

Did Bin Laden Read Mao Correctly?

Bin Laden leu Mao corretamente?

Abstract: The Global War on Terror has consumed a great deal of American resources since 2001. Operating within Iraq and Afghanistan for almost two decades, the US has failed so far to put together a plan for war termination in the Middle East. This raises the question of whether, or not, al Qaeda's – along with associated movements' – strategy and related operations have been successful since war was declared on the United States. To respond to the question, we compared elements of al Qaeda's plans and actions with Mao Zedong's theory on how to carry out a protracted war in three stages. By doing so, it sounded reasonable to state that al Qaeda, although fairly successful in implementing its stage 1, failed to evolve its own army-like to deal with stages 2 and 3. It was also observed that neither al Qaeda nor al Qaeda in Iraq have timely reassessed their failing strategy.

Keywords: Protracted war. Al Qaeda. Zarqawi. Insurgency. Middle East.

Resumen: La Guerra Mundial contra el Terrorismo ha consumido una gran cantidad de recursos americanos desde 2001. Operando dentro de Irak y Afganistán por casi dos décadas, los EE.UU. han fallado hasta ahora en la elaboración de un plan para la terminación de la guerra en el Oriente Medio. Esto plantea la pregunta si la estrategia de Al Qaeda –junto con los movimientos asociados– y las operaciones relacionadas han sido exitosas o no desde que se declaró la guerra a los Estados Unidos. Para responder a la pregunta, comparamos elementos de los planes y acciones de al Qaeda con la teoría de Mao Zedong sobre cómo llevar a cabo una guerra prolongada en tres etapas. Al hacerlo, parecía razonable afirmar que Al Qaeda, aunque tuvo bastante éxito en la implementación de su etapa 1, no logró desarrollar su propio ejército para lidiar con las etapas 2 y 3. También se observó que tanto Al Qaeda como el movimiento asociado llamado Al Qaeda en Irak no reevaluaron oportunamente su fallida estrategia.

Palabras Clave: Guerra prolongada. Al Qaeda. Zarqawi. Insurrección. Oriente Medio.

Carlos Eduardo Macedo 
Marinha do Brasil. Escola de Guerra Naval.
Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil.
carloermacedo@yahoo.com.br

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COLEÇÃO MEIRA MATTOS

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1 Introduction

It was the distant 2001 when the United States of America (US) stepped in the Global War on Terror (GWT). By that time, before the outcry of the people in the wake of the September 11 episode (9/11), it did not simply seem the right thing to do, but the only imaginable response to carry out. Fast forwarding, what the US faces today, however, is a two-decade intervention from which Washington is finding difficult to step out with the sensation of mission accomplished. The setting of unachievable political goals, being the most remarkable one “prevent[ing] any future acts of international terrorism against the United States” (UNITED STATES, 2001), may have contributed to this sort of trap. The reality is that the US so far has been struggling to put together a war termination plan. Even with the last two Presidents— Barack Obama (1961-) and Donald Trump (1946-) – stating the necessity of leaving the Middle Eastern theater in order to, respectively, pivot security priority to East Asia (CLINTON, 2011) and formally embrace the near-peer competition *vis-à-vis* China and Russia (UNITED STATES, 2017, p. 26).

With all this, we may be pushed to affirm that the terrorist organizations, namely Al Qaeda (AQ) and its associated movements (AM), have been successful with their overall strategy and related operations since their war was declared against the US. If we consider, however, that their ultimate objective was the political congregation of the whole *Umma* in a new Caliphate-like state – which includes getting rid of local apostates and foreign influence –, their Master Plan, their strategy as named by Brian Fishman’s book (2016), is still far from turning into reality. Thus, it seems of a reasonable conclusion that the American unsuccessful GWT is not necessarily due to a profitable strategy in the side of AQ/AM. Conversely, we propose that AQ/AM’s overall strategy and operations, although called the world’s attention with mind-blowing results right after the first steps, have not been fully effective since the war on the US was declared in 1998¹, after the promulgation of the *fatwa* that instituted a “*jihad* against Jews and Crusaders” (BIN LADEN *et al.*, 1998).

The argument for our statement above arises after comparing facets of the terrorist groups’ balance of “ends-means-ways” with the Maoist-inspired theory on how to conduct an insurgency based on the “three stages of a protracted war”. Although those events are sixty years apart, and there is no formal claim from AQ that the group followed Mao Zedong’s (1893-1976) footsteps, such comparison seems credible because Mao’s united front and AQ/AM, in both cases started their campaigns against an imperial power without being the legitimate (or sole) local power, and with no formal occupation of a sovereign territory of their own and no direct influence to, or support from, a group of people. In the case of Mao’s Communist Party, it started the protracted war against Japan, while also competing with the *Kuomintang* for internal legitimacy inside

1 Countless sources postulate that war was rather declared by the *fatwa* of 1996 (August). For this paper, we consider that the *fatwa* of 1996 was a public wakening of al Qaeda calling attention not only from the Islamic world but also from the US. Two characteristics of the *fatwa* of 1998 justify our choice as the real benchmark in declaring war on the US: a) it was signed by others than just bin Laden himself, and b) it was proceeded indeed by acts of war – the attacks in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam.

China (ZEDONG, 1967, p. 43). Same way as the older example, AQ, far from being the only and uncontested *jihad* movement in the Middle East, and controlling no land, proclaimed a war against the “invader” US. According to the terrorist group’s plan, the recreation of the Islamic Caliphate, its ultimate objective, would only be possible after the elimination of the US presence in the area.

Having Mao’s strategy – the three stages of a protracted war – as a milestone, next sections of this paper will detail that, regardless prominent achievements of AQ/AM, especially during stage 1, the groups’ *modus operandi* – how they put means and ways together – did not fully contribute to the achievement of the final political objective, as originally designed by its long-standing leader Osama bin Laden (1957-2011). At least, not until his death in 2011². Bottom line upfront, we will show, in the section 3 of this paper, that AQ ended up with just a fairly successful stage 1, while failing to implement the other two remaining stages. The reason that not even the stage 1 was fully triumphant is that its main mistake was not being able to form its own guerrilla/army to execute the remainder of the group’s strategy. Therefore, the terrorist group was not able to build on the success of the actions carried during stage 1 and implemented a poor stage 2 and almost nothing of stage 3. This will be addressed more deeply in section 4. In addition, AQ/AM neglected another topic of Mao’s recipe, failing at timely reassessing the results of the setbacks suffered by them. As a result, they also failed at transitioning back and forth from one stage to another, which would be a likely “procedure” after a sound reassessment. Section 5 will get into this matter, showing that this was one of the main features of the successful North Vietnamese war scheme. Before all these, ensuing lines will discuss the Maoist three stages of a protracted war, as a sediment to our thesis.

2 “On protracted war”

As previously stated, the AQ never really claimed to be a Maoist-inspired group. Indeed, one may argue that this label fits to the Taliban much better than it does into the AQ. However, there are authors, such as Daniel Byman (2006), who, while studying the AQ and other terrorist groups, postulate there is no clear-cut between insurgency and terrorism. According to them, the latter might be a supplementary and expedite way to achieve the ends of the former. Although the guerrilla is noticeably the preferred way an insurgency fights, Byman finds echo in Michael Gross (2014), who states that terrorism cannot be ruled out as a means in an insurgency’s panoply. Especially when going protractedly does not seem to be enough and the nature of terror meets the urgency in coercing – compelling – the occupying power to cede something. With all this in mind and considering that Mao Zedong is the main reference

² Since this case has repercussions that are still going on in the present time, this paper will focus on the period in which bin Laden was still alive and, presumably, ruling AQ.

in the realm of insurgencies, his recipe for a protracted war was chosen as a theoretical baseline to examine the AQ/AM's strategy.

Classic strategy in the Western world is deeply influenced by some of the writings of Prussian theorist Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831). At least in terms of conventional war. Amongst his famous statements, two are still fundamental for the teaching of strategy and operational art in military schools of the Occident: "war is merely the continuation of policy by other means" (CLAUSEWITZ, 1989, p. 87); and the definition of the "paradoxical trinity", which, according to Glascott (2017), entails the chaos of war due to the tension between government, military might and people.

By the transcribed sentence above, we may understand that, while war is "other means" for conducting policy, yet it is a different thing, with its own dynamics. Military objectives shall indeed contribute to reaching political goals, but, in a Clausewitzian world, politics stay behind the scenes while military movements are progressing on the field. Politics should only appear to reasonably take advantage of the military results. In short, Clausewitz did not offer that politics and military march hand in hand; each, although conscious of the other party's importance, follows its own rationale.

As for the chaotic trinity, a possible interpretation is that it derives from different roles, with opposing tendencies, performed by the three sections of the state's war machine: the government, the military, and the people. Three horses free to roam, as the metaphor written down by Glascott (2017). To compensate for that, a sound strategy "maintains a balance between these three tendencies, like an object suspended between three magnets" (CLAUSEWITZ, 1989, p. 90, our emphasis). As a result, Western military culture tends to respect the separation of the roles of government, military, and people. Ideally, Governments shall reasonably conduct the war's general effort; military planners are to not only be meticulous and less vulnerable to the play of chance but also show great adaptability ("creative spirit") during the war; passionate people are to be convinced to turn hatred into power will and to allow themselves to be converted into fighting forces and means for large-scale production.

It is difficult, though, to follow this recipe when waging war as an insurgent movement. There is still no state and no formal army. For the sake of this, Mao Zedong, although not ruling Clausewitz out, accommodated the trinity and the relation between war and politics in his way. First, by mixing and matching elements of politics and war altogether, which results in a dualism of political struggle and armed conflict at the same time. Only "the marriage of violence to politics" (PIKE, 1986, p. 216-217) can bring victory. So, different from stated in the paragraphs above, according to Mao, politics do not simply wait for military results to capitalize on them. They are all mingled. Second, and a corollary of the previous sentence, separation is blurred between government, military, and people. Because there is no specific military segment, political leaders are the generals themselves and the people are not just an indirect manpower production force but an army with no formal enlistment. The people are an instrument of war in itself (PIKE, 1986, p. 220).

This said an insurgency needs to work with time in its favor. Time passing, the informal army and lower echelons of politics will eventually merge into a regular army. Insurgencies, then, need to wage a protracted war. For that, Mao (ZEDONG, 1967, p. 34-40) envisioned three stages, starting the first one with village-based (rural) support. The first stage is not meant to be decisive yet is to maintain movement on peripheral territories while building not only systems of subsistence and communication but also a myth around the ideology and its “prophet”. All that to cut the countryside from the control of the formal state while perpetrating a “hearts and minds” strategy. The movement that characterizes the Stage One is to be implemented based on banditry, ambushes, and rural guerrilla; not on regular military actions even because organized corps of soldiers are still not available. Paradoxically, it is a defensive phase, since there is no physical strength to confront a regular army. Only when enough areas are secured and there is already an army-like group forged and trained, the Stage One can transition to the next level. Not before a remarkable demonstration of force to attract the response of the incumbent state.

Stage Two is when the insurgency needs to overcome a stalemate imposed by the response of a regular opposing force. It, then, involves attrition in a conventional small-scale war, in which spaces gained in the previous phase are to be consolidated. By this time, politics must come out from behind the curtains, and the informational dimension of war gains predominance. It officially reaches the status of war against the establishment. Thus, it is a dangerous period for the insurgents since they no longer enjoy anonymity. After surviving the first half of this stage, it is time to accelerate and escalate the war, bringing it to other areas and increasing speed to bleed the enemy. The insurgency is to keep such intensity and pace until the group is ready to launch the Stage Three, one of decisive battles of offensive character, carried by a then-institutionalized regular army.

After detailing the three stages of a protracted war, we can follow with our analysis of AQ/AM’s strategy and operations. We shall first acknowledge that terrorism and insurgency cannot be said as the same concepts. The selection of targets is one of the main differences between them (DASGUPTA, 2002). Both, however, fit to the concept of being, each one, a movement that uses political violence as a mean of asymmetric warfare. This way, there is not much of an obstacle to carrying the comparison we proposed. If terrorism was such a thing in the time of Mao’s writings, it is reasonable that he might have reserved some pages to accommodate the organized terror in his theory. Given this, the next section will seek to demonstrate that AQ/AM’s stage one was fairly successful.

3 A proficuous beginning

In the aftermath of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan (1988), long before issuing his *fatwa* against the US in 1998, bin Laden kicked off the organization of AQ. Generally, that happened in a low-profile manner. Even the involvement of AQ in some events in the first half of the ‘90s, all of them somehow against the US, was of less notability without the group claiming

formal responsibility on them. It was only *The 9/11 Commission report* (UNITED STATES, 2004, p. 59-60) that confirmed the participation of AQ in training warlords battling US forces in Somalia, in 1993; in an attack to a Saudi-US joint facility in Riyadh, in 1995; and in the attempt to attack the World Trade Center, in 1993.

Avoiding any initial protagonist role among other *jihadist* movements and “accepting” Saudi’s government disavowal (1992), bin Laden used discreet Sudan to establish his sanctuary. It was also from there he launched his “Golden Chain”,

an increasingly complex, almost worldwide organization [that] included a financial support network [to the mujahideen fight in Afghanistan] put together mainly by financiers in Saudi Arabia and the Persian Gulf states [by which] donations flowed through charities or other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (UNITED STATES, 2010, p. 55).

The hosting country was used to, simultaneously, carry money laundering and to leverage his wealth to generate a self-supporting economy aimed to turn feasible the envisioned *jihad* (BERGEN; CRUICKSHANK, 2011). More importantly, the same authors propose that bin Laden focused on strengthening AQ’s legitimacy amongst other *jihadist* movements. He carried actions to support the Taliban rule in Afghanistan; maintained and improved military training camps; financed AQ-alike movements; and shaped their message to conquer the mobilization of common people.

Although this paper is mainly concerned with what has happened after 1998, the analysis of the early years of AQ is of fundamental importance while addressing the question we proposed on the effectiveness of AQ’s strategy. Altogether, preparative movements and isolated offensive actions before the *fatwa* of 1998 were the materialization of a well-orchestrated initial step of Stage One, in a Maoist-type protracted war. Without the sound preparation that culminated with the consolidation of AQ’s influence, we can doubt the *fatwa* itself would have ever been released. It was because AQ chose to operate in the shadows while building up its foundation, that the rest of the stage 1 could be implemented, culminating with 9/11. Had the message not been shaped to gain clerical support, it would have not reverberated in the mosques and religious schools. Thus, no “hearts and minds” in the Sunni world would have been conquered to accept the death of not only *mujahideen* but also of innocent Muslims killed in some of the initial attacks. As for the development of its leadership toward other *jihadist* groups, AQ had gained the protagonist role as it provided a considerable number of fighters to Muslim struggles taking place in Tajikistan, Chechnya, and Kashmir (UNITED STATES, 2004, p. 64). Besides building legitimacy, the involvement of AQ’s fighters – generally trained in the camps of Pakistan and Afghanistan – in insurgencies of the time was equally relevant to enhance the experience of the men, who would eventually be employed in further stages of AQ’s protracted war against the US.

The group's growth finally resulted in Sudan becoming a doubtful haven. Some may say that the move to Afghanistan, in 1996, had delayed future operations (UNITED STATES, 2010, p. 55), and this does not seem all incorrect. Especially when we recollect that, as already discussed in footnote 1, the 1996-*fatwa* ended up more as just propaganda than as a substantial declaration of war to the US. However, AQ's foundation was sound enough to prevent compromising the strategy as a whole. This said, after the 1998-*fatwa* was released, the remainder of the strategy of the group followed its designed path and the *grand finale* of stage 1 showed a military escalation only possible to a very well-trained and prepared *jihadi*. First carrying an attack on land, AQ targeted the US *diplomatic power* with the explosion of the embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam, in 1998. The next choice was a token of the US *military power*, and the USS Cole was targeted at sea by a maritime asset in 2000. Finally, 9/11 showed the AQ's capacity in carrying an "airstrike" in its way and an iconic piece of American *economic power* (and soft power as well – part of the famous NYC's cinematic skyline) was brought down, while the center of the political power has also been attacked. Indeed, the escalation of events has shown that AQ was able to operate in all domains of war (land, sea, and air) and to attack different expressions of the American national power (diplomatic, economic, and military). More than this, the escalation culminated with an attack on the US homeland, which has not happened since World War II³, and provoked the American-led GWT, the beginning of stage 2 for the purpose of this paper.

Before we conclude this section, it is convenient to acknowledge that some of AQ's features here described do not perfectly match the original description of Mao's stage 1. In our opinion, however, differences between AQ's actions and Maoist theory more resemble the common saying "history doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes" than invalidate their similarities. This said some noticeable mismatches between the two strategies in their early phases can be interpreted as an adaptation carried by AQ to face the singularities of the new strategic environment. For example, yet there was no indication from Mao that the fight should be expanded outside the targeted country, we should consider that the Japanese occupation in China was "stronger" than the American one in the Middle East; the Japanese, then, offered obvious targets inside China while the US did not inside the AQ's geographic objective. Equally, although in Mao's writings there was neither a prescription for seeking haven abroad nor for bringing foreign people to the fight, two aspects need to be considered: the continental size of China compared to the Middle Eastern countries and the nationalist [and ideological] character of the Chinese fight versus the religious impeller of AQ. The huge size of China provided Mao with various havens and maneuvering space that were not available in the Middle East for bin Laden. On the other hand, the religious inspiration of the AQ's fight allowed the group to attract foreign fighters while the character of the Maoist struggle was not meant to use alien direct support.

3 Even though, the attack on Pearl Harbor happened on a territory (not a formal state) outside the continental US.

Conclusively, not even the differences between the united front in China and AQ do not hamper the fact that they are equivalent phenomena. All in all, there are enough similarities, being the following the easiest to identify: the seek for protagonism and consolidation of power, the informational aspect (propaganda – the *fatwa* of 1996 as an example), and the avoidance of direct military fight against the target. Looking at these similar features, AQ was indeed successful in conducting its stage 1.

4 Flawed acceleration of ensuing stages

The enemy will attempt to safeguard the occupied areas and to make them his own by the fraudulent method of setting up puppet governments (ZEDONG, 1967, p. 55).

The transcription above calls attention for the response of the incumbent state to the rise of an insurgency. Because of the differences we previously described regarding the strategies of Mao and bin Laden, especially the fact that there was not a specific incumbent state, the particular American response, after 9/11, was of its own. Different than Japan, who was already occupying China when the Chinese stage 2 began, the US formally declared the GWT and started a more direct intervention in the Middle East. Thus, the response of the Americans to AQ was “stronger” than one of the Japanese in China.

This difference in the response of the target, though, does not necessarily demand a change from the side of the insurgents carrying stage 2. There is no elimination of the need for the insurgency to be prepared to survive a stalemate against an enemy who is militarily stronger and able to ostensibly hold ground (main cities) with the support of locally chosen governments. That is why Mao proposes that stage 2 shall be marked by the insurgency being able to enhance and prolong the stalemate. By doing so, the stronger side would eventually diminish its power because of some facts that lead to the “deterioration of troop morale [and] popular discontent at home” (ZEDONG, 1967, p. 57). In addition, Mao (ZEDONG, 1967, p. 55) suggests that protracting this stage, while weathering “its hardships”, will also serve the purpose of waiting for the international situation (opinion) to change in favor of the insurgency. It is imperative, however, to be prepared with a minimum of military force organization. Even though guerrilla still prevails in this stage, it is no longer enough to only operate in the deep rear of the enemy, because direct clashes on the front will inevitably arise.

This stage, then, would be the most peculiar phase of a protracted war. Indeed, it is neither just defensive nor simply offensive. It shall mix and match conventional and asymmetric lines of operation to fulfill a strategy in which there is not a distinct separation between attack and defense. It is also the most decisive; not because it seeks decisive battles, but because it slowly bleeds the enemy to the point it ends up changing the balance of strength. Finally,

Professor Paine (2012, p. 237) warns the danger in evolving from stage 1 to stage 2; from operations “under the radar”, even perceived as mere banditry, to the enemy’s ultimate acknowledgment that an eventual near-peer competitor has emerged. By the beginning of this stage, the enemy is still stronger, and “willpower alone [can] not defeat modern weapons” (PAINE, 2012, p. 139). Thus, the transition from stage 1 is only recommended after a critical mass of fighters is formed by the amalgamation of the insurgency and the local society. Combining all said – the distinctiveness, the importance, and the difficulty of stage 2 –, the result is that the insurgency shall wisely consider whether it is ready, or not, to go on with the last act of stage 1. As previously discussed, the latter is likely to provoke a large-scale response of the enemy, against which the insurgency shall be able to defend conquered spaces. The corollary of the previous analysis is that the big event of stage 1 is only to be perpetrated when the struggle has already sufficiently benefitted the insurgents during stage 1. In short, and using Maoist terms, once “luring the enemy in deep” in one’s own terrain (ZEDONG, 1967, p. 32) is a new reality (stage 2), enough military force – even if it is still not perfectly organized as such – is needed to face the enemy’s resistance. Failing in this stage means, most likely, not being able to reach the final objectives and, ultimately, failing as an insurgency.

This said it is noteworthy that AQ, the first group to take the *jihad* to the “far enemy”⁴ (FISHMAN, 2016, p. 12), enjoying relevant results in its stage 1, was not ready for the American response. Heavily relying on the Taliban, AQ was not able to resist not even the first blow. The Taliban has always held a contested and only tenuous leadership in Afghanistan. Taking advantage of this, the coalition between the US and the Northern Alliance, who carried impressive ground advances along with the American aerial strikes, caused the Taliban to be disbanded. That represented the end of AQ’s haven in the Hindu Kush range. With almost no fight, bin Laden fled to Pakistan (BARFIELD, 2010, p. 269-270).

AQ’s second chance for a protracted war against the US was opened in Iraq in 2003/04, in the aftermath of the overthrow of Saddam’s regime. The political turmoil and the social upheaval were assessed by AQ as an opportunity to get the western enemy trapped in its own choice of carrying an unlimited war while facing with diminished support of its allies and a lessening approval of its internal public. The opportunity to create a stalemate in “the heart of the Arab world” (FISHMAN, 2016, p. 22) fell onto AQ’s lap while the group was not fully ready for it. Opening a new front in Iraq was a matter of manpower, which again, same as in Afghanistan, in 2001, was not available.

To overcome this, AQ decided, although some internal resistance, to franchise the brand to Abu Zarqawi’s (1966-2006) group and some dissidents of the vanished Ba’ath Party, merging them all into the al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) in August 2004. This opportunistic approach of AQ unveiled the same *modus operandi* of the war in Afghanistan. Again, AQ was trying to control the operations from abroad, relying upon a third-party *jihadi*. This time

4 All previous jihadist movements only focused on their “near enemies”, “apostate” governments financed by the US, according to them. Even some of the contemporary groups opposed AQ’s idea of reaching the “far enemy”. This would eventually provoke a response against which AQ could not be able to weather (FISHMAN, 2016, p. 12).

with the aggravating support of a patchwork of Ba'ath-nationalist forces, whose participation complicated, even more, the unification of objectives. At least, there was a nuance that went along with the Maoist prescription for stage 2. Bin Laden introduced the diplomatic piece into the confrontation, with his speech in October 2004 that showed a clear attempt to not only corrupt American legitimacy in invading Iraq but also break the coalition around the US (BIN LADEN, 2004).

The diplomatic effort soon became useless. The actions of AQI, although initially successful, being able to build on the terrible social repercussions of the power vacuum left in Iraq after American intervention, quickly frustrated the expectations of AQ's informational campaign. At the end of the day, there was no match between AQ's plan and Zarqawi's short-term strategy – or simply an action-oriented plan with obedience to no strategy at all. The latter's visceral approach to the *Sharia* (FISHMAN, 2016, p. 44) turned fighting – and slaughtering – into an objective in itself. This altogether stained AQ's message. To complicate this relation, there was not much the primitive system of command and control (C_2) between AQ, in Pakistan, and its affiliates, in Iraq, could do to stop the horrific show of executions. Because the C_2 was based on couriers bringing letters back and forth, it was ineffective to bring to AQI the message that “policy must be dominant over militarism” (FISHMAN, 2016, p. 77).

The effect, besides compromising the AQ's legitimacy as the main combatant to a foreign invader, also ruined AQI's base area inside Iraq and turned future operations in the country almost unfeasible to AQ. In short, AQI started receiving clerical disavowal, including from Abu Maqdisi (1959-), Zarqawi's former mentor (FISHMAN, 2016, p. 62-67). Not only the extreme violence contributed to that. Two other events played well in that sense: first, the employment of scholars and regular men in the defense frontline of Fallujah; and second, the AQI's activism in addressing violence and killing to Sunni Muslims not totally aligned to the *jihad* rule. To overcome the growing dissatisfaction inside the area of operations, a second and simultaneous front against the Shi'ites was the solution implemented by AQI. The result, however, was that the initiative exposed Sunni common people to Shia backlash the *jihadists* were not prepared to respond (FISHMAN, 2016, p. 82-83). Attacks against Shi'ites, thus, had the opposite effect rather than attracting Sunni unconditional support to AQI.

The aforementioned episodes reflect Zarqawi's obsession with his short-term plan: the creation of the Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). Bringing Maoist protracted war theory again to the discussion, this is clearly a matter of the third stage of the strategy, which will only come after a prolonged stalemate during stage 2. A state cannot simply be proclaimed if a sound base – in the case of ISI, clerical support besides a regular military force – was not previously built.

With no care to bin Laden's directives (MENDELSON, 2016), and probably no knowledge of Mao, Zarqawi anticipated stage 3 without getting stronger than the enemy during stage 2. This means that the acceleration of the plans in Iraq brought the counter-offensive phase before the stalemate was finished. Actually, the latter was barely launched. The analysis of Mao's writings reminds us that it is through this period of an impasse that an insurgency would have enough time and room to merge its guerrillas and the rest of the peo-

ple into a regular army. Also, it would reach the aim of forging its base area and building its *Clausewitzian* trinity – using the people’s hatred to enlist them in a regular army; and using clerical favorable leadership as a base for a future theocratic government (analogy with CLAUSEWITZ, 1989, p. 89).

Finally, we shall consider that Mao’s prescriptions for building a state were based on a strong unifying ideology. Nevertheless, the micro-universe of Iraq, with its different peoples – Arabs and Kurdish, to stay simple – and competing confessions of the Islam – Sunni, and Shia –, brings a tough, maybe impossible, challenge in building a sound and amalgamating ideology. This turns especially true when clerical support lacks even from the Sunni “priests”. Zaraqawi’s “cumulative strategy”⁵, implemented by an “army” that, in reality, was a mix of different *jihadis* and banded Iraqi military – all with different aims and supply chains and distinct levels of training – was already a problem. Adding to this the poor ideological preparation of the battlefield, the fall of the ISI became inevitable. Ultimately, Zaraqawi failed to “ensure that the counter-offensive [did] not collapse halfway through internal dissension” (ZEDONG, 1967, p. 58). Altogether, AQI lacked internal cohesion and grassroots support. It ended up, then, fighting various simultaneous enemies, just to reach its culminating point of victory (see CLAUSEWITZ, 1989, chapter 22).

5 Late reassessment and no transitioning between stages

Reassessment in a war, for this paper, is the constant examination of whether ongoing operations are contributing, or not, to reach military, strategic, and, ultimately, political objectives. It also evaluates the responses of the opponent to one’s incentives. It is an activity with high subjectivity, being highly influenced by biases and very dependent on an effective system of C2.

To leave room for proper actions after a process of reassessment, Mao postulated that the protracted war does not need to follow a linear line that methodically connects the stages 1, 2, and 3. Rather, his recommendation is:

Because the area is big and diverse, [the strategy] doesn’t need to go with same speed throughout the whole region. It shall follow a ‘rising here and subsiding there’ scheme (ZEDONG, 1967, p. 58).

What the Maoist theory wants to stress with the passage above is that, once a new stage is started, actions related to previous stages are not necessarily ruled out. In other words, it is not because stage 3 is characterized by the [military] counter-offensive that it

⁵ Under quotation because it is not the same one as described by J.C. Wylie (1967, p. 117-121). While Wylie wrote about a cumulative strategy toward a single enemy, Zaraqawi targeted the Shi’ites, tried to hold an important piece of Iraqi territory (Fallujah), targeted objectives in a neighbor country (Jordan) and carried a massive informational campaign, all while fighting US troops and the US-backed Sons of Iraq (SoI).

only preconizes open attacks. There will be areas in which actions of banditry, guerrilla, or even terror – all typical of stage 1 – will be needed. In some others, propaganda and defensive measures will be the rule. Altogether, this procedure is not only an accommodation to the imperatives of the terrain but also a sort of deception toward the enemy.

Going back to our case study, the first thing to consider is that combining bin Laden's long-term strategy with Zarqawi's action-oriented and short-term plan was not an easy job. Thus, the creation of a single and comprehensive strategy came only, at maximum, with much of compromise. Some may even argue that a combined strategy was never reached.

Trying to accommodate such a combination of strategies in 2005, when significant portions of both branches' plans were already in place, was even tougher (FISHMAN, 2016, p. 44-46). In attention to this, it seems clear that AQ tried as much as possible to not intervene, even when the "AQ-AQI's joint plan" was failing in Iraq. As a result, a reassessment, a plan for changing the course of actions, from the AQ side was not turned available until 2010/11. Although the speech of Ayman al-Zawahiri (1951-) in December 2006 called for uprisings (typical from stage 1) against the Saudi Royal Family, his address, as a whole, was more an endorsement of how operations were being conducted than a clear direction for change in plans (AL-ZAWAHIRI, 2006). Albeit the creation of a state was not a short-term objective of AQ, the latter felt obliged in defending the proclaimed ISI. Zawahiri's speech was, then, a general call not only for other *jihadis* to keep the fight after Zarqawi's death (2006) but also for both the Islamic "Academia" and press to support the effort of the war. Besides, we may say that the lack of reassessment was also due to the flawed perception in the side of those who were merely "observing" the war from a faraway haven. Supported by a poor C₂ system, the AQ may have suffered from a sort of confirmation bias, according to which the precipitation in proclaiming the ISI was perceived as a result of a successful campaign of AQI.

A public version of a sound reassessment came very late with another speech of Zawahiri in September 2011 (AL-ZAWAHIRI, 2011). Although officially celebrating a decade-anniversary of 9/11, the speech set the tone of AQ recognizing its weakness and renouncing the jihadi overall leadership. Basically, the then-leader of AQ recognized the success of the Arab Revolution (Spring) and called for the return to stage 1, with more isolated attacks to Americans and allies and the reconstruction of the financial – and informational – chain. The speech apparently synthesized a series of letter exchanges, including from bin Laden, in the period of 2010-2011 (LAHOUD, 2012). In all of them, AQ's leadership recognized the errors from the past, mainly the attacks to Muslim civilians rather than American targets and acknowledged bin Laden's struggle in exerting minimal influence on other *jihadis*. Those exchanges also proposed a new type of work for AQ rather than as a leader seeking to control the *jihadis*: to play the role of an enabler, centralizing a sophisticated and coherent media strategy, and providing military training and operational collaboration.

Had this reassessment happened before, it is unlikely that it would have refrained Zarqawi from working in his own way. However, a formal disavowal of his actions could have prevented the arise of *Zarqawiism* – a movement hardly controllable and with ongoing repercussions – after his death. Had the media strategy been in place before, horrific scenes of execution would not have compromised AQ's main message and lessened its leadership.

Alternatively, AQ could have timely sent other eminent fighters to join Iraqi Sunni militias whose eventual success would have diminished Zarqawi's role and would have controlled the rise of opposing groups, like the US-backed Sons of Iraq (SoI). Bottom line is that AQ should have better controlled the expansion of the brand and not granted Zarqawi with a proxy to operate in his way. At maximum, AQ should have considered Zarqawi as just another local partner operating under close (local) supervision.

A timely reassessment would have also shown the centrality of the Iraqi Shia population to a strategy to hold the country against the American response. The Shia population is indeed a center of gravity in Iraq not only because it comprises most of the Iraqi people (UNITED STATES, 2020) but also due to its strategic location in the Southeast of the country, in an area that could have been used as part of a military and a logistic corridor linking to Pakistan through Iran. Had the regions in this corridor been shaped to minimize mutual grievances between Shia and Sunni people, and to remain friendly to AQ during the war, it could have served as a sort of Ho Chi Minh trail – of the Vietnam War (1955-75). The same way the Vietnamese took advantage of the latter, a geographic corridor between the AQ's haven in Pakistan and the Southeast of Iraq would have provided room and flexibility for AQ in waging war to the US. It would have allowed using, at the same time, all elements of the three stages of a protracted war and, then, a great deal of deception while combating a stronger enemy. Without such enlarged space, AQI executed the transition between stages in a wrong way and new terrorist attacks turned to be the only means to convey the message that the group was not solely playing defensively. Examples of those attacks in Amman, Jordan (in November 2005) and in Samarra, Iraq (in February 2006) only targeted innocent Muslims causing AQI to “lose considerable sympathy from the Muslim public, [...] separating them from their popular bases” (LAHOUD, 2012, p. 13). With no reliable offensive option, the load was heavy on the defense. Without a regular-sized army to carry conventional war (Maoist stage 3), the 10-month long fight to hold Fallujah ended up involving the deployment on the field of clerics and scholars (FISHMAN, 2016, p. 55-58) who were meant to work in the task of conquering hearts and minds (Maoist stage 1), and, ultimately, of forging and delivering new soldiers.

6 Counterarguments: aq had fruitful stages 2 & 3

On the contrary to what has been discussed so far, it may be argued that AQ's stages 2 and 3 were productive and the overall strategy is still ongoing to bring AQ's heirs to the original utmost objective. It may be added that AQ and ISI (AQI) increased the costs for the American presence in the Middle East and this created for the US an unfavorable balance with the original value of the objective. An objective we may say as ambitious as the desired end state of a shaped Middle East region that favors both advancing American interests and, more importantly, preventing new attacks on the US mainland or its deployed assets. So, although AQ is a weakened institution nowadays, the actions of the group paved the way on which ensuing movements can benefit from American “tiredness” of the ori-

ginal enterprise of shaping a secure environment to favor its geopolitical interests. The outcome of this is that the American government overtly pushes for the final withdrawal of its assets from the region to happen anytime soon. And this shall happen regardless of how far the desired end state is. Following this, a favorable prediction to AQ's heirs points that local governments will likely fall, leaving the whole area ready for the creation of the Caliphate.

In the wake of this counterargument, it can be said that *Zarqawiism* survived to Zarqawi's death because AQI's stage 2 and the group's launching for a stage 3 were not wrong anticipations of the planned timeline, but actually, a necessary move to take advantage of the opportunity opened by the US in Iraq. Following this rationale, one can argue that 2011 is still very early to be a parameter of time to measure the effectiveness of AQ's original strategy. After all, backlashes were predicted and the AQ's Master Plan, as exposed by Fishman's book (2016), was set for final results only in 2020. Advocates for the plan would argue, then, that it is no coincidence the paradoxical current situation of the US policy; cumulative public demonstrations of the will of leaving Iraq and the Middle East as a whole versus the inability to put together a reasonable plan for war termination.

This proposed view of AQ's success can be supported by facts, being the most relevant one the expansion of ISI's original scope followed by the proclamation of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL/ISIS) in 2014, within the timeline proposed by the Master Plan. Such a huge step could not happen without a successful stage 2 in which AQI was correct in adopting the *Suntzu* recommendation for attacking the enemy's strategy (TZU, 1963) and in eliminating the gray zone that stands between the *Sharia* and the *jihad* (STERN, 2016). Attacking the enemy's strategy began with the understanding that the American end state in Iraq would have been turned easier through a process of pacification led by the United Nations (UN). By targeting the UN mission in 2003, Zarqawi certainly contributed to a decreased will of the UN – already wary of US allegations on the presence of weapons of massive destruction in Iraq – to operate in the country. With the UN retreat, other potential allies also decreased their participation and formal support, and, with time, the US image got eroded before the international arena. Eliminating the gray zone, materialized by the attacks against the Shi'ites, was a necessary evil to augment Sunni future disposition to take part in the fight, which has been demonstrated by the increasing numbers of fighters and organizations⁶ involved in different levels of *jihad*.

Big picture at sight, all that has been seeded by bin Laden and Zarqawi is now contributing to the difficulty for the US in leaving Iraq and Afghanistan and, ultimately, for the unprecedented initiative of the peace talks with the Taliban. These events can, indeed, bring the perception of an effective strategy and an accordingly execution of operations.

⁶ Burak Kadercan's lecture on "ISIS and current conflict in the Middle East" (US Naval War College, Newport, RI, March 21, 2020). Professor Kadercan stated that the number of fighters grew from around 50K in 2001 to a rough estimation of 175K in the present. Also, the number of organizations grew from 20+, in 2001, to 65+, nowadays.

7 Rebuttal – there was not much of a harm to the us

Addressing the proposed question on the effectiveness of Al Qaeda (AQ)’s strategy and operations is a tough task since this is still a matter of ongoing History. However, even the examination of the facts in the aftermath of 2011 shows the strategy has not been completely effective.

Regarding the establishment of ISIS in 2014, the first thing to consider is Fishman’s (2016, p. 37) statement that it was “more coincidental than causal”. It cannot be denied that ISI was an inspiration, but by the time ISIS was created, the alliance between Zarqawiists (ISIS’s embryo) and AQ had already crumbled. Although ISIS is not a new and isolated phenomenon, its ties to AQ’s strategy are cloudy. The experiment of ISIS, albeit turned possible because of the surge of fighters after Zarqawi’s propaganda, turned massive after the instrument of social media, is sustained only by young, radical, and inexperienced fighters, not backed by the clerical mainstream. At the end of the day, ISIS’ collapse, as ISI’s in the last decade, seems just a matter of time.

Even the spread of alike movements, such as in Yemen and Somalia, seems of less strategic importance. The perception is that they are just a temporary consequence of failing states, in which warlords have embraced a conveniently available ideology. This, in part, explains the growing number of *jihad* organizations and fighters mentioned in the last section. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to state that they have very few related to each other and, mainly, to the original *jihadi* idea. Then, these recent movements lack a unifying rationale to promote the amalgamation of them all. The result is that, paradoxically, some *jihadis*, rather than contributing to unify the *Umma* around the original project of the Caliphate, are only deepening the boundaries already existing between states artificially created by European imperialism. And this all began with AQ’s initiative of franchising the brand to overcome its weakness in manpower.

When it comes to the cost of the war compared to the value of the objective, it is indeed reasonable to infer that the US spending of more than 6 trillion dollars in 18 years of war (CRAWFORD, 2019) sounds like a gradual bleeding of the American economy without a clear sense of achievement. This has not counted in much favor of AQ’s strategy notwithstanding. The continuous growth of the American GDP over this decade suggests that the “bleeding” is not hampering the US economy. Rather, it emphasizes the American national power in sustaining large troops abroad while growing its economy. In terms of intangible costs, one may point that, internally, the GWT has ignited bipartisan politics. In the international arena, it is still a matter of constant grievances coming from traditional allies, and, more relevant, a cause for the “distraction” of the US while some of its competitors have reached shining achievements through uncontested hybrid warfare⁷. While the last sentences are true, the US has not experienced the same kind of political turmoil or civil unrest, as during the years in Vietnam. Maybe because the antagonist groups in the Middle East failed to put an augmented focus on American targets and, as a result, did not get close to cause popular

⁷ Russia against Georgia, in 2008, and against Ukraine in 2014; China, in the South China Sea (see STAVRIDIS, 2016).

discontent at the opponent's home. In parallel, although lessened for a while, American leadership tends to gain predominance again once-powerful threats for NATO and Far Eastern countries are perceived as more realistic.

We agree that, although the US is searching a way-out of Afghanistan and Iraq, peace talks with the Taliban should not be, in a first glance, part of the solution. Yet this sounds like an American weakness, what it entails is the recognition that the military instrument is not enough to reach the political objectives. The same rationale applies to the withdrawal from Iraq. Moreover, there is an urgent demand for the US military to focus on other theaters, as the nation is now pivoting to state competition.

Finally, although *jibadi* movements have grown, as previously demonstrated, the lack of general governance over all the different branches of them transformed what was supposed to be an embryonic regional movement into a fight of local fundamentalist warlords. Even less concerning, not rarely, recent episodes of terrorism have been just a matter of solitaire wolves. To tackle those isolated threats, the use of military force is an exaggerated response; a global effort of law enforcement, supported by shared intelligence, seems more suitable. In short, this does not mean the US was beaten by the AQ.

8 Conclusion

This paper aimed to respond to the question of whether the strategy and related operations of AQ/AM were effective after the war was declared on the US in 1998. Considering that AQ, like any other *jihad*, is more than just a terrorist group, we took advantage of its status as a *quasi*-insurgency to compare elements of its strategy with the Maoist prescription for protracted wars. We revisited Mao's work "On Protracted Wars", and found out that his envisioned strategy, against an imperial war – Japan – invading his territory, was mainly divided into three stages: defensive, stalemate, and counter-offensive. Our comparison pointed out that AQ's strategy was flawed because, although it tried to follow Mao's structure in three stages, it was based on an accelerated tempo that prevented AQ from having all available elements for transitioning from one stage to the other.

In section 2, we went through the description of Mao's stages. We saw that stage 1 is one of less military organization and complexity. Indeed, the actions may be seen sometimes as mere banditry. Because of these characteristics, AQ was able to conduct this stage fairly productively. During this period, the group was efficient in discreetly raising funds and legitimacy. Actions of the group were successfully implemented while AQ was operating behind the scenes. Only when enough clerical support – and from other *jihadis*, as well – was turned available, the 1998-*fatwa* was released declaring war on the US. The problem for AQ was that the last act of its stage 1, precisely the 9/11, was carried in a time – and in such magnitude – the group was not militarily prepared to confront the American-led response.

Therefore, AQ could not implement, with forces of its own, the defensive attrition which is particular to the Maoist stage 2. To try to overcome this, AQ franchised the response to Zarqawi's AQI, whose strategy's tempo and goals were completely different than those of the AQ. This said, what was observed is that AQI accelerated stage 3, without sufficiently degrading the enemy's force

and will to remain on the field. Zarqawi's actions even called for the recrudescence of international support to the US. His actions also led to the compromising of the battlefield due to an exaggerated clash between Sunni and Shia populations in Iraq.

Even when the strategy was falling apart, AQ/AM failed to reassess. Both groups ignored Mao's writings concerning the volatility of the protracted war's strategy. According to this feature, there is no red line between the three stages, and actions, more related to each of the three of them, shall alter depending on how the enemy is behaving. Once the AQI started stage 3 type of actions to hold the ISI, the group simply put aside any other actions pertaining to the previous phases (guerilla, ambushes, banditry, and civil disobedience, in areas secured by the enemy, myth-building, social assistance, and, mainly, spreading the message). AQ's reassessment that the strategy was wrong came as late as 2011, only when the group's leadership was already hopelessly diminished by AQI's inconsequent actions and after bin Laden's death. For the purposes of this paper, we considered that Zawahiri's recognition that AQ was supposed to go behind the curtains again represented the collapse of the group's strategy and the temporal finishing line for our analysis.

This paper acknowledged that a vision different than ours is possible. Indeed, an interpretation that AQ sedimented the path to other movements arise is feasible. This view could be reinforced by the growing numbers of fighters joining *jihadis*— whose number also grew — throughout the Middle East, and by the American recognition that the GWT would never reach its political objectives. Although these counterarguments are sound, our rebuttal was based on the fact that the growth in numbers only came with the uncontrollable spread of the fight, which is ultimately turning the unification of the *Umma* even more difficult than it was when AQ came out. In parallel, American withdrawal is not necessarily related to AQ's success; terrorism as for now seems much more a law enforcement problem than a matter to be tackled by the military instrument. Also, the US no longer enjoys the stamp of "the hegemon of the unipolar world", and, thus, cannot stand having its military force employed in something alien to great power competition.

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