Calhoun

Institutional Archive of the Naval Postgraduate School

Calhoun: The NPS Institutional Archive

Faculty and Researcher Publications

2009-08

Subversion as a Facet of Terrorism and Insurgency The Case for a Twenty-First Century Approach; Strategic Insights: v.8, issue 3 (August 2009)

Subversion as a Facet of Terrorism and Insurgency: The Case for a Twenty-First Century Approach

by Lindsay Clutterbuck and William Rosenau

Introduction

For most analysts (to the extent they consider the subject at all), subversion as a threat essentially evaporated with the close of the Cold War. A notable exception is David Kilcullen, a leading counterinsurgency strategist, who recently outlined what he terms the "five classes of threat that currently confront Europe," namely, terrorist cells, subversive networks, extremist political movements, insurgent sympathiser networks, and crime overlapping with terrorism.[1] In order to understand the dynamics of this complex and shifting threat, he offers a new definition of subversion, as "the conscious, clandestine manipulation of grievances, short of armed conflict, in order to weaken states, communities and organisations."[2] In Europe, according to Kilcullen, subversion is directed primarily against Muslim communities, and takes the following forms:

> the penetration of Muslim community organisations, mosques and youth groups by militants who manipulate people's grievances for the purpose of recruitment to insurgent and terrorist activity... subversive manipulation of civil unrest... agitation and recruitment in prison populations... infiltration of security services [and the] intimidation of moderates and the assassination of political opponents.[3]

In helping to reintroduce us to the concept of subversion, Kilcullen has laid the groundwork for additional research into its contemporary manifestations. This article will address the first-order question of change and continuity in subversion since the Cold War. Although the motivations, interests, and ideologies that propelled Cold-War era subversion have largely vanished, the tactics and techniques of subversion have not. Today the most important subversives are not Third World guerrillas, or Communist Party operatives burrowing within Western governments, but extremists from the outermost fringes of the Muslim world who operate within local Muslim communities. Subversion remains a tool of insurgents everywhere, but it is also an important part of the repertoire of other armed groups, clandestine organizations, and religious extremists. Understanding the contours of the threat is an obvious first step in crafting countermeasures.

To provide context for understanding present-day subversion, this article begins with an overview of subversion as it was conceptualized and practiced in the West during the twentieth century. Because of some interesting parallels with contemporary subversion, this section includes a consideration of Irish Republican subversion in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This is followed by an analysis of present-day subversion by Islamist extremists in the

United Kingdom, where the problem of subversion directed against Muslim communities is particularly acute. The article then offers some preliminary policy considerations for the United States.

Subversion in its Historical Context

For most of the twentieth century, Western governments saw political subversion as an essentially Marxist-Leninist phenomenon and an instrument of international communism. To be sure, European colonial powers in the pre-war period frequently characterized labor militancy, nationalist agitation, student unrest—in fact, nearly any indigenous opposition to colonial or imperial authority—as subversive. However, colonial administrators and metropolitan politicians inevitably traced such instability back to a wellspring in Moscow.[4] At the height of the Cold War, the linkage between conflict and disorder in the so-called "underdeveloped areas" of the Third World and Soviet (and, later, Chinese) subversive designs was an axiom in Western capitals. Beginning in the mid-1950s, combating subversion through internal security assistance to threatened regimes became a significant component of the U.S. efforts to thwart Soviet advances in the Third World. During the early 1960s, Kennedy Administration counterinsurgency enthusiasts integrated countersubversion into a more thoroughgoing political-military strategy for pushing back communist revolution by simultaneously fighting guerrillas, building "host-nation" capacity, and delegitimizing anti-regime elements. Although acknowledging the theoretical possibility of non-communist subversion, as a practical matter Cold-War counterinsurgents regarded subversion as a set of communist techniques that included creation of front groups, the manipulation of strikes, and the infiltration and control of mass organizations.[5]

However, for U.S. and allied decisionmakers, the developing world was hardly the only target for communist subversion. The West itself, and in particular, its state institutions, was deemed to be at risk. As J. Edgar Hoover, the director of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and arguably the country's most prominent anti-communist, declared in 1957, the United States confronted a "monster of subversion" in the form of international communism.[6] While it is tempting to dismiss such fulminations, recent scholarship confirms the depths of Moscow's seventy-year commitment to penetrating and manipulating Western institutions.[7] Countering subversion remained an important FBI priority until the mid-1970s, when press and Congressional investigations into Watergate and related scandals effectively shut down the bureau's domestic intelligence operations.

On the other side of the Atlantic, however, countersubversion remained a priority for Britain's internal security structures until the end of the Cold War. During the mid- to late 1970s, a number of apparent threats to parliamentary democracy—most notably, violent trade-union militancy, orchestrated in some cases by communist and Trotskyist groups—led the Security Service ("MI5") and police Special Branches to devote considerable resources to investigating the threat from subversion.[8] In Britain, as in the United States, "subversion" was never defined in law, but as employed by MI5, the term connoted the manipulation of individuals and groups by undemocratic forces. Subversives, according to the Security Service, "sought to infiltrate and manipulate bona fide organisations, such as trade unions or pressure groups, as a way of exercising influence out of proportion to any support they could achieve through the ballot box."[9]

Irish Republican Subversion

A different facet of subversion, as an integral part of a campaign of terrorism, emerged in Northern Ireland from 1969 onwards as the early, Marxist-Leninist leaning Irish Republican Army (IRA), under Chief of Staff Sean MacStiofain, moved to capitalize on the sectarian violence that had erupted in opposition to the burgeoning Civil Rights movement in Northern Ireland.[10] The IRA did not create the conditions that led to sectarian rioting and mob violence. They were initially few in number and had virtually no weapons.[11] However, they were quick to capitalize on the

situation by quickly building and controlling a support base among republican communities that had suffered the most and were still felt under threat. Their activities were essentially subversive in nature and designed to replace normal government control of the population with their own.

The methods they used ranged from using coercion in those communities to enforce both the authority of the IRA and their self-proclaimed 'right' to act as judge, jury and not infrequently executioner of those who they suspected of acting as police or Army informers or who showed any tendency to be sympathetic towards them or hostility to the IRA or its methods. They organized "rent strikes" and other forms of civil disobedience up to and including violent street protests and disorder, ran propaganda campaigns (particularly in relation to imprisoned IRA "volunteers") and systematically assassinated Royal Ulster Constabulary police officers and members of the local Ulster Defence Regiment (irrespective of whether any of them were on or off duty) . Viewed in this context, every act of terrorism they carried out, irrespective of whether the victims were police, military or civilians, became an act of political propaganda designed to portray the IRA to a local, national and international audience as a force to be reckoned with.

So-called "no-go" areas were established, particularly in the Bogside and Creggan housing estates of Londonderry, then renamed "Free Derry" by republicans. In the absence of any official presence, the IRA controlled "their" areas by a system of street committees. They established their own "courts" and used them to impose punishments ranging from "street cleaning, tarring and feathering, shooting in the arms and legs and death."[12] It took nearly thirty thousand troops and police under "Operation Motorman" in July 1972 to clear the barricades sealing off "Free Derry" and to reintroduce the rule of law, albeit on a very tenuous basis for many years to come.[13]

Contemporary Subversion in the United Kingdom

The current situation in the UK is not best described either by using Kilcullen's five-threat model (although it encompasses them all) nor by excluding "armed conflict" from the concept of subversion as it operates today (it forms an integral part of the overall dynamic). All these elements are found today under one particular threat faced by the UK, namely Al Qaeda generated and inspired violent jihadism and terrorism. It is complex, multi-dimensional and poses many new challenges. It manifests itself in two main ways; as radicalism, extremism and terrorism within the UK and in insurgency and violent jihadism in countries other than the UK.[14]

These activities are underpinned by individuals and networks involved in two crucial aspects of generating these: First there is logistical and financial support and facilitation; second, there is the encouragement, channelling and assistance of young Muslim men to participate in violent jihad overseas. It is from this pool in particular that almost all of the key individuals involved in planning and preparing terrorist attacks in the UK to date have been drawn, a fact that prompted the UK Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, when on a recent visit to Pakistan, to state: "Three quarters of the most serious plots investigated by the British authorities have links to Al Qaeda in Pakistan."[15]

Subversion in its generally understood British sense of seeking to undermine parliamentary democracy can also be found enfolded in the current threat.[16] Two main groups, Hizb ut-Tahrir ("Liberation Party," or HT) and Al Muhajjiroun ("The Emigrants"), as well as so-called "radical preachers" such as Omar Bakri Mohammed and others, call directly for the replacement of the democratic system with a single Caliphate based on Sharia law. HT does not advocate violence as a means to achieve this objective and hence it would be easy to dismiss its members as mere idealists. However, evidence from insiders who have left the organisation paint a picture of their aims and methods—including the use of front groups—that would be instantly recognisable to the "practiced subversives"[17] of the twentieth century.[18] In addition to this specific subversive aspect of the wider threat, of more importance to the UK is the overall subversive impact generated by a combination of all the elements of the threat. However, the subversive impact on

the state itself is minimal. Where it is felt most keenly is within the many Muslim communities that are the most affected by it and in turn, the reverberations of this are inevitably felt throughout wider society.

The UK government has put in place a wide variety of measures to prevent and mitigate the threat. The national counterterrorism strategy, known as CONTEST, has a strand based on the concept of "Prevent" which acts as the focal point for the many activities that are underway to strengthen and support initiatives at the local level.[19] To better deliver CONTEST, in May 2007 the Home Office itself was restructured, along with other complementary changes to the machinery of government. Its wider criminal justice system functions were transferred to a new Ministry of Justice and to better deliver the community-based requirements, the Department for Local Government and Communities became involved for the first time in tackling extremism and terrorism.[20] The Home Office retains overall responsibility for counter terrorism and policing.

Countersubversion: Policy Options for the United States

By any measure, American Muslims are overwhelmingly law abiding, socially integrated, and prosperous—far more so than Muslims in a number of Western European countries.[21] Nevertheless, U.S. authorities have uncovered a number of terrorist plots. None of these ever came close to carrying out a terrorist attack, although the prison-based Jama'at al-Islam As-Sahee cell in Southern California neared the operational stage, according to Los Angeles police officials[22] Moreover, transnational extremist organizations like HT are active in the United States,[23] and Muslim communities are likely targets for subversion, albeit to a much smaller degree than they are across the Atlantic. Although the FBI has made a substantial effort to develop relationships within Muslim communities, and to encourage Muslims to remain vigilant against potential extremists in their midst, countersubversion remains a badly neglected subject whose significance is not fully recognised, both inside and outside of government. Indeed, since September 11, 2001, the entire subject of domestic terrorism ("homegrown" or inspired from outside) has languished in an analytical ghetto.[24] More research is required to identify the contours and dimensions of terrorist threats emanating from within the United States. In the meantime, the following is a first attempt to outline an approach to countersubversion that is appropriate for, and sensitive to, the U.S. context.

American legal traditions, cultural norms, and a deeply-ingrained minimalist philosophy regarding the size and capacity of the state make a heavy-handed approach both undesirable and politically unacceptable. To be sure, Americans in the years immediately following the September 11, 2001 attacks supported vigorous government action to combat terrorism at home and abroad. But the backlash in response to domestic eavesdropping and the creation of a "surveillance state" arrived relatively quickly, and stretched across the U.S. political spectrum. Another attack on the scale of 9/11 could generate political support for stronger measures against perceived "enemies within." But in the absence of such an attack, any "maximalist" approach to countering subversion is likely to face stiff opposition—and not just among Muslim-Americans.

As Kilcullen suggests, Muslims should not be seen as sources of insecurity, but rather as targets for extremists.[25] Two approaches to countersubversion should therefore receive particular emphasis. First, local police, who ideally will have close relationships within threatened communities, should play a major role in protecting individuals and groups from intimidation and other strong-arm tactics by subversives. As with policing more generally, public trust is essential, and so the police must make major commitments to understanding and supporting the Muslim communities in which they operate.

Second, public information campaigns should have a prominent place in any effort to identify and thwart subversion. The protections offered by the free speech clause of the First Amendment are not absolute, and some forms of subversion—for example, "calls to commit illegal acts

imminently," that is, incitement—are clearly against the law.[26] But many forms of subversion, such as the use of front groups, are not illegal, and cannot be prosecuted. However, this does not mean that such activities are harmless. In Western Europe, the activities of groups like HT have had highly disruptive effects on religious and political expression. Exposing front groups, extremist recruitment activities, and indoctrination at colleges and universities—in other words, showing subversion for what it is—can help strip away the clandestinity that is essential for subversion to succeed. Although the state might be tempted to assist in such a "sunshine" policy, it would almost certainly be more credible and effective if the threatened communities themselves exposed subversion in their midst. Among other things, it would avoid the perception that the state is interfering in any way with Islam itself and seeking to impose a preferred version of the faith.

Conclusion

As this article has argued, present-day subversion shares key features with its earlier manifestations. The targets and overall objectives of today's subversives are different, to be sure, but some of the methods remain timeless. Moreover, as was the case during the Cold War, subversion needs to be conceptualized as one facet of a broader campaign that employs in a non-linear fashion a range of violent, less-violent, and non-violent instruments that serve to reinforce each other.

However, it is crucial to understand the differences between contemporary subversion, which is directed against Muslim communities, and subversion during the Cold War, which was directed primarily (but not exclusively) at state institutions. The infiltration of the armed forces, police, and government agencies is probably a small component of subversion today. The main thrust of countersubversion, both in Britain and the United States, should therefore be on the protection of Muslim communities from those who are undermining them from within, and on building and strengthening linkages between those communities and the larger society.

About the Authors

Lindsay Clutterbuck, Ph.D., is a Research Leader for RAND Europe in its Cambridge, UK office. His contributions to recent RAND publications include *Considering the Creation of a Domestic Intelligence Agency in the United States* (edited by Brian Jackson, 2009) and *Radicalization or Rehabilitation: Understanding the Challenge of Extremist Prisoners* (2007, with Greg Hannah and Jennifer Rubin).

William Rosenau, Ph.D., is a political scientist in the RAND Corporation Washington Office, and an adjunct professor in the Security Studies Program, Edmund A. Walsh School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University. His recent RAND publications include *The Phoenix Program and Contemporary Counterinsurgency*; and *Corporations and Counterinsurgency* (2009). In October he will joining the research staff of the Center for Naval Analyses.

The views expressed in this article are those of the authors, and do not necessarily reflect those of RAND or its research sponsors.

For more insights into contemporary international security issues, see our Strategic Insights home page. To have new issues of Strategic Insights delivered to your Inbox, please email ccc@nps.edu with subject line "Subscribe." There is no charge, and your address will be used for no other purpose.

References

1. Kilcullen briefly examines four European countries, Denmark, France, Netherlands and the United Kingdom. David Kilcullen in *The Accidental Guerrilla: Fighting Small Wars in the Midst of a Big One* (London: Hurst and Company, 2009), 246-248

2. Ibid., 253

3. Ibid.. 246-248.

4. Martin Thomas, "Colonial States as Intelligence States: Security Policing and the Limits of Colonial Rule in France's Muslim Territories, 1920-40," *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28, No. 6 (December 2005), 1041. In Winston Churchill's judgment, Leon Trotsky was nothing less than the "ogre of international subversion." Quoted in Michael Vestey, "An Ogre, Nonetheless," *The Spectator* (London), August 19, 2006, 47.

5. See, for example, Andrew R. Molnar, *Human Factors Considerations of Undergrounds in Insurgencies* (Washington, DC: Special Operations Research Office, American University, 1965), 41-49.

6. Quoted in Lee Bernstein, *The Greatest Menace: Organized Crime in Cold War America* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 9.

7. See for example John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Alexander Vassiliev, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009); and Christopher Andrew and Vasili Mitrokhin, *The Sword and the Shield: The Mitrokhin Archive and the Secret History of the KGB* (New York: Basic Books, 2000). At the same time, it must be remembered that the both superpower "blocs" engaged in subversion. But given the normative nature of the term (subversion is what one's opponents engage in, after all), it is unlikely that any government would describe its own actions as subversive.

8. For more on the threat to parliamentary democracy posed by the "hard Left" during this period, see Douglas Eden, "We Came Close to Losing Our Democracy in 1979," T*he Spectator* (London), June 6, 2009, 18-19.

9. MI5, "Subversion," accessed August 20, 2009. Since the end of the Cold War, the subversive threat "diminished and is now negligible," according to MI5, and the service says it no longer investigates subversion.

10. See Tim Pat Coogan, *The IRA* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), 341-353, 365-384.

11. Ibid., 367.

12. Ian Greig, *Subversion, Propaganda, Agitation and the Spread of People's War* (London; Tom Stacey Ltd, 1973), 149.

13. Government of the United Kingdom, "No-Go areas and Operation Motorman," T*he Cabinet Papers: 1915-1978*, National Archives, accessed August 20, 2009.

14. Particularly in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Kashmir and recently, Somalia

15. "PM Offers Pact to Stop Pakistan Exporting Terror," *Guardian.co.uk*, December 15, 2008, accessed August 20, 2009.

16. Max Manwaring, *State and Nonstate Associated Gangs: Credible "Midwives of New Social Orders"* (Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, May 22, 2009), 27-49.

17. The phrase is from J. Bowyer Bell, "The Armed Struggle and Underground Intelligence: An Overview," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 17 (1994): 135.

18. See for example Ed Husain, *The Islamist* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), particularly chapter 6.

19. See Government of the United Kingsom, Home Office for Security and Counter Terrorism, "Counter-terrorism Strategy - The four Ps - Pursue, Prevent, Protect, Prepare," accessed August 20, 2009.

20. See Government of the United Kingdom, Communities and Local Government, "£12.5 Million to Tackle Radicalisation and Help Prevent Extremism in Communities," June 3, 2008, accessed August 20, 2009.

21. Lisa Miller, "American Dreamers," *Newsweek* (web edition), July 30, 2007, accessed August 20, 2009.

22. "Two Plead Guilty to Domestic Terrorism Charges of Conspiring to Attack Military Facilities," *Reuters*, December 14, 2007, accessed August 20, 2009.

23. See for example Gwendolyn Driscoll, Vik Jolly, and Ann Pepper, "Garden Grove Grocer Under Scrutiny," *Orange County Register*, August 25, 2005, accessed August 20, 2009; and Jennifer O'Neill and Steve Miller, "Controversial Mulsim Group, Hizb ut Tahrir Meeting in Chicago," *WBBM Newsradio 780 (Chicago)*, July 19, 2009, accessed August 20, 2009.

24. For more on this point, see Edward J. Valla and Gregory Comcowich, "Domestic Terrorism: Forgotten, But Not Gone," in Jeffrey N. Norwitz (ed.), *Armed Groups: Studies in National Security, Counterterrorism, and Counterinsurgency* (Newport, RI: U.S. Naval War College, 2008).

25. Kilcullen, *Accidental Guerrilla*, Op. Cit., 251.

26. Richard A. Posner, "Counterintelligence, Counterterrorism, Civil Liberties, and the Domestic Intelligence Controversy," in Jennifer E. Sims and Burton Gerber (eds), *Vaults, Mirrors, and Masks: Rediscovering U.S. Counterintelligence* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 270.