

IRREGULAR WARFARE *IS* WARFARE

By KENNETH C. COONS, JR.,
and GLENN M. HARNED

Violent extremism is the most likely and dangerous threat the Nation will face between now and 2020. U.S. superiority in conventional warfighting has driven our adversaries to avoid direct military confrontation. The 2006 Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) began with the recognition that irregular warfare (IW) has become the “warfare of choice” for our adversaries, who employ a strategy of physical, economic, and psychological subversion, attrition, and exhaustion to undermine and erode the power, influence, and will of the United States and its strategic partners. They fight us among the people in protracted struggles for popular support and legitimacy, limiting the utility of conventional applications of our military power.

Soldiers survey remains of building after firefight

U.S. Army (Russell Lee/Alta)

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Our adversaries are unconventional, and so our approach for defeating them must be unconventional as well. We cannot defeat them solely by force; we must use a blend of political, informational, military, economic, and sociocultural approaches, in combination with foreign governments, security forces, and populations.

Potential Struggles

Violent extremism is not the only threat our nation will face in the near future. The danger of interstate war has not passed. The United States must maintain its dominance in interstate warfighting capabilities in order to deter and, if necessary, win such wars. However, the character of interstate warfare is changing. IW and conventional warfare are combining into new forms of hybrid warfare,¹ as potential state adversaries are more likely

Should the United States confront such states, its military will most likely need robust IW capabilities to wage hybrid warfare among a hostile population.

By the end of the QDR, the Department of Defense (DOD) senior leadership had come to the following assessment with regard to IW:²

- U.S. forces were primarily organized, trained, educated, and equipped for conventional warfighting, and these capabilities remained essential to deter and fight conventional wars.
- U.S. forces were not as well organized, trained, educated, or equipped for protracted IW on a global scale.
- DOD was underinvested in general purpose force (GPF) and special operations force (SOF) capabilities and capacity for protracted IW.

over the definition of IW. Some within DOD advocated an IW definition based on *who conducts it* (the actors) while others advocated a definition based on *how it is conducted* (the methods). In the end, DOD senior leadership agreed that the IW definition should be based on *why it is conducted* (strategic purpose). In January 2006, the Deputy Secretary of Defense approved a working definition so that IW concept and capability development could proceed, and this working definition with slight modification became the approved definition on April 17, 2006:

IW is a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant populations. IW favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will.³

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Soldier searches for Taliban weapons cache in Baghran Valley

55th Signal Company Combat Camera (Preston E. Cheeks)

Execution Roadmap

In December 2005, DOD began crafting a QDR IW Execution Roadmap. Its purpose was to facilitate implementation of the IW-related policy decisions of the QDR. The IW Roadmap was a temporary vehicle intended to enable a successful transition from the QDR to execution planning and programming with a near-term focus on the fiscal year 2008–2013 defense program. On April 26, 2006, the Deputy Secretary of Defense directed execution of the IW Roadmap with 28 tasks organized into 5 major initiatives for developing IW capabilities and capacity within DOD. The initiatives were:

- Transform the way DOD manages its military and civilian personnel to meet IW operational requirements (first priority), which entails changing the way the military Services identify, access, educate, train, develop, utilize, and retain personnel with IW-associated expertise and increasing opportunities for DOD personnel to obtain, maintain, and improve language proficiency and understanding of foreign cultures.

to possess chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) weapons and delivery means; sophisticated antiaccess capabilities; significant irregular capabilities for horizontal escalation; and populations mobilized to resist U.S. military intervention. Future interstate warfare is more likely to be some form of hybrid warfare than the conventional warfare for which the Armed Forces are preparing.

Senior leadership emerged from the QDR not knowing exactly what IW was, but knowing that DOD needed dramatically greater IW capabilities to wage and win current and future struggles.

Defining IW

The DOD-wide IW effort during the QDR generated a year-long disagreement

Colonel Kenneth C. Coons, Jr., USAF, is Chairman of the Warfighting Department at the Air War College. Colonel Glenn M. Harned, USA (Ret.), leads the Booz Allen Hamilton Team that supports irregular warfare efforts at U.S. Special Operations Command, U.S. Joint Forces Command, U.S. Marine Corps, and the Office of the Secretary of Defense.

- Rebalance GPF capabilities and capacity to conduct long-duration counterinsurgency (COIN) and counterterrorism (CT) operations; train, equip, and advise large numbers of foreign security forces; and foster the development of civil society and effective governance in ungoverned and undergoverned areas.

- Increase SOF capability and capacity in two classified mission areas and to meet SOF air mobility requirements.

- Increase DOD capability and capacity to conduct counter-network operations, which entails identifying, locating, characterizing, perturbing, and disrupting extremist cells, networks, and individuals, and predicting their operational behavior.

- Redesign joint and Service military and civilian education and individual and unit training for the conduct and support of IW.

The IW Roadmap also provided an illustrative list of irregular warfare activities. This list was important because it bound the scope of IW. The roadmap noted that U.S. Government agencies do not conduct terrorism and transnational criminal activities as a matter of national policy or law. This list has stood the test of time and, with the addition of strategic communication, remains intact:⁴

- insurgency and COIN
- terrorism and CT
- unconventional warfare
- foreign internal defense
- stability operations when conducted within the context of an IW strategy or campaign aimed at gaining or maintaining the support of a host population
 - transnational criminal activities that support or sustain IW and the law enforcement activities to counter them
 - civil-military operations
 - psychological operations
 - information operations
 - intelligence and counterintelligence operations.

Joint Operating Concept

Among other tasks, the IW Roadmap directed U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) to develop a joint concept for IW. In November 2005, USSOCOM and the Marine Corps Combat Development Command (MCCDC) agreed to develop a Multi-Service Concept for Irregular Warfare to lay the intellectual foundation for a future

IW joint concept. The Multi-Service Concept was approved in August 2006, shortly after the same writing team began work on the IW Joint Operating Concept (JOC).

The IW JOC identifies the following joint force problem: “How can Joint Force Commanders employ conventional and nonconventional military capabilities in support of integrated [U.S. Government] and multinational partner efforts to gain or maintain control or influence over a relevant population?”⁵ The central idea of the IW JOC is that the joint force will solve this problem by conducting “protracted regional and global campaigns using indirect approaches against state and non-state adversaries to subvert, coerce, attrite, and exhaust adversaries rather than defeating them through direct conventional military confrontation.”⁶ These campaigns will be population-oriented, not adversary-oriented, and will emphasize winning the support of the relevant populations, promoting friendly authority, and undermining and eroding adversary power, influence, legitimacy, and support. Below

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are the major propositions of current DOD thinking as captured in the IW Joint Operating Concept. They have been refined by more than a year of experimentation.

First, irregular warfare is “a major and pervasive form of warfare”⁷ that occurs in politically unstable environments of persistent conflict among populations. It is *not* an environment or a type of military operation. Second, what makes IW “irregular”⁸ is the focus of its operations—a relevant population—and its strategic purpose to gain or maintain legitimacy and influence over, and the support of, that relevant population through political, psychological, informational, military, and economic methods. Warfare that has the population as its “focus of operations” requires a different mindset and different capabilities than warfare that focuses on defeating an adversary militarily.⁹

Third, the foundation for IW is the centrality of the relevant populations to the nature of the struggle. All parties seek to undermine their adversaries’ legitimacy and credibility and to isolate their adversaries

physically and psychologically from the relevant populations. At the same time, they also seek to bolster their own legitimacy and credibility with those same populations.¹⁰ Popular support, per se, may not be relevant for certain terrorists and other extremists who simply coerce a population into compliance. However, defeating irregular challenges usually requires gaining legitimacy and influence over, and securing the support of, the relevant populations, not defeating an adversary primarily through direct military confrontation.

Fourth, IW is ultimately a political struggle with violent and nonviolent components. The use of the term *violent* in the definition was a particularly contentious issue. The term refers to the nature of the struggle, not the prescription of violence as the primary way to wage it. IW is “politics with guns.”



Marine cares for orphaned Iraqi child

The use or threat of political violence as a tool to undermine an adversary’s legitimacy and influence is one of its defining characteristics. It is the violent nature of the struggle that separates IW from the normal political process. Because IW is about finding political solutions (or managing intractable political problems), the military should always have a

supporting role, even when it is providing the preponderance of resources.

Fifth, IW extends beyond the military domain. Governments and populations wage IW, not only armed forces. Influencing foreign governments and populations is a complex and inherently political activity. IW campaigns will fail if waged by military means alone. The nature of IW requires the U.S. Government to achieve the level of unified action necessary to integrate all available instruments of national power to address irregular threats. The Government will have to develop whole-of-government approaches to wage IW at the political,

strategic, operational, and tactical levels. The relevant U.S. civilian agencies must build their capacity to operate in unstable or hostile environments.¹¹

Sixth, IW depends on not only our military prowess, but also our understanding of such social dynamics as tribal politics, social networks, religious influences, and cultural mores. People, not platforms or advanced technology, are the key to IW success—patient, persistent, and culturally savvy people who can build the long-term relationships essential to executing IW.¹²

Last, waging protracted IW depends on building global capability and capacity. IW

will not be won by the United States alone, but rather by, with, and through the combined efforts of our strategic partners. This requires the joint force to establish long-term sustained presence in numerous countries to build the necessary partner capability and capacity to extend U.S. operational reach, multiply forces available, and increase options for defeating our adversaries.¹³

The IW JOC also identifies four supporting ideas that contribute directly or indirectly to achieving the central idea of the concept:

- establish persistent global presence for IW
- establish and maintain interpersonal relationships to support IW
- expand the role of the GPF to support and execute IW missions
- create alternative command and control (C²) mechanisms for conducting and supporting IW when a joint task force (JTF) is not required to conduct major combat operations. Three such mechanisms include extending the joint interagency task force (JIATF) concept used today for counterdrug operations to regional subordinate unified commands and JIATFs with IW missions; establishing interagency advisory assistance teams at sub-national levels of government; and expanding the use of U.S. Military Groups (MILGRPs) to conduct and support irregular warfare as integral components of U.S. missions abroad.

Wargames

As the sponsor of the irregular warfare JOC, USSOCOM was responsible for experimenting with the concept during the first year of its life. As part of the experimentation process, USSOCOM cosponsored the Unified Quest 2007 and 2008 (UQ 07 and UQ 08) wargame series with the U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and U.S. Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM). The IW JOC was tested against complex scenarios without discovering any substantive problems with its logic, description of future operating environments, or fundamental descriptions of operational requirements for the future joint force. No other JOC has been so tested. As the spiral game play evolved, so did participant discussion of the dynamics of IW, with certain areas deserving particular attention discussed below.¹⁴

Planning and Preparation. Players recognized the need for a different type of planning, assessment, and preparation period.

Soldiers engage Taliban fighters near Allah Say, Afghanistan



U.S. Army (Michael L. Casteel)

Players recognized that IW is a “messy” form of warfare that does not lend itself to clean formulas or predictable outcomes. UQ participants struggled to determine the appropriate approach to the irregular problem set they faced. Many civilian participants considered the military planning process stovepiped and rigid. They stated that the U.S. Agency for International Development in particular has a more dynamic planning process that is derived from the political and cultural nature of the interagency process and, unlike the military planning process, factors in more ambiguity and longer term objectives (years, not months).

Ambiguity of IW. The challenges of building IW campaigns demonstrated the discomfort and confusion of GPF players when forced to wrestle with the ambiguity inherent in IW. While players generally agreed that the ideas introduced in the IW JOC were valid and central to future warfighting, they struggled with the nature of this form of warfare, especially when they were unable to articulate the risk associated with various indirect approaches.

Population as Focus of Operations. UQ participants overwhelmingly validated the idea that IW should be population-oriented and that conventional approaches to warfare do not fully accommodate this notion.

MILGRPs Conducting and Supporting IW. The use of MILGRPs as an alternative C² mechanism for IW was a recurring theme during UQ 07 and UQ 08. Participants generally agreed that MILGRPs with enhanced legal and budget authorities have distinct advantages over JTFs when conducting or supporting IW activities in the absence of major combat operations.

Importance of Strategic Communication. These activities depend on early crafting of a compelling narrative that resonates with all relevant populations, legitimizing friendly IW messages and actions while discrediting the messages and actions of adversaries in the minds of the relevant populations. One of the most profound ideas to emerge during UQ 07 was the concept of narrative advanced by Michael Vlahos of The Johns Hopkins University. A *narrative* is a story that a party to an armed struggle uses to justify its messages and actions so they become legitimate and favorable to the relevant populations. Strategic success in IW requires a narrative that not only counters and discredits adversary narratives but also offers an alternative that is at

least as compelling to the relevant populations. The respective narratives become the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual foundations for each party’s policies, strategies, campaigns, and operations.

Difficulty with Whole of Government.

The whole-of-government approaches that the IW JOC seeks to implement depend on achieving unified action through agreed interagency processes and procedures that do not exist. Implementation is unlikely without a collaborative effort between the President and Congress. The requirements for U.S. Government civilian agencies to conduct IW do not reflect the reality of interagency barriers to implementing whole-of-government approaches. The senior civilian participants in the 2008 seminar wargame agreed that

than were the military participants. DOD preaches unified action but non-DOD senior participants argued instead for the more realistic goal of managing diverse institutional cultures, relationships, and politics.

In 2007, the Office of the Secretary of Defense sponsored a three-part IW wargame to inform DOD efforts to develop new operational and organizational constructs and identify capability and capacity shortfalls. The game tested the use of GPF and SOF to stabilize a large, failing country. The IW JOC held up well. Significantly, no team recommended a direct military intervention with GPF ground forces; all wanted to pursue a more indirect approach in support of host country security forces. All teams agreed that the problem was primarily political and

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implementing the IW concept is about leveraging *relationships* within the interagency community. This process is ad hoc and will never be as efficient as the military planning process. Civilian participants generally were more comfortable with this as an approach to the ambiguities of irregular challenges

that the Department of State should have the lead. They also agreed that the problem was regional and asked that MILGRPs be established or reinforced in the threatened country and in all neighboring countries.

Most players did not think Congress would allow the executive branch to transform



Squad leader directs Marines during firefight with Taliban insurgents

U.S. Marine Corps (Keith A. Mills)

for IW and believed that U.S. civilian agencies would therefore be unable to build sufficient IW capacity to fill their shortfalls. Some players argued that even if the agencies could build adequate capacity, it might be more cost-effective to expand DOD civil affairs, psychological operations, and foreign area officer capabilities and detail these resources to the civilian agencies or assign them to MILGRPs to function under the direction of Foreign Service Officers, especially in unstable or hostile operational environments where civilian agencies cannot operate effectively.

Moreover, the teams could not agree on how to build up the host country national police and the associated judicial and penal institutions. They saw the problem as magnitudes more difficult than building up a foreign military. DOD does not have a constabulary-like paramilitary force with police powers; the Coast Guard and Border Patrol are the closest government organizations to a European-style constabulary. There is no clear-cut solution to this critical shortfall in capability to conduct COIN and CT missions.

Capability Assessment

When USSOCOM completed the final draft of the IW JOC in December 2006, it knew that appendix C (Table of Operational Effects and Broad Military Capabilities) needed further refinement. Continuing their collaboration, USSOCOM and MCCDC in

January 2007 invited the other DOD components to join in an effort to identify and prioritize the key capabilities the joint force needs to conduct global IW operations. Three teams applied the ideas in the IW JOC against selected steady-state security posture scenarios to write three concepts of operations (CONOPS) for waging IW in friendly states,

the Coast Guard and Border Patrol are the closest government organizations to a European-style constabulary

hostile states, and nonbelligerent states. From these CONOPS, the teams developed a framework of key IW capabilities in terms of tasks, conditions, and effects.

The teams found that many of the *tasks* that joint forces perform in IW are essentially the same as the tasks they perform in conventional warfare. However, the *conditions* under which they perform them in IW are fundamentally different from the conditions under which they perform other military operations. These different IW conditions require the joint force to reexamine how it performs these common tasks in IW. The teams also found that many of the desired *effects* for the tasks are different when conducted in IW because the effects

are more focused on the relevant populations than on adversaries.

The teams completed the revised appendix C in late July 2007, in time for its use during fiscal year 2010–2015 program development. USSOCOM and MCCDC are using it as the starting point for a co-led IW-focused Joint Capabilities-based Assessment (CBA) that began in August 2007. The Joint Staff approved its joint capabilities document in August 2008, and the functional solutions analysis is under way.

Current Assessment

DOD has made great progress over the last 3 years. There is growing consensus on the definition, character, and scope of IW. The Deputy Secretary of Defense has approved multiple plans for correcting IW shortfalls. The fiscal year 2008–2013 program devoted significantly more resources to IW. The Secretary of Defense approved and signed the IW JOC on September 11, 2007. The 2007 version of Joint Publication 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, incorporates IW concepts into joint doctrine for the first time, and new joint publications on counterinsurgency and counterterrorism are being written. The Joint Staff completed its assessment of GPF requirements for COIN and CT and presented their options for meeting those requirements to the Deputy Secretary of Defense in December 2007. The Services and other DOD components have a greater appreciation for their IW requirements. An IW-focused CBA is under way, and its products will help drive DOD requirements and programming efforts. USSOCOM and USJFCOM are collaborating on a series of IW workshops and experiments to further refine the IW concept. Other government departments and agencies have not embraced the term *irregular warfare* but support State Department initiatives to improve the ability of the U.S. Government to plan and conduct State-led “complex operations.” The State Department has issued an interim *Counterinsurgency Guide for U.S. Government Policy Makers*, is co-sponsoring with DOD an Interagency Consortium for Complex Operations, and has expressed interest in expanded strategy and planning coordination between DOD and State.

Nevertheless, much remains to be done. As a whole, DOD institutions remain too oriented on peacetime processes to sustain and enhance conventional warfighting

Marines maneuver during firefight, Operation Iraqi Freedom



1st Marine Division Combat Camera (Kevin F. Reed)

capabilities, at the expense of modifying those processes to meet current wartime demands, improve outcomes, and prepare for persistent conflict in the future. The correct metrics for measuring IW transformation are programs funded and capabilities and capacity fielded—not briefings given, plans written, and processes followed. Many in DOD disagree on the appropriate balance among conventional warfighting and IW capacities and the appropriate balance of effort required among U.S. Armed Forces and civilian departments and agencies. There is widespread institutional resistance to the concept of transforming DOD to wage persistent and protracted irregular warfare on a global scale. Some within DOD also see IW as a temporary inconvenience that will go away when U.S. major combat forces leave Iraq, a belief reinforced by the fact that DOD has not clearly articulated what the force employment requirements are for waging IW globally. Absent a defined endstate for IW transformation, the best DOD has been able to achieve are marginal improvements to existing capabilities.

There are still debates over whether IW and hybrid warfare will replace conventional warfare. In some respects, the current combat operations in Iraq and Afghanistan tint the lens of the debate, but the measures of effectiveness for IW transformation should *not* be improvements to current operations but rather how well DOD prepares for the broader ongoing effort against violent extremists and their state and nonstate sponsors.

DOD continues to struggle with how to deal with the inability of relevant civilian departments and agencies to expand their own capacities to perform nonmilitary tasks (governance, essential services, economic development, and so forth) that are vital to waging IW and conducting complex operations.

But we must get past these challenges and seize the momentum of the IW JOC. The Armed Forces have been assigned an important new IW mission and must now adapt their portfolios, requirements, programmatic funding, and conventional mindsets to IW.

A Way Ahead

Transformation efforts of this scale are difficult, but a path does exist. The major initiatives of the IW Roadmap are still valid, and DOD should continue to pursue them as it moves forward in the fielding of new IW capabilities and capacity.

USSOCOM needs to increase its SOF capabilities and capacity to perform unconventional warfare and other indirect IW activities on a global scale, and particularly outside the U.S. Central Command area, where by our absence we have ceded the strategic initiative to our adversaries. Our nation cannot “kill or capture” its way to victory in this struggle. At best, our manhunting efforts buy time for more decisive indirect IW activities to achieve their desired effects.

DOD needs to implement the options identified in the Joint Staff assessment of GPF IW capabilities and capacity. The general purpose forces need a new COIN and CT paradigm; the current paradigm of U.S.-based joint expeditionary forces organized into JTFs is inappropriate for steady-state IW requirements. DOD should embrace a return to the Cold War paradigm of large numbers of empowered MILGRPs operating under the direction of U.S. Chiefs of Mission and collaborating regionally to defeat transnational adversaries. The leading advocate of this paradigm shift is noted strategist Colonel Robert Killebrew, USA (Ret.), who has written a study¹⁵ for the Center for a New American Security and an article in *Army* magazine¹⁶ on the need to adopt such a paradigm shift.

The DOD intelligence components and unified commands need to accelerate their efforts to improve counter-network operations. As the IW Roadmap states, “Vital to this effort is increasing the ability of DOD to capture and integrate knowledge from anthropologists, sociologists, geographers, demographers, and other social scientists into intelligence and operational analysis at all levels down to the tactical.”

The military departments and Services, unified commands, and National Defense University need to institutionalize the changes they have made to joint and Service education and training for IW. The U.S. military has a century-long history of adopting temporary solutions in response to irregular challenges, only to scrap them when the challenges pass. This current struggle will not pass in the foreseeable future. Our education and training base needs permanent solutions to meet the demands from the field that will come once the general purpose forces adopt a new paradigm for waging IW.

Most important of all, the military departments need to create or improve career paths, incentives, and advancement opportunities for DOD personnel with critical

IW-related skills and knowledge. If we do not create new demands that force the Service personnel management systems to transform, we cannot hope to identify, access, educate, train, develop, utilize, and retain adequate numbers of the people we need to wage protracted IW on a global scale.

The 2006 *QDR Report* states that “to achieve global effects across countries, regions, and groups, the United States must localize and defeat terrorist extremist cells with approaches tailored to local conditions and differentiated worldwide.”¹⁷ Seven years into this struggle as it was redefined on 9/11, the Department of Defense must do everything it can to accelerate the fielding of new capabilities and capacity to wage irregular warfare and win this struggle. **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ *Hybrid warfare* is the simultaneous and intertwined application of conventional and irregular warfare methods to achieve strategic objectives.

² U.S. Department of Defense, *Irregular Warfare Execution Roadmap* (IW Roadmap) (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, April 28, 2006), 6.

³ Joint Publication (JP) 1, *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States* (Washington, DC: The Joint Staff, May 14, 2007), I-1.

⁴ Irregular Warfare Joint Operating Concept (IW JOC), version 1 (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, September 11, 2007), 8.

⁵ IW JOC, 15.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷ JP 1, I-6.

⁸ Some IW advocates would prefer a different term, such as *unconventional*, *nonconventional*, or *traditional* warfare, but *irregular warfare* is the term of record at least for the remainder of this administration.

⁹ JP 1, I-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ IW JOC, 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, 1.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ U.S. Southern Command, *Unified Quest 07* Analytical Report (June 4, 2007), 5-8 and 12-23.

¹⁵ Robert B. Killebrew, *The Left-hand Side of the Spectrum, Ambassadors and Advisors in Future U.S. Strategy*, The Future of the U.S. Military Series (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, June 2007).

¹⁶ Robert B. Killebrew, “The Army and the Changing American Strategy,” *Army* (August 2007), 25-34.

¹⁷ Department of Defense, *2006 Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, February 6, 2006), 22.