Massoud. His vision of a less centralized Afghanistan with more governance and authority out in the provinces is a very powerful vision, and it fits in the culture and history of Afghanistan very well. Also, it is very clear that Commander Massoud has been quite open to negotiating with the Taliban. I think that the Taliban are going to centralize on both of these points, and I think that is going to prove to be a problem. It looks like they have no appetite at all for negotiation. So the question now is how Massoud intends to proceed in an environment like this, where it is already clear this is more than just a civil war situation. As you pointed out, elite Pakistani forces and technology as well as foreign fighters are in the country. So what is Commander Massoud’s strategy at this point?

NAZARY: For years, we have conducted research on why we have perpetual conflict in Afghanistan. This conflict did not start in 1978 with the toppling of the late President Daoud Khan. It didn’t start in 1973 when the monarchy was overthrown. We can see a pattern of conflict in Afghanistan for the past 200 years, a power struggle throughout the past two centuries since Afghanistan was founded, or since the government existed in Kabul. Our conclusion as to why conflict is so prevalent in Afghanistan, whether it is the conflicts of the past half century or the Civil War of 1929, or the civil wars and conflicts between the different factions of the ruling family in the 19th century, or fighting between different tribes, is that it happens because the competition over power is a zero-sum game. Afghanistan is a country made up of ethnic minorities. Unfortunately, there is a narrative that says there is a majority of Pashtuns, and all other groups are minorities. But that’s not the case. Everyone is a minority; no one group constitutes more than 50 percent of the population. There has never been an actual census in the country, so it is very difficult to claim that one ethnic group is a majority while others are minorities.

One indication that Afghanistan is a country made up of minorities is what has occurred during the past 20 years, especially with the parliamentary elections. In the parliamentary elections, despite all of the investment that went into electing more Pashtuns into Parliament, whether it was the Karzai administration or



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the Ghani administration, the Pashtuns were still unable to secure a majority. In a move that was unconstitutional, they gave 10 extra seats to the nomads, who were all ethnically Pashtun. Even that didn't help them pass the 50 percent mark. In the presidential elections, if the Pashtuns were a majority, they would never have formed coalitions with other ethnic groups. These are signs that Afghanistan is a country made up of minorities. One minority, or one ethnic group, or one individual tribe cannot just take over power and subdue everyone. We have seen a pattern: whenever this has happened, we see conflict inside Afghanistan, because people do not want to be subordinated. They do not want to give up their freedoms or their rights.

ARQUILLA: This is why the Commander's point about decentralized governance is so important. In a country with minorities, it only makes sense to decentralize governance.

NAZARY: True. For this reason, when we did our research, everything convinced us that the only solution to Afghanistan's problem is decentralization. To change the rules of the game, to end this zero-sum competition over power, the only way of doing this would be to weaken Kabul and distribute power to the rest of the country. There are many models of federalism in the world: the United States, Canada, Germany; even our neighbors Pakistan and India are federated countries, as are Russia and Iraq.

ARQUILLA: You and Commander Massoud favor the cantonal model of Switzerland, yes?

NAZARY: Yes. The reason is that we wanted to keep the current structure of the provinces and the districts. So it made sense for us to favor the Swiss model. The canton structure is very similar to the political units that we have in Afghanistan, as compared to what is in the United States or elsewhere.

ARQUILLA: So your theory is that decentralization would actually reduce violence within the country precisely because power would be so localized in governance. Seems like a very good theory.

NAZARY: Security would be localized. There are plenty of experts here, including some Americans, who are in favor of localizing security, and research has been done on this topic. In Afghanistan, highly centralized armed forces are not viable for bringing security. Decentralization should apply to the political, administrative, and security realms, and when it comes to economics, we need to have the equal distribution of resources. Based on the advice we've had from economists and other experts, the best way to create competition between the provinces is for these provinces to have direct sources of revenue and to be able to use their natural resources for the benefit of the local population. For example, when Panjshir becomes developed, the neighboring province of Parwan is going to say, "Why are they developing their province? We should develop ours as well. Let's use our capabilities to facilitate economic growth and compete with the other provinces." So a positive competition would be created, with a decentralized system in which resources would be equally distributed and the provinces themselves would have independent sources of revenue.

ARQUILLA: This would minimize the temptation for a central government to engage in any kind of corruption or disproportionately benefit from

resources. It seems to me there was a geophysical survey of Afghanistan done about a decade ago in which they found that there were about \$2 trillion worth of precious metals and minerals that were distributed pretty evenly around the country, including a lot of emeralds in Panjshir. So it would seem that would fit very nicely with your decentralization approach.

NAZARY: Right now, we have retreated from the main valley of Panjshir into the side valleys, and we are present in some of the other valleys of Baghlan Province. We believe that, until we are able to fight a conventional war again, guerilla warfare makes more sense. This is what we pursued in the 1980s, when the late Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud launched his struggle against the Soviets.

Let us go back for a moment to Commander Massoud's strategic plans. We talked a lot about his preference for decentralized governance, but let's talk for a moment about his current strategy. The government and Pakistani and other foreign fighters are there on the floor of the Panjshir Valley; the NRF has a difficult situation and it is not at all clear at the moment what kind of external support there might be. So what is the strategy you might use to fight terrorism directed against the people living in Panjshir, and to continue to resist a government that has risen to power in violation of all the promises that were made at Doha, Istanbul, and everywhere?

We believe that we are the actual partners of the West when it comes to fighting terrorism because we believe in the same values.

It is very difficult to control territory in the Hindu Kush mountains. After a while, outside forces become exhausted, and then they will either retreat or be defeated, so it is just a matter of time. There has been fighting for the past two nights. At the same time, we believe that we are the actual partners of the West when it comes to fighting terrorism because we believe in the same values. We believe in democracy, human rights, women's rights, education, providing freedom, and preserving the independence of the country. All of these are rights that we all cherish

and, especially for us, we really emphasize social justice and multiculturalism in Afghanistan. This is something that Commander Massoud himself has been repeating in all of his speeches and engagements.

So it makes sense that the West aligns itself with such local forces, just as the Kurds in Iraq or in Syria were the natural allies of the West to help fight ISIS and other terrorist groups. In Afghanistan as well, these people have a track record of being willing and able to fight terrorism. We have been aligned

Regional military commands of Afghanistan in 2009.



with the West since the late 1970s: first during the Cold War against the Soviet Union; after that, beginning in the 1990s against international terrorism, and continuing up until today. So it makes sense for us to plead to the West for assistance in whatever form it comes, so that these forces are preserved. Just as the Peshmerga forces in Kurdistan were able to provide a safe zone for threatened groups and others who were displaced in Iraq, we need something similar in Afghanistan. Unfortunately, it is becoming less and less possible here now because the Taliban are inside Panjshir Valley. But Afghanistan, or at least a part of Afghanistan, has to be outside of Taliban rule, especially the northeast. Our emphasis is the Hindu Kush security belt that runs from the Pamir Mountains near the border with China up to the southern tip in Bamyān. This security belt is very strategic. Anyone who controls the belt will have influence over Kabul. This is why the Taliban started from the north this time.



Ahmad Shah Massoud

ARQUILLA: I think you have made an incredibly important point about the geostrategy of Afghanistan. It might be useful for those reading or hearing this conversation to get a sense of how this influences Kabul. Panjshir is 100 miles from Kabul, right?

NAZARY: Yes. Panjshir has always had a strategic position—Panjshir and the Shamali Plain. With the exception of August 2021, whenever there has been a power vacuum in the country, it has been the northern forces that entered and filled that vacuum. Whether it was 1982, 1929, 1880, the 1840s, even 1828 just before the invasion of the British, every time there has been a vacuum, it has been filled by the northern forces. Many of the kings were coronated in the Shamali Plain [south of Panjshir Valley]. All of them were coronated in the north, either in Panjshir or the Shamali Plain, and then they entered Kabul. So the position that the Shamali Plain and Panjshir and the security belt have is very strategic. In order for a safe zone to be created, it is very important to have that security belt, and Bagram Airbase, being just south of the security belt and south of the Hindu Kush, should also be included in such a safe zone. This was something that we emphasized; however, it is becoming less possible now, in the short term.

The other reason is you have the highest concentration of religious minorities in the northeast. There aren't many religious or sectarian minorities in other parts of the country. The largest concentration is in the Baghlan area. The Ismaili minority are in Badakhshan and Baghlan. They are considered total infidels by the Taliban, by al-Qaeda, by ISIS: based on their narrative, these groups consider the Ismailis worse than the Christians and Jews. They say that Christians and Jews have corrupted Islam and created a sect called Ismailis. They say that the Ismailis' leader, His Highness the Aga Khan, is also dependent on the West. They consider the Ismailis outside of Islam and deem them not worthy of living, which is the same opinion that ISIS and al-Qaeda had when it came to the Yazidis in Iraq: they should either convert to the true path or they deserve to die. The second religious minority are the Hazara Shi'as in central Afghanistan. Protecting this area is essential to preventing genocide in the future. So for us, protecting these communities and keeping them away from terrorists is very important. This itself is a counterterrorism effort. You are saving lives and you are not allowing terrorists to become entrenched in this strategic belt. Once terrorism takes this area under full control, it is very difficult to go and remove that, to take it and clear it of that element.

There is a valley north of Panjshir; it is called Warduj, and it is very strategic. The late Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud wrote in his diary that if Panjshir ever falls, the next option that we have is Warduj because of its strategic position. It is very difficult for outsiders to enter this valley. For the past five years, al-Qaeda fighters have settled in Warduj and have brought their families with them. Unfortunately, the former government never made a serious attempt to clear this area. The terrorists are still there. This is an example of how, once they enter and take over a valley, it is very difficult to remove them.

So right now, we are in the epicenter of the struggle against terrorism. We are preventing terrorists from taking our security belt and from creating a very strong layer for themselves where they can plan and launch attacks against Western assets in the region and on Western soil, whether it is in Europe or North America, in the coming years. In

the 1980s, the Soviets bombed Panjshir every day. They had attack helicopters; they had jets; they had everything; it did not make a difference. The Soviets stopped their offensive on Panjshir long before the first Stinger missile was delivered to our front in the northeast. It wasn't the Stinger that drove them away. Aerial bombings do not work in places like Panjshir. Over-the-horizon counterterrorism campaigns, where you send in planes to conduct the bombing, do not work. If you do not have people on the ground making an effort, aerial bombings will not change anything. There are enough caves, enough places for them to hide, and it is very difficult to identify them.

ARQUILLA: I remember the Russians tried to deal with the caves using fuel-air explosives—weapons themselves that exist outside the laws of war—and even those did not work. Your point is very well taken that airpower or over-the-horizon makes little sense in a situation like this. I would like to go back to your central point here, which is that the resistance front is the front line against terrorism. The Biden Administration has said that its goal now is to fight terrorism, and it seems to me that the logic here would imply strong efforts being made to end Taliban terrorism, whether that be by diplomatic, economic, or, in my view, by military support in some form. It seems to me if we stand against terrorism, we cannot stand by and allow acts of terrorism to continue. You mentioned some of the war crimes and the acts of brutality and terror being committed in the valley by the Taliban today. If you have evidence of these that you could share with the world, it would be very important and very compelling. Are you going to be able to do that?

NAZARY: There was a video that was leaked by a Talib, we believe by mistake. When they took the governor's office two days ago and hoisted their flag on top of it, they started rounding up young civilian men. We did not keep our armed forces inside the main valley. We told them to go to the side valleys, which are their actual bases. The Taliban started rounding up young men, especially in the Bazarak District, and in the video there were trucks filled with these young men going to an undisclosed location.

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We do not know where they took these men. So we are seeing such acts. This is the only evidence we have right now. One thing that has happened is the Taliban have completely cut off Panjshir from internet and cell service. There are no other ways of getting information out, apart from couriers, and it is very difficult even for couriers because Panjshir doesn't have many routes to leave. There is only one door: it is a gorge that allows you to enter Panjshir through a very narrow pass. It is very easy to control traffic between Panjshir and the Shamali Plain.

ARQUILLA: The international community should demand an accounting for those individuals who were put on trucks and taken somewhere. Where are they; what happened to them; are they safe? It should be a matter of great urgency.

NAZARY: We believe that right now the US administration does not have the interest in supporting the resistance. The narrative going around DC for the past year or so has been that the Taliban would combat the threat of ISIS and the threat of international terrorism in Afghanistan. The influx of al-Qaeda fighters or fighters affiliated with al-Qaeda showed otherwise. Thousands of al-Qaeda fighters have entered Afghanistan and are closely working with the Taliban. The al-Qaeda leader Amin al-Haq was spotted in Nangarhar Province, where he received a hero's welcome. So if the Taliban have been tolerating the al-Qaeda leadership, we might have Ayman al-Zawahiri returning to Afghanistan too, very soon.

As I mentioned earlier, our own intel sources within the Taliban tell us that there were well over 500 Arabs fighting with the Taliban during their operation in Panjshir, when they took over the government office.

ARQUILLA: In the Taliban units themselves?

NAZARY: Yes. On Twitter, I posted a video of Arab fighters speaking in Arabic, saying they were going to the front to fight against Panjshir. That is clear evidence that you have terrorists present. And now, with the announcement of this government yesterday, you have basically all

those individuals who are still blacklisted as terrorists in the government. None has denied his role in terrorism and links with international terrorism, including Sirajuddin Haqqani. This makes it difficult for those promoting the narrative that the Taliban could help us to go after ISIS. The Taliban will also never risk the relationship with these terrorist groups because of a few million dollars from the United States, because they can receive that amount of money from the drug trade, from China, and from other countries that are aligned with them. They don't need aid from the United States. People say they might change, but if they were going to change, they wouldn't have announced such a government. The Taliban's source of legitimacy comes from these rogue forces throughout the Islamic world, these terrorist groups, or we could even say from criminal drug syndicates.

The Taliban's source of legitimacy comes from these rogue forces throughout the Islamic world, these terrorist groups, or we could even say from criminal drug syndicates.

ARQUILLA: It's ironic, isn't it? Decades ago, the Taliban were against the drug trade, but now they have become addicted to the funds derived from the business. It also troubled me when I heard a government official tell me that the Taliban and Haqqani have tension between them and the Taliban don't want to have anything to do with Haqqani, yet we see Haqqani Network people in great positions of power. I believe there is now a Haqqani who is in charge of the border control in the government. I am not going to say there is a hostage situation, but it is curious how hard it is to get the remaining Americans out of the country. We have a situation where all the values that the United States has stood for are only being upheld by the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan and those who have joined it, including some from the national force. The things we stand for are only being upheld by those who are fighting against the regime. It is a confusing and troubling matter for me.

We are taping this on the 8th of September 2021. Tomorrow is the anniversary of the terrorist attack that assassinated Commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was a great freedom fighter and champion of democracy. In the 20 years since his death, his legacy has been one of continued desire for freedom among the people of the Panjshir and the north, and the creation of the most secure areas in Afghanistan, in this strategic geography you have described. In his son and those who follow him, like



The tomb of Ahmad Shah Massoud

yourself, we see an upholding of those ideals, even in the face of American abandonment. I personally view what you are doing as brave, worthy of support, and as noble a cause as there is on this planet today. I salute what you are doing and hope that we will see a free Afghanistan one day.

NAZARY: Once again, I would like to thank you for inviting me. It was a great pleasure being part of this program. As you said, these two events in the month of September signify a deep relationship between the United States and Afghanistan: 9 September 2001 and 11 September 2001 changed both countries' histories. Both attacks were perpetrated by the same group. We have similar values we are fighting for: freedom, human rights, democracy, and justice for all. And we have a mutual enemy, international terrorism, which is threatening Afghanistan; it has hijacked the country and it will pose a threat to US interests. So there is still room for an enduring partnership between both nations. At the moment, the NRF is the only remaining US ally in Afghanistan; unfortunately, the others are not there anymore. This is the last resistance against terrorism, and if this resistance is unable to sustain itself, there won't be any more opposition against the Taliban in the years to come. So it is important that the international community come to the aid of the

NRF, and help these efforts that are not only for Afghanistan but for the security of the whole world. If terrorism is victorious in Afghanistan, it will challenge the security of many regional countries and, ultimately, the Western world and elsewhere.



WATCH THE INTERVIEW

You can watch the videos of these interviews at <https://nps.edu/web/ecco/afghanistan-panel-session>

ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

DR. JOHN ARQUILLA is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Defense Analysis at the US Naval Postgraduate School.

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NOTES

1. Ali Nazary spoke in his official capacity as Head of Foreign Relations for the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan. The views expressed by John Arquilla are his alone, and do not reflect official US Navy or government policy. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Part Two: 29 January 2022

John Arquilla spoke again with Ali Nazary online in January 2022, after the Taliban had been in power in Afghanistan for five months. They discussed the current situation in the Panjshir Valley, where the NRF continued to resist Taliban attacks, and the changes to Afghanistan under Taliban rule.¹

John ARQUILLA: It is our privilege to welcome Mr. Ali Maisam Nazary to join us again in conversation about the ongoing situation in Afghanistan. The last time we spoke was in September 2021, shortly after the Taliban had taken over. What we would like to do in today's session is to get a sense of what the situation might be in Panjshir with the NRF, and also to get Mr. Nazary's sense of how other groups around the country are reacting to Taliban attempts to rule and whether a rural resistance might emerge.² Also, we will try to speak to some of the issues of Taliban behavior that, in my view, can only be described as war crimes. Mr. Nazary, please begin by giving us a sense of the current status of the resistance in Panjshir and wherever else it may be in Afghanistan.

Ali NAZARY: Thank you very much for inviting me once more and giving me time to explain the situation in Afghanistan, especially the current status of the NRF. The situation when we last spoke in September was much different from today. Today, the situation is much worse. Afghanistan is suffering from a humanitarian crisis that is unprecedented in its history, and it is suffering from a security crisis. Right now, there is basically no law and order in the country. It's a country that has no government. It's in a state of anarchy. Just yesterday, I was interviewed by someone who was asking questions about the conference in Norway [talks in Oslo, 23-25 January 2022, between representatives of the Taliban government, Western officials, and Afghan civil representatives] and whether this conference will lead to recognition of the Taliban government. I said, "A recognition of what? There is no government to recognize in Afghanistan." We've seen a drastic increase in transborder criminal activities, whether it's human trafficking, drug trafficking, or antiquity trafficking. Many groups are dealing with increased oppression. We're seeing women being abducted and arrested, and the same with other youth, intellectuals, and journalists. Former NDSF [National Directorate of Security Forces] personnel are being targeted on a daily basis. Whoever is found, whether soldier or officer, is not spared. The Taliban's whole claim of a general amnesty was a joke. They say it in words, but we don't see their words being translated into action. They are targeting officers and soldiers they identify throughout the country.

Before the government [of President Ashraf Ghani] fell, many of our commanders were restricted because they had to follow orders from the national security advisor, Hamdullah Mohib, who had no military or security training or experience. He was giving orders to these qualified, well-trained commanders. Now we're able to formulate strategies and tactics based on how the Taliban fight. So the NRF commanders are now more efficient and more effective because those restraints are not there anymore. We're going to increase our ranks by this spring and summer. We are getting recruits every day. There are going to be many opportunities for us to change the situation, at least in the northeast, because the situation in Afghanistan is fluid. Right now, there is no law and order; there is no state; there

is no government. We didn't anticipate a year ago that the government in Kabul would collapse so quickly. This situation is so fluid that it's possible that the Taliban will not last in many parts of the country in the coming months.

ARQUILLA: You had mentioned that the core of the resistance forces are veterans coming out of the Afghan security forces. I'm also hearing that some of the former members of what we called the Northern Alliance are also thinking about joining the fight against the Taliban, including people like Abdul Rashid Dostum and Ara Mohammad Noor, because they are discontented with the Taliban's failed effort at governance. Is there any sense that those other members of the Northern Alliance are coming back in?

Just as the general population in Afghanistan despise the Taliban, they also despise many corrupt individuals who held power during the past 20 years.

NAZARY: No. At the moment, there is neither the will nor plans for them to return to Afghanistan or start any sort of resistance on the ground. Just as the general population in Afghanistan despise the Taliban, they also despise many corrupt individuals who held power during the past 20 years. Many of these people exploited the people of Afghanistan; they engaged in all sorts of corruption and decadence and embezzled from the people. As a result, they lack popular support, so it would be very difficult for them to return to their country. Even before August 15 [2021], they had the capability of resisting. They had arms; they had money; they had ammunition; they had everything that was needed for resistance, but they chose to leave the country instead of staying on. However, more people from throughout the country, from different ethnicities and different sectarian groups, are joining the NRF every day that passes. So we are receiving support from all over the country.

ARQUILLA: This is an excellent point and something we in the West need to make sure we're aware of. This is not a story of individual warlords who have their own problems with corruption and authoritarian rule in their own areas. This is actually a national movement that you're talking about, that will be free of any kind of warlordism. Sometimes the people who criticize the resistance think it just means that the warlords are coming back, but you're really describing a national movement here. Is that correct?

NAZARY: Yes. Just to give you an example, three months ago, in order to show their opposition to us, those

individuals [former warlords and exiled politicians] created a coalition in Turkey, which afterwards prohibited them from conducting any political activities. It was called the National Resistance Council [Supreme Council of National Resistance of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan], with all those personalities being part of it, but they did not receive any popular support.³ They were unable to attract any attention around the globe, so they basically withdrew to their homes and we haven't heard from them since then. They were in opposition to what we're doing because, as I stated back in September 2021, the NRF is a grassroots movement that comes from the people. This isn't a coalition of political parties or political figures. It was formed by the people, whether it was the civilians or the former armed forces who came together in Panjshir and other places and said, "We believe this individual, Commander Ahmad Masood, who stayed in the country. We trust him. He wasn't involved in [the corruption of] the past 20 years; he's educated; he's young; we believe he could liberate our country, so we pledge our allegiance to him." So this is a popular movement, a movement that comes from the people, not from a class of elites or political figures who were involved in [corrupt activities over] the past 20 years.

ARQUILLA: Another point that's very important, particularly to the Western countries that so recently left Afghanistan, is the national movement's view about the Taliban's mistreatment of women. We walked away from Afghanistan after having brought hope to the women of the country. The Taliban made promises, but they are all being broken. Women are being kidnapped, and I hear that some are being executed. It seems to me that championing the rights of women would be an essential element to the national resistance. Is the NRF trying to actively recruit women to the movement, not just under arms but also to be part of a civil resistance to Taliban rule?

NAZARY: We have three fronts that we're working with. One is the military front: our armed resistance. Second is our political front, which consists of our diplomatic efforts outside of Afghanistan to prevent any sort of recognition for this terrorist group, to spread awareness, to show that there is an alternative for Afghanistan, and to show the international community that it has to wait and see how the situation of the country is going to develop in the coming months. The third front is the civil resistance in the cities. But we must be careful. Women are being detained; many of them are being executed, and many of them are being transferred outside the country. A lot of children are also being abducted. We don't know where these women and children are. We have heard some reports that they're being taken to Pakistan, and who knows where they'll be sent afterwards. We are in touch with women, and published

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a statement two days ago after the Norway conference ended, supporting the civil resistance. But we don't want to associate the women with the NRF because of the risks that come with it.



ARQUILLA: Do you think Pakistan will support the Taliban very directly, or will it watch and see how matters unfold in the near future?

NAZARY: Well, Pakistan has been giving the Taliban full support. They believe their 40-year investment has now yielded results. Now they want to protect this investment in Afghanistan and their faction in power, the Haqqani Network. There was a very interesting article in *Foreign Affairs* three or four days ago that beautifully explained the role that the Haqqani Network is playing in supporting terrorists, whether it's al-Qaeda or even ISIS K [Islamic State Khorasan Province].⁴ People believe that ISIS K might be against the Taliban and the Taliban against ISIS K. But it's not that black and white. There is a lot of cooperation and interaction between the two groups. Pakistan, for example, has still been allowing safe passage for many terrorist groups in the past few months. We've been seeing an influx of foreign fighters from the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and Central Asia through Pakistan into Afghanistan. Pakistan could easily block the border and prevent these groups from coming into Afghanistan. There have been some problems between Pakistan and the Taliban, but we believe these problems are superficial and are not going to change their relationship, because the Taliban are highly dependent on Pakistan. Their families are still residing in Pakistan; their wives and children are in Quetta and Peshawar, and many are in Islamabad and Karachi, so the Taliban cannot have an anti-Pakistan strategy.

There are people trying to create a narrative where the Taliban are asking for independence, that they have a different mindset, that they want to be more independent from Pakistan, that they're not listening to Pakistan. But this is all a façade, because the people in Afghanistan believe that the Taliban are a proxy of Pakistan, that they're serving Pakistani interests and their group's interests, not the interests of Afghanistan's people. Those who are trying to change the narrative are making a point about some symbolic acts, such as saying that the Taliban prevented Pakistan from building a fence at one part of the border. These are all lies and fictitious news that came out in order to change the mindset and mentality of Afghanistan's people. But in reality, the Taliban are deeply dependent on Pakistan. Without Pakistan, they cannot survive.

◀ **The Tall Buddha of Bamiyan** before its destruction by the Taliban.

However, Pakistan has failed to legitimize the Taliban. Before 15 August, [Pakistan's leaders] were a bit more successful in convincing many international players that the Taliban had changed, that they are more moderate, that they are going to accept women's rights, that they are going to accept human rights, and so forth. But after 15 August, their work became very difficult for them. For example, at the United Nations, [Pakistani officials] failed to take Afghanistan's UN seat and give it to the Taliban, or even to keep it empty. They failed to remove the sanctions on the Taliban in December. Then they started to mobilize the Islamic world in order for the Taliban to receive legitimacy and recognition from a few Muslim countries, and they convened the

Organization of Islamic Cooperation conference in Islamabad in December, but that also failed. It's interesting that the conference was held with only a few Muslim countries. It was supposed to have been a ministerial-level conference where

all Muslim countries should have sent their foreign ministers, but only a few countries sent their foreign ministers. When the Taliban official spoke, all the officials left the hall, and then no one, especially the Saudi foreign minister, was willing to meet with the Taliban. On that day, 17 December, when the OIC conference was happening in Islamabad, all the foreign ministers of the Central Asian republics went to New Delhi. So that was a strong message they sent to Pakistan. This is because of the problem with terrorism, which I would like to get into before we finish.

ARQUILLA: It seems to me the case is overwhelming for putting diplomatic pressure on Pakistan. If Islamabad's support for the Taliban were to cease, I think the prospects for your national insurgency would be greatly improved. I know you have some interesting insights about terrorism, so why don't we move to that subject?

NAZARY: Unfortunately, in the past six months, we've had an influx of foreign fighters into Afghanistan. Our sources tell us there are around 13,000 to 14,000 foreign fighters operating inside Afghanistan. According to strong evidence from our intel sources, around 6,000 personnel are stationed along the border between Afghanistan and

Tajikistan. The fighters are members of two groups: the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan and the Jamaat Ansarullah, which is made up of Tajik nationals. They came from the Middle East, where many of them were fighting alongside al-Qaeda and ISIS for the past few years. Now they've returned, and the Taliban have given them control of the border areas, and supplied them with US-made gear—night vision goggles, uniforms, helmets, weapons—everything that they need. So you have this force now, 6,000 strong along Central Asia's borders, threatening not only Tajikistan but all of Central Asia. This is a cause for concern for many of these countries because Tajikistan shares the longest border with Afghanistan compared to all the other

republics. It is a very mountainous, rugged border, and so it's going to be very difficult to control the situation if more foreign fighters are moving toward the north. The Taliban have moved their Badri suicide bombing brigade, which is part of the Haqqani

Network, to the border region as well, and they're sending threats and messages to Central Asia, especially to Tajikistan. The same has happened at other borders, especially in the west; some factions of the Taliban have been having problems with the Iranians, especially after allowing Baluchi insurgents from Iran to build a base there. Another point that has to be made is that the Haqqani Network controls the Afghan passport agency, and they're distributing passports and identification to these foreign fighters. What's going to happen is that many of these terrorist foreign fighters are going to join the mass migrations toward Europe with identification from Afghanistan. So when members of the NRF, especially myself, go on the media or into meetings, we emphasize that this isn't a civil war; this is a continuation of the global war on terror because these people are not planning attacks inside Afghanistan. They are preparing themselves for something beyond Afghanistan. The Taliban have appointed a few al-Qaeda members in key positions. One of them is Qari Ehsanullah Baryal, who has been appointed governor of Kabul Province. He's part of al-Qaeda, not the Taliban.

ARQUILLA: Doesn't this just continue what the Taliban were doing when they were in power the first time around,

The Taliban have moved their Badri suicide bombing brigade, which is part of the Haqqani Network, to the border region as well, and they're sending threats and messages to Central Asia.

and all kinds of foreign fighters were welcomed in the country? Aren't we just seeing some of the same behavior? This could be another argument against giving any kind of official recognition to the Taliban government. You know, it is still a puzzle to me that the Oslo meeting even happened. How does the NRF look at this? Did Oslo give the Taliban

between the different factions is deepening every day. Since late September, they've been openly fighting against each other. The bombing that happened in Kunduz [at the Shi'a Gozar-e-Sayed Abad Mosque on 8 October 2021] was the Haqqanis. The bombing that happened in Kandahar, in the Shi'a mosque [the Imam Bargah Mosque, on 15 October



A banner with a picture of late Afghan commander Ahmad Shah Massoud, near Darband in Panjshir Province, on 15 September 2021.

some credibility, or is your strategy at the diplomatic level still working against them?

NAZARY: This is a form of appeasement. There are, unfortunately, some Western diplomats who believe that we should legitimize the Taliban and interact with them diplomatically because there is no other option. The other option in Afghanistan is ISIS, which we're completely against. But it's wrong to believe that the Taliban are the only option, that they could stabilize the country and then fight against ISIS. In the past six months, the one thing that has happened is that we've seen the Taliban fracture. There are five factions within the Taliban, and the rift

2021]; that was conducted by the Haqqanis. In front of the Eid Gah Mosque in Kabul [a bombing on 3 October 2021], it was the Kandaharis going after the Haqqanis; in November, the Kandaharis assassinated a well-known Haqqani Network commander, Mawlawi Hamdullah Mukhlis; he was the one who sat in Ashraf Ghani's chair on the night of 16 August, when they took the presidential palace.

What's going on right now is that Kabul and many parts of the country are being divided into fiefdoms between the different factions. Kabul is now being controlled by Mullah Yaqoob, their so-called defense minister, who is the son of Mullah Omar. Many neighborhoods are controlled by the

Kandaharis and many are controlled by Haqqanis. There are different laws being implemented in each one. There are different attitudes towards different matters. They are fighting against each other. The Haqqanis control the Interior Ministry, and their men are going after Mullah Yaqoob's men, who control the Defense Ministry. They have been stealing each other's resources: the Defense Ministry vehicles are being taken by the Haqqanis and vice versa. So these rifts are increasing and it's going to get worse because they—all of them—know that the Taliban's Supreme Leader is not alive. Haibatullah Akhundzada might have died or been assassinated two years ago. [Editor's note: there is still some uncertainty about whether he is, in fact, dead.] The ISI is concealing his death, and therefore, all of them are competing over power. Who will succeed Haibatullah once the ISI announces that he hasn't been alive for two years? Siraj Haqqani is grooming himself for that position. Yaqoob believes he is the rightful heir because he is the son of Mullah Omar. Same with Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar, who runs the Kandahari faction.

In the past two weeks, we have seen more fighting between the non-Pashtun Taliban in the north and the Pashtun Taliban, whether it's the Kandahari faction or the Haqqani Network. For example, in Badakhshan, there have been at least three battles between the non-Pashtun local commanders and the Taliban commanders who come from the south and the east. Just last week, 12 Taliban were killed in such clashes in Badakhshan between the non-Pashtun Taliban from Badakhshan and the Taliban coming from elsewhere. The non-Pashtun Taliban, whether in Faryab or Takhar Provinces, are not ideologically Taliban. They joined this group because there was no other alternative when they went against Ashraf Ghani. They raised the white flag of the Taliban, but now it is becoming apparent to them that they don't belong to this group because they are being marginalized. Just two weeks ago in Faryab Province, the Uzbek Taliban rose up against the Taliban associated with the Haqqanis, and the Kandaharis disarmed both groups. They told them to leave and brought down the white flag and raised the Turkistan flag, which symbolizes Uzbek nationalism. This continued for a few days. This shows the different rifts and how fragile the situation is for the Taliban—and this is when the situation is stable. This is happening in winter, so imagine what will happen in the spring when the fighting season starts.

Just two weeks ago in Faryab Province, the Uzbek Taliban rose up against the Taliban associated with the Haqqanis, and the Kandaharis disarmed both groups.

ARQUILLA: I would like to spend some time on your views of what lies ahead. What will it look like in the coming months when the fighting resumes? What is on the diplomatic calendar? What do you see for the civil resistance as well? We hope to receive another visit from you in six months or so and see how things have gone, but give us a sense of where things are heading now.

NAZARY: Fighting will intensify. If it happens internally, within the Taliban, they will fracture. They are overstretched right now. They are weak. They cannot keep control of most of the country. It's unimaginable that the Taliban will control the same amount of territory in six months or so as they do today. We are preparing ourselves for the coming months, mobilizing our forces and increasing our ranks. And then there are other dangers. ISIS is not going to stay quiet. It has an abundant amount of resources. It is distributing cash; we don't know where it's coming from, but ISIS recruits are being paid \$400 to \$500 dollars per year.

ARQUILLA: As a signing bonus.

NAZARY: Yes. Right now, Afghanistan is facing a humanitarian crisis where people are having a hard time making \$10 per month, and ISIS is giving up to \$500. This situation is preparing itself for a showdown. You have these terrorist groups that are threatening neighboring countries. The conflict might pour into some other countries in the region, and it might drag these countries back into Afghanistan. The situation might become much worse than what we saw in Syria and Iraq in 2013-2014.

It is difficult to imagine Afghanistan stabilizing. Just a day ago, the UN Special Representative to Afghanistan from the Security Council said that the war in Afghanistan has ended. I think that is the most absurd statement anyone can make. The war hasn't ended. There is no sign the war has ended. Yes, there is a bit of calm. I am not saying there is fighting going on throughout the country. But there is a catastrophe just waiting to happen, and the reason is because of such ignorance and negligence by many countries, whether it's regional countries or the international community. They believe everything has ended in Afghanistan, that there is no terrorism or outside threats that they have to engage. They believe the humanitarian crisis is the

The prime minister has said that their “primary responsibility is jihad. The responsibility to feed and provide for the people is that of God. So people should pray to God, they shouldn’t ask us.”

only crisis. Yes, I believe the humanitarian crisis has to be addressed, but you must remember one thing: the humanitarian crisis came into being because the Taliban hijacked the country. In order to end the humanitarian crisis, you have to address the root cause of it, and the root cause is having such a group that doesn’t know how to govern the country. In the past six months, they haven’t been able to manage even a small administration. They don’t have the will to serve the people, to provide for other people. This is something their prime minister has said, that their “primary responsibility is jihad. The responsibility to feed and provide for the people is that of God. So people should pray to God, they shouldn’t ask us.” That is their mentality, and as long as this group stays in power, there will be a humanitarian crisis.

The way the international community is dealing with this is not constructive. In 2014, when ISIS hijacked parts of Iraq and Syria, the Western world did not interact with them diplomatically. There was a humanitarian crisis that began in those parts, but they did not engage directly with ISIS and try to legitimize them. They addressed the root cause by removing ISIS from power. Now we are seeing the same thing repeat itself in Afghanistan, but the strategy is different. The people of Afghanistan want to be given an opportunity to show they are going to create an alternative government, and that a terrorist group like the Taliban cannot represent them. The people still support democracy. They want reform in their country. Unfortunately, the democracy over the past 20 years was flawed. There was pervasive corruption, but the Afghan people want another chance to create a better democracy and a better society for themselves. They have shown this in different ways, whether through peaceful protests in the cities or armed conflict in the rural parts of Afghanistan and the strategic Hindu Kush mountain range.

Even outside of Afghanistan, the diaspora communities around the world have shown their disdain toward the Taliban. The Taliban don’t enjoy legitimacy or popular support. The outside world has to understand this and should formulate its strategy based on the reality on the ground. We believe there is still a chance in the next six months or so for something better to come about in Afghanistan:

a better entity to represent the interests of Afghanistan’s people and Afghanistan as a whole, as a country. This is what the National Resistance Front is working on. We are hopeful that, in the next six months, we will be able to liberate at least some parts of the country and to fulfill these promises.

ARQUILLA: Your point about the open recruitment campaigns that ISIS is undertaking right now is especially troubling, because we know their vision extends well beyond Afghanistan. So this is a problem for the world. To the best of my recollection, when things went well in Afghanistan, it took just a small number of American special forces—the A teams—working with the Afghans to help them free themselves from the Taliban. It seems to me you are leading a movement that will be able to do that even without foreign special forces. I can only hope that is the case, and you can bring an end to this suffering and the terrible risks that the world, by averting its gaze, is allowing to unfold. You have provided and continue to provide an antidote to the mistaken thinking that the meeting in Oslo or the report to the UN put forth, that somehow the war is over.

We thank you for your time and look forward to doing this in the future. I hope that much of what you have said about the coming months will come to pass. Again, my sincerest thanks.

NAZARY: Thank you for giving me the opportunity and for your encouragement and support. The Afghan people need as much support as they can receive from the international community.



WATCH THE INTERVIEW

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ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER

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NOTES

1. Ali Nazary spoke in his official capacity as Head of Foreign Relations for the National Resistance Front of Afghanistan. The views expressed by John Arquilla are his alone, and do not reflect official US Navy or government policy. The interview has been edited for length and clarity.
2. For more on the current situation in Panjshir, see Susannah George and Aziz Tassal, "Inside the Taliban's Secret War in the Panjshir Valley," *Washington Post*, 8 June 2022: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/06/08/afghanistan-panjshir-valley-taliban-resistance/>
3. Sakhi Khalid, "The Supreme Council of National Resistance Establishes in Afghanistan," *Hasht e Subh Daily*, 22 October 2021: <https://8am.af/eng/the-supreme-council-of-national-resistance-of-afghanistan-established/>
4. Melissa Skorka, "Afghanistan's Most Dangerous Threat: Why America Can't Take on the Haqqani Network Alone," *Foreign Affairs*, 24 January 2022: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/central-asia/2022-01-24/afghanistans-most-dangerous-threat>

THE WRITTEN WORD

Irregular Soldiers and Rebellious States: Small-Scale U.S. Interventions Abroad

by Michael P. Noonan

*Reviewed by Dr. Craig Whiteside, US Naval War
College at the Naval Postgraduate School*



T

HE US MILITARY'S SHIFT FROM FIGHTING IRREGULAR CONFLICTS TO preparing for Great Power competition has tremendous logic in the face of China's continued rise as a modern military power with a significant economic base. Although this rise has been steady, and slogans about pivoting to the Pacific are not new, the US pullout from Afghanistan has inspired some to claim that now is the time to move on, and that nothing we learned over the past two decades is very relevant to the large-scale combat operations that would be necessary in a US-China war. This would be a mistake for many reasons, but mostly because there is a real possibility that the United States will be drawn back into conflicts in the irregular war space, albeit for different reasons than the ones that prevailed after 9/11.



Noonan's operating assumption

is that, in the near future, US allies and partners will require US assistance in order to counter irregular threats such as subversion, terrorism, and internal unrest.

With perfect timing, Michael Noonan's *Irregular Soldiers and Rebellious States* enters the debate with a well-written examination of (mostly) US irregular warfare practice, its current institutions, and possibilities for the future. Noonan has a doctorate in War Studies from King's College London, and served as an advisor during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He argues that, despite the inclinations of US military and political leaders to focus on the challenges of near-peer rivals in multiple theaters, future conflict might look more like the last two decades of irregular warfare than like World War II.

Noonan's operating assumption is that, in the near future, US allies and partners will require US assistance in order to counter irregular threats such as subversion, terrorism, and internal unrest. He points out that providing such assistance would support US national interests, and he affirms that current doctrine and practice are sufficient foundations on which to build. He begins the book with a thorough assessment of how US military leaders think about the best ways to address "indirect" threats, uses case studies of what he terms "offensive" and "defensive" interventions to demonstrate past practices, and ends the book with a realistic appraisal of the future of irregular warfare. He adeptly utilizes a wide range of historical case studies and the best scholarship on irregular warfare in a way that should appeal to academics, policymakers, and practitioners alike.

The strongest parts of this book are the clear thinking on irregular warfare (defined doctrinally as a violent contest for power among populations using non-traditional actors and means) and the way that Noonan makes a complex topic understandable to readers outside of the special operations community. Foreign internal defense, unconventional warfare (support for foreign insurgencies), and direct action are different tools that can be used to leverage US knowledge, expertise, and resources to support important US interests in competitions short of war. In this space, Noonan argues, “the U.S. arsenal of ‘big stick’ military tools must also be complemented through the maintenance of a smaller and more nimble stick that is both sharp and smart.”¹

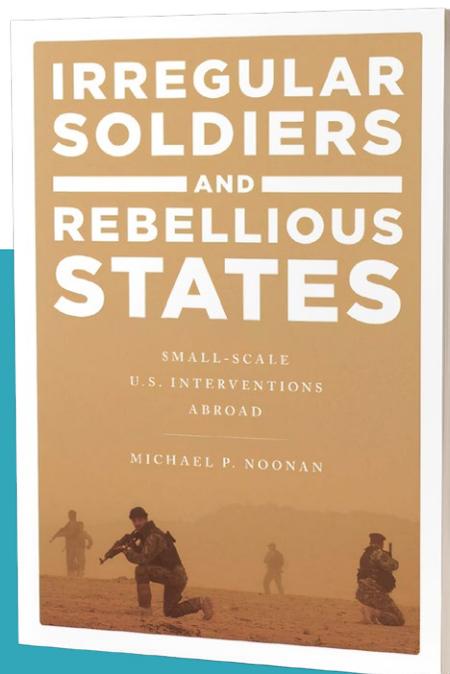


A WZ-8 unmanned reconnaissance drone on display in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, China, on 29 September 2021.



Soldiers with Qwat al Khasah, Iraqi Special Forces, train at Camp Taji, Iraq, on 7 March 2020.

Noonan divides US experience into defensive and offensive “indirect interventions,” which translate into efforts to, respectively, shore up partners that are facing internal and/or external subversion, and create problems for US adversaries—usually significant powers—on their peripheries. This is a helpful typology for the reader since it clarifies when particular irregular capabilities and forms are used, and for what reasons. Building Iraqi



► *Irregular Soldiers and Rebellious States: Small-Scale U.S. Interventions Abroad*
by Michael P. Noonan
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Ministry of Peshmerga drivers leave the Forward Logistics Element yard in Erbil, Iraq.

special forces to tamp down the Islamic State insurgency is quite different from rolling back the Caliphate with a proxy force in Syria, even if they are occurring in the same theater. The international coalition's ability in the last few years to achieve favorable results against the Caliphate with irregular formations (supported ably by general-purpose forces) supports Noonan's overall argument as to the value of these missions.

The use of irregular soldiers in these campaigns, and others in Africa and Southeast Asia, have led critics to blame these exquisite formations for the tendency of administrations to conduct an endless war against terrorism, devoid of strategy and endstates. This argument, however, ignores the many Congressional authorizations and ongoing funding for irregular warfare that have supported four consecutive US administrations in their efforts to use these capabilities to bolster strategic partners and manage smaller threats to stability and security, thus keeping the problems local rather than letting them become global. The growth of the Islamic State in Africa, and its efforts to conduct its own type of unconventional warfare to support nascent and aspiring franchises, indicate that our continued engagement will only grow. The importance of Africa to global stability and prosperity is becoming more obvious as well, and Noonan correctly notes that this reality is sure to "drive the level of U.S. involvement going forward."²



Shops burned down by suspected members of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) during an attack on 9 February 2020.

My only disagreement is with Noonan's second policy prescription, in which he describes concepts of war and peace as a false dichotomy. This is a popular notion but nonetheless incorrect.

The final chapter, in which the author offers findings and policy prescriptions that are convincing and straightforward, is strong. My only disagreement is with Noonan's second policy prescription, in which he describes concepts of war and peace as a false dichotomy. This is a popular notion but nonetheless incorrect, and he doesn't put forward an argument for why war and peace are no longer distinct so much as wants us to accept it uncritically. War is an exceptional state of relations between two parties (often states); blurring lines between war and peace and

confusing non-violent competition for war are far more dangerous than believing that holding distinct notions of peace and war “limits choices and reduces American flexibility,” as Noonan asserts.³ His description of war and peace as being on a spectrum of conflict is not incorrect; however, the claim that they also somehow overlap undermines his own argument that we should counter irregular threats to partners in an indirect manner (i.e., outside of direct conflict between large powers). These operations, done in politically sensitive environments, happen more often during peace than in war. There is a bit of irony in this observation, because the very Congressional authorities that Noonan cites allow the US military to advise and assist allies and partners, sometimes in combat conditions, to secure our interests. The United States can be at war with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and at peace with great power rivals, all while competing (sometimes forcibly) for influence and power in the international system. To conflate *all* activities in the irregular space as war—whether against the Islamic State or in support of proxies fighting great powers, as in Ukraine—is not only a conceptual error, but could unintentionally cause a conflict to escalate into a very conventional (and easily recognized) form of war.⁴

The Trump and Biden administrations’ mutual embrace of Great Power competition (in varying degrees and with different strategies), and the resultant reorientation of the armed forces for near-peer threats—combined with the fading need for trained irregular warriors in active combat zones and the poor results in Afghanistan and Iraq—might lead potential readers to ignore this book.⁵ That would be a great mistake. Noonan is right when he notes that, despite the discomfort with the topic, “small wars are not going away.”⁶ As painful as it may be, this is the time to think about recent experience, contrast it with others from the past, and continue to refine doctrine and praxis for the next intervention, wherever that may be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES

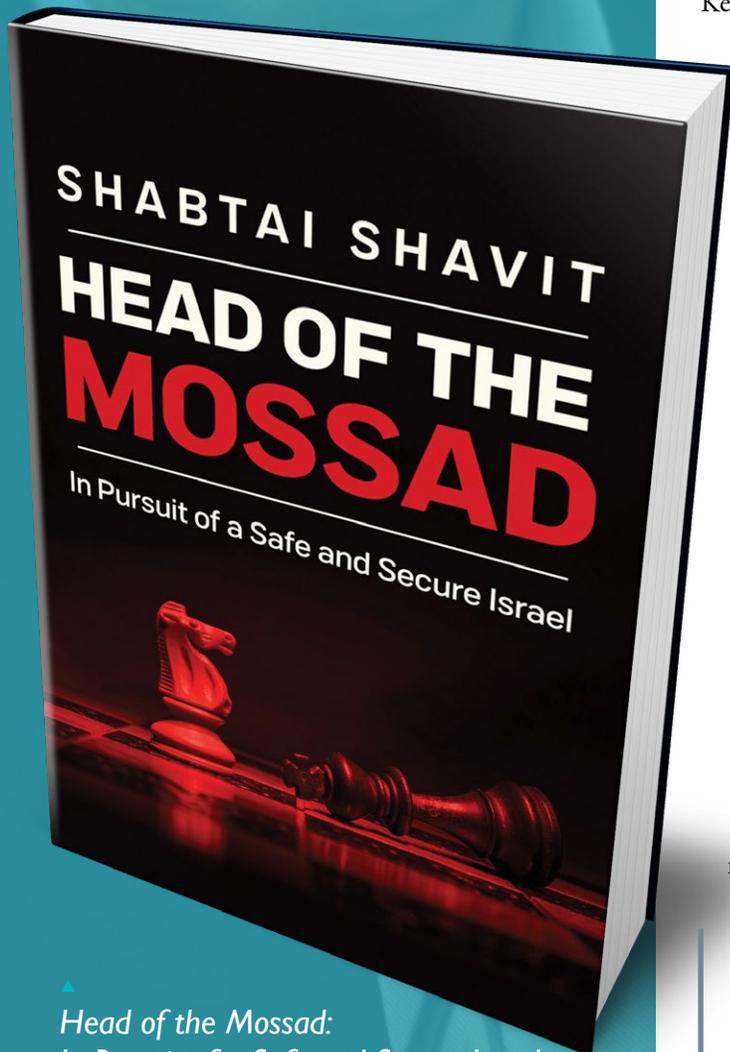
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THE WRITTEN WORD

*Head of the Mossad:
In Pursuit of a Safe
and Secure Israel*

by Shabtai Shavit

*Reviewed by Major Tim Bettis,
United States Air Force*



*Head of the Mossad:
In Pursuit of a Safe and Secure Israel*

By Shabtai Shavit

Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre
Dame Press, 2020

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434 pages

ONE EVENING IN THE AUTUMN OF 1994, secret negotiations of the utmost importance took place deep inside the al-Maqar palace compound in Amman, Jordan, home of the Jordanian royal family and the site of key government offices. On their hands and knees on the floor, with a map between them, Jordan's King Hussein and Israel's Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin delineated the boundary between their respective territories, finalizing what would become one of the region's most historic peace treaties. The nearly 50-year-old conflict between these neighbors would come to an end and bring security to Israel's longest border.¹

Key to these historic negotiations was the Mossad, Israel's national intelligence agency, whose long history of secret ties to the Jordanian royal family served as a critical diplomatic backchannel for Israeli leadership. Author Shabtai Shavit served as the Mossad's director from 1989 to 1996, leading it through a tumultuous period that included the collapse of the Soviet Union, the first Palestinian intifada, the 1990 Persian Gulf War (during which Iraqi President Saddam Hussein fired Scud missiles into Israeli cities), the signing of the Oslo Accords, and the assassination of Rabin, a man whom Shavit clearly revered.²

Shavit is only the fourth former head of the Mossad to publish a memoir of his time in service, and his book, *Head of the Mossad: In Pursuit of a Safe and Secure Israel*, is now available for the first time in English.³ An intimate look into key events in modern Israeli history told from the perspective of the spymaster in the room, this book is less an exhilarating tale of cloak-and-dagger derring-do and more a compilation of Shavit's personal notes, lectures, and accounts of his experiences within the innermost circle of the Israeli national security bureaucracy. He also devotes a significant portion of his memoir to policy proposals and his view of the future role of the United States in the Middle East.

This book is less an exhilarating tale of cloak-and-dagger derring-do and more a compilation of Shavit's personal notes, lectures, and accounts of his experiences.

Born in Palestine in 1939, Shavit was the first Mossad director who had not participated in Israel's 1948 War of Independence.⁴ After completing mandatory service in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), he began his service with the Mossad in 1964. Two years later, he was shuttled off by then-director Meir Amit to an assignment in southwestern Iran—an ally of Israel prior to the revolution of

1979—where, living amidst the lush marshes and sweltering summers at the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, Shavit worked to bolster the intelligence and security partnership between Tel Aviv and Tehran. As Shavit describes the place, “The swamps were surrounded by dense and impenetrable wild vegetation, most of it reeds, and groves of trees that rose high above the swamp into which their roots were sunk.”⁵ The nearly three years that Shavit and his family spent living in Khuzestan Province between Abadan, Ahvaz, and Khorramshahr helped to shape Shavit’s perspective on Iran, a topic that would occupy a significant amount of his attention during his career. “The insight I derived from Iran’s ethnic structure and size,” Shavit recalls, “is that only an authoritarian, centralized regime, with powerful and intimidating governing systems, could control a country of this magnitude and a huge population of innumerable races and ethnic groups with no common denominator between them.”⁶ Shavit’s orientalist undertones begin to surface, however, when he recommends the book *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* to those interested in

a quick grasp of modern-day Persians. According to *The Encyclopedia Iranica*, the book, published in 1824 by former British diplomat James Morier, is a three-volume satire that “lampoons Persians as rascals, cowards, puerile villains, and downright fools, depicting their culture as scandalously dishonest and decadent, and their society as violent.”⁷ To Shavit, *The Adventures of Hajji Baba of Ispahan* is a “kind of encyclopedia of the Persians as a race, as a people, and as individuals.”⁸

In the immediate aftermath of the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Shavit served as the head of the Mossad’s operations department. He supported Director Zvi Zamir during hearings conducted by the Agranat Commission, which investigated how the IDF had failed to anticipate and prepare for Egypt’s and Syria’s attacks. The commission’s report included recommendations for significant institutional reforms to Israeli security institutions, among them the creation of an internal research division inside the Mossad.⁹ This experience served Shavit well later in his career. As an intelligence director and



Former heads of Israeli intelligence and the IDF (from L to R): Shabtai Shavit, former head of Mossad; Amnon Reshef, former IDF Major General; Asher Levy, former IDF Brigadier General; and Giora Inbar, former IDF Brigadier General.



Shavit lays out what he believes to be Israel's redlines, its threshold for launching an attack against Iran's nuclear infrastructure, and options for how such an attack could be executed.

Arak IR-40 Heavy Water Reactor, Iran

leader of a sprawling bureaucracy, he founded a team called “Forum 2000” whose function, according to Shavit, was “to discuss the threats and opportunities that the Mossad might face leading up to the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first,” with a charge to make recommendations on how to adapt the Mossad for this emerging reality.¹⁰ Among a broad range of predictions, the forum emphasized the disruptive role that cyber technology would have on intelligence as a function, its impact on secrecy, and the necessity for Israel to pursue a competitive edge in cyber technology development, acquisition, and fielding. “A condition for victory in [cyber] warfare,” according to Shavit, “is to get ahead of the adversary by at least one and a half generations, in the area of defense as well as in the area of attack. The one-and-a-half-generations rationale is based on the assumption that if the adversary catches up to you, you will still have the advantage of being half a generation ahead.”¹¹ It is clear that Shavit’s leadership of the Mossad in the 1990s helped position it to be the formidable regional force that it is today.

Arguably, the most striking part of Shavit’s memoir is his intimate exposé of the thinking, conversations, and calculations of Israel’s senior-most national security decision-makers as they focused on their most pressing threat: the Iranian nuclear program. In the chapter titled “Intelligence and the International Arena,” the former spymaster walks through his analysis of Iran’s strategic objectives in the region, the roles that great powers like Russia, the European Union, and the United States play in the Persian Gulf, and Israel’s options and priorities to prevent Tehran’s successful acquisition of a nuclear bomb. Fearful of an American-led diplomatic outcome that permits Iran to maintain a one-to-two-year breakout capability, Shavit lays out what he believes to be Israel’s redlines, its threshold for launching an attack against Iran’s nuclear infrastructure, and options for how such an attack could be executed. For example, would the attack be conducted in conjunction with the United

States? Or would it be “blue and white” only, meaning an operation conducted solely by the IDF? Would the United States be informed ahead of time? If so, when?¹²

Shavit’s policy proposals, however, are the weakest part of his book, largely due to the biases of the author. In discussing a potential Israeli attack against Iran’s nuclear program, he argues that such an attack “could mark the end of the era of global nuclear proliferation”—a statement that seems to be grounded more in idealism than in reality.¹³ He also drifts at times into overly simplified views of neighboring Arab states; for example, he describes Qatar as a state that “aligned itself with Iran when it realized that it could not necessarily rely on the United States” to protect it.¹⁴ In reality, Qatar, as a small state, is merely engaging in a strategy of hedging, balancing strong neighbors and powers against one another in order to secure its survival in a dangerous pond—a strategy not unlike the one Israel is pursuing.

Additionally, Shavit lays out a plan for a new regional order in the Middle East, to be externally imposed upon the region by the “good guys” in order to break the area out of its decades of deadlock, insecurity, and instability.¹⁵ He cites the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the secret 1916 accord between Great Britain and France to divide the territory of the former Ottoman Empire among themselves, as the model for the future. After all, Shavit argues, it “lasted for a hundred years!”¹⁶ Such a new regional architecture, Shavit continues, would be composed of Iraq, Jordan, the demilitarized state of Palestine, an independent Kurdistan, and a newly created “Sun-nistan” (an idea also raised by John Bolton in a 2015 *New York Times* op-ed) to occupy the territory in eastern Syria and western Iraq once occupied by ISIS.¹⁷ Syria would fall under Russian patronage and, in exchange, Shavit says that the United States and NATO countries would “present Russia with a series of demands (relating to Ukraine, the Baltic states, etc.), including that Syria abandon its support for Hezbollah.”¹⁸ One might then ask what role the century-old Sykes-Picot Agreement played in creating the region’s deadlock in the first place?

Moreover, Shavit’s plan, even if it were feasible (and despite its explicit imperialist overtones), could never be achieved if the United States, which Shavit identifies as the primary enforcer, were successfully to downsize its footprint in both the Levant and the Persian Gulf in favor of an expanded presence in the Indo-Pacific, a policy change first announced by then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in 2011.¹⁹ Indeed, Shavit recognizes this and, perhaps engaging in a bit of geostrategic flattery, argues that “if the United States wants to maintain its influence in the world, not only must it not abandon the Middle East, but it must deepen its involvement, not necessarily militarily, but diplomatically, economically, and internationally.”²⁰

Shavit doesn’t shy away from expressing his opinion of former President Donald Trump, a man whose practical strategy toward arms control and nuclear proliferation he describes as “frenetic” and composed largely through “tweetstorms” and “spontaneous statements.”²¹ According to the former Mossad director, such an approach to security on the Korean Peninsula would only push the North Koreans toward more aggressive forms of brinkmanship. Shavit predicted that Kim Jong Un would succeed in



US President Donald Trump (L) meets with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov (R) in the White House Oval Office on 10 May 2017.

“knocking Trump off balance,” and that if President Trump truly wanted to bring about a peaceful, negotiated end to Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program, then a unilateral US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal (referred to formally as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) would not only damage American credibility in general but also show the North Koreans that any deal they made might collapse when a new president entered the White House.²²

Israel’s partnership with the United States is highly strategic, underpinning its strategy to survive as a nation in a hostile neighborhood.

slammed Trump for “violating the unwritten codes of conduct of intelligence,” and described the president as a “bull in a china shop.”²⁴ “If tomorrow I were asked to pass information to the CIA, I would do everything I could to not pass it to them. Or I would first protect myself and only then give it, and what I’d give would be totally neutered,” Shavit said.²⁵ This is a tragic statement from an official who talks so intimately about the special relationship between the Mossad and the CIA. “Throughout my tenure as director of the Mossad . . . I made every effort to preserve the Mossad’s role as an asset for the CIA,” Shavit writes.²⁶

The year 2021 marked 25 years since Shabtai Shavit left service, yet apart from the recent agreement normalizing relations between Israel, Bahrain, and the United Arab



Al-Aqsa Mosque, Jerusalem

Shavit makes no mention of a 2017 incident, first reported in the *Washington Post*, that occurred during a meeting in the Oval Office between then-President Trump, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, and Russian Ambassador to the United States Sergey Kislyak, in which Trump divulged highly classified “code word”-level intelligence—intelligence purportedly originating from sources under Israeli control.²³ Israel’s partnership with the United States is highly strategic, underpinning its strategy to survive as a nation in a hostile neighborhood, and key to this relationship is the closely guarded (and highly compartmentalized) matter of intelligence sharing. Shavit, along with Danny Yatom, another former Mossad chief, was horrified by this incident. In an interview with *The Times of Israel*, Shavit

Emirates, Israel’s neighborhood looks similar to the way it did in 1996. While Israel has concluded peace agreements with neighbors Egypt and Jordan, similar accords with Syria remain elusive. Given the history of war between Israel and Syria (and the latter’s support for anti-Israeli militant groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon), this status quo perpetuates the sense of insecurity among Israeli defense officials, who are often reminded that large, hostile military forces remain entrenched just across the borders. Iran arguably presents a greater threat to Israel today than it did in 1996, having bolstered its strategic missile force, expanded its nuclear program, and pushed its presence deeper into Israel’s immediate periphery—Lebanon, Syria, and Gaza.²⁷

**Rockets being fired from
the Gaza Strip** into Israel on
10 May 2021.





Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu,



Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett

Since 1996, when Israel welcomed its then-new Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu,²⁸ the Knesset has stalled in making any significant progress in negotiations with its Palestinian counterparts toward Palestinian self-determination, largely because of the dominance of conservatives like Netanyahu across the Israeli government. While the recent ouster of Netanyahu may signal shifting winds in Israeli domestic attitudes, the rise to power of Naftali Bennett, a former Netanyahu ally, doesn't lend much hope.²⁹ In fact, progress toward Palestinian self-determination has regressed significantly since the 1990s, as evidenced by 11 days of fighting between Israel and Hamas in May 2021 that killed at least 243 people in Gaza and 12 in Israel. Fighting between Israeli police and Muslim demonstrators during Ramadan, Islam's holiest month, led to an incident in which Israeli police broke into al-Aqsa Mosque and threw stun grenades at worshippers.³⁰

During Shavit's tenure, he dealt with the latter part of the first Palestinian intifada, and felt the early tremors of the second.

During Shavit's tenure, he dealt with the latter part of the first Palestinian intifada, and felt the early tremors of the second. In the same moment, Israel lost Yitzhak Rabin to the gun of a far-right assassin, who feared that Rabin, working to lead the nation through this period of significant domestic instability while negotiating the US-led Oslo Accords, was capitulating to Israel's enemies. Rabin is remembered by Shavit as a patriot, a leader, and a peace-maker who never hesitated to defend his nation, sometimes even from itself. Shavit reflects that near the end of his life, Rabin "became convinced that the State of Israel could not continue to live by the sword and that no opportunity to break through the wall of hostility should be neglected."³¹ Shavit himself addresses this dilemma more explicitly, openly sharing what he calls his Machiavellian view of the world: "if we chose morality over security with regard to the enemy in question, then what we would achieve would be dying with the proud knowledge that we had died as more moral beings."³² Yet Shavit also wonders, "shall the sword [of Israel] devour forever?"³³ Shabtai Shavit's memoir is a powerful contribution to the canon of literature published by senior Israeli political leaders, and is an essential read for those interested in firming up their understanding of Israel's perspective on Iran, the Middle East, and its own future role in an increasingly multipolar world.

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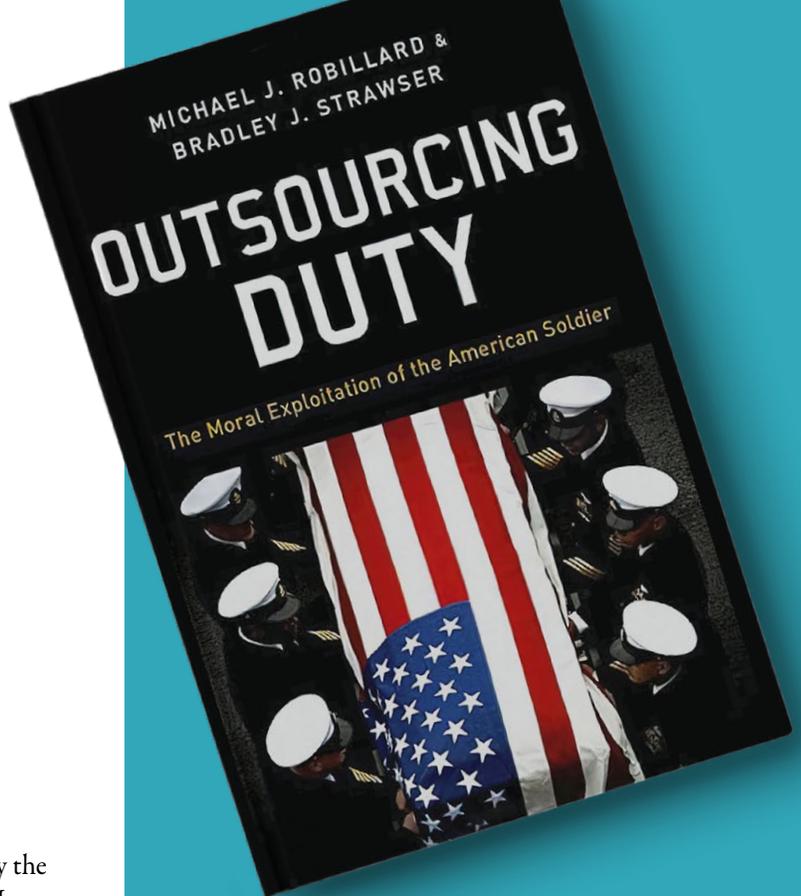
PUBLICATION ANNOUNCEMENT

Outsourcing Duty: The Moral Exploitation of the American Soldier

Michael J. Robillard and Bradley J. Strawser
Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2022
US \$35
240 pages

Are contemporary soldiers exploited by the state and society that they defend? More specifically, have America's professional service members disproportionately carried the moral weight of America's war-fighting decisions since the inception of an all-volunteer force? In this volume, Michael J. Robillard and Bradley J. Strawser, who have both served in the military, examine the question of whether and how American soldiers have been exploited in this way.

Robillard and Strawser offer an original normative theory of “moral exploitation”—the notion that persons or groups can be wrongfully exploited by being made to shoulder an excessive amount of moral weight. They make the case that this exploitation accurately describes the relationship between the United States and the members of its military, and offer a thorough and in-depth analysis of some of the exploitative and misleading elements of present-day military recruitment, the moral burdens soldiers often bear, and the stifling effect that a “Thank you for your service” and “I support the troops” culture has had on serious public engagement about America's ongoing wars. Robillard and Strawser offer a piercing critique of the pernicious divide between military members and the civilians who direct them. They conclude by arguing for several normative and prudential prescriptions to help close this ever-widening fissure between the United States and its military, and within the United States itself. In so doing, their work gives a much needed and urgent voice to America's soldiers, the other one percent.



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Michael J. Robillard is a former fellow at the Notre Dame Institute for Advanced Studies. Prior to his time at Notre Dame, he was a postdoctoral researcher at the University of Oxford's Uehiro Centre for Practical Ethics, focusing on issues of counterterrorism ethics. As a former US Army officer and Iraq war veteran, his academic research has focused on a variety of contemporary issues within moral and political philosophy, just war theory, and philosophy of technology. He also has published several popular editorial articles concerning artificial intelligence as well as free speech in academia in *Aeon*, *Quillette*, and the *New York Times*.

Bradley J. Strawser is an associate professor of Philosophy in the Defense Analysis department at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA. Dr. Strawser, himself a US Air Force veteran, received his PhD in Philosophy from the University of Connecticut, and has lectured on the ethics of war and peace, military ethics, bioethics, and development ethics throughout the United States and Europe. He has published in such peer-reviewed journals as *Analysis*, *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, *Philosophia*, *Journal of Military Ethics*, *Public Affairs Quarterly*, *Journal of Human Rights*, and *Epoché*. Dr. Strawser has published books with Oxford University Press, Palgrave Macmillan, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, and Routledge.

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