It seems hard for some military and political leaders as well as others to understand that our fight against al Qaeda and its affiliates is really a war. In fact, I’ve had several conversations over the past few months with people who believe we are fighting not a war, but some kind of police action against terrorist criminal activity. We cannot hope to structure a clear and comprehensive strategy if we lack clarity and comprehensive understanding of the task at hand.

“As a total phenomenon,” Clausewitz tells us, war is best understood in terms of a remarkable trinity composed of “primordial violence, hatred, and enmity … the play of chance and probability … and … of subordination, as an instrument of policy.” He equates the first element of this trinity with the people, the second with the command and the army, and the third with the government. “The political aims,” Clausewitz states, “are the business of government alone.” War is, therefore, a continuation of political activity by other means—for instance, using force to compel an enemy to do a state’s will.

In the 19th century, nation-states, in pursuit of political aims, seized the monopoly on the use of force. At the time Clausewitz wrote, it was mostly nation-states that had the means to wage war: human capital, money, production, supply chains, the organization to make all this work together toward a common set of aims and a population willing to support this huge effort. Explaining war in terms of people, the army and government were Clausewitz’s primary focus. He knew, however, that war cut a wider berth. In fact, Clausewitz describes war as a chameleon that “slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case.”

“Every age,” he goes on to write, “had its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions.” At the time Clausewitz wrote, the nation-state had been ascending for about 200 years, but he was aware that war had other “ages.” We should be aware of this as well—what we have seen and are seeing in Iraq and Afghanistan is the chameleon of war changing yet again.

In the war we are fighting, the leadership of al Qaeda, rather than the government of a nation-state, has provided the reason for subordination. In lieu of a national population, al Qaeda’s ideology—complete with an interpretation of both history and current conditions—has created the enmity, hatred and motivation within its affiliate groups and their followers. The elements of chance and probability are provided not by a conventional army but by a variety of unconventional irregulars and terrorists ranging from true believers and suicide bombers to...
those on the street paid to lay an improvised explosive device (IED) or act as early warning to criminals selling their skills to whomever pays.

Al Qaeda has figured out a way to raise not only human capital in fighters and leaders, but also to raise the money to pay its fighters and purchase arms, equipment and supplies. It has also figured out how to create a supply system and build an organization—actually, a network of loosely affiliated organizations—and, most important, how to make all this work together toward the political aims laid out in its strategy. Nation-states’ monopoly on waging war has eroded.

The real problem with understanding the war we are fighting lies within our mental framework. Legally, diplomatically and militarily, we understand war too narrowly as the conventional militaries of one nation-state or group of nation-states fighting against those of another. According to this framework, all other use of violence is crime or “operations other than war.” The chameleon, however, is changing colors. We can hold to our framework and refuse to call this a war. Or we can recognize what Clausewitz called “the most far-reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander” can have: “to establish ... the kind of war on which they are embarking; neither mistaking it for, nor trying to turn it into, something that is alien to its nature.”

The genius of al Qaeda lies in its ability to combine the profits of criminal activities with a coherent and resonant ideology, as well as within its organizational construct: Its network is loose enough to allow local groups to exploit local inequities, dissatisfactions and hopelessness even without direct involvement from “the home office,” but tight enough to maintain focus on the main strategic goal of replacing the nation-states it targets with its versions of a caliphate. Unlike those of most insurgencies, however, al Qaeda’s documents describe a strategic goal that is global, not just local or regional. The group has described multiple times and in open form not only its goals, but also the ways in which it plans to achieve them and the means it intends to use. Its members understand that they are fighting a global insurgency, which they have dubbed a “defensive jihad.”

Why is it important that we understand that we are fighting a war and that the war is of a certain type? Simple: If we acknowledge that we are fighting a global insurgency being waged by a network of groups loosely affiliated with al Qaeda or its ideology, then the probability increases that we will be able to structure a proper global counterinsurgency strategy. If we are unable to recognize that we are fighting a war—a global insurgency—even though our enemies do, that probability decreases.

The global counterinsurgency is not a war against Islam; it is not a “clash of civilizations.” It is a war against known insurgents who have declared war against us, published a set of strategic goals and a strategy, and have operated pursuant to that strategy for more than a decade.

Successful counterinsurgency strategies deny freedom of movement to
the insurgents. Such strategies also deny access to financial and logistical support. They counter the ideology of the insurgents not just with words, but also by enhancing governmental effectiveness in providing for the population. Success lies with a mix of targeted, kinetic combat operations—special operations, police and conventional military—as well as with a mix of nonkinetic civil, informational, governmental and economic operations. The necessary counterinsurgency strategy has to be integrated not only into the action of local governing authorities within a given nation-state but also among the global organizations, civil and military, that will have to be tasked with (or created to carry out) planning and executing strategy on a global scale. Success will result from a comprehensive strategy that is flexible enough to allow for local variations, yet coherent enough to work globally.

A successful strategy against the kind of insurgency we face does not depend on the (false) belief that “taking out the head” will end the insurgency, nor does it depend on a unilateral approach. Military action, while necessary, is not sufficient; neither can it be carried out by a single nation. Globally, counterinsurgency must be waged in theaters with sequenced civil-military campaigns conducted by the military leaders and diplomats of many nations, and with sufficient cohesiveness to achieve common goals.

Our predecessors shed preconceptions, created new organizations, developed new coordination mechanisms and aligned the priorities of multiple nations to fight World War II, their global war. That war was easier to understand because it was the paradigm of our mental framework: a conventional war of one set of nation-states versus another set of nation-states. A global insurgency is very different, much less clear—but failure is not an option. We need to understand that we are fighting a war and that the war is a global insurgency. Only then can we derive from that understanding a specific global counterinsurgency strategy.

**A soldier from the 25th Infantry Division prepares to track al Qaeda insurgents in the Tamiyah area, north of Baghdad.**

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