



A twelve-man Special Forces team from the U.S. Army Special Operation Command's 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne) travels on horseback to link up with insurgent Afghan forces opposing the brutal Taliban regime in Afghanistan. Starting 19 October 2001, the team's forty-nine-day campaign, supported by the other services and interagency departments, successfully helped organize and assist indigenous Afghan forces in the overthrow of the Taliban government. At the time, Afghanistan was providing a safe haven to the al-Qaida terrorist organization and its leader Osama bin Laden, the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks against the United States. (Photo courtesy of the U.S. Army)

The Strategic Imperative

USASOC's Role in Advancing Civil Resistance Movements during Irregular Warfare

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I hold it that a little rebellion now and then is a good thing, and as necessary in the political world as storms in the physical.

—Thomas Jefferson

As the Army transitions toward prioritizing large-scale combat operations and multi-domain operations (MDO), the threshold for entering conventional military conflict rises and calls into question the efficacy of conventional military approaches, particularly in addressing nonstate actors and asymmetric threats. U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) has emerged as the Army's most pivotal actor in countering complex threats in a dynamic operational environment.

By leveraging USASOC's unique skills and capabilities, the Army can impose costs upon adversaries below the threshold of armed conflict. However, as USASOC trains to remain proficient in its core activities, a capability gap exists within the unconventional warfare enterprise. While Special Forces soldiers are experts in advising guerilla military forces to conduct armed resistance movements, the persistent rise in civil resistance movements to challenge oppressive authority is a domain USASOC cannot ignore. This article advocates for USASOC to integrate a mission to advise civil resistance movements as part of the unconventional warfare strategy.

As part of the irregular warfare mission set, unconventional warfare requires high flexibility and ingenuity to achieve mission success. Following the Arab Spring uprisings in the early 2010s, the ubiquitous nature of technology has lowered the bar for entry to challenge authoritarian regimes. Resistance movements no longer require guerilla militias to operate as the decisive force for overthrowing regimes. On the contrary, according to academic researchers, civil resistance movements are four times more effective than armed resistance movements and create a more sustainable replacement government.¹ This article first contextualizes the problem by demonstrating the capability gap. Then, it explains civil resistance movements and crucial operating concepts such as the mechanisms for change, civil resistance planning structures, tactics, and the Spectrum of Allies. Finally, it identifies the organizations best suited for developing expertise in civil

resistance movements, thereby providing a framework to assume the mission set in a manner that supports and enables unconventional warfare.

Contextualizing the Problem

USASOC has two main challenges to overcome. First, it has trained elite soldiers who are experts in a mission with less than an 8 percent chance of success, and this chance is decreasing yearly.² Second, it has no units or experts specializing in civil resistance movements, even though such movements are four times more effective in bringing about regime change.³

Special Forces soldiers receive training to help guerilla forces overthrow established governments tactically.⁴ The Special Forces Qualification Course includes a culminating exercise called "Robin Sage," in which candidates must evaluate the combat effectiveness of guerilla forces, train them in unconventional warfare doctrine and techniques, and demonstrate their expertise.⁵ This model has been successful in the past, particularly in 2001, when Special Forces soldiers worked with the Afghan Northern Alliance to overthrow the Taliban.⁶ However, such successful operations are rare. Only 8 percent of attempted armed resistance movements have been successful as of 2019, and even when they succeed, the new regimes often face continued violence, civil war, and challenges to their authority.⁷

Civil resistance movements differ from armed resistance movements by prioritizing nonviolent strategies and weaponizing the information environment to achieve their goals.⁸ They employ various tactics such as protests, demonstrations, strikes, and noncooperation to build information networks, create viral content, and increase the reach of their message.⁹ The Arab Spring protests are

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examples of civil resistance that began when a fruit stand vendor in Tunisia self-immolated and inspired mobilized demonstrations throughout the Arab world.¹⁰ These protests resulted in governmental overthrow in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya, and led to significant political changes in seventeen countries.¹¹ However, it is crucial to note that this movement was not uncontrolled chaos but a version of unconventional warfare waged by ordinary citizens who weaponized the information environment to inspire the masses. Despite the considerable doctrine covering tactical operations and training during unconventional warfare, no manuals describe military support to civil resistance movements through a partner force.

Furthermore, no organization within USASOC specializes in developing expertise in civil resistance movements and training to support foreign populations in their efforts. Since the Arab Spring, citizens have noticed that civil resistance allows them to oppose their oppressive governments and mobilize publicly. Protests have even occurred in countries participating in the great power competition like Russia, Iran, and China.¹² In February 2024, even North Koreans working in China staged protests.¹³

As the U.S. military seeks to achieve an information advantage and effectively coordinate MDO, civil resistance movements remain a capability gap. The military expertise in unconventional warfare is valuable. However, as occurrences of civil resistance increase, the ability to compete in a global battlefield dominated by information-centric resistance becomes more important. The Army must adapt its approach to understand civil resistance and commit organizations to harness its power. USASOC must invest in developing expertise in all aspects of irregular warfare, and civil resistance movements are the most significant area for investment.

Civil Resistance Movements Explained

On 25 February 1986, the former president of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos, fled the country due to peaceful protests demanding his resignation.¹⁴ Despite Marcos leading his government to perpetrate numerous human rights violations such as torture and extrajudicial killings, it was the citizens, including women, children, and the elderly, who brought an end to his rule.¹⁵ The People Power Revolution of 1986 in the Philippines is one of the case studies examined in

Harvard University professor Erica Chenoweth's 2012 book titled *Why Civil Resistance Works*.¹⁶

Chenoweth studied 323 mass actions worldwide between 1900 and 2006 in her book, analyzing 160 variables related to success criteria, participant categories, and state capacity.¹⁷ Her dataset included every known resistance movement with at least one thousand participants.¹⁸ Her research produced an astounding result: nonviolent civil resistance was twice as likely to succeed in producing change as violent resistance movements, even in situations dealing with violent authoritarian regimes.¹⁹ By 2019, civil resistance movements grew to four times more likely to succeed than armed resistance movements.²⁰

Chenoweth's research further indicates that mobilizing 3.5 percent of a population is a threshold sufficient to overthrow a government regime.²¹ Despite USASOC's expertise in waging unconventional warfare and mobilizing insurgencies, there has never been an armed resistance movement that surpassed the 3.5 percent rule.²² The lack of armed resistance movements reaching the 3.5 percent threshold indicates that while Army Special Forces are proficient in their assigned tasks at the tactical level, USASOC must make adjustments to achieve continued mission success at the operational and strategic levels.

Attempting to fight a violent oppressor through coordinated civil resistance may seem counterintuitive. However, as Gene Sharp stated in his influential book *From Dictator to Democracy*, "By placing confidence in violent means, one has chosen the very type of struggle with which oppressors nearly always have superiority."²³ Not only do the oppressive regimes have the tactical advantage, but armed resistance movements also have a greater reliance on secrecy, which is increasingly becoming difficult to achieve with the ubiquity of technology.²⁴ While illegal underground radio stations, publications, and social media content will benefit from a degree of secrecy, integrating tactics that rely primarily upon openness will reduce fear and generate an advantage for authentic content generation.

Mechanisms for Change

Sharp's book outlines four mechanisms by which civil resistance movements can produce change.²⁵ These mechanisms are conversion, accommodation, nonviolent coercion, and disintegration.²⁶



In an act of nonviolent civil disobedience in India, Mahatma Gandhi led a twenty-four-day march that lasted from 12 March 1930 to 6 April 1930. Known as the Salt March, it served as a direct-action campaign of tax resistance and nonviolent protest against the British salt monopoly. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

Conversion occurs when nonviolent resisters subjected to suffering and repression emotionally move members of the oppressive regime.²⁷ In 1989, during the fall of the Berlin Wall, border guards became emotionally moved by the protestors and hesitated to follow orders.²⁸ Eventually, the guards allowed people to cross, leading to the wall's collapse.²⁹

Accommodation occurs when the issues brought about by resistance are limited, and the perception of giving in to the demands is a better solution than continuing to deal with resisters.³⁰ Mahatma Gandhi's 1930 salt march is an example of accommodation. Gandhi led a march to the Arabian Sea to collect salt, an essential human mineral, in protest of salt taxation.³¹ The act did not result in regime change but led to government concessions negotiated with Gandhi and increased support for the Indian independence movement.³²

Nonviolent coercion occurs when mass noncooperation and defiance change the social and political

situations so that the oppressive government can no longer control the economic, social, and political processes.³³ The 2007 Saffron Revolution in Myanmar was an example of nonviolent coercion when Buddhist monks led a movement of public defiance. While the movement didn't achieve all its goals, there was a reduction in the military junta's hold on power, and the government implemented reforms.³⁴

Disintegration occurs when noncooperation becomes so severe that the oppressor's bureaucracy refuses to obey.³⁵ Military and police refuse orders, and assistance from former supporters fades away. The Tunisian Jasmine Revolution, which dissolved the Tunisian government and ousted President Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali from his twenty-three-year rule, exemplifies disintegration.³⁶ Following the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a Tunisian fruit stand vendor, protests erupted throughout the country, resulting in a harsh government response.³⁷ The government

was fully dissolved by 14 January 2011, and elections occurred within six months.³⁸

Civil Resistance Planning

Army doctrine currently outlines USASOC's efforts during unconventional warfare through eight phases.³⁹ The phases start with the steady state status quo of Phase 0 and escalate through the entire unconventional warfare operation until Phase 7, where unconventional warfare forces revert to national control and shift to regular forces.⁴⁰ Civil resistance movements plan through a concept called the "Movement Action Plan (MAP)" developed by Bill Moyer in 1987.⁴¹ The MAP has eight stages for the movement to progress through:

1. Stage one (normal times). In normal times, there may be politically quiet periods where citizens feel frustrated with the systemic oppressor, but there is no organized movement to confront it.⁴² Even though the conditions may be against the best interests of society, they are not in the public spotlight or on society's agenda.⁴³

2. Stage two (prove the failure of institutions). Civil resistance movements inherently must elicit a strong emotional response from the public. During stage two, the movement seeks to expose the government's hypocrisy and increase outrage at violations of public trust.⁴⁴

3. Stage three (ripening conditions). Discontent among victims and allies, along with historical developments, set the stage for civil resistance movements. During stage three, the movement matures, creating conditions for significant future events.⁴⁵

4. Stage four (social movement take-off). A highly publicized and shocking trigger event brings a previously unrecognized social problem to the forefront of the public spotlight. During stage four, the civil resistance movement begins to participate in dramatic civil disobedience, creating opportunities for various communities to repeat their public displays of opposition.⁴⁶

5. Stage five (identity crisis of powerlessness). After enduring long periods of effort and making many sacrifices, members of a civil resistance movement may start to lose faith in the success of their cause. The perception that those in power hold too much influence can create a feeling of futility. This stage may require focusing on past victories and gathering new members to replenish the movement's energy.⁴⁷

6. Stage six (majority public support). The civil resistance movement needs to gain the support of neutral individuals and expand its base by winning a larger majority of the population to actively support the cause. The sixth stage requires a long and gradual process of utilizing information to influence mainstream and non-political actors to agree with the movement's position.⁴⁸

7. Stage seven (success). Once the new social consensus has shifted against those in power, the success of a movement can be indicated in three ways. First, a dramatic shutdown can occur when a spark among the population suddenly creates an overwhelming coercive force that leads to change.⁴⁹ Second, a quiet shutdown can occur when the governing regime makes a face-saving effort to proclaim victory while subtly changing policies.⁵⁰ And third, attrition occurs when success is achieved seemingly invisibly through a gradual political process.⁵¹

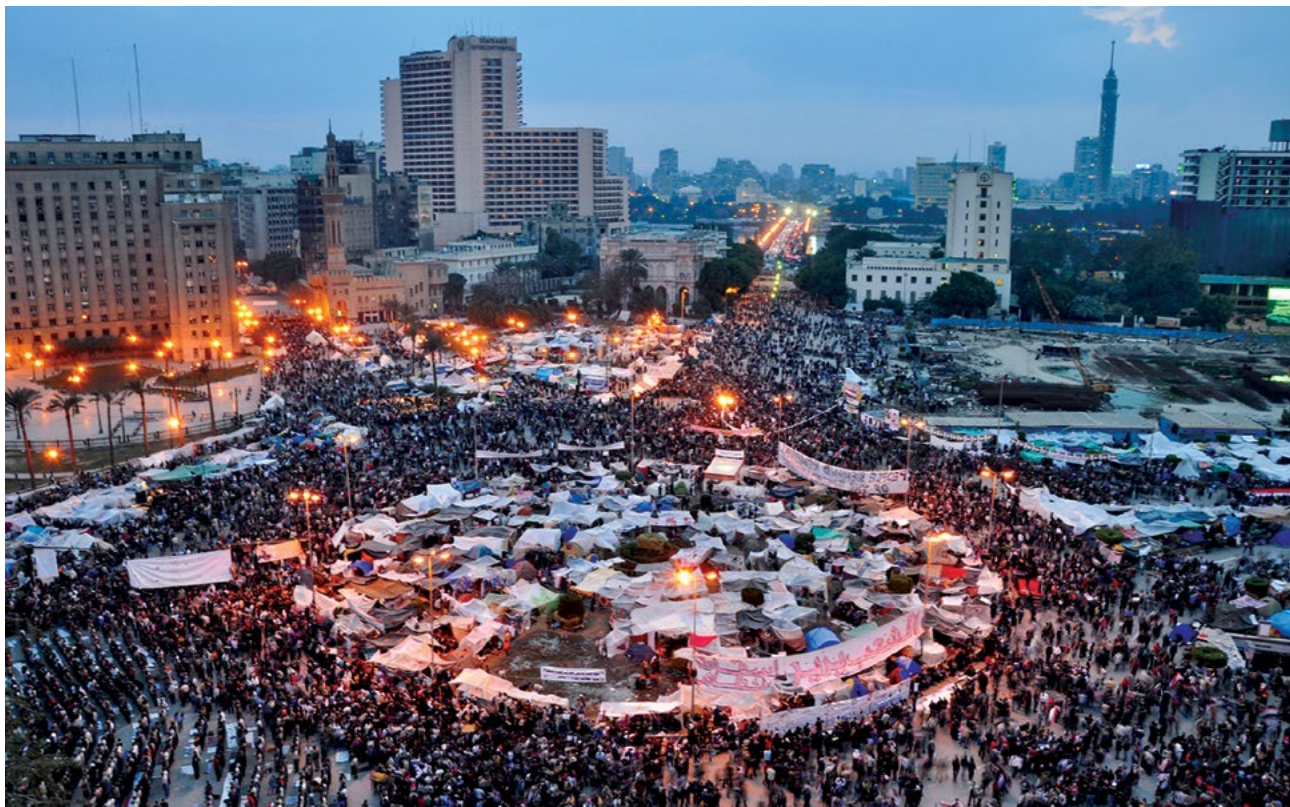
8. Stage eight (continuing the struggle). After achieving its goals, the civil resistance movement should continue working toward new demands and building social consensus on various issues.⁵²

A unique aspect of the civil resistance planning process is that it accounts for the likelihood of disillusionment. It forces organizers to recognize that, at some point, the movement will not achieve its stated goals and must reorganize and try again. Special operations soldiers assessed for their ability to deal with ambiguity will be able to handle the civil resistance movement planning process and rapidly guide an indigenous force through the steps to overcome adversity. Once the movement has reached the sixth stage and seeks to gain the majority public support, special operations soldiers with expertise in performing influence operations can assist in building the population that opposes the oppressive government.

Civil Resistance Tactics

Effective nonviolent resistance movements integrate a variety of disruptive tactics that rarely find themselves as part of military discourse. However, techniques such as leafleting, banner hanging, hashtag hijacking, and media-jacking might find themselves at home within the John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School's Psychological Operations (PSYOP) Training pipeline.

Just as it would be irrational to assume soldiers with no training or experience could lead a Special Forces



Over one million protesters gather on 9 February 2011 at Tahrir Square in Cairo demanding the removal of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and his regime. The protest began 25 January 2011 and focused on legal and political issues including police brutality, civil liberty, freedom of speech, inflation, and low wages. On 11 February 2011, Egypt's vice president announced Mubarak's resignation, with power transferring to the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces. (Photo by Jonathan Rashad, Flickr)

operation advising a tactical guerilla movement, it would be imprudent to assume soldiers can support civil resistance movements without developing the expertise. While civil resistance movements incorporate a wide variety of tactics and military planning, five civil resistance tactics follow that are relevant and easy to immediately integrate into special operations training exercises while building the capability.

App flooding. Appropriation of a politically neutral phone application to the civil resistance by overwhelming it with campaign messages.⁵³ In 2020, Russian citizens, amid COVID-19 lockdowns, implemented this tactic using the Yandex.Navigator app.⁵⁴ Protestors manually reported their locations on the app to show severe congestion in areas under strict lockdown.⁵⁵ The protest disrupted police situational awareness and forced the concentration of resources toward content removal.⁵⁶

Clandestine leafleting. The delivery of messages without putting the individual at risk through

alternative methods such as floating lanterns.⁵⁷ In October 2011, protestors in Damascus, Syria, changed the color of the water in public fountains to blood red and later unleashed hundreds of ping pong balls with messages written on them through the streets.⁵⁸

Hashtag hijack. Using someone else's hashtag to rapidly spread the resistance movement's message to a larger audience.⁵⁹ In 2012, protestors in the Maldives coopted the government hashtag "#SunnySideofLife" to disseminate images of the government arresting protestors and using tear gas.⁶⁰

Currency hacking. Stamping resistance messages on local currency, turning money into widely distributed leaflets.⁶¹ In 2011, a Palestinian resistance movement began writing "Free Palestine" on shekel paper notes, causing the Central Bank of Israel to make a formal statement that marked notes would not be accepted.⁶² The Central Bank's public statement further increased the reach of the resistance movement to individuals who had yet to see a marked note.⁶³

Mass street action. A large public protest in an area likely to disrupt public activities.⁶⁴ During the Arab Spring, millions of Egyptians demonstrated mass street action when they occupied Tahrir Square and confronted security forces, resulting in eighteen bloody days of protest.⁶⁵

All civil resistance tactics are part of efforts to pursue the decisive point of public support of 3.5 percent. A large public protest in which a government force uses tear gas and violence to quell public action is a resounding success from the perspective of a civil resistance movement's influence efforts. Violent suppression draws in media attention, viral social media content, and a public consensus that the authoritarian regime has gone too far. The goal of each nonviolent action is to bait the ruling government to respond and overreact, forcing them to invest time and resources while simultaneously functioning as a loudspeaker for the movement's narratives. Large-scale military training exercises such as Robin Sage and combat training center rotations provide resources and opportunities to practice advising civil resistance while coordinating with the tactical elements that engage in armed resistance. A tool called the Spectrum of Allies should be integrated into the civil resistance advisor's vernacular to ensure they understand the scope and progress of their role.

Understanding the Spectrum of Allies

The Spectrum of Allies tool was developed by activist George Lakey to strategically align strategies among different social groups based on their level of support for the cause.⁶⁶ The tool aims to categorize target audiences into one of five categories:

1. Active support. These individuals are taking active steps to support the resistance movement, such as participating in protests, handing out leaflets, or operating an underground radio station.⁶⁷

2. Passive support. These individuals ideologically align with the resistance movement but have yet to cross the threshold into active participation.⁶⁸ The resistance movement's goal should be to lower the threshold for participation and influence this group into active support.

3. Neutral. This group supports neither the resistance movement nor the oppressive regime.⁶⁹ They either need to be more informed or are unaffected by the status quo. The goal of the resistance movement is to

move this group into passive support by exposing them to the brutality of the oppressive regime. Exposing these individuals to social media content, such as the government abuse of civilians, is a priority for influence.

4. Passive opposition. These individuals ideologically support the oppressive government but do not take active steps to demonstrate that support.⁷⁰ The civil resistance movement's goal for these individuals is to force them to question their ideological loyalty. Civil resisters can disrupt their perceptions of support by exposing them to instances where the government oppressed its loyalists.

5. Active opposition. These individuals take active steps to support the government regime and are frequently government members, military, or police.⁷¹ The civil resistance movement's goal for these individuals is to generate an emotional response that creates hesitation in their actions. One example is showing active opposition members their children or family who are in protest crowds.

While utilizing the tool, the primary goal is to tailor narratives, messages, and tactics so that individuals move one category group closer to actively supporting the nonviolent resistance group. The model indicates that even for security forces strongly ideologically aligned with the authoritarian government, the goal is to integrate tactics that move them into the passive resistance category and reinforce an unwillingness to enforce government policies. An example of a transition between active and passive opposition occurred in Serbia during the Bulldozer Revolution to overthrow Slobodan Milošević. Police officers were ordered to shoot into the crowd of protestors but refused.⁷² Later, one officer indicated that he had refused because he knew his kids were among the protestors.⁷³ The nonviolent resistance movement did not need to convince the police officers to join their protests actively; they needed the police officers to transition to a passive state and refuse to persecute their orders actively. Terrorist organizations have placed this principle into practice repeatedly by placing their operations inside hospitals, schools, and religious structures, forcing military forces from an active state into a passive one.

Building the Expertise

As USASOC eliminates one of its PSYOP group headquarters and transitions the PSYOP and civil



Several hundred thousand protesters chanting "Gotov je!" [He's finished!] gather on 5 October 2000 at the House of the Federal Assembly of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in Belgrade as the building burns during what was known as the Overthrow of Slobodan Milošević, or the Bulldozer Revolution. Milošević's government fell the same day. (Photo courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)

affairs battalions under the Special Forces groups, a unified mission set must accompany them.⁷⁴ The primary mission of Army Special Forces groups is to lead and train unconventional warfare forces in an occupied nation.⁷⁵ Accordingly, the civil affairs and PSYOP battalions must adopt a nested mission to accompany its new position in the table of organization and equipment. A mission that outlines leading and training civil resistance movements in support of unconventional warfare operations is appropriately nested and utilizes the specialized skills within the organization.

The civil affairs branch has civil reconnaissance experts who specialize in assessing, engaging, and influencing civil components and are well-suited to engage with civil resistance movements.⁷⁶ Civil affairs medical sergeants are likewise prepared to operate in an irregular warfare environment and generate opportunities to establish rapport and reinforce relationships among nonviolent resisters. While Special Forces soldiers are responsible for developing relationships with guerilla forces, the civil affairs elements within the Special Forces groups should perform simultaneous and

parallel operations to embed with the nonviolent resistance movement. Civil affairs soldiers routinely train to bridge the civil-military divide and build rapport, a skill that will enable linking up and coordinating resistance.

PSYOP soldiers have the expertise and resources required to produce resistance products and enable the execution of nonviolent tactics. Many nonviolent resistance tactics require producing and disseminating leaflets, movies, audio, or internet content, and PSYOP soldiers are well-suited to execute those tasks. Their ability to perform expert-level target audience analysis and ensure the products reflect local customs make them well-suited for support operations. Some civil resistance tactics require advanced technical knowledge that PSYOP soldiers have integrated into their training; they only need to develop the ability to apply this knowledge in a civil resistance context. The civil resistance mission set also enables PSYOP soldiers to utilize the indirect-MISO (military information support operations) series construct, speeding up the bureaucratic processes for mission and product approval.⁷⁷ As Army Reserve and active duty PSYOP forces start to train under the

newly established psychological warfare school, there is an opportunity to contextualize the training within a civil resistance framework and build out techniques for mission support.⁷⁸ While adding a mission set at a time when the Department of Defense inspector general has determined that the Army does not have enough PSYOP personnel to meet the Department of Defense's growing demand might seem counterintuitive, it is a move for greater efficiency.⁷⁹ Developing relationships with civil resistance members creates opportunities to establish mechanisms for product dissemination and methods for determining measures of effectiveness. Rather than linear influence operations, PSYOP soldiers can develop influence networks reinforcing themes and narratives in relevant MISO programs.

Conclusion

As USASOC works to establish itself as a vital component of MDO, it must close the capability gap within civil resistance movements. The USASOC Central Idea and Contributions to MDO construct describes expanding the global special operations forces network and participating in irregular warfare as assets for penetrating and disintegrating great power standoff systems.⁸⁰ If USASOC hopes to expand strategic options, it must close capability gaps and expand the capability of its force to integrate civil resistance tactics and progress foreign audiences toward mechanisms for change. While incorporating the Spectrum of Allies helps visualize

the cognitive domain, the Army must go further and formalize the doctrinal change within the DOTMLPF (doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership and education, personnel, and facilities) construct.

By understanding the scope and effectiveness of civil resistance movements, USASOC can appropriately prioritize their execution while integrating them as part of mission planning. Developing special operations soldiers with a complete understanding of the mechanisms for change, civil resistance planning process, civil resistance tactics, and the Spectrum of Allies will enable unconventional warfare and irregular warfare planners with the tools necessary for improving the likelihood of mission success. Formalizing the doctrinal mission of civil resistance advisory and support as civil affairs and PSYOP battalions transfer under the Special Forces groups is the most effective method of developing a nested, mutually supportive mission set while taking full advantage of specialized skills. USASOC lives by the special operations forces imperative of understanding the operational environment and, therefore, must recognize that the information-centric interconnected world creates opportunities for cascading information flows that disrupt governments. It is incumbent upon the special operations enterprise to seize the opportunity and become experts in civil resistance movements rather than observing on the sidelines during ordinary citizens' attempts to liberate themselves from oppression. ■

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Operation Anaconda Virtual Staff Ride



The Army University Press's Operation Anaconda virtual staff ride (VSR) examines the U.S.-led coalition attack into the Shahi Kowt Valley of Afghanistan in 2002. The study encompasses irregular warfare in the employment of special operations forces, multinational operations with Afghan forces, conventional forces, and joint operations.

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Shahi Kowt Valley



Takur Ghar



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