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Interacting with Security Forces

Challenges and Chances for Avoiding Violent Repression in Social Defence

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Abstract

The paper summarizes findings from the recent academic literature on disobedience among security forces, with a particular focus on chances and challenges in contexts of social defence. It thereby sheds some light on how those involved in social defence efforts may realistically gauge the chances of such disobedience, try to actively encourage it, as well as skilfully respond to it. While disobedience can be a valuable resource for a nonviolent resistance trying to avert or minimize the threat of violent repression, effective social defence must also remain sustainable in its absence.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Social Defence and the Threat of Repression

Even when political/strategic[1], economic[2], environmental[3] or humanitarian[4] problems of military defence systems are recognized, they are commonly justified by their seeming necessity. For a society under armed attack, the claim goes, the only option is to repel that attack with armed force; and to prepare for and deter such an armed attack, a society effectively has no choice other than to build a military defence system. Against this view, a minority of scholars and activists have pointed to social defence[5] as a possible alternative to military defence. Simply put, social defence can be understood as *unarmed* (/nonviolent) resistance aimed at the *protection* of lives and the *preservation* of social structures and values in the face of an armed aggression. (It thus conceptually contrasts with nonviolent resistance aimed at social, political and/or economic *change*.)[6]

One of the most apparent challenges against the idea of social defence – and nonviolent resistance more broadly – is *(physical) repression*. Without arms, wouldn't the resistance be hopelessly exposed to ruthless repression by its opponent, sustain major losses and quickly be subdued?

While an intuitive and valid concern, nonviolent resistance movements have dealt with the threat of physical repression in multiple, sometimes 'surprisingly' effective ways. A resistance may for instance try to minimize the vulnerability of the resistance and its participants to repression; dissuade opponent authorities from ordering a violent crackdown; or turn the dynamics of the repression in the resistance's favour[7]. Beyond that, there is a further, potentially potent means by which resistance movements have attempted to handle the challenge of physical repression, which this paper focuses on: Getting the agents of repression – the (riot) police, military, paramilitary troops or other armed organisations tasked with inflicting violence on a resistance – to refuse to (fully) comply with orders to forcibly suppress the resistance.

1.2 Security Force Disobedience

Such a refusal, which I will refer to as 'security force disobedience'[8], can take various forms. Disobedience can range from covert to overt, individual to collective, passive to active. For

[1] E.g. Cady 2010; Lebow 2016; Dobos 2020
[2] E.g. Crawford 2021; Pemberton 2023
[3] E.g. Parkinson 2020; Parkinson/Cottrell 2021
[4] Crawford 2023; Savell 2023; Stamatopoulou-Robbins 2024
[5] Some earlier classic publications include King-Hall 1958; Roberts 1967, 1969; Boserup/Mack 1974; Ebert 1981a, 1981b; Sharp 1985, 1988, 1990; Martin 1993; Vogele 1993; Müller 1995; Burrowes 1996. For newer publications, see e.g. Bartkowski 2015; Johansen/Martin 2019; Martin 2020; Petrauskaite 2021; Bund für Soziale Verteidigung 2023.
[6] This distinction is to some extent artificial, and certainly not clear-cut. For instance, while initial resistance to an armed attack may constitute social defence according to this distinction, if the attacker establishes (partial) political and territorial control, later phases of the resistance against the now-occupier may fall outside this narrow definition in that they would then aim at changing the status quo. For a more refined critical perspective on this distinction, see e.g. Martin 1993. Despite this ambivalence and potential conceptual shortcomings of the definition, it will be adopted here because the 'new-coming' nature of the opponent/aggressor implies unique possibilities and challenges, as discussed below.
[7] This last mechanism has been discussed in the literature under the terms 'political jiu jitsu', 'backfire'- or 'backlash'-effect. See e.g. Hess/Martin 2006; Sutton et al 2014; Chenoweth 2018.
[8] Other terms used in the literature include 'security force defection', 'disobedience' and 'disloyalty'.

instance, security forces may simply stand by and observe the protests they were ordered to disperse; they may (individually or collectively) leave a security force organisation; they may criticise the government they are supposed to support or renounce the use of force on that government's behalf; or they may even publicly express support for a resistance campaign.[9] Beyond directly mitigating the threat of repression faced by a nonviolent resistance, such security force disobedience can also alter the power balance between a resistance and its opponent authorities in a broader way, as the latter's ability to coerce a resistance movement often hinges significantly on its ability to apply systematic physical violence.

Classic work on social defence has long recognized disobedience in the opponent security forces as one factor that can critically help social defence efforts.[10] More recently, empirical research has shown that security force disobedience greatly enhances the chances of political success in nonviolent resistance movements in general, including in conflicts against highly repressive governments. Focusing on defections as one particular form of disobedience, a statistical analysis of 80 nonviolent campaigns finds that major security force defections "increase the likelihood of success [of a campaign] by nearly 60 percent".[11] Other comparative studies have similarly highlighted that whether or not the security forces defect is one of the most critical factors determining a nonviolent resistance's outcome.[12] (Some even go so far as to suggest that security force defections are a necessary condition for nonviolent campaign success,[13] but this is not borne out by the empirical record of the entirety of cases of successful nonviolent campaigns, see the introduction to Chapter 3.)

1.3 Empirical Material

How can the possibilities and challenges of security force disobedience in contexts of social defence be best explored and assessed in an empirically grounded manner?

The ideal empirical basis for such an analysis would surely be cases of social defence (some with and some without security force disobedience). Paradigmatic cases of social defence could include the resistance against the invasion of the CSSR by Warsaw Pact troops in 1968;[14] the Golan Druze resistance in 1981-82 against Israeli annexation;[15] and the resistance against the French occupation of the Ruhr area in 1923.[16]

While especially the Czechoslovakian resistance provides valuable empirical insights, any discussion of the possibilities and challenges of security force disobedience in contexts of social defence faces a fundamental epistemological challenge: there are few, and no recent, cases of social defence in the narrow sense outlined – and even fewer with notable instances of disobedience to learn from.

Meanwhile, there has been a large body of recent research on disobedience during other types of nonviolent resistance, especially cases of populations nonviolently challenging their long-time

[9] For a more systematic conceptualization and categorization of different forms of security force disobedience in the face of (nonviolent) resistance movements, see e.g. Dahl et al 2024.
[10] Boserup/Mack 1974:52f.; Sharp 1990:99; Martin 1993; Johansen/Martin 2019:134f.
[11] Chenoweth/Stephan 2011:52,58
[12] Nepstad 2011a, 2011b; Dahl 2016
[13] Barany 2011:24; Degaut 2019
[14] Windsor/Roberts 1969
[15] Kennedy 1985
[16] Müller 1995

governments. This research draws on a much larger pool of empirical cases. For instance, it includes cases of primarily nonviolent anti-colonial struggles, e.g. in India 1930-1945, Ghana 1949-1951, Zambia 1944-1964, or the Baltic states in 1987-1991. It is also possible to draw limited insights from nonviolent anti-regime campaigns, such as in Iran in 1979, in the Philippines in 1986, in Serbia in 2000 or in the Arab Spring starting in late 2010. In addition to vastly expanding the qualitative evidence that can be drawn on, these cases allow quantitative analysis based on more than 170 nonviolent resistance movements worldwide,[17] including the named case and many more that occurred in different places around the world since 1945. Quantitative and qualitative research leveraging these data has led to novel insights and a richer picture about the chances and challenges nonviolent resistance movements face with regard to security force disobedience.

Thus, this paper aims to systematically review and synthesize the current state of research on nonviolent resistance movement's interaction with security forces and the latter's disobedience. In so doing, it considers the implications of these findings for social defence specifically. To be sure, there are some differences between social defence and other forms of nonviolent resistance, with some unique possibilities and challenges related to disobedience in the cases of social defence. For instance, often in social defence,[18] the security forces deployed to repress the resistance are in some way 'foreign' to a resistance and its main participant base. This brings with it unique challenges in interacting with security forces and encouraging and handling their disobedience. For this reason, even while drawing heavily upon experiences from a broad range of nonviolent resistance other than social defence as explained, the paper will be particularly attentive to the particular dynamics and challenges of disobedience that may arise in social defence settings.

1.4 Outline

This paper zooms in on security force disobedience in contexts of nonviolent resistance, and specifically social defence, from three angles. Firstly, I discuss findings from the literature on how resistance movements can try to encourage disobedience in security forces that have been, or may be, ordered to forcefully repress a resistance and its participants (Chapter 2). Secondly, I will consider structural and contextual factors that can make such efforts to encourage security force disobedience more or less easy (Chapter 3). Finally, I will briefly look into challenges a resistance may face in responding to disobedience and discuss potential strategies to deal with those challenges (Chapter 4).

It should be noted that this paper mainly aims to introduce findings from recent academic research to those politically interested in nonviolent resistance or defence and as such does not systematically reflect on the methodological side of the studies reviewed. The interested reader is referred to the original publications referenced in the text, alongside subsequent research citing them.

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[17] Number of resistance campaigns whose primary method was nonviolent, recorded in the (most frequently used) NAVCO 2.1 dataset (Chenoweth/Lewis 2013; Chenoweth/Shay 2019).

[18] Note that this is not a conceptual necessity. Nonviolent resistance against coups (e.g. against the Knapp Putsch in 1920) can be counted as social defence, in which case the police or the military may be deployed against fellow citizens, i.e. relevant security forces may belong to the society being attacked and defending itself. However, in many cases of social defence – and crucially, when social defence is discussed as an alternative to military defence –, the most critical cases are arguably those where the security forces are in some way 'foreign' to the defending population.

2. Encouraging Security Force Disobedience

Inspired by the above-cited insights on the significance of security force disobedience, some research has asked whether and how nonviolent resistance movements may act in a way that actually increases the chances of security force disobedience. These studies have identified a range of tactics that may help a nonviolent resistance movement encourage security force defections; in addition, they also provide crucial insights into how effective different types of tactics can be, and under which circumstances. While these studies strongly indicate that whether any tactics 'work' is highly dependent on the contextual circumstances of a resistance, awareness of the possible ways of encouraging security force disobedience may help nonviolent resistance movements (and social defence efforts specifically) take advantage of them as opportunity allows.

In the following, I outline potentially relevant tactics in four broad (not necessarily mutually exclusive) categories: methods of encouraging disobedience by weakening security forces' belief in the desirability or necessity of suppressing the resistance (2.1), by creating non-confrontational interaction routines between the resistance and the security forces (2.2), by raising the costs and difficulties security forces expect with the forcible suppression of the resistance (2.3) and by lowering the practical barriers security forces face in disobeying orders or defecting in the context of an ongoing nonviolent resistance (2.4).

2.1 Diminishing the Perceived Desirability of Violent Repression

One set of methods aims to diminish the extent to which security force members perceive the forceful suppression of the resistance as adequate or worthwhile.

2.1.1 Messaging

This involves, firstly, so-called 'messaging' and direct communication with the security forces.

How and where can a resistance communicate with opponent security forces? Research has identified various tactics used by resistance movements. Most obviously, when security forces are deployed to control or suppress demonstrations or other resistance activities on the ground, participants of those actions may try to engage individual security force members in conversations (as was famously done for example in Czechoslovakia in 1968).[19] Resistance movements have also taken advantage of arrests as an opportunity to make contact with security force personnel in police stations and holding cells (e.g. in Serbia 1999/2000)[20] or sent out people to visit the places where security forces were known to be stationed, using the delivery of letters or other formalities as a pretext.[21]

Some nonviolent resistance movements manage to establish (often covert) targeted and personal connections with individual security force members. While feasible only under very specific circumstances, this has included private meetings with individual high-ranking security force members (e.g. Ukraine 2004).[22] More recently, encrypted messenger services have been used by resistance movements to communicate with individual, often middle and lower ranking security

[19] Martin 2021
[20] Keel 2021
[21] Binnendijk/Marovic 2006
[22] Binnendijk/Marovic 2006

force members (as for example in Belarus 2020 and in Myanmar 2021; also see chapter 2.4).[23]

In addition, or as an alternative to such direct communication, resistance movements have utilized means of indirect communication. This has included the use of traditional printed and broadcasting media that are accessible to the resistance and also consumed by at least some security force personnel (as in Ukraine 2004),[24] as well as leaflets and posters.[25] More recently, online platforms and webpages have also been used by resistance movements as a way of disseminating specific messages to active security force members, especially in contexts of government-controlled traditional media (for example in Belarus 2020).

What kind of 'messages' can or should a nonviolent resistance disseminate vis-à-vis security forces? Firstly, messages may aim at security force member's beliefs about the nature and goals of the resistance movement.[26] Security forces sent out to handle a nonviolent resistance have often been given specific information with regard to the objectives of the resistance, the identity of its participants, and its actions. This information is not necessarily accurate; for instance, security force members may have been told that a resistance is driven by a specific interest group or by foreign agents, or that it pursues subversive goals through violent actions, even if this is not the case. Thus, resistance participants may attempt to explain their motives and goals to security force members or highlight their identities as 'normal' citizens committed to nonviolent action.[27]

In parallel, protesters may seek to explain why they consider the opponent government authorities' actions or demands to be illegitimate, highlighting concrete events to illustrate that illegitimacy.[28] Some movements have also found it helpful to stress that (irrespective of the political subject matter) the opponent's (violent) response to the resistance is clearly disproportionate,[29] and that the security forces' own professionality requires that they at least abide by relevant laws, including those prohibiting intentional violence against civilians (cf. Ukraine 2004/05).[30]

In terms of framing its objectives, a resistance movement may derive certain benefits from addressing security forces' organisational and corporate interests specifically and demonstrating an awareness of and a willingness to accommodate (some of) those interests.[31] Along these lines, some resistance movements have pledged – as part of their communication strategy aimed at drawing the security forces away from the regime and to their own side – to ensure security force members' career continuity, to grant economic benefits or political privileges to the security forces as an institution or to forgo criminal prosecution for previous human rights violations committed by the relevant security force organisation.[32] While only the last one could potentially be relevant in the case of social defence, and while such conciliatory promises carry the risk of provoking divisions within the resistance and thus certainly need to be approached very carefully, they can be powerful tools for undermining an opponent's attempts to have the security forces perceive the resistance as a deeply hostile and threatening force.

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[23] Kyed 2022
[24] Binnendijk 2009
[25] Martin 2021
[26] Binnendijk 2009
[27] Keel 2021; Martin 2021
[28] Binnendijk 2009
[29] Anisin/Musil 2021
[30] Binnendijk/Marovic 2006
[31] Morency-Laflamme 2018
[32] Binnendijk 2009; Keel 2021

It has further repeatedly been noted that rather than being a one-way street, communication with the security forces can also provide the resistance with valuable, if limited, insights into loyalties, attitudes towards the resistance and the general 'mood' within different parts of the security forces.[33] For instance, a resistance may learn more about which units have been subjected to more or less extensive indoctrination, which groups hold the strongest grievances against the government authorities or are least sympathetic towards its policies, which parts of the security forces may otherwise be relatively open to the resistance's cause, or about the power relation between different organisations within the security apparatus. This can give the resistance a better idea of what to expect from different parts of the security forces, as well as help it better tailor the content of its own messaging efforts to what is most likely to resonate with specific segments of the security force forces.[34]

To what extent does such communication actually 'work' to lessen security forces' commitment to forcibly suppressing the resistance? Research on individual cases[35] as well as comparative analyses[36] suggest that it does have at least some such effect. Specifically, they indicate that a large discrepancy between what the security forces expect, based on the information they have been given by government authorities, and what they subsequently directly see and hear about the resistance on the ground, can have a profound impact.[37] It can make them more suspicious about and careful in following regime orders, diminishing their inclination to automatically apply whatever degree of violence is demanded, and increase their propensity towards refusing to obey at least certain types of orders they deem clearly inappropriate.[38]

Research further suggests that especially face-to-face communication between resistance participants and security force members can lead to the latter reflexively acknowledging their solely professional – but not ideological/normative – commitment to the task of suppressing the resistance. Arguing with protesters about the (il)legitimacy of the resistance's and the government authorities' respective cause, security force members may attempt to conclude the discussion by contending that they are, in any case, doing their job for reasons of professional duty, rather than out of personal conviction or commitment to the government's cause.[39] This reflexive distancing from the 'mission' can reinforce less-than-full morale and make security force members more hesitant to follow orders perceived as extreme.

Among other things, research has noted that the effectiveness of a resistance's communication and messaging efforts vis-à-vis security forces may vary with the (perceived) cohesiveness of the resistance, or its ability to 'speak with one voice'.[40] Cleavages within a resistance with regard to objectives and/or methods and forms of actions can diminish the impact of its messages, which may be seen as coming from and applying to only a specific fraction of the resistance and even be contradicted directly by conflicting actions on the part of fractions.

2.1.2 Networking

[33] Keel 2021
[34] Binnendijk/Marovic 2006
[35] Binnendijk/Marovic 2006; Binnendijk 2009; Anisin/Musil 2021; Keel 2021
[36] Morency-Laflamme 2018; Johnson 2024
[37] Martin 2021
[38] Binnendijk 2009
[39] Keel 2021
[40] Morency-Laflamme 2018

A second potent means of diminishing the extent to which security force members perceive the suppression of the resistance as desirable or worthwhile involves the expansion and utilization of social network ties into the security forces.

What are social network ties, and what kind of ties matter? Social network ties can be of different depth and form, from 'just knowing each other', to having previously cooperated or worked together, to being connected by higher levels of interpersonal trust. Research has identified a variety of social network ties that can be potentially helpful in encouraging disobedience. While direct personal ties between resistance participants and active members of relevant security forces are certainly a great asset, a resistance can also benefit from more indirect social network ties. These may include ties to families or friends of active security force members[41] or to retired security force members. Even more broadly, they could include ties to members of the society where the security forces are drawn from who may in turn personally know individual security force members. Advantage may also be taken of ties to a personality who is respected by many security force members or who holds a certain type of authority that security force members widely recognize (this could e.g. be a recognized civilian bureaucrat or a representative of a social group with whom many military personnel identify).[42] In rare cases, resistance movements have benefited from help from within a security force organization in expanding their social networks vis-à-vis the security forces. This would take the form e.g. of retired higher-ranking security force members favourable to the resistance leveraging their own contacts to approach other officers or their subordinates, their families and fellow veterans. This proved quite effective due to the retired officers being able to take advantage of their status.[43]

How can a resistance take advantage of such ties, and (how) do such ties 'work' to weaken security forces' belief in the desirability of forcibly suppressing the resistance? In the case of direct ties, it has been observed that the mere existence of ties can matter. Simply having members of the security forces know members of the resistance can already increase the chances that at least those members of the security forces fail to follow orders when required to use violence against the resistance, by virtue of the feeling of familiarity created through those direct ties.[44] This dynamic of security force members hesitating to follow orders due to their acquaintance with those they are asked to repress has been observed in several recent resistance movements, notably for instance in Egypt in 2011.[45] (The relevance of this mechanism is also corroborated by the fact that authorities often make conscious efforts to deploy security forces drawn from geographically remote areas with little direct social ties to a resistance movement).

Social networks ties, including indirect ones, can also aid nonviolent movements in their aforementioned communication efforts vis-à-vis security forces. In particular in contexts of high uncertainty, security force members have been shown to assign more weight and to be potentially more responsive to information received from personally trusted sources, as opposed to general public sources.[46] For this reason, maintaining low-key exchanges with groups with personal ties to security force members and disseminating relevant messages and information (see above) through these groups may help a resistance bolster the perceived credibility of its messages

[41] Binnendijk/Marovic 2006
[42] Binnendijk 2009; Morency-Laflamme 2018
[43] Binnendijk 2009
[44] Binnendijk 2009
[45] Nassif 2015
[46] Koehler et al 2016

among security force members.[47] An additional advantage of messaging through social networks is that being more informal and less overt, it may less easily be hampered by media restrictions or subjected to government authorities' surveillance.[48] It has further been shown, e.g. through qualitative interviews with defectors in Syria since 2011, that communication through personal networks, due to its often continuous character, can facilitate an accumulation of information that successively strengthens security force members' resolve to defect over time.[49]

In rare cases when direct ties to active or retired personnel are available, resistance movements have also managed to obtain certain reassurances from security force members. This has for example included mid-ranking officers agreeing in advance not to pass potential orders of physical repression from their superiors on to their subordinates, or to even make active efforts to stop other parts of the security forces from engaging in repression (e.g. Ukraine 2004).[50] This type of reassurance is unlikely to be had except under very favourable circumstances, but when obtained can be a potent driver of security force disobedience in the event of orders to violently suppress a nonviolent resistance.

2.1.3 Building the foundation

Thirdly, a resistance can consciously control some of its own characteristics in order to diminish the extent to which security force members perceive the forceful suppression of the resistance as necessary or adequate.

One is for the resistance to be perceived as consistently nonviolent.[51] A resistance's abstinence from violent actions has been found to potentially diminish security force members' commitment to its forcible suppression in multiple ways. It reduces the threat to security force personnel's own physical safety, which can otherwise be a strong motivation to use violence against a resistance.[52] Thus reducing the pressure on the security forces to use force to protect themselves can considerably mitigate one of the main push-factors towards security force violence.[53] Sticking to nonviolent action is further a necessary complement to a resistance's verbal attempts to counteract opponent narratives about the resistance as violent or terrorist (see above).[54] Only by (not only speaking but) operating in ways that belie opponent authorities' charges can a resistance hope to undermine authorities' attempts at delegitimising the resistance and increase the chances that security forces will question orders to use violence against it. In particular in contexts where there have been previous violent confrontations or where there is a simultaneous violent resistance, a commitment to nonviolent methods helps a resistance distinguish itself from violent rebels in security forces' eyes.[55] Such a role of nonviolent discipline in increasing the chances of security force defections has been indicated by statistical analyses,[56] with some authors arguing that even so-called 'radical flanks' tend to be detrimental in this regard.[57]

[47] Binnendijk 2009
[48] Binnendijk 2009
[49] Albrecht/Koehler 2018
[50] Binnendijk/Marovic 2006
[51] Keel 2021
[52] Binnendijk 2009
[53] Morency-Laflamme 2018
[54] Keel 2021; Binnendijk/Marovic 2006; Binnendijk 2009
[55] Keel 2021
[56] Chenoweth/Stephan 2011
[57] Johnson 2021

Another feature of a resistance that may make security force disobedience more likely is the breadth of participation in and support for the resistance. A resistance comprising a broad range of societal groups makes it harder for the opponent regime to portray the resistance as driven by the interests of a small or foreign interest group and to convince its security forces of the appropriateness of the resistance's suppression.[58] Broader participation also makes it more likely that there are social network ties between the resistance and the security forces.[59] As indicated above, it can be particularly beneficial for a resistance to have persons or groups that are widely seen as legitimate or authoritative among security force members, such as retired generals or other persons directly linked to the security forces, participate in or at least express public approval for the resistance.[60]

2.2 Building Non-Confrontational Interaction Patterns

Closely related to efforts aimed at reducing the perceived desirability of suppressing a resistance are methods that help establish and reinforce patterns of non-confrontational interaction between the resistance and security forces.

2.2.1 Fraternisation

Some of those methods involve so-called fraternisation.

What is fraternisation? Most generally, fraternisation involves resistance participants acting non-confrontationally vis-à-vis security force members, and as if anticipating the security forces to act non-confrontationally (and nonviolently) too. In so doing, they attempt to create a situational norm, or expectation, of non-confrontational behaviour. The goals is to establish non-confrontational interaction as the situational default in that encounter between the resistance participants and the security force members.

Such fraternisation can involve a range of different concrete actions. Examples include encircling or climbing on tanks, thereby shortening the physical distance to security force personnel; engaging them in face-to-face conversations or offering food or drinks to them; or shortening the symbolic distance by displaying certain signs or context-specific gestures.[61] In verbal fraternisation, participants of nonviolent resistance movements have specifically sought to highlight shared identities, grievances or physical hardships between resistance participants and security force personnel. For example, they may point to the "long hours on the job (for police) and long hours on the occupational space of protest (for dissidents)"[62] or asked, "brother soldiers, why do you kill your brothers?".

(How) does fraternisation and the building of non-confrontational interaction patterns 'work' to make security forces less inclined to follow orders to use violence against the resistance? Certainly, fraternisation attempts are routinely met with countermeasures by the security forces. Security forces may consciously maintain physical distance, simply by reversing away as a crowd

[58] Bellin 2012
[59] Johnson 2024
[60] Binnendijk/Marovic 2006; Binnendijk 2009
[61] Ketchley 2014; Anisin/Musil 2021; Johnson 2024
[62] Anisin/Musil 2021: 405; also Keel 2021

approaches or by intimidating or event attacking protestors.[63] These can be seen as attempts to negate the situational default of non-confrontational interaction proposed by resistance participants, by increasing "both the fear of further confrontations and the situational tension experienced by [...] troops and protestors alike".[64]

Despite such countermeasures, fraternisation has played a conspicuous role in a number of nonviolent resistance movements and their successful incitation of security force disobedience, such as in Czechoslovakia (1968), the Philippines (1986), Iran (1978/79) or Egypt (2011).[65] Observing such cases, it has been argued that situational defaults, e.g. of non-confrontational or nonviolent interaction, once established can prove a relatively high barrier to deviant (in this case, confrontational or violent) behaviour.[66] (In addition, such fraternisation and non-confrontational approaches to the security forces may also help constrain more violence-prone segments within the resistance itself, by setting an alternative default mode of interaction with the security forces.) A qualitative review of a wide variety of explanations for security force disobedience has corroborated this view, identifying fraternisation as "a significant predictor of shirking, although not decisive on its own".[67]

2.2.2 Facilitation

Relatedly, a resistance may attempt what has been termed facilitation.

Facilitation involves "reach[ing] mutually advantageous, routinized, and reliable arrangements with the coercive apparatus that emphasize the opposition's reasonable and human qualities".[68] That is, the resistance deliberately cooperates, albeit on a limited scale, with the security forces with the aim of normalizing and routinizing amicable interaction between the resistance and the security forces at least in specific settings. This cooperation would need to take place in ways that do not undermine the nonviolent actions at issue, and in this sense constitutes highly pragmatic cooperation. For example, a resistance may make it a habit to help the security forces with routine work by proactively providing them with technical information about rallies, such as regarding routes or expected participant numbers, if these can be disclosed without compromising the effectiveness of those actions.

(How) does the building of non-confrontational interaction patterns through facilitation 'work' to increase the chances of security force disobedience? While receiving much less academic attention than fraternisation, facilitation has been utilized by some nonviolent resistance movements (e.g. Serbia 2000). In some of those cases, facilitation tactics seemed to have had some observable impact in encouraging non-confrontational and even cooperative behaviour from the security forces in response, if only after some time. For example, in one case "[s]enior policemen began to advise protest leaders on which streets to avoid if they didn't want to run into the riot police, or to forewarn them when violent extra-regional police forces were in town. Many times, protest organizers were invited to police stations to discuss how to reduce the security risks of the main events".[69] While even skilful facilitation usually creates cooperative

[63] Ketchley 2014
[64] Ketchley 2014: 162
[65] Kraemer 2014
[66] Ketchley 2014
[67] Johnson 2024: 439. See also Barany 2016; Johnson 2017
[68] Keel 2021: 232
[69] Keel 2021: 231

interaction patterns only in specific settings, it can potentially shape security forces' perceptions of and attitude towards the resistance beyond those single settings. Specifically, it can foster shared understandings – engrained in routinized interaction – between the resistance and security forces of each other as not *essential* enemies (but at most contingent ones, conditional on the particular conflict constellation).[70] Thereby, it can potentially contribute to making security forces more reflective about orders to use violence against resistance participants.

2.2.3 Building the foundation

It should be noted that fraternisation and facilitation, in order to be possible or effective, generally require certain preconditions.

Firstly, both fraternisation and facilitation build upon the expectation that (and can achieve their effects only on condition that) security forces to some degree reciprocate the offer of non-confrontational and/or cooperative interaction put forward by the resistance. Thus, although there is no definite level of social proximity that fraternisation or facilitation presupposes, they are clearly easier to implement and more likely to achieve their intended effects in dealing with local, regularly deployed security forces.[71] In the case of special, particularly loyal units or units that are deployed only on a single occasion, these tactics may be much less useful.

In light of this, a resistance may attempt to consciously try to bring about those conditions that facilitate fraternisation and facilitation. This may be done for example by prioritizing locally organized, small- to medium-sized resistance events over large, centrally organized ones, as the handling of the former tend to require security forces to engage in much more low-key interactions with resistance members.[72] Relatedly, simultaneous nationwide protests or other geographically dispersed actions, by strategically raising the absolute number of security force personnel needed in order to control those actions, can force the opponent authorities to deploy also troops other than their most loyal units, simply out of numerical necessity (cf. Serbia 2000; Ukraine 2004/05).[73]

Secondly, due to their specific mechanism, fraternisation and facilitation generally presuppose that the security forces do not feel physically threatened by the resistance. This (among other things) implies that the resistance must generally stick to nonviolent action (also see 2.1) if it is to take advantage of one of these methods.[74]

While seemingly less discussed in the literature, it should further be noted that challenges to successful fraternisation or facilitation needn't come only from the 'outside' , but may also be internal to a resistance. One such potential challenge are divisions within the resistance about how to relate to the security forces. Especially in highly polarized political contexts or when the resistance has already been subjected to repression at the hands of a security force organisation, (parts of) the resistance may naturally feel resentful and reject what is seen as collaboration and betrayal with enemy forces. This can not only diminish the effort going into these strategies, but further lead to a situation where those who do attempt them can get into trouble. Under such circumstances, the first step would likely be to negotiate within the resistance some common

[70] Keel 2021
[71] Keel 2021
[72] Keel 2021
[73] Binnendijk/Marovic 2006
[74] Binnendijk 2009

understanding / compromise regarding the types and extent of fraternisation or facilitation efforts that are, if not actively supported, at least tolerated by resistance participants in general.

2.3 Raising the Perceived Costs of Violent Repression

The methods discussed so far are mainly concerned with reducing the extent to which security forces perceive a resistance's forcible suppression as desirable, and with building non-confrontational interaction routines. Meanwhile, another set of tools seeks to lower security forces' confidence in the practicability of suppressing a resistance by force.

These tools can be especially relevant in contexts where security forces are insensitive to the methods introduced so far.[75] This could be the case, for example, when security forces are cut off from external information or brought in from geographically distant areas and thus cannot be communicated with easily, or when they receive special rewards for participating in a resistance's repression so that they derive positive value from it irrespective of the resistance's specific features and actions. In fact, in most cases – including in successful nonviolent resistance movements that also managed to promote security force disobedience –, there remain some elements in the security forces, be it particular units or whole organisations (e.g. elite units), which are largely immune to the tactics outlined in 2.1 and 2.2.[76] In these cases, increasing the perceived costs of attempting a resistance's suppression – in other words: making the alternative to disobedience highly unattractive – can be vital in keeping those parts of the security forces from following regime orders to violently suppress the resistance.[77]

Repression generally comes with specific operational, organisational and political risks to the security forces. On the operational level, attempts to suppress a nonviolent resistance may simply fail to yield their intended effect of calming the situation, leading instead to a further growth of the nonviolent resistance or an escalation into armed struggle. Organisationally, violent repression against unarmed citizens may trigger internal disagreement or divisions and weaken the security forces' organisational integrity. Finally, depending on the outcome of the conflict, it may lead to the organisation or some of its members being subjected to sanctions or losing political or economic privileges, thus entailing 'political risks'. Central to efforts to making repression a costly alternative to disobedience is to raise one or multiple of these types of risks.

2.3.1 Demonstrating Strength

The expected costs of violence against a resistance may be raised, firstly, by enhancing the resistance's perceived strength.

One way to do so is through an increase in the perceived size of the resistance. A resistance may attempt to raise the number of persons actually participating in actions, or alternatively (or complementarily) may prioritize methods of concentration such as demonstrations, sit- or stand-ins etc., which help create a stronger impression of a 'mass' of people joining in the resistance.

Does a resistance's greater size make security force disobedience more likely, and if so, how? An increase in size can discourage security forces from obeying orders and attempting to violently

[75] Binnendijk 2009
[76] Keel 2021
[77] Binnendijk/Marovic 2006

crush a resistance through two main mechanisms. Firstly, as resistance actions such as demonstrations increase in size, containing them by brute force can become an operational challenge. That is, the probability (as perceived by security force members) rises that the resistance would withstand such repression attempts anyway, that it might even grow as a result, or that the repression attempt would merely cause further chaos and the loss of every appearance of public order – a prospect security forces tend to prefer to avoid.[78] Secondly, as the amount and visibility of physical violence required in order to suppress a resistance grows in tandem with the latter's size, so do the political risks of repression (again, as perceived by the security forces). For example, it might become more likely that a repression attempt would tarnish the security force organisation's public image or political standing or that the organisation would face sanctions of some sort.[79]

Recent empirical research corroborates the role of (perceived) campaign size in enhancing the chances of security force disobedience. Statistical analyses show that the probability of security force defections steadily increases as the size of a nonviolent campaign increases,[80] with the "largest nonviolent campaigns hav[ing] about a 60 percent chance of producing security-force defections, an increase of over 50 percent from the smallest nonviolent campaigns".[81] Similarly, a large-N QCA[82] analysis shows that a campaign size larger than 100,000 was a necessary condition in order for a nonviolent resistance to trigger security force defections.[83] These findings are further supported by qualitative research showing for instance that "[c]rowd size was the one factor explicitly mentioned by nearly all members of security forces and challenger strategists interviewed as significant in creating hesitation about the costs of a nonviolent resistance's crackdown".[84]

While certainly important, empirical research shows that a large size is not the only feature that can help a nonviolent resistance enhance its perceived strength. Alternative means that have been observed include increasing the geographic and social scope of the resistance;[85] increasing the perceived degree of unity within the resistance;[86] and displaying broad mobilization (see also 2.1).[87] Each of them have been argued to increase the likelihood that the security forces will perceive following orders to violently suppress the resistance to be costly and unlikely to yield favourable results (i.e. to restore order or safeguard security forces' interests).

2.3.2 Sanctioning Repression

The perceived costs of a resistance's repression can also be increased by enhancing the visibility of and credibly threatening sanctions for potential repression attempts.

For instance, security forces may be explicitly informed that their behaviour is being watched or

[78] Brooks 2013
[79] Bellin 2012:132
[80] Chenoweth/Stephan 2011: 46-50
[81] Chenoweth/Stephan 2011: 48
[82] Qualitative Comparative Analysis (QCA) is a research method which utilises cross-case comparisons to identify how certain qualitative factors (or combinations thereof) are likely to influence an outcome.
[83] Anisin 2020
[84] Binnendijk 2009: 268
[85] Bellin 2012
[86] Binnendijk 2009
[87] Binnendijk 2009

recorded (e.g. Ukraine 2004),[88] or audio-visual recording devices may be visibly installed in key locations of resistance actions. (Although it should be noted that documenting – and in particular publicizing – security force violence, especially in ways that involve personal identification of perpetrators, also carries the risk of contra-productively deterring security force members who have already engaged in violence from defecting for fear of further sanctions, as well as contributing to increased tension between the resistance and the security forces.[89]) With regard to sanctions for repression, research suggests it can under certain circumstances be advantageous to reach out to groups that can potentially better impose social or political costs on relevant security forces than resistance participants themselves, such as security force members' 'home communities' or groups that share relevant identities with security force members (if they are not primarily drawn from the resistance participant's base).[90] A resistance may also attempt to ask third-parties (that is, international governmental or non-governmental organisations, e.g. human rights organisations) to threaten normative or material sanctions in the event of violent repression. Statistical analysis has further shown that solid organisational structures increase a resistance's capacity to respond to violent repression with increased mobilization and can thus help a resistance credibly threaten to impose political costs for potential repression.[91]

The political risks of repression as perceived by security forces can further be raised by sticking to nonviolent forms of action.[92] In general, engaging in physical violence carries a higher risk of harming a security force organisation's public standing or reputation (including among its support base) or triggering internal controversy when directed against unarmed civilians than when directed against an armed opponent. Accordingly, a commitment to nonviolent action can serve as a means of increasing the political risks security forces face in using violence against the resistance. In addition, the perceived risk of judicial sanctions also tends to grow when the resistance is obviously committed to nonviolent action, since this makes it less straightforward to cover a repression event up in the 'chaos' of armed conflict, to negate involvement or to relativize the repression by pointing to the immediate threat posed by the resistance. These heightened risk perceptions of political and judicial sanctions can make security forces more reluctant to follow orders that require engaging in heavy and publicly visible violent repression.

2.3.3 Leveraging intra-security force dynamics

Oftentimes, not all parts of the security forces are equally loyal, or equally inclined towards (dis)obedience. In such cases, a resistance may attempt to deter the more loyal parts of the security forces from following repression orders by leveraging their aversion against what may be termed 'organisational' risk: the risk of intra-security force division, discipline breakdown or even infighting.

Raising the organisational risks of repression can for instance help discourage a security force leadership that is more loyal than its subordinates from following repression orders. Regimes not seldom specifically co-opt the security force leadership, offering it special material, political or other benefits, so that the higher ranks tend to have stronger incentives to follow government orders and to be less sensitive to a resistance's efforts (discussed in 2.1) to reduce the perceived

[88] Binnendijk/Marovic 2006
[89] Levy 2023
[90] Binnendijk 2009
[91] Sutton et al 2014
[92] Binnendijk 2009

desirability of its suppression. In addition, the fact that the higher ranks are generally not engaged 'on the ground' makes it more difficult for a resistance to establish non-confrontational interaction patterns (see 2.2) with them.[93] By contrast, the concern for the organisation to maintain its organisational integrity and command hierarchy (and not to split between those that follow repression orders and those that hesitate or refuse to do so) is generally more pronounced in the higher ranks, making them potentially more receptive to heightened organisational risks.

How can a resistance take advantage of security force leaders' aversion to organisational risks? By increasing the leadership's perceived likelihood that their subordinates may refuse to obey them if they order a violent crackdown of the resistance. The prospects that lower ranks may balk at their (i.e. superiors') orders has been observed to make the leadership more reluctant to transmit government orders to violently crack down on a resistance to their subordinates, *even if* they would personally approve of or even welcome such a crackdown.[94]

Accordingly, one of the best ways to enhance the likelihood of disobedience in higher ranks fundamentally inclined to stick with a government's orders is to sway their subordinates, through one or several of the other tactics introduced earlier in this chapter.

In an analogous manner, it has been argued that whole units that are inherently highly loyal to the regime, e.g. due to special rewards or indoctrination. can be deterred from following regime orders to violently repress a resistance, if at all, only through increasing their perceived likelihood that other security force organisations would protect the resistance against them. In that case, the risk of having to fight against other security force organisations could potentially discourage even inherently highly loyal units from following through on government orders.[95]

2.4 Lowering Practical Barriers to Disobedience

Even security force members who are in principle disinclined to suppress a resistance may become reluctant to defy orders in the face of the unique risks associated with disobedience. A final set of tactics observed in previous nonviolent movements thus aims at mitigating the practical barriers that most often hinder security force disobedience.

Research on this topic has mainly focused on defections and desertions rather than more subtle forms of disobedience. Among the most immediate sanctions defectors and deserters face are threats to their physical safety and the loss of their main source of income. Resistance movements have attempted to mitigate these costs of disobedience, for example, by suggesting escape routes and means of transportation that minimise the risks of detection and consequent punishment[96] as well as by providing civilian clothing, shelter and food to defectors and deserters (e.g. in Iran 1978/79; the Philippines 1986).[97] Importantly in many cases, it is not only the defectors and deserters themselves but also their families that are threatened with physical harm as a means of deterring future cases of disobedience. In response, some resistant movements have also tried to assist in keeping defectors' families safe.[98] In addition, it has been observed that (potential) defectors and deserters may also feel threatened by the prospect of potential sanctions

[93] Nassif 2015
[94] Pion-Berlin et al 2014; Nassif 2015; Lutscher 2016
[95] Binnendijk/Marovic 2006
[96] Binnendijk 2009
[97] Anisin/Musil 2021; Levy 2023
[98] Kraemer 2014

from the resistance itself (or some segment of it). Accordingly, a resistance hoping to encourage disobedience may need to take measures also to mitigate this concern security force members may have and to shield defectors from physical threats by groups that may seek revenge or from more subtle social ostracism.[99]

In the communication between potential defectors and members of the resistance working to aid defection, encrypted digital communication has proven beneficial in recent resistance movements (an example being Myanmar 2021-).

Some research also shows how international actors and external third-parties can play supporting roles in mitigating the risks associated with disobedience. For instance, for some security force members, in particular of the higher ranks, defection or desertion can become a much more tolerable prospect if they have the option of moving to third-states offering refuge as opposed to having to go into hiding in the immediate geographical context of the conflict.[100] Similarly for defectors' families, international actors might under certain circumstances be able to contribute to lowering the risks of their being harmed by offering nonviolent accompaniment or other forms of civilian protection.

2.5 Outlook

Several gaps in knowledge remain regarding the possibilities for a nonviolent resistance movement to encourage security force disobedience.

Firstly, existing research exhibits a bias with regard to the forms of disobedience it has examined. As already alluded to in the introduction to this chapter, existing studies have overwhelmingly focused on defection, that is, security forces actively 'switching sides' to support the resistance against the regime. Meanwhile, subtler or more small-scale forms of disobedience and ways in which security forces may consciously fail to fulfil orders to violently repress a resistance have been largely neglected. But given the high risks associated with defection – which also imply that at least in certain contexts it might be prohibitively difficult to convince security forces to defect –, options for security forces reluctant to engage in violence against a nonviolent resistance of not to fully complying with those orders without having to defect or desert straightaway, could be highly relevant as well.

Relatedly, there appears to be a lack of academic attention to other agents who might also play a role in the repression of a resistance and whose disobedience might matter to a nonviolent resistance. Parts of repression, in particular routinized or systematic repression, commonly also relies on the civilian administration. As there are likely both commonalities and differences in the conditions that facilitate or hinder disobedience in the civil sector as opposed to the security forces, an extension of the focus in the study of disobedience – as a way of stopping regime orders to repress a resistance from being implemented – to include also disobedience in civil bureaucrats and other civilian agents could provide insights useful to potential social defence efforts.

[99] Binnendijk 2009
[100] Kyed 2022; Levy 2023

3. Gauging the Chances of Security Force Disobedience

While some methods, as outlined in chapter 2, can help a nonviolent resistance movement enhance the likelihood of security force disobedience, there are also cases in which disobedience is precluded by structural or contextual conditions or at least rendered highly unlikely. This could be the case when contextual factors make the described methods difficult to implement, or when security forces are unlikely to be responsive such efforts for structural reasons.

In such cases where there are strong structural hindrances to security force disobedience, a resistance generally benefits from realistically recognizing this fact. Attempting to encourage disobedience in opponent security forces, for instance by trying to fraternize with them, in contexts where such efforts are very unlikely to bear fruit can put resistance participants unnecessarily at risk (and contribute to frustration at failed efforts and dampen morale within the resistance). In such contexts, it can therefore be more promising to focus on alternative strategies for handling the risk of physical repression rather than seeking unlikely security force disobedience. (And while security force disobedience can undeniably be of considerable strategic value to a nonviolent resistance, its lack does not by itself preclude a resistance's success. As already alluded to in the introduction to chapter 2, there have been nonviolent resistance movements that attained at least some of their objectives without significant levels of security force disobedience, let alone major defections; examples include e.g. the anti-regime campaigns in Thailand in 1973 and in 1992, in South Korea in 1987, in the Central African Republic in 1993 or in Nepal in 2006.[101])

Recent empirical research offers various findings on the factors that structurally aid or hinder security force disobedience, which may be useful for a resistance trying to gauge the structural context and estimate as realistically as possible the likelihood of security force disobedience. (It is worth noting that as was the case with research on ways of encouraging security force disobedience, the focus in the current literature has largely been on security force *defections*, with an agent-wise focus on the military.)

3.1 Security Force Characteristics Shaping the Likelihood of Disobedience

Firstly, comparative[102] and statistical[103] analyses suggest that the chances of security force defections vary depending on whether security force members are conscripted or professionally recruited: Conscripted forces are more likely to refuse to follow orders to violently repress a nonviolent resistance. Several mechanisms may account for this. Professional security force members may be more willing than conscripts to obey questionable orders, first, because of a higher motivation towards service in general (as reflected in the fact that they usually join the forces voluntarily, while conscripts may have been 'dragged' into service and may not so strongly identify with their role in the security apparatus to begin with). Second, professional security forces often have stronger career incentives to follow orders (as for them but not for conscripts, the security force organisation is the main source of financial stability and professional promotion). Professional security forces may also have been subjected to more intensive and lengthy indoctrination. Furthermore, compared to conscripts, who tend to be more

[101] Croissant et al 2018a
[102] Lutterbeck 2013; Pion-Berlin et al 2014
[103] Cebul/Grewal 2022

representative of society as a whole including in their political beliefs, professional security forces may have views closer to the regime and weaker identification with the resistance and its cause. Finally, due to the longer time they tend to have spent in service and their corresponding shift of social networks towards other members within the security forces, professional security forces can be expected to have less extensive social networks outside the security forces. Each of these mechanisms can, albeit to varying degrees, also be expected to operate in cases where the community which conscripts are drawn from is not identical to the society the resistance is mainly based in, as most paradigmatically in the case of social defence.

Empirical studies further suggest that the number of security force organisations a government relies upon may affect the chances that any of these organisations will defect when the government faces a nonviolent resistance movement. Having multiple competing security organisations ('security force fragmentation') can help a government to reduce the risk of coup d'états by taking advantage of the mutual deterrence, the 'checks-and-balances' between them. However, as quantitative as well as comparative studies have found, such security force fragmentation may make security forces more likely to defect in the face of a large nonviolent resistance movement.[104] This is because such fragmentation firstly tends to "generate grievances and competition between the different sections of the security forces",[105] decreasing the willingness of the disadvantaged to exert themselves or endure risks just to meet the government's demands.[106] Secondly, it tends to reduce transparency and inhibit the flow of information between organisations, making it harder for the regime to monitor them all effectively. (Both of these mechanisms can also be expected to operate and to raise the likelihood of security force disobedience in social defence settings.) The evidence for the positive impact of security force fragmentation on the chances of disobedience is particularly robust when the number of effective armed organisations grows above two,[107] and when the greater number of organisations comes with a reduction in the resources allocated to each organisation.[108]

3.2 Security Force-Government Relations Shaping the Likelihood of Disobedience

The behaviour of security forces in the face of a nonviolent resistance movement is also shaped by how and to what extent they have been subjected to political and economic co-optation by the government. In many cases, government leaders try to establish or reinforce their control over the security forces by rewarding political loyalty with economic or other material benefits, professional promotions or political privileges. Mixed arguments have been made, mostly on the basis of comparative analyses, with regard to how this affects the likelihood of disobedience in contexts of nonviolent resistance.

On the one hand, co-optation by the government has been argued to decrease security forces' likelihood of defecting in the face of a nonviolent resistance. Because the privileges of such security forces, in particular of their leaders, are intractably tied to their loyalty to the government, these organisations become heavily dependent on the government's favour and have much to lose from disobedience.[109] By contrast, security force organisations receiving less

[104] Dahl 2016; Degaut 2019
[105] Dahl 2016: 3
[106] Makara 2013
[107] Lutscher 2016
[108] Dworschak 2020
[109] Bellin 2012; Nepstad 2013; Koehler 2017

favours from the regime have less economic and political prerogatives to protect by showing the government unconditional loyalty.[110] (While this contrast would likely be particularly salient in contexts of anti-regime resistance movements, since in this case disobedience potentially implies a change in the government altogether, it might also play a role in social defence settings.)

On the other hand, it has also been argued that such co-optation may in fact increase the chances of security force defection in contexts of a nonviolent resistance. In particular non-institutionalized co-optation tends to decrease transparency within the organisation and make defection less easy to detect and punish consistently.[111] In addition, whatever rewards for loyalty the government is distributing among its security forces, they are seldom evenly distributed. This can create grievances in parts of the security forces, be it among specific units, the lower ranks or other groups, that receive less from the government, and make those disadvantaged parts all the more likely to 'seize the chance' and to defect when the security forces face an organised nonviolent resistance.[112] This mechanism is likely less relevant in social defence settings than it is in cases of anti-regime movements, as the disadvantaged can generally hope to enhance their positions by defecting only if they expect that regime change may occur if a sufficient number of security force members choose to defect. Furthermore, it should be noted that in cases where the regime manages to reward loyalty more evenly within the security force organisation – for example by distributing immaterial and non-competitive goods, such as citizenship in the case of foreign mercenaries and their families –, a more unambiguous loyalty-promoting effect might be achieved.[113]

3.3 Security Force-Resistance Relations Shaping the Likelihood of Disobedience

A distinctly negative effect on the chances of security force disobedience has been observed when the security forces are stacked with members of an ethnic group that differs from that (primarily) represented in the resistance.[114] This holds true in particular when such a policy is implemented thoroughly and consistently.[115] An analogous effect has relatedly[116] also been observed for cases in which the resistance's primary ethnic group differs from the ethnic group that is dominant within the state whose government is being opposed.[117] These observations have been explained by the fact that in such cases of ethnic division between the security forces and the resistance, security force members are more likely to perceive the resistance as a threat not just to the government and its policies but to the security forces as an institution.[118] In part, it has been argued, security force members are likely to feel threatened and become more loyal to the government precisely because they expect others to expect them, by virtue of their ethnicity, to be particularly loyal to the regime.[119] This is a mechanism which social defence efforts likely benefit from being aware of, and which may be mitigated only – and likely only partly – through

[110] Brooks 2013; Lutterbeck 2013; Albrecht 2015
[111] Dahl 2016
[112] Lee 2005, 2009, 2015; Makara 2013; Degaut 2019
[113] Louer 2013; Makara 2013
[114] McLauchlin 2010; Makara 2013; 2016
[115] Morency-Laflamme/McLauchlin 2020
[116] This is a closely related finding, on the assumption that the ethnic group dominant in a state tends to be identical to the one dominant in that state's security forces
[117] Pischedda 2020
[118] Makara 2013; 2016
[119] McLauchlin 2010; Morency-Laflamme/McLauchlin 2020

conscious efforts aimed at contradicting the opponent regime's effort to highlight ethnic differences and establishing social networks vis-à-vis the 'other' ethnic group.[120]

At play also in the case of ethnic divisions, the lack of social network ties (see chapter 2.1) between the security forces and a resistance is particularly severe in cases where the security forces are, often intentionally, drawn from geographically remote areas. At the extreme, a resistance may face security forces that are largely comprised of expats or foreign mercenaries.[121] In these cases, the possibilities for some of the tactics discussed in chapter 1 – in particular those aimed at decreasing the extent to which security forces perceive the suppression of the resistance as desirable (chapter 2.1) or at building non-confrontational patterns of interaction (chapter 2.2) – are likely to be severely circumscribed.

3.4 Context Factors Shaping the Likelihood of Disobedience

Research has further identified contextual factors that affect the chances of security force disobedience. Some quantitative studies have for example suggested that favourable economic conditions make security forces less likely to turn against a government facing a nonviolent resistance.[122] This has been ascribed to the fact that such economic conditions render a government's promise to distribute financial rewards to loyal security forces more credible than would be the case under weaker economic conditions. While this finding likely needs further empirical validation, if it holds, it would with regard to social defence efforts indicate that international economic sanctions and domestic boycotts, strikes and other forms of economic non-cooperation might complement and facilitate efforts to encourage security force disobedience.

Another contextual factor that has been found to affect the likelihood of security force defections during nonviolent resistance movements is the response of third-parties, in particular states. Comparative and quantitative studies have found that international support for the government and international support for the resistance respectively de- and increase the likelihood of security force defections.[123] These findings have been explained by the fact that security forces generally try to align with the 'winning side' in the conflict because doing so is most likely to serve their organisational interests, and that international support for one side is taken as a signal that that side is (other things being equal) more likely to prevail in the conflict. (To what extent this mechanism is relevant in social defence settings likely depends on whether security forces' interests are as sensitive to conflict outcome in such settings as in domestic conflicts between a regime and an opposition.)

3.5 Outlook

This chapter has reviewed recent research on factors beyond the (direct) control of a nonviolent resistance which may affect the likelihood of security force disobedience. The first thing to be noted is that while I have discussed these research findings in terms of indicators by which a resistance may gauge its chances of successfully promoting security force disobedience, the

[120] cf. McLauchlin 2018
[121] Louer 2013; Bramsen 2018
[122] Yap/Chu 2015
[123] Nepstad 2013; Kalin et al. 2022

dividing line between factors that can and cannot be altered by a resistance is certainly not absolute. For example, when ethnic divisions between the resistance and the security forces are identified as an disobedience-inhibiting factor, a resistance can take this (unfavourable) condition as a given and try to adapt to it. But alternatively it might also, under suitable circumstances, try to alleviate this unfavourable structural context by expanding its ethnic basis, e.g. including groups and persons from the security forces' ethnic group or 'home community'.

Secondly and relatedly (and as already alluded to in the introduction to this chapter as well as 2.3), facing uncompromisingly loyal security forces does not by itself condemn a resistance to simply suffer the violence they inflict. There certainly are organisations or units whose obedience to regime orders is quite unshakeable.[124] However, such units and organisations tend to be limited in size, and thereby usually also in scale at which they can operate. The challenge (including for social defence efforts) thus becomes to intentionally create situations where these organisations or units become size-wise insufficient, for example by making tactical use of methods of diffusion – where resistance activities take place in a geographically dispersed manner – as well as of more subtle action types (limited non-cooperation, intentional misunderstanding, work-on without collaboration etc.), which require sustained attention and considerable 'human resources' in order to systematically detect, punish or deter. By thus making the disobedience-immune parts of the security forces insufficient size-wise, the resistance can try to 'draw out' more parts of the security forces that are not as loyal (and potentially try to encourage disobedience in them). This is crucial insofar as it is generally not just the absolute number of obedient forces but also the *proportion* of obedient to insubordinate security forces that matter in determining whether or not a government can successfully suppress a resistance by means of physical violence.[125]

One factor that could plausibly structurally inhibit (or perhaps aid) security force disobedience, yet to date appears to have received only limited academic attention, is the role of newer developments in military and security-related technology.[126] The use of (partly) autonomous weapons systems for instance could potentially create an unprecedented distance between a nonviolent resistance and human agents in the security forces tasked with subduing that resistance. While this may not be an imminent threat to potential social defence efforts – partly because these weapons systems are mainly geared towards fighting armed opponents –, further developments in the field likely merit more attention in relation to nonviolent resistance movement's chances of inciting security force disobedience.

[124] Keel 2021
[125] Brooks 2013
[126] cf. Johansen/Martin 2019

4. Handling Security Force Disobedience

While disobedience can, as already mentioned, considerably enhance a nonviolent resistance's chances of achieving its immediate political objectives, when it does occur, it also comes with its own set of challenges. The challenges that a nonviolent resistance faces with regard to disobedience do not end at the point where disobedience takes place but potentially extend well beyond that. While some of those challenges may be more pressing in the case of anti-regime resistance movements and less so in the case of social defence, they still warrant some extra consideration.

The challenges associated with disobedience and potential remedies to them will vary depending on the form of disobedience at issue – specifically, whether it happens on the individual level, or whether security force organisations as a whole 'defect' from the government. These cases are thus discussed separately.

4.1 Dealing with Individual-level Disobedience

In the case of individual defections, the main risk to a nonviolent resistance identified in the literature is the emergence or strengthening of violent flanks. Being not only trained and possibly experienced in armed violence but also not seldom taking their weapons when defecting, defectors can, when not received skilfully, under certain circumstances be inclined to join a violent resistance against the government and its security forces.[127] Depending on the number of defectors relative to the strength of the nonviolent resistance, this can change the overall dynamics of the resistance and "shift momentum away from nonviolent opposition movements and toward armed struggle" (as happened for example in Libya and Syria after the uprising in 2011).[128] This has been argued to have not necessarily favourable consequences and implications for the resistance, including for its vulnerability to systematic violent repression and for its chances of broader success.[129]

Research has also identified risk factors for such developments. Firstly, it has been observed that the prior existence of a parallel violent resistance movement or a violent flank to the nonviolent resistance movement greatly increases the above risk, as joining the resistance's more violent segment in such cases easily appears the 'natural' path for defectors given their skills and experience.[130] Secondly, it has been observed that defectors have occasionally been pushed towards joining or building up an armed resistance by civilians or even participants of the nonviolent resistance explicitly encouraging defectors to do so or asking them for armed protection (in particular in contexts of increasing government repression), effectively creating social pressure for defectors to engage in armed resistance.[131]

In order to mitigate these risks, research has identified several possible measures that a nonviolent resistance can take. This includes, at a minimum, fully respecting deserters' intention to simply withdraw from the conflict (as opposed to actively contributing to the opposition /

[127] Levy 2023
[128] Kraemer 2014
[129] Levy 2023
[130] Kraemer 2014
[131] Kraemer 2014; Levy 2023

resistance);[132] it also means refraining from explicitly or implicitly expecting defectors to provide armed protection to the resistance.[133] Persons wishing to join the resistance can be integrated into the nonviolent resistance for instance through concrete tasks that allow them to take advantage of their expertise in the nonviolent resistance's context, e.g. by working on inviting more defections or by contributing to courses on nonviolent discipline for civilians.[134]

4.2 Dealing with Organisation-level Disobedience

Somewhat different challenges have been observed with regard to united defections on the level of a whole organisation or segment thereof. The main risk identified in these cases is that the respective security force organisation can easily gain a disproportionate influence over subsequent political developments. Looking into nonviolent anti-regime campaigns, statistical analyses have found that when the military plays a prominent role in helping (or 'allowing') the resistance to depose an incumbent, democratic political change in the long run becomes less likely.[135] This tendency has been shown to be particularly pronounced in cases where the security forces defect as a unified force, as opposed to when they split internally over the response to the resistance.[136] In the specific case that the military not only disobeys government orders but takes over power (in the form of a coup), even if only provisionally, this also has been shown to make subsequent democratization less likely[137] as well as to potentially increase the risk of violent repression.[138]

These downside risks of organisation-level disobedience may not as such be directly relevant in the case of social defence. However, the above observations point towards certain more general concerns which may also affect social defence efforts. They indicate that it can be difficult for a nonviolent resistance to gain or maintain leverage over security force organisations that have 'defected'. Having been 'spared' from the opponent government authorities' repression by the security forces' favour can in turn make it very difficult for a nonviolent resistance to assert itself against that same security force organisation. That is, a nonviolent resistance's dependence on the security forces' continued support in its conflict vis-à-vis opponent civilian forces can render it effectively incapable of resisting pressures from that security force organisation. In a more specific sense, the above empirical observations highlight the fact that when security forces as an organisation turn against the opponent regime or its orders, they may be positioning themselves against a particular leader or order mainly with the intent to calm down and take away the momentum of a resistance, just to save the overall political project or to pursue their own political ambitions in defiance of the incumbent government *and* the resistance.[139] This warns nonviolent resistance movements or social defence efforts against automatically interpreting security forces' organisational defiance against the opponent government or its orders as implying support for the resistance and its cause.

[132] Kraemer 2014
[133] Levy 2023
[134] Kraemer 2014; Levy 2023
[135] Rasler et al 2022
[136] Neu 2018
[137] Koehler/Albrecht 2021
[138] Lachapelle 2020
[139] Holmes/Koehler 2020

4.3 Outlook

Compared to the extensive amount of research that has been conducted on the causes and paths that lead up to security force disobedience (chapter 1 and 2), comparatively little academic attention has been paid to the aftermath of disobedience, that is, what happens if and when such disobedience has been successfully encouraged.[140]

For potential social defence efforts, it could be particularly useful to examine more closely the expectations with which security force members may defect and their attitudes towards the nonviolent resistance; what 'entry points' into the nonviolent resistance typically look like for persons defecting under varying circumstances; and what hardships security force members defecting in contexts of a nonviolent resistance commonly face, both generally and in trying to potentially contribute to resistance efforts.

[140] Kraemer 2014

5. Conclusions

Security force disobedience—whether quiet non-compliance, selective refusal to follow orders, or full defection—can be a major advantage for social defence. When it happens, it can slow or halt violent repression, protect civilians, and undermine the attacker's ability to impose control. Research shows that the chances of this behaviour increase when the defending movement is visibly nonviolent, has wide participation across society, and finds ways to communicate directly or indirectly with security personnel. In social defence, where the goal is to protect communities and maintain social functions, showing that the resistance is broad-based and defensive in nature can make it harder for security forces to view it as a threat.

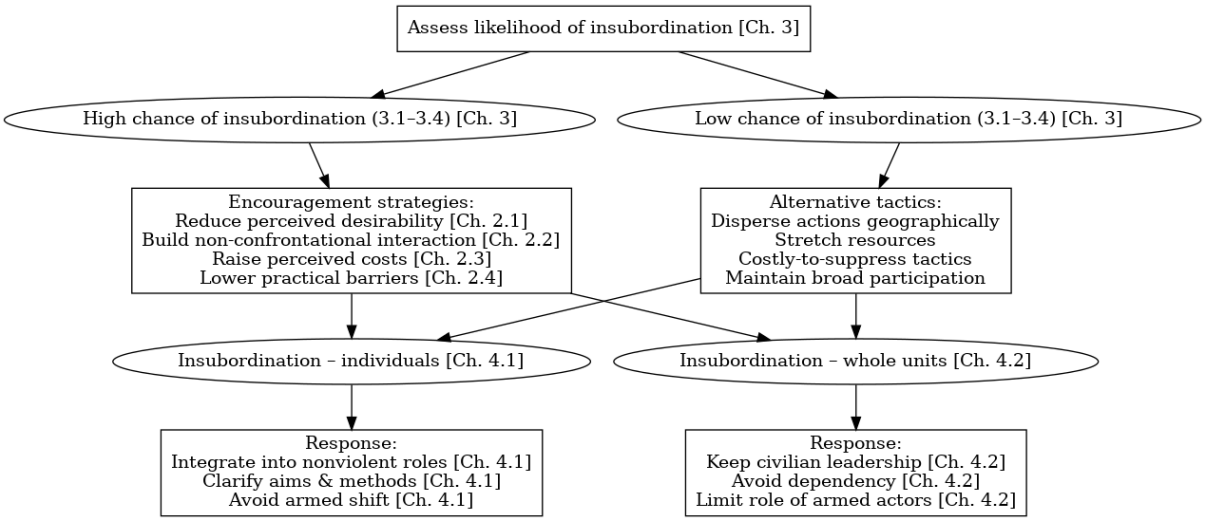
The most direct ways to encourage disobedience are personal contact and communication. In some historical cases, protesters spoke to soldiers face-to-face at checkpoints, gave them food, or explained their reasons for resisting. In other cases, contact was indirect—through letters, radio, leaflets, or, more recently, social media messages aimed at security personnel. Even a brief conversation or a trusted message can break down stereotypes and create doubt about orders to use violence. For social defence, this means identifying whatever channels exist—local intermediaries, shared community figures, or even intercepted media—and using them to present the movement's aims clearly.

In many social defence situations, these opportunities are limited. Security forces may be brought in from other regions, belong to different ethnic groups, or be specially trained and rewarded for loyalty. They may also operate in tightly controlled environments with little freedom to interact. This makes fraternisation harder, but not impossible. Appeals can still be made through respected religious or cultural leaders, messages in a shared language, or media that reaches their families and home communities. Even small effects—like slowing enforcement or softening the approach to arrests—can make a difference over time.

Where there are strong reasons to think disobedience is unlikely—because forces are highly professionalised, strongly indoctrinated, or deeply separated from the local population—social defence needs to focus on other ways to protect itself. This can include holding multiple actions in different places so forces are stretched thin, using tactics that are logistically costly to suppress, and keeping participation broad so repression becomes politically risky. These methods can limit harm and keep the movement going even if every order is followed to the letter.

When disobedience does occur, it can bring both benefits and risks. Individual defectors may have valuable inside knowledge, but they might also try to take on armed roles or push the movement in a more militarised direction. Entire units switching sides can strengthen the defence in the short term but may develop their own political goals that conflict with the civilian movement. Social defence should plan in advance how to integrate defectors into nonviolent roles and how to ensure leadership stays in civilian hands.

Clear boundaries are important for preserving the character of social defence. This means explaining to defectors what the movement's goals and methods are, avoiding dependence on armed actors for core functions, and ensuring that any cooperation does not undermine public trust. Where possible, defectors can be given roles that make use of their skills—such as training civilians in unarmed protection methods, advising on the opponent's tactics, or helping to reach out to more of their former colleagues.



The overall lesson is that disobedience should be encouraged where possible but not treated as the foundation of the defence. Preparing the ground—through communication, visible inclusiveness, and consistent nonviolence—can make it more likely. But the defence must be able to stand even if no security personnel refuse orders. This balance allows social defence to seize the opportunity when disobedience occurs while remaining effective and resilient if it does not.

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