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The Difference Between Terrorism and Insurgency

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By **Scott Stewart**

It is not uncommon for media reports to refer to the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant as a terrorist group. While the group certainly does have cadres with advanced terrorist tradecraft skills, it is much more than a terrorist group. In addition to conducting terrorist attacks in its area of operations, the group has displayed the ability to fight a protracted insurgency across an expansive geography and has also engaged in

conventional military battles against the [Syrian](#) and [Iraqi](#) militaries.

Because of this, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant is much more accurately referred to as a militant group — a group that uses terrorism as one of its diverse military tools. We have taken some heat from readers who view our use of the term "militant group" to be some sort of politically correct euphemism for terrorism, but militant group is really a far more accurate description for groups like the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, al Shabaab and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which all have the capacity to do far more than conduct terrorist attacks.

Terrorism and Insurgency

First, it is important to recognize that **terrorism is only one tool** used by organizations that wage asymmetrical warfare against a superior foe. Terrorism is often used to conduct armed conflict against a militarily stronger enemy when the organization launching the armed struggle is not yet at a stage where insurgent or conventional warfare is viable. (Although there are also instances where state-sponsored terrorism can be used by one state against another in a Cold War-type struggle.)

Marxist, Maoist and focoist militant groups often use **terrorism** as the first step in an armed struggle. In some ways, al Qaeda also followed a type of focoist vanguard strategy. It used terrorism to shape public opinion and raise popular support for its cause, expecting to enhance its strength to a point where it could wage insurgent and then conventional warfare in order to establish an emirate and eventually a global caliphate.

Terrorism can also be used to supplement insurgency or conventional warfare. In such cases, it is employed to keep the enemy off balance and distracted, principally by conducting strikes against vulnerable targets at the enemy's rear. The Afghan Taliban employ terrorism in this manner, as does the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

Once a group becomes more militarily capable, the group's leaders will often switch strategies, progressing from terrorist attacks to an insurgency. Insurgent warfare, often referred to as guerilla warfare, has been practiced for centuries by a number of different cultures. Historical commanders who employed insurgent tactics have ranged from the Prophet Mohammed to Mao Zedong to Geronimo.

Simply put, insurgent theory is based on the concept of declining battle when the enemy is superior and attacking after amassing sufficient forces to strike where the enemy is weak. The insurgents also take a long view of armed struggle, seeking to live to fight another day rather than allow themselves to be fixed and destroyed by their superior enemy. They may lose some battles, but if they remain alive to continue the insurgency while also forcing their enemy to expend men and resources disproportionately, they consider it a victory. Time is on the side of the insurgents in this asymmetrical style of battle, and they hope a long war will exhaust and demoralize their enemy.

This style of warfare is seen very plainly in the history of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant. In 2004, when the group was called al Qaeda in Iraq, it attempted to progress from an insurgent force to a conventional military, seizing and holding territory, but it suffered terrible losses when facing the United States in clashes that included the first and second battles of Fallujah. In 2006, the group, known then as the Islamic State in Iraq, suffered significant losses in the battle of Ramadi, and the losses continued during the Anbar Awakening. However, the group persevered, abandoned its efforts to hold territory and reverted back to a lower-level insurgency, continuing its pursuit of a long war.

The group's persistence paid off. Now known as the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant, the militants regained strength after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and through their involvement in the Syrian civil war. Today, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant is arguably the most powerful jihadist militant

group in the world. The group has even been able to progress militarily to the point where it can engage in conventional military battles simultaneously against the Syrian and Iraqi armies. The group is clearly more than just a terrorist group; its military capabilities are superior to those of many small countries.

Constraints

All that said, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant is also constrained as it employs its military power. Its first constraint is the projection of that power. Force projection is a challenge for even large national militaries. It requires advanced logistical capabilities to move men, equipment, munitions, petroleum and other supplies across expanses of land, and it becomes even more difficult when substantial bodies of water must be crossed. The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant is aided by the fact that it can operate along internal supply lines that cross the Iraq-Syria border, allowing them to move men and material to different areas of the battlefield as needed. Mostly this movement is achieved by means of trucks, buses and smaller, mobile technicals (pickup trucks) and motorcycles.

For the most part, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant is practicing a mobile hit-and-run style of warfare aided by sympathetic Sunni forces, but in some places, such as Mosul, Ramadi and Baiji, they are conducting more conventional warfare along fixed battle lines. The militants have not shown the capability to project their conventional or even insurgent forces very far into the Kurdish and Shiite-controlled areas of Iraq, where they lack significant local support. In the past, they have been able to conduct terrorist operations in Kurdish and Shiite areas, including Arbil, Baghdad and Basra, but in recent years the group has not conducted terrorist attacks outside of its operational theater. Back in 2005, the group carried out bombing and rocket attacks in Jordan, including the [Nov. 9, 2005 suicide bombing attacks against three hotels in Amman](#), but it has not conducted an attack in Jordan for many years now. Local supporters often facilitate the group's terrorist operations in Iraq, Syria and Jordan, even when foreign operatives conduct a suicide bombing or armed assault.

Historically, it has been fairly unusual for a militant group to develop the capability to project power transnationally. Developing such a capability without state sponsorship is even more unusual; transnational groups such as Hezbollah, Black September and the Abu Nidal Organization all received significant state sponsorship. It is far more common for militant groups to confine their military operations within a discreet theater of operations consisting of their country of origin and often the border areas of adjacent countries. In many cases, the militant group involved is a separatist organization fighting for independence or autonomy, and its concerns pertain to a localized area.

In other cases, militant organizations have more global ambitions, such as the jihadist or Marxist visions of global conquest. These groups will often try to accomplish their global goals via a progression that begins with establishing a local political entity and then expanding. This initial local focus requires a group to commit its military resources toward local targets rather than transnational targets. This is likely why, for example, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant has not yet attempted to conduct transnational terrorist operations directed against the United States and the West. The group has more pressing local and regional targets to hit.

Militant groups face another constraint on the projection of military power in the form of transnational terrorism: The tradecraft required to plan and orchestrate a terrorist attack undetected in a hostile environment is quite different from the skill set needed to operate as a guerilla fighter in an insurgency. In addition, the logistical networks needed to support terrorist operatives in such environments are quite different from those required to support insurgent operations. These constraints have shaped our assessment that the threat posed by [foreign fighters returning to the West from Syria](#) is real but limited.

Among the things that made the al Qaeda core organization so unique was its focus on the "far enemy" (the United States) first rather than the "near enemy" (local regimes). Al Qaeda also developed the capability to train people in advanced terrorist tradecraft in camps like Deronta and create the logistical network required to support terrorist operatives operating in hostile territory. Following the 9/11 attacks, al Qaeda lost its training camps and logistical networks. This has made it much more difficult for the group to conduct transnational attacks and explains why the long-awaited follow up attacks to the 9/11 operation did not materialize. Indeed, in 2010 the al Qaeda core group jumped on the bandwagon of [encouraging individual jihadists living in the West to conduct simple attacks where they live](#) rather than travel to other countries to fight.

Among the al Qaeda franchise groups, such as al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb and al Shabaab, tensions have erupted between members of the organization who favor the al Qaeda-like focus on the far enemy and those who want to focus their military efforts on the near enemy. For the most part, the regional franchises are also under heavy pressure from the local authorities and are struggling to survive and continue their struggles. In such an environment, they have very little extra capacity to devote to transnational attacks.

Even a local franchise group like al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which has adopted more of a transnational ideology, can be constrained by such factors. Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has not been able to launch an attack directed against the U.S. homeland since the [November 2010 printer bomb attempt](#). Moreover, it is important to recognize that al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula launched the attacks targeting the United States from its base of operations in Yemen rather than sending operatives to the United States to plan and execute attacks in a hostile environment. The group did not have operatives with the requisite tradecraft for such operations and also lacked the logistics network to support them. Therefore, the al Qaeda franchise was limited to executing only the transnational attacks it could plan and launch from Yemen.

So far, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant has not demonstrated a focus on conducting transnational attacks against the far enemy. It also has not shown that it has operatives capable of traveling to foreign countries to plan and conduct sophisticated terrorist operations there. However, the group retains a robust terrorist capability within its area of operation and has consistently been able to acquire weapons and explosives, fabricate viable explosive devices and recruit and indoctrinate suicide operatives.

The Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant is far more than a terrorist organization. It can launch complex insurgent campaigns and even conduct conventional military operations, govern areas of

territory, administer social services and collect taxes. Labeling the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant solely as a terrorist organization underestimates the group's capabilities, giving it the element of surprise when it launches a major military operation like the one resulting in the capture of a significant portion of Iraq's Sunni-dominated areas.

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