Stumbling out of the Gates: Security Strategy and Military Weakness after Revolutionary Victory

Kai M. Thaler

Abstract

While revolutionary regimes may be durable in the long run, they are weak when they first come into power, but their particular weaknesses depend especially on whether the old regime security apparatus has been fully defeated, or if elements of it defected and persist in the new state. I argue that where old regime security forces persist, the new regime will focus on coup-proofing, leaving itself vulnerable to insurgent or foreign threats. Where the old regime's security forces are defeated or disintegrate but armed domestic rivals remain, revolutionaries will focus on defeating them, potentially neglecting external threats. Absent both old regime forces and armed domestic rivals, revolutionaries will focus heavily on external threats, neglecting possible domestic threats. I develop this theory through interview and archive-based comparative case studies of Nicaragua, where the old regime military dissolved, and Iran, where it remained largely intact. Nicaragua's revolutionaries emphasized foreign defense, while the Iranian regime worried primarily about coups and then domestic rebels, with military effectiveness suffering in both cases in their first several years in power. Externally focused Nicaragua allowed insurgencies to take root, while Iran's coup-proofing revolutionary regime was only saved by invading Iraqi forces' hesitancy. Both regimes eventually corrected their initial missteps, but their decision-making reinforces the importance of old regime security forces' status in revolutionary transitions and that the period of early weakness is when international engagement can have the greatest impact on new revolutionary regimes.

Keywords: regime change; rebel-to-government transitions; coup-proofing; authoritarian military effectiveness; revolutionary transitions

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Social revolutions rupture domestic socioeconomic and political structures and unsettle regional and global politics, so they are often followed by counterrevolutionary civil wars, international wars, or both,[1] and new revolutionary regimes must manage the security apparatus to maintain their newfound power. Scholars argue that revolutionary regimes build strong, effective security forces due to their capacity to mobilize society.[2] And revolutions give birth to some of the most durable authoritarian regimes:[3] In 2021, the Chinese Communist Party celebrated its centennial, and marked 72 years in government, having built China into a global superpower.[4] Right after seizing power, though, revolutionary regimes are usually militarily weak and highly vulnerable to challenges.[5] How do new revolutionary regimes organize their security forces, and what explains variation in their perception of and susceptibility to different domestic and international threats?

All regimes must balance their security priorities among three threats: coups from within the regime, domestic rebellion, or international attacks, and striking the right balance is always difficult for regimes with limited resources,[6] but I argue that it is particularly hard for new revolutionary regimes. Building inductively from a comparison of the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua and the Islamic Republic of Iran after their

1   E.g. Stephen M. Walt, *Revolution and War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Jean Lachapelle et al., "Social Revolution and Authoritarian Durability," *World Politics*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (2020), pp. 557–600, doi:10.1017/S0043887120000106.

2   Jonathan R. Adelman, *Revolution, Armies and War* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1985); Ted Robert Gurr, "War, Revolution, and the Growth of the Coercive State," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (April 1988), pp. 45–65, doi:10.1177/0010414088021001003; Theda Skocpol, "Social Revolutions and Mass Military Mobilization," *World Politics*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (1988), pp. 147–168; Jeff Carter, Michael Bernhard, and Glenn Palmer, "Social Revolution, the State, and War: How Revolutions Affect War-Making Capacity and Interstate War Outcomes," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 56, No. 3 (February 2012), pp. 439–466, doi:10.1177/0022002711431796.

3   Steven Levitsky and Lucan Way, *Revolution and Dictatorship: The Violent Origins of Durable Authoritarianism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022); Lachapelle et al., "Social Revolution and Authoritarian Durability"; Terrence Lyons, "From Victorious Rebels to Strong Authoritarian Parties: Prospects for Post-War Democratization," *Democratization*, Vol. 23, No. 6 (2016), pp. 1026–1041, doi:10.1080/13510347.2016.1168404; Dan Slater, "Violent Origins of Authoritarian Variation: Rebellion Type and Regime Type in Cold War Southeast Asia," *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (2020), pp. 21–40, doi:10.1017/gov.2018.4.

4   E.g. Tony Saich, *From Rebel to Ruler: One Hundred Years of the Chinese Communist Party* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2021).

5   Lachappelle et al. note that "most revolutionary autocracies are born weak" (2020: 564). The Chinese Communist Party is a relative exception, having built up decades of military and rebel governance experience.

6   Stephen R. David, "Explaining Third World Alignment," *World Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 2 (1991), pp. 233–256; Brian L. Job, "The Insecurity Dilemma: National, Regime, and State Securities in the Third World," in Brian L. Job, ed., *The Insecurity Dilemma: National Security of Third World States* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1992), pp. 11–35; Barry Buzan, *People, States, and Fear: An Agenda for International Security Studies in the Post-Cold War Era*, 2nd ed. (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1991); Caitlin Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army: Battlefield Effectiveness in Authoritarian Regimes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015); Caitlin Talmadge, "Different Threats, Different Militaries: Explaining Organizational Practices in Authoritarian Armies," *Security Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (2016), pp. 111–141, doi:10.1080/09636412.2016.1134192; Sheena Chestnut Greitens, *Dictators and Their Secret Police: Coercive Institutions and State Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

respective 1979 revolutions, I theorize that new revolutionary regimes' security strategies and the military effectiveness challenges they face depend on the status of the previous government's security apparatus: whether it has been destroyed or whether remaining elements that have defected are maintained or incorporated into new, revolutionary security forces.[7] Old regime security forces' prior training, socialization, and relative autonomy from revolutionary forces are likely to generate insecurity among revolutionaries, and so I assume revolutionaries' ideal preferences would be for the destruction or disintegration and reorganization of security forces to ensure full revolutionary control.

When the old security apparatus has been destroyed, I hypothesize that revolutionary regimes will worry less about coups and will not engage in coup-proofing. If elements of the old security apparatus remain intact, the revolutionary regime may have heightened coup fears and therefore should weaken or counterbalance the military, through purges and officer stacking or shuffling and creating parallel forces to curtail military autonomy and power.[8] Where old regime forces persist within the state, revolutionaries will pursue coup-proofing even if there are threats of domestic rebellion or from external rivals, undermining military effectiveness. If the old regime security apparatus is defeated or disintegrates, but there are competing revolutionary organizations, then there will be a focus on countering these domestic rivals, potentially to the neglect of external threats; if there are not revolutionary competitors, then the new regime will focus on external threats from ideological rivals or revanchist neighbors seeking to exploit revolutionary upheaval.

Due to their inexperience, insecurity, and/or ideological biases, revolutionaries may therefore overemphasize one threat and neglect another, "underbalancing"[9] and potentially struggling to achieve military effectiveness even when they have defeated the old regime and its security forces. Figure 1 illustrates the theory's expectations. Over time, if the regime survives the initial turmoil and consolidates its hold on power, it should be able to correct early errors and balance security resources to address the threats it faces, securing the regime durability that violent revolutions can generate.[10]

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[7] See Zoltan Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016). on militaries' reactions to attempted revolutions.

[8] See e.g. Erica De Bruin, *How to Prevent Coups d'État Counterbalancing and Regime Survival* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020); Tobias Böhmelt and Ulrich Pilster, "The Impact of Institutional Coup-Proofing on Coup Attempts and Coup Outcomes," *International Interactions* 41, no. 1 (2015): 158–82, https://doi.org/10.1080/03050629.2014.906411. Anti-colonial revolutions will be less likely to face this dilemma, with the old regime security apparatus usually withdrawn to the metropole, though locals who served in the colonial security forces may remain.

[9] Randall L. Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2004), pp. 159–201.

[10] Levitsky and Way, *Revolution and Dictatorship*; Lachapelle et al., "Social Revolution and Authoritarian Durability"; Killian Clarke, "Revolutionary Violence and Counterrevolution," *American Political Science Review*,

Figure 1. Revolutionary Security Forces and Military Effectiveness Pathways
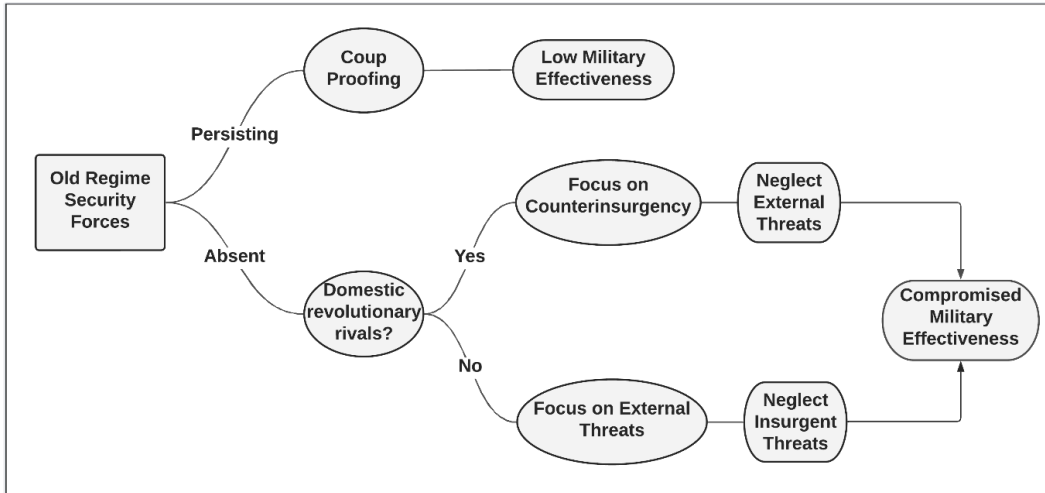
In Nicaragua, revolutionaries strategically defeated the old regime security forces, which disintegrated, and focused heavily on external defense while ignoring budding insurgencies. In Iran, much of the old regime military defected and remained intact, leading the revolutionaries to focus on coup-proofing, even in the face of domestic rebellions and a looming foreign threat, contrary to expectations that external threats help unify revolutionary regimes.[11] Military effectiveness was especially undermined in Iran, but both revolutionary regimes suffered serious military setbacks in their first few years in power that eventually prompted the restructuring and reorienting of security forces.

While I focus on revolutionary regimes, this study integrates different areas of civil-military relations and security studies,[12] examining regime change, rebel-to-government transitions, coup-proofing, and authoritarian military effectiveness. After reviewing the literature on revolutionary regime security challenges, military development, and military effectiveness, I discuss the selection of the Nicaraguan and Iranian revolutionary

doi:10.1017/S0003055422001174; Anne Meng and Jack Paine, "Power Sharing and Authoritarian Stability: How Rebel Regimes Solve the Guardianship Dilemma," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 116, No. 4 (2022), pp. 1208–1225; Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968).

11   Levitsky and Way, *Revolution and Dictatorship*; Lachapelle et al., "Social Revolution and Authoritarian Durability." More generally, see e.g. Douglas Gibler, "Outside-In: The Effects of External Threat on State Centralization," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 54, No. 4 (2010), pp. 519–542 and Arthur A. Stein, "Conflict and Cohesion: A Review of the Literature," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1976), pp. 143–172, on how external conflict is expected to create internal cohesion.

12   Risa A Brooks, "Integrating the Civil-Military Relations Subfield," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (2019), pp. 1–20.

regime cases and the data sources for my analysis. I then present process-tracing case studies demonstrating how the differing statuses of the old regime security apparatus affected the Nicaraguan and Iranian revolutionary regimes' security force development and strategies and contributed to their initial struggles with military effectiveness. I conclude by exploring the implications of my argument and findings for engagement with new revolutionary regimes, an especially important issue after the Taliban's 2021 return to power in Afghanistan for a second time, amid divides within the Taliban leadership and questions about whether they could control their own forces or might revert to supporting transnational terrorist organizations.[13]

Security after Revolutions

Revolutions generally succeed only when a regime's security apparatus has suffered a significant military defeat or when segments of or all the security forces withdraw support from the regime.[14] Once in power, new revolutionary regimes must secure themselves against domestic rivals, but they also frequently face external wars due to having upset regional or global political balances and alliances; enemies seeking to take advantage of the revolutionary state's discord; transnational ideologies being viewed as threats; or foreign policy miscalculations by revolutionary leaders.[15] For many revolutionary regimes historically, "external wars combined with civil wars, or external support sustained civil war combatants."[16] Revolutionaries therefore must rely on security forces to protect their newly gained power, but several scholars have argued that revolutions can increase military effectiveness through improved state

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13   Barbara Elias, "Why the Taliban Won't Quit Al Qaeda," *Foreign Policy*; Daniel Byman, "Will Afghanistan Become a Terrorist Safe Haven Again?," *Foreign Affairs*; Adam E. Casey, Dan Slater, and Jean Lachapelle, "Taliban Leaders Are Back in Charge in Afghanistan. Can They Control Their Own Army?," *Washington Post*.

14   D.E.H. Russell, *Rebellion, Revolution and Armed Force* (New York: Academic Press, 1974); Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Katherine Chorley, *Armies and the Art of Revolution* (London: Faber & Faber, 1943); Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why*; Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, Revised an (New York: Vintage, 1965).

15   Walt, *Revolution and War*, 1996; Zeev Maoz, "Joining the Club of Nations: Political Development and International Conflict, 1816-1976," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 2 (1989), pp. 199–231; Jeff D. Colgan, "Domestic Revolutionary Leaders and International Conflict," *World Politics*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (2013), pp. 656–690, doi:10.1017/S004388711300021X; Patrick J. Conge, *From Revolution to War: State Relations in a World of Change* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

16   Jaime Becker and Jack A. Goldstone, "How Fast Can You Build A State? State Building in Revolutions," in Matthew Lange and Dietrich Rueschemeyer, ed., *States and Development: Historical Antecedents of Stagnation and Advance* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 191. See also Gurr, "War, Revolution, and the Growth of the Coercive State."

capacity and economic development;[17] greater ability to mobilize the population;[18] increased cohesion of revolutionary elites;[19] and fighters' dedication to a "messianic" ideological mission.[20]

Military strength and effectiveness, however, take time to develop, and most revolutionary regimes begin their time in power militarily weak and unlikely to be effective on the battlefield, harming new leaders' domestic legitimacy and threatening revolutionary regime survival. Since "a state that has just undergone a revolution is rarely ready for war," new revolutionary regimes often seek "at least cordial relations" with rivals to consolidate power domestically[21] and overcome the weakening effects of revolutionary violence and upheaval.[22] Jonathan Adelman focuses on revolutionary military success during later periods of consolidated control, yet states that "Revolutionary armies are especially vulnerable to disaster...in the early years of their development. Hastily improvised on the battlefield under weak central command, often inadequately supported by nascent revolutionary regimes, frequently relying more on revolutionary enthusiasm than professional organization."[23] In the United States in the 1780s, "only a token number of [poorly trained and equipped] troops were available for national service, and there was no effective military administration," leaving the United States vulnerable to British and Spanish trade and navigation restrictions.[24] After revolutionary victory in France, military setbacks created fears the revolution would be defeated.[25] In Russia, "The one major foreign adventure of the fledgling Bolshevik regime, the invasion of Poland in 1920, ended in military defeat," with the new regime "fortunate that World War I had defeated or exhausted its major foreign opponents."[26]

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[17] Carter, Bernhard, and Palmer, "Social Revolution, the State, and War"; Adelman, *Revolution, Armies and War*.

[18] Adelman, *Revolution, Armies and War*; Skocpol, "Social Revolutions and Mass Military Mobilization"; Fred Halliday, *Revolution and World Politics: The Rise and Fall of the Sixth Great Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

[19] Carter, Bernhard, and Palmer, "Social Revolution, the State, and War"; Lachapelle et al., "Social Revolution and Authoritarian Durability"; Levitsky and Way, *Revolution and Dictatorship*; Meng and Paine, "Power Sharing and Authoritarian Stability."

[20] Jasen J. Castillo, *Endurance and War: The National Sources of Military Cohesion* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); Amos Perlmutter, *The Military and Politics in Modern Times: On Professionals, Praetorians, and Revolutionary Soldiers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977).

[21] Stephen M. Walt, "Revolution and War," *World Politics*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (1992), p. 328.

[22] Walt, *Revolution and War*, 1996, 21–22.

[23] *Revolution, Armies and War*, 206.

[24] Conge, *From Revolution to War*, 130.

[25] David Armstrong, *Revolution and World Order: The Revolutionary State in International Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 93; Conge, *From Revolution to War*, 51.

[26] Skocpol, "Social Revolutions and Mass Military Mobilization," 155–156.

The gains in military effectiveness that some authors highlight[27] thus only come after regimes have weathered periods of weakness and potential defeat. Revolutionary regimes must prioritize among different threats, and I assume that there should be a rational hierarchy if all threats are equal. Coups present the most immediate threat to leaders or regimes, potentially toppling them in hours or days, with little time to appeal to outside allies for help, and so coup threats should be the top priority. Rebellions would be the next highest priority, followed by external threats. Despite generally having less military power than rival states do, rebellions present threats not only to regime survival, but also regime legitimacy, since they challenge the new revolutionary regime's attempts to establish a Weberian state monopoly on the legitimate use of violence; rebellions can also provide a beachhead for indirect or direct foreign intervention.

In practice, however, the actual and perceived threats that regimes face can differ significantly, resulting in varying security responses. How the revolutionary security apparatus develops, I argue, results from the new regime's perception of the threats it faces, which heavily depends on the "level of defeat" of the old regime security apparatus.[28] Though coups may be more likely in post-civil war countries more generally,[29] in revolutionary cases, the party with greatest control over coercive power within the revolutionary movement is most likely to emerge as the controlling revolutionary vanguard.[30] Therefore, if the old regime security apparatus has disintegrated—whether due to defeat in a foreign war or a lengthy, intense rebellion[31]—the threat of a coup from *within the movement* should be low, and I hypothesize that resources should be primarily devoted to countering rebellions or external threats.

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27 Carter, Bernhard, and Palmer, "Social Revolution, the State, and War"; Adelman, *Revolution, Armies and War*.

28 Matthew Soberg Shugart, "Patterns of Revolution," *Theory and Society*, Vol. 18, No. 2 (1989), pp. 249–271. The need to balance between coup risk and military strength also applies to non-revolutionary regimes: R. Blake McMahon and Branislav L. Slantchev, "The Guardianship Dilemma: Regime Security through and from the Armed Forces," *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 109, No. 2 (2015), pp. 297–313, doi:10.1017/S0003055415000131; Jack Paine, "Reframing the Guardianship Dilemma: How the Military's Dual Disloyalty Options Imperil Dictators," *American Political Science Review*, pp. 1–18, doi:10.1017/S0003055422000089., but revolutionary regimes assume power in especially tumultuous, high-pressure, and conflictual environments.

29 Desha M. Girod, "Reducing Postconflict Coup Risk: The Low Windfall Coup-Proofing Hypothesis," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (2014), pp. 153–174; Aaron Belkin and Evan Schofer, "Toward a Structural Understanding of Coup Risk," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 47, No. 5 (October 2003), pp. 594–620, doi:10.1177/0022002703258197.

30 Arthur L. Stinchcombe, "Ending Revolutions and Building New Governments," *Annual Review of Political Science*, Vol. 2 (1999), p. 50.

31 Philip A. Martin, "Insurgent Armies: Military Obedience and State Formation after Rebel Victory," *International Security*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (2022), pp. 87–127; Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*.

Yet if elements of the old regime security apparatus survive within the revolutionary state, the threat of intra-regime conflict and coups remains, and we should see coup-proofing efforts that undermine military effectiveness against insurgents or external enemies.[32]

Where the old regime security apparatus is gone, but competing revolutionary armed groups persist, fighting them will be the focus to establish domestic control, potentially ignoring external threats. If the old regime security apparatus has disintegrated and there were no other major competing armed groups fighting the old regime, then revolutionaries will concentrate on countering external threats, potentially neglecting the development of new insurgencies. When regimes face multiple threats, their military effectiveness will be undermined if they get organizational practices and the balance of internal and external defense wrong, winding up facing the threat(s) they have neglected; they will likely only adjust practices after incurring heavy costs,[33] as revolutionary Nicaragua and Iran's experiences demonstrate.

Comparing Revolutionary Nicaragua and Iran

Prior comparative studies of the 1979 Nicaraguan and Iranian revolutions have examined the revolutionary insurrections' similar causes and dynamics, as well as their political consequences.[34] Beyond this comparative precedent, sufficient parallels exist between the Nicaraguan and Iranian cases in their prerevolutionary context, revolutionary movements, and early revolutionary regime experiences to justify a

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32 Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army*; Ulrich Pilster and Tobias Böhmelt, "Coup-Proofing and Military Effectiveness in Interstate Wars, 1967-99," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (2011), pp. 331–350, doi:10.1177/0738894211413062; Stephen Biddle and Robert Zirkle, "Technology, Civil-Military Relations, and Warfare in the Developing World," *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1996), pp. 171–212; Risa A. Brooks, "An Autocracy at War: Explaining Egypt's Military Effectiveness, 1967 and 1973," *Security Studies*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (2006), pp. 396–430; James T. Quinlivan, "Coup-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1999), pp. 131–165; Philip Roessler, *Ethnic Politics and State Power in Africa: The Logic of the Coup-Civil War Trap* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Jonathan M. Powell, "Trading Coups for Civil War: The Strategic Logic of Tolerating Rebellion," *African Security Review*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (2014), pp. 329–338, doi:10.1080/10246029.2014.944196. Coup *success* is less likely after revolutions due to security force weakening and reorganization broadly, though, not necessarily because of counterbalancing: Erica De Bruin, "Preventing Coups d'état: How Counterbalancing Works," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Vol. 62, No. 7 (2018), pp. 1433–1458, doi:10.1177/0022002717692652.

33 Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army*.

34 John Foran and Jeff Goodwin, "Revolutionary Outcomes in Iran and Nicaragua: Coalition Fragmentation, War, and the Limits of Social Transformation," *Theory and Society*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1993), pp. 209–247; Misagh Parsa, *States, Ideologies, and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of Iran, Nicaragua, and the Philippines* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Farideh Farhi, *States and Urban-Based Revolutions: Iran and Nicaragua* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1990); John Foran, "A Theory of Third World Social Revolutions: Iran, Nicaragua, and El Salvador Compared," *Critical Sociology*, Vol. 19, No. 2 (1992), pp. 3–27.

controlled comparison.[35] A high degree of similarity between the cases and a nearly dichotomous[36] difference in the main independent variable of old regime security apparatus status facilitates macro-causal inferences[37]—while recognizing the limitations of examining a small number of cases and the differences between the countries. The toppled Iranian and Nicaraguan dictatorships were dynastic regimes with a high degree of autonomy from society and strong economic and military dependence on the United States.[38] Personalized, ruler-controlled security apparatuses protected both: the National Guard (*Guardia Nacional*) in Nicaragua and the army and SAVAK secret police in Iran. In both countries, long-simmering rebellions and political discontent exploded in the late 1970s into widespread, mainly urban insurrections uniting a broad coalition of anti-regime actors.[39] The United States under the Carter administration withdrew regime backing or threatened to at key moments. Finally, in contrast to Skocpol's theory of social revolutions,[40] neither revolutionary victory came after an interstate war defeat that might have damaged the military.[41] Both new revolutionary regimes were authoritarian, with power initially split between moderates and a radical vanguard before the radicals took full control.

Despite these similarities, some key differences are notable. First, Iran's revolutionary vanguard was far more religiously influenced—though if we view Shi'a Islamism as the clerical vanguard's ideology, it parallels the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional*'s (FSLN's; Sandinista National Liberation Front) ideology of *sandinismo* (fusing Marxism-Leninism, anti-imperialism, and Catholic Liberation Theology). Second, Iran was more economically independent due to oil wealth, yet both countries' prerevolution depended on foreign suppliers for their militaries and neither had a significant domestic military industry,[42] so Iran's greater economic independence did not greatly affect

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35 Dan Slater and Daniel Ziblatt, "The Enduring Indispensability of the Controlled Comparison," *Comparative Political Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 10 (January 2013), pp. 1301–1327, doi:10.1177/0010414012472469.

36 I am unaware of any social revolutions in which the old regime security apparatus completely survived, so I treat complete destruction versus partial preservation as dichotomous.

37 Theda Skocpol and Margaret Somers, "The Uses of Comparative History in Macrosocial Inquiry," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 22, No. 2 (1980), pp. 174–197.

38 Farhi, *States and Urban-Based Revolutions*; Parsa, *States, Ideologies, and Social Revolutions*.

39 Jeff Goodwin and Theda Skocpol, "Explaining Revolutions in the Contemporary Third World," *Politics & Society*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (1989), pp. 489–509, doi:10.1177/003232928901700403; Farhi, *States and Urban-Based Revolutions*.

40 *States and Social Revolutions*.

41 See Theda Skocpol, "Rentier State and Shi'a Islam in the Iranian Revolution," *Theory and Society* 11, no. 3 (1982): 265–83.

42 Iran had some small arms production, but the revolutionary regime benefitted little from the shah's U.S.-dependent investments in military-industrial development: Gawdat Bahgat and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Defending Iran: From Revolutionary Guards to Ballistic Missiles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 75–78; Nikola B. Schahgaldian and Gina Bakhordarian, *The Iranian Military Under the Islamic Republic* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 1987).

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security apparatus development, nor did it necessarily lead to effective use of the advanced weapons Iran could more easily buy. Third, and related to the theory, the FSLN was the only major revolutionary armed group in Nicaragua, but in Iran, there were multiple armed groups with different ideologies seeking to topple the old regime, several of which continued competing with the new revolutionary government. This allows us to weigh the relative influences of old regime security apparatus status and revolutionary competition on security strategy and military effectiveness. Finally, the most important difference is in the status of the old regime security apparatus at revolutionary victory: The Nicaraguan National Guard (Guardia Nacional) remained loyal to the regime until the end and then suffered defeat and disintegration, but Iranian security forces defected en masse and maintained much of their prerevolutionary structure.

Data

For the Nicaraguan case, primary data are mainly from archival research at the Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua y Centroamérica (IHNCA) in Managua and from selected interviews conducted in Nicaragua in 2015 and 2017 with a purposive sample of 20 former FSLN military and political leaders, opponents, and civil society figures (research was approved by the Harvard University Committee on the Use of Human Subjects).[43] Relevant interview data are cited in footnotes, and due to repression in Nicaragua since 2018, names are not provided for quoted or cited living interviewees who are not prominent public figures today—though no interviewees requested anonymity at the time. Archival sources include internal and external FSLN communiqués, pamphlets and books produced by the FSLN, transcripts of FSLN leaders' speeches, and articles from the military magazine *Revista Segovia*. This in-country research was supplemented by sources from the Hoover Institution archives at Stanford University. For the Iranian case, I analyze declassified U.S. State Department and intelligence documents from the Digital National Security Archive (DNSA) and translated internal Iraqi documents from the Wilson Center's Iran-Iraq War digital collection (WC). I also draw on the secondary literature on both cases.

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[43]   I interviewed 14 former FSLN military and political officials, 4 civil society actors, and 2 strong FSLN opponents.

Nicaragua: Obsessing over Invasion, Ignoring Insurgency

When the FSLN and a popular revolutionary coalition forced dictator Anastasio Somoza Debayle to flee Nicaragua on July 17, 1979, they precipitated the collapse of Guardia Nacional's resistance two days later. This ended a dynasty started four decades earlier by Somoza's father, a Guardia commander who took power in a coup in 1936 after training and organization by U.S. Marines. The United States then supported the Somoza family dictatorship politically, militarily, and economically, continuing a history of direct U.S. interference and military intervention in Nicaragua stretching to the 1840s.[44] As gathering revolutionary momentum in 1978 and 1979 made Somoza's unpopularity clear, the United States sought to manage a transition such that the FSLN would not take charge of the country and the Guardia would remain intact.[45] The FSLN denounced these plans as attempts to keep "*somocismo* without Somoza," convincing them of "the necessity to force at all costs the total capitulation of the Guardia."[46]

The Guardia fought to the end for the Somoza regime's survival using indiscriminate violence, with few defecting to the revolutionaries,[47] and when the regime fell, thousands of Guardias fled to Central American neighbors, the United States, and beyond, later forming the core of the "*Contras*," U.S.-backed counterrevolutionary groups. The FSLN and population took hundreds more Guardias prisoner. When the revolutionary government established the new Sandinista Popular Army (EPS) in 1979, very few ex-Guardias were included, mostly in technical roles.[48]

FSLN leaders saw the Guardia Nacional's dissolution and members' exclusion after victory as necessary due to historical precedents, citing coups against reformist presidents Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala and Salvador Allende in Chile.[49]

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[44] Michel Gobat, *Confronting the American Dream: Nicaragua Under U.S. Imperial Rule* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Richard L. Millett, *Guardians of the Dynasty* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1977); Thomas W. Walker and Christine J. Wade, *Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle*, 5th ed. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2011).

[45] Martha L. Cottam, "The Carter Administration's Policy toward Nicaragua: Images, Goals, and Tactics," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 107, No. 1 (1992), pp. 123–146.

[46] Humberto Ortega Saavedra, *A Diez Años de La Rendición de La Guardia Somocista* (Managua: Dirección Política Central del EPS and Instituto de Historia de Nicaragua, 1989), pp. 16–17.

[47] Tomás Borge, "El Poder Tienen Las Clases Tradicionalmente Explotadas," *Cuadernos de Marcha*, Vol. 1, No. 5 (1980), p. 85.

[48] Hoover Institution, *Alfonso Robelo C. Box 3, Folder 2.*

[49] Guillermo Toriello Garrido, *La Agresión Imperialista Contra Las Revoluciones, Guatemala (1944-1954) y Nicaragua (1979): Semejanzas y Diferencias* (Managua: Dirección General de Divulgación y Prensa de la JGRN, 1983), p. 11; Thomas W. Walker, "The Armed Forces," in Thomas W. Walker, ed., *Revolution & Counterrevolution in Nicaragua* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), p. 77.

Though there was official shared power between the FSLN's National Directorate and a broader governing junta, this ultimately proved a brief façade, with the FSLN asserting control and moderates on the junta soon resigning in protest.[50]

The new security forces took the form of the EPS military, the Sandinista Police, and the state security wing of the ministry of the interior, all technically state institutions, but politicized and led by members of the top-level FSLN leadership. Political education was a key component of military training, creating armed forces loyal not only to the state, but to the FSLN. The FSLN emphasized that the basis of EPS discipline was in "strong political consciousness and in the Sandinista education of its fighters, in the most broad understanding of patriotic duty, in personal responsibility for the defense of and loyalty to the homeland."[51] Politicization was structurally ensured, as "the general staff of the EPS consisted exclusively of veteran Sandinistas, and 'Political and Cultural Sections' headed by Sandinista militants were established in all units of the EPS and the Sandinista police for purposes of 'political education.'"[52] There were not any competing revolutionary organizations, so the FSLN was able to recruit and organize its new security forces without worrying about existing domestic rivals.

Threat Perception in Nicaragua

The FSLN was preoccupied with the threat of a U.S. invasion, rather than with domestic anti-regime forces, organizing the military and mobilizing militias in preparation for one specific war: "What war? Not the war against counterrevolutionaries or Somocistas, but preparing the country for a war of confrontation against U.S. imperialism…"[53] The FSLN described the revolutionary regime's "Military Doctrine" as "anti-imperialist…determined and influenced directly for concrete reasons…by the pretensions of powers like U.S. imperialism that historically have attempted to subjugate our country over the last 100 years."[54]

The FSLN's primary rhetorical and practical security focus was on direct confrontation with the United States even several years into the war against the Contras in the early 1980s. The opening lines of an FSLN political education document stated that the

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[50] See e.g. John A. Booth, *The Nicaraguan Revolution: The End and the Beginning* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1982); Eric Weaver and William Barnes, "Opposition Parties and Coalitions," in *Revolution & Counterrevolution in Nicaragua*, ed. Thomas W. Walker (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1991), 117–42.

[51] Dirección Política E.P.S., *Preparación Política: Clases, Soldados y Marineros* (Managua: Dirección Política del Ejército Popular Sandinista, 1984), p. 53.

[52] Foran and Goodwin, "Revolutionary Outcomes," 225.

[53] Departamento de Propaganda y Educación Política del FSLN Sección de Educación Política, *El E.P.S. y La Participación de Las Masas En La Defensa de La Soberanía* (Managua: FSLN, 1983), pp. 10–11.

[54] Sección de Educación Política, 8.

foundation of the "revolutionary defense strategy is constituted by the constant and real danger of externally launched military aggression by the forces of U.S. imperialism."[55] In a speech on Army Day in 1985, military commander and FSLN Directorate member Humberto Ortega referred only to the "Yankee interventionist war" and its "mercenary" forces, refusing to acknowledge any possibility of or rationale behind organic domestic dissent and resistance.[56] A 1991 Nicaraguan postmortem argued that "By tactics or by purposeful disregard of the facts, the Frente Sandinista never recognized, not even partially, the existence of a civil war."[57]

The FSLN was not completely naïve to the possibility of a domestic rebellion,[58] but it found this type of counterrevolution very unlikely. Nicaraguan society had, from 1978 through the beginning of the revolutionary government in 1979, been unified in opposition to Somoza and in hope for political transformation, even across classes,[59] so it was unfathomable to most people that anyone would want to return to war. The FSLN itself became more cohesive after the organization's three factions reunified leading up to victory (though disagreements remained) and the possible U.S. threat helped unite them after taking power,[60] so there was little worry of a coup.

The dissolution of the Guardia and its members' flight or imprisonment convinced FSLN leaders they did not have to fear old regime loyalists rebelling within the country, but rather needed to focus on reorganizing the now-armed masses who had joined the revolutionary struggle for possible confrontation with the United States.[61]

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55   Dirección Política E.P.S., *Preparación Política: Clases, Soldados y Marineros*, 7.

56   Humberto Ortega Saavedra, "2 de Septiembre: Mensaje a La Nación En Ocasión Del Día Del Ejército," *Revista Segovia*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1985), pp. 46–53.

57   CIPRES, *La Guerra En Nicaragua* (Managua: Centro para la Investigación, la Promoción y el Desarrollo Rural y Social, 1991), p. 21. When there was, in fact, extensive domestic discontent feeding Nicaragua's rebellions: Alejandro Bendaña, *Una Tragedia Campesina: Testimonios de La Resistencia* (Managua: Editora de Arte, 1991); CIPRES, *La Guerra En Nicaragua*; Lynn R. Horton, *Peasants in Arms: War and Peace in the Mountains of Nicaragua, 1979-1994* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1998); Philip A. Dennis, "Review: The Miskito-Sandinista Conflict in Nicaragua in the 1980s," *Latin American Research Review*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (1993), pp. 214–234; Verónica Rueda-Estrada, "Ni Paladines de La Libertad Ni Mercenarios. La Experiencia de Los Comandos de Nicaragua," *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 46, No. 3 (2021), pp. 359–381, doi:10.1080/08263663.2021.1970333.

58   CIPRES, *La Guerra En Nicaragua*, 163–164.

59   Bruce E. Wright, *Theory and Practice in the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Athens, OH: Center for International Studies, Ohio University, 1995), p. 102; Mark Everingham, *Revolution and the Multiclass Coalition in Nicaragua* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1996).

60   See e.g. Eric Mosinger, "Balance of Loyalties: Explaining Rebel Factional Struggles in the Nicaraguan Revolution," *Security Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 5 (2019), pp. 935–975, doi:10.1080/09636412.2019.1662481. on the FSLN's factions. Unity was especially strong in the first three to four years after revolutionary victory (interviews with Alejandro Bendaña, FSLN diplomat; Dora María Téllez, FSLN guerrilla commander turned cabinet minister). The unifying capacity of threat aligns with Lachapelle et al.'s findings, though in the Nicaraguan case, it did not lead to more effective, regime-securing responses to the most proximate threat the FSLN faced: insurgency.

61   Interviews with Luis Carrión (FSLN guerrilla leader turned Directorate member and Deputy Minister of the Interior), Joaquín Cuadra (FSLN guerrilla leader turned EPS general), and Hugo Torres (FSLN guerrilla leader turned EPS general).

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This led to incomprehension or willful ignorance when a domestic insurgency emerged in rural areas, organized by agricultural elites with peasant foot soldiers. Rural dissent, while eventually fueled by U.S. arms and money, resulted from a failure of the revolution to deliver benefits to rural areas; opposition to FSLN agricultural and economic policies; and FSLN policies and officials challenging the rural moral economy.[62] FSLN leaders, however, viewed all instances of domestic rebellion as part of a U.S. plot that would end with an invasion, and so doubled down on externally oriented defense.[63]

Security Apparatus Development in Nicaragua

This skewed focus manifested in a security strategy that concentrated on a hypothetical interstate war to the neglect of the existing civil war, allowing insurgency to expand. The early emphasis in developing the EPS military was on constructing conventional forces, with strategic planning focused on resisting a direct U.S. invasion.[64] FSLN leaders made great efforts to acquire MiG fighter jets from the Soviet Union and Mirage fighters from France.[65] U.S. opponents cited this as an example of FSLN aggressiveness, but Humberto Ortega claimed fighter jets were a necessary defensive measure, saying the EPS was "looking to complete our anti-aircraft defense system by acquiring aircraft in a reasonable quantity," and arguing that any Nicaragua fighters, "would always be fewer than the [fighter jets] possessed by, for example, our neighbor Honduras."[66] The EPS also devoted significant resources to acquiring tanks and heavy armored vehicles designed for conventional efforts to repel a U.S. invasion, describing this armor as "means to be used by the EPS to defend National Sovereignty from the imperialist aggressor."[67]

These plans were unrealistic. In the event of a direct U.S. invasion, Nicaraguan fighter jet forces would likely have been quickly defeated or destroyed on the ground, with similar results for armor. Walker points out the particular impracticality of the EPS's Soviet

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[62] Timothy C. Brown, *The Real Contra War: Highlander Peasant Resistance in Nicaragua* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2001); Horton, *Peasants in Arms*; CIPRES, *La Guerra En Nicaragua*; MIDINRA, *Notas Sobre Campesinado, Revolución y Contrarrevolución: Zelaya Central* (Managua, 1984); Bendaña, *Una Tragedia Campesina: Testimonios de La Resistencia*.

[63] FSLN officials later recognized some of their mistakes. Humberto Ortega told journalists in 1986 that early resistance stemmed from "campesino sectors...where there was no great socioeconomic impact, there was not, from the beginning, attention from the Revolution": Humberto Ortega Saavedra, "La Desarticulación Mercenaria [Interview]," *Revista Segovia*, Vol. 2, No. 16 (1986), pp. 4–5.

[64] E.g. Roger Miranda and William Ratliff, *The Civil War in Nicaragua: Inside the Sandinistas* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1993), 72, 223.

[65] Walker, "The Armed Forces," 88.

[66] Humberto Ortega Saavedra, "El Carácter Defensivo Del Ejército Popular Sandinista," *Revista Segovia*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1985), p. 51.

[67] Oscar Solórzano, "El Tanque T-55," *Revista Segovia*, Vol. 2, No. 22 (1987), p. 53.

tanks, which "were found to be of little use in the very different Nicaraguan setting. Instead, they were stored near major population centers such as Managua and deployed in moments of heightened tension with the United States as an apparent deterrent to direct U.S. invasion."[68] Nicaragua's military buildup did not deter the United States. A 1982 U.S. State Department report declared that "The military programs of Cuba and Nicaragua are far in excess of any conceivable defensive need, with the exception of an attack by the United States. In that case, neither country could expect to have an effective deterrent."[69] Fighter jets and armored vehicles were ill-suited[70] to the type of counterinsurgency war the EPS *actually* needed to wage in the mountainous northern interior and tropical lowlands of the Caribbean coast.

Some scholars argue that conventional arms acquisitions during the Cold War period were subject to superpowers' whims,[71] that is, the EPS got tanks because the Soviets were offering them. Yet while the Soviets also delivered light armored vehicles to Nicaragua in the early 1980s,[72] EPS commanders gave them little emphasis in their planning and did not employ them to improve counterinsurgency efforts. Alternatively, tanks and fighter jets could be viewed as conventional institutional symbols of statehood and sovereignty sought by the EPS to achieve status internationally and conform to transnational norms.[73] Yet I found no discussions in the archives of these weapons as anything other than means for strategic national defense, and, as Humberto Ortega's statement above suggests, Nicaragua was not seeking airpower parity with other states in the region, as institutional theory would predict.

Military Ineffectiveness and Adjustment in Nicaragua

The deployment of forces to confront early Contra fighters was also ill-conceived and suffered due to the focus on countering a hypothetical U.S. invasion. A rural insurgency developed in the interior mountains, U.S.-backed ex-Guardia forces in the *Fuerza Democrática Nicaragüense* (FDN) began attacks from bases in Honduras, and

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68 Walker, "The Armed Forces," 87–88. The Contras never made in-roads in urban areas, and urban protests never expanded beyond a small sector of the population, so it is highly unlikely these tank deployments aimed to threaten a domestic audience into submission.

69 DNSA, "Information on Cuba, Nicaragua and El Salvador" (US Department of State, February 18, 1982). 043766.

70 Jason Lyall and Isaiah Wilson, "Rage against the Machines: Explaining Outcomes in Counterinsurgency Wars," *International Organization*, Vol. 63, No. 1 (2009), pp. 67–106.

71 E.g. Andrew J. Pierre, *The Global Politics of Arms Sales* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982).

72 SIPRI, "SIPRI Arms Transfers Database," http://www.sipri.org/databases/armstransfers.

73 Mark C. Suchman and Dana P. Eyre, "Military Procurement as Rational Myth: Notes on the Social Construction of Weapons Proliferation," *Sociological Forum*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1992), pp. 137–161, doi:10.1007/BF01124759; Theo Farrell, "World Culture and Military Power," *Security Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (April 2005), pp. 448–488, doi:10.1080/09636410500323187.

Indigenous communities organized resistance on the Caribbean coast,[74] but nascent rebels encountered only scattered, poorly organized and ill-equipped government forces. Rebels crossing the Honduran border faced 10-man units of Frontier Guard Troops,[75] but border posts were so dispersed that there was an "absence of troops over great stretches of the border."[76] The fight at the frontier and in the mountains was left to reserves and local militias, who, while "enthusiastic,"[77] possessed limited training and equipment, and thus were of low combat effectiveness.[78] In 1984, the U.S. Army assessed that "The best trained and equipped units have been deployed to posts in Managua and other major urban areas, while the less-trained militia and reserve units have been responsible for defending border areas from the contras," a strategy resulting "in a disproportionate amount of Sandinista casualties."[79]

Excessive focus on a potential U.S. invasion and the lack of a strong, effective response to rebel incursions and attacks allowed the Contra forces to develop and grow when they could potentially have been nipped in the bud, as classic counterinsurgency doctrine prescribes.[80] It took several years of fighting under this misguided strategy before the FSLN leadership realized their mistakes and recalibrated their military plans, a process resulting from both internal learning and the assistance of Cuban military advisers. Only in 1983, as Contra forces built on initial traction and expanded with increased U.S. funding, did the FSLN shift its military structure and strategy, expanding the EPS's troops and equipment to create new units and developing a new counterinsurgency-focused strategy, with help from new chief Cuban military adviser General Arnaldo Ochoa, hero of the war in Angola.[81]

In the initial period of the rebellion in 1981, the EPS created one set of new units, the *Unidades de Lucha Contra Bandas Somocistas* (LCBS), led by experienced guerrilla

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74   See e.g. Rueda-Estrada, "Ni Paladines de La Libertad Ni Mercenarios. La Experiencia de Los Comandos de Nicaragua." on the different Contra forces.

75   Jorge Portocarrero, "Nuestras Legendarias T.G.F.," *Revista Segovia*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (1986), pp. 13–15.

76   Humberto Ortega Saavedra, "Fuerzas Mercenarias Hacia Su Derrota Total," *Revista Segovia*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (1986), p. 10.

77   CIPRES, *La Guerra En Nicaragua*, 266–267.

78   David Close, "Responding to Low-Intensity Conflict: Counterinsurgency in Sandinista Nicaragua," *New Political Science*, Vol. 9, No. 1–2 (1990), pp. 5–19.

79   Department of the Army, "Army Intelligence Survey: Nicaragua, Volume 3—Armed Forces (U)" (Washington, D.C., 1984).

80   E.g. David Galula, *Counter-Insurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964); John A. Nagl, *Learning To Eat Soup With A Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons From Malaya And Vietnam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

81   Miranda and Ratliff, *The Civil War in Nicaragua*.

fighters, to carry out special missions in the mountains using irregular tactics.[82] LCBS units were small and under-resourced, however. In 1983, while still viewing the expanding war solely as a manifestation of U.S. aggression, the FSLN implemented nationwide conscription. Expanded forces allowed the EPS to "perfect its organic structure" through institutionalization and professionalization,[83] but also led to the development of more specialized counterinsurgency units with officers who had experience in the LCBS units.[84] Larger permanent forces of regular troops reinforced key regions and several new types of units were created.

Most prominent were the irregular warfare battalions (BLIs), active mainly in mountainous terrain in the north and in forest areas of the southern border where Contra units were active. In some cases, artillery units were moved under the command of BLI officers, integrating conventional units into irregular warfare,[85] while BLI officers at times also directed air support,[86] approaching the highly effective "modern system."[87] The EPS also created highly mobile light hunter battalions (BLCs), rapid deployment battalions designed to confront and pursue Contra forces; BLC members were kept in their home regions to use their local social and geographic knowledge,[88] the sort of knowledge key for employing violence selectively and effectively in civil wars.[89] This prioritization of local knowledge was emulated in 1984 with units known as permanent territorial companies (Copetes) that kept conscripts in their home areas, helping "stabilize economic and social activity and bringing the political message of the Revolution to the campesino population."[90]

These counterinsurgency-focused units increased military effectiveness. Commander Javier Carrión described their impact in securing the northern border: "Before when the Contras descended from the border with Honduras we brought out BLI troops [to fight them] and left open frontier points through which they infiltrated even more people. Now there are BLI troops guarding the border and we fight the [rebels] with permanent

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82   Jorge Portocarrero, "Las Pequeñas Unidades de Lucha Contra Bandas," *Revista Segovia*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1985), pp. 49–51; CIPRES, *La Guerra En Nicaragua*, 272–273.

83   Noel Portocarrero, "La Institucionalización Del E.P.S.," *Revista Segovia*, Vol. 2, No. 23 (1987), p. 23.

84   Portocarrero, "Las Pequeñas Unidades de Lucha Contra Bandas," 51.

85   Jorge Portocarrero, "La Artillería En La Lucha Irregular," *Revista Segovia*, Vol. 2, No. 5 (1986), p. 24.

86   E.g. Manuel Salvatierra, "Un Plan Montado Al Detalle Por La CIA: Repunte 85 [Interview]," *Revista Segovia*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (1985), p. 60.

87   Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

88   Revista Segovia, "Los Batallones Ligero Cazadores," *Revista Segovia*, Vol. 2, No. 11 (1986), p. 16.

89   Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

90   Jorge Portocarrero, "Las Co.P.T.: Vigorosa Expresión de Combatividad Campesina," *Revista Segovia*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (1986), p. 29.

companies [Copetes] reinforced by one or two BLI companies."[91] While dismissing most EPS forces as ineffective and weak, Contra commander "Pecos Bill" said of the BLIs, "You have to hand it to them—they're an equal opponent,"[92] and Humberto Ortega in 1987 described BLI creation as "one of the greatest successes of our military in recent years."[93]

The belated shift to more specialized and mobile counterinsurgency units was critical in turning the tide against the Contras and denying them any lasting foothold on Nicaraguan soil. Vice-Minister of Defense and Chief of the EPS General Staff Joaquín Cuadra described the improvements as due to changes on two levels: "strengthening territorial defenses and a strengthening of the capacity of the primary strike and mobile forces like the BLI."[94]

New units were bolstered by more appropriate equipment. Realizing fighter jets would not be forthcoming, the FSLN more practically improved helicopter capabilities— helicopters having been the transport and attack workhorses of U.S. and Soviet counterinsurgency efforts in Vietnam and Afghanistan's similarly difficult terrain. Soviet-made HIND helicopters were "of crucial importance in some of the pivotal battles against the contras in the mid-1980s."[95] A former U.S. embassy military attaché found that "the approximate doubling of the helicopter force from six HIND attack helicopters and 15 HIP assault transport helicopters to 10–12 HINDS and 35 HIPs" in 1986–87 resulted in "increased mobility in the counterinsurgency war as well as in preparation for the conventional defense of the Pacific Coast and Managua."[96] Political efforts to aid peasants with financing and a more privatized vision of agrarian development were key factors in shifting allegiances in contested rural areas, while greater autonomy for the Caribbean coast helped placate Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations.[97]

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[91]   Javier Carrión, "En La III Zona Militar: Hacia Una Derrota Estratégica de Los Mercenarios [Interview]," *Revista Segovia*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1985), p. 15.

[92]   Dieter Eich and Carlos Rincón, *The Contras: Interviews with Anti-Sandinistas* (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1985), p. 186.

[93]   David Fulghum, "'Nuestra Estrategia Es De Resistencia Activa' [Interview]," *Revista Segovia*, Vol. 2, No. 19 (1987), p. 4.

[94]   Joaquín Cuadra, "Estamos Venciendo. Los Aplastaremos!!," *Revista Segovia*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (1985), p. 11; see also Horton, *Peasants in Arms*, 199; Walker, "The Armed Forces," 89.

[95]   Walker, "The Armed Forces," 87–88. See also Millett "Nicaragua's Frustrated Revolution," *Current History*, Vol. 85, No. 507 (1986), pp. 5–8, 38–39.

[96]   Alden M. Cunningham, "US Strategic Options in Nicaragua," *Parameters*, Vol. 18, No. 1 (1988), pp. 60–72.

[97]   Foran and Goodwin, "Revolutionary Outcomes"; Close, "Responding to Low-Intensity Conflict: Counterinsurgency in Sandinista Nicaragua"; Rachel A. Schwartz, "Rewriting the Rules of Land Reform: Counterinsurgency and the Property Rights Gap in Wartime Nicaragua," *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, p. forthcoming, doi:10.1080/09592318.2022.2033497; Dennis, "Review: The Miskito-Sandinista Conflict in Nicaragua in the 1980s."

This shift in military orientation over time reflected leaders' grudging recognition that they were in fact facing a civil war and not only the work of the CIA and "mercenaries," as they were ideologically predisposed to believe. Despite continued worries into the mid-1980s that a U.S. "surprise invasion" was the "greatest danger,"[98] the FSLN began to "understand that their army's success in the counterinsurgent war makes a U.S. invasion less likely because the rebels would have failed to develop sufficient legitimacy to make the political costs of invasion acceptable to the United States,"[99] underscoring the mistake of failing to strongly confront the rebels early on.

The 1983 U.S. invasion of Grenada spooked FSLN leaders,[100] but there was little reason to believe success in Grenada would push the United States to consider a similar approach in Nicaragua, and in fact it was in 1983 that the FSLN significantly shifted its security strategy toward counterinsurgency. Grenada's government had suffered an unpopular coup and its military and territory were tiny compared to Nicaragua,[101] while U.S. public opinion was also strongly against an intervention in Nicaragua.[102] Consistent majority legislative and public opposition to Contra aid and involvement of U.S. troops in Nicaragua "constrained" the Reagan administration, which thus "had to limit involvement to indirect assistance rather than providing larger amounts of funding or direct support,"[103] leading to the subterfuge of the Iran-Contra Affair. After the Grenada invasion, FSLN leaders also sought to deter the United States not by claiming Nicaragua's conventional forces could repel an invasion, but by threatening to send forces into neighboring countries to foment and support rebellions.[104]

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[98] Ministerio de Defensa, *Principales Planteamientos Del E.P.S., Sobre La Doctrina, Estrategia, Estructura y Equipamiento Para El Fortalecimiento, Consolidación, y Desarrollo de La Defensa Nacional En El Quinquenio 86-90* (Nicaragua. Ministerio de Defensa. Box no. 1: Hoover Institution, 1985), p. 4.

[99] Cunningham, "US Strategic Options in Nicaragua."

[100] Kenneth Roberts, "Bullying and Bargaining: The United States, Nicaragua, and Conflict Resolution in Central America," *International Security*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (1990), p. 78; DNSA, "Council of State Condemns U.S. Action in Grenada" (US Department of State, October 28, 1983), 04907; Robert A. Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition: The United States and Nicaragua* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2002), p. 203.

[101] See e.g. Hugh O'Shaughnessy, *Grenada: Revolution, Invasion, and Aftermath* (New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1984).

[102] Bruce W. Jentleson, "The Pretty Prudent Public: Post Post-Vietnam American Opinion on the Use of Military Force," *International Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (1992), pp. 49–73, doi:10.2307/2600916.

[103] Richard Sobel, "Introduction: Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Controversy over Contra Aid," in Richard Sobel, ed., *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Controversy over Contra Aid* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993), p. 15; see also Richard Sobel, ed., *Public Opinion in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Controversy over Contra Aid* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1993).

[104] Interview with former FSLN guerrilla turned EPS staff officer; interview with Hugo Torres.

It is unlikely the Reagan administration would have completely dropped its support for Nicaraguan rebels, and it almost certainly would have continued covert operations, but a stronger FSLN military and political response to the beginnings of the Contra rebellions would have saved Nicaraguan lives and funds and potentially cut the civil war shorter. With the Guardia having disintegrated and no armed revolutionary rivals, however, the FSLN instead overemphasized external defense, failing to acknowledge and address domestic insurgency and allowing U.S.-supported Contra fighters to capitalize on domestic discontent. This resulted in three wasted years for the FSLN and EPS and significant suffering for civilians. Revolutionary Iran's military development took a different, but similarly costly path.

Revolutionary Iran: Coup-Proofing and External Vulnerability

Iran's 1978–79 revolution toppled the U.S.-supported regime of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi through large-scale urban insurrection and protest by a wide coalition of actors, similarly to the Nicaraguan experience.[105] The cases diverged, however, in the old regime militaries' reactions to revolutionary mobilization: While Nicaragua's Guardias maintained loyalty to the end, Iran's military factionalized, dooming the shah's regime, but letting significant military elements survive into the post-revolutionary period.

During the 1970s, the shah engaged in a massive, U.S.-aided military buildup,[106] while seeking to maintain personalistic control to forestall potential coups.[107] Officers were closely monitored, while elite units and the SAVAK secret police were kept under especially tight control for counterbalancing. Lower-ranking officers, warrant officers, and conscripts had less oversight, fewer rewards, and more tenuous loyalty to the shah, making them ripe for revolutionary mobilization and unlikely to fire on people seen as their peers.[108]

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[105] Parsa, *States, Ideologies, and Social Revolutions*; Foran and Goodwin, "Revolutionary Outcomes"; Farhi, *States and Urban-Based Revolutions*.

[106] See Nikki R. Keddie, *Roots of Revolution: An Interpretive History of Modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 176–177.

[107] Schahgaldian and Bakhordarian, *The Iranian Military*; Rebecca Cann and Constantine Danopoulos, "The Military and Politics in a Theocratic State: Iran as Case Study," *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (1998), pp. 269–288, doi:10.1177/0095327X9702400204; William F. Hickman, *Ravaged and Reborn: The Iranian Army* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1982); Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why*.

[108] Keddie, *Roots of Revolution*, 255; Hickman, *Ravaged and Reborn*; Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why*.

As opposition mobilization gathered steam in 1978 and early 1979 (the shah left the country in January 1979) and a variety of Islamist and secular social actors and armed groups coalesced in a broad revolutionary front, the military began to fracture.[109] There were some early defections and opposition groups worked to increase divisions and desertions,[110] but the most important events came in February 1979. On February 8, a week after opposition figurehead Ayatollah Khomeini was allowed to return from exile, thousands of uniformed military personnel, including hundreds of officers, marched in pro-revolutionary demonstrations paying homage to Khomeini.[111] The next day, approximately 800 air force technicians defected and won a battle against the loyalist Imperial Guards, sparking new attacks on security forces and a cascade of military defections, including among high-ranking officers. On February 11, military commanders declared the armed forces neutral, sounding the regime's death knell.[112]

As in Nicaragua, during the period after revolutionary victory, power was split between the *de jure* ruling provisional government and the *de facto* control of Khomeini and the Islamist-dominated Revolutionary Council. The revolution had included a broad coalition of middle-class merchants, leftists, Islamists, and others, but Khomeini and his followers moved quickly to consolidate Islamist control and protect themselves from challengers, including militant leftists and ethnic minorities.[113] The remnants of the official security forces were under provisional government control; these forces were already greatly debilitated, especially the army, fewer of whose troops had defected during the revolutionary struggle, leading to widespread desertions upon revolutionary victory. Speaking on February 20, 1979, the new army chief of staff stated, "I inherited an army which in Tehran did not contain even one soldier, and which, because of treachery by some of the former military leaders, had its barracks emptied of arms and in most cases destroyed by fire."[114] From the beginning of the revolution, Iraqi officers and officials

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[109] E.g. Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 39–41.

[110] Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 120–122; Barany, *How Armies Respond to Revolutions and Why*, 66.

[111] DNSA, "Political/Security Report February 8, 1979" (US Department of State, February 8, 1979), 01994, p. 6.

[112] Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 41–42. By the next day, only the Imperial Guards, under "siege" in their barracks, were still fighting revolutionary forces: DNSA, "Political/Security Report February 12, 1979" (US Department of State, 1979), 02037.

[113] Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution*, Updated Ed (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft: The Politics of Islam in Iran* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Rasmus Christian Elling, *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); Alam Saleh, *Ethnic Identity and the State in Iran* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[114] Afshon Ostovar, "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution: Ideology, Politics, and the Development of Military Power in Iran (1979-2009)" (University of Michigan, 2009), p. 51.

noted overall political discord in Tehran and clear divisions within the Iranian military, plus likely declining capabilities due to previous reliance on U.S. expertise and technology,[115] vulnerabilities they would soon exploit.

Threat Perception and Force Restructuring in Iran

Parallel to the military, Khomeini and the Revolutionary Council began organizing the militias and revolutionary committees loyal to them that had taken part in defeating the shah's regime, selecting some to create the *Pasdaran*, or Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), a body organized to protect the revolution from internal enemies and to help support ideologically aligned movements abroad.[116] Khomeini sought to elevate the IRGC's status in the public eye, "hint[ing] at a more official role for the Guards, which, unlike the committees and unofficial militias, placed them in the arena of Iran's national armed forces."[117] There was some debate among the elements of the new government over "how deep purges should go in [the] army" and how to reconstitute the military,[118] with provisional Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan in late February 1979 highlighting the need to preserve the military for external defense,[119] though purges were ongoing throughout these debates.

As the IRGC was built up, the military was being broken down to reduce coup threats— despite the military's ongoing counterinsurgency against Kurdish separatists and potential threats from armed leftists and other ethnic minority groups who kept their arms after the shah's fall and rejected the revolution's particular Islamist turn.[120] The clerical Revolutionary Council made clear its intent to remove the military's

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[115] WC, "Saddam and High-Ranking Officials Discussing Khomeini, the Ethiopian-Eritrean Conflict, the Potential for Kurdish Unrest, and the Iranian Economy," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Conflict Records Research Center, National Defense University, SH-SHTP-A-000-851, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111640; WC, "General Military Intelligence Directorate Report Assessing Political, Military, and Economic Conditions in Iran," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Conflict Records Research Center, National Defense University, SH-GMID-D-000-842, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111645.

[116] E.g. Kenneth Katzman, "The Pasdaran: Institutionalization of Revolutionary Armed Force," *Iranian Studies* 26, no. 3–4 (1993): 397–98, https://doi.org/10.1080/00210869308701809; Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards*, 43–44; Frederic Wehrey et al., *The Rise of the Pasdaran: Assessing the Domestic Roles of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2009), 21–23. See Alemzadeh, "The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in the Iran–Iraq War: An Unconventional Military's Survival," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 4 (2019): 622–39, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2018.1450137, on IRGC members' motivations and ideological-strategic development.

[117] Ostovar, "Guardians of the Islamic Revolution," 52.

[118] DNSA, "Political Issues: The Islamic Republic and the Military" (US Department of State, March 14, 1979), 02632; see also DNSA, "The Revitalization of the Iranian Armed Forces, Secret" (Central Intelligence Agency, March 9, 1979).

[119] Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 43–44.

[120] Ervand Abrahamian, *The Iranian Mojahedin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); Maryam Alemzadeh, "The Attraction of Direct Action: The Making of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps in the Iranian Kurdish Conflict,"

"counterrevolutionary" potential, announcing that "The purging of the armed organizations affiliated with the former diabolical regime is among the top priorities of the new government."[121] The clerics were so worried about a coup that the IRGC set up checkpoints at the entrances of army barracks,[122] and religious judges were installed at military garrisons to try officers for "anti-revolutionary acts."[123] While purchase orders for new weaponry and spare parts were being canceled or going unfulfilled,[124] a purge of high-ranking military officers began.[125] James Bill calculated from Iranian press reports that between February 11 and June 11, 1979, 49 military personnel, 45 police officials, and 40 SAVAK agents were executed, along with other government officials.[126] From February to September 1979, "[a]bout 85 senior officers were executed and hundreds more (including all major-generals and most brigadier-generals) were imprisoned or forced to retire," along with purges of domestic intelligence and police officers.[127] Despite having planned for reductions in the army's size, by July 1979, ground forces were estimated at "no more than 50 percent of the new, reduced strength requirements," with the U.S. Embassy in Tehran finding that "for the time being, Iran's military services remain a concept more than a reality…they are not capable of effectively conducting a major joint operation in defense of their country."[128]

A second, wider purge began in late September 1979, with newly appointed Minister of Defense Mostafa Chamran saying, "the most important issue which must be addressed in the Defense Ministry…is the question of a purge in the army."[129] By early 1980, 12,000 people had been purged from the military, over 80 percent of them from the army, with the navy and air force less impacted due to their greater revolutionary

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British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, p. forthcoming, doi:10.1080/13530194.2021.1990013; Elling, *Minorities in Iran*; Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft*.

[121]   Hickman, *Ravaged and Reborn*, 8.

[122]   Ariel I. Ahram, *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 112.

[123]   Sepehr Zabih, *Iran Since the Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), p. 19.

[124]   E.g. DNSA, "Iran: Military Supply Procedures Affecting Spare Parts" (US Department of State, October 15, 1979); DNSA, "Iranian Desire to Sell Back F-14s" (US Department of State, August 27, 1979), 09467.

[125]   By mid-March 1979, U.S. State Department sources reported the "shooting of eight top military men, and retirements of all three and four-star generals, plus arrests of others down to level of lieutenant colonel on a case-by-case basis": DNSA, "Political Issues: The Islamic Republic and the Military."

[126]   James A. Bill, *The Eagle and the Lion: The Tragedy of American-Iranian Relations* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 262.

[127]   Hickman, *Ravaged and Reborn*, 9.

[128]   DNSA, "Quarterly Political Assessment, Confidential" (US Department of State, July 22, 1979), 07635, pp. 9–10.

[129]   Hickman, *Ravaged and Reborn*, 12.

loyalty and lesser role in prior repression.[130] There was chaos at the command level, with officers and officials shuffled rapidly at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Defense, and all of the military branch commands.[131] As Iraq's interior minister saw it, Iran's revolutionaries "want[ed] to destroy the Army."[132] Over 23,000 personnel, including nearly 17,000 officers, had been purged from the military by 1986.[133]

Even though the army had long experience fighting against domestic insurgents, the Revolutionary Council wanted to increase the prestige and experience of the IRGC compared to the distrusted military, and so they turned more of the tasks of domestic counterinsurgency over to the IRGC.[134] Externally, throughout 1979, the Iranian revolutionary regime antagonized Saddam Hussein's Iraqi Ba'ath regime, fomenting anti-Ba'ath demonstrations, spreading propaganda urging Iraqis to overthrow their government, and supporting Iraqi rebels and dissidents and a terrorist campaign targeting Ba'ath officials.[135] This led to a series of escalating border clashes, until, in September of 1980, Iraq voided the 1975 Algiers Agreement peace treaty and invaded Iran.[136] Despite knowing of Iraqi invasion planning from at least mid-1979, the revolutionary regime remained preoccupied with internal security and was unprepared to defend Iran against this threat.[137]

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[130] Hickman, *Ravaged and Reborn*; Efraim Karsh, "Military Power and Foreign Policy Goals: The Iran-Iraq War Revisited," *International Affairs*, Vol. 64, No. 1 (1987), pp. 83–95; Chaim Herzog, "A Military-Strategic Overview," in Efraim Karsh, ed., *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), pp. 255–268.

[131] WC, "General Military Intelligence Directorate Report Assessing Political, Military, and Economic Conditions in Iran," 9–10.

[132] WC, "Transcript of a Meeting between Saddam and His Commanders Regarding the Iran-Iraq War," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Conflict Records Research Center, National Defense University, SH-SHTP-D-000-847, p. 38, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111648.

[133] Schahgaldian and Bakhordarian, *The Iranian Military*.

[134] Alemzadeh, "The Attraction of Direct Action"; Bahgat and Ehteshami, *Defending Iran*, 54; Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft*, 99.

[135] Karsh, "Military Power and Foreign Policy Goals"; Shamram Chubin, "Iran and the War: From Stalemate to Ceasefire," in Efraim Karsh, ed., *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1989), p. 14; Pierre Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 2–4.

[136] On Iraqi decision-making and initial objectives, see WC "Saddam Hussein and His Advisers Discussing Iraq's Decision to Go to War with Iran," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Conflict Records Research Center, National Defense University, SH-SHTP-A-000-835, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110099. and Cordesman and Wagner *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II: The Iran-Iraq War* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1990), pp. 31–33..

[137] Shireen Hunter, "The Iran-Iraq War and Iran's Defense Policy," in Thomas Naff, ed., *Gulf Security and the Iran-Iraq War* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 1985), pp. 172–173; Cordesman and Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II*, 35–36; Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 9. The United States shared intelligence and warned the revolutionary regime in October 1979 that Iraq was planning to invade: Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft*, 117.

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Purge Impacts, Interservice Rivalry, and Poor Military Effectiveness

During the first four years of the ensuing war, the Iranian revolutionary government's two primary military policies—purging the military and organizing the IRGC as a parallel institution—hamstrung efforts to confront Iraqi forces and, to a slightly lesser extent, domestic insurgents, in favor of coup-proofing. These policies had two debilitating effects. First, the military lacked the necessary officer expertise, personnel, technical knowledge, and maintenance capabilities to effectively repel the initial invasion and counterattack Iraqi forces. Iraqi intelligence in mid-1980 assessed that "Iran has no power to launch wide offensive operations against Iraq, or to defend itself on a large scale,"[138] and senior Iranian leaders expected defeat at the war's outset.[139] Second, political disagreements among leaders and rivalry between the military and IRGC led to uncoordinated operations that cost Iran dearly in strategic losses and casualties.

Removing a high percentage of field-grade officers (major to colonel) had "a devastating effect on the army's ability to conduct combat operations."[140] Logistics and maintenance were heavily affected by the officer purge, especially the loss of technical expertise of those who had worked closely with U.S. advisers or received training in the United States.[141] The Iranian army therefore could "could hardly deploy half of its 1,735 tanks, 1,735 AFV [armored fighting vehicles], and 1,000 artillery pieces."[142] Threats from their own government also made officers more likely to desert or defect, as one officer did in 1981, taking one of Iran's cryptography machines with him to the Iraqi side.[143] The air force likewise lost capabilities through American advisers' departure and the flight or purging of Iranian technicians,[144] along with reduced experience and expertise among commanders and pilots.[145] In 1980, as hostilities escalated, the air force could only operate half its aircraft.[146]

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[138] WC, "General Military Intelligence Directorate Report Assessing Political, Military, and Economic Conditions in Iran," 44.

[139] Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 62–63.

[140] Hickman, *Ravaged and Reborn*, 18.

[141] E.g. Hickman, 15.

[142] Karsh, "Military Power and Foreign Policy Goals"; Herzog, "A Military-Strategic Overview," 254.

[143] Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 71.

[144] WC, "General Military Intelligence Directorate Report Assessing Political, Military, and Economic Conditions in Iran," 41. The air force and navy also suffered supply cutoffs, as Western countries refused to fulfill equipment orders after the revolution: ibid., 20, 28.

[145] Schahgaldian and Bakhordarian, *The Iranian Military*, 27.

[146] Karsh, "Military Power and Foreign Policy Goals"; William O. Staudenmaier, "A Strategic Analysis," in Shirin Tahir-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi, ed., *The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts* (New York: Praeger, 1983), pp. 27–50; Herzog, "A Military-Strategic Overview."

Iraqi intelligence estimated the "percentage of the serviceability of the fighters is within 30–40% and of the helicopters is about 50% at best."[147]

As war broke out in 1980 and increased personnel were needed, the purges left the military with shrunken forces, "poor training standards and [a] shortage of qualified instructors."[148] Between desertions, purges, and restructuring, Iran's army shrunk from 285,000 to approximately 150,000 personnel, while the air force weakened from 100,000 to 70,000 personnel,[149] losing both their previous numerical and technical superiority over Iraqi counterparts. President Abolhassan Bani-Sadr claimed that army forces, other than a few small units, were kept away from the front during the Iraqi invasion to give them "more time to recover from the purges."[150] Invading Iraqi forces thus primarily encountered lightly armed, easily overwhelmed border guards, IRGC forces, and militias.[151] Tank deployments suffered from a lack of transport vehicles, leading to excessive wear and breakdowns.[152] The IRGC did not coordinate their efforts with available armored units near the frontier, leaving the IRGC exposed against Iraqi armor, mechanized divisions, and artillery.[153] This lack of synchronization prevented Iran "from putting up an effective defence and accounted for the initial Iraqi successes."[154] When Iran's air force sought to mount a counterattack, they could not conduct a raid on Iraq's radar installations and surface-to-air missile batteries, since "the few crews qualified for this kind of mission had been thrown in jail following the Revolution."[155]

As the war continued, battle losses compounded purge-induced force and expertise losses. By late October, after only a few weeks of war, "Iran had reportedly lost some 90 (out of approximately 200 operational) combat aircraft, and its air activity succumbed to

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147 WC, "General Military Intelligence Directorate Report Assessing Political, Military, and Economic Conditions in Iran," 41. Due to dependence on U.S. advisers, Iran's prerevolution military had trouble operating all of its advanced weapons systems, but the level of inoperative systems was higher post-revolution, Karsh, "Military Power and Foreign Policy Goals," though some air force units adapted in spite of adverse conditions and remained surprisingly effective in combat: Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), chap. 4; WC, "Saddam Hussein and Senior Iraqi Officials Discussing the Conflict with Iran, Iraqi Targets and Plans, a Recent Attack on the Osirak Reactor, and Various Foreign Countries," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Conflict Records Research Center, National Defense University, SH-MISC-D-000-827, p. 53, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/111647.

148 Schahgaldian and Bakhordarian, *The Iranian Military*, 44.

149 Hickman, *Ravaged and Reborn*, 14.

150 Herzog, "A Military-Strategic Overview," 259.

151 Hickman, *Ravaged and Reborn*, 19; Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 110, 115.

152 Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, 192.

153 Karsh, "Military Power and Foreign Policy Goals," 36.

154 Herzog, "A Military-Strategic Overview," 259.

155 Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 27.

manpower and material shortages."[156] In early 1981, after five months of fighting, a U.S. assessment of ground forces concluded that Iran had 20 brigades with a total of 57,000 troops and 350 tanks compared to 38 brigades, 110,000 troops, and 1,740 tanks for Iraq, with the numbers "probably understat[ing] Baghdad's real advantage…Many Iranian personnel are poorly combat-trained and ill-organized Revolutionary Guards, Gendarmerie and raw recruits."[157]

Iran's remaining military capabilities were constrained by political division in Tehran and interservice rivalry with the IRGC.[158] Moderates in the provisional government, and especially Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, emphasized rebuilding the military as the focal point of national defense, while Khomeini and the Islamist Revolutionary Council were determined the IRGC and militias would spearhead defense of the revolution and their own power. Regular military forces were required to give their weapons to the IRGC and to train them, with the army feeling "that the Guards will replace it in the future."[159]

Even when leaders attempted to organize IRGC and military units together in the same location, troops from one unit would not follow orders given by a commander from the other organization, and they instead conducted virtually separate wars."[160] Lack of coordination led to friendly fire incidents, including ground forces shooting down their own aircraft.[161] Logistic and supply systems remained separate,[162] exacerbating purge-induced disorder. Some sources even suggested that the clerics "wanted the regular forces to suffer battlefield defeats in these initial operations so that the regular forces would lose credibility as a potential counterweight to the new regime."[163] By October 1980, Iraq's defense minister believed that Iranian forces could be defeated "in two weeks" if Iraq maintained its offensive momentum.[164]

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[156] Karsh, "Military Power and Foreign Policy Goals," 37.

[157] DNSA, "The Iran-Iraq Conflict: Status and Prospects" (US Department of State, February 13, 1981).

[158] E.g. Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 70–71.

[159] WC, "General Military Intelligence Directorate Report Assessing Political, Military, and Economic Conditions in Iran," 30–31.

[160] William F. Hickman, "How the Iranian Military Expelled the Iraqis," *Brookings Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1983), pp. 19–23, doi:10.2307/20079790.

[161] Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, 195.

[162] Karsh, "Military Power and Foreign Policy Goals."

[163] Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army*, 191.

[164] WC, "Transcripts of Meetings between Saddam and Senior Iraqi Officials Discussing Military Tactics During the War with Iran, Including the Use of Napalm and Cluster Bombs, Tank Maneuvering, and Attacking Oil Refineries," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Conflict Records Research Center, National Defense University, SH-PDWN-D-001-021, p. 71, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/110083.

In October 1980, Iran established a Supreme Defense Council (SDC), with the moderate Bani-Sadr as chair, to try to unite the military and IRGC and better wage the war. However, the IRGC quickly rejected Bani-Sadr's authority,[165] and he received constant pushback from the clerics, who removed him from the SDC post and the presidency in June 1981. Purges and surveillance sought to root out Bani-Sadr's remaining influence,[166] with air force pilots in mid-1981, for instance, subject to interrogations and restrictions on the amount of fuel and weapons they could carry, undercutting operations and opening the skies for increasing Iraqi bombing missions.[167] The Islamist leadership's concentration on rooting out internal rivals also left the military directionless, failing "to mount the major summer offensive everyone was expecting" and ceding the initiative to Iraq,[168] which the IRGC did not mind, since they did not want the military receiving credit for victories against Iraqi forces.[169]

From late 1981, however, the clerics felt fully in control and less worried about a coup pushing *them* out of power, reducing pressure on the military and resuming interservice coordination efforts in the war against Iraq.[170] Their feelings of security were also due to the IRGC's increased strength and its crushing of internal armed opposition groups.[171] The military was therefore allowed to plan combined-arms efforts utilizing air, armor, artillery, infantry, and IRGC forces in a series of offensives from late 1981 to early 1982 that succeeded in expelling Iraqi forces from Iranian territory.

Force Integration and Fluctuating Effectiveness in Iran

There was an opportunity to try to end the war at this point, but due to a combination of ideological biases and a continued desire to establish IRGC supremacy over the military, the Islamist clerics decided to turn the tables and invade Iraq, misguidedly believing Iraq's Shi'a majority would rise up alongside them.[172] The military leadership was sidelined again, abandoning the successful combined-arms strategy for frontal human-wave assaults by IRGC and militia forces without air or heavy weapon support. Predictably, "nearly all the Iranian offensives into Iraq at that time were repulsed with

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[165]   Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army*, 169; Katzman, "The Pasdaran," 391–392.

[166]   Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft*, 164–165.

[167]   Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 175–176.

[168]   Razoux, 173.

[169]   Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft*, 165.

[170]   Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 74.

[171]   Ostovar, 54–59, 73–74; Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 173; Alemzadeh, "The Attraction of Direct Action"; Elling, *Minorities in Iran*; Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft*, 144.

[172]   Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 221, 245; Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft*, 169–175; Ray Takeyh, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Reassessment," *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 64, No. 3 (2010), pp. 365–383, doi:10.3751/64.3.12.

heavy casualties,"[173] and the IRGC could not hold territorial gains.[174] Although the military leadership had been "trained specifically to confront the Iraqi army," IRGC forces' inexperience and poor organization turned their offensives "into fiascos."[175] The IRGC and militias, as irregular infantry forces,[176] could have been much more effective fighting with guerrilla tactics in the mountainous northern border regions, rather than used in human-wave attacks on flatter terrain, but they were not used in this region until 1988.[177]

Over time, the cleric-dominated government came to realize the mistakes it had made in so thoroughly weakening the military and attempting to replace it solely with irregular forces. Between 1984 and 1986, they renewed efforts to improve cooperation between the military and the IRGC,[178] leading to successful combined-arms offensives culminating in the capture of Iraq's Faw Peninsula in February 1986, and leading U.S. analysts to believe fighting was trending strongly in Iran's favor.[179] IRGC structures and training were also formalized over time to professionalize the force by the end of the war in 1988.[180] The military, meanwhile, was gradually rebuilt along more Islamist lines, with officers promoted for loyalty to the clerics, attempting to forestall coup attempts, but recognizing the conventional military's necessity as part of the war effort.

Coup-Proofing Success, but Near Military Disaster

Ultimately, the clerics successfully protected themselves from coup threats, weakening the remaining old regime military through purges, Islamization of the officer corps, and creating highly loyal parallel organizations in the IRGC and militias.[181] There was some coup plotting abroad by former officers of the shah's military in 1979,[182] yet little

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173 Efraim Karsh, *The Iran-Iraq War: A Military Analysis* (London: International Institute for Strategic Studies, 1987), p. 43.

174 Hazem Kandil, *The Power Triangle: Military, Security, and Politics in Regime Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 122; Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 96.

175 Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*, 114.

176 see Alemzadeh, "The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps"; Alemzadeh, "The Attraction of Direct Action."

177 David Segal, "The Iran-Iraq War: A Military Analysis," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 66, No. 5 (1988), pp. 946–963.

178 Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*; Karsh, "Military Power and Foreign Policy Goals"; Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*, 320.

179 DNSA, "The Gulf War, Secret, Briefing Paper, Excised Copy, February 27, 1986, 2 Pp." (US Department of State, February 27, 1986).

180 Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*; Bayram Sinkaya, *Revolutionary Guards in Iranian Politics: Elites and Shifting Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*; Katzman, "The Pasdaran."

181 Cann and Danopoulos, "The Military and Politics"; Schahgaldian and Bakhordarian, *The Iranian Military*.

182 DNSA, "[Former Military Leaders Plot to Overthrow Provisional Government of Iran]" (Central Intelligence Agency, August 10, 1979), 493038; DNSA, "[Organization of Iranian Military Officers Opposed to Ayatollah Khomeini]" (Central Intelligence Agency, September 21, 1979); Mark J. Gasiorowski, "The Nuzhih Plot and Iranian Politics," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (2002), pp. 645–666.

military constituency existed for a coup domestically, and the clerical regime uncovered these plots and quickly worked to "crush" them.[183] The intelligence and police apparatus also transitioned smoothly to revolutionary control, so the clerics were both well-apprised of domestic plotting and did not have to fear these security forces.[184] In 1980, army commanders announced the disruption of a planned May coup attempt,[185] while the IRGC easily suppressed the poorly coordinated Nuzhih coup plot in July.[186] A Soviet analyst argued that a coup had become highly unlikely by the mid-1980s due directly to "the strength of the revolutionary guards, and the decimation of the Iranian military's best officers in successive waves of repression."[187] The coup-proofing purges that weakened the military, however, tempted Saddam Hussein to seek a revision of the status quo.

Iranian forces' disorganized and ineffective resistance to the invasion led to rapid defeats, and could have been even more costly had Hussein not hesitated, halting Iraqi advances in September 1980.[188] This decision "saved the Iranian army from a major defeat and allowed it to remain largely intact…[and] to reorganize, regroup and move to the offensive."[189] Many Iranian leaders had expected defeat,[190] and Hussein himself lamented in November 1980 that Iraq had lost the initiative, saying "the enemy woke up from the shock and we gave him two full months so far" to regroup, such that attacking Iranian forces "has become tough now and might cause us serious casualties."[191]

U.S. analysts felt that the "key question raised by the imbalance of forces is why Baghdad's troops did not secure greater gains, and in a shorter time," arguing that ineptitude, extreme caution, and casualty-aversion were to blame.[192]

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[183]   DNSA, "[Iraqi Support for Iranian Kurds]" (Central Intelligence Agency, September 6, 1979), 54572.

[184]   Kandil, *The Power Triangle*, 116.

[185]   WC, "General Military Intelligence Directorate Report Assessing Political, Military, and Economic Conditions in Iran," 9.

[186]   See especially Gasiorowski, "The Nuzhih Plot."

[187]   US Department of State, *Developments in Iran: A Soviet View* (US Department of State, 1985).

[188]   Cordesman and Wagner, *The Lessons of Modern War, Volume II*, 88–90; Segal, "The Iran-Iraq War," 952; Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*.

[189]   Karsh, "Military Power and Foreign Policy Goals," 34.

[190]   Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam*, 62–63.

[191]   WC, "Transcript of a Meeting between Saddam Hussein and the Armed Forces General Command," History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, Obtained and translated by the Conflict Records Research Center, National Defense University, SH-SHTP-D-000-856, pp. 25–26, https://digitalarchive.wilsoncenter.org/document/116986.

[192]   DNSA, "The Iran-Iraq Conflict: Status and Prospects." Due to dependence on U.S. advisers, Iran's prerevolution military had trouble operating all of its advanced weapons systems, but the level of inoperative systems was higher post-revolution, Karsh, "Military Power and Foreign Policy Goals," though some air force units adapted in spite of adverse conditions and remained surprisingly effective in combat: Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran*, chap. 4; WC, "Saddam Hussein and Senior Iraqi Officials Discussing the Conflict with Iran, Iraqi Targets and Plans, a Recent Attack on the Osirak Reactor, and Various Foreign Countries," 53.

William Staudenmaier likewise states that "the fact that Iran was not defeated early in the war can be attributed primarily to the inept tactics and strategy of the Iraqis, rather than to any leadership exerted by Iran's high command."[193] While Iran later turned the tables on Iraq through high-casualty mass infantry attacks, Caitlin Talmadge similarly points out that this would likely not have succeeded had Iraqi forces "offered even slightly more effective resistance. In other words, it is important not to mistake Iraqi errors for Iranian military prowess."[194]

The clerics, due to the persistence of the old regime military, prioritized coup-proofing despite needing "a functioning military to deal with all the threats they faced besides coups."[195] Determination to promote the irregular, less experienced IRGC over the military led to blunders like the overuse of human-wave attacks, resulting in strategic defeats and thousands of Iranian deaths, and undermining domestic support for the war effort, despite claims that revolutionary fervor could outperform conventional tactics.[196] Distrust of the military and refusal to postpone reorganizing the security apparatus led Iran into a longer, deadlier war than necessary. The clerics eventually balanced the distribution of their security resources to counter internal and external threats at the same time, helping the regime retain power and build regional influence up to the present.[197] The short-term costs, though, could have been even more devastating and potentially toppled the revolutionary regime if not for Iraqi restraint and hesitation.

Discussion

This study has demonstrated how the presence or absence of the old regime security apparatus shapes revolutionary regimes' military development and security strategy, showing that it can lead to serious policy miscalculations by inexperienced, relatively weak new governments who must balance responses to internal and external threats. In Nicaragua, a belief that the Guardia Nacional's disintegration and FSLN victory had ended domestic threats led to a military policy focused on conventional confrontation with the United States, preventing the revolutionary military from responding effectively when rebellion arose domestically. Much of the Iranian military survived the shah's fall, but they faced suspicion and enmity from clerical leaders in the new regime, who purged the military and created the IRGC and militias as parallel, highly loyal

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[193]   Staudenmaier, "A Strategic Analysis," 38.

[194] *The Dictator's Army*, 196. See also Murray and Woods, *The Iran-Iraq War*. and Razoux, *The Iran-Iraq War*.

[195]   Talmadge, *The Dictator's Army*, 10–11.

[196]   Takeyh, "The Iran-Iraq War," 369.

[197]   E.g. Bahgat and Ehteshami, *Defending Iran*.

security forces. These policies worked to prevent a coup (and leftist and Kurdish insurgencies were unsuccessful), but coup-proofing left Iran militarily uncoordinated and scrambling to resist an invasion from Iraq.

In Risa Brooks' formulation of the four elements jointly necessary for military effectiveness—integration, responsiveness, skill, and quality[198]—the Nicaraguan forces early on were deficient in responsiveness, improperly evaluating and addressing their threat environment with their force structure and usage. In revolutionary Iran, there was primarily a failure of integration, with coup-proofing concerns undermining communication and coherence across forces, after purges had also reduced the forces' skill and quality.[199] Both countries in the end arrived at the proper balance of a "centralized coercive apparatus designed both to suppress domestic opposition and to confront external foes,"[200] but only after suffering the damaging consequences of their shortsightedness.

The Iranian case demonstrates what revolutionary regimes prioritize when the old regime security apparatus persists and there are competing revolutionary armed groups and a potential external threat (with coup-proofing the top priority), but I have not examined a case where the old regime security apparatus disintegrated and armed group rivals remained. In Angola, where the *Movimiento Popular de Libertação da Angola* (MPLA) came to power in 1975 still facing two other rebel groups who had been fighting both the Portuguese colonial regime and the MPLA itself, the new revolutionary MPLA government concentrated on fighting their rebel rivals. The MPLA was able to rely on Cuban aid to counter a South African intervention that it would have struggled to combat on its own, and MPLA leaders did not engage in coup-proofing. There were massive purges after an alleged attempted coup by Interior Minister Nito Alves and his supporters in 1977, but still no development of counterbalancing forces.[201]

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[198] Risa A. Brooks, "Introduction: The Impact of Culture, Society, Institutions, and International Forces on Military Effectiveness," in Risa A. Brooks and Elizabeth A. Stanley, ed., *Creating Military Power: The Sources of Military Effectiveness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 1–26.

[199] See also Castillo, *Endurance and War: The National Sources of Military Cohesion*, on regime interference with security forces' autonomy and training undermining cohesion and battlefield performance, as occurred with Iran's coup-proofing measures, such as inserting religious commissars in military units. In some cases, bribery or indoctrination of forces may allow for coup-proofing without reducing military effectiveness, Dan Reiter, "Avoiding the Coup-Proofing Dilemma: Consolidating Political Control While Maximizing Military Power," *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 16, No. 3 (2020), pp. 312–331., or weapons of mass destruction and alliances can substitute for the military effectiveness coup-proofing curtails, Cameron S. Brown, Christopher J. Farriss, and R. Blake McMahon, "Recouping after Coup-Proofing: Compromised Military Effectiveness and Strategic Substitution," *International Interactions*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (2016), pp. 1–30., but Iran's revolutionary regime, while employing indoctrination generally among the population and security forces, did not adopt these other measures.

[200] Ahram, *Proxy Warriors*, 118.

[201] Michael Wolfers and Jane Bergerol, *Angola in the Front Line* (London: Zed Press, 1983); John A. Marcum, *The Angolan Revolution, Volume II: Exile Politics and Guerrilla Warfare (1962-1976)* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1978); Paul Fauvet, "The Rise and Fall of Nito Alves," *Review of African Political Economy*, No. 9 (1977), pp. 88–104; John S. Saul, "'When Freedom Died' in Angola: Alves and After," *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 41, No. 142 (2014), pp.

I have also focused on two violent social revolutions, which are most likely to both cause breakdowns of the old regime security apparatus[202] and to result in external threats.[203] Attention to the status of the preexisting security apparatus is necessary for analyzing all types of transitioning regimes, though, even in regions and eras with limited threats of foreign invasion or intervention. This is especially the case for any new regime with "revolutionary" goals of major sociopolitical or economic transformation.[204] The destruction of the old regime security apparatus, even in a widely popular revolution, does not signal the end of domestic threats, which may come from unexpected sources. In Nicaragua, some of the earliest armed resistance came from leftists who felt the FSLN's policies were too moderate,[205] rather than from elites who were expected to resist socioeconomic transformation. Likewise, when elements of the old regime military remain, those responsible for atrocities should be tried, and monitoring for coup plots is prudent, but large-scale purges and disorder may signal vulnerability to external enemies and invite revisionist invasions. If the old regime military remains intact, the new regime must reach some accommodation with it to prevent discord and the possibility of a coup,[206] while maintaining capabilities to counter external and insurgent threats.

609–622, doi:10.1080/03056244.2014.928279; David Birmingham, "The Twenty-Seventh of May: An Historical Note on the Abortive 1977 'Coup' in Angola," *African Affairs*, Vol. 77, No. 309 (1978), pp. 554–564; Linda M. Heywood, "Angola and the Violent Years 1975-2008: Civilian Casualties.," *Portuguese Studies Review*, Vol. 19, No. 1/2 (2011), pp. 311–332.

[202] Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*; Shugart, "Patterns of Revolution," 257–259.

[203] Walt, *Revolution and War*, 1996; Lachapelle et al., "Social Revolution and Authoritarian Durability."

[204] Jeff D. Colgan, "Measuring Revolution," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, Vol. 29, No. 4 (2012), pp. 444–467; Mark R. Beissinger, *The Revolutionary City: Urbanization and the Global Transformation of Rebellion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2022).

[205] E.g. Stephen M. Gorman, "The Role of the Revolutionary Armed Forces," in Thomas W. Walker, ed., *Nicaragua in Revolution* (New York: Praeger, 1982), pp. 115–132.

[206] Kevin Koehler and Holger Albrecht, "Revolutions and the Military: Endgame Coups, Instability, and Prospects for Democracy," *Armed Forces & Society*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (2021), pp. 148–176; Clarke, "Revolutionary Violence and Counterrevolution."

Conclusion

The security apparatus remains a bellwether for the success or failure of any regime change effort.[207] As the cases examined in this paper demonstrate, when regime change does happen, it is critical to focus on the persistence or absence of old regime security forces and the structure of the new forces to understand a new regime's threat perception, strengths, and weaknesses, which condition possibilities for effectiveness both on the battlefield and in domestic politics. Even in cases where new regimes eventually find a good defensive balance against internal and external armed threats, coup-proofing can have negative effects threatening regime survival or, at the least, harming the population.

For international actors determining how to engage with new revolutionary regimes, one key implication is that they are at their weakest and most uncertain right after taking power. With more time, revolutionary governments can improve their threat perception, better balance their strategic orientation, and work to ensure security forces' loyalty (or at least create barriers to coups). Once their power is more secure, regimes can withstand domestic and international pressures and threats to achieve long-term durability.[208] Foreign efforts to shape revolutionary regimes' directions or armed attempts to topple them are therefore especially likely to succeed early on.

In cases where the old regime security apparatus has survived, international actors can pressure the military to try to avoid a coup, especially as military interference and coups have grown more common across Africa, Asia, and Latin America in recent years,[209] with international anti-coup norms poorly implemented and coup-makers often tolerated.[210] International actors could work with new leaders and the security forces to make clear a coup would not be accepted abroad, potentially allowing the new regime to instead devote energy and resources toward domestic reconstruction and addressing public needs, rather than concentrating on building counterbalancing forces.

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207 Zoltan Barany, "The Role of the Military," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 22, No. 4 (2011), pp. 24–35.

208 Levitsky and Way, *Revolution and Dictatorship*; Lachapelle et al., "Social Revolution and Authoritarian Durability."

209 David Pion-Berlin and Igor Acácio, "The Return of the Latin American Military?," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2020), pp. 151–165, doi:10.1353/jod.2020.0062; Naunihal Singh, "The Myth of Coup Contagion," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (2022), pp. 74–88; Joshua Kurlantzick, "The Revival of Military Rule in South and Southeast Asia: Dangers to the Region's Democratic Future" (New York, 2022).

210 Oisín Tansey, "The Fading of the Anti-Coup Norm," *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (2017), pp. 144–156; George Klay Kieh and Kelechi A. Kalu, eds., *Democratization and Military Coups in Africa: Post-1990 Political Conflicts* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021).

When revolutionaries seize power and the old regime security apparatus is out of the picture, early engagement is the best option for shaping policies and outcomes. During the Cold War, when left-leaning rebels managed to seize power, the United States automatically treated them with suspicion. This drove more moderate left-wing revolutionaries toward Cuba and the Eastern Bloc when there were opportunities for more positive engagement that could have potentially better advanced U.S. interests. In Mozambique, Frelimo had sought U.S. support before taking up arms and throughout its anti-colonial war against Portugal, and the more moderate leaders who gained control of the organization wanted to chart an independent course, rather than siding with the Soviet Union or China.[211] When Mozambique first became independent, the Soviets were wary of Frelimo, uncertain of their ideological commitments, but U.S. antagonism and Rhodesian and South African aggression turned Frelimo toward the Soviets in the 1980s.[212] In Nicaragua, the more moderate FSLN leaders who gained primacy in the movement in the late 1970s had been warned by Fidel Castro that they should take a less radical course than Cuba; they were open to greater cooperation with the United States, even cutting off arms supplies to leftist rebels in El Salvador, but the Reagan administration proved FSLN radicals' suspicions correct by enacting an economic blockade and supporting the Contra rebels against them.[213]

These issues continue to be relevant. When U.S. and allied international forces withdrew from Afghanistan in 2021, the Taliban quickly regained control. During their first stint in power (1996–2001), the Taliban enacted a revolutionary Islamist program, seeking to transform Afghan society in line with their view of Islamic law and Pashtun traditions, along with supporting al-Qaeda's transnational jihadist struggle.[214] The Taliban's ideology evolved over the course of its time back in rebellion after 2001,[215] and when they returned to power in 2021, Taliban leaders sought to reassure international audiences that they would not support transnational terrorism and would take a more moderate stance on women's rights.[216] There was uncertainty about their sincerity, but this was a time when Taliban leaders were internally divided and also facing pressure

211 John A. Marcum, *Conceiving Mozambique* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

212 William Minter, "Major Themes in Mozambican Foreign Relations, 1975-1977," *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1978), pp. 43–49; Crawford Young, "United States Policy toward Africa: Silver Anniversary Reflections," *African Studies Review*, Vol. 27, No. 3 (1984), pp. 13–14; Marcum, *Conceiving Mozambique*.

213 Sergio Ramírez, *Adiós Muchachos: A Memoir of the Sandinista Revolution* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*.

214 Anand Gopal and Alex Strick van Linschoten, "Ideology in the Afghan Taliban"; M.J. Gohari, *The Taliban: Ascent to Power* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Alex Strick van Linschoten and Felix Kuehn, *An Enemy We Created: The Myth of the Taliban-Al Qaeda Merger in Afghanistan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

215 Gopal and van Linschoten, "Ideology in the Afghan Taliban."

216 E.g. Max Fisher, "Seeking Global Recognition, Taliban Take a New Approach: Making Nice," *New York Times*.

from their sometime allies in Pakistan.[217] With Afghanistan infrastructurally and economically devastated after years of war, there was an opportunity to engage with Taliban leaders to try to shift their political stances.[218] The United States and its allies instead cut off significant funds as Afghanistan plunged into economic crisis and Taliban hardliners gained increasing control; by early 2023, however, despite increasing authoritarianism and the curtailing of women's rights, even staunch critics were calling for more productive diplomatic engagement with the Taliban.[219]

Enmities may sometimes be too deep to overcome, especially when actors have a history of direct combat, like the United States and the Taliban, and revolutionaries must be receptive to outside actors' entreaties. In Nicaragua and Iran, however, below the revolutionaries' surface-level anti-imperialism, they remained pragmatic and there were both moments of productive engagement with the United States and missed opportunities for more positive relations.[220] Regardless of political history, it remains clear that revolutionary regimes are particularly vulnerable when they initially take power. Whether the old regime security apparatus survives or not, revolutionaries will struggle to find a balance in defending their newfound power, and their path can be reshaped at this early juncture. Initial missteps and misperceptions are likely to be corrected over time, but in many cases, it is only thanks to luck and rivals' hesitation and stumbles that revolutionary regimes survive and endure.

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[217] Lynne O'Donnell, "Taliban Splintered by Internal Divisions, External Spoilers," *Foreign Policy*; Byman, "Will Afghanistan Become a Terrorist Safe Haven Again?"

[218] E.g. Ali M. Latifi, "Afghanistan's Muttaqi Urges Countries to Engage with New Gov't," *Al Jazeera*.

[219] Lynne O'Donnell, "A Nobel Nominee's Controversial Call for Engagement With the Taliban," *Foreign Policy*.

[220] James G. Blight et al., *Becoming Enemies: U.S.-Iran Relations and the Iran-Iraq War, 1979-1988* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), p. ch.7; Pastor, *Not Condemned to Repetition*; Tabaar, *Religious Statecraft*.