

# Why Urban Guerrilla Proliferates

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One obvious reason for the proliferation of urban guerrilla warfare is the twin processes of modernization and steep demographic growth, which means both that the space taken by human residential areas has risen dramatically and that these areas are massively concentrated in urban centers: towns and cities. But there is another reason that has to do with the great proliferation and spectacular success of guerrilla warfare in general in our times. I shall start by seeking to account for the proliferation of guerrilla or insurgency warfare in general, and then move to explain how this impinges on the growing popularity of urban guerrilla. The two developments are closely connected, and their root cause, though quite evident, is often overlooked.

Indeed, the success of guerrilla warfare in the past century constitutes an enigma, with insurgency earning a reputation of near invincibility. Mighty powers that proved capable of crushing the strongest great power opponents fail to defeat the humblest of military rivals in some of the world's poorest and weakest regions. It has been barely noted, however, that rather than being universal, this difficulty has overwhelmingly been the lot of liberal democratic powers – and encountered precisely because they are liberal and democratic. Much of the democracies' conduct in this respect – the butt of heavy criticism, some of it justified – is actually a badge of honor for them, but also the cause of their failures.

Historically, the crushing of an insurgency necessitated ruthless pressure on the civilian population, which liberal democracies have found increasingly unacceptable. This simple fact was originally pointed out by my friend Dr. Gil Merom of the University of Sydney. Premodern powers, as well as modern authoritarian and totalitarian ones, rarely had a problem

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with such measures, and overall they have proved quite successful in suppression. All empires worked this way, including democratic Athens and republican Rome. They could *only* work this way. The British and French empires sustained themselves at a relatively low cost only so long as the imperial powers felt no scruples about applying ruthless measures, as the British, for example, still did as late as 1857 in suppressing the Indian mutiny. However, as liberalization deepened from the late nineteenth century, the days of formal democratic empires became numbered. At the turn of the twentieth century, the British setbacks and eventual compromise settlement in South Africa and withdrawal from Ireland were the signs of things to come for other liberal democratic empires as well. How did Ireland that had been kept under the British heel for centuries suddenly succeed in seceding? It was only when the demand for self-determination became hard to resist by liberals, who *also* found the old methods of bloody suppression repugnant and unacceptable, that Ireland was able to gain independence. It has scarcely been noticed that the wave of decolonization after 1945 took place *only* vis-à-vis the liberal democratic empires, most notably Britain and France. The nondemocratic empires, far from being made to withdraw by indigenous resistance, were either crushed in the two world wars, as with Germany and Japan, or dismantled peacefully when the totalitarian system disintegrated, as with the Soviet Union.

Consider imperial Germany's conduct in Africa before World War I, which was exceptional even by colonial standards. In German Southwest Africa, today's Namibia, the Herero revolt in 1904 was countered by a policy and strategy of extermination. Wells were sealed off, and much of the population was driven out to the desert to die, while the rest was worked to death in labor camps. Only 15,000 out of 80,000 Herero survived. In German East Africa, today's Tanzania, the Maji-Maji revolt in 1905-7 was similarly answered with extermination. A small force of 500 German troops destroyed settlements and crops so systematically that more than a quarter of a million natives died, mostly of starvation. These were chilling demonstrations of the effectiveness of the old techniques of imperial suppression.

Skeptics might cite the successful guerrilla waged against Nazi Germany in Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union. However, there can be little doubt that had Germany won the Second World War and been able to apply more troops to these troublesome spots, its genocidal methods

would have prevailed there too. The Soviet Union's failure in Afghanistan is another obvious counterexample, but Afghanistan – the ideal guerrilla country – was the exception, the outlier, rather than the rule in the Soviet imperial system. Chechnya may be more enlightening in this respect, and the sequence is unmistakable: Soviet methods under Stalin – including mass deportation – were the most brutal and most effective in curbing resistance, while liberal Russia of the 1990s proved to be the least brutal and least effective, with Putin's authoritarian Russia constituting an intermediate case. It is in fact the ease with which the empire was held down within the Soviet Union itself and in Eastern Europe that is worthy of attention. Indeed, the sample of successful insurgency is entirely skewed, suffers from a heavy selection bias, for as Sherlock Holmes has noted, it is "the dog that didn't bark" – the imperial domains lying helpless under the totalitarian iron fist – that are the most conspicuous, and most telling. The same applies to China, whose continued successful suppression of Tibetan and Uyghur nationalism is likely to persist so long as China retains its nondemocratic regime. In all the totalitarian powers insurgency is successfully deterred, nipped in the bud, or effectively crushed.

This is not to say that the democracies' conduct has been saintly. Atrocities, tacitly sanctioned by political and military authorities or carried out unauthorized by the troops, have regularly been committed against both combatants and non-combatants. All the same, strict restrictions on the use of violence against civilians constitute the legal and normative standard for liberal democracies. And although many, probably most, violations of this standard remain unreported, those incidents that have been exposed in open societies with free media are met with public condemnation and judicial procedures. All these developments radically limit the liberal democracies' powers of suppression, judged by historical and comparative standards.

The notion that ruthless brutality is the sine qua non of successful counter-insurgency suppression conflicts with the "winning of hearts and minds" that has been posited as the key to success in the recent liberal democratic discourse. Indisputably, winning over at least the elites of conquered societies – through benefits, cooptation, and the amenities of soft power – has always played a central role in imperial "pacification." Yet that velvet glove always covered an iron fist that had crushed local resistance mercilessly in the first place and remained unmistakably in

place as the *ultima ratio* of foreign control. The winning of hearts and minds has indeed become the liberal democracies' guideline for the pacification of foreign societies, but only because they have practically lost the ability to crush such societies by force. The unpleasant truth is that the winning of hearts and minds is very rarely successful and prohibitively expensive, whereas ruthless suppression is both highly effective and cheap.

This finally brings us to the recent rise in the use of urban environment by insurgents, which is largely a function, and a striking demonstration, of the liberal democracies' self-imposed limitations on the use of force. Traditionally, insurgency flourished in the remote parts of the countryside. Urban environment constitutes a deadly trap against an enemy who has no scruples about setting cities on fire, as in the past, or razing them to the ground with artillery fire, as in modern time. This traditional rationale was demonstrated by President Hafez al-Assad of Syria, who in 1982 had whole neighborhoods in the city of Hama destroyed with artillery fire, when his army brutally suppressed a revolt by the Muslim Brotherhood, killing an estimated 15,000-25,000 of the city's population. Today, the younger Assad's regime fails to suppress the insurrection in Syria despite its brutality. The tragedy in Syria has been going on for nearly two years, and is estimated to have cost the lives of perhaps fifty to sixty thousand people. However, the elder Assad inflicted nearly half that number of casualties in three days, and in a single city, in 1982. For fear of foreign intervention, the younger Assad is not free to emulate his father. Putin's Russia is no substitute for the backing of the former Soviet superpower, regrettably gone. Of course, in its own backyard Putin's Russia has been utterly ruthless, subjecting the city of Grozny to heavy artillery fire and intense aerial bombing and leaving it in ruins in 1999-2000, but practically eliminating Chechen resistance there in a remarkably short while.

By contrast, irregulars fighting against liberal democracies make urban areas their bastions precisely because they are able to take shelter within the civilian environment, while relying on their opponents to refrain from operating indiscriminately in these settings. Indeed, the devastation caused by Israel in the villages of southern Lebanon, from where Hizbollah fired rockets on Israeli towns and villages during the 2006 Lebanon war, created an outcry both in Israel and abroad, even though Israel had warned the inhabitants to leave, and "only" about 1000 Lebanese were killed, the majority of them Hizbollah people. The same applied even more to Israel's

Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in December 2008-January 2009, which made Israel all the more cautious during Operation Pillar of Defense in Gaza in November 2012.

Of course, in their wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq the Americans too encountered urban insurgency that took cover within the civilian population. And yet Israel has become the most outstanding case, and not merely because it is more vulnerable to criticism than the United States. Israel is special because the irregulars who fight it do so not in far-away countries, thousands of kilometers away, but on its own borders, only a few dozen kilometers from Israel's own population centers. And this gives them the unique capability to strike at these centers as their chief strategy. As they do not see themselves bound by moral limitations from doing so, an unprecedented situation has been created. I am not a fan of Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu or his policies, but he has captured the current reality very well by stating that Hamas and the other organizations now use their towns and cities as safe havens and launching pads for missiles which they shoot at Israeli towns and cities.

Thus, what we have been witnessing here is the common phenomenon of unintended consequences in its most paradoxical effect. A highly commendable attempt to distance the civilian population from the harms of war has been parasitically exploited by guerrillas who do not abide by this standard to plant their warlike capabilities and activities within the civilian medium, thereby *increasing* civilian involvement. This is somewhat akin to the famous poverty trap in the developed world – which also applies to the Palestinian refugees – where entitlements intended to alleviate poverty might sometimes actually expand and perpetuate it by creating dependency or because of a cynical exploitation of the system.

Does this mean that the democracies should retract or relax their self-imposed restrictions on violence against civilians, the main cause of their poor record of success in counter-insurgency wars, and, indeed, a testimony to their noblest qualities, for which they get so little credit? Although civilian life and property will inevitably continue to suffer in such circumstances, a significant stiffening of the democracies' attitude and conduct is unlikely to occur, nor should it. At the same time, however, a true and fair appreciation of causes and consequences of the current realities is very much required. Many of us may be sympathetic to the success of the guerrilla in colonial settings during the past century, including, one

may add, in the Palestinian territories. Yet rather than serving the cause of liberation and national self-determination, guerrilla in today's world, including Gaza and Lebanon, is harnessed to serve the most sinister and extremist causes, and threatens with the possible use of weapons of mass destruction. One may add that humanitarian interventions too inevitably encounter the same intractable problems just described, which, indeed, partly deters the democracies from getting involved.

Given their self-imposed restrictions on the use of force in civilian settings, the democracies' performance in such circumstances is unlikely to improve dramatically, and real remedies are in short supply. There is still an unfulfilled potential in the adaptation of high-tech warfare to the task of fighting irregulars and discriminating them from the civilian population in which they are nestled. Both Israel and the United States invest heavily in such technologies and have made major strides in this direction. In addition, the democracies try to cultivate indigenous allies, who not only enjoy greater local legitimacy than a foreign power and are more familiar with the local populations, but, one must admit, are also less constrained in their conduct. Finally, even unfriendly state regimes, which can be coerced, usually constitute a better option than no regime at all or a wholesale foreign intervention. The European aerial support for the rebels against Qaddafi in Libya was tailored to avoid the kinds of military involvement, most notably in urban settings, at which liberal democracies are at their weakest. Israel's policy vis-à-vis Hamas in Gaza, and, indeed, the West's policies towards Syria, are informed by similar considerations.

Of course, when vital interests are concerned and indigenous state authorities either do not exist or are unable to enforce their authority, direct military action on the ground, involving the challenge of guerrillas who use urban areas as their bases of operation, may still prove necessary, revealing the liberal democracies at both their best and weakest.