

MCDC Countering Hybrid Warfare Project

Fighting Without Firearms

Contending with Insurgents and Soft, Non-Kinetic Measures in Hybrid Warfare



Information note, March 2018

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Hybrid warfare often refers to the wars conducted between regular and irregular forces. But it can also refer to conflicts that mingle kinetic and non-kinetic weapons. Ordinarily, asymmetric war turns our attention to kinetic weaponry: precision guided weapons (PGM) of varying strengths on the state side and imprecise, improvised explosive devices (IED) on the non-state side. But the PGM/IED divide only tells part of the story. Some of the best and most effective weapons for insurgents do not shoot. These are the non-kinetic weapons of soft war and they have provided insurgents with impressive strategic and tactical victories ([Gross 2015](#); [Gross and Meisels 2017](#)). How states might counter these gains is the issue at hand.

Non-kinetic, soft war weapons can be categorized in several ways. Technologically, they vary considerably and include cyber weapons, sanctions and blockades, lawfare, media warfare, non-violent resistance and human shields. Non-kinetic weapons may also be categorized by their targets. Cyber warfare and economic measures, for example, target enemy civilians and military forces directly and seek a military advantage by disabling digital networks or by economically squeezing the civilian population to force concessions from an adversary. In contrast, non-violent resistance, human shielding and hunger striking put militants and their supporters rather than enemy actors at risk for bodily harm. Their avowed purpose is to generate backlash when state actors respond with excessive force.

Non-kinetic, soft war tactics often float 'under the radar'. Nevertheless, they provide armed groups significant tactical and strategic victories when they face a *law compliant adversary*. The latter condition is exceptionally important. Successful non-violent resistance, shielding and hunger striking all require the risk of self-inflicted harm. Putting themselves at risk, activists and insurgents must be reasonably certain that their adversaries are sensitive to violating the law and causing disproportionate harm. This sensitivity allows non-violent resistance activists to force their adversary to offer concessions and makes human shielding and hunger striking very effective weapons when armed groups face off against democratic nations.

The sections below describe three case studies to show how an armed group, Hamas, used non-violent resistance, human shielding and hunger strikes to achieve significant tactical and strategic victories against Israel when kinetic and other strategies largely failed. These cases include successful non-violent resistance when a flotilla of ships largely manned by peace activists taunted the Israeli Navy in 2010. Named after the largest ship in the flotilla, the Marmara operation handed Hamas a major strategic victory when Israel was forced to relax the blockade around Gaza. In the second case, Hamas successfully utilized human shields to deter Israeli attacks on Hamas

military assets in Operations Cast Lead (2008-9) and Protective Edge (2014). The final case describes how Hamas militants used hunger strikes to improve prison conditions and gain political recognition from Israel in recent years. No other tactics provided Hamas with comparable military and political achievements.

Non-violent resistance: The Case of the Mavi Marmara 2010

At first glance, the progression of events surrounding the *Marmara* hardly appear connected to non-violent resistance. Each side resorted to violence with the result that nine (and later 10) activists lost their lives in the subsequent melee. Nevertheless, the *Marmara* offers a classic case study of how non-violent resistance can successfully provoke disproportionate harm that, in turn, 'backfires' and generates fierce condemnation of Israel and worldwide support for Hamas.

Backfire is one of the more problematic tactics of non-violent resistance. Non-violent activists have long known that their success often depends on their ability to provoke their adversary to respond with unrestrained force. Gandhi's march on the Dharasana Salt Works in 1931 is a vivid example. Marshalling his forces to march on the gates of the factory, activists were brutally beaten back. Yet the activists kept coming and the subsequent news accounts of the violence they endured generated widespread condemnation of British policy in India and support for Gandhi at home and abroad. This is **backfire**. It requires both a disproportionate reaction from the authorities and a sensitive audience at home. When these elements come together, backfire 'increases the resistance, sows problems in the opponents' own camp, and mobilizes third parties in favor of the nonviolent resisters' (Sharp 1989:5).

The [Marmara episode](#) exemplifies the simplicity and effectiveness of NVR. With the election of a Hamas government in Gaza in 2006 Israel imposed a tight land and naval blockade to prevent shipments of missiles and other war materiel (United Nations (UN) 2012). By the UN's account, the Israeli naval blockade met the minimum conditions of legality: it was effective, proclaimed publically and enforced impartially (UN Secretary General 2011). In 2010, a flotilla set sail to break the blockade, deliver foodstuffs, toys and medical supplies to the Palestinians and call the world's attention to the growing humanitarian crisis in Gaza. While the smaller ships of the flotilla heeded Israeli warnings and turned away, the largest of the flotilla, the Mavi Marmara, announced its intent to run the blockade. Intercepting the ship, Israeli commandos boarded and took control by force. About 40 passengers resisted the takeover with improvised weapons, knives and axes. When the smoke cleared, nine Turkish passengers lay dead and many wounded.

The flotilla was wildly successful. The deaths of Turkish activists ruptured Israel's relations with Turkey and brought Israel a flood of negative media attention, international condemnation and

high-level commissions of inquiry in the UN, Israel and Turkey ([Kershner, 2010](#); UN Secretary General 2011). In the wake of the Marmara episode, Israel eased the passage of goods significantly and the Egyptians opened their border with Gaza allowing trade and smuggling to flourish and the economy to steadily improve (UNOCHA 2011). In short, the *Marmara* was a transformative event, breaking Israel's hold on Gaza, trumpeting the Palestinian cause around the world, enhancing the stature of Hamas and laying grounds for a vibrant black market economy that would soon fill Gaza with advanced military hardware.

In light of the violence utilized by some of the activists, one might rightly ask whether the Marmara was an act of non-violent resistance or an armed guerrilla operation. In answering this question, it is crucial to note that non-violent activists do not forfeit their right to self-defense. They may choose not to exercise this right but there is no firm moral reason that they cannot fight back with the means necessary to save their lives and bodies. What organizers cannot do, however, is mislead other participants or expose them to danger without their consent. Gandhi and other followers of non-violent resistance often train demonstrators. They learn what to expect, how to react and how to maximize backfire. This was not apparent among the Marmara activists.

While organizers publically professed a non-violent and peaceful blockade run, they privately prepared to resist the ship's takeover with substantial force. While this led to impressive results, the price in terms of the deaths, injuries, interrogation, incarceration and loss of property that befell unprepared peace activists is not justifiable. They did not consent to this. Most activists committed themselves to non-violence and, like proper civil disobedients, were prepared 'to suffer the consequences of arrest' (UN Secretary General 2011:46-8, §88) but not physical injuries. Many of the Marmara activists were, it seems, intentionally misled about the organizers' commitment to non-violence. They did not sign on for a gunfight and organizers did not take the means necessary to protect non-violent protesters from harm.

It is no wonder then that Israel concluded that many of those on board were not civilian activists but 'direct participants in hostilities' whose violent actions permitted Israel to use armed force to subdue them (Turkel 2010:19-21). From Israel's perspective, the Marmara blockade run was not an act of civil disobedience but an act of war, no different from an insurgent attack on a military facility. Fighting among the non-violent activists, militants attacked troops with bars and knives. In the ensuing fight, commandos could only make a minimal effort to protect non-combatants and avoid disproportionate casualties as they fought back.

As such, Israel faced a very difficult tactical situation. Hamas activists may have abused some of the principles of non-violent resistance but they carefully eschewed firearms and the televised scenes of violence left sufficient ambiguity to make their claims of self-defense credible. The ensuing civilian loss of life coupled with the absence of any military cargo on the ship, reinforced the asymmetry of the situation and fed the resulting backfire.

Israeli options were limited but the flotilla did not pose a significant military threat. There was a point that Israeli exceeded early on, where the right action in the face of resistance would have been to back off and let the ship go on its way. Without boarding the

Marmara, there would be no backfire. This would have left the Palestinians with a successful blockade run, a symbolic victory to be sure but nothing near the strategic victory they walked away with.

The lesson of restraint in the face of non-violent resistance is one that many states do not learn well, particularly when an adversary like Hamas uses non-violent resistance as part of a repertoire of tactics many of which are violent. As a result, non-violent resistance is often successful, thereby making some states all the more determined to defeat non-violent resistance. These efforts, in turn, feed a vicious cycle whereby states react with excessive force, and generate backfire. This humiliates the state actor and encourage greater force the next time around. While states may take many covert steps to foil ambitious operations like those of the Marmara flotilla (for example, arresting activists, disabling ships in port or at sea) there comes a point of no return where a state best serves its interests by letting non-violent resistance run its course.

Human shields

In the Gaza operation Cast Lead (2008-2009), the Israel Defense Forces filmed [videos](#) depicting how strikes on apartment buildings suspected of housing weapons stores were scuttled when tens of individuals went to their rooftops. Others [clips](#) show how armed Hamas fighters called to children to escort them from under fire and thereby shield them from attack (ITIC 2008, 2009).

Human shields easily frustrate sophisticated, law compliant military organizations. Bound by international law and their own military ethos, state armies often find themselves hamstrung when confronting insurgents willing to draw their own civilians into battle. From the viewpoint of state armies, human shields represent a gross violation of the laws of armed conflict. From the perspective of guerrilla organizations, human shields offer a tempting strategy to offset their military weakness. Shields provide at least three benefits. They increase freedom of movement and operation for guerrilla forces by making it difficult for state armies to distinguish combatants from non-combatants, provide more bodies to fight a numerically superior enemy and finally, have significant deterrent effects. When effective, human shields harm no one and offer a significant military advantage to insurgents at no cost.

Human shields are any person who claims immunity from direct attack and whose presence near military operations or infrastructures confers protection against an opposing army. Customary international humanitarian law and numerous treaties, conventions and military manuals prohibit belligerents from using 'the civilian population or individual civilians... to render certain points or areas immune from military operations, to shield military objectives from attacks or to shield, favour or impede military operations' (Additional Protocol I 1977 Article 51(7); also: ICC 2011, 8(2)b(xxiii); [ICRC Rule 97](#)). Nevertheless, I have argued at length that properly conceived and despite vociferous objections from the international community, there is room for human shields in just guerrilla warfare (Gross 2015: 127-150). Many guerilla organizations cannot wage war without aid and cover from the civilian population. Permitting insurgents to fight without uniforms, as Additional Protocol I of the Geneva Conventions ([Article 44](#)) allows, tacitly recognizes the right to intermingle with

and gain protection from the civilian population.

As we consider how states may respond to human shields, it is necessary to distinguish between involuntary and voluntary human shields ([Melzer 2009](#)). Involuntary shields are non-combatants drafted without their consent or knowledge to protect military assets. In some cases, insurgents coerce civilians to locate to and protect a specific location (e.g. the roof of a building housing an arms dump) or insurgents conduct military operations close to civilians to shield themselves from attack (as may happen when missile launchers are located near schools). In each case, involuntary human shields retain their non-combatant immunity from direct attacks. Voluntary shields, by contrast, choose to shield and, thereby, lose their immunity from direct attack. If we therefore imagine civilians assembling on the roof of a building to protect military assets, it is crucial that the attacker knows whether the shields are involuntary or voluntary. If the former, they are protected from disproportionate harm by the principle of non-combatant immunity but if the latter, the shields forfeit their immunity and may be attacked as any other direct participant of armed conflict.

Answering questions about involuntary or voluntary status are extremely difficult and I will assume, absent convincing evidence to the contrary, that all shields are involuntary. On this assumption, an intricate game of brinkmanship emerges as insurgents and states interact. For their part, guerillas hope to prevent an armed attack against a military facility. Pushing further, we can ask whether insurgents also want to precipitate substantial harm to their own civilian population and generate backfire. This demands an intricate calculation. Backfire occurs if innocent compatriots lose their lives in sufficient numbers to trigger condemnation at home or abroad *and* force the attacker to make a greater military concession than merely not destroying the target. To better understand the complexity of using shields to generate backfire consider the two options insurgents may have against a law compliant adversary.

In the first option, insurgents force a large number of involuntary human shields to the roof of a building they want to protect. If the number of civilians is sufficiently great so that the attacker realizes that destroying the building and killing the civilians is disproportionate, then the law compliant attacker will desist. Insurgents have achieved a tactical victory at no cost in human life. They have protected a military asset, gained some sense of empowerment and enhanced their prestige. They did not, however, generate backfire.

In option two, insurgents opt for backfire by either provoking the attacker (say by firing at planes) or by trying to shield a very high-value military target. Imagine on the roof of the same building housing an arms depot is a primed missile ready to launch toward a major city. This time the attacker does not hesitate, but destroys the building, the missile launcher and the shields. Putting aside the complicity of insurgents who callously risked the lives of innocent civilians, one can ask: 'Is this scenario tactically advantageous if it generates backfire?' The answer is 'maybe' if the propaganda benefits of backfire outweigh the loss of their military asset. Insurgents must further consider the public outcry they face from their own people if large numbers of shields die. In short, using shields to generate backfire by letting them die will probably not yield any greater advantage than using shields to protect an asset

by letting them live. The calculation might be offset however, if insurgents can wring additional concessions from their adversary if they allow compatriots to die. This may occur when excessive civilian casualties force a law compliant adversary to curtail its military operations or accept a ceasefire on disadvantageous terms as happened during Israeli operations in Lebanon in 1996. There, an Israeli attack against Hezbollah killed over 100 civilians taking refuge in a UN compound near Qana, Lebanon. Subsequent reports were inconclusive but some evidence suggests that Hezbollah positioned its rocket launchers close to the UN site to either deter an Israeli strike or benefit from condemnation of Israel if Israeli strikes went awry (which they did). Following the incident, the [UNSC](#) called for an immediate cease-fire that was implemented about a week later.

Given what seems to be daunting success of shielding, how may state armies respond? This brings us back to the principle of proportionality.

'Launching an attack which may be expected to cause incidental loss of civilian life, injury to civilians, damage to civilian objects, or a combination thereof, which would be excessive in relation to the concrete and direct military advantage anticipated, is prohibited.' ([ICRC, Rule 14](#))

To shield a military asset, insurgents must bring sufficient numbers of civilians to the site so that an attack that would kill them all would be disproportionate and thereby deter a law complaint adversary. To be disproportionate, the number of civilians needs to exceed the anticipated military advantage of destroying the target. Because civilian lives and military advantage are not commensurable, it is extraordinarily difficult to weigh one against the other. How many lives for example, outweigh the advantage of destroying an arms depot holding n number of missiles of x explosive capability? Add to that a y probability that the intelligence is accurate and a z possibility that the attack will succeed and one readily sees how difficult this calculation can become. Nevertheless, both defenders and attackers must draw some rough estimates. The shield defenders will want to overwhelm a site with shields so that any attack that harms them all is manifestly disproportionate. Shield attackers will want to be certain that the value of the target they are attacking is sufficiently high that it will overwhelm nearly any number of civilian casualties.

All this leaves shielding effective but not game changing. Shields, like any other non-combatant, remain liable to proportionate, collateral harm. This places an added constraint on the magnitude of risk that insurgents must observe when they place civilians at risk. Ideally, shields should face no danger at all and when shielding works, this is precisely what happens. Since this success is not guaranteed, the best insurgents can do is to minimize the risk of harm by competently judging their enemy's willingness to respect shields, bringing sufficient numbers of shields to deter an enemy from attacking a military target and learning from past mistakes to prevent the needless death and injury to shields in the future.

To ensure a level of permissible risk among shields, insurgents must pay particular attention to proportionality while keenly understanding that an attacking army may permissibly cause proportionate collateral harm in pursuit of legitimate military objectives. The more important the insurgent target, the more

civilians may suffer collateral harm as an attacking army seeks to destroy it. At one point, the guerrilla army will find it difficult to bring sufficient numbers of non-combatants to protect the target, and shielding will not work.

In other words, shields work best when military targets are of low to moderate value. In these circumstances, insurgents may be able to bring enough shields so it becomes obvious that any harm befalling them is disproportionate, thereby deterring an attacking army. The number of shields must be so great as to manifestly overwhelm the value of destroying the military target they are protecting. For this reason, shields are far less useful when trying to protect a high-value target where attacking state armies will have far more leeway to cause incidental civilian casualties before they are excessive. Human shielding, therefore, is a powerful weapon but not decisive. When shielding successfully deters an enemy or mitigates the force a law compliant adversary chooses to deploy, insurgents achieve a significant military advantage at little cost. If insurgents miscalculate and fail to bring enough shields to make an attack disproportionate, they will not deter law compliant states who may legitimately destroy shielded targets if the ensuing harms to civilians is not excessive. Human shielding is effective but will not protect an enemy's critical military assets.

Hunger Striking

In 1981, the British government allowed ten hunger striking imprisoned Irish Republican Army (IRA) members to die, a decision that had momentous implications for the conflict in Northern Ireland (English 2003: 263-274; 280-83). IRA demands were relatively modest. They sought neither the withdrawal of the British from Northern Ireland nor their own release from prison. Rather, they demanded recognition as *political* prisoners: the right to organize educational activities and the right to refuse prison issue uniforms or do prison work. The British, however, refused to negotiate. "A crime is a crime is a crime" declared Margaret Thatcher. From the British perspective, the IRA was a criminal organization whose members deserved no forbearance or respect. The results were disastrous and British policy backfired thunderously bringing Britain worldwide condemnation, sweeping popular support for the IRA, a vicious, decade-long campaign of terror and the successful entry of the Sinn Fein into British politics. Wary of similar missteps, states facing hunger-striking insurgents tread more carefully today.

Hunger strikes are acts of brinkmanship no different from backfire or human shields as strikers put their own health on the line to force concessions from the state. As evidenced by the IRA, The Kurdistan Worker Party (PKK) or Hamas, hunger striking is a common strategy of soft war, often chosen by groups waging what is otherwise an armed struggle. Like non-violent resistance and human shielding, hunger strikers direct violence against themselves betting that a law compliant state averse to disproportionate and unnecessary harm will blink first and comply with their demands before the strikers sicken and die.

As hunger strikes progress, states have only three options: force-feed hunger strikers; accommodate them; or let them die. Force-feeding is a problematic option. Following frequent American attempts to successfully force feed hunger strikers at Guantanamo Bay by strapping them to a chair and snaking a feeding tube into their gut, [the International Committee of the Red Cross](#) (2013) and

the [World Medical Association](#) (2006) condemned force-feeding detainees as inhuman and degrading, an affront to dignity and a flagrant violation of a person's right to refuse medical care. States, on the other hand, will want to force feed prisoners to avoid painful political concessions or prevent the civil unrest and adverse public opinion that will arise when prisoners die. How might law compliant states act when faced with hunger strikers?

To answer this question, both international law and state interests require some perspective. Proponents of international law must realize that the right to refuse medical treatment is not categorical, that feeding hunger strikers in violation of their wishes is not tantamount to torture and that lingering emaciation and starvation are no less appalling than force-feeding. Hunger striking prisoners are not terminally ill patients who refuse end-stage medical care of questionable efficacy. Rather, they are foot soldiers in an ongoing political and military conflict who choose to pursue their grievances by lethal brinkmanship in the austere environment of a military prison.

Considering these circumstances, several points are important ([Gross 2013](#), [Garasic 2015](#)). Most significantly, the state retains its right to defend the public order. Capitulation to strikers' demands or simply letting them die cannot be the state's only option. This is the lesson from the calamitous hunger strike of the IRA. Seeing how striking to the death can significantly strengthen a national movement, it seems clear that state interests can, in some cases, override the absolute obligation to respect the right of hunger striking political prisoners to refuse treatment at any cost.

A hunger striker's absolute right to refuse treatment also fails for other reasons. Considering the unique psychosocial make-up of prisoners in harsh conditions raises reasonable doubts about the authenticity of their choice to self-starve. Consequently, doctors who wish to save life may reasonably choose to save the lives of hunger strikers even against the strikers' expressed wishes if it appears that hunger strikers were coerced into striking by their peers or commanders. Nor is force-feeding torture as some claim. Torturers inflict prolonged and severe pain to elicit information or terrorize the innocent. Inserting a feeding tube to save lives pursues a different goal entirely.

None of this should suggest that states may force feed striking political prisoners at will. A new law in Israel, for example, allows the court to order force-feeding when a striker's life is in imminent danger *and* the strike threatens national security and public order. In the US, a US district court issued and then rescinded a restraining order to prevent force-feeding in Guantanamo Bay in May 2014. More cases are sure to follow. What then must a conscientious, law compliant state consider? First, state authorities must recognize that hunger striking is a legitimate means to conduct a struggle for national self-determination. Second, they must realize that force-feeding, although not tantamount to torture, carries costs. It provokes outrage among prisoners and their supporters, puts medical practitioners in the uncomfortable position of strike-breakers and may, if unregulated, slide toward the unwarranted infringement of other rights. Third, and in spite of government pressure, the authorities must carefully consider whether and how ongoing strikes impinge upon the public's welfare. Barring the prospect of a clear and present danger, the public authorities must assure sufficient time for negotiation before breaking a strike, just as they would in a labor strike. For

this reason alone, force-feeding at Guantanamo Bay after two or three days is premature.

Negotiations are the first order of business because political hunger strikers usually make feasible demands. Neither IRA nor Palestinian prisoners demanded that Britain or Israel leave disputed territory nor release prisoners unconditionally. Rather, they strove for modest political gains to support their struggle: IRA inmates sought recognition as political prisoners. PKK activists sought the use of Kurdish in local courts and schools. Jailed Hamas militants did not demand an end to the occupation. Rather they sought improved prison conditions, more frequent visits and an end to administrative detention. In these circumstances, states have an obligation to pursue negotiation and only impose force-feeding when they have exhausted all other means, when the threat to public welfare is imminent and overwhelming and before prisoners reach a medical state of irreversible harm. Despite the hard moral dilemma that force-feeding raises, the duty to respect a person's right to refuse food is not absolute. In those rare instances when negotiations have run their course, public welfare is imminently endangered and prisoners face certain death force-feeding is morally permissible. No one should let them die.

As a practical matter, it appears that many states have learned the lesson the British failed to grasp in 1981. Hunger striking, like human shielding, works best when its goals are modest. Just as human shields cannot protect high value targets, hunger strikes will not provide more than local tactical victories unless, as the British teach us, they are severely mismanaged. The PKK did not secure the release of Ocalan, but they did win local concessions that permitted widespread use of Kurdish. Similarly, [Palestinian hunger strikes](#) in 2014 and 2017 were successful. Some prisoners won release from prison while other garnered better conditions. In each case, these were important victories for militants. They enhanced their prestige, improved prison conditions and instilled a sense of empowerment as part of an ongoing and complex conflict.

Conclusion

In the context of insurgency and wars for national liberation, it is important to understand that non-kinetic, soft war tactics allow armed groups to level the playing field to an extent they cannot achieve with kinetic weapons, improvised explosive devices, assassination or even missiles. Among the most effective non-kinetic weapons are those that direct violence at militants and their own constituencies with the express purpose of provoking a disproportionate response and backfire. Law compliant states are not helpless in the face of backfire but they must be deliberate and cautious. In some cases, as the Marmara episode shows, the best response is to let non-violent protests run their course. In the cases of human shielding and hunger striking states have an array of options as long as they are willing to allow militants short-term tactical gains to deny them long-term and significant strategic victories.

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