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Unrest in Iran: A Test Case for Counterinsurgency Theory

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Recent events in Iran involving the questionable election results that placed Mahmoud Ahmadinejad into his second term as president have raised the levels of public outcry and consternation both inside Iran and internationally. The political pundits and policymakers are speculating on what this means for the future of Iran and how this situation will end. The debate is premature and largely facile¹ at this point, but what is interesting is that the initial Iranian government reaction to the potential insurgency bubbling up from disgruntled Moussavi supporters provides a well-suited test case for some of the commonly accepted counterinsurgency (COIN) tenants. An embryonic insurgent movement borne of deep resentment against the Iranian government and the de facto rulers of Iran, the Supreme Council, coupled with an extremely harsh COIN reaction creates an experimental situation which allows scholars, practitioners, and policymakers a rare opportunity to analyze, in real time, COIN theory.

The Experimental Setting in Iran

On 12 June 2009 a national election was held in Iran and speculation prior to the election had the incumbent Mahmoud Ahmadinejad facing stiff competition from conservative reformist candidate Mir Hossein Moussavi. The election was predicted to be a close affair with high voter turnout favoring Moussavi. High voter turnout was indeed reported on 12 June 2009 but, surprisingly, Ahmadinejad was declared a “landslide winner” over Moussavi.² Initially, Interior Minister Sadeq Mahsouli reported no violations in any aspect of the election.³ Further, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei congratulated Ahmadinejad and declared the result a “divine assessment.”⁴ Amid allegations of election fraud which surfaced soon after the declaration of a “landslide” win for Ahmadinejad, largely peaceful protests erupted and millions of Moussavi’s supporters took to the streets.⁵

¹ An *Economist* article provided claims that the clerical rulers were in disarray and that “something momentous had happened in a pivotal country” a mere eight days after the election results in Iran. *Economist*, “Iran Rises Up,” (20th to 26th June 2009): 11.

² “Ahmadinejad Wins Landslide,” *Iran Daily*, No. 3423, 14 June 2009, first viewed on 15 June 2009, <http://www.iran-daily.com/1388/3423/html/>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Nahid Siamdoust, “Teheran’s Rallying Cry: ‘We Are the People of Iran,’” *Time*, 15 June 2009, first viewed on 17 June 2009, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1904764,00.html?xid=rss-topstories>

⁵ Ibid.

The government initially seemed to show some predilection toward conciliation as the Guardian Council, Iran's body overseeing elections, was called to review the results; but this opening was quickly closed as discrepancies were admitted and, at the same time, deemed so insignificant as to not affect the election outcome. Protests became even more fervent in the streets and in one incident a group of protesters attempted to storm a pro-government militia compound only to have gunmen on the roof fire on the protesters, killing several.⁶ United States President Barack Obama, seemingly in anticipation of Iranian President Ahmadinejad's move to blame the United States, repeatedly expressed that the U. S. government would not intervene. He warned against any direct involvement and said the United States needed to avoid being seen as meddling in Iranian affairs.⁷

The government of Iran seemed to be initially caught off guard by the loud post-election protests. But it took very little time for the Iranian leaders to determine a course of action in response to this potential insurgency and a very real threat to their continued leadership. As protesters grew bolder, openly screaming "Death to the Dictator,"⁸ the government responded with a dual COIN strategy of cracking down on protesters and restricting information dissemination. The Internet was mitigated as a means of coordination and fomentation as social networking sites, like Facebook, were shut down.⁹ Facebook was later restored, but Iran continued to restrict access to the Internet by slowing the speed of communication and effectively shutting down the transference of large image and video files. Cell phone communications were also blocked soon after protests started.¹⁰ At the same time, reporters were restricted from moving around the country and from reporting certain events. Eventually, almost all foreign press representatives were kicked out of the country entirely.¹¹

Despite some reports in the western media of a rift among the clerical leaders in Iran, the Iranian government continued to build up forces against protesters saturating "major streets and squares with police and Basij militia."¹² Hundreds were arrested and the Basij militias are reported to be engaging in particularly brutal tactics against Moussavi supporters. Basij militia members have even been accused of storming college dormitories and beating, possibly killing, student agitators. The government appeared to be supporting such actions, consistently warning protesters that open opposition to the election result will be met with a harsh response.¹³

⁶ "Iranian Protester Killed After Opposition Rally," *Associate Press*. 15 June 2009, first viewed on 17 June 2009, http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090615/ap_on_re_mi_ea/ml_iran_election.

⁷ Jeff Zeleny and Helene Cooper, 17 June 2009, first viewed 17 June 2009. "Obama Warns Against Direct Involvement By U.S. in Iran," *New York Times* online, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/17/us/politics/17prexy.html>.

⁸ "Iranian Protester Killed After Opposition Rally," *Associate Press*. 15 June 2009, first viewed on 17 June 2009, http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090615/ap_on_re_mi_ea/ml_iran_election.

⁹ "Iran Restores Access to Facebook," *Associated Press*, 26 June 2009, first viewed on 26 June 2009, <http://technology.canoe.ca/2009/05/26/9576876-ap.html>.

¹⁰ "Iran: Halt the Crackdown," *Human Rights Watch*. 19 June 2009, first viewed on 20 June 2009, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/06/19/iran-halt-crackdown>.

¹¹ Nazila Fathi and Michael Slackman, "Unrest in Iran Sharply Deepens Rift Among Clerics," *New York Times*. 22 June 2009: 1.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ "Iran: Halt the Crackdown," *Human Rights Watch*. 19 June 2009, first viewed on 20 June 2009, <http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2009/06/19/iran-halt-crackdown>.

Moussavi responded to the crackdown with a vow to continue his protest and “pay any cost” to fight the contested election results.¹⁴

The cause gained a strong symbol when a young woman was allegedly killed by either governmental sharp shooters or a Basij militiaman during one of the larger protests. In a heinous act of violence, Neda Soltani was gunned down in the streets and western newspapers reported that she quickly became “lionized by an engaged online community inside and outside Iran.”¹⁵ Neda, whose name means “the voice” in Farsi seemed to be a perfect martyr who could be used to rally and solidify the cause against government oppression.

But the oppressive governmental tactics have proven successful, in the short-term, in quelling dissent as large group protests quickly faded a little over a week after the contentious election. Mir Hossein Moussavi does not have an organized political party to use to organize protest. Some have postulated that “he attracted a large following more because of whom he opposed” rather than who he was.¹⁶ The budding insurgency is already being forced to adapt to the new reality and adopt new tactics. Calls for strikes have failed to resonate, but some opposition members are attempting to embarrass “plainclothes agents by circulating photographs of those who infiltrated protests and beat demonstrators.”¹⁷

President Ahmadinejad is predictably blaming the United States for the instability in Iran. On 23 June 2009 President Ahmadinejad expressed that he was “appalled and outraged” by President Obama’s harsh condemnation of Iran’s handling of the protests.¹⁸ Ahmadinejad also lashed out at all the foreign media, arguing that these outlets were waging war against the Iranian people.¹⁹

The gist of this analysis is that an insurgency is developing in Iran which is still in the early stages and which has failed to coalesce despite the justness of the cause, the violence perpetrated by the state, and the existence of at least one symbolic martyr. As will soon be argued, this created an ideal scenario in which to test some of the key assertions presented by icons in the field of COIN study.

Some Major COIN Theorists and Their Prescriptions for Dealing with an Embryonic Insurgency

While David Galula emphasizes that insurgent actors have myriad advantages over the counterinsurgent,²⁰ he also observes there are decisive actions that can be taken early in an

¹⁴ “Moussavi Vows to ‘Pay Any Cost’ to Fight Iran Election Results,” *CNN*, 15 June 2009, first accessed 26 June 2009, <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/06/15/iran.elections.protests/index.html>.

¹⁵ Robert Tait and Matthew Weaver, “How Neda Soltani Became the Face of Iran’s Struggle,” *The Guardian*, 22 June 2009, first viewed 26 June 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jun/22/neda-soltani-death-iran>.

¹⁶ Nazila Fathi and Michael Slackman, “Options Shrink for the Opposition as Iran Tightens Grip,” *New York Times*, 25 June 2009, first viewed 26 June 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/26/world/middleeast/26iran.html>.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ “Ahmadinejad: Anyone Who Strikes Iran Will Regret It,” *Haaretz.com*, 14 June 2009, first viewed 20 June 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1092669.html>.

²⁰ David Galula, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice*, (1964), New York: Praeger: 7, 9 and 12.

insurgency that have a decent chance of successfully disrupting the development of the movement. Galula aptly notes this would be more likely to occur in communist or totalitarian regimes than it would be to occur in democratic ones. Democratic regimes are slow to react and more tightly constrained against the use of force or intrusive intelligence gathering measures aimed at the domestic populace.²¹ However, Frank Kitson believes it is all but impossible for any regime, regardless of type, to swiftly institute the Draconian measures necessary to stop a developing insurgency. Even Kitson admits that if such actions were possible, “it is easy to see that the first steps should have been to prevent the enemy from gaining an ascendancy over the civil population, and in particular to disrupt his efforts at establishing his political organization.”²²

Unlike Galula and Kitson, Bard O’Neill believes that any government can react quickly to an insurgency and have a great deal of success. According to O’Neill, any government, regardless of type, has the advantage during the embryonic stages of an insurgency due to a higher level of political organization and more mature institutions in addition to control of well-organized means of coercion.²³ Having argued this, O’Neill notes that governments who could act and succeed initially often fail to do so due to either governmental complacency and a lack of proper vigilance or because many of the early stage activities are non-violent and, therefore, go undetected as insurgent consolidation.²⁴ Further, even governments that do react quickly often fail to understand what type²⁵ of insurgency they are dealing with and, therefore, make grave initial errors.²⁶

A Template for Initial COIN Actions

Both Galula and O’Neill, and to a lesser extent Kitson, argue that governments can react swiftly to crush an insurgency. However, all the authors mentioned believe swift governmental response is impeded, to a greater or lesser extent, by various factors endemic to the particular nation-state which is experiencing the insurgency. Having said this, all three authors’ tenets, when considered as a whole, provide clear theoretical guidance regarding what governments should do to address an insurgency in the early development stage. The following section addresses those policy proscriptions and explains why these actions are argued to be key in addressing the initial stages of insurgency.

Intelligence: Recognition and Understanding

Gaining as much early intelligence as possible helps the counterinsurgent to identify what type of insurgency is in play, who the key actors are, how the group is organized, how much initial support the movement has, and how great the threat is. Galula argues it is of great importance to

²¹ Galula, 27.

²² Frank Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversions, Insurgency, and Peacekeeping*, (1971), St. Petersburg, Florida: Hailer Publishing: 67.

²³ Bard E. O’Neill, *Insurgency and Terrorism: From Revolution to Apocalypse*, 2nd edition revised, (2005), Washington, D.C: Potomac Books: 155.

²⁴ O’Neill, 155, 157-8.

²⁵ O’Neill identifies nine distinct types of insurgency all demanding differing governmental responses.

²⁶ O’Neill, 158.

place infiltrators into the movement early such that a better understanding can develop.²⁷ Kitson builds on this, positing that in the early stages of an insurgency two shortcomings for the insurgent are evident. First, many more people will be involved in protests in the street than are necessary for terror or guerilla campaigns. Second, the participants themselves “are not disciplined members of a clandestine organization.”²⁸ Both aspects lead to a larger signature that allows for easier infiltration and tracking.

Basic understanding of the insurgent cause is one of the key prerequisites for successful COIN.²⁹ Any intelligence gained in properly understanding the cause allows the counterinsurgent flexibility. Galula even argues a counterinsurgent can make a list of insurgent demands and cross off the ones that cannot be capitulated to and consider addressing the rest.³⁰

For O’Neill, it is of paramount importance to develop intelligence in order to understand what type of insurgency one is dealing with. For example, O’Neill claims that both conspiratorial and urban warfare strategies “necessitate a governmental response that concentrates on political efforts and on intelligence and police work in cities,” while a reactionary-traditionalist, transnational threat from al Qaeda demands an emphasis on international cooperation.³¹

Coercive Countermeasures

Bard O’Neill notes there are many examples of governments reacting with violence when insurgencies manifest themselves. Governments have a mixed record when using indiscriminate violence. The Soviet Union experienced the most success and O’Neill credits this to superior Soviet “organizational, material, and technological resources.”³²

Interestingly, O’Neill finds Saddam Hussein’s use of indiscriminate violence,³³ coupled with economic programs aimed at Shiite supporters and potential supporters, to be very successful. Hussein was able for decades to keep a majority group in Iraq who had experienced systematic governmental mistreatment from ever successfully challenging his dictatorial rule.³⁴ In some respects, this case flies in the face of Galula’s critical mass thesis in which he postulates that when the insurgent group clearly outnumbers the minority running and supporting the government, that group’s chance for success increases dramatically.³⁵

Galula emphasizes the importance of creating and using a “machine for the control of the population” in any successful COIN campaign. This “machine” consists of a well-organized political structure and administrative bureaucracy, as well as police and armed forces which are

²⁷ Galula, 67-8.

²⁸ Kitson, 86.

²⁹ Galula, 18-19.

³⁰ Galula, 103.

³¹ O’Neill, 21 and 159.

³² O’Neill, 174-6.

³³ Although it must be noted Saddam Hussein’s violent reaction was particularly heinous including mass executions of not only insurgents but also, in many cases, their entire families, O’Neill, 174.

³⁴ O’Neill, 174.

³⁵ Galula, 15.

used as the physical coercion arm to directly counter insurgent activities.³⁶ Galula emphasizes that no “machine” is of any use against an insurgency unless the national leadership is resolute in its use of the “machine.”³⁷ The national government must consistently apply pressure to a burgeoning insurgency in order that it does not gain its balance and secure a foothold.

Although Kitson feels it is nearly impossible for a government to react quickly enough to an insurgency to have a decisive early effect, he does find some historical proof to the contrary. In 1943, the Freedom Council was developed to resist Nazi occupation in Denmark. However, this movement failed to grow and its leader, Flemming Muus, describes how there was great difficulty controlling the early movement and complained of its high visibility which made it vulnerable to a ruthless and effective Nazi crackdown.³⁸

Controlling the Message

Galula emphasizes the massive importance of the cause to an insurgency. He argues this is especially true in the early stages of an insurgency.³⁹ Therefore, the insurgent needs to find avenues to propagate his message and develop and spread his cause through a broad segment of the national population. Many insurgencies desire, and often need, external support; hence the aim of propaganda to build and spread the cause is also often aimed at an international audience as well. Galula argues that propaganda is a one-sided weapon in favor of the insurgent, especially early in the process. Galula notes, “The insurgent, having no responsibility, is free to use every trick; if necessary, he can lie, cheat, exaggerate. He is not obliged to prove; he is judged by what he promises, not by what he does. Consequently, propaganda is a powerful weapon for him. With no positive policy but with good propaganda, the insurgent may still win.”⁴⁰

In the case of controlling the message, there is a wide gulf between Galula and O’Neill. O’Neill believes that the counterinsurgent government can react effectively to counter insurgent propaganda. O’Neill rightly sees insurgency taking years to develop and implement. He concludes from this that governments have a great deal of time to analyze, formulate, and respond with sharply defined propaganda of their own. He warns that a poor response to insurgent propaganda might result in loyal governmental supporters becoming alienated from the system and falling prey to insurgent propaganda.⁴¹

The author believes that in this case of discrepancy between Galula and O’Neill, Galula has the stronger point with regard propaganda. While no response on the part of a counterinsurgent government is likely to alienate some loyal supporters, as O’Neill describes, the author believes that the best course of action, especially in the early stages is for the counterinsurgent to prevent the spread of insurgent propaganda.

³⁶ Galula, 27.

³⁷ Galula, 26.

³⁸ Kitson, 87.

³⁹ Galula, 18-25.

⁴⁰ Galula, 14.

⁴¹ O’Neill, 84.

Summary

The developing insurgency in Iran offers COIN scholars a unique opportunity to watch major theses presented by Galula, O'Neill and Kitson tested in a current, real-world example. Drawing from these authors it follows that the proper course of action for any counterinsurgent government facing a budding insurgency is to react quickly in three domains. The counterinsurgent government should remain constantly vigilant against insurgency at all times and never fall complacent simply because many years have passed since the last serious challenge to governmental rule. This tenet applies equally to democracies as it does to totalitarian and autocratic regimes. Once a problem is identified, an emphasis is placed on infiltration and intelligence gathering such that not only the level of threat is properly recognized but also the type of threat, including the cause.

Once a proper understanding is gained, the counterinsurgent government should engage in coercive countermeasures. What is counterintuitive is that while use of force, especially widespread and brutal force, is de-emphasized during the middle and later stages of insurgency, according to COIN theory, it can prove to be extremely effective early on. Discipline of the brutality is still emphasized and indiscriminate force seems less effective than a more comprehensive campaign of force targeting insurgents and some supporters coupled with concessions where possible.

Finally, controlling the message is important as the cause is just beginning to foment and resonate. The author sides more with Galula in this case and, therefore, the most important actions a government can take involve preventing the spread of the message. Shutting down the Internet, controlling the news, eliminating or severely restricting cell phone usage, restricting the movement and reporting of foreign journalists and jamming satellites can go a long way toward disrupting the necessary propaganda activities of the insurgent. Even if these activities cannot be maintained in part or whole for long, being able to disrupt the initial development of the cause in the first few weeks and months of an insurgency should prove effective.

Based on the theory described, it appears that Iran is, in fact, on the right course in crushing the insurgency. The Iranian government has consistently applied brutal countermeasures against even peaceful means of protest in the early stages of the insurgent movement. Most of the arrests, and even the violence, appeared to be targeted against insurgents and agitators with one visible exception in the Neda Soltani case. While none of the actions can be condoned from a democratic perspective, it appears that the autocracy will prevail despite the popular backlash to a highly suspect election result. This assertion flies in the face of popular belief and western reportage and, if correct, begs for a more active western role.

The author is under no illusions that Moussavi will prove to be beacon of democracy, capitalism and human rights as there is very little space between his ideology and actions and those of Ahmadinejad. However, if the populist insurgency were to prevail, it would go a long way toward establishing the power of the people of Iran and in diminishing the stranglehold the Supreme Council now holds over the country.

Given all that has been argued above, and in light of the fact that overt support for the insurgency will likely only fuel Ahmadinejad's cause, the only logical course of action in attempting to keep the currently stifled insurgency from failing is to enact covert means of support. Covert support could range from material to economic to rhetoric from western powers, reminding the people of Iran that western powers will not stop supporting their just cause. Unfortunately, if western powers cannot determine how to provide clandestine support to this embryonic insurgency, it is likely to fail. The weight of such a failure would be great, as the Supreme Council will not re-solidify its position and, at the same time, its members will have learned the precise formula for quelling any future insurgent challenges.

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