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## THE CONCEPT OF CENTER OF GRAVITY AND THE ISLAMIC INSURGENCY

Maj Wayne Lindsay

**JCSP 43 DL**

***Exercise Solo Flight***

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EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

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# THE CONCEPT OF CENTER OF GRAVITY AND THE ISLAMIC INSURGENCY

## Introduction

Since 2001, the Great Western Democracies have been involved in a series of almost ceaseless wars against poorer, technologically inferior, and in some cases, nearly barbarous Islamic states. The United States led invasion of Afghanistan saw the mobilization of some 130,000 troops from 51 countries against a nation where the capital city could not boast an operable sewer system.<sup>1</sup> The 2003 invasion of Iraq and subsequent counter insurgency operation, continued to 2011, saw the commitment of more than 160,000 troops, and consumed well in excess of a trillion dollars of American treasure.<sup>2</sup> It would take the most disingenuous of academics to argue that the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which lasted until 2017, was not a simple continuation of this War.

During all of these conflicts, commanders, planning staffs and intelligence professionals strove to determine useful enemy Centers of Gravity (CoGs) which could be decisively struck in order to bring the conflicts to rapid and successful conclusions. They all failed. The Taliban continue to fight a dogged insurgency in Afghanistan to this day; and even the most optimistic intelligence analysts foresee a reconstituted form of ISIS continually emerging from the lawless regions of South-Western Iraq to plague any emergent government.

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<sup>1</sup> North Atlantic Treaty Organization. *NATO and Afghanistan*. NATO E-Library, 10 Nov. 2017, [www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics\\_8189.htm](http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8189.htm).

<sup>2</sup> Kimberly Amadeo. *The Ongoing Costs of the Iraq War*. The Balance, 30 Dec. 2017, [www.thebalance.com/cost-of-iraq-war-timeline-economic-impact-3306301](http://www.thebalance.com/cost-of-iraq-war-timeline-economic-impact-3306301).

## **Thesis**

The concept of Center of Gravity is not useful when fighting an Islamic Insurgency; as the Center of Gravity is Islam itself, and the mere presence of non-Muslim warriors within an Islamic population reinforces this CoG.

## **Thesis map**

This thesis will initially, excluding the introduction, be proved by defining the CoG concept. This will be followed by the outlining, defining and describing of important aspects of Islamic ideology, namely, the *umma*, *dar al harb*, *dar al Islam*, *Jihad* and martyrdom. The final section, excluding the conclusion, will briefly look at how the Taliban and the Islamic State reinforced their respective CoGs using Islamic ideology.

## **Centers of Gravity**

The United States Joint Staff Officer's Guide defines CoGs as being, "...the characteristics, capabilities, or locations from which a military force derives its freedom of action, physical strength, or will to fight."<sup>3</sup> This definition can be applied to the strategic, operational and tactical levels but it is really the most useful when considering two opposing Westphalian states. Within the strategic context, the national means of production could be a CoG which can be articulated through the production of target packs and engaged with air power. At the operational level, an enemy's replenishment capacity could be a CoG which could be articulated with a campaign plan designed to stop resupply and engaged by means of a

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph L. Strange and Richard Iron. "Center of Gravity: What Clausewitz Really Meant." *JFQ: Joint Force Quarterly* 35, Autumn 2004, 21.

blockade. At the tactical level, an enemy's armoured offensive power could be his CoG which could be articulated with targeting priorities and engaged with tanks, helicopters and artillery.

Within an Islamic insurgency, the concept of CoG becomes much more problematic. At the strategic level, Clausewitz noted that, "In countries subject to domestic strife, the center of gravity is generally the capital."<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to extend this assertion to Western experiences in either Afghanistan or Iraq. In Afghanistan, the Taliban predominantly drew their support from rural populations and never seriously sought to hold Kabul or even provincial capitals such as Kandahar. The same holds true for Iraq and Syria. Rather than focus on Damascus and Baghdad, ISIS designated Raqqa as its capital and ruled from that location.

At the operational level, the task becomes no easier. Readily identifiable CoGs such as supply chains or communications systems simply do not exist. In Afghanistan, allied forces continually sought to identify and target Improvised Explosive Device (IED) networks to little avail. The problem was, the IED networks were not supply networks in the traditional sense of suppliers, factories and transportation infrastructure; but were loose arrangements of confiscated homes, day labourers and contracted drivers. Similarly, communications networks were not comprised of satellites and communications arrays but of stolen cell phones and walkie-talkies.

At the tactical level the concept of CoG is nearly impossible to apply. By and large, insurgents do not operate in either battalion sized or larger formations or use complex equipment requiring support echelons. They use vehicles commonly in use within the civilian population and generally refrain from wearing uniforms or carrying identifying markers. The use of small arms predominates. Because of this, there are no armoured personnel carriers, tanks, aircraft or

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<sup>4</sup> Carl Von Clausewitz. *On WAR Book 8, Chapter 4: Table of Contents*. Clausewitz.com, 16 May 2017, [www.clausewitz.com/readings/OnWar1873/BK8ch04.html#a](http://www.clausewitz.com/readings/OnWar1873/BK8ch04.html#a).

artillery units to strike. There are seldom significant formations to strike, and when they do appear, they generally dissolve and disappear into the local population when pressed. Because of these realities, analysts seeking to define the Islamic insurgent's CoG invariably choose the insurgent's connection to the population. The problem is, Islam is the insurgent's connection to the population.

## Islam

As early as 622 A.D., the Prophet of Islam, Mohammad, had worked to create a community of believers, or the *umma*, which were bound together by their faith.<sup>5</sup> The *umma* includes all Muslims but specifically excludes Christians, Jews and Sabatians, who are classified as *dhimmi* or treaty peoples. Within Islam, the *dhimmi* are accorded a significantly lower status than Muslims and are required to pay a special tax, the *jizya*.<sup>6</sup> Outside of the *umma*, unbelievers are considered akin to animals and lack any legal status. Mohammad's desire to fortify the *umma* against unbelievers was so great that the simple act of cooperating with unbelievers was equated with apostasy, the most severe transgression in Islam.<sup>7</sup>

Aside from the categorization of the *umma* and the *dhimmi*, the Islamic World is broken down into *dar al Islam* (the house of Islam) and *dar al harb* (the house of war). *Dar al Islam* is comprised of all Muslims and *dhimmi* who live within an Islamic state and have submitted to

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<sup>5</sup> Bat Ye'or. Translated by Miriam Kochan, and David Littman. *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002, 36. I have eschewed the use of CE and BCE and opted for the more traditional AD because I find the underlying political motivation to be academically dishonest. Arguing for the use of CE over AD when writing about dates that could just as easily be referred to using the hijri calendar is unsupportable.

<sup>6</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr. *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2015, 3:61. For clarity's sake I will note that pagans are afforded an even lower status than 'the Peoples of the Book', but a discussion of their status falls outside this study.

<sup>7</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Study Quran*, 5:54.

God's will, as articulated by the Prophet Mohammad. *Dar al harb* is the rest of the World and is the abode of Infidels. While these divisions of theocratic law may seem obscure and of little use to a discussion on CoG selection, they are not. This is because Muhammad commanded Muslims to continue fighting until there is only one god.<sup>8</sup> This means fighting within the *umma* against the presence of infidels and within *dal al harb* until all the infidels submit and *dar al Islam* comprises the entire world.

It is frequently difficult for students from the Secular West to understand the all-pervasive impact of religion within *dar al Islam*. Under *Sharia*, apostasy is punished with death, homosexuals are killed and women and *dhimmi* are given lesser status under the law. The Pew Research Center conducted polls which showed that 99 percent of Afghans and 91 percent of Iraqis supported *Sharia* and that over 60 percent of Muslims worldwide considered Americans to be selfish violent, greedy and immoral.<sup>9</sup> Similar polling also indicated that Muslim belief in God is nearly universal with almost 100 percent of Muslim populations expressing belief. Belief in the Quran as the literal word of God is also extremely high and ranges from a low of 97 percent of the population in Asia to nearly 100 percent in the populations of North Africa and the Middle East.<sup>10</sup>

A final term which must be understood when considering the place of CoG within an Islamic insurgency is *Jihad*. *Jihad* literally means to strive and is an extremely complex term within Islamic theology and jurisprudence which can refer to either internal personal struggles or

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<sup>8</sup> David Cook. *Understanding Jihad*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005, 64-65.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Lipka. "Muslims and Islam: Key Findings in the U.S. and around the World." Pew Research Center, Pew Research Center, 9 Aug. 2017, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/08/09/muslims-and-islam-key-findings-in-the-u-s-and-around-the-world/).

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Liu. "The World's Muslims: Unity and Diversity." Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project, Pew Research Center, 9 Aug. 2012, [www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-executive-summary/](http://www.pewforum.org/2012/08/09/the-worlds-muslims-unity-and-diversity-executive-summary/).

externalized violence. This study will deal with the latter.<sup>11</sup> The Quran and Hadith both make it clear that all Muslims who are able, have a religious obligation to make war on unbelievers in both *dar al Islam* and *dar al Harb*.<sup>12</sup>

The concept of *Jihad* is particularly strongly reinforced within Islam through the rewarding of martyrdom. Quran Sura 9:111 declares, “Truly God has purchased from the believers their souls and their wealth in exchange for the Garden being theirs. They fight in the way of God, slaying and being slain.”<sup>13</sup> While *Jihad* and martyrdom have always held an important place in Islam, recent history and changes in religious thought by religious leaders such as Sayyid Qutb from Egypt, Abu Mawdudi from Pakistand and Ayatullah Khumanyni in Iran, have caused a resurgence in their use as political tools against infidels within the *umma* and states which support them.<sup>14</sup>

All of this is to say that the Muslim warrior is automatically defined as a member of his religious community, the *umma*. He belongs to this community in a way that no infidel can ever aspire to. Even when the *umma*'s interests are not aligned with that of the *Jihadist*'s, the members of the *umma* will be extremely resistant to helping the infidel because of the severe religious stricture laid down by Mohammad in the Quran. A Muslim who aids the infidel against his fellow Muslim risks being labelled as lower than an apostate and may be ejected from his community, killed, and ultimately denied access to paradise. The almost universal belief in the

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<sup>11</sup> Michael David Bonner. *Jihad in Islamic History: Doctrines and Practice*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, 2. Islamic polemicists will frequently paint Jihad as only expeditionary and Muslim apologists will often paint it as only non-violent. Both opinions are either deceptive or ill informed. Jihad refers to a vast body of Islamic jurisprudence which covers a variety of subjects of which defensive and offensive war are significant fields of study.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>13</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *The Study Quran*, 9:111. In the interest of full disclosure the remainder of Sura 9:111 states, “It is a promise binding upon Him in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Quran. And who is truer to His pact than God? So rejoice in the bargain you have made. That is indeed the great triumph.

<sup>14</sup> David Cook. *Martyrdom in Islam*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, 139.

Muslim World in the God of Mohammad, and in the literality of the Quran, assure an almost endless supply of potential jihadists.

### **Afghanistan and Iraq**

The September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York resulted in the Bush Administration's demand that the Taliban surrender Osama Bin Laden. The Taliban refused and the United States subsequently launched its invasion. Islamic apologists often argue that the Taliban's refusal was culturally driven and not religiously motivated, but even the Taliban seem unaware of the distinction. The senior Taliban representative in Pakistan stated that, "...giving up the man wanted for the atrocities in America would be an 'insult to Islam'."<sup>15</sup> Osama Bin Laden's 1996, *Declaration of Jihad against the United States* could not have made it any clearer that he was fighting a religious war. In it, he constantly refers to the alliances between the Christians and the Jews which are constituted to commit atrocities against Muslims.<sup>16</sup>

Attempting to separate the Taliban from Islam is akin to separating flour from bread. Sharia was the law of the land, the police were sectarian in nature and the Quran was the ultimate authority.<sup>17</sup> The Taliban were so anti-modernist and anti-western in nature that they even impressed Saudi Wahabis with their piety.<sup>18</sup> During the years of the insurgency, Afghans were

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<sup>15</sup> Alex Spillius Peshawar. "We Won't Hand over Bin Laden, Say Defiant Taliban." *The Telegraph*, Telegraph Media Group, 22 Sept. 2001, [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/1341340/We-wont-hand-over-bin-Laden-say-defiant-Taliban.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/afghanistan/1341340/We-wont-hand-over-bin-Laden-say-defiant-Taliban.html).

<sup>16</sup> Michael Schuer. *Through our Enemies Eyes: Osama bin Laden, Radical Islam, and the Future of America*. Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, 2007, 26-27.

<sup>17</sup> William Maley. *The Afghanistan Wars*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2002, 233-234.

<sup>18</sup> Kathy Gannon. *I s for Infidel...J is for Jihad, K is for Kalashnikov*. New York: Public Affairs, 2005, 41. Gannon's book is interesting because she goes to extreme lengths to separate the insurgency from Islam but blames it on American brutality and portrays the Pashtuns as simple music loving people driven to fight.

known to hide Islamic icons for fear that American soldiers would kill them if they found out they were Muslims.<sup>19</sup> It is not reasonable to think that the local Afghans became convinced of this on their own. They had been indoctrinated with the belief that the Americans were crusaders rampaging in Islamic lands.

The rise of ISIS provides an interesting opportunity for the academic or the student of military thought to examine the motivations behind an Islamic insurgency as the group is technologically savvy and goes so far as to publish an online magazine, *Dabiq*. The name of the magazine itself is telling as the *Hadith* reports that Mohammad declared that, “the last hour will not come until Muslims vanquish the Romans at *Dabiq* or *al-Amaq*.”<sup>20</sup> This in and of itself clearly demonstrates that the authors are trying to situate the insurgency as a continuation of the age old conflict between Islam and the Christian West (Rome).

In *Dabiq 15: Break the Cross*, there is a telling article entitled, *Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You*, in which the author notes that it is a Muslims duty to terrorize unbelievers. This assertion is used to justify the attack on the ‘sodomite nightclub’ on Miami.<sup>21</sup> The first stated reason that ISIS hates, and fights in Iraq, Syria and internationally, is because unbelievers reject the oneness of Allah. The second is that secular liberal societies permit the things Allah bans. The third is that the West allows atheists. The fourth is that they hate the West because of its crimes against Islam. The fifth is they hate the crimes against Muslims. The sixth is because

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>20</sup> Analysis. “Dabiq: Why Is Syrian Town so Important for IS?” *BBC News*, BBC, 4 Oct. 2016, [www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30083303](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-30083303).

<sup>21</sup> Unknown. “Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You.” *Dabiq*, no. 15, [clarionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/islamic-state-magazine-dabiq-fifteen-breaking-the-cross.pdf](http://clarionproject.org/wp-content/uploads/islamic-state-magazine-dabiq-fifteen-breaking-the-cross.pdf), 30.

the West invades Muslim lands.<sup>22</sup> None of these are secular arguments. The stated motivations of ISIS are sectarian in nature and there is no credible reason to disbelieve them.

While ISIS attempted to establish a government in Syria and Iraq it sought to create a caliphate rather than a Westphalian state. It recruited internationally by issuing a call to protect the *umma* from the Crusader West. It adopted Sharia and strictly enforced religious norms. It also clearly situated its insurgency, both in Syria and Iraq and internationally, in religious terms.

## **Conclusion**

The concept of CoG is undoubtedly a useful term when considering two competing Westphalian states. The imposition of the Hunger Blockage against the Central Powers in World War I is an excellent example of the strategic targeting of resupply as an enemy CoG and it provided tangible benefits. German attempts to destroy British aircraft, airfields and radar installations during the Battle of Britain is an excellent example of the targeting of a CoG that could have yielded tangible benefits if the Luftwaffe had maintained its selected aim. Similarly, the targeting of German fuel dumps during the Battle of the Bulge provides an excellent example of a CoG whose destruction saved the day. Sadly, examples of this nature are not to be found in an Islamic insurgency.

The Islamic insurgencies in Afghanistan and Syria and Iraq have been remarkably low tech. They are not conducted with large armies in support of complex governmental systems, and consequently there is no strategic CoG to select. Fighters rely upon limited communications and formations without supply echelons; and consequently, there are no operational CoGs to

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

select. At the tactical level, the insurgent relies upon small arms and small group tactics; and consequently, there are no CoGs to attack. So, we are left with the insurgent's population as a potential CoG.

As we have seen, the Islamic insurgent, when he is fighting against a non-Muslim, immediately adopts the mantle of a *mujahideen* (soldier of God) or *Jihadist*. He is a member of the *umma* and any non-believer he fights against automatically adopts the mantle of Crusader. Even when the *Jihadist* is not fully supported by his community, he can rely upon the fact that members of the *umma* will be extremely reluctant to assist his enemies for fear of being branded an apostate.

The Islamic insurgent not only draws his strength from the *umma* but reinforces it, as we have seen in Afghanistan and Iraq and Syria. The faithful are taught to see the *umma* as *dar al Islam* and the rest of the World as *dar al harb* and being filled with unbelievers. Foreign soldiers are seen as Crusaders and the enemies of Islam.

CoG is not a useful concept when fighting an Islamic insurgency for the reasons stated. Choosing the insurgent's connection to the population as a CoG is useless. It cannot be targeted and it cannot be defeated. The mere presence of unbelievers within *dar al Islam* reinforces the insurgent's CoG.

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