

Sowing Dissension among the Insurgency

When Lewis Gann wrote that governments involved in Counterinsurgency should “attempt to sow dissension among the enemy,” he only dedicated two and a half paragraphs of text to what otherwise is a powerful idea.¹ In his limited analysis are only a few historical examples. He offers no serious insights into “how” counterinsurgents can achieve this goal. Too often, academics of irregular warfare are quick to offer counterinsurgents great ideas that can contribute to victory, not appreciating how difficult it is to “operationalize” those ideas successfully.

I haven’t personally come across a whole lot of rigorous theoretical research that can help counterinsurgents understand how to foment distrust in clandestine organizations. Trust theorists like Sztompka can definitely help, but I haven’t found anything intended directly for application in irregular war. Pentiti legislation, pseudo-gangs, deception, and other initiatives have accomplished this end, but rarely has creating distrust been documented in unclassified sources as the immediate or priority objective of such operations. Therefore, I offer you the following theoretical approach from personal experience rather than any sort of research. Noteworthy is that this experience comes from fighting as an insurgent, rather than as a counterinsurgent. Consequently and unfortunately, I know how well it can work. After I present the methodology, I will try to give you a narrative of how it was done against me.

First, let’s acknowledge that every insurgency is different. Looking at the seven doctrinal dynamics of an insurgency (leadership; organizational and operational patterns; external support; phasing and timing; environment and geography; objectives; and ideology), there are literally hundreds of thousands of different insurgent organizational permutations. Typically, such diversity is an asset to the insurgent because it demands that the counterinsurgent taper his efforts to a seemingly endless array of revolutionary idiosyncrasies—at least if the counterinsurgent hopes to succeed. On the other hand, the same diversity can simultaneously challenge insurgent leaders in their attempts to unify their organization politically and militarily. Multiple factions or tribes within an insurgency may participate for various reasons or seek different goals, notwithstanding the differences in composition, disposition, strength, morale, resources, and more. Trying to unify such an organization in order to politically defeat a regime is no small task, especially given the extreme restriction on resources that characterize any insurgency. Herein is the counterinsurgent’s opportunity to sow dissension.

Based solely upon my experience, I propose a 5-phase process to internally eroding an insurgency. We will identify commonalities between groups, and then target them discriminately and methodologically, increasing competition over scarce resources inside of an already volatile environment. Once infighting results, we have set the conditions for the host nation’s Internal Defense and Development strategy (IDAD).²

Phase I entails using all available legal means to understand the insurgency. The exact nature and extent of these efforts exceeds the scope and space of this paper. Though I will devote little

¹ Gann, Lewis. *Guerrillas in History*. Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1971. p. 83.

² See JP 3-07.1, Appendix B for more information about IDAD.

physical space to this discussion, I do not want to mislead readers to underestimate the difficulty or importance of this task. In fact, of the five phases, I argue that phase I is the most important simply because the remaining four phases depend upon the accuracy of such efforts here.

Assume we have insurgency comprising four factions, and it looks something like this:

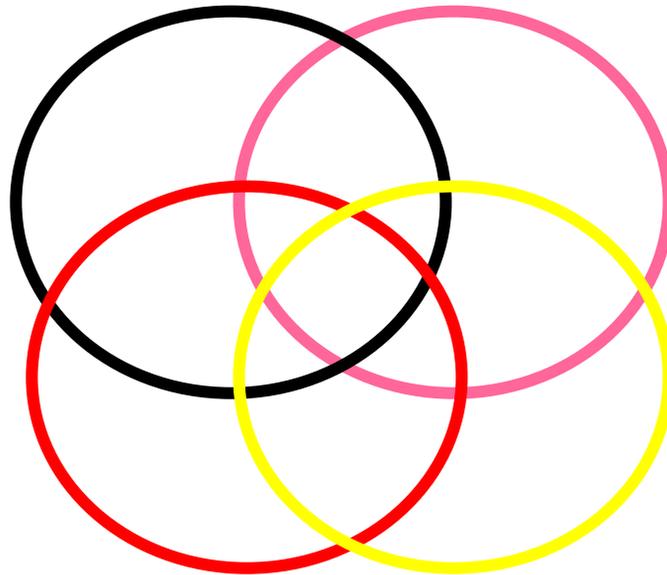


Figure 1: An example insurgency

Once we have an understanding of our insurgency, we need to analyze the commonalities between the factions. Of primary importance are those commonalities shared by all factions. In other words, we need to identify the one thing (or things) that all factions agree upon. These may be leaders, resources, policies, goals, support mechanisms, and so on. Figure 2 graphically illustrates these commonalities in the blue region. Second, we begin to identify commonalities shared by multiple factions, but not *all* factions. In the example insurgency from figure 1, we have four areas (or commonalities) between three different factions (represented in figure 2 as the green regions). We also have four areas (or commonalities) between two different factions (represented in purple regions below).

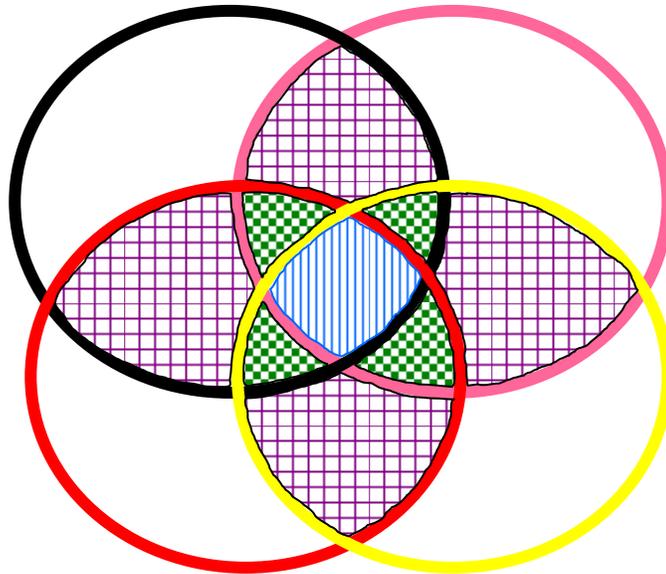


Figure 2: Areas of commonalities between factions of the example insurgency

Readers must remember that though the purple and green shaded areas each represent commonalities between two or three factions, respectively, they do NOT imply that the substance of those regions is identical. In other words, the purple commonalities between the black and pink factions are different than the purple commonalities between the red and black factions, and so on. Similarly, the green commonalities between the yellow, red, and pink factions are different from the green commonalities between the red, black, and yellow factions, and so on.

Readers must also recall that insurgencies organize, mobilize, and fight using diplomatic, informational, economic, and cultural tactics in addition to their military tactics. In fact, examinations of communist insurgencies from the Cold War era show how their organizations mobilized finance, education, and political personnel at the squad or village levels.³ Therefore, the identified commonalities between insurgent groups should be both military and non-military in nature, especially since success in these wars is both military and non-military at the tactical and strategic levels.

Phase II of this operation entails targeting the commonalities. Soldiers from the national to the tactical levels should leverage all aspects of power—diplomatic, informational, military, economic, and cultural—on these commonalities. In short, our goal is to defeat, deny, and/or

³ A good example of this can be found on page 49 of Greenberg, Lawrence. *The Hukbalahap Insurrection: A Case Study of a Successful Anti-Insurgency Operation in the Philippines – 1946-1955*. Washington, D.C.: United States Army Center of Military History, 1986. (U.S. Army Publication, CMH Pub 93-8). Also interesting is that many communist insurgencies (Vietnam, Malaya, Philippines, FARC, Mao, and others) were well-organized in comparison to today's insurgencies in Iraq or Afghanistan. Centralization and unification tended to be important considerations for communist cadres, and one would be hard pressed to find true equivalents of COMINTERNs or Politburos in Iraq or Afghanistan today, even if such control might be the goal of certain contemporary insurgents. Nevertheless, it is BECAUSE communist cadres were so organized that we can see exactly how important tactical non-military activities can be to insurgents.

disrupt those things that the factions agree upon, driving a wedge between them. Put another way: we are going to “divide” the insurgency (the “conquer” comes later). Initially, we can measure success as coordination between factions decreases. Of first priority is the blue shaded region. This is the most efficient way to undermine insurgent inter-factional cooperation, which conserves COIN resources. Interestingly, from a political and military vantage, the blue shaded region also represents the greatest long-term threat to the regime.

Next, we target the green regions...or whatever areas the highest number of factions can cooperate within. They are our second operational and logistical priority behind the blue regions. Next—obviously, then—is the purple regions. Whereas before we measured decreasing coordination amongst commonalities, now we can measure the diminishing number of commonalities between factions: we can measure progress as the blue, green, and purple regions “shrink.”

Dividing the insurgency must serve either of two political ends: to bolster the legitimacy of the regime (constructionism) or to undermine the legitimacy of the insurgency (destructionism). Implied is an effective IO campaign that can translate all forms of targeting (whether economic, informational, cultural, diplomatic, or military) into political value for the regime. For example, using illegal or immoral means to divide the insurgency may effectively divide the insurgency but also undermine the legitimacy of the regime. Therefore, such options are not viable.

Phase III begins once we have factions that have split off from the insurgency. Factions may splinter off piecemeal, or the whole organization may collapse. Figure three portrays a complete collapse.

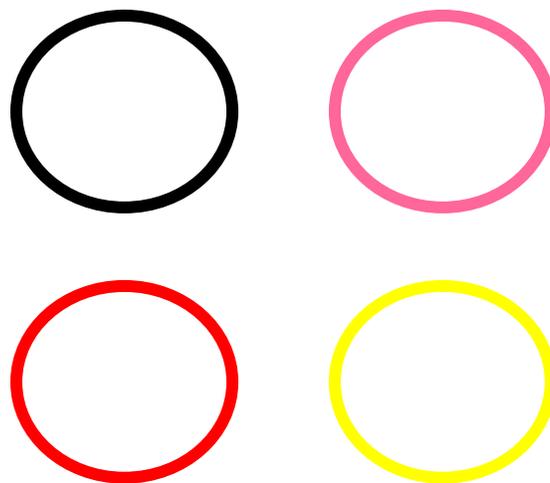


Figure 3: Factions split from a unified insurgency.

The temptation in phase III is for the counterinsurgent to immediately begin targeting (all forms: diplomatic, economic, military, economic, and cultural) of each individual faction. Though understandable, there are two higher priorities. First, COIN forces must prevent or target any attempts to re-unify. Second, COIN forces should target or continue to target critical resources. Since resources represent the critical weaknesses to any insurgency, factions often unite and

share resources to facilitate shared objectives. As those factions split off, that sharing will likely cease. Competition for shared resources will increase. As long as COIN forces sustain the first priority of phase III—denial of re-unification, that competition will at a minimum significantly disrupt insurgent activity. As insurgent activity decreases, COIN forces have a better opportunity to leverage all forms of targeting against individual factions, from negotiations to direct action, in order to further subvert the trust between factions.

Inter-factional violence marks Phase IV. Competition between factions results in violence between them. Critically short resources are diverted to attacking other factions rather than the regime or the population. The results can include any or all of the following: (a) trust can completely break down, and without it, large scale operations become more difficult; (b) inter-factional operations may cease, and the insurgency cannot offer the population a consistent viable political alternative to the regime; (c) insurgents might find themselves in an increasingly hostile environment, pursued not just by government forces but also by other insurgents; (d) increased insurgent security requirements further strain insurgent resources; (e) violence can beget more violence as blood vengeances replace strategy; (f) as rapidly depleting resources are misused against illogical targets, subordinates may begin to question the decisions of superiors.

Interestingly, though phase IV may signal the beginning of the end, phase IV is most likely characterized by an *increase* in violence on the ground. Worse, the violence may give the appearance that “civil war” is imminent, and stability is in jeopardy. The population is increasingly vulnerable, and strained insurgent resources only force insurgents to demand more support from them. Such demands may appear as terrorism or other forms of coercion. Since the regime may already have a reduced capacity to handle internal security problems, its capacity to prevent increased violence in phase IV may be limited. However, the regime now rests on the razor’s edge of victory.

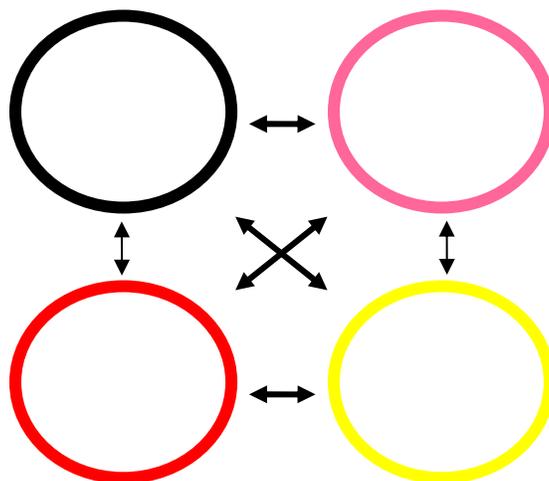


Figure 4: Factions begin fighting each other

Phase V entails engaging the population. Cynics may snipe this process claiming state-capacity concerns. In short, they argue that if the regime doesn’t have the resources to quell escalating violence, then the capacity to engage the population is similarly absent. However, effective counterinsurgents realize that victory is defined in political terms, not military ones. Strong

information operations should continue to drive popular support away from the insurgents. Escalating inter-factional violence permits the regime to divert resources to IDAD functions without lessening pressure on the factions. The regime may sustain neutralization of the factions by focusing on preventing re-unification and interdicting critical or shared insurgent resources.⁴ Finally, the regime's political challenges come from smaller, less-appealing factions with fewer resources rather than from unified and cooperating political machines.

I must disclaim here that though increased inter-factional violence of phase IV may look like (and be misinterpreted as) imminent "civil war," I am not trying to imply that this is precisely the case in Iraq today. There are many potential causes for such rampant inter-factional violence, some controlled, some not controlled. I cannot state authoritatively one way or the other that the current sectarian violence in Iraq is the result of intentional and successful efforts to foment dissension within the Iraqi insurgency. The sectarian violence may have resulted from other factors, none of which I can confirm from my comfortable chair here in New York.

Very important is that if the state fails in Phase V, then the state may lose the war. The insurgent may fail in phases I through IV, but if the regime cannot solidify political victory in phase V, then the state is still vulnerable to insurgent claims of state incapacity—even if the insurgency is itself politically or militarily ineffective. In other words, if the counterinsurgent thinks that the military destruction of the insurgency in Phase IV is sufficient, then the regime is doomed to failure. If the state fails to engage the alienated population through IDAD and establish its legitimacy, then adding more violence to the political climate is a failure, not a success. Political follow-through is critical in any aspect of COIN, and sowing dissension among the insurgency is no different.

First example.

There were three insurgent factions in north central Afghanistan working with U.S. Army Special Forces. The Jamiat-i-Islami (allied to the Northern Alliance), the Jumbesh-i-Milli (National Islamic Movement), and the Hazara tribes (Shi'i faction) worked as a coalition to kill al-Qaeda (AQ) and oust the Taliban (TB). Needless to say, there was a long history of hate, prejudice, betrayal, and death between the three factions.

These anti-Taliban forces were grossly under-armed in the fall of 2001. Perhaps one in three guerrillas had a weapon, and ammo was equally scarce. The U.S. government supplied weapons and ammunition to these forces so they could work with their SF counterparts against TB/AQ.

If a shipment of 50 weapons arrived, and there are three factions, one can't evenly divide 50 by 3. One faction is going to have to get one more weapon than another. At times when the tactical situation threatens every faction significantly, every weapon matters tremendously. At first, we tried to give one faction an extra weapon and promised that the next time the other faction would get the extra. However, third party cadres (cadres not from the U.S. coalition and not working for TB/AQ) used their access to the factions to convince them that the U.S. issue of weapons was directly interpretable as to which faction the U.S. favored. Thus, even if the factions "believed"

⁴ In other words, the IDAD function of neutralization can remain constant, while the regime can renew and re-prioritize the functions of security, mobilization, and balanced development.

SF promises to make up any shortages on the next shipment, they still felt threatened by the fact that the other faction received the extra weapon “first.” Factions became increasingly suspicious of each other and the issue process. Every issue of either lethal or non-lethal support to the insurgency became a major operation in order (a) to guarantee transparency and (b) to ensure the coalition survived what should have otherwise been a very simple process.

What’s truly amazing is the amount of effort and resources expended. For the third-party cadres, they spent barely any time, money, or resources. USSF cadre spent countless man-hours trying to hold the coalition together at every issue event. Ironically, the USSF cadre had to work hardest to maintain trust with and among their Afghani counterparts even though the US government was the sole *provider* of those resources in the first place. Trust between the factions over supplies was never completely achieved. Every man-hour wasted maintaining trust, guaranteeing cooperation, and providing transparency was a man-hour not used engaging the population, killing TB/AQ, or establishing an interim government.

Second example.

AFSOC aircraft dropped in tons of supplies to the insurgency using USSF and AFSOC personnel as GTA facilitators. Airdrops comprised both lethal (guns, ammo, etc.) and non-lethal aid (food, blankets, medicines, etc.) for both the insurgency and the population. Air drops also contained critical resupply items for the SF teams that they could not obtain from popular support. SF secured drop zones in liberated areas for delivery of requested items. Drops ranged from one to dozens of bundles of supplies. One SF team has only 12 men, so collection, inventory, and distribution of humanitarian aid for the population required mobilization of the locals and the guerrilla units. Based upon the first example, you probably see where this is going.

Third-party cadres (same jerks) used their access to the Hazaras to float disinformation about our humanitarian aid (HA) drops. By the time we were in Mazar-i-Shariff, we had a reasonably fair and transparent dissemination “system” set up among the three factions. Each of those factions then disseminated the HA to the populations (tribes) from which they came. HA drops came several times per week. Third-party cadres convinced the Hazaras that the size of their regular HA issue was far inferior to those of the Jamiat and Jumbesh tribes. To add to the *mêlée*, third party cadres told the Hazaras that Jamiat and Jumbesh factions were taking the Hazaras’ fair share. They convinced the Hazaras that all Hazaras had to be on the drop zone whenever a HA drop came in if the Hazaras expected to receive their HA. Finally, they told the Hazaras not to expect the Jamiat and Jumbesh tribes to give the Hazaras a chance to claim anything, so the Hazaras should take whatever they could and run away as fast as possible.

Drop zones immediately became circuses. Whenever local Hazaras heard the distinct hum of MC-130 aircraft overhead, they ran out onto the nearby drop zone and absconded with whatever they could touch.

Eventually, some of the drop zones degenerated into firefights. Sometimes Hazaras shot at Jamiat; sometimes they shot at themselves (not realizing it at 0230 hours). USSF and AFSOC personnel on the drop zone quickly found themselves caught in cross-fires and unable to return fire on friendlies.

Control of nighttime resupply operations was significantly diminished. Critical SF gear was grabbed by desperate Hazaras who were convinced it was theirs to lose. Critical military gear needed to sustain insurgency military operations was lost. Limited supplies threatened the insurgency's ability to sustain the initiative against fleeing TB/AQ and establish interim effective coalition governments in their wake. Resupply operations now also (like the resupply issue points) became major military operations. Drop zones had to be moved constantly, which at times confused the Air Force who then dropped on the wrong DZ. Surveying multiple new drops zones caused major delays to other operations because of the limited number of qualified men in the region. The numbers of locals used to help collect, inventory, and distribute resupply items had to be limited, which increased time on the target and other security problems. And so on.

Once again, I direct your attention to the amount of resources and time spent by the third party cadres versus the resources and time spent by USSF and the other insurgents. Then, please consider the opportunities that were lost because of the time and resources otherwise wasted.

Example three. The worst one.

Villages to the west of Mazar-i-Shariff were typically homogenously populated. One tribe lived in one village, and another tribe in the next village, and so on. As mentioned, there is a long history of hate and death and discrimination.

Third party cadres (same jerks...still) dressed up in distinctive Jamiat clothes. In the middle of the night, they went into adjacent towns, shot up the down, turned up crops in the field, lit fires, and if possible, raped women or killed men. The Jumbesh reported the atrocity to their USSF team on the next day and demanded justice. The first SF team immediately ran to the other SF team working with the Jamiats and asked for a SITREP. The Jamiat-aligned SF team went to the warlord for an explanation. The warlord talked to his leaders, then returned to the SF team leader and accused the Jumbesh village of false accusations intending to justify a Jumbesh raid.

On the next night, the third party cadres dressed in Jumbesh clothes and raid the Jamiat village. The Jamiats were outraged, convinced that the Jumbesh had used the accusation from the previous day as the justification for the night's affairs. Now, they wanted justice, too. The Jamiat-aligned SF team leader went to see his buddy with the Jumbesh. The Jumbesh leaders denied any wrongdoing. Tit-for-tat violence rapidly escalated over several square kilometers of villages. SF teams started patrolling villages to try and catch the culprits. Inter-factional cooperation on military and political activities quickly ground to a halt. NGOs remained out of country refusing to enter the region and assist the population until the violence stopped. With no inter-factional cooperation, HA drops were difficult to run and factions bickered incessantly at issue points. Each faction's leaders were convinced that they were not raiding the others but that the others were raiding them.

They were half-right. Neither side was raiding the other (at least initially), but they were all being raided—by the third party cadres. In addition to the abrupt halt in military, political, and economic activities, SF teams diverted 100 percent of their efforts to diplomatic, military, and

political efforts to hold the coalition together. Luckily, AQ and TB had been so badly beaten that they had fled too far or were too weak to capitalize on the moment. It eventually took significant HUMINT activities to confirm the origin and sponsor of these activities, but not after weeks of efforts at great resource and operational costs, notwithstanding the lost rapport between factions.

Finally, once again...consider this: How much effort did the third party cadres put into this? Compare that to the gain of the disruption against us...

Conclusions:

Clearly, U.S. COIN forces will not engage in illegal or immoral activities like the third party cadres did. However, they can play on insurgent commonalities, to include critical resources and other non-military aspects, to sow dissension within an insurgency and grind enemy activities to a halt. Once trust is lost and infighting ensues, the population is vulnerable to the protection, reforms, and governance of the regime (something neither TB/AQ nor the third party could capitalize on). Additionally, the regime has created a hostile environment for insurgent factions without committing large amounts of resources against them. There are clearly legal and moral ways to accomplish this endstate, and with the appropriate political follow-through, COIN forces can gain maximize the benefits of creating dissension within enemy insurgencies.

Read all past irregular warfare messages of the week at http://www.usma.edu/dmi/irregular_warfare.htm