The Thistle and the Drone: How America's War on Terror Became a Global War on Tribal Islam

Akbar Ahmed (Brookings Institution Press, 2013), 424 pp.

The Way of the Knife: The CIA, a Secret Army, and a War at the Ends of the Earth

Mark Mazzetti (Penguin Press, 2013), 381pp.

Reviewed by J.R. Seeger

In the 13 years since 9/11, many dozens of books have been written about the war on terror. Regardless of their individual quality, these books tend to fall into one or more of the following three categories: descriptive histories, polemics, and autobiographic diaries by participants in the conflicts since 9/11. The two works reviewed here fall into the first two categories. They are well-written descriptive accounts of the worldwide conflict, albeit from very different positions within the world community.

The Thistle and the Drone reminds the intelligence professional of the importance of understanding local culture and history as the start point for any successful counterinsurgency and counterterrorism operation. In the case of *The Way of the Knife,* the lesson focuses on the complexities of collaboration and competition among US government organizations, both within the Intelligence Community (IC) as well as between the IC and the US Special Operations Command (USSOCOM). Gratefully, both authors caveat their authoritative research with clear and early statements of personal bias that allow readers to separate fact from opinion throughout the text.

The Thistle and the Drone is but the latest offering by Akbar Ahmed, a PhD in anthropology. Ahmed first applied his academic training to real-world problem solving in Pakistan as a political agent in the South Waziristan Agency of the Federally Administered Tribal Areas and later as a senior administrator in the Pakistani state of Baluchistan. His earlier works, *Millennium and Charisma among the Pathans* (1976) and *Pukhtun Economy and Society* (1980), are essential reading for anyone headed into the complex world of tribal politics on either side of the Durand Line. Ahmed subsequently served as the senior Pakistani diplomat to the United Kingdom. He currently holds the Ibn Khaldun Chair for Islamic Studies at American University and is a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, DC.

In *The Thistle and the Drone,* Ahmed provides an exhaustive survey of tribal cultures across North and East Africa, Yemen, Southwest and Southeast Asia. Ahmed describes for each region the importance of tribe, clan, and local cultural traits related to leadership, personal honor and respect, and tribal decision-making. According to Ahmed, these are the people described in Leo Tolstoy's *Haji Murad* as resembling "the thistle"—hard to eliminate from the natural habitat and painful to touch. Ahmed laments the fact that most Western leaders make decisions in the ungoverned spaces of the Islamic world based on input from "the center" (that is, the capital city of a country). In Ahmed's view, the "center" is nearly always in direct conflict with the traditional societies in which the order of tribe and clan is far more important than the laws enforced by the central government.

Thus aligned with the "center" view, Western powers tend to pick fights with tribals who live in remote areas and conduct warfare on their own terms in their own territory. Frustrated by the lack of success of on-the-ground combat operations, Western powers have resorted to technology (in this case, the drone) to conduct punitive operations against these remote and dangerous peoples. This further alienates the tribal society

and intensifies the conflict by creating "the accidental guerrilla" described in David Kilcullen's book of the same name. His accidental guerrilla is simply a tribal caught up in the local conflict and often forced to choose between siding with a local resistance organization or with a foreign military force working with the central government.[1]

While most intelligence professionals will grasp Ahmed's major point within the first few chapters, by far the greater value of this book lies in the detailed examples Ahmed provides of various tribal communities around the world. Avoiding the esoteric, he provides data useful to the diplomat, intelligence officer, or warrior engaged in political actions or operations in nearly every part of the Islamic world.

There is no doubt that Ahmed is disappointed in the West's efforts in the war on terror and how this has become, in his opinion, a "war on tribal Islam." With arguments based on a large data set meticulously accumulated over the first 250 pages of text, his closing chapters provide exceptionally clear recommendations for the way forward. It remains for current IC professionals to determine if this advice can or should be followed.

The Way of the Knife, a detailed account of the same war on terror, speaks from the perspective of the military and IC leadership working in Washington, and world capitals, described in Ahmed's books. Mazzetti is a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist who has worked as a war reporter and covered the national security beat for the *New York Times* since 9/11. His writing style is clear and concise, and his access to senior officials in the US government is obvious from the number of "insider" vignettes provided.

From this optic, Mazzetti zooms in on the natural tension that exists within the IC between the CIA and other intelligence collectors. Nowhere is this tension more marked than between the CIA and the Department of Defense regarding the post-9/11 transformation of the CIA from an organization with a primary focus on Cold War intelligence collection to one directly involved in warfighting. Clearly, Mazzetti shares the opinion expressed in this book by former Director of National Intelligence Admiral Dennis Blair: "Going back to the history of CIA covert operations, I think you can make the argument that if we had done none of them we would probably be better off, and certainly no worse off than we are today…" While there is much room for reasonable debate of this statement, Mazzetti selects his research material on intelligence operations from 1979 to 2013 in large part to support Blair's viewpoint.

Mazzetti works to remind the reader that he is building a story from multiple sources. While he does a credible job, as is the case with many unclassified accounts of sensitive national security operations, Mazzetti's information tends to be based on a small number of sources with direct access. These sources would appear to have been authorized by their respective organizations to discuss the operations, or they fall into the category of retired individuals who chose to discuss sensitive information without authorization. This leaves the author with the difficult challenge of sorting out what information is fact, what is a controlled press placement, and what is a tale provided to settle an old score with a bureaucratic rival.

However, in the last case, when focusing on Washington bureaucratic rivalries, Mazzetti becomes more selective in his description of the antagonism among elements of the IC, the Department of Defense, and the Special Operations community. His sources describe a world that supports his own view that the CIA should not have been encouraged to follow "the way of the knife" and should remain a strategic intelligence collection and analysis organization. The bias in this view is highlighted by the abundance of examples of turf wars that resulted in failure on the global battlefield. After 12 years of war, there are certainly more than enough negative outcomes to point to, and many of Mazzetti's chapters dive deep into the diverse types of failures. Few of Mazzetti's sources dwelled on successful, cooperative operations.

For the intelligence professional, this narrative remains useful; the stories Mazzetti outlines are clear and concise and provide essential lessons that future IC leaders could apply in the next conflict. However, for anyone outside the IC, the book simply reads like a list of failures in Washington and in the field. Unfortunately, this litany of failures tends to obscure other sto-

[1] David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (Oxford University Press, 2009).

ries—discussed but covered less thoroughly in *The Way of the Knife*—that underscore that fact that good leaders can cooperate to resolve bureaucratic conflict. These stories do not receive equal treatment within Mazzetti's discussion of failures and bureaucratic conflict.[2]

Both of these titles belong on the bookshelf of any intelligence professional who wants to understand how the IC and the Special Operations community changed when the United States went to war after 9/11. The information is current, and the authors are excellent writers and researchers who describe intelligence and special operations across a transnational battlefield.

No one who has lived through the fight since 9/11 can pretend to be neutral on how the United States has conducted operations to defeat al-Qa'ida, and although neither author might be said to have provided a totally unbiased view, they are clear in their perspective from the onset. For the informed reader, the data can largely speak for itself.

[2] For another perspective on *The Way of the Knife*, see Richard Willing, *Studies in Intelligence* 57, no. 3 (September 2013).