

Strategies: Building an Insurgency

A second strategy terrorist groups use is they try to take their small group and build it into a large insurgent organization that can conduct guerrilla warfare. Now, as Professor Hoffman said, there is a difference between terrorism and insurgency. But, in strategic terms, often terrorists are trying to go from one stage, terrorism, to a much larger stage of insurgency. And, indeed, many of the terrorist groups that have consumed the attention of the world, such as Hezbollah, or the PKK in Turkey or Sendero Luminoso in Peru, are insurgent groups that also use terrorism.

So how do they do this? Again, the goal is to conduct a series of attacks that force the government to respond. The government, however, is responding against the population in general, rather than on the terrorist group, in particular. Often, the government lacks precise intelligence. So it doesn't know who, among the population, is responsible for the violence. So there may be mass arrests of young males. They may go after community leaders, rather than going after those who are embracing violence. And in general, they make mistakes.

And these mistakes have several consequences. One consequence is that people lose faith in their own government. It can't stop the violence. It's arresting the wrong people. And in general, it's proving that it's not able to guarantee security for the population. As a result, the government is discredited among its own people. And even more important, it's discredited among the population that the terrorist groups seek to champion. They become the defenders of the community. They gain recruits. They gain money as people see the government as the enemy, because the government is blindly lashing out. As they gain money, as they gain recruits, they can do more attacks.

And as the circle continues, they're able to gain more recruits and start to do insurgent operations, attacks on military targets. They're often setting up social services where they're able to attract people because they are providing education or providing hospitals. And, over time, they control territory, where they're able to act really like a mini government, where they can even tax and control the population, to the point where they can force people to support them, simply out of fear.

And so this can be a very effective strategy. But again, it's a very difficult one. The terrorist group, as with attrition, has to survive. It has to be able to wage a long campaign when, especially initially, the government has superior resources. And also, as with attrition, the violence that the terrorist group may do is often unpopular, especially initially, that people question killing of civilians and they're afraid of the government crackdown. So a terrorist group can be quite vulnerable with this strategy. And as you could probably tell from my remarks, this goes hand in hand with attrition. Often, the purpose of attrition is to create insurgency. And by sustaining an insurgency, it has an attrition effect on the government in question.

An example of using terrorism to create insurgency happens with the Al-Qaeda linked fighters in

Iraq. Now, in 2003, the United States invades Iraq, overthrows Saddam Hussein, and there's a power vacuum. And, in the initial months after the US occupation begins, you see violence of all stripes beginning. You see tribal violence. You see anti- U.S. nationalist violence. You see former regime elements attacking U.S. forces. And you also see a lot of crime. So, in general, the population is not secure. The population feels that the government is not able to protect them.

And in Western parts of Iraq, and this is the part of Iraq where many Sunni Arabs live, they also see the government as ideologically hostile. They believe the United States has put in a Shia dominated government. They believe the United States is there to throw Sunni Muslims out of power. And so, you have elements linked to Al-Qaeda come in. And the population may not embrace all their goals, but it sees them as a group that wants to help protect the community, wants to help the community defend itself. And as the government collapses, as social services collapse, as the police collapse, the community depends much more on itself. There's really no alternative to working with militia groups.

And the United States and the Iraqi government starts to respond. But at first, they lack precise intelligence. So often they're making mass arrests and getting the wrong people. And often they are shooting back. And they're, when they kill people, they create a dynamic where the cousins, the brothers, the family members, of those involved join insurgent groups to seek revenge. So what we see is initial limited violence create a government crackdown that largely fails. We see initial limited violence discredit the government. And over time, the groups get bigger and bigger, to the point where they're waging a large scale insurgency. They're doing guerrilla warfare. They're holding territory. And they are otherwise acting as a government of their own.

However, by making this move, the group also becomes very vulnerable. They're operating openly. And by controlling territory, many of their members are widely known. And the population of Iraq turns against the Al-Qaeda linked elements, starting during the Iraqi civil war, roughly around 2006. And because the population turns against them, and this is in part due to their excess violence, in part due to their alien ideology, and also because the United States starts to be seen as the protector of the Sunni community. The various tribes around Western Iraq start to support US efforts at going after the Al-Qaeda linked elements. And very, very quickly, these elements are shattered. By having precise intelligence, by losing the support of the population for the insurgents, the United States is able to conduct a very effective counterinsurgency campaign and drive back Al-Qaeda in Iraq, at least temporarily.