Know Your Enemy: On the Futility of Distinguishing Between Terrorists and Insurgents

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To cite this article: James Khalil (2013): Know Your Enemy: On the Futility of Distinguishing Between Terrorists and Insurgents, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 36:5, 419-430

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2013.775501

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Know Your Enemy: On the Futility of Distinguishing Between Terrorists and Insurgents

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Academics and military analysts regularly attempt to distinguish terrorists from insurgents through focusing on the extent to which these adversaries (a) adopt nonviolent methods, (b) apply uncompromising forms of violence, (c) generate local support, (d) recruit and maintain manpower, and (e) control territory. In contrast, this article argues that attempts to distinguish between these adversaries inevitably fail, firstly, as they arbitrarily impose binary distinctions upon continuous variables (e.g., in levels of support, manpower figures), and secondly as there is a lack of agreement across these supposedly identifying characteristics. Thus, contrary to common wisdom, it is concluded that there is no contradiction in simultaneously labeling groups such as the Taliban and Al Qaeda as both terrorists and insurgents. Indeed, a complete understanding of these groups requires an assessment of their activities at both the tactical (as terrorists) and strategic (as insurgents) levels.

The Importance of Conceptual Clarity

U.S. Army Counterinsurgency Field Manual 3–24, written under the guidance of General David Patreus, states that “insurgents resort to such tactics as guerrilla warfare and terrorism.”¹ In Rethinking Insurgency, Steven Metz similarly maintains that “insurgents have long used terrorism in the operational sense.”² Comparable claims are also made by other prominent authorities, including David Kilcullen, Bruce Hoffman, and Bard O’Neill.³ While such observations would seemingly imply that “insurgents” may simultaneously be “terrorists,” academics and military analysts frequently attempt to create a binary distinction between these adversaries through an emphasis on differences in:

- Their reliance on nonviolent methods
- Their application of specific forms of violence
- Their ability to generate public support
- Their size of manpower
- Their ability to control territory

Received 12 July 2012; accepted 25 November 2012.
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Consequently, heated debates arise regarding the “true nature” of certain adversaries. For instance, Colonel Michael Morris maintains that “Al-Qaeda represents not terrorism, but an insurgency featuring a Salafist theology which appeals to significant proportions of Muslim believers.” In contrast, Michael Boyle asserts that:

The Al-Qaeda organization is neither an insurgency against a US hegemonic order nor the vanguard of a global Islamic resistance to globalization or westernization. It is a resilient and highly lethal terrorist organization with a fanciful political program and relatively little popular support in the Muslim world.

Far from being a matter of semantics, efforts to separate terrorists from insurgents have considerable negative repercussions. Based on this supposed distinction, parallel literatures on terrorism and insurgency have emerged, across which important insights often fail to disseminate. This is demonstrated by the infrequency in which the journal Terrorism and Political Violence is cited in Small Wars and Insurgencies, and vice versa, despite the similarities of the themes under scrutiny. This “stove-piping” of intellectual effort is also apparent through comparing two relatively recent articles by Martha Crenshaw and Steven Metz, which respectively comment on the nature of “new terrorism” and “contemporary insurgency.” Despite a focus on many of the same themes (for instance, the decentralized nature of modern adversaries), and even the same cases (particularly Hezbollah), these articles share not a single source.

The negative impact goes beyond “mere” academic interest, however, as the suitable labeling of an adversary is a necessary first step in fashioning an adequate response. The Department of State’s description of organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah as “Foreign Terrorist Organization” is not inaccurate, but it is highly misleading. Specifically, this label overlooks the considerable political and socioeconomic dimensions of these groups, characteristics that are implicit to the term “insurgents.” Conversely, to others the “insurgent” label places an insufficient emphasis on the extent to which such groups are reliant on violence against civilians. This article argues that a complete understanding of such groups, for policymakers and academics alike, requires an assessment of their activities at both the tactical (i.e., as terrorists) and strategic (i.e., as insurgents) levels.

The subsequent sections sequentially review assertions that, unlike their insurgent counterparts, terrorists: (a) are less reliant on the simultaneous use of nonviolent methods, (b) apply specifically uncompromising forms of violence, (c) operate with limited community support, (d) are numerically smaller, and (e) do not maintain territorial control. There are notably fewer definitions of “terrorists” and “insurgents” (i.e., the actors) than “terrorism” and “insurgency” (i.e., the methods), and on this basis much of the subsequent discussion revolves around the latter. A common-sense approach is adopted throughout this article in which terrorists are deemed to be those individuals and groups that apply terrorism, whereas insurgents are those reliant on insurgency.

Assertion 1: Terrorists Can be Distinguished From Insurgents Through a Focus on the Latter’s Reliance on Nonviolent Methods

Terrorism is a notoriously contested concept, with high profile debates revolving around the suitability of the “state terrorists” label and the issue of moral relativity (often summed up as “terrorists versus freedom fighters”). Beyond these headline disagreements, however, a lack of consensus is also apparent with regard to other key definitional issues such as whether this term is applicable to violence directed at civilians only, the broader category of
Terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi-)clandestine individuals, group, or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal, or political reasons, whereby—in contrast to assassinations—the direct targets of violence are not the main targets. The immediate human victims of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators. Threat- and violence-based communications processes between terrorist (organization), (imperiled) victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target (audience(s)), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion or propaganda is primarily sought. (Alex P. Schmid and Albert J. Jongman, 1988)

“Terrorism” refers to the deliberate use of symbolic violence or the threat of violence against non-combatants for political purposes. ... Terrorism, in this case, is defined not by the status of the perpetrator but by the nature of the act. Its symbolic quality, which distinguishes it from conventional forms of violence, is due to its indirect and psychological character. Terrorist actions are ultimately designed to influence one target by attacking another. (Gordon McCormick, 2003)

Terrorism is herein defined as the threat or use of physical coercion, primarily against non-combatants, especially civilians, to create fear in order to achieve various political objectives. Achieving such objectives requires behavioral change on the part of specific audiences. The target audience whose behavioral modification is sought will vary from case to case and may involve individuals, selected groups, the general public, governments, or some combination thereof. (Bard O’Neill, 2005)

We may attempt to define terrorism as the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in pursuit of political change. ... Terrorism is specifically designed to have far-reaching psychological effects beyond the immediate victim(s) or object of the terrorist attack. It is meant to instill fear within, and thereby intimidate, a wider “target audience” that might include a rival ethnic or religious group, an entire country, a national government or political party, or public opinion in general. Terrorism is designed to create power where there is none or to consolidate power where there is very little. Through the publicity generated by their violence, terrorists seek to obtain the leverage, influence, and power they otherwise lack to effect political change on either a local or an international scale. (Bruce Hoffman, 2006)

Figure 1. Selected definitions of terrorism.11
Insurgency is violence in support, strategically, of a political goal, operationally, of a political infrastructure, tactically, of local political domination. Such a definition recognizes both the political nature of the insurgent campaign and its symbiotic relationship with force. Put in slightly different terms, an insurgency, then, is a political campaign backed by “muscle”; that is, by threatened or actual violence. (Thomas Marks, 1996)

*Insurgency* may be defined as a struggle between a nonruling group and the ruling authorities in which the nonruling group consciously uses political resources (for instance, organizational expertise, propaganda, and demonstrations) and violence to destroy, reformulate, or sustain the basis of legitimacy of one or more aspects of politics. (Bard O’Neill, 2005)

First, [insurgency] is essentially a political process. … [Mao’s campaign, for instance] involved political activism, infiltration, propaganda, subversion and the selective use of terror and assassination. … Second, the techniques of an insurgency evolve with the societies from which it arises. … Third, organizing an insurgency is an act of desperation, a course of action only taken when all other avenues have been blocked. … Fourth, and most importantly, an insurgency has to involve the population; its energy, its ability to sustain itself and to continuously replace and regenerate its losses, arises from popular support. (John Mackinlay, 2009)

[Insurgency is] an organized movement that aims at overthrowing the political order within a given territory, using a combination of subversion, terrorism, guerrilla warfare, and propaganda. (David Kilcullen, 2009)

of welfare and community justice, and the empowerment of marginalized social groups. Thus, insurgency is fundamentally distinct from terrorism, as while the latter is a tactic limited to the sphere of violence, the former is a strategy that also encompasses politics and socioeconomics. Located at these separate “levels,” terrorism may occur in the presence or absence of insurgency, and vice versa.

In accordance with this understanding, there is a wide recognition that the “insurgents” label is more appropriately applied to groups that focus to a considerable extent on nonviolent methods. As is argued by Colonel Michael Morris, for instance, “insurgencies combine violence with political programs in pursuit of revolutionary purposes in a way that terrorism cannot duplicate.” Indeed, Morris adds that “terrorists may pursue political, even revolutionary, goals, but their violence replaces rather than compliments a political program.”

Bruce Hoffman similarly maintains that terrorists “are constrained both numerically and logistically from undertaking concerted mass political mobilization efforts.”

In practice, however, each group can be located on a continuous scale according to the extent to which they apply such nonviolence. At the “thick end,” Khaled Hroub maintains that the majority of Hamas’s resources were spent (prior to their 2006 election victory) on “the social and welfare programs that the movement provides to the Palestinians.” Similarly, regarding the case of Hezbollah, David Kilcullen notes that:

Sure, they have a terrorist wing, and they will kill you if you step out of line. But they also have a community militia that will protect you and keep crime
down, and they have charities that will help you if you are poor, and they can get you a job, and teach your children in their schools, and treat you in their hospital if you are sick, and represent you in parliament through their political party, and you can watch their television channel, al-Manar, and listen to their radio station and read their newspaper.¹⁸

The Nepali Maoists similarly employed a wide range of nonviolent methods with the aim of generating support during their “People’s War.”¹⁹ They lowered rents in their areas of influence, and in certain cases even fulfilled their promise to redistribute “land to the tiller.” They also undertook campaigns in support of female inheritance rights and employment, and in opposition to polygamy, prostitution, and domestic violence. In addition, they provided community justice, with a focus on crimes such as corruption, rape, and murder. However, in contrast to both Hamas and Hezbollah, the Maoists channeled relatively few resources to development, at least outside of their “heartlands” of Rolpa and Rukum.¹⁹

Perhaps a further rung down this ladder, the Taliban’s focus is seemingly more concentrated on the production of force. Nevertheless, according to David Kilcullen this organization provides community justice through issuing title deeds and resolving inheritance, water, and grazing disputes.²⁰ Kilcullen also claims that the Taliban “treat propaganda as their main effort,” and that their information strategy covers a wide range of political, economic, and religious themes.²¹ Thus, with their campaign qualifying as “insurgency” according to the definitions provided in Figure 2, the “insurgents” label may appropriately be applied. Indeed, following this logic the insurgents tag may also legitimately be utilized regarding the most notorious of contemporary “terrorists,” Al Qaeda, through a focus on their extensive application of propaganda.²²

This is absolutely not to suggest that all terrorists are also insurgents, particularly given that many “micro-groups” (some of which based in “the West”) lack the resources to apply such nonviolence. However, the use of propaganda, at a minimum, does provide a comparatively low hurdle for groups to qualify as insurgents. As a consequence, attempts to create a binary (i.e., exclusive) distinction between terrorists and insurgents through focusing upon the application of nonviolence would serve to deprive the former concept of many important case studies. In contrast, more nuanced attempts to distinguish between these belligerents through reference to the extent to which they apply nonviolence also fail as they are dependent on arbitrary “lines in the sand.” While Al Qaeda and pre-2006 Hamas may represent “ideal types” at the two extremes of this variable, most groups are actually located in the intermediate “grey areas.”

**Assertion 2: Terrorists Can be Distinguished From Insurgents Through a Focus on the Former’s Application of Uncompromising Violence**

The second cluster of approaches to distinguish terrorists from insurgents asserts that the former apply distinctly uncompromising or “brutal” forms of violence. For instance, Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman assert that “terrorist violence” is “widely perceived as more inhuman” than other forms of “political violence direct against a government.”²³ More concretely, Eli Berman maintains that insurgents target only security or state officials, rather than civilians, whereas their terrorist counterparts are less discerning.²⁴ In fact, few security experts would back this latter stance as it would render the concept of “insurgents” valueless through depriving it of perhaps all possible cases. For instance, while their 1996–2006 “People’s War” indisputably qualifies as insurgency according the definitions
in Figure 2, prominent Nepali rights advocates, the Informal Sector Service Centre, maintain that at least 48 percent of the 4,970 fatalities caused by the Maoists were civilians.25

Of course, there are other conceivable means to separate terrorists from insurgents through a focus on the nature of their violence, and it is necessary to explore other candidates. Returning to the case of Nepal, Amnesty International reports that:

[Individual A] was killed because he was “a person with a long record of anti-people activities and had proven charges against him of being an informer leading to the killing of a number of innocent people by the royal army in Lamjung.” According to other sources, however, he was killed because he had earlier refused to give “donations” demanded by the Maoists and had received several threats as a result.26

Amnesty also maintains that:

[Individual B], a member of the central committee of the Nepal Students Union, affiliated with Nepali Congress [the main political opposition to the Maoists], was killed on 1 December, 1988 on his way to the university campus in Gorkha district. He was first attacked with a khukuri, then shot in the head, throat and stomach. He had not received any threats. After his killing, a newspaper known to be sympathetic to the Maoists commended that [Individual B] had been killed “because he was against the Maoists.”27

While not “spectaculars” that are often associated with the “terrorism” term, these acts meet most definitions (see Figure 1) as they target “symbolic” victims to communicate a message to a “third party” (other individuals who may apply “anti-people activities”) in pursuit of a political objective (Maoist revolution). However, while brutal in execution, these actions were largely predictable. Landlords, moneylenders, and other “enemies of the people” could largely ensure their own safety through offering “donations” and succumbing to the other Maoist demands. Thus, these acts are qualitative distinct from, for instance, the random targeting that formed a core component of Sendero Luminoso’s repertoire in Peru during the 1980s and 1990s.28 This is even more the case regarding suicide attacks, as perpetrated by groups as distinct as the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and Hamas.

While not disputing that the “terrorist” label is more appropriately applied to groups that have a greater tendency to apply uncompromising or “brutal” violence, attempts to separate them from insurgent actors on the basis of such actions are unsatisfactory. Beyond their random targeting, much of Sendero’s violence resembled that of the Nepali Maoists, underlining the similarities between these cases.29 More fundamentally, however, it is necessary to ask why these traits should be privileged over the other candidates reviewed in this essay, such as levels of support, the ability to control territory and the application of nonviolence. Or, put another way, Hamas may correctly be labeled terrorists given the nature of their violence, but this should not disqualify them from the “insurgents” tag gained through their provisions of welfare.

Assertion 3: Terrorists Can be Distinguished From Insurgents Through a Focus on the Latter’s Increased Levels of Community Support

The third, and perhaps most common, attempt to distinguish terrorists from insurgents focuses on the reduced level of community support supposedly gained by the former.30
However, there is a notable lack of consensus with regard to this supposed distinction. For instance, Martha Crenshaw claims that terrorists “may be isolated from the broader society,” or alternatively they “may act as an extremist offshoot of a larger social movement, profiting from the patronage of a significant segment of the population.”31 Similarly, Michael Boyle maintains that:

Terrorist organizations vary significantly in their relationship with the local communities. While some terrorist organizations (such as the IRA in Northern Ireland) have deep roots in their self-ascribed community, others are parasitic and do not necessarily represent or even reflect legitimate grievances of their host population.32

David Kilcullen also indicates an opposition to this supposed distinction in claiming that:

In this popular conception, shared by many Western legislators and policymakers, although not by terrorism specialists, terrorists are seen as unrepresentative, aberrant individuals, misfits within society. . . . [Whereas] insurgents are regarded as representative of deeper issues or grievances within society.33

Research conducted by the Asia Foundation in Afghanistan indicated that 56 percent of the populace held at least “a little” sympathy for the “armed opposition” in 2009, but that this figure decreased to 29 percent in 2011.34 Leaving to one side the reliability of surveys conducted in such environments,35 and the fact that there are multiple opposition elements in Afghanistan, this poses important questions as to how to determine the point at which these groups transform from insurgents to terrorists, or vice versa. Put another way, attempts to distinguish between terrorists and insurgents though focusing on support levels fail as they imposes a binary distinction (i.e., support versus no support) on what is actually a continuous variable (i.e., degrees of support). While the “terrorist” label may be more appropriately applied to groups that tend to lack support, there can be no convenient threshold on which an exclusive distinction may rest.36

Indeed, further complexity can also be added to this discussion through considering that specific subpopulation are more disposed to supporting certain belligerent groups, including Catholics for the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA), Tamils for the LTTE, and Shi’a for Jaish al-Mahdi in Iraq. Individuals from a variety of identity groups were more prone to sympathize with the Maoists in the case of Nepal, including those from marginalized ethnic groups and the Dalit caste. Asia Foundation also found that 37 percent of interviewed Pashtuns were sympathetic to the armed opposition in Afghanistan in 2011, compared to 30 percent of Uzbeks, 22 percent of Tajiks, and only 18 percent of the Hazara.37 Such observations bring awkward questions as to whether an organization may be terrorists for one subpopulation, but insurgents for another.

Assertion 4: Terrorists Can be Distinguished From Insurgents Through a Focus on the Latter’s Elevated Numerical Strength

A fourth attempt to distinguish between terrorists and insurgents revolves around the supposedly superior manpower of the latter. For instance, Colonel Michael Morris maintains that “insurgencies normally field fighting forces orders of magnitude larger than terrorist organizations.”38 Of course, there are substantial issues with the reliability of the available
figures, with the opposing forces often exaggerating these numbers in opposite directions to the extent that it is not uncommon for official estimates to be an order of magnitude smaller. In addition, it is often unclear as to whether the figures relate only to military wings of the belligerents, or also to local “self-defense” militias and the political and civil units commonly associated with such groups.

These issues aside, the open source estimates available for PIRA provide a platform for several rhetorical questions. Between the mid-1970s and the late-1980s there was a significant decline in PIRA combatants from around 1,200 to 400, but is it possible to pinpoint a time when this organization transformed from an insurgent outfit to mere terrorists? If not, can an adequate threshold be identified outside of this range, perhaps at 2,000 or 200 cadres? And, would the same figure be applicable if the campaign occurred within a more extensive operating environment, such as India or the United States? As the terms are widely understood, terrorists may well be numerically smaller than their insurgent counterparts, but, as with levels of support, there are no meaningful thresholds in numerical strength on which an exclusive distinction may rest.

Assertion 5: Terrorists Can be Distinguished From Insurgents Through a Focus on the Latter’s Ability to Control Territory

While numerical strength figures are at least theoretically easily countable, “territorial control” proves to be an altogether more complex variable. Stathis Kalyvas provides the intellectual high water mark regarding this theme in Logic of Violence in Civil War. The Kalyvas system relies on a five-point scale from complete incumbent control (Zone 1) to total insurgent control (Zone 5), with three intermediate zones of contestation. It hinges on whether incumbent and insurgent combatants are garrisoned in the vicinity, and the extent to which their representatives operate freely in the selected locations. While there are limitations with the Kalyvas approach, of key importance is that the system moves beyond the usual simplistic binary judgment as to whether or not a territory is “controlled.”

Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman assert that “non-state ‘pure’ terrorists do not control territory,” and Bruce Hoffman similarly maintains that terrorists “generally do not attempt to seize or hold territory.” However, a common feature of insurgency is also that the challengers refuse to contest territory in the knowledge that they lack the required capabilities. With few localized exceptions, even comparatively well-resourced outfits such as the Maoists of Nepal were unable to achieve any real control in urban zones during their “People’s War.” Indeed, the term “control” is perhaps misleading as it often overstates the extent to which non-state belligerents are able to sustain their dominance. A main factor determining whether incumbents reclaim such territory is often their willingness to absorb the associated costs, including casualties and losses in support through likely instances of “collateral damage” (to use that despicable term).

Concluding Remarks

As this article highlights, military analysts and academics often attempt to create a binary distinction between terrorists and insurgents through emphasizing that the former: (a) are less reliant on the use of nonviolent methods, (b) apply uniquely uncompromising forms of violence, (c) operate with limited community support, (d) are numerically smaller, and
(e) do not maintain territorial control. However, as indicated in Figure 3, while these traits do reflect tendencies associated with the widely held understanding of these concepts, they fail to provide an adequate platform on which to base an exclusive distinction. First, such attempts impose binary distinctions on continuous variables, as is immediately apparent in observing that “terrorists” do simply morph into “insurgents” at the margin through the addition of one extra cadre or sympathizer. Neither is it satisfactory to present terrorists and insurgents as “ideal types” at the extremes as many or most groups obtain intermediate scores for these variables, thereby falling into the in-between “grey areas.”

Second, the failure of these efforts is based on a lack of agreement between the identified traits. This is perhaps best demonstrated through identifying Sendero as insurgents for controlling territory (Assertion 5) and for generating popular support (Assertion 3), but as terrorists for their application of randomly targeted violence (Assertion 2). Similarly, Hamas would qualify as terrorists for their use of suicide attacks (Assertion 2), but insurgents for their substantial provisions of welfare (Assertion 1) and elevated support levels (Assertion 1).
3). Al Qaeda certainly fits the definition of terrorists if the focus is on the nature of their violence (Assertion 2), but also as insurgents when emphasis is placed on their information operations (Assertion 1).

Thus, the core conclusion of this paper is that there is no contradiction in labeling groups such as Al Qaeda, Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Taliban simultaneously as both terrorists and insurgents.44 Indeed, it is necessary to adopt this approach as a comprehensive understanding of such groups requires assessments of their activities at both the tactical (i.e., as terrorists), and strategic (i.e., as insurgents) levels. This has substantial implications for academia given the current status quo in which important research findings often fail to disseminate between essentially parallel literatures. It also has substantial relevance for policymakers given the common tendency to overlook critical traits of these adversaries through simplistically framing them as either terrorists or insurgents.

Notes

4. While this article focuses on “terrorists” and “insurgents,” the central insights are equally applicable to other related concepts such as “violent non-state actors” and “guerrillas,” with there being considerable overlap between all such terms.
7. More broadly, research into terrorism and insurgency also remains largely isolated from wider fields such as social movement theory.
9. Only academic definitions are discussed within this article, as those provided by international and state institutions (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO], government departments, etc.) tend to reflect the priorities of the organization involved, as observed in Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, p. 31.
12. While remaining central to most definitions, this political component has been challenged in recent literature by an increased focus on the extent to which such actors are motivated instead by economic gain.

15. Ibid.
22. See, for instance, Morris, al Qaeda as Insurgency, p. 4.
27. Ibid.
28. For instance, it may be possible to tie a distinction to the utilization of Kalyvas’s concept of “indiscriminate violence,” as outlined in Stathis Kalyvas, Logic of Violence in Civil War (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
29. Indeed, such indiscriminate violence aside, the Maoists consciously sought to replicate the Sendero approach.
30. See, for instance, Mackinlay, The Insurgent Archipelago, p. 71.
32. Boyle, “Do Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency go Together?” p. 344
33. Kilcullen, Counter Insurgency, pp. 186–187
36. The concept of local support is treated with greater nuance in Khalil, Insurgent-Populace Relations.
38. Morris, al Qaeda as Insurgency, p. 2
40. First, the categories incorporate a range of specifications and thus are not entirely exclusive. For instance, in a given area the incumbent forces may be permanently garrisoned (as is specified for the Zone 2 description), but the insurgent may also regularly hold meetings at night (as is specified for the Zone 3 description). Secondly, this system is unable to account for the locations that are “controlled” by neither side, a problem that is particularly apparent in cases where there are multiple competing armed actors, including other “insurgents,” “militias,” and “warlords.” An alternative approach, sacrificing parsimony, would be to measure insurgent and counterinsurgent control as separate (but often inversely related) variables, with additional variables for other armed actors.
41. Schmid and Jongman, Political Terrorism, p. 16; Hoffman, Inside Terrorism, p. 35.
42. Indeed, the rural focus is a matter of doctrine in the Maoists call to “surround the cities from the countryside.”

43. Consider, for instance, the insurgent losses of control in Fallujah in 2004 and Basra in 2008 through the U.S. and Iraqi offensives.

44. Indeed, many of those attempting to separate these adversaries ultimately concede that there is at least some overlap. Hoffman (Inside Terrorism, p. 35), for instance, states that “none of these [terrorists, guerrillas, insurgents] are pure categories and considerable overlap exists.”