

Identity Politics and Hybrid Warfare: Exploring the Role of Various Identity Groups in the 2009 Iranian Green Movement

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Abstract—Hybrid Warfare is a combination of various conventional and unconventional means of warfare used for both military and political ends. It employs a combination of information warfare and propaganda; diplomacy; economic sanction and financial warfare; regular, irregular, and special forces; terrorist and subversive groups, etc. to weaken the enemy and to achieve foreign policy goals. This paper looks at how various identity groups based on, and which includes students, youth, women, workers, ethnicity, religious, diaspora, and political ideology were used as instruments of hybrid warfare in the 2009 Iranian Green Movement.

Index Terms—Hybrid Warfare, Iranian Green Movement, United States, Conflict

I. INTRODUCTION

War is often resorted to when all other means fails in order to implement a state's foreign policy, but under certain circumstances when it cannot involve in an armed conflict, it engages in other forms of warfare without escalating into a full fledged conflict. Such form of warfare is called variously as Political Warfare, New Generation Warfare, Unrestricted Warfare, Asymmetric Warfare, etc. and is popularly known as Hybrid Warfare which is characterized by William S. Lind as belonging to the fourth-generation warfare. Its implication in the present day international politics deserves more attention, and is explored here in the context of the involvement by the United States of America (U.S.) in the 2009 Iranian Green Movement.

II. HYBRID WARFARE

Frank Hoffman, who first introduced the term hybrid warfare defined it as the employment of various modes of warfare which includes "conventional capabilities, irregular tactics and formations, terrorist acts including indiscriminate violence and coercion, and criminal disorder." Such wars can be conducted by both state and non-state actors is carried out

by individual or separate units which are "generally operationally and tactically directed and coordinated within the main battlespace to achieve synergistic effects in the physical and psychological dimensions of conflict," and involves the use of both regular and irregular forces [1]. Here irregular forces mean those which are not part of regular forces and can also include mercenaries, civilians, etc. Closely connected with hybrid warfare is the tactic of swarming where several units conduct a coordinated attack on a target from various directions and then disperse. Though this is a military tactic it has civilian use and can be conducted in non-combat zones as well.

To Nadia Schadlow, hybrid warfare blurs and blends what was earlier separate categories of conflict which includes "military, economic, diplomatic, criminal, and informational means to achieve desired political goals" [2]. Andrew Korybko broadened the definition of hybrid warfare which to him is a combination of multiple conventional and unconventional tools and includes the employment of regular armed forces, irregular and special forces, supporting local unrest, information and propaganda warfare, economic warfare, cyberattacks, diplomacy, etc. [3]. And Jack

McCuen, retired U.S. Army Col., defines hybrid warfare and names the three conflict zones where such warfare is conducted as: “full spectrum wars with both physical and conceptual dimensions: the former, a struggle against an armed enemy and the latter, a wider struggle for, control and support of the combat zone’s indigenous population, the support of the home fronts of the intervening nations, and the support of the international community.”

Also related to the civilian aspect of hybrid conflict is the use of nonviolent action or political defiance against regimes as conceptualized by American political scientist Gene Sharp. Sharp, who originally wrote his book ‘From Dictatorship to Democracy’ for Burmese democratic opposition activists fighting against their political regime became the bible of Ukrainian civic youth organization Pora, meaning ‘It’s time!’ The technique and the methods described in the book was later taught by non-governmental organizations such as The Centre for Applied Nonviolent Action and Strategies (CANVAS) founded in 2004 by Srđa Popović and Slobodan Đinović, and The International Center on Nonviolent Conflict (ICNC), to activists around the world and Iran in particular. The role of Sharp, Robert L. Helvey, formerly Colonel and CIA officer, and other organizations are stated in the indictment by the president of the Tehran Islamic Revolutionary Court on August 1, 2009. The indictment notes that more than 100 of the 198 methods were used in the green movement [4].

With respect to Iran it clearly identified hybrid warfare as the threat posed by the U.S. against it. In 2019, the 10th International Meeting of High Representatives for Security Issues was held in the Russian city of Ufa. In this joint meeting between Russia, China, India, Pakistan,

Afghanistan, and Iran, Ali Shamkhani who is the secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council talked about the hybrid threat posed by the U.S. to it and other countries in the world [5]. In general, hybrid warfare blurs the distinction between war and peace, legal and illegal, combatants and civilians, where states, and state actors involve in propaganda, supporting insurgents and subversive activities, among other activities as mentioned earlier. Some of these actions are acknowledged by the states involved, whereas others are expressly denied.

III. STATUTORY AND LEGAL INSTRUMENTS

The policy of intervention and regime change was first stated in the Iran Freedom and Support Act (IFSA), 2006 which is similar to the Iraq Liberation Act of 1998 – the difference being, unlike the latter, the former does not mention the use of military force. The act states its policy as supporting: first, self-determination efforts by the people of Iran over the form of government; second, independent human rights and peaceful pro-democracy forces in Iran; and third, that force should not be used against Iran.

Under Sec. 302 (a) (1) of the act, “the President is authorized to provide financial and political assistance (including the award of grants) to foreign and domestic individuals, organizations, and entities working for the purpose of supporting and promoting democracy for Iran. Such assistance may include the award of grants to eligible independent pro-democracy radio and television broadcasting organizations that broadcast into Iran” [6]. Financial assistance for that purpose will be made using funds available under the Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI), the Human Rights and Democracy Fund, and the Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative.

Sec. 302 (b) (1-6) says that financial and political assistance should only be given to an individual, organization, or entity which opposes the use of violence and terrorism and has not been listed as a foreign terrorist organization, etc. Further they should advocate that Iran should abide by nonproliferation in terms of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons, etc. They should also follow democratic values and support that a democratic form of government be adopted in Iran. That they respect human rights; fundamental equality of women; equality of opportunity for people; support free press; freedom of speech, association, and religion.

In 2007 President Bush signed a 'non-lethal presidential finding which allows the CIA to conduct a covert operation to destabilize Iran [7]. This shows that President Bush after knowing the downsides of outright war chose a covert way this time, and even initiated steps to that end. The plan involves a coordinated campaign of propaganda, disinformation, and manipulation of Iran's international financial transactions and currency, subversion, etc. Though the permission was given by Bush it materialized only during the tenure of President Barack Obama following his authorization, [8] and continued with Donald Trump.

Parallel to the CIA finding, the Bush administration also authorized a secret military task force under the control of the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), then operating in Iran with a similar aim, for which the President after September 11 signed an Executive Order which gave the Pentagon permission to do things which it had never been able to do before without notifying the U.S. Congress [9].

III. INSTITUTIONS, FUNDS, AND TRAINING

The National Endowment for Democracy (NED) funding to Iran groups started way back from 1990. According to Center for Media and Democracy's (CMD) online publication SourceWatch, the groups funded from grants by NED for programs relating to Iran from 1990-2005 include: Iran Teachers Association (1991, 1992, 1993, 1994, 2001, 2002, 2003), Foundation for Democracy in Iran (1995, 1996), Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation (2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006), National Iranian American Council (2002, 2005, 2006), Women's Learning Partnership (2003), Vital Voices Global Partnership (2004), Center for the International Private Enterprise (2004, 2006), American Center for International Labor Solidarity (2005), the International Republican Institute (2005), Institute of World Affairs (2005), Civic Education and Human Rights (2006) [10].

In 2008, the NED gave \$140,000 to Abdorrahman Boroumand Foundation (ABF). Anne Applebaum in her report in the Washington Post says that anti-regime groups like ABF has encouraged violence in Iran, as well as the slow rise in strength of the women's rights movement [11]. And in 2009, the NED gave \$674,506 in grants for Iranian activities [12]. Iran's Ministry of Intelligence has brought out the full list of 60 organizations involved in a soft war against the country [13].

IV. THE GREEN MOVEMENT

The trigger for this political opposition movement as in the case of Otpor movement in Serbia in 1998 and other cases, is the disputed election results. In the 2009 10th Iranian presidential elections, only 4 of the 476 who applied for the candidacy were approved by the Guardian Council,

which is an important body in charge of approving candidates to contest for presidency among other functions. The four candidates include, conservatives such as the incumbent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Mohsen Rezaee, and the reformists, Mehdi Karroubi and Mir-Hossein Mousavi, who was the last Prime Minister of the country.

Elections were held on 12 June 2009 with a turnout of 85%, and even before the votes were counted Mousavi announced himself as the victor and anything contrary is to be regarded as a sign of fraud [14]. This is a tactic which is used to provoke anger in a country's population and then direct it against the target which could be either a country's leader or its regime. Prior to and following the election all the six western organizations which conducted opinion polls gave the lead to Ahmadinejad; whereas among the 23 local organizations, 12 gave the lead to Ahmadinejad, and 11 to Mousavi [15]. The results which were announced on 13 June declared Ahmadinejad the winner with 62% votes, and Mousavi with 33%, etc.

On the same day big protests and violence took place alleging election fraud. Riot police used batons to disperse a 3,000 strong crowd of Mousavi's supporters who were wearing the symbolic green colour which was also his campaign colour and chanted slogans like 'Down with the dictator,' etc. John Simpson of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) reported from Tehran that a mob of 3000 attacked the police, disarmed them and burned their motorbikes [16]. We had earlier seen that Obama had given permission to organize the coup by funding various NGOs that support Iranian dissidents. Later he decided to stay silent during the initial phase of the revolution, and ordered the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to break any contact

with it had developed with the supporters of the movement. Though the agency has contingency plans when it came to supporting democratic uprisings around the world, such as providing protesters with communications, funds, and even weapons, the president asked them to wait and watch [17].

Despite the president's response, the protests raged for nineteen months across four years, which saw massive demonstrations and counter demonstrations in the state's capital city Tehran, by both the protesters and supporters of the regime, and that period was later described as the 'edge of the abyss' by Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei [18]. Such protests are described by the media as spontaneous, indigenous, and uncoordinated, but Ivan Marovic, ex-instructor at CANVAS says that, "Revolutions are often seen as spontaneous. It looks like people just went into the street. But it's the result of months or years of preparation. It is very boring until you reach a certain point, where you can organize mass demonstrations or strikes. If it is carefully planned, by the time they start, everything is over in a matter of weeks" [19].

V. THE ROLE OF CANVAS AND ICNC

In the news report titled 'Inside the US's regime-change school' which appeared in Asia Times Online, the correspondent narrates the story of Nilofar, a young Iranian woman in her 30s, who was invited to attend a workshop in Dubai, United Arab Emirates (UAE) [20]. When she arrived for the workshop she found that the other participants were surprised to see her as this program was mainly for activists. The program which was held at the hotel Holiday Inn was wrongly advertised in the hotel lobby as a conference held by the Griffin Hospital. The Griffin Hospital is a community hospital founded in 1909, situated in Derby, Connecticut,

and has no branches outside of Connecticut. The only American hospital with branches in Dubai, UAE is the American Hospital Dubai.

After getting booked by the two organizations which ran the program she found that the course was organised by exiled Iranians based in Los Angeles, U.S., Americans who supervised it, and three Serbs who were part of the Otpor democratic movement which overthrew the former president of Serbia Slobodan Milosevic, in 2000. During the program, the organizers, instructors and students identified themselves using aliases, and was instructed to communicate with each other once the course was over using an encrypted e-mail service called Hushmail. During the class, the instructors from Serbia conducted role-playing games where program participants take on the personalities of characters like a Shi'ite cleric or an Iranian woman. In these exercises in empathy and psychology, importance was given to ridicule the ruling elite as a potent means of 'demythologizing' them in front of the Iranian people.

Nilofar says that the instructors taught us some of the methods which were used to remove Milosevic, so that we could which were best to overthrow the regime. Cyrus Saftari, an independent Iranian analyst, opines that the idea is to provide money and train activists to provoke a movement based on the Otpor movement in Serbia. The role of the activists would be to use techniques such as anti-government graffiti to give confidence to the student movement allowing the government to suppress it. This could then be used as a justification to trigger in Iran a mass uprising which will be then seen as spontaneous and indigenous.

Nilofar finds that the majority of the trainees at the workshop as power hungry and emotionally volatile people. Many of the political activists in Iran comes from lower-class families which faced severe deprivation and now wants to overthrow the government. She correctly finds that these idiot students who are now beaten up will be pushed aside to make way for tomorrow's leaders. Eli Lake of the The New York Sun reports that Ali Afsahi, a former film critic and journalist, was arrested in Dubai for attending a human rights training seminar in the same place in 2005. The workshop was sponsored by the Yale University-based Iran Human Rights Documentation Center which was given \$1 million by a smaller American government aid program in 2004, to provide for the opposition in Iran. Mr. Afsahi also took part in a seminar conducted by the ICNC, which involved a session by some Serbian activists [21].

VI. IDENTITY GROUPS IN THE MOVEMENT

Millions of Iranians belonging to various social classes and backgrounds including students, youth, women, workers, and ordinary citizens, took part in the protest marches in 2009, and were the biggest such movements since the 1979 revolution [22], and the 1999 student protests. This resulted in a brutal government crackdown with many killed and thousands arrested. A total of 500 people which includes activists, journalists, intellectuals, and even well-known political figures were detained as part of government suppression of the movement. Paramilitary raids were conducted on university campuses, and around 200 were arrested after clashes at the Tehran university, though many were later released. Security forces fired teargas on the protesters at Shiraz university, following which more than 100 were taken into custody. In the students'

participation, the role of The Student Movement Coordination Committee for Democracy in Iran established in 1997 to oppose the radical Islamic regime, of which Aryo B. Pirouznia is the coordinator and spokesperson and based in Dallas, Texas, needs to be further examined.

The Green Path of Hope is the organizational body of the green movement founded by Mousavi on August 15, 2009. Apart from Mousavi, the other central leaders of the association include fellow candidate Karroubi, and Zahra Rahnnavard. Its managing body, the Green Coordination Council persuaded opposition followers to participate with women's rights activists for the occasion of International Women's Day in 2011. The Iranian women's rights activists have called for protest marches demanding more gender equality in the Islamic state, as well as to free imprisoned women and other leaders of the movement. Shirin Ebadi, a human rights lawyer and the winner of the 2003 Nobel Peace, urged Iranians to rally calling for constitutional laws to be reformed in order to ensure gender equality [23].

The Green Path of Hope which is formed to continue protests against the legitimacy of Ahmadinejad's presidency following the election, and to achieve people's rightful demands. Its central council which has six main members is connected with reformist political parties, movements, and NGOs. The path in the words of Mousavi consists of, "countless self-initiated and independent social networks form the body of this movement" [24]. A significant part of the body will be the ordinary protesters and the method is to build pressure from the lower segments of society and get them connected with social networks, so that they can lead the protests in a lawful manner. This shows how political identity of people can be channelized into political activism,

although all the political activists need not have affinity to any political ideology and may also join for monetary benefits.

Regarding the role of religion, following the death of Grand Ayatollah Hossein Ali Montazeri on December 19, 2009, who had become a spiritual leader of the opposition, clashes took place between the government forces and the mourners on his funeral held on December 21. On December 27, which is the holy day of Ashura which marks the death of Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the Islamic prophet Muhammad, demonstrations were held from Mam Hussein Square to Freedom Square and on the revolution street, and also witnessed most violent clashes. In this symbolic protest Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is now equated with the Caliph who killed Husayn and the protesters shouted slogans like 'Yazid will fall' and 'Death to Khamenei' [25].

Ethnic links to the movement can be found in the U.S. support for Jundallah or People's Resistance Movement of Iran (PMRI), which is a Sunni militant organization based in southeast Iran on the Iran-Pakistan-Afghanistan tri-border region, which fights for Iranian Sunni Muslims, and conducts deadly raids in Iran [26]. This group is behind the 2009 Zahedan and Pishin bombings on May 28 and October 28. Iranian diaspora responded to the movement among others not only by supporting it with a public statement [27], but by organizing protests in front of Iranian embassies in various state capitals.

CONCLUSION

Anti-government political movement such as the 2009 Iranian green movement need not be seen as spontaneous, indigenous and uncoordinated, but as planned, foreign, and

coordinated, together with other factors. In the background of the Alliance of Youth Movement (now Movements.org), CANVAS, AND ICNC, the role of hybrid warfare is obvious and highlights its relevance when it comes to understanding various protest movements happening around the world.

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