

## The roads to power: The infrastructure of counterinsurgency

by Laleh Khalili

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In "Monty Python's Life of Brian," a Judean leader tries to stoke a rebellion against the Romans. He tells a small crowd, "They've bled us white, the bastards," and asks his comrades, "What have the Romans done *for us*?"

The other men reply by cataloging Rome's great building projects, transportation networks, and bureaucratic systems. The agitator, played by John Cleese, responds: "All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?"

I have always found the scene slyly resonant yet deeply inadequate. The idea that an imperial power constructs the groundwork for civilization must have been familiar to the members of Monty Python—all of whom were educated at British institutions that once trained men to rule the colonies. In its celebration of empire, the scene says nothing about how these collateral benefits were first and foremost designed to extract resources from the colonies and move soldiers and materiel needed to rule them. It ignores the way militaries use infrastructure to pacify intransigent populations and incorporate conquered peoples and places into global systems of rule.

The Talmudic passage on which the "Life of Brian" scene is based is more revealing. In the Tractate Shabbat, 33b, Rebbe Judah praises the works of the Romans: "They have made streets, they have built bridges, they have erected baths." Rebbe Simon counters: "All that they made they made for themselves; they built market-places, to set harlots in them; baths, to rejuvenate themselves; bridges, to levy tolls for them." What the Talmud makes clear is that the social benefits of infrastructure were secondary effects of empire building.

Across time, this centrality of logistics has proven crucial to the work of conquest.

Napoleon, for instance, was successful not only because he had a great strategic mind, but also because he had an administrative apparatus that ensured trains could supply his army from behind the lines. In fact, according to military historian Martin van Creveld, Napoleon was the first European leader to send commissionaires ahead of the military "in order to organize the resources of this or that town and set up a market." In Russia, Napoleon's failure was caused as much by a rare flaw in his logistical planning—locals seized the goods needed to support his frontline troops—as the exigencies of battle.

Throughout history and in all continents when armies have marched across continents, a crowd roughly 50 to 150 percent their size followed. These civilians reshaped local economies as they provided militaries with a range of commercial services that included repairing weapons, provisioning food, mending clothing, and sex work.

From Napoleon until the current day, the diffusion and proliferation of roads, markets, and civilian institutions have gone hand in hand with fighting battles. Wars, while destructive, are often the engines of economic and political transformations—many of which are not immediately visible. Military historians, for example, trace the emergence of the vast network of railroads across Western Europe to the logistics lines that fed the different sides of European wars fought by the French and Prussians throughout the 19th century. The extensive highway system in the U.S. incorporated old supply lines used during the Indian Wars that fed and clothed the settlers and conquerors of indigenous lands. Even today, the impetus for the construction of roads and highways in the U.S. often comes from the necessary infrastructural support demanded by the Department of Defense. A 1956 U.S. law established the National System of Interstate and Defense Highways, which facilitated the movement of troops and military equipment across the U.S. Many of the best roads in the U.S. are still those serving defense and aerospace manufacturers in the South and Northwest.

#### “Civilization”

As well as being a tool to bring conquered populations to heel, roads have long been seen as markers of societal development. One of the clearest articulations of this view comes from Marshal Bugeaud, who invaded and colonized Algeria in the 19th century. In his assessment of his Algerian adversaries, Bugeaud claimed that Arabs “have none of these major centers of government, population, and commerce at the heart of a civilized country nor any of those large arteries that circulate the life of civilized nations: no inland points, no major roads, no factories, no villages, nor farms.”

Roads, markets, and schools in particular were seen as vectors of civilization—the trinity that would allow the incorporation and pacification of indigenous populations. Hubert Lyautey, who helped conquer Indochina (1894-1897), Madagascar (1897-1902), and Morocco (intermittently and in different roles from 1903 until 1925), similarly acclaimed roads as instruments of cultural advancement. In Morocco, Lyautey boasted of building about 1,000 miles of new roads to connect Morocco to Algeria and Tunisia and seaports to inland cities, integrating Morocco into French colonial administrative and security systems.

The construction process itself is an extraordinary way to transform labor regimes. In Madagascar, where communal and village labor was mostly agricultural, France created a proletariat forced into *corvée* labor to build roads. From the colonizing power's first actions, it created racialized work regimes where, of all the peoples of Madagascar, the Malagasy were

exploited for road construction. The racial hierarchies created in this system persisted long after the French decamped.

### Hearts and minds

Most of today's wars are neither the pitched battles of the Napoleonic era nor colonial invasions. This is an age of counterinsurgencies, yet these "small wars" nearly always require large infrastructure investments. Counterinsurgencies are asymmetrical (one side has more superior firepower) and unconventional (a formal military fights an unconventional or guerrilla force). Because guerrilla forces cannot survive without the day-to-day support of civilian populations (who provide food, shelter, or information), counterinsurgencies are as much about winning over local populations as they are about the military defeat of insurgents.

In a 2006 essay published in *Military Review*, the Australian guru of U.S. counterinsurgency Lt. Col. David Kilcullen argued that interfacing with civilians is essential to counterinsurgencies:

This is the true meaning of the phrase "hearts and minds," which comprises two separate components. "Hearts" means persuading people their best interests are served by your success; "minds" means convincing them that you can protect them and that resisting you is pointless. Note that neither concept has to do with whether people like you. Calculated self-interest, not emotion, is what counts.

To convince residents that an occupying force is in their best interest, the logistics of counterinsurgency are as significant as the actual fighting. This is not only because the transportation of goods and materiel sustains forces or are what sometimes remains after the war (as the Roman aqueducts did), but because the *very process* of logistics provision does vital political work.

The two modern examples I want to speak about are Afghanistan and Palestine. In both locations—as in dozens of countries where counterinsurgencies have been fought—roads and other infrastructure projects don't simply serve tactical or immediate military functions. They are instruments of social engineering. Though similar, Afghanistan and Palestine, the two cases discussed below, can also be distinguished by the settler colonial system of the latter. The differences reveal contrasting political uses of the roads.

Afghanistan has only about 7,500 miles of paved road. Given the vastness of the country, this is a tiny number. Since 2002, the U.S. military and other donors (including USAID and NATO) have built around 2,000 of these miles. In Afghanistan, the U.S. military leaders considered roads so significant to their fight against the Taliban that the vast majority of the emergency funds of local commanders (nearly \$900 million out of a total of \$1.3 billion) were spent on road construction. In many instances, these roads are either continuations or restorations of routes originally built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the 1960s (as Cold War

infrastructure) or extended by the Russians after 1980. The new roads paid for by the U.S. connect the largest cities to supply routes within Afghanistan, while the Iranian government constructed the Herat-Mashhad road to facilitate trade and pilgrimage between the two countries. As Kilcullen wrote in the *Small Wars Journal* blog in 2008:

Like the Romans, counterinsurgents through history have engaged in road-building as a tool for projecting military force, extending governance and the rule of law, enhancing political communication, and bringing economic development, health, and education to the population. Clearly, roads that are patrolled by friendly forces or secured by local allies also have the tactical benefit of channeling and restricting insurgent movement and compartmenting terrain across which guerrillas could otherwise move freely. But the political impact of road-building is even more striking than its tactical effect.

By connecting far-flung habitations to administrative centers and easing transportation between sites of production and markets, roads are a means of economic integration. In Afghanistan, the U.S. saw roads as a way to strengthen market exposure for farmers and pastoralists. The amount by which safer roads lowered the cost of shipping consumer goods even became a metric to gauge the effectiveness of a counterinsurgency. The use of trade to quantify success indicates the inextricability of counterinsurgency and market economies.

Tactically, roads can also be used as offensive means of separating the guerrillas from the population. Because roads are patrolled, guerrillas often have to leave populated valleys and escape to higher altitudes. In the same *Small Wars Journal* post Kilcullen wrote:

Instead of being in the villages among the people, the insurgents are now forced up into the sparsely populated (often uninhabited) hills. This has political as well as security effects: The population gets a visual impression of the enemy firing down into the valley (where they live) and the security forces defending the villages, rather than (as previously) the enemy living in the villages and the security forces attacking the villages to get at the enemy.

Kilcullen does not mention it, but this division also cuts off the guerrilla forces from the civilians who can support them with food and medicine.

Road building and other logistics projects also tend to consolidate dominant institutions. These institutions include not only the nation-state, although the role of the state is enormously important. In counterinsurgencies, such projects also reinforce local power constellations that the counterinsurgents see as beneficial. Again Kilcullen, in his blog post, is instructive:

The road project involves a series of negotiated agreements with tribal and district elders—the approach the PRT [provincial reconstruction team] is taking is to make an agreement with the elders to construct the portion of the road that runs through their tribal

territory. This has allowed them to better understand the geographical and functional limits of each elder's authority, and to give the people a sense of ownership over the road: Since a local workforce has constructed it (and is then paid to protect it), they are more likely to defend it against Taliban attacks. Also, the project generates disputes (over access, resources, timing, pay, labor etc.) that have to be resolved between tribes and community groups, and this allows Afghan government representatives to take the lead in resolving issues and negotiating settlements, thereby connecting the population to the provincial and local administration and demonstrating the tangible benefits of supporting the government.

This insistence on tribes as *the* prevalent and legitimate power holders in the region echoes the Sandeman system established in 1877 by the British imperial officer Robert Sandeman in Baluchistan, in today's Pakistan. Britain made tribal leaders responsible for the safety of the roads from bandits and for the implementation of British colonial policy. The system secured tribal leaders' power over their own tribesmen while making the leaders themselves beholden to colonial masters. As a proxy system of rule, the British colonial officials felt this system was less costly than direct forms of domination, though colonialists, imperialists, and counterinsurgents have debated its effectiveness since Sandeman's day.

#### The infrastructure of occupation

In contrast to the U.S. in Afghanistan, Israel uses roads to isolate residents from the global market, nearby Palestinian communities, and neighboring countries. In Palestine, bypass roads physically block Palestinians from accessing regional trade networks and main Palestinian cities and villages. Israeli-constructed roads connect settlements in the West Bank to each other and to transportation networks inside the Green Line—the 1949 armistice line that served as Israel's de facto border until 1967. So far, Israel has built more than 1,000 miles of bypass roads, which are primarily used by Israeli settlers and citizens. Unlike the organically developed Palestinian roads, these thoroughfares ignore the natural contours of the land and blow through hills and farmland to connect Israeli settlements to cities inside the Green Line. Since settlements are central to the military strategies of the Israeli state (as outposts overlooking Palestinian habitations), these roads linking them serve to facilitate surveillance and control of Palestinians.

The security of these roads is considered so paramount that, in many instances, Palestinians on Palestinian roads that intersect the bypass roads are not allowed to cross. Even where the checkpoints, earth-mounds, roadblocks, and fences can be negotiated quickly, avoiding a bypass road can add 10-25 miles to a trip that is a quarter that length.

The bypass roads are meant to ensure the security of settlers in the West Bank by allowing them unrestricted and swift mobility and providing quick access to security and military

forces. Furthermore, the roads partition the West Bank into variegated areas with different access regimes: Areas A, B, and C, as well as seam zones, free-fire zones, and a whole series of other politically differentiated areas result in vast bureaucracies with confusing permit regimes that restrict the movement of Palestinians.

These roads expropriate Palestinian land. According to UNDP, over 40,000 acres has been confiscated from Palestinians to make way for these roads, which often cut through olive groves and result in the destruction of agriculture and communities. Israeli law usually only allows for the seizure under rules of military necessity (which have been extensively challenged in court). Thus as in many other instances, Israeli law has drawn on subsumed laws of historic states preceding it in Palestine to implement changes its post-1948 laws would not allow. In the case of bypass roads, the Israeli state has used the Jordanian equivalent of eminent domain legislation, which had been in effect in the West Bank prior to 1967, to lay claim to territory, arguing that in this case Jordanian law is in force in the West Bank.

In Palestine, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, road building employs locals in sites of internal or civil conflict, thus co-opting some segment of the population into the system of economic reproduction. This employment process—often drawing on ethnic, national, or linguistic difference—allows for the processes of divide-and-rule to control the populations. In the case of the bypass roads, the Israeli Ministry of Transport employs Palestinians in dire financial need to work on the roads' construction. These labor regimes not only incorporate the population into new work regimes, they also make it beholden to the existing regimes of power.

### Circulation

In his reflection on the development of security regimes as fundamental elements of the nation-state, the theorist Michel Foucault emphasizes the importance of circulation to the police. Foucault doesn't just mean material transportation networks; he focuses on "circulation itself, that is to say, the set of regulations, constraints, and limits, or the facilities and encouragements that will allow the circulation of men and things."

"From this," he writes, "stem those typical police regulations, some of which seek to suppress vagrancy, others to facilitate the circulation of goods in this or that direction, [and] others that want to prevent qualified workers from leaving their place of work, or especially the kingdom. After health and the objects of bare necessity, after the population itself, this whole field of circulation will become the object of police."

As such, roads (and logistics provision more generally) create the *raison d'être* of the state and its security apparatus.

Circulation is so central to capitalism that the whole of Marx's second volume of *Capital* and good bits of the third volume, as well as his *Grundrisse*, are dedicated to reflections on "the annihilation of space by time"—or the ability of mechanical modes of transportation and communication to accelerate the delivery of goods to market. Roads—built on grounds whose ownership is sometimes in the hands of the state, but increasingly in those of corporations (or a combination of the two)—facilitate transportation and communication (as often telegraph, telephone, and internet cables are laid alongside roadsides). Roads are therefore embodiments of the circulation of commodities and capital par excellence. And every road built by an imperial power reinforces the economic system advanced by that power. This fungibility between infrastructures for capital accumulation and those for fighting wars remains fundamental to our era. This infrastructural power allows extraction, circulation, and accumulation. And so very often its origins lie in the waging of war.

*This article is based on a lecture given on April 18, 2016 at Georgetown University.*