Washington:
Potomac Books,
2009

224 pages

$55.00
($26.95 paper)

Al-Qa'ida's Doctrine for Insurgency: Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin's "A Practical Course for Guerrilla War"

by Norman Cigar

Reviewed by Dr. J. Boone Bartholomees, Jr.,
Professor of Military History, US Army War College

Sun Tzu is famous for his admonition to know your enemy; this book is another step toward knowing modern Islamist terrorists. Norman Cigar, a research fellow with a strong Arabic background, and former professor at the Marine Corps University, has translated and analyzed one of several extant texts intended as doctrine for the jihadist movement. This one is by Abd al-Aziz al-Muqrin, who was a lifelong terrorist and briefly head of Al-Qa'ida of the Arabian Peninsula (QAP), the branch organization for Al-Qa'ida in Saudi Arabia, until Saudi security forces killed him in June 2004. Al-Muqrin wrote his text *A Practical Course for Guerrilla War* as a training manual for his QAP forces. The book was published both in pamphlet form and serialized on QAP's website. The impact of the work on overall terrorist doctrine or the degree of authority attributed to it is unknown, although it is still available in Arabic on various terrorist websites. This is the first English translation to be published. This reviewer cannot comment on the quality of the translation, but Cigar's extensive analysis (about half of the book) is very well done.

A Practical Course for Guerrilla War is a very tactical manual. There are long chapters on topics such as using dead drops for communications, how to ambush a motorcade, and urban tactical procedures. Much of this is straight out of western doctrinal manuals, which al-Muqrin leaned on heavily. For example, he recommends clearing buildings from top to bottom and blowing entry points rather than using doors or windows—standard procedures that depend on both access to roofs of denied buildings and extensive supplies of demolitions, which is always problematic for western armies and well outside the capability of most guerrilla forces. He does not discuss why a guerrilla would want to clear a building. Conversely, one sees glimpses of strategic thought or passages that give strategic insight in several sections of the book. Al-Muqrin starts his text with a definition of war, the objectives of war, and the causes of war. He covers those subjects in about three-quarters of a page, but that brief excursion gives a glimpse into how he thinks about war. For example, al-Muqrin defines just war as war by an oppressed people against their oppressor. He defines unjust war as war waged "to dominate other belief systems, to replace the prescriptions of religious laws, to seize territory, and to plunder (other's) riches." That reflects his (and many other terrorists') understanding of the current conflict. When he gets into types of war and how to fight a guerrilla war, al-Muqrin defaults directly to Maoist theory. He adopts Mao's three phases

of protracted war directly. He sees the countryside as the critical terrain. He emphasizes gaining the support of the people, although he does not spend much time discussing the subject since he seems to assume the people believe as he does and will naturally support the jihad once they see its importance. Al-Muqrin believes conventional forces supported by guerrillas will win the final victory, which is not part of standard jihadist literature. This raises the issue of *A Practical Course for Guerrilla War*'s place in jihadist literature.

> *al-Muqrin adopts Mao's three phases of protracted war.*

Al-Muqrin's text is representative of its genre; however, it differs from other terrorist doctrine in several respects. For example, the introductory remarks are full of the obligatory religious obeisance, but the body of the text is much more sectarian than most jihadist works. This reflects its purpose as a military manual rather than a political text, which would be more religious in nature. Similarly, this text is written in the context of QAP and with that very specific environment in mind. Thus, Cigar finds it unusual that al-Muqrin does not discuss weapons of mass destruction (WMD), but that is perfectly understandable since a devout Muslim would be reluctant to use WMD in Saudi Arabia even if he thinks the government is apostate. The Arabian Peninsula perspective also makes the reliance on Maoist theory understandable since al-Muqrin wrote as a nationalist insurgent, not as a terrorist with international pretentions. More puzzling is the lack of mention of improvised explosive devices or suicide bombers, both major elements of jihadist tactics that have been used in Saudi Arabia, perhaps reflecting experience with the negative impact of collateral damage on public opinion. The most interesting aspect of this work is how much it reflects traditional military theory; strategically, one sees heavy influence from Mao and Sun Tzu, and the tactical material is often adaptations of western military manuals or other standard works such as Carlos Marighella's *Manual of the Urban Guerrilla* rather than some sort of new, uniquely Islamist thinking. Similarly, al-Muqrin recommends a fairly standard hierarchical guerrilla organization rather than some fancy network (not unexpectedly, since jihadists think of themselves as a movement, not a network). Perhaps he did not know about networks or have the sophistication to develop his own theory; or perhaps as we grow to know our enemies we will realize they really are not ten feet tall.