On Counterinsurgency
Evaluating the role of Civil Militias

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*"A poem need not have a meaning and like most things
in nature often does not have."*

— Wallace Stevens

Abstract

Strategy and tactics in counterinsurgency warfare must be meaningful and provide the necessary thrust to carry out successful operations so as to bolster state structures, if at all they remain as meaningful connotations in post-modern deconstructive narrations. The population emerges as 'the factor' in insurgency and its counterpoise. Seen through the panoptic structures of both insurgents as well as counterinsurgents – seeking the support of the population or at least neutralising their effect appears as the significant breakthrough in a counterinsurgency war.

Insurgencies abound since the Spanish Rebellion of the Napoleonic days. Nevertheless, the praxis of counterinsurgency warfare still seems to lack a perfectly unidirectional guideline. The central tendency however, is to rotate about the British-American-French axis of 'population-centric' counterinsurgency. Most democracies, India included, adhere to such a doctrinaire; punctuated with minor adjustments suitable to their local specificities. And with Edward Luttwak's prescription of 'out-terrorising' the insurgents[1] so as to deter them from being 'born' out of the multitude appearing as insensibly brutal and barbaric to modern democracies; the other option of 'soft' counterinsurgency remains as the logical one.

On the contrary, deriving logic from Zambernardi's trilemma[2] of counterinsurgency – the very moment the counterinsurgent attempts for the protection of its security personnel - it loses the war against the insurgents. Indeterminacy hence creeps into the strategy of the counterinsurgent, and in modern democracies – the counterinsurgent is in a quagmire – torn apart in a contestation between winning the 'unwinnable' irregular war as well as 'losing', in the process, as few personnel as desirable under political compulsions. Withstanding pressures from the civil society and media is another hurdle.

Here comes the (Un) Civil Militia (?)

Very famously, German sociologist Max Weber defined the state as *'a human community that claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory'*. However, as Ariel I. Ahram notes in Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-sponsored militias, that few states have ever actually sought a complete monopoly over military force, "much less possessed it." Ahram's study actually contends that the devolution of state control over violence to non-state actors; that is military decentralisation is not a new phenomenon of the post-modern world, and does not, according to the author, necessarily presage a descent into chaos. Rather, as per Ahram, the international community must learn to live with civil militias and not try, somewhat in vain, to displace and uproot them.

Macartan Humphreys and Jeremy M. Weinstein have put forth some alarming statistics.[3] Since 1945, civil wars have engulfed 73 countries and caused deaths of more than 16 million people, combatants and non-combatants included. In fact, 25 per cent of civil wars since 1945 have lasted at least 12 years (Fearon 2004). Humphreys and Weinstein further argue that strategies of conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction predict participation of combatants in defense of the state. To quote:

> "……. *the empirical results challenge standard interpretations of grievance-based accounts of participation, as poverty, a lack of access to education, and political alienation predict participation in both rebellion and counterrebellion.*"

The authors analyse that individuals are more likely to participate in rebellions if some or all of the following factors are satisfied:

- They expect to receive selective incentives from the fighting groups.

- They believe that they could be safer inside a fighting faction than outside it.
- Members of their community are active in the movement.
- Their community is characterised by strong social structures.
- They are economically deprived.
- They are marginalised from political decision-making.
- They are alienated from mainstream political processes.

Factually speaking, the necessity and effectiveness of irregular civilian defence forces have been demonstrated numerous times in history. In that regard, the following list may not be exhaustive[4]:

- Civic guards in 16th century Europe.
- In American War of Independence.
- Home guards of the Kenyan state Vs the Mau Mau guerrillas.
- Peru's self defence committees (peasant groups) during the Communist insurgency.
- Sons of Iraq programme as raised by the American forces.
- In Phillipines at the turn of the 20th century by the Americans.
- In the Indian Wars in America.
- During the Vietnam War.
- In North Caucasus (especially Chechnya) by Russia.
- Ghaziya raids in Sudan by the French Army.
- By Israel in Lebanon.
- By Indonesia in East Timor.
- By Nazi Germany in Greece.
- By NATO-ISAF in Afghanistan.

The example of using the local Afghans against the Taliban insurgency may be termed to be the latest addition in the list. Joe Quinn and Mario A. Fumerton report that the local populace stood up to the Taliban at Kaman-i-Kalan, a town in the Kunduz province in March 2009.

Defining 'counterinsurgency' as a protracted political-military struggle to deny the insurgent actor the opportunity to establish control over the population, Quinn and Fumerton argue that 'securing and protecting' the population is the key to winning the coveted prize of popular support. However, counterinsurgents will find it difficult to gain the trust, confidence and collaboration of the population if they are unable to sustain a constant presence among the people. Moreover, the authors say that:

Once a conflict begins, military action has the potential of generating new political dynamics; including ethnic defection.

'although protecting civilians may seem intuitive to many of us who embrace a population-centric approach to counter-insurgency, putting the principle into practice has historically proven to be extremely challenging'.

The main reason cited by Quinn and Fumerton for this difficulty is because counterinsurgent forces are almost never able to maintain a presence in all places at all times where the population might be in need of protection. They refer to this as the 'ubiquity problem'. The Sons of Iraq (SoI) programme was another local, bottom-up approach. SoIs were paid with a three-months' contract. The programme employed former insurgents to provide local security. This process of reintegrating former insurgents generally serves two purposes: To discover moles in the insurgent ranks and Strengthening of the population-centric counterinsurgency.

Putting forth their arguments in this direction, the researchers posit the following factors in favour of setting up a local-militia in Afghanistan:

● Locals resolve the identification problem – of how to separate the Taliban guerrilla from the Pashtun villager (one of the factors of Zambernardi's trilemma).

● Denies the insurgent his social sphere.

● Helps the counterinsurgent to get acquainted with the local culture

The 'perfect' counterinsurgent, if any, is to be found within the Afghan population itself. And therein lies the logic of applying the Afghan Local Police (ALP) programme.

Ethnicity in a Civil War

Stathis N. Kalyvas of the Yale University boldly asserts[5]:

"I hypothesize that a key determinant of the variation of the behavioural potential of ethnicity, is the willingness of incumbent states facing ethnic rebellions to recruit ethnic defectors……"

According to him, 'ethnic defection' is a key process to explain that ethnic identity and civil war are consistent with constructivist approaches.

Three major observations crystallise out of Kalyvas' theoretical perspective toward civil wars. Those are enunciated as under:

- Ethnic boundaries are cemented as the civil war progresses.
- In so far as civil wars shape ethnic identities, they do so by hardening them.
- Actors such as strong states and foreign occupiers should be, with other parameters being equal, more likely to seek out ethnic defection compared to weaker actors, including poor post-colonial states.

In the paper, Kalyvas predicts a rise in ethnic defection in the latter stages of the irregular war. He says that a mix of coercion and financial inducement is needed to usher in insurgent defection. Furthermore, revenge by former insurgents could be skillfully maximised in the counterinsurgency warfare. He thus articulates:

"It is worth stressing that the process of ethnic defection is extremely consequential even when the numbers of defectors remain relatively small. This is so, because ethnic identity ceases to be a reliable indicator of pro-ethnic rebel behavior."

Now, who represents the 'will' of the ethnic community? Kalyvas presents an interesting analysis. Ethnic rebels are forced to resort to violence against members of their own ethnic group, so as to 'deter' further defection. The resulting intra-ethnic violence against members of the same group, according to Kalyvas, liquidates their claims to usurp the 'actual will' of the entire group. In fact, ethnic defection destroys those elements that make ethnic identity so important for collective action. As a result, many ethnic civil wars, namely those where ethnic defection takes place, turn into contests for the loyalty of the population and resemble non-ethnic civil wars.

In a micro-comparative test of the determinants of ethnic defection, Kalyvas concentrates on a study conducted in southern Greece under the occupation of Nazi Germany. And the results of the data analysis could be outlined as under:

- Localities that experienced insurgent violence supplied recruits to the civil defence militia which fought alongside the Nazis.
- More recruits flowed from regions where there was more rigid control of the occupation (Nazi) forces.
- Incidentally, there appeared to be a geographical factor embedded in the

counterinsurgency; viz, there was a positive correlation between recruitment in the German-backed militia and higher elevations from the sea level

Once a conflict begins, military action has the potential of generating new political dynamics; including ethnic defection. Ethnic boundaries are fluid, as Kalyvas shows through his piercing analysis.

The 'Other' side of the Insurgency

Irregular war could be delineated as some sort of a social process. And many individuals enter the war long after it has started – driven by incentives and constraints. A particularly strong incentive is revenge; which may be 'deftly' used by the state actor to bolster civil militias. Matthew P Dearing writes along similar lines[6]:

> *"Historical and exogenous lessons abound of state-led initiatives to devolve security to the local level."*

He cites the additional examples of the counterinsurgency initiatives of Japan, Thailand and Sudan. The Janjaweed militia in Sudan is described to be 'rapacious' and 'brutal'. Combining these 'lesser known examples', as the author terms them, the following lessons seem to have been learnt as far as civil militias in counterinsurgency warfare is concerned:

- The ends of counterinsurgency justify the means. The state acted as a supervisor and supporter of local capacity-building initiatives.
- Placing 'inciters' of violence under institutional state structures serves to build social capital as citizens begin to trust the capability of the state to secure them. For instance, rural Afghans historically have sought the protection of tanzim and other political or military alliances.

Usman A. Tar, however, is quite critical of the Janjaweed. In the paper, "The perverse manifestations of civil militias in Africa: Evidence from Western Sudan", Tar investigated whether the Janjaweed militia in western Sudan acted as informal units of the regular Sudanese Army or were 'merely' ethnically-motivated with no connection with the state whatsoever. In the process, he argues with evidences that Janjaweed militias were formidably entwined with the state structures. In fact, Tar is extremely apt as he writes[7]:

"The dilemmas posed to Africa by such phenomena as civil wars, civil militias, 'warlordism', (counter)insurgencies, child soldiers, and violence against non- combatants – especially vulnerable social categories (elderly, children, disabled and women) – are perhaps comparable to the on-going 'global' war on terror"

It may so happen persuading an insurgent to defect and support the government is more effective than killing him (her).

However, like most state authorities, the Sudanese government denies links to the Janjaweed.

Treading along the expected path, Will Clegg says that effective counterinsurgency requires a strategy aimed at securing control of civilian populations. Historically, irregular forces recruited from local communities have helped generate, sustain and manage collaboration between civilians and counterinsurgent forces. However, according to Clegg, irregular forces do not necessarily promote the success of the counterinsurgent[8]. For instance, if the civil militias are poorly managed, then private interests may be pursued using the means of violence at their disposal, thereby undermining the broader campaign of counterinsurgency. Hence, man-management has to be done skillfully by the state actors.

Due to the ratio of hard-core insurgents to local recruits, the threat to state survival posed by an insurgency can be dramatically reduced by severing an insurgency's hard-core members from civilian populations (viz. the 'good' Taliban and 'bad' Taliban theorisation). Even if a residual terrorist threat remains, the survival of the state will not be threatened unless the hard-core militants gather a large number of people.

When the number of insurgents goes down, and the strength of the incumbent government is made clear to local communities, insurgents are often compelled to rely on dramatic acts of indiscriminate violence. Nevertheless, such an act could turn out to be a blessing in disguise. However, more the insurgents rely on terror; the deeper it undermines their attempts to gain popular support. Thus, in general terms, an insurgency can be said to be defeated if and when it is largely separated from civilian populations.

The 'logic of violence' in counterinsurgency war is such that the prospects of the counterinsurgents to separate insurgent cadres from civilians are low unless they can first impose control over the communities in which civilians live. Furthermore, gathering intelligence is crucial.

Divide and Rule

Sometimes, irregularity could be a source of strength. It may so happen persuading an insurgent to defect and support the government is more effective than killing him (her), as it contributes to the size of government forces while depleting the enemies' material strength and morale. It has to be kept in mind that counterinsurgency belongs to fourth generation warfare. Hence, psychological warfare is a critical component of it. Clegg's view-points were grossly similar to the above, while analysing the counterinsurgency operations of the Sultan of Oman between 1970 and 1974.

Not along very dissimilar lines, Humphreys and Weinstein tested the existing theories pertaining to the determinants of participation in armed insurgencies. As micro-level survey data, they focused on the civil war in Sierra Leone (from 1991 to 2002). Their findings regarding the behaviour of the combatants in defense of the state could be enumerated as under:

- Those in a relatively better economic position will have a stake in defending the political status quo (the dreaded caste-based militia called Ranvir Sena in erstwhile Bihar, India against the Naxalites is an example of this order).
- Members of ethnic groups that benefit from political power have stronger incentives to prevent a successful rebellion.
- Individuals active and engaged in mainstream political processes will mobilise to defend the existing political system. (The tussle of the Marxist and conservative party cadres with the ultra-left wingers in the erstwhile Naxalite movement and present Maoist movement in India, is a pertinent case in point)

In sum, it could be said that as state structures melt away, local defense militias become a major bulwark against brutal insurgent attacks in rural (urban) areas. This policy of inserting militias into the populace is certainly the (in)famous 'Divide and Rule'. Howsoever unethical it may sound in modern democratic parlance; the policy still remains as a convenient instrument in weakening the camp of the belligerent rebels. In this regard, Alexander B. Downes of the Duke University may be quoted at length[9]:

"States in today's world that are beset by civil conflict face conflicting pressures: the international community favors negotiations and power sharing, but governments also want to make as few concessions as possible to rebels. Using negotiations to create spoilers provides one way out of this dilemma: the government can co-opt

certain groups into signing a superficial peace accord and then tar those who refuse to agree as intransigent dead-enders. The trick is to offer just enough in the way of concessions to peel away opportunistic or moderate rebel factions. In exchange for perks and material rewards, these groups can be enlisted to provide intelligence or additional combat power against their former comrades."

Latin America - like Africa and Asia - if not somewhat more, had suffered and still suffers from chronic insurgencies. During the last two decades of the twentieth century - in El Salvador, Columbia and Mexico, the acting regimes faced growing opposition from leftwing militant groups. To decapitate the insurgencies, the state-actors sometimes relied on the infamously termed 'death squads' – which at times did not remain under the control of the military and the ruling elite. Ralph Rozema of the Utrecht University contends[10] that though the squads were under authoritative control in El Salvador and Mexico, they operated more independently in Colombia. In fact, in the former two countries, the squads ceased to exist when the government reached a peace agreement with the left ultras. Whereas, in Colombia, as Rozema reports, the militias were heavily involved in the illicit drug trade and developed into a powerful force with whom the government had to negotiate to reach an agreement for their demobilisation. Interestingly and expectedly, at Chiapas (Mexico), existence of death squads were denied by the state. Nevertheless, in 1996, when the Mexican government could chart out a peace agreement with the EZLN group or the Zapatistas, the death squads disappeared. In Columbia, on the other hand, as pointed out by Rozema, paramilitary militias, seized the properties of peasants they had evicted from their land, a development characterised as contrarreforma agraria.

In 2003, the civil militias signed an agreement with the government for their disarmament, demobilisation, and reintegration. Since then, many of them have successfully reintegrated in the society, but others have resorted to criminal groups - mainly involved in drug trafficking. Nevertheless, the role of civil militias in counterinsurgency warfare tends to receive a fillip when even Usman A. Tar – a vehement critic of the Janjaweed, posits the logic behind using them. Apart from the lone factor that civil militias like Janjaweed obscures state violence, Tar is razor-sharp to indicate that civil militias could be used as an advance party to penetrate the rebel strongholds. Moreover, as per Tar, civil militias are extremely useful in providing human intelligence to state forces.

However, it is needless to mention that there are viral offshoots of using civil militias. Firstly, atrocities and human rights abuses committed by such irregular

armies stand to degrade the legitimacy of the state. Hence, for most of the times, the state structures do not officially attest to the use of civil militias (as in the case of Salwa Judum). Secondly, demobilisation of these irregular forces in a post-insurgency clime could be a formidable task (in the case of Colombia, as discussed by Rozema). Thirdly, inconsiderate and rampant use of civil militias always has the possibility of inflaming the insurgency and finally, a projected environ of an ethnically-driven civil war could be another fallout.

In a 'hot' revolutionary war, as David Galula argues, the counterinsurgent may delve on the following possibilities[11]:

- Act directly against the insurgent leaders.
- Act indirectly on the conditions of insurgency.
- May 'infiltrate' the insurgent movement.
- Build up the political machine so as to politically defeat the insurgents.

By 'infiltration', Galula meant intelligence operations which may internally wreck the insurgent organisation. He cites the case of Okhrama or Czar's Police which had crept into the organisation of the Bolshevik Party. Interestingly, in his second law of counterinsurgency, Galula too, seeks support through an active minority in the population on which the insurgents base themselves.

Conclusions

Deriving on the theoretical literature about the usage of civil militias, the following arguments seem to crystallise:

For modern democracies like India, it would be pragmatic enough if it proceeds with the population-centric approach to counterinsurgency. Human intelligence could be best gathered in environs where the state could 'secure' the affected population.

Since democracies cannot altogether do away with the parameter of 'force protection', the option of erecting civil militias seem to be a safer option. However, legitimisation of the civil militias is required. Hence, local ethnic youths need to be provided jobs in the constabulary. It suffices three purposes. One, this reduces the ambience of unemployment. Thus it leads to a better economy and consequent satiation of the belligerent population. Two, it helps in gathering viable intelligence. And three, it sucks the water for the guerrilla fish as one youth with job to 4 to 5 satisfied locals; especially in densely populated territories. Such a methodology has recently been applied by the state in the provinces of Chhattisgarh and West Bengal after the Salwa Judum had been struck down in India as illegal.

Definitely, a word of caution lies here. Vsevolod Gunitskiy in *The National Interest* despises[12] the system of arbitrary terror imposed by state forces in the name of counterinsurgency. He writes with literary impunity while putting forth the example of Russian troops in Chechnya:

> *"One consequence of Russian conduct in Chechnya has been the radicalisation of the population."*

It may be inferred that whether civil militias provide the necessary succour to the counterinsurgent or not, the implementation of such an instrument of state policy has to be rare and under careful analysis. Further empirical and theoretical work needs to be done in so far as civil militias are concerned. Case studies in active areas of insurgency – especially in democracies which were former colonies (like India) – needs to be taken up for obtaining incisive results.

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Notes

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