

## Book Reviews

### Counterinsurgency<sup>1</sup>

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*There are no universal answers, and insurgents are among the most adaptive opponents you will ever face. Countering them will demand every ounce of your intellect.*<sup>2</sup>

#### I. Introduction

Drawing on his military experience, research, and defense consultant work, David Kilcullen describes how to understand, distinguish, and defeat both a traditional and global insurgency in his book, *Counterinsurgency*. He proposes that our knowledge of counterinsurgency (COIN) is always evolving, and in order to be effective, we must understand the conflict and respect the local people.<sup>3</sup> The timing of his work is perfect as Kilcullen claims that today's war on terrorism is actually a global insurgency that must be countered with a new strategy.

Kilcullen's extensive background in the counterinsurgency arena includes combat time as an infantry officer in the Australian Army and various government positions, such as Senior Counterinsurgency Advisor in Iraq and Chief Counterterrorism Strategist at the U.S. State Department.<sup>4</sup> While his book features a wealth of information on COIN, some of its impact is lost due to a lack of organization and a failure to develop his global insurgency theory. Nevertheless, the overall work provides useful and informative insights for Department of Defense (DoD) members, politicians, and anyone interested in today's conflict environment.

#### II. Summary

Recapturing one of his earlier works,<sup>5</sup> Kilcullen uses the first part of his book as a technical handbook for troops on the ground, especially in Iraq and Afghanistan. He provides a series of twenty-eight "how-to" guides ranging from learning about one's deployed environment to recognizing talent in the unit and keeping the initiative.<sup>6</sup> Kilcullen then

widens his target audience to higher-level decision-makers by delving into strategy and effective methods of measuring progress in war. He finally expands his audience to those interested in the current terror threat as he describes personal experiences and explains global insurgency and its relationship to the War on Terrorism.

#### III. Counterinsurgency School from Within

In the first part of his book, Kilcullen quickly pulls the reader to the ground level of an insurgency by defining it. The definition he adopts comes from Field Manual (FM) 3-24, which identifies an insurgency as an "organized movement aimed at overthrow of a constituted government through use of subversion and armed conflict . . . ."<sup>7</sup> His twenty-eight "how to" guides, however, go beyond the manual's tenets and provide a down-to-earth guide for young deploying officers. While the articles speak mainly to those in operational roles, Kilcullen's key nuggets of advice are also useful to those in advisory positions, such as judge advocates.

For example, he gives pre-deployment advice in his first article, "Know Your Turf," which emphasizes the importance of learning about the people, religion, and culture of a region before deploying.<sup>8</sup> While this advice parallels guidance provided in the leadership section of FM 3-24,<sup>9</sup> Kilcullen shies away from the doctrinal level to directly address deployers, essentially commanding them to become world experts on their deployed location.<sup>10</sup> He takes a similar approach in the twenty-third article in which he characterizes civil affairs as "armed social work."<sup>11</sup> Kilcullen argues that "civil affairs is central to the mission, not an afterthought."<sup>12</sup> This observation powerfully puts the military's role in COIN into perspective and shifts the main focus from killing insurgents to attacking the insurgency. Kilcullen's position on civil affairs again matches FM 3-

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<sup>1</sup> DAVID KILCULLEN, COUNTERINSURGENCY (2010).

<sup>2</sup> *Id.* at 29.

<sup>3</sup> *Id.* at 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> Biography of David Kilcullen, CTR. FOR A NEW AMERICAN SECURITY, <http://www.cnas.org/node/539> (last visited Sept. 8, 2010).

<sup>5</sup> David Kilcullen, "Twenty-Eight Articles": *Fundamentals of Company-Level Counterinsurgency*, MILITARY REV., May-June 2006, at 103-08.

<sup>6</sup> KILCULLEN, *supra* note 1, at 30-48.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. DEP'T OF ARMY, FIELD MANUAL 3-24, COUNTERINSURGENCY para. 1-2 (15 Dec. 2006) [hereinafter FM 3-24].

<sup>8</sup> KILCULLEN, *supra* note 1, at 30.

<sup>9</sup> FM 3-24, *supra* note 7, paras. 7-7, 7-8.

<sup>10</sup> KILCULLEN, *supra* note 1, at 30.

<sup>11</sup> *Id.* at 43.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*

24,<sup>13</sup> but he goes beyond the “what” to explain the “how,” advising deployers to build consensus with local nationals and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) when pursuing projects. His explanations are simple and written in layman’s terms, but the importance of his message cannot be overstated.

Kilcullen’s twenty-eight articles offer excellent and succinct advice for deploying servicemembers, and it is no surprise that they were later appended to FM 3-24.<sup>14</sup> However, by placing these technical guides at the beginning of the book, Killcullen may alienate general readers with no military background. Even readers with a military background may feel overwhelmed by such an extensive list of lessons presented so early in the book. This section might have been easier to process at the middle or end of the book when the reader has had more time to become comfortable with the terms and broad issues of COIN.

#### IV. Deny Sanctuary

Kilcullen uses a first person, story-like approach to educate readers on the basics of insurgency and COIN strategy, and, for the most part, he summarizes principles found in FM 3-24, with a few exceptions. For example, he proposes that there are four, instead of five, elements of an insurgency and leaves out the “movement leader” element found in the field manual model.<sup>15</sup> He also arranges the elements in a hierarchy by placing them in a pyramid format.<sup>16</sup> The center of gravity or source of power for an insurgency, he argues, is its connection to the local population, or “mass base” element, which is at the bottom of his pyramid.<sup>17</sup> He claims, “[i]nsurgents need the people to act in certain ways (sympathy, acquiescence, silence, reaction to provocation, or fully active support) in order to survive”<sup>18</sup> or in order to have freedom of movement within the population.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, cutting the insurgency off from the population, denying the insurgents sanctuary, and forcing them to become marginalized or to come into the open and be killed, represents a critical task.<sup>20</sup>

Although his strategy is not new to the COIN world, Kilcullen concisely conveys his lessons in an easy-to-understand form. By doing so, he effectively reaches that

part of the audience he calls the “general reader interested in understanding today’s conflict environment.”<sup>21</sup> Educating the reader on the basics of insurgency is an important stepping stone for Kilcullen’s later development of a global insurgency.

#### V. A New Approach

After examining the elements of insurgency and the strategy for defeating it, Kilcullen suddenly and surprisingly argues that the model he described is not adequate to deal with, what he calls, a global insurgency or the War on Terrorism.<sup>22</sup> He explains that the global insurgency operates in “cybersanctuaries” and ungoverned borders, and, because it is not contained to one country, defeating it must involve attacking its system elements rather than using the traditional denial of sanctuary approach.<sup>23</sup> Unfortunately, Kilcullen fails to fully develop key concepts of his argument, and the last part of the book feels rushed and incomplete as a consequence. Even though he writes in his preface that the book “is far from a definitive study” and is “merely an incomplete selection of tentative, still-developing thoughts”<sup>24</sup> some areas should be developed further in order to fully appreciate his argument.

Initially, Kilcullen claims that there is an ongoing global jihad that can be characterized as an Islamist global insurgency,<sup>25</sup> but he doesn’t fully explain the relationships and cooperation among the jihadists. He proposes that the jihad is made up of various Islamist groups, to include al Qaeda, attached to an Islamist jihad network, and its aim is to overthrow the world order.<sup>26</sup> To support his theory, he points to Islamist theaters of operation throughout the world where Islamist terrorism is occurring.<sup>27</sup> He claims that the “theatres are regions where operatives from one country cooperate with operatives from neighboring countries or conduct activities in neighboring countries.”<sup>28</sup> However, he does not fully explain how cooperation between these regions is occurring.

Kilcullen acknowledges that three of the regions do not have ongoing active insurgencies and claims that the other six do. Yet, in several of the active regions such as East Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and Maghreb, he points to the presence of radical Islamist activity, al Qaeda, or both but

<sup>13</sup> FM 3-24, *supra* note 7, para. 1-153.

<sup>14</sup> *Id.*, app. A.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.* paras. 1-51, 1-59–1-67. Field Manual 3-24 lists the five elements of an insurgency: leadership, combatants, political cadre, auxiliaries, and mass base. *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> KILCULLEN, *supra* note 1, at 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*

<sup>19</sup> *Id.* at 10.

<sup>20</sup> *Id.*

<sup>21</sup> *Id.* at ix.

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at 190.

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 191–92.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at x.

<sup>25</sup> *Id.* at 184.

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*

<sup>27</sup> *Id.* at 169.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.*

does not demonstrate any cooperation between insurgent groups in the regions.<sup>29</sup> He mentions that “there is a greater than 85 percent correlation between the presence of Islamist insurgency . . . and terrorist activity or Al Qaeda presence” in the area,<sup>30</sup> but he does not cite a source for this statistic. Even so, a correlation between Islamist insurgency and terrorist activity or an al Qaeda presence would not necessarily prove cooperation among the groups or regions. Similarly, the mere existence of terrorist groups that operate all over the world is not enough to establish the existence of a global jihad. Moreover, since the idea of a global jihad is central to his global insurgency strategy, elaborating on the concept with more up-to-date examples would have given greater weight to an otherwise fascinating argument.

## VI. Caliphate?

Kilcullen could have strengthened his global insurgency theory by exploring a major goal of global jihad: the reestablishment of a caliphate, or worldwide Islamic government. He writes, “The jihad, therefore, can be described as a form of globalized insurgency.”<sup>31</sup> Unlike traditional insurgencies, “this insurgency seeks to transform the entire Islamic world . . . seeking to reestablish a caliphate throughout the Muslim world and, ultimately, expand the realm of Islam (Dar al Islam) to all human society.”<sup>32</sup> The idea of global insurgency, or at least its growth, seems to flow from a desire to reestablish a caliphate, which Kilcullen mentions several times throughout his work. Yet, he does not explain who the caliph might be, how he might come to power, or the likelihood of a caliphate emerging at all. Readers, therefore, are left to wonder what the caliphate really means to the global insurgency.

Various definitions for “caliphate” exist, but the common theme among them is that a caliphate represents a united system of governance for all Muslims.<sup>33</sup> Terrorists have publicly claimed that they want to restore the caliphate, and other, non-violent Muslim groups have done the same, though condemning the use of violence as forbidden by Shari’ah law.<sup>34</sup> While Kilcullen provides an in-depth picture of the globalized insurgent network and how to attack it, he fails to explore the meaning of the caliphate or explain how

the movement to reestablish the caliphate could or should be addressed.

Readers might guess that he means the worse type of caliphate—one that emerges from violence and is headed by a violent ruler who intends to use terrorism to take over the Western world. How the caliphate emerges and who ultimately serves as the caliph will be critical in determining whether Muslims across the world recognize the legitimacy of the caliphate and whether the world ends up with an established system of Muslim governance or continued global insurgency. Because Kilcullen’s recommendations for defeating a global insurgency would certainly be affected by the emergence of a caliphate, his failure to explore the issues surrounding the caliphate may leave readers wondering about its effects on his proposed strategy. The global jihad and caliphate are significant to Kilcullen’s global insurgency theory, and developing the concepts further would have strengthened his arguments.

## VII. Setting the Stage

Kilcullen’s presentation would also have benefited from greater development of his terminology. Though he repeatedly uses terms such as “Islamist” and “global insurgency,” he does not clearly define the terms other than describing their activities. This lack of clarification leaves readers guessing or choosing from the many controversial definitions that exist today. Clearly defining the terms would avoid uncertainty and would help clarify Kilcullen’s position.

The word “Islamist” in particular could have various meanings to include one who practices the Islamic religion,<sup>35</sup> one who believes Islam is a political ideology,<sup>36</sup> or some other variation. When Kilcullen uses the term in the context of insurgency, it is unclear whether he’s referring to an insurgency by a religious group, political group, religious or political extremists, or all of the above. Similarly, when Kilcullen introduces the term “global insurgency,” he argues that the Islamist jihad is best understood as a global insurgency that uses terrorism as a key tactic, but he does not explain what he means by a global insurgency. Is he referring to a single, unified insurgency of global proportions? A coalition of individual insurgencies with varying ideologies spread around the world? Separate and distinct insurgencies with no ties to one another, located in different countries? He discusses tools of globalization and reminds us of the definition of insurgency, but again, he leaves readers guessing at his terminology. Defining these, and other, specialized terms would have helped established a stronger foundation for his arguments.

<sup>29</sup> *Id.* at 171–73.

<sup>30</sup> *Id.* at 175.

<sup>31</sup> *Id.* at 185.

<sup>32</sup> *Id.*

<sup>33</sup> See Caliphate (Islamic History), BRITANNICA ONLINE ENCYCLOPEDIA, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/89739/Caliphate> (last visited Sept. 13 2010); see also Caliph—Definition, MERRIAM-WEBSTER DICTIONARY ONLINE, [www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/caliph?show=0&t=1283777456](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/caliph?show=0&t=1283777456) (last visited Sept. 8, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> KILCULLEN, *supra* note 1, at 168; see also The Media Office, HIZB UT-TAHRIR, <http://web.archive.org/web/20070927200032/www.hizb-ut-tahrir.info/english/about.htm> (last visited Sept. 12, 2010).

<sup>35</sup> See 1 SHORTER OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY 1429 (5th ed. 2002).

<sup>36</sup> See Sheri Berman, *Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society*, 1 PERSPECTIVES ON POL. 257 (2003).

## VIII. Conclusion

Overall, *Counterinsurgency* is recommended reading for general readers, planners, and deployers alike, despite its lack of development in a few areas. Kilcullen does a good job of outlining the current state of COIN thinking for those not familiar with the insurgency world or the various strategies used to fight insurgencies. It provides insight on how traditional COIN principles can influence today's insurgency environment, which is no longer tied to one country. It also serves as a good pocket reminder to

deploying servicemembers of how to be effective in the deployed environment.

David Kilcullen's expertise is evident as he explains how both a traditional and global insurgency may be defeated. His use of down-to-earth characterizations, such as "cybersanctuaries"<sup>37</sup> and "armed social work,"<sup>38</sup> help illustrate the material he covers. With better placement of his twenty-eight "how to" guides and further development of concepts in Part VI, his keen insights and intriguing strategies would more effectively reach a wider audience.

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<sup>37</sup> KILCULLEN, *supra* note 1, at 192.

<sup>38</sup> *Id.* at 43.