Taking the Surge Global in the Age of Facebook

By Capt. Robert Cohen

The war against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and its affiliates is the first war fought in the age of Facebook and Twitter. This new strategic environment means that the actions and comments of ordinary citizens or politicians everywhere—Muslims in Raqqa, Christians in Iowa, and everyone in between—have unprecedented military significance because of their potential impact on the global ideological contest. As actions in Afghanistan and Iraq have made clear, victory over radical Islamic insurgencies depends on winning the battle for the hearts and minds of local civilians, where the most persuasive arguments are economic development, political inclusion, cultural respect, dignity, and reliable safety. Militaries cannot and should not have to achieve these objectives alone.

However, faced with a global Islamist insurgency, the United States government and its political system continue to put forth military-heavy policies which advance these strategic objectives haphazardly. Decried by some as "Whack-a-mole" or reactionary,[1] military-heavy policies tend to focus on killing fundamentalists or dismantling networks while complementary policies to alleviate radicalism's root causes—lack of dignity and economic opportunity in the Muslim world—receive considerably less funding and enduring commitment.

To avoid continual repeats of the bloody and painful disappointments in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria, the United States and its allies must change their approach to this global ideological insurgency. They must meet this threat with global counterinsurgency, which has never been needed before. In an age when civilizations are simultaneously clashing and intertwining, this will require new strategies, tactics, and unprecedentedly large-scale thinking grounded in proven counterinsurgency doctrine.

Undertaking this change in strategy will require three key constituencies—militaries, civilian government agencies, and ordinary civilians--to participate in defeating the root causes of the new global insurgency. These constituencies also must adapt to a novel technological and strategic environment, in which a Quran-burning pastor in Florida can trigger religious riots in Afghan villages, or Danish cartoons spur fundamentalism in the Nigerian Sahel. Fighting an ideological war in the age of Facebook brings new considerations, which inform the difficult but essential task of taking counterinsurgency global. The United States and its citizens must also demonstrate the generational commitment that won the Cold War, recognizing that there is no quick fix for a problem that started with the rise of Wahhabi puritanism in the 1700s as a response to the declining Ottoman Empire.[2] Otherwise, terrorism will continue to metastasize, all three groups will suffer, and uniformed service members will continue to be sent on strategically vain missions.

What Wrong Looks Like

> *"You can always count on the Americans to do the right thing – after they've tried everything else."*
>
> – Winston Churchill

Winston Churchill's description of Americans' strengths and flaws could barely resonate more strongly today. Since radical Islam began to threaten the United States in 1979, via the Islamic revolution in Iran and the spread of Wahhabism from Saudi Arabia, the United States has tried almost every conceivable policy to defeat it except championing opportunity for the average Muslim. In approximately chronological order (Table 1), United States has confronted fundamentalist Islamic threats by supporting jihadists and then abandoning them,

American Policy	Countries or Territories
Abandoning a country full of Islamic militants	Afghanistan (1979)
Supporting a dictator in a conventional war against Islamic militants	Iran-Iraq war (1980-88)
Supporting dictators who suppress fundamentalist Islam	Egypt (1952-present), Jordan (1994-present), Yemen (2001-present), Tunisia (1956-2011), Algeria (1992-present), Bahrain (1979-present)
Tacitly accepting the rule of dictators who violently suppress both radical Islam and secular opposition	Iraq (1980-1991, 2011-2014), Syria (1976-present), Uzbekistan (1991-present), Chechnya (1994-present)
Tacitly accepting the rule of dictators who tolerate or encourage radical Islam	Saudi Arabia (1979-present), Pakistan (1979-present)
Supporting an open-ended occupation of Muslim-majority territories by non-Muslims	Palestine (1948-present)
Invading for regime change	Afghanistan (2001), Iraq (2003)
Using military force to protect secular nationalists from dictators	Kurdistan (1991-2001), Bosnia (1992-2004), Kuwait (1991-2003), but not Syria (2012-present)
Supporting a democratic government's counterinsurgency	Philippines (Mindanao) (2002-present), Iraq (2007-2010), Afghanistan (2001-present), Somalia (2011-present), Nigeria (2013-present)
Withdrawing military support before stable institutions were built	Libya (2011), Iraq (2011), and possibly Afghanistan (to be determined)

Table 1. Past United States policies to confront the threat of radical Islam.

supporting jihadists and then abandoning them, supporting a strongman in a brutal war against Islamic revolutionaries, supporting dictators who suppress radical Islamist ideology, tacitly accepting the rule of dictators who suppress all forms of dissent, supporting an open-ended occupation of Muslim-majority territories by non-Muslims, supporting dictators who permit or encourage a radical Islamist ideology, using military force to protect secular nationalists from dictators, invading for regime change, supporting a democratic government's counterinsurgency, and withdrawing military support before a country was ready to support itself. Only in Bosnia,[3] Philippines,[4] and Iraq[5] (for a few years) did the United States prioritize protecting civilian populations and even nod toward supporting economic and political development.

The fact that most of these efforts coincided with a global expansion of radical Islam implies that these efforts were strategically ineffective or counterproductive, and that a change in strategy is long overdue. As Churchill portended, Americans must finally start doing the right thing, which they (should have) learned in Iraq is championing economic opportunity and safety for the average Muslim. Despite the litany of recent failures, the United States has reasons for cautious optimism. It won an ideological war against Communism and the Soviet Union, despite countless mistakes and setbacks, by employing strategies which it has yet to apply against radical Islam. Successes such as South Korea, Taiwan, Israel, Colombia, Poland, and the autonomous region of Kurdistan highlight the potential return on investment from committing to the political and economic empowerment of average citizens from other cultures. Recent history has shown that counterinsurgency can succeed in the Muslim world, even in places as hard as Iraq, the Balkans, or the southern Philippines.[6] The lessons learned in past successes and failures provide a strong foundation on which to build a global counterinsurgency strategy.

Foundational Considerations

General Petraeus stresses that the first step to solving a big problem is "getting the big ideas right."[7] The most important big idea in a global counterinsurgency with ubiquitous media technology is that the strategic environment is unprecedented. There are several big ideas which will prove fundamental to failure or success. The first requires the most justification and deepest acceptance.

1. *The most important battle is for the hearts and minds of 1.6 billion Muslims.* While the magnitude of this challenge appears unfathomably large, unfortunately, such is the ideological battle space in an interconnected world. In an environment where radical jihadists can come from anywhere in the world, and where images of injustices against Muslims beam to every corner of the globe, the global Muslim community, the civilian population, is key to successful counterinsurgency.[8]

The most important lesson of the 2007 Surge in Iraq was that the same young Muslim man can become either a fierce insurgent or an American ally, depending on incentives and dignity of daily life. The Anbar Sunnis' rejection of radicalism and subsequent support for ISIL in the face of Shiite brutality and economic deprivation underscores the true nature of the struggle; namely, that potential insurgents are circumstances-dependent. In a global insurgency, these same factors can play out anywhere in the world. Therefore, all 1.6 billion Muslim civilians are potential recruits to the extremist cause or allies against it. The West has not yet given them many reasons to believe it supports their economic opportunity and pursuit of happiness. In this paramount aspect of global counterinsurgency, the West has been largely MIA.

While many frame the struggle as a civilizational clash between Islam and the West, this is imprecise, counterproductive, and aligns with ISIL's narrative. Like Al-Qaeda before them, ISIL's victims are overwhelmingly Muslim, which undercuts the idea that the root conflict is a Christian-Muslim clash. While cultural differences matter, the real struggle is between the forces of modernity, economic prosperity, and pluralism against fundamentalists who would rather live in the seventh century. The West and 1.6 billion Muslims can be allies in this struggle.

ISIL's goal is eponymous—the establishment of a medieval caliphate with strict Islamic law and themselves in power. Therefore, their true enemy is not the West, but anyone who does not support their worldview, which includes the many Muslims who fueled the Arab Spring. These hundreds of millions prefer modern rights and comforts, in part because they see the possibilities via Facebook and Twitter.

At least two key pieces of evidence support this interpretation. First, the Arab Spring showed the widespread yearning in the Muslim world for modern values of freedom and economic opportunity. During my recent deployment to Iraq, I spent time with several Sunni interpreters who implored us to "defeat Daesh" and mentioned dreams for their future which mirror those of young men everywhere—security, a good job, and a happy marriage.

However, they also shed light on the enormous challenges that will remain even after ISIL's defeat. Their bitterness at atrocities committed by Shiite militias and the Shiite-dominated government—especially former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, whom they called a "butcher"—suggests that reconciliation will take decades and perhaps generations. Furthermore, the economics of the region do not predict widespread inclusivity for its burgeoning population, particularly for the young men so at risk to radicalization. A 24-year-old Iraqi interpreter epitomized the economics that continually renew the military threat. Despite graduating first in his class at university, his school counselor told him, "Don't dream too big." Americans can scarcely imagine hearing their future so dismissed, of having an infinitesimal chance of realizing their potential. The scourge of corruption that infects the region understandably exacerbates their economic alienation and indignation, and I felt it palpably. That millions of young Muslim men face such a chasm between their aspirations and opportunities points to why many have not yet committed to Western ideas, but also shows where Western help could yield a high return on investment.

Second, seventh-century Islam appeals to but a narrow few. A recent Brookings Institution study estimated that of the 300 million active Twitter accounts worldwide, including tens of millions in the Islamic world, only about fifty thousand accounts support ISIL, which is barely more than the estimated number of ISIL fighters and less than 0.1% of the global total of Muslim civilians.[9] In any population of a thousand, we should expect to find at least one crazy (and indeed, the estimated percentage of sociopathy in the general population is about 1-4%).[10] ISIL no more represents the world's Muslim population than Joseph Kony of the brutal Lord's Resistance Army in Uganda does its Christians.

Still, ISIL's barbarism found fertile ground in Iraq and Syria for instructive reasons. While Sunni cruelty gets great publicity in Western media, Shia crimes against Sunnis are equally deserving.[11] For example, where Sunni jihadists use beheadings for intimidation, Shiite death squads use drills.[12] Bashar Al-Assad's starving, gassing, torturing, and barrel-bombing of civilians has served as a recruiting tool for Sunni extremists worldwide to defend their fellow Sunnis against apostates, and a reason for local civilians to accept Islamists over secular regimes in Damascus and Baghdad. As one Islamist in Syria told the BBC, "I thank the West for not intervening in Syria. This has helped to revive religion in the hearts of the people."[13]

2. *The enemy's narrative spreads easily.* ISIL's sophisticated and non-stop propaganda videos demonstrate that they understand the importance of the Battle of Facebook and how to take advantage of the new strategic environment. The West has the same opportunities, if it chooses to use them.

3. *The religious underpinnings of the insurgency are relevant.* The United States does not face a transnational terrorist threat from Angola or Chile, despite having recently supported dictators as unconcerned with human rights as those in the Muslim world. With religion one of the strongest call to arms in human history, and with electronic means of reaching disturbed souls from Orlando to Bali, the ideological struggle must account for the religious nature of this insurgency.

4. *What ordinary citizens say and do in the West has new significance.* Gaining 1.6 billion Muslims as allies in building a prosperous and pluralistic future depends on their feeling that the West is a reliable partner in doing so. In the age of Facebook, Islamophobic actions and comments from anyone—a newspaper (*Charlie Hebdo*), a pastor (Terry Jones)[14], or an ordinary citizen (Craig Hicks)[15] can go viral and find fertile soil among alienated populations. For counterinsurgency in a part of the world where respect and honor arguably matter more than rights, such behavior has severe consequences.

5. *Images live forever.* Abu Ghraib will forever live in infamy in the digital age. In an ideological struggle, electronic media makes it that much harder for Western armies to overcome past mistakes which undercut it. However, the same holds true for our enemies' atrocities.

6. *All counterinsurgencies are interconnected.* If defeated in Iraq, irreconcilables can move to new territory with

unprecedented ease. Their ideas can move with just a few keystrokes. Victory in Iraq is strategically irrelevant if Libya, Pakistan and Syria sustain the global insurgency. Success or failure in one location can inspire others faster than ever.

7. *Counterinsurgency doctrine still works.* Despite the new technology, each of General Petraeus' fourteen points for soldiering in Iraq remain relevant, and even take on new meanings (Table 2).[13]

	General Petraeus' Observations from Soldiering in Iraq[13]	Extrapolation to Global Counterinsurgency
1	"Do not try to do too much with your own hands."	Empower and support local change agents wherever possible.
2	Act quickly, because every Army of liberation has a half-life.	Act quickly, because enemy organization and entrenchment grow with time
3	Money is ammunition.	Economic development and dignity are force multipliers.
4	Increasing the number of stakeholders is critical to success.	Allies matter at the international and local levels alike.
5	Analyze "costs and benefits" before each operation.	Do not pursue policies that produce more terrorists globally than they eliminate.
6	Intelligence is the key to success.	An ounce of prevention is worth a trillion dollars of cure.
7	Everyone must do nation-building.	Civilian government agents and the general public must aid in region-building.
8	Help build institutions, not just units.	Only institutions provide lasting security and dignity of daily life.
9	Cultural awareness is a force multiplier.	Cultural awareness, by anyone who can show up on Facebook, is a force multiplier.
10	Success in a counterinsurgency requires more than just military operations.	Stamping out a global counterinsurgency is not the military's job alone.
11	Ultimate success depends on local leaders.	Ultimate success depends local leaders, including national leaders.
12	Remember the strategic corporals and strategic lieutenants.	Any incident, insult, or death can trigger a global contagion.
13	There is no substitute for flexible, adaptable leaders.	Today's challenges require a level of thinking of unprecedented complexity.
14	A leader's most important task is to set the right tone.	The leading countries' politicians and citizens must set the right tone.

Table 2. Extrapolating Gen. Petraeus's success in Iraq to global counterinsurgency.

For example, "money is ammunition" takes on new relevance as regional economic development. "Ensuring that an operation kills more terrorists than it creates" has global connotations when a humanitarian catastrophe in Syria can radicalize Muslims in Belgium and Nigeria. "Cultural awareness is a force multiplier" warns average Western citizens and soldiers alike that they both impact the ideological struggle. Statements or policies which disparage the beloved faith of 1.6 billion people act as a force multiplier for the enemy, while extremism which alienates local or global populations strategically undermines their fight. Most importantly, "A leader's most important task is to set the right tone" applies just as well to an American government official leading a global counterinsurgency as to a Brigade Commander leading a counterinsurgency in Ramadi. Thus far this election season, several American politicians have egregiously violated General Petraeus' most important admonition.

8. *Behaviors travel in social networks.* Recent public health research has demonstrated that constructive and destructive behaviors such as obesity, drug abuse, and even happiness can travel through populations as epidemics just like infectious diseases.[17] Similarly, through the newly available and more globally integrated social networks, constructive and destructive ideas or behaviors can spread like never before.

Strategies to Take the Surge Global

The new technological and strategic factors which make the insurgency global also allow counterinsurgency techniques to reach globally. In several instances, the West has shown that counterinsurgency doctrine works and is morally superior to the Russian model employed in Chechnya (and now Syria), where Vladimir Putin labeled all rebels, even secular nationalists, as "terrorists" and perpetrated genocides.[18] The Cold War also showed that the correct strategy, if *appropriately resourced and given enough time*, can achieve historic success. Although a global and decades-long counterinsurgency appears politically unpalatable, costly, and still possibly insufficient, it represents the world's best hope to vanquish radical Islam. As the military has long known, good strategy will compensate even for large mistakes. Extrapolating Petraeus's fourteen keys to successful insurgency (Table 2) to a global scale provides a base of actionable strategies and tactics to advance a global counterinsurgency. This section will expound on the most central of these:

1. *Protect civilian populations and win the allegiance of the Muslim street in building a prosperous and pluralistic future.* Sunnis in Anbar province only turned against Al-Qaeda in Iraq once it became clear that the Americans championed their safety and opportunity more than the terrorists did. In a global counterinsurgency, this means that wanton genocide in places such as Syria, Bosnia or Chechnya must be prevented if possible. Inaction in the setting of capability indicates apathy and acceptance. America had the military capability in 2012 to stop the Syrian government from bombing secular rebels by instituting a no-fly zone similar to the ones over Kurdistan and Bosnia in the 1990s. Instead the Syrian government has been permitted to kill over 400,000 people and create the biggest refugee crisis since World War II, which helps Putin's cause by destabilizing and dividing Europe. America also could have moved to establish a safe zone for refugees on the Turkish border, as on the Kenya-Somali border, but policy makers chose not to do so. Politically, Western leaders could unite in compassion toward refugees such as by trumpeting the words on the Statue of Liberty ("Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore"). Such an act would demonstrate the West supports human rights even when it is hard and when the rights belong to Muslims, but instead, major candidates in several countries (the United States,[19] United Kingdom[20] and Hungary,[21] for example) have targeted the desperate refugees with demagoguery to cultivate populist and nationalistic support. By seemingly making human rights concerns contingent on religion or birthplace, the West inadvertently affirms ISIL's narrative of Western antipathy towards Muslims and alienates the Muslim street. We must do the opposite.

This strategy also requires that fragile countries recently removed from civil wars, such as Libya, Iraq, Afghanistan, or Syria, not be abandoned until political and economic opportunity are secured. America showed some staying power in West Germany and South Korea, but not Iraq or Afghanistan. Yes, this will take decades,

but the alternative is worse. The costs of neglecting civilian populations face us coldly today in the eyes of starving and mutilated Syrian children and ISIL barbarians.

2. *Promote economic development and political inclusion.* While in any population some sadists will be born, they only find sufficient adherents among poverty or humiliation. Humiliation in particular represents an underappreciated source of radicalization.[22] Dignity and opportunity are the best deterrents to radicalism gaining traction. An entire field of economics, sustainable economic development,[23] describes policies governments and aid agencies can champion that foster inclusive economic growth (rather than the extractive economic institutions so prevalent in the Muslim world), which often initiates a self-reinforcing cycle of increased political freedom, leading to still further economic opportunity, which then generates still more political freedom.[24] U.S. government agencies such as USAID, global institutions such as the World Bank, and numerous non-governmental organizations have a mixed but positive record from which to draw lessons in fostering dignity and growth. In particular, the dramatic change in Latin America from 1978-1990 when fourteen of seventeen dictatorships—many of them unspeakably brutal—ceded power to democratic governments suggests the possibilities for the Muslim world.[25]

3. *Balance local ownership with building institutions.* Gen. Petraeus' observation that local ownership enables success and sustainability remains pertinent. However, he also stresses the need to build institutions, and today some countries simply are not yet strong or stable enough to defeat radicalism on their own. In "Why Nations Fail," Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson propose that institutional strength explains the difference between successful or failed states.[26] A global counterinsurgency will differentiate between places that need sustained help to build institutions and those which can thrive under local ownership.

4. *Utilize new information technologies to win the global ideological battle.* Although ISIL is fighting hard in the battle of new media, its ideology is still bankrupt. The West must achieve electronically the same superiority it has in conventional military means.

5. *Enlist the Western public to help the cause, or at least do no harm.* Cross-cultural bonds and pluralism develop sustainably via significant ties between average citizens. In the age of Facebook such opportunities are easier. The West and East should increase opportunities for cultural exchange. Still more importantly, they must work together to discredit voices of division in the West and East. If the bile from the American campaign trail has taught us anything, it is that the Muslim world's suspicion that the United States does not prioritize their empowerment has some validity. Some politicians have correctly identified that there exists a market in American politics for brazen Islamophobia. Air Force veteran and Republican Senator Lindsey Graham calls it the "dark side of American politics,"[27] and it is a market that until 2016 not even a politician had had the moral turpitude to openly summon. But the recent parade of xenophobia has perhaps clarified why an American strategic victory against radical Islam has proved so elusive. Why would Muslims fight alongside Western armies when they know Western governments condone the very intolerance they ask Muslims to combat?

Politicians, thought leaders, and individual citizens all can play a constructive role in channeling the decency of a billion Westerners. The bravery required by politicians or thought leaders to stand against ignorance pales in comparison to that shown by many clerics and political leaders in Iraq who risked and often received assassinations for standing against intolerance. Additionally, individual citizens and especially thought leaders can impact dozens or thousands of people through the simple but profound fact that behaviors and attitudes travel through social networks just like diseases.[28] Humans are social animals, and fortunately or unfortunately, no man is an island.

The military can leverage its good standing with the public to further these efforts. Flag Officers should make regular appearances on television to generate and sustain public support for strategies which will last for their entire careers. The Pentagon should cultivate counterinsurgency links with the State Department through an official office with joint funding and dedicated staffing, fostering the synergistic cooperation and well-prepared

individuals to follow in the footsteps of Iraq Surge executors General Petraeus and Ambassador Crocker.[29] Top military leaders can also privately advocate these strategies to Congress and the President, although success here will depend as always both on Generals' diplomacy and their civilian bosses' wisdom and humility.

6. *Demonstrate long-term commitment.* A captured Afghan Taliban fighter once told U.S. interrogators: "You've got the watches, we've got the time."[30] Civilians and local leaders will not risk death if they believe they will be abandoned as soon as possible. Defeating Communism in Eastern Europe—an ideology with far less history, no Golden Age comparable to the Ottoman Empire, no religious or ethnic underpinnings, and clear evidence of failure—still required eight decades. In the battle against radical Islam, the West must show generational commitment that recalls the Korean War, the Berlin Airlift, the space race and the arms buildup. This also allows new generations, potentially with new values and less embittered by history, to be born.

Here too the short-term focus of electoral democracies has proved lacking. There are few examples beyond the Cold War of decades-long commitment to a struggle. However, the eventual mainstreaming of abolitionism, trust-busting, and Keynesian economics demonstrates that ideas with currency but initially few adherents can, over time and with the right spokespeople leveraging circumstances and evidence, achieve consensus among the population. A global counterinsurgency founded on economic parity still awaits such spokespeople, be they politicians, journalists, or activists.

7. *Lead by example.* The past two decades' turmoil has shaken global confidence in the "Western consensus." Although the West retains many competitive advantages, it cannot remain comfortable with being "the cleanest dirty shirt."[31] The world's 1.6 billion Muslims know from history that Islamic rule can coincide with prosperity, peace, and dignity. Although medieval religious rule cannot succeed in the 21st century economy, the West must show that its model works in practice as well as in theory. The Arab Spring was fueled by average Muslims seeing, in part through social media, that the West offers a better model than did their dictators or clerics. The West must seek to prove them right, or this demographic will continue to seek alternative ideologies. The West defeated Communism only after Eastern Europeans concluded that the Western model offered them better chances than their authoritarian leaders did, and not because America told them it would.

Conclusion

Above all, policy makers and citizens of the United States should recognize the lesson of recent history—that the solution least appealing to short-term electoral politics may have the best chance of success. In the words of Middle East expert Tom Friedman, the job of leaders is to change the polls, not read the polls.[32] Lt. Gen. Sean MacFarland, former commander of the fight against ISIL who successfully led a successful counterinsurgency pilot in Ramadi, Iraq in 2006, recently underscored this when he sharply criticized bombast and unworkable military policies proposed on the 2016 U.S. Presidential campaign trail.[33] In the age of Facebook, where problems do not go away, integration is unavoidable, narratives matter and the entire world is in play, sophisticated policy is necessary. As former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has stressed, "outcomes are not predetermined, and it's not necessarily the case that everything has a happy ending."[34] Military-heavy policies have been put forth by Washington policy makers because of the military's high esteem in American political discourse, but these policies have proven strategically ineffective without the complementary support from the general public and civilian government agencies described herein. The military should persuade counterpart civilian agencies and the general public to visibly prioritize sustainable economic and political development support for all nations, Muslim and non-Muslim, as part of a long-term global counterinsurgency. Will it work? Nobody can know, but it is the world's best chance, and we've already tried everything else.

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