Counterinsurgency: not an Arab specialty

by Florence Gaub

The Arab War on Terror is in full swing. Never before has the region seen as many terrorist networks, guerrilla groups, and militias fighting against governments as now. In Egypt, Iraq, Algeria, and Yemen, central governments are struggling with insurgencies of one type or another, with Western governments providing tacit or overt support.

Unfortunately, Arab states are not good at counterinsurgency. Egypt's Sinai campaign has now entered its fourth unsuccessful year; Yemen's Houthis have come back with a vengeance after a decade in which six military campaigns were waged against them; Algeria fought an outright war against Islamist networks in the 1990s but never won it completely – terrorist activities in the Maghreb not only continued in the 2000s, they are on the rise again. Years of training and $25 billion in aid failed to produce an Iraqi security force capable of eradicating, or even containing, a proto-state organisation like the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). And the Libyan and Syrian armed forces failed to quell the uprisings against the respective regimes.

So why is it that counterinsurgency appears to be so difficult for governments in the Middle East and North Africa?

A non-military task

To begin with, counterinsurgency is counterintuitive in military terms: using violence to counter violence does not usually yield the desired results. Although insurgents make use of, *inter alia*, snipers, kidnappings and suicide bombings, their prospects of achieving outright military victory are dim – as are the chances of the central government of successfully rooting them out. Even where the military manages to crush an insurgency temporarily – as colonial France did during its 1957 *Bataille d'Alger* – more insurgents are created in the process. Short-term victories, therefore, do not translate into long-term stability. In fact, several of the ongoing insurgencies today in the Arab world – be it in Algeria, Yemen or Iraq – are the direct products of previous counterinsurgency operations.

In order to successfully conduct a counterinsurgency operation often anything *but* violence is required. Based on its lessons in Vietnam and Iraq, the US government counterinsurgency guide points out that 'unlike conventional warfare, non-military means are often the most effective elements, with military forces playing an enabling role'. This is because, in contrast to inter-state war, an insurgency is not a battle

over resources or territory, but over the relationship between the governed and the governing. Quelling an insurgency means not only neutralising the insurgents, but also addressing the root political causes of the crisis and avoiding the excessive use of force.

Arab states often struggle, at the political level, to settle domestic conflicts with the majority using diplomatic means; and, at the military level, to neutralise the insurgent minority with the necessary finesse so as to protect the civilian population at large. Insurgents must be carefully separated from the surrounding (and potentially enabling) population: a failure to do so will only generate more recruits.

Insurgency: politics by other means

In many Arab countries, politics is a zero-sum game whereby whoever is in power will monopolise resources, as well as the political space, and exclude antagonists of any type. More often than not, Arab insurgencies are the result of such exclusion from the political space, and reflect a lack of other channels through which to criticise the central government. Extended to the military sphere, this means that insurgencies will be approached with the same 'winner takes it all' mentality: opponents are to be crushed rather than convinced.

Iraq is one such example. Since the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the country has lived through several insurgencies simultaneously; between 2003 and 2007, at least four different types of insurgents fought the government and the international troops stationed there. These included former Baathists, Sunni jihadist networks, Iraqi nationalists and Shia militias.

Levels of violence were reduced considerably because several of the insurgent groups were co-opted politically: Sunnis from the Anbar province decided to join an American campaign against what was then the Islamic State in Iraq, while Shia militias such as the Mahdi Army disarmed under a ceasefire-like agreement with the government. This, in turn, allowed the Iraqi security forces to focus their efforts on the Baathists and jihadist networks.

However, the counterinsurgency proved to be unsustainable. After the American withdrawal in 2011, political frustration in both Sunni and Shia camps boiled over. Promises to integrate Sunnis into the Iraqi security forces in exchange for fighting ISIL went unmet; de-Baathification by a largely Shia leadership continued unabated; peaceful demonstrations against the government were met with violence; and tribal leaders were discredited when Baghdad failed to deliver on jobs. Sunnis subsequently became a recruitment pool for ISIL to tap into. With regard to the Shia, the supposedly disbanded Mahdi Army began to regain power after its leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, returned from his self-imposed exile in Iran in 2011. While its reincarnation, the Peace Brigades, now fight ISIL, Sadr has made it no secret that he is willing to use them against the central government should he feel compelled to so.

Yemen is another example: the current insurgency is related to a previous one dating back to 1962. Then, an Egypt-supported rebellion ousted the centuries-old Zaidi Shia Imamate (which, in a twist of history, was supported by Saudi Arabia) and established a militarised political system – which then went on to marginalise those in the largely Shia area the Houthis hail from.

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When Hussein Badreddin al-Houthi, a cleric, founded a theological movement with anti-governmental tones in the 1990s, Sana'a saw it as an attempt to reverse the events of 1962. Attempts to arrest him in 2004 triggered an insurgency largely rooted in northern Yemeni/Shia frustration with the central government. However, six military campaigns against the Houthis have failed to produce lasting stability: while Yemen's military managed to reduce the Houthis' capacities, it failed to eradicate the root causes which led to the insurgency in the first place.

A ceasefire in 2010 did not hold because Houthis continued to be excluded from Yemen's political system, even after President Saleh was ousted in 2011. Though often presented as a sectarian conflict, Yemen's insurgency is at heart a rebellion over Sana'a's legitimacy. There is no military solution to the ongoing crisis: the Houthis need

a political way out. At the moment, however, neither the government of President Hadi nor his military backers in Saudi Arabia are inclined to compromise.

Eating soup with a knife

As noted by T.E. Lawrence (of Arabia), himself a participant in the Arab insurgency against the Ottoman Empire, the fight against insurgents "is messy and slow, like eating soup with a knife". Counterinsurgencies are messy because they require infantry-based operations to take place amidst the civilian population; and they are slow because they involve the gradual separation of rebels from civilians. In order to combat the insurgents, armed forces can adopt either an 'enemy-centric' approach, which focuses on either killing the opponents and punishing the population for aiding them, or a 'population-centric' approach, which starves the rebels of their support network by convincing civilians to not assist them.

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One example of a population turning against the government over a poorly-conducted counterinsurgency campaign is Egypt. Attempts to sedentarise the Sinai's largely Bedouin population and curb their illicit networks turned them against the central government in the 1980s. North Sinai is one of the poorest governorates of Egypt: Bedouins cannot join the armed forces, it is difficult for them to purchase land, and they were excluded from the emerging tourism industry on the Red Sea.

That the majority of security personnel on the peninsula are from the mainland only reinforces a sense of segregation and the Bedouin perception that the Egyptian presence in the Sinai is in fact an occupation, akin to that of Israel after the 1967 war. In addition, limits on troop numbers in the Sinai – in accordance with the peace treaty with Israel – mean that Egypt has little control over an already fluid and hostile population.

From the early 2000s onwards, jihadist networks – which had re-emerged in the 1990s on Egypt's mainland – began to operate in this environment. Several terrorist attacks against tourist targets were met with sweeping punitive measures such as the arrest of family members of terrorists and holding them as 'hostages'. In the years between the attacks and the toppling of Mubarak, relations between the security forces and the population in the Sinai deteriorated sharply. In 2008, for example, Bedouins abducted 25 policemen following deadly clashes at a demonstration, and attacks on gas pipelines increased.

In 2011, the insurgency re-emerged with a vengeance. While the armed forces were busy trying to manage the security situation in Cairo, attacks against police stations, military installations and energy infrastructure multiplied, as did kidnappings of tourists. Militants also crossed into Israel to perpetrate attacks. The problem with the Sinai insurgency, like in Iraq, is that it involves not one but several overlapping networks and grievances. The jihadist component, which consists of some 2,000 militants, is embedded in a Bedouin population of 300,000. While both groups share the desire to inflict damage on the government, their motives for doing so differ markedly.

Two subsequent military campaigns – Operation Eagle and Operation Sinai – have not managed to quell the insurgency in spite of the deployment of several thousand special forces – exceeding the agreed limit imposed by the Camp David Accords but agreed to by Israel. For Egypt's security forces to eradicate the jihadist networks, they will have to separate the Bedouins from the insurgents – an effort which requires local knowledge of both the region's population and its geography (neither of which they seem to have). Although the campaign's rhetorical commitment to 'care [for] and respect' the local population is designed to 'win hearts and minds', the destruction last year of over 800 houses, the displacement of over 10,000 people

and the disruption of illicit economic activities have achieved the opposite.

At the heart of the problem stands the negative mainland perception of Sinai Bedouins. In the 2012 movie *Al-Maslaha* (The Goods), for instance, the Bedouin character, Salim, is depicted as a lazy, brutal drug-smuggler, whereas his opponent, Hamza, is a kind, hard-working and loyal police officer. Egypt's military is failing on the human terrain because they perceive the population to be part of the problem rather than the solution.

Losing hearts and minds

Algeria had to learn the limits of countering violence with violence the hard way in the 1990s. Its insurgency erupted in 1992 after the armed forces cancelled the first national democratic elections once polls indicated that Islamist parties were projected to win. As Islamist guerrilla groups formed all over the country, the military targeted the parties' supporters, arresting hundreds and cracking down hard on demonstrators. A far-reaching counterterrorism law and the imposition of a curfew gave the regime the necessary breathing space to combat the insurgents. But after what appeared initially to be a government victory, the insurgency came back even stronger in 1994.

In an ever-increasing spiral of violence, both the regime and the insurgents managed to lose the hearts and minds of the Algerian population. In areas where Islamists imposed harsh rules and extorted money from the civilians under their control, they lost the support of the (previously sympathetic) pious middle class. Wherever government units indiscriminately targeted civilians, they created more hostility, as can be read in the 2001 account by a former special forces officer, titled *The Dirty War*. Soon, the levels of violence perpetrated by both sides had generated the phrase "*qui tue qui en Algerie*" ("who is killing whom in Algeria").

The insurgency finally died down in the early 2000s after as many as 150,000 people had been killed: a combination of military pressure against the jihadists and two laws granting amnesty to repentant insurgents depleted the pool of fighters. However, the *Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat* (Salafi Group for Preaching and Combat) managed to retreat into the mountains with its approximately 300 fighters and has continued to perpetrate attacks. In 2006, it swore allegiance to al-Qaeda, turning into al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

The Algerian military has continued its campaign since then, but has been unable to eradicate the problem completely: in early 2013, terrorists loosely affiliated to AQIM stormed a gas facility, causing 39 casualties. Today, AQIM is said to have grown to about 1,000 fighters, in spite of Algeria's success in inflicting major damage to its infrastructure and capabilities. However, Algeria's military has learned that if it wants to keep AQIM at bay, it needs to shield the civilian population from violence – or more potential recruits will be created in the process.

The cost of counterinsurgency

Most Arab states suffering from a form of insurgency not only share a political culture of exclusion and a military conviction that hitting hard will achieve the desired results – they also operate with severe resource constraints, limiting their effective capacity to reach out to the populations they are trying to separate from the insurgents. Improving local services, for instance, was an important element of American counterinsurgency in Iraq. And the lack of jobs plays an important role in feeding the insurgencies in both the Sinai and northern Iraq.

But since Arab leaders are already navigating in economically dire straits, it will be nearly impossible – not to say counterintuitive in their minds – to throw money at a problem that is perceived, first and foremost, as a security issue.

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