



The enemy without uniform: how insurgents forever changed the rules of engagement for Italian missions abroad

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For generations the soldier has been trained to recognize his opponent through relatively clear elements: a uniform, a unit, a military position, means and weapons belonging to an enemy army.

The wars fought after September 11, 2001, and especially those in Afghanistan and Iraq, have progressively demolished this certainty.

The enemy could be a man seemingly indistinguishable from the rest of the population. He did not necessarily wear a uniform, did not permanently occupy a trench and might not openly carry a weapon.

He could be a farmer during one part of the day and a combatant during another. He could observe a patrol, report its passage, place an explosive device, subsequently recover a hidden weapon and then return within a village.

This is the figure of the **insurgent**.

A figure that certainly does not originate in Afghanistan, but which precisely in the campaigns of Afghanistan and Iraq has become central for an entire generation of Western military personnel.

And it has also profoundly changed the face of Italian missions abroad.

From enemy soldier to insurgent

In conventional warfare the fundamental principle remains relatively simple: two opposing armed forces confront each other and their members constitute military objectives, except when they are hors de combat, have surrendered or enjoy specific protections.

In insurgency this distinction becomes much more difficult.

Insurgents normally belong to non-state armed organizations that fight against a government, a foreign force or both. They can operate through relatively structured cells or through much less visible networks.

Above all, they do not necessarily have an interest in distinguishing themselves from the civilian population.

It is precisely this characteristic that transforms the battlefield.

The soldier no longer fights exclusively against someone who openly presents himself as a combatant. He must continuously distinguish between the population he must protect and people who may use that same population as an environment within which to move.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has long described this problem of contemporary conflicts: when combatants and civilians share the same spaces and members of armed groups are not immediately recognizable, the principle of distinction becomes extremely difficult to apply on the ground.

Attention: "insurgent" is not a new legal category

This is an essential point.

The word **insurgent** is extremely useful on the military, operational and doctrinal level, but does not automatically create a third legal category between "civilian" and "combatant".

International humanitarian law continues indeed to be based on the principle of distinction.

Civilians are protected from direct attack.

However, this protection may cease, in the circumstances provided for by the law of armed conflicts, when a person **directly participates in hostilities**.

For members of organized armed groups, the concept of continuous combat function also comes into play, the so-called *continuous combat function*, developed in the interpretation of international humanitarian law specifically to address the reality of non-international armed conflicts.

It is therefore wrong to summarize the change by simply stating:

“Before you couldn't shoot at a man dressed as a civilian, after Afghanistan you could”.

The reality is much more complex.

A civilian remains protected.

The operational problem becomes determining **who is actually a civilian and who is instead participating in hostilities or belongs to the combatant component of an organized armed group**.

It is probably one of the most difficult decisions that can be required of a soldier.

An armed man is not automatically an enemy

Another fundamental consequence concerns the possession of weapons.

In many theaters of operation, the simple presence of a weapon could not automatically transform a person into a target.

In Afghanistan, especially in rural areas, the possession of weapons was also part of the country's social reality.

For the Western soldier this meant having to assess behavior, context, intentions, available intelligence and numerous other elements before eventually using force.

The issue became even more complex because the insurgent could deliberately exploit this ambiguity.

A weapon could remain hidden until just moments before the action.

An improvised explosive device could be placed without the author being visibly armed.

An observer could simply use a telephone.

A motorcyclist could approach a convoy without initially appearing different from dozens of other civilians.

The battlefield thus became above all an environment to **interpret**.

Rules of Engagement

In this context, **Rules of Engagement** acquire enormous importance.

The ROE establish, within the legal and political framework applicable to the mission, when and under what circumstances a military force may use force.

They do not replace international humanitarian law and may be more restrictive than what the law abstractly permits.

Furthermore, there is no single rule of engagement valid for all missions.

They change depending on the mandate, the theater of operation, the phase of the operation, and the limitations decided by individual States.

Much of the operational ROE is also classified.

In Afghanistan the problem became particularly evident because ISAF had to simultaneously counter an insurgency and maintain population support.

Striking an insurgent could produce a tactical success.

Accidentally killing an Afghan family during that same action, however, could represent a strategic defeat.

The population becomes the center of the battlefield

This is where one of the most important concepts of **counterinsurgency** emerges.

The population does not simply represent something to protect while fighting.

It becomes the center of competition itself.

The insurgent needs the population to hide, receive information, move, recruit men, gain support or simply avoid being reported.

The counterinsurgency force must instead convince that same population that the State and security forces are capable of protecting them.

From this principle derives an enormous transformation.

Success can no longer be measured simply by counting how many enemy fighters have been eliminated.

A battle can be militarily won and politically lost.

But for Italy the problem had already appeared in Somalia

For the Italian Army this transformation does not arise suddenly after September 11th.

Almost ten years before Afghanistan, **Somalia had already shown Italian military personnel many of the elements that would later become characteristic of wars against insurgents.**

At the time, however, this concept was not yet part of the operational language with the meaning and especially with the centrality it would assume in the following years.

Italian documents and accounts spoke mainly of **militiamen**, men from the various Somali factions or, in the case of the clashes in Mogadishu, forces traceable to General Mohamed Farah Aidid.

The difference is not merely terminological.

The mission in Somalia had been conceived within the framework of an international intervention aimed at restoring security conditions, allowing humanitarian aid and proceeding with the disarmament of factions in a country devastated by civil war.

The Italian soldier found himself, however, quickly facing a reality that no longer corresponded to the traditional image of either an enemy soldier or a simple armed civilian.

July 2, 1993: a dramatic anticipation

The symbolically most important moment was **July 2, 1993**, during the **Canguro 11** operation and the clashes that passed into history in Italy as the **battle of Check Point Pasta or the Pastificio**.

Italian forces engaged in a sweep and weapons search operation were struck by the violent reaction of Somali militias traceable to Aidid.

Barricades, automatic weapons, snipers and anti-tank rockets quickly transformed the streets of Mogadishu into a real battlefield.

But the most difficult operational problem was another.

The enemy did not constitute a regular force clearly separated from the population.

The armed men did not wear a true military uniform that would allow them to be immediately identified as belonging to an enemy force.

They could move within the population, use the city's buildings, suddenly appear with a weapon and subsequently disappear again into the urban fabric.

The crowd, civilians, armed men and fighters could be found in the same space.

Using the language of that time, they were **militiamen**.

With the operational categories that would be established after September 11, many of those behaviors can be read as typical of an **irregular force operating in an insurgent environment**.

This does not mean retroactively transforming the battle at the Pastificio into a classic counterinsurgency operation.

Nor does it mean automatically attributing a particular legal status to those men through the word "insurgent".

It does mean, however, recognizing that **Somalia had already anticipated the problem that Afghanistan and Iraq would later definitively impose on Western Armed Forces:**

fighting an armed opponent who does not necessarily wear a uniform and who operates within the same population that the international force must protect.

On July 2, 1993, the paratroopers and other Italian military personnel engaged in Mogadishu found themselves facing this reality almost a decade before the word *insurgent* became a common part of the vocabulary of Western missions.

Somalia was, in this regard, a dramatic anticipation.

Afghanistan would transform that experience from an exception into a **central problem of operational doctrine.**

Afghanistan: the counterinsurgency turning point

This philosophy reached its most evident formulation during the ISAF mission.

In 2009, U.S. General Stanley McChrystal, then commander of the NATO mission in Afghanistan, introduced an operational line that placed population protection at the center of the campaign with even greater force.

ISAF directives in particular limited the use of firepower in situations where the risk to civilians was high.

Procedures relating to the use of air support, indirect fire, *escalation of force* and the management of incidents involving civilians were strengthened.

The principle was simple but extremely important:

not everything that is tactically possible is necessarily strategically useful.

The objective was not only to destroy the enemy.

It was to prevent him from controlling the population.

And everything changes for Italian military personnel

The Italian experience must be read within this transformation.

Somalia, Bosnia and Kosovo had already demonstrated how fragile the distinction between war and peacekeeping had become.

Militias, paramilitary groups, armed civilians, irregular checkpoints and populations directly involved in the conflict had already forced Italian soldiers to confront scenarios in which identifying the threat was not simple.

But Afghanistan took this evolution to a completely different level.

The Italian contingent, especially in the western region with responsibility over Herat and the surrounding provinces, did not simply carry out surveillance activities.

Italian units conducted patrols, operations with Afghan forces, territorial control activities, and operations in areas where insurgent groups were present.

Convoys and patrols could be attacked through ambushes, rockets, light weapons, suicide bombers, and above all **IEDs**, improvised explosive devices.

It was a war in which combat could begin in a few seconds and end just as quickly.

The enemy could fire and then disappear again into the territory.

The IED changes the soldier's mindset

Probably no weapon better represents contemporary insurgency than the IED.

The soldier no longer only has to observe what is in front of him.

He must observe the terrain, an apparently recent hole, a pile of stones, a parked car, an object out of place, a man staring intently at the column. A person using a phone at a particular moment.

The threat could be under the road while the person controlling it is hundreds of meters away.

This profoundly changes training.

Observation, knowledge of behavioral patterns, intelligence, and the ability to recognize anomalies become as important as the ability to use a weapon.

From checkpoint to escalation of force

One of the most difficult situations involves vehicles or people approaching a military position without following the indications.

Is it a civilian who did not understand?

A distracted driver?

A frightened person?

Or a suicide bomber?

This is where the importance of **escalation of force** comes from.

- Warnings
- Orders
- Visual signals
- Acoustic devices

Progressive actions designed, when the situation allows, to make the person understand that he must stop before it becomes necessary to resort to lethal force.

A few seconds can separate a normal interaction with a civilian from a life-or-death decision.

It is one of the most dramatic characteristics of counterinsurgency missions.

The soldier becomes a sensor too

Counterinsurgency produces another transformation.

Every patrol becomes a source of intelligence.

The military must remember which people were present in a village.

Which vehicles.

Which activities appeared normal.

Who suddenly went missing.

Which roads were frequented.

How the population reacted to the passage of patrols.

Even an apparently insignificant change could become an indicator.

Knowledge of the territory was no longer merely geographic.

It became above all **human**.

Hence the enormous importance of knowledge of tribes, families, local authorities, relationships between villages, and social dynamics.

Talking to the population becomes a military activity

In counterinsurgency, even activities that in conventional warfare might seem secondary become an integral part of the operation. Talking to village elders and tribal leaders, supporting the reconstruction of a school or a well, training local police and promoting a return to normality in markets all mean building security and reducing the room for maneuver of insurgents.

It was on this logic that the **Provincial Reconstruction Teams** deployed in Afghanistan were based, in which civilian and military tools contributed to the stabilization of the territory. Italy had one of the main PRTs right in Herat, at the heart of the area of responsibility of the Italian contingent.

The counterinsurgency paradox

War against an insurgency, however, contains a paradox.

The more the enemy blends with the population, the greater the need to protect that population.

The more the risk to soldiers increases, the more important it becomes to avoid indiscriminate reactions.

The insurgent can deliberately try to provoke a disproportionate response.

If he can generate civilian casualties attributable to government or international forces, he can turn a tactical defeat into a propaganda victory.

It is one of the reasons why in Afghanistan the reduction of civilian casualties progressively became one of the fundamental elements of the ISAF strategy.

All of this inevitably falls on the soldier on the ground.

In conventional war, enemy identification can happen miles away.

In counterinsurgency it often happens at fifty meters, at twenty, at five.

The decision may have to be made in just seconds.

And after each incident, reports, reconstructions, image analysis, testimonies and verification of ROE compliance can follow.

The modern soldier must therefore combine aggression when necessary and the ability to hold fire when the situation is not sufficiently clear.

These are two apparently opposite capabilities.

In the war against insurgents they become complementary instead.

Afghanistan also changes equipment and training

The change is not limited to rules of engagement alone.

The Afghan experience accelerates the transformation of the entire soldier.

Ballistic protections and communication systems increase.

Countermeasures against IEDs develop.

The importance of observation systems grows.

Drones and sensors are employed with increasing frequency.

Vehicles are modified to better resist explosions.

Training includes scenarios in which civilians, allied military, insurgents and local forces coexist in the same space.

Even a simple patrol becomes an extremely complex activity.

No longer just “peacekeeping”

It is also for this reason that generically defining those operations as **“peace missions”** tells only part of the story.

The political mandate could have been stabilization, support for the Afghan government, or population security.

On the ground, however, Italian units found themselves repeatedly involved in actual combat.

The Italian Parliament discussed several times the very nature of the ISAF mission: the rules of engagement first and foremost and the use of weapons systems.

In 2012 the Defense Minister Giampaolo Di Paola, speaking about the use of Italian AMX aircraft, reiterated that the available means would be used to ensure the protection of Italian military personnel, Afghan forces and allies within the framework of existing rules of engagement.

It was now evident how much the theater had changed compared to the traditional image of the international interposition mission.

The legacy of insurgents

More than twenty years after the beginning of the war in Afghanistan, many lessons from that experience remain present in Western Armed Forces.

Conventional wars have forcefully returned to the center of attention, especially after the Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

But the insurgent has not disappeared.

Contemporary conflicts continue to see the coexistence of regular armies, militias, paramilitary groups, terrorist organizations, commercial drones, civilians gathering information and fighters not wearing uniforms.

The distinction between front and rear is once again increasingly difficult.

And perhaps this is the most important legacy of the post-September 11 wars.

The soldier can no longer limit himself to recognizing **an enemy uniform**.

He must recognize **hostile behavior** within an extremely complex human environment.

He must be able to fight and, at the same time, know when not to fight.

Because in the war against an insurgency the most difficult moment is not always when you open fire.

Very often it is when you have to decide **whether to open it**.