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A Comprehensive
and Proactive
Approach to
Unconventional
Warfare

by

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On the cover: Protesters in Bucharest's Republican Square protect themselves during the Romanian Revolution on 23 December 1989. After initially following regime orders to repress the civil resistance movement, the Romanian army switched allegiance from the regime to the resistance and battled to protect protesters from the state's security police, the feared *Securitate*. Dictator Nicolae Ceaucescu's regime fell within a week. Source: Newscom

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A COMPREHENSIVE AND PROACTIVE APPROACH TO UNCONVENTIONAL WARFARE

The armed forces play an absolutely key role in fostering, allowing, or suppressing democratic movements in authoritarian states. Thus it is very much in the interests of the established democracies to help military leaders in authoritarian or transition countries make the right choices.¹

-Admiral (U.S. Navy, Retired) Dennis Blair

Ongoing operations to train and equip moderate Syrian opposition forces are useful in serving as a venue for exploring gray zone unconventional warfare (UW) intervention options. The current U.S. approach to such security challenges, however, is symptomatic of a circumscribed view of, and therefore a less effective application of, unconventional warfare in gray zone conditions.²

‘Gray zone’ is a term increasingly used to refer to a segment of the conflict continuum that lies between peaceful, steady-state diplomacy and traditional war. It is an environment where security challenges are characterized by “ambiguity about the nature of the conflict, opacity of the parties involved, or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks.”³ The complexity of such challenges renders traditional diplomatic and economic solutions ineffective or inappropriate, while decision makers seek to avoid the political risks and consequences associated with direct military engagement.

To better posture itself for engagement in gray zone political warfare, the U.S. Government, and especially Special Operations Forces (SOF), must work to reestablish, revitalize, and master important but seemingly lost components of our UW capability, as well as engage in concept development marked by uncommonly creative and innovative thinking. This challenge was noted by a theater special operations commander in 2014:

We must advance from the nostalgic vision of remote guerrilla bases in denied territory and adapt to a world of split-second communications and data transfer, nonviolent resistance, cyber and economic warfare, and the manipulation of international law to undermine national sovereignty ... In our era, unconventional warfare is more likely to take the form of a civil resistance movement ... Waging

¹ Dennis Blair, *Military Engagement: Influencing Armed Forces Worldwide to Support Democratic Transitions*, vol. 1, *Overview and Action Plan* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2013), 4–5.

² Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 8 November 2010 (As Amended Through 15 February 2016) defines unconventional warfare as: “Activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area.”

³ Philip Kapusta, “The Gray Zone,” *Special Warfare*, October–December 2015, 20.

and countering this new unconventional warfare demands great sophistication and agility.⁴

America's Syria experience comes at a time when the rapidly expanding effects of globalization—instant knowledge transfer, mass popular political awareness, restlessness, and social mobilization—call for a much improved U.S. ability to facilitate democracy's triumph over tyranny. USSOCOM and interagency partners should advocate and prepare for a more broad-based, interagency approach to collaborative, *full-spectrum* unconventional warfare. This includes being proactive in ensuring that unconventional warfare is presented as a viable option to policymakers early enough for proper preparation and implementation.

Proactive political and unconventional warfare can be enormously effective in furthering U.S. interests. History shows, on the other hand, that limited, reactive, poorly timed, non-wartime UW efforts rarely succeed. The following sections of this paper will explain how a broader and more assertive approach to the challenge in Syria might have produced dramatically different results. Guerrilla warfare remains an important part of our UW capability, but a more comprehensive approach includes other aspects that are preparatory and supplementary to that. These aspects are every bit as important as guerrilla warfare, especially in gray zone applications. And while there is no denying that UW is a high-risk enterprise, there are means of mitigating those risks.

Clearly, unconventional warfare is an inherently interagency affair. What follows applies to all aspects of full-spectrum unconventional warfare and, aside from some Special Operations Forces (SOF)-specific references, makes no attempt to delineate interagency roles and responsibilities. For several reasons, not the least of which is the potential shifting of lead agency over time, a certain degree of interagency duplication of capability in many associated functions is not undesirable. Command, control, and collaboration aspects will be addressed later in the paper.

Assessing State Instability and Identifying Windows of Opportunity

Because timing plays such a decisively important role in UW, the ability to recognize and act upon indicators of UW windows of opportunity is imperative. This calls for an estimative intelligence capability focused specifically on structured and continual analysis of the prospects for or existence of internal dissent in the face of authoritarian rule. We must become much better at not only recognizing the conditions for domestic unrest (the *potential* for state instability), but at detecting the presence of nascent clandestine opposition, the emerging shape and scope of that opposition, the character and agenda of its leadership, the substance of its narrative, and the pace and trajectory of its development. An early and growing in-depth understanding of such a movement can help determine if a benefactor-proxy relationship would serve U.S. interests.

⁴ Major General Gregory J. Lengyel, Commander, Special Operations Command Europe (SOCEUR), "Sponsor Welcoming Remarks," JSOU/BALTDEFCOL/SOCEUR Unconventional Warfare Seminar, Tartu, Estonia, 4–6 November 2014, 5.

Being able to articulate the basis of this understanding and this determination is at the core of our senior leaders' ability to sell unconventional warfare as a viable foreign policy option in a given situation.

Development and application of a strategy of comprehensive and proactive unconventional warfare, as presented in this paper, also requires a keen appreciation of the concept of 'tipping points' and other aspects of mass social behavior in relation to internal conflict. Watts and Pezard have described tipping points as "a subset of 'critical mass' or 'threshold' dynamics in which the behavior of a certain proportion of the population ... causes others to behave in a similar manner, leading to cascading effects."⁵

Understanding and Mapping the Human Terrain

Our prospect for success in such indigenous-centric engagements hinges on our ability to influence the behavior of those who comprise the body and leadership of the resistance movement. If we expect to influence their behavior, we first need to understand their relationships and affiliations; their attitudes and perceptions; their hopes and aspirations and motivations; their grievances and fears and frustrations. Mapping the human terrain is an absolutely imperative step in this process. This involves illuminating schisms and cleavages (both extant and potential) within the fabric of the society. With regard to the mass population this can include a wide variety of social aggregates, for example: religious sects and factions, diaspora populations, kinship networks, human rights groups, the urban poor and other underprivileged and neglected population groups, political constituencies, the media, economic and trade elites, corruption victim groups, political activists, women's rights groups, trade unions, teacher associations, student activist groups, veterans organizations, and activist clergy groups. Simmering ethnic, clan, or geographical tensions and rivalries need to be fully appreciated.

Within the state apparatus (to include the leadership, the bureaucracy, security forces, and political parties) this might include: political elites, patronage and clientelism networks, reformist opposition legislative groups, various internal power struggles, leadership or party factions, or warlord fiefdoms. Cleavages specific to security forces might include, for example, schisms between those enjoying a cronyism relationship with the regime and those with a more professional orientation.

Clearly such a mapping effort is an endless process fed by both human intelligence networks and open source research. It also benefits from leveraging social media data and social network analysis.⁶

⁵ Stephen Watts and Stephanie Pezard, "Rethinking Small-Footprint Interventions," *Parameters* 44(1) (Spring 2014): 24. Also see Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2007), and Thomas C. Schelling, *Micromotives and Macrobehavior* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006).

⁶ For a Syria case study application of this, see Seth Lucente and Greg Wilson, "Crossing the Red Line: Social Media and Social Network Analysis for Unconventional Campaign Planning," *Special Warfare*, January–March 2013, 20–26.

A Thorough and Continuous Estimate of the Resistance

As nascent resistance elements begin to form from these population groups and coalesce into movements, U.S. analysts and UW planners must begin an assessment of all elements. Which groups have goals and objectives compatible with U.S. interests? Which population groups are represented? How do they view the United States? Have they expressed a willingness to accept external support? Do they enjoy the support of prominent people within the civil population, the church, or the government? Would they be capable of laying the foundation for a more inclusive and participatory form of government, one that is truly responsive to the needs of its citizens? Could they form the nucleus of a resistance coalition?

This last question is of particular importance, for unity of effort is just as important for a resistance movement as it is for a conventional military campaign. Historically, resistance, whether formed against a sovereign government or an occupying power,⁷ is nearly always characterized by multiple factions that may or may not be compatible with one another. In order to have the best chance of success, indeed in order to ensure survival, as many of these factions as possible must agree to form a coalition. Organization of the *Forces Françaises de l'Intérieur* in 1943, for example, was the result of an 18-month negotiation and mediation effort on the part of agents of General Charles de Gaulle with numerous French resistance factions, some of which were openly hostile to each other. Allied special forces such as the Jedburghs, the Office of Strategic Services Operational Groups, and the British Special Air Service served as the duct tape that held this tenuous resistance coalition together through final liberation.

Gaining a Position of Early Influence

Discreet contact with an inchoate movement—still in the latent and incipient stages of development—provides the best opportunity to influence, shape, and steer the movement. As explained above, when organized opposition to a regime begins to take shape, several factions with varying and possibly competing agendas form. In the early stages, this lack of unity works to the advantage of the regime. If not held in check, however, it can quickly devolve into full-blown civil war, as was the case in both Libya and Syria.

Engaging movements early in this development process can put us in a position to encourage and facilitate the convergence or alliance of competing but compatible factions and strands. Moreover, it would enable us to help thwart or inhibit the development of competing factions or movements that are incompatible and adversarial. The most opportune time to neutralize or destroy such competing factions is when they are still in the latent and incipient stages.⁸ As our relationship with the movement matures, and we have satisfied ourselves as to

⁷ It should be noted that resistance against an occupying power is often *also* aimed at a collaborationist (and therefore likely illegitimate) national government. Examples of this include the Vichy French government that collaborated with the German occupiers in World War II and the Marxist PDPA government of Afghanistan that collaborated with the Soviet occupiers during the Cold War.

⁸ See Colonel John D. Waghelstein, *Reading the Tea Leaves: Proto-Insurgency in Honduras*, CIWAG Case Study on Irregular Warfare and Armed Groups (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2012).

the movement's viability and popularity, we would be in a position to orchestrate political and military advisory support. Such early advice might be focused, for example, on optimizing mobilization structures and strategies, organizing for clandestine efficiency and survivability, identifying and exploiting subversive infiltration opportunities, or maximizing influence campaigns.⁹ Advisory support from the Department of State might involve front group organization and legitimate political action.

Understanding the Function and Power of Subversion

Subversion, defined as “actions designed to undermine the military, economic, psychological, or political strength or morale of a governing authority,”¹⁰ has been an element of our UW doctrine from the very beginning. It has, however, been largely overlooked, misunderstood, or ignored, and has thus been given scant attention in our UW doctrine, training, and education. But its effective and timely application can often preclude costlier and more protracted insurgency or guerrilla warfare. Although it has historically been viewed as most effective when carried out over an extended period of time, it can actually contribute to more rapid conflict resolution and thus prevent a descent into civil war. Subversion includes at least three distinct forms of activity: front groups, infiltration, and civil unrest.¹¹ The last of these three forms—civil unrest—is at the heart of the Syrian crisis and deserves more attention to understand where this fits in full-spectrum unconventional warfare.

Why the Growing Preference for Nonviolent Civil Resistance?

As a recent RAND report noted, “Prodemocracy opposition movements are appearing with increasing suddenness, frequency, and intensity, owing in large part to new means of social networking and political organization ... even firm authoritarian regimes may face serious opposition, much of it democratic in intent.”¹² This trend began with the many successful anti-communist civil resistance movements at the close of the Cold War and continues to the present, most notably with the wave of unrest in North Africa and the Middle East that came to be called the “Arab Spring.” The Syria crises began with protesters intending to replicate the earlier nonviolent civil resistance movement that proved so successful in Tunisia.

Many resistance movements have chosen the nonviolent strategy for reasons that were made evident in a 2008 study that indicated that movements following such an approach are twice as likely to succeed as compared to those following a strategy of violent resistance.¹³

⁹ Will Irwin, *How Civil Resistance Works (And How SOF Can Help)*, Joint Special Operations University (JSOU) report (forthcoming monograph).

¹⁰ Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, 8 November 2010 (As Amended Through 15 February 2016), 228.

¹¹ William Rosenau, *Subversion and Insurgency* (Santa Monica, CA: The RAND Corporation, 2007).

¹² David C. Gompert and Hans Binnendijk, *The Power to Coerce: Countering Adversaries Without Going to War* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2016), 24.

¹³ Maria J. Stephan and Erica Chenoweth, “Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict,” *International Security* 33, no. 1 (Summer 2008): 7–44.

Moreover, as continuing research has shown, this gap between the success rates of the two approaches continues to grow. Lastly, “it is also true that external support for nonviolent opposition movements is more likely to have favorable results than external support for violent ones,” and that such support can be provided as a means of encouraging a regime to institute reforms, facilitate regime change, or coerce a regime into making foreign policy adjustments.¹⁴

What This Means for SOF and Our UW Approach

The importance of this trend to SOF is that it requires creative conceptual thinking on how to accommodate our current UW doctrine to new gray zone realities. Nonviolent civil resistance efforts in places such as Libya and Syria quickly turned violent for several reasons; properly and well-timed UW engagements could have made a difference. Unfortunately, while our new joint UW doctrine (Joint Pub 3-05.1, *Unconventional Warfare* (FOUO), 15 September 2015) recognizes that SOF may operate in support of nonviolent civil resistance, it contains no suggestions on how this might be done. A discussion of UW campaign design and examples of UW lines of effort, for example, offers nothing aimed at weakening a regime’s pillars of support and changing internal power relationships.

If a movement chooses to follow a nonviolent civil resistance strategy, SOF and interagency partners could provide advice on resistance organization to improve security, effectiveness, and survivability

(e.g., underground cellular structures—series or parallel, depending on function; creation of auxiliary capabilities, etc.). Counsel could also be given on proven nonviolent tactics, techniques, and procedures. Most important, advisors could stress the importance of nonviolent discipline. A single rock-throwing episode can result in violent security force overreaction as police and soldiers feel the need to protect themselves and the regime finds justification in ordering more violent repression. In fact, this is precisely what occurred in Syria.



Serbian students carrying national flags and banners with the fist symbol of the *Отпор* (Resistance) student movement during a protest rally in central Belgrade on 9 November 1999. The U.S.-supported “Bulldozer Revolution” resulted in the overthrow of dictator Slobodan Milosevic. Source: Newscom

¹⁴ Gompert, 25, citing Erica Chenoweth and Maria Stephan, “Drop Your Weapons: When and Why Civil Resistance Works,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2014.

Preparing for an Armed Resistance Contingency

Although a pro-democracy civil resistance movement chooses to follow a nonviolent strategy, recent history provides dramatic evidence that there is no guarantee the struggle will remain nonviolent. Events in Libya, Syria, and elsewhere attest to the fact that good intentions count for little in the face of determined violent repression by a ruthlessly authoritarian regime. Prudent resistance and UW planners must take this into account and develop auxiliary or contingency plans. Among the key observations made by participants at the SOCEUR-sponsored UW seminar hosted by the Baltic Defence College in 2014 was the recognition that resistance can be armed or nonviolent, but both must be planned and prepared for.¹⁵

Depending on the nature of the regime and the anticipated government response to nonviolent resistance activity, SOF can help organize and develop a separate, armed branch of the resistance, if necessary and if such support is requested. A ‘train and equip’ effort could then be initiated in a remote area or in a neighboring friendly state. Patience and discipline should prevail until the nonviolent movement has been given every chance to succeed.

SOF must also be prepared to support shifts in allegiance of the targeted regime’s own security forces. In the 1989 Romanian Revolution, student demonstrators sought to bring an end to President Nicolae Ceaucescu’s 24-year reign. Initially, security forces fired on student protesters in accordance with orders from the Ceaucescu regime, but within 48 hours

SOF must also be prepared to support shifts in allegiance of the targeted regime’s own security forces.

the army switched allegiance from the government to the resistance. Army forces then fought a brief but bloody battle with Ceaucescu’s brutal state security police, the *Securitate*, which remained loyal to the dictator.¹⁶ In some circumstances, it is conceivable that SOF could fight alongside such mutinous security elements in battling forces remaining loyal to the regime.

To provide added coercive effect and force protection, additional SOF and/or conventional forces can be positioned either in nearby friendly countries or offshore as a quick-reaction force, humanitarian intervention force, or combat search and rescue capability.

Our Most Ignored UW Tool

An area of much needed revitalization in our UW doctrine and practice, one capable of having significant potential impact, is that of psychological preparation. Our UW doctrine has long been built around a seven-phase approach to providing U.S. support to a resistance movement or insurgency. The initial phase of this approach is one of immense importance, but its focus has changed in recent years and the original intent of the phase, in part, has therefore been largely forgotten. Early doctrine referred to this initial phase as “Psychological Preparation,” and it

¹⁵ JSOU, Baltic Defence College, and SOCEUR, “Unconventional Warfare/Resistance Seminar Series, Baltic Defence College, Tartu, Estonia, After Action Report, 4–6 November 2014,” 3.

¹⁶ Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of December 1989* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 125–33.

included emphasis on not only unifying public opinion against the government and psychologically preparing the civil population and the resistance for accepting U.S. support, but also on influencing the target country's security forces.¹⁷ In recent years, this phase has been renamed simply "Preparation," with much emphasis shifted to intelligence preparation and area study, while continuing to stress psychological preparation of the civil population and the resistance. Current doctrine does not adequately address influencing a regime's security forces. This provides a good example of how changing terminology for reasons of 'political correctness' can unintentionally result in a change in focus and a resulting weakening of capability.

An interagency *coercive propaganda* effort, employing a blend of covert and overt methods, can contribute to police and military leadership reassessing the morality of their cause. Security force members can develop a feeling of isolation from the population (which includes family, friends, and neighbors), not to mention disillusionment with and distrust of the regime. The following section illustrates just how effective such methods could be in removing regime security forces from the conflict before any fighting begins.

The Dynamic of Change in Power Relationships

Our inclination, which clearly comes through in our UW doctrine, is to view the target government (to include its security forces), as an unbending, irrational, and hostile monolith. This viewpoint impedes our ability to consider approaches toward disaggregation of that monolith and working to neutralize or coopt elements of the regime's pillars of support. Efforts aimed at weakening those pillars can result in collapse of the regime through disintegration of its sources of power.

Nonviolent resistance advocate Gene Sharp uses the terms *nonviolent coercion* and *conversion* to describe those actions taken by the resistance and their supporters to reduce the reliability of segments of the regime's security forces or other key elements of the state. "Nothing is static. Power relationships, both absolute and relative, are subject to constant and rapid changes."¹⁸ This can quickly reach the point where police and military forces mutiny, either taking a neutral position, as the Egyptian army did in 2011, or actually shifting allegiance from the government to the resistance, as has happened on many occasions. Even the state's civil service bureaucracy may follow suit. As these pillars of support collapse, the regime's power and structures of oppression begin to disintegrate. As described by one of Dr. Sharp's associates, "Until the primary pillars of the regime are undermined, neutralized, or destroyed, there is little

¹⁷ See, for example, U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 31-21, *Guerilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations*, 29 September 1961, 171-172; and FM 3-05.201, *Special Forces Unconventional Warfare Operations*, 30 April 2003, 1-19.

¹⁸ Gene Sharp, *From Dictatorship to Democracy: A Conceptual Framework for Liberation* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 52.

prospect of political reform or regime change.”¹⁹ The state’s dependence and monopoly on the use of force to remain in power is, in effect, the regime’s *center of gravity*.

It must be remembered that security forces and civil servants are themselves part of the society. Regardless of their position, they remain part of a community, with family, friends, and neighbors, all of whom are part of extensive social networks. Officers who view themselves as patriotic and loyal servants of the government sometimes allow their professionalism to lead them to follow unquestioningly a regime that has become corrupt and abusive toward its people. Seldom do members of any nation’s armed forces, however, enlist or accept a commission with the hope of one day turning their weapons on their own people. This truth must be exploited.

To most people in countries under an authoritarian regime, the police are the most prominent day-to-day face of government. Unfortunately, in corrupt and repressive regimes, the task of serving and protecting the regime too often takes priority over that of serving and protecting the people. Nevertheless, the police, in “carrying out the orders of a dictator should not, in general, be viewed as the enemy of the people. They are servants of a system that has failed. It is the system that needs to be replaced, not the thousands of honest and honorable people whose training and skills are necessary to serve and protect a democratic society.”²⁰

Aside from those few who clearly qualify as criminal abusers of their power, all security forces—military, police, paramilitary—should be engaged with the message that they are not viewed as the enemy, but as fellow victims of a malicious regime and professionals who will be needed in reestablishing order and security in a post-regime future. Influence messaging must make clear to security force leaders that their status will not be jeopardized, but rather that there will be an important role for them to fill under a democratic government. This applies, as well, to civil servants and others critical to the functioning of bureaucracy. The alternative approach is the one taken, with catastrophic results, by the United States following the 2003 invasion of Iraq, later described by former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates as our “amazing bungling after the initial success, including ... disbanding the Iraqi army, and implementing a draconian de-Baathification policy ... that seemed to ignore every lesson from the post-1945 de-Nazification of Germany.”²¹

Influence messaging must make clear to security force leaders that their status will not be jeopardized, but rather that there will be an important role for them to fill under a democratic government.

The fact that security forces very often view themselves as professional and moral servants of the people, and can therefore become sympathetic to a resistance cause, can be seen in the following examples.

¹⁹ Colonel (U.S. Army, Ret.) Robert L. Helvey, *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict: Thinking About the Fundamentals* (Boston: The Albert Einstein Institution, 2004), 9.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

²¹ Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), 28.

- On 22 February 1986, two general officers announced their defection from the regime of Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos and their allegiance to Corazón Aquino, from whom Marcos had just stolen an election. The generals, along with two battalions of soldiers who had mutinied, barricaded themselves in two military camps outside Manila. When Marcos ordered the army to crush the rebels, attacking troops equipped with tanks backed down when confronted by huge crowds of unarmed civilians, part of the nonviolent “People’s Power Movement.” Fighter pilots ordered to strafe the camps refused to do so for fear of civilian casualties. These actions sparked a nationwide defection of soldiers and officers from the regime. Marcos and his wife were forced to flee the Philippines three days later.²²
- In the 1989 Romanian Revolution, as noted earlier, army forces mutinied and went over to the side of the resistance. The Ceaucescu regime fell within a week.²³
- Czechoslovakia’s 1989 “Velvet Revolution” began with demonstrations on 19 November, with police initially using violence to disperse crowds and repress further protests. This quickly changed by the following day, however, as police took no further action against the growing protests. Soldiers were never ordered out of their barracks by their officers and even the People’s Militia, the Communist Party’s private 20,000-man state security force, refused to attack the demonstrators. By the first week of December, the Communist Party leadership resigned, bringing an end to 41 years of communist rule and the initiation of a parliamentary republic.²⁴
- After initial violent repression of the *Otpor* civil resistance movement during Serbia’s 2000 “Bulldozer Revolution,” several mid- and high-ranking military and police leaders, growing disillusioned with the regime of President Slobodan Milošević, entered into a secret pact with opposition leaders. Through back-channel communications with security force sympathizers, *Otpor* and a political opposition group arranged a nationwide march on the capital by hundreds of thousands of protestors with the knowledge that the police and military would

²² Kurt Schock, *Unarmed Insurrections: People Power Movements in Nondemocracies* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 78–79.

²³ Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of December 1989*, 125–33.

²⁴ Victor Sebestyen, *Revolution 1989: The Fall of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009), 372–79.

disregard orders to violently repress them. Police agreed that they would erect barricades but would not enforce them. Milošević resigned within 24 hours.²⁵

- Georgia’s “Rose Revolution” of 2003 sought the overthrow of President Eduard Shevardnadze. Within a month, some elite military forces defected and joined the opposition. Defecting government officials included the secretary of the Security Council. The minister of security remained in office but refused to allow security forces to take part in arrests or shooting of protestors. The defection of the ministry of the interior’s elite Gulua unit spurred further defections by military units. Shortly thereafter, Shevardnadze resigned.²⁶
- Ukraine’s “Orange Revolution” in 2004 sought to oust fraudulently elected presidential candidate Viktor Yanukovich. Senior military officers refused to follow orders to attack protestors; shortly thereafter the Parliament and Supreme Court chose to side with the protestors, sealing Yanukovich’s departure.²⁷
- In Lebanon’s March 2005 “Cedar Revolution,” seeking the removal of Syrian troops from Lebanon after a 29-year occupation, the Lebanese Army ignored orders to put down mass demonstrations; Syria withdrew the last of its troops the following month.
- Lastly, Kyrgyzstan’s 2005 “Tulip Revolution” toppled a 14-year autocrat after police and the military failed to effectively resist mass protests.²⁸

Most of the above noted results were achieved even without the added coercive effect of well-orchestrated external influence activities, although there is evidence that military officers involved in diffusing confrontations in Georgia in 2003 and the Ukraine in 2004 had been involved in earlier NATO Partnership for Peace engagement programs.²⁹ The one known exception was the 2000 Serbian Bulldozer Revolution, which included a program known as “Ring Around Serbia.” This NATO influence campaign employed a ring of FM transmitters placed in countries bordering Serbia to broadcast Serbian language programming into Serbia to: counter the state-controlled media of Slobodan Milošević, wean public support away from Milošević, and bring about regime change. “These transmitters ... played a major role in the

²⁵ Adam Roberts and Timothy Garton Ash, eds., *Civil Resistance and Power Politics: The Experience of Non-violent Action from Gandhi to the Present* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 311–15.

²⁶ Anders Åslund and Michael McFaul, eds., *Revolution in Orange: The Origins of Ukraine’s Democratic Breakthrough* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2006), 182.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 194, n23.

eventual downfall of the Serbian dictator.”³⁰ Although space limitations preclude coverage here, lessons should also be gleaned from cases where nonviolent revolution failed, such as in Burma, China, and Iran.

As part of the Department of State-led U.S. program to support Serbia’s *Otpor* resistance movement in 2000, retired U.S. Army Colonel Robert L. Helvey ran a weekend workshop for *Otpor* leaders in Budapest, where he stressed nonviolent discipline and the importance of applying the principles of war to their nonviolent campaign. Helvey has pointed out the importance of initiating subversive influence activities as early as possible:

The time to develop plans to undermine the willingness of the army to intervene against civilian protesters is well before a government’s decision to employ them is made. Key to any plans for undermining the willingness of the army to commit forces against protesters is to convince them that their own lives and the lives of their families are not threatened and that professional soldiers will have a secure future under democratic rule.³¹

On Signature

Historically, U.S. support to foreign opposition elements has often been provided through covert programs to maintain deniability. Sooner or later, however, media exposure of such programs often results in causing embarrassment and loss of credibility to the movement and unfavorable blowback effects for the U.S. Government. One method of avoiding this is to provide U.S. support overtly under the auspices of State Department pro-democracy programs, as was done in the case of U.S. support to the



Otpor movement. This does not preclude a supporting role for SOF, nor does it preclude concurrent covert programs.

An estimated 100,000 Lebanese citizens take over Beirut’s streets and gather in Martyr’s Square in the early morning hours of 1 March 2005, celebrating the resignation of their Syrian backed government. The Lebanese army refused to follow orders to violently repress the demonstrations in what has been called the Cedar Revolution. Photo by Lena Kara/REX (514698d). Source: Newscom

³⁰ National Archives and Records Administration memorandum, “Inventory for FOIA Request 2006-0206-F, Records on ‘Ring Around Serbia,’” Clinton Presidential Library, 25 October 2006.

³¹ Helvey, *On Strategic Nonviolent Conflict*, 11.

Timing and the Consequence of Missed Opportunities

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, policymakers and senior SOF leaders must be able to recognize UW windows of opportunity and present or support the case for a UW intervention. The significance of missed UW opportunities was highlighted recently by a former member of the Defense Policy Board, who observed that the United States “vacates the space between war and peace [the gray zone],” which is exactly where our “enemies and adversaries prefer to operate.” The writer illustrated her point with the following case:

At least as far back as 2006 ... King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia ... sought to work with the United States and others to consider regime change in Syria. The door was open to combine U.S. expertise with Saudi resources to empower anti-Assad opposition groups, thus undercutting not only the Syrian regime itself but also Iran’s regional power—by undercutting its proxy in Damascus. However, little was done during the waning years of the Bush administration on that front, and the Obama administration did even less. As a consequence, when the civil war broke out in 2011, the United States had few levers to pull to help arrive at the outcome we wanted ... The result was a fractured Western-leaning opposition and an empowered jihadi movement.³²

Perhaps even more costly have been missed opportunities in Iran, which experienced large-scale student protests in July 1999 and even greater unrest ten years later. In what became known as the Green Movement, as many as 3 million peaceful demonstrators took to the streets of Tehran in the summer of 2009 to protest what has been almost universally viewed as a fraudulent presidential election to keep Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in power. As described in one U.S. government account, “Security forces were initially paralyzed by the numbers. But then the regime unleashed security forces, including Revolutionary Guards, units of the *Basij* paramilitary units, and plain-clothed paramilitary forces called *Lebas Shakhsi*. Thousands of protestors were beaten, hundreds were arrested, and dozens were killed by snipers.”³³ Reportedly, some former officers of the Revolutionary Guards later expressed deep remorse for the brutally repressive actions ordered by the regime.³⁴

Iran, which continues to be a weapons of mass destruction proliferation concern, has been a U.S. State Department-designated state supporter of terrorism since 1984 and continues to advise, train, fund, and equip terrorist and insurgent groups throughout the Middle East, including providing sophisticated improvised explosive device technology and other advanced

³² Dr. Nadia Schadlow, “Peace and War: The Space Between,” *Commentary*, 18 August 2014.

³³ Abbas Milani, “The Green Movement,” United States Institute for Peace website: iranprimer.usip.org/resource/green-movement (accessed 25 April 2016).

³⁴ Chavala Madlena, “As Iran’s Crackdown Continues, Former Revolutionary Guard Officers Speak Out,” *The World Post*, 25 May 2011, at http://huffingtonpost.com/chavala-madlena/as-irans-crackdown-contin_b_621442.html (accessed 25 April 2016).

weaponry to insurgents who used them against U.S. forces in Iraq.³⁵ Regarding the lack of U.S. support for the 2009 “Green Revolution,” former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates later wrote that he felt “we could and should have done more, at least rhetorically.”³⁶

Command, Control, and Collaboration

The failed 1980 Iran hostage rescue mission proved to be a catalyst in the modernization and reorganization of United States Special Operations Forces, including the creation of a Counterterrorist Joint Task Force and, eventually, USSOCOM. Similarly, the Syria Train and Equip mission could serve as a clarion call for the creation of a Special Warfare Joint Task Force with a strong interagency planning and coordination oversight instrument similar to the National Security Council-level Office of Policy Coordination of early Cold War years. USSOCOM should further study such a concept.

Gray Zone UW Terminology

Finally, an observation is offered on the continuing debate over terms such as “political warfare” and “unconventional warfare,” so often found to be problematic with some of our interagency partners. While we in the United States, along with many of our partner nation representatives, view the actions described in this paper as falling short of warfare and therefore nesting within the gray zone realm, it should be understood that many states on the receiving end of these activities could very well view them as acts of war. Terms that have stood the test of time, therefore, should continue to be viewed as appropriate, although interagency partners might prefer the term “support to resistance.”

Catch-phrase terms such as “Phase Zero” and “left of bang,” on the other hand, are not helpful, as they give the false impression that operations in the gray zone are somehow preparatory to larger-scale and more violent follow-on operations. In fact, any requirement for such follow-on escalation would be an indication of failure to resolve gray zone challenges quickly and quietly, which should be the preferred U.S. approach.

Consideration might also be given to resurrecting use of the term “psychological operations” to emphasize the importance of the original propaganda role of this capability when used in a UW context. The term “military information support operations” has come to be viewed by many as more associated with counterinsurgency-focused efforts to “win hearts and minds.”

³⁵ U.S. Department of State Bureau of Counterterrorism, “Country Reports on Terrorism 2014,” <http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/crt/2014/239410.htm>; and U.S. Department of Defense, “More Evidence Shows Iran Directly Supports Iraq Insurgents,” DoD News article by David Mays, 3 October 2007, <http://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=47669> (accessed 25 April 2016).

³⁶ Gates, 328.

Conclusion

In Syria, our current benefactor-proxy relationship seems plagued by divergent objectives and interests while the U.S. operational approach is characterized by seemingly disjointed, poorly coordinated, and competitive efforts. At the very least, in other words, our Syria Train and Equip intervention appears to violate at least two principles of joint operations (objective and unity of command/unity of effort).

The full-spectrum approach to unconventional warfare described in this paper could have resulted in a quite different outcome for Syria. Early U.S. UW engagement, effective influence and coercion actions, and a more disciplined approach to nonviolent civil resistance could have resulted in early regime change favorable to U.S. interests. This could have been followed immediately by a host nation-initiated U.S. foreign internal defense (FID) engagement to begin the process of retraining the Syrian military and forestalling any counter-revolution or counter-coup activity. Russian intervention, the enormous refugee crisis that continues to plague Europe and Turkey, and the lingering potential for increased U.S. force commitment might all have been averted. Furthermore, and most important, such a FID engagement with a newly legitimized Syrian military and police force, coupled with coordinated defense efforts with neighboring Turkey and Jordan, could have gone far in preventing encroachment on sovereign Syrian territory by the so-called Islamic State.

All of this would depend on a U.S. willingness to adopt a more aggressive and proactive approach to political warfare and to capitalize on a more comprehensive application of unconventional warfare. Recent administration approaches have been to allow uprisings, such as those in Libya and Syria in 2011, to develop on their own and hope for the best. Clearly, such a dilatory approach too often works to our disadvantage in the long run, leading to risky and costly belated efforts to put things right. USSOCOM readiness to advocate early and continual UW engagement could make the difference.



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