

Irregular Warfare: Everything yet Nothing

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“If something is everything, then it is nothing.”

-- Lee Grubbs

September 11, 2001 the Global War on Terror began. This global war has brought to life a timeless tactic called irregular warfare (IW). IW is difficult to define, explain, and employ. Yet, with no firm understanding or consensus on what IW actually means, the Department of Defense (DoD) developed the *Irregular Warfare (IW) Joint Operating Concept (JOC)* on 11 September 2007. Version 1.0 of the *IW JOC* proposes that IW is a protracted form of warfare, on a global or regional scale, that will require new capability development. Fortunately, for the Joint Warfighter, the intent of the *IW JOC* was only to further IW discussion, debate, and experimentation intended to influence future IW concepts and capability development. As presented, the definitions and concepts in the *IW JOC* have unnecessarily created confusion within the DoD by ignoring more than fifty years of experience and doctrine related to the challenges faced by the post-Cold War world and after the events of September 11, 2001.

The history of IW needs closer examination to capture those lessons learned to advance the IW discussion beyond the *IW JOC*. Given the significance and long-term DoD investments in the concepts presented in the *IW JOC*, this paper will analyze whether DoD has presented an appropriate definition of IW based on a doctrinal review of IW's roots. The paper will also look at the doctrinal relationship between Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) and IW. If necessary, the authors will propose a more fitting definition for IW that is aligned with its doctrinal characterization.

Background: Issues with Defining IW Post-9/11

The *IW JOC* proposes defining IW as “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" (IW JOC 2007, 6). This definition was approved by the previous Commander, United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM), General Bryan D. Brown and the current Secretary of Defense, Robert M. Gates. A different definition of IW came out of an IW workshop in September 2005 organized by USSOCOM and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations and Low-Intensity Conflict (ASD-SO/LIC). The Deputy Secretary of Defense subsequently approved this 2005 definition, which became the version published as part of the *Quadrennial Defense Review Irregular Warfare Roadmap*, stating:

"Irregular Warfare is a form of warfare that has as its objective the credibility and/or legitimacy of the relevant political authority with the goal of undermining or supporting that authority. Irregular warfare favors indirect approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities to seek asymmetric approaches, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will" (Joint Warfighting Center 2006, L-1).

The Debate: The Ever-elusive Definition of IW

By highlighting dissent on the definition of IW at the highest levels within the DoD in less than a two-year period, the conclusions of the *Irregular Warfare Special Study* bring the point closer to home. "The controversy over IW terminology is nothing new. After 44 years of discussion, a definitive definition still has not emerged" (Joint Warfighting Center 2006, II-3). Central to this argument is the fact that by grouping loosely related activities, IW as a concept seems to add no appreciable value to the body of joint doctrine. Research conducted by the Joint Doctrine Group in the Joint Warfighting Center, United States Joint Forces Command (USJFCOM), in completing the *Irregular Warfare Special Study*, revealed the doctrinal quagmire based on the lack of consistency, clarity, or consensus given the vast choices of synonyms glibly associated with IW:

IW is used loosely as a synonym for unconventional warfare, asymmetric warfare, guerrilla warfare, partisan warfare, nontraditional warfare, low intensity conflict, insurgency, rebellion, revolt, civil war, insurrection, revolutionary warfare, internal war, counter insurgency, subversive war, war within a population, intrastate war, internal development, internal security, internal defense, stability, law and order, nation building, state building, small war, peacemaking, peacekeeping, fourth generation warfare (4GW), and global war on terror (GWOT) (Joint Warfighting Center 2006, II-3).

Furthering the confusion led by the DoD, the authors of the *IW JOC* admit that "a precise IW definition is hampered by two major factors: 1) the role of IW at the different levels of war, and 2) the methods used to define IW" (IW JOC 2007, 6). The authors of the *IW JOC* then assigned a different definition for each of the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of war. Instead of investing adequate academic rigor to bounding the problem, the authors then excused themselves by claiming that IW is so complex and contextually dissimilar at each level of war, that those operating at the different levels of war must apply IW differently.

Furthermore, those crafting the *IW JOC* failed to determine whether the definition of IW should focus on who conducts IW (actors), how those actors conduct IW (methods), or why the actors conduct IW (strategic purpose). The authors further determined that the one thing that makes IW different from other notions of warfare is that the focus of IW operations is on a relevant population, with a strategic purpose of gaining or maintaining control or influence over, and support of, the relevant population (*IW JOC* 2007, 7).

The Struggle for the Population is Not New – and is *Not* the Focus for IW

U.S. Army doctrine documented the United States' history of military operations centered on a struggle for support of the population as early as 1951. Field Manual (FM) 31-20, *Operations Against Guerilla [sic] Forces*, stated that guerrilla warfare (GW) and IW are the same thing:

- 'guerilla [sic] warfare' is used loosely to describe all kinds of irregular warfare. It is generally associated with broad movements that may be briefly described as
- a. A people's war or revolution against existing authority
 - b. A war conducted by irregular forces (supported by an external power) to bring about a change in the social-political order of a country without engaging it in a formal, declared war
 - c. A war conducted by irregular forces in conjunction with regularly organized forces as a phase of a normal war
 - d. Operations, generally of short duration, conducted by detached regular forces in the enemy's rear areas (FM 31-20 1951, iii)

As an umbrella concept including IW, FM 31-20 further defined GW as “the operations, predominantly of a military nature, and characterized by the extensive use of unorthodox tactics, conducted by irregular forces acting either separately from, or in conjunction with, regular forces” (FM 31-20 1951, 1).

Further explaining the mission set of GW and guerrillas, FM 31-20 stated the terms applied to all organizations and individuals, and to their operations, including the fifth column, guerrilla, irregular, partisan, resistance group, saboteur, or underground (FM 31-20 1951, 2). In its application in 1951, GW/IW could be used in one of two main ways. First, powerful forces could use GW/IW to achieve quick and economical fulfillment of either military, political, or economic aims, in conjunction with regular forces or as a separate entity. Secondly, those parties to a conflict who are inferior to the other in one or more of the essentials of modern warfare: armament, resources, regular forces, or strategic position could use GW/IW (FM 31-20 1951, 11). GW/IW was seen as something exercised almost exclusively at the tactical level of war.

U.S. Army doctrine also acknowledged in 1951, that one of the broad aims of guerrilla strategy was to maintain (or destroy) the morale and the will of the population to resist. While the current school of IW thought would lead one to believe that IW requires new concepts as a radical departure from traditional warfighting concepts, the authors of the first edition of FM 31-20, immediately following lessons learned during World War II, readily identified that “guerilla [sic] operations follow the same principles and methods of war as regular operations; only their application differs” (FM 31-20 1951, 40). Follow-on manuals in the FM 31-20 series, *U.S. Army*

Special Forces Group (Airborne) (1955), *Special Forces Operational Techniques* (1965), and *Special Forces Operational Techniques* (1971) all advanced similar concepts, though the manuals' focus shifted to training guerrillas as part of an Unconventional Warfare (UW) campaign.

The “Lost” Meaning of IW

Given the established association between IW and GW as the starting point, other doctrine of the day completed the IW thought process. FM 31-21, *Organization and Conduct of Guerilla* [sic] *Warfare*, termed the guerrilla force as “an irregular force, organized on a military basis, supported chiefly by sympathetic elements of the population, and operating against established civil and military authority. It may receive support from a foreign government” (FM 31-20 1951, 2). A guerrilla force was comprised of those individuals of a resistance movement who banded together on a military basis once the underground resistance group had developed sufficient strength to become overt.

The authors of FM 31-21 defined a resistance movement as “the operations of discontented or hostile elements of a population against established civil and military authority by various hidden and open methods. The individuals who take part in a resistance movement are held together by common sympathies and interests, often political” (FM 31-20 1951, 2-3). While U.S. Army doctrine replaced the term “resistance movement” with “insurgency” or “revolutionary movement” in the mid-1960s, the movements were comprised of a hard-core leadership cell, a small visible element (the guerrilla force) which was organized to perform overt armed military and paramilitary operations using guerrilla tactics, a much larger clandestine, covert force (the underground), and the supporting civilian populace (the auxiliary).

It is this point that requires emphasis – it is the hard-core leadership and underground that conducts the vital activities of infiltration and political subversion, establishes and operates shadow governments, and acts as a supporting organization for the guerrillas. It is the guerrilla force, ordinarily comprised of irregular or partisan forces, which conducts GW/IW; the intent of these GW/IW operations, generally in the enemy's rear areas, was to harass, delay, and disrupt the enemy's military operations. As a tactical matter, GW/IW seeks to inflict casualties and damage upon the enemy rather than to seize or defend terrain through extensive use of surprise, and places emphasis on avoidance of casualties. GW/IW is *not* focused on the population.

Enemy Use of IW

In the next edition of FM 31-21, *Guerrilla Warfare*, the U.S. Army first introduced the concept of UW, which it defined as operations “conducted in time of war behind enemy lines by predominantly indigenous personnel responsible in varying degrees to friendly control or direction in furtherance of military and political objectives. It consists of the interrelated fields of guerrilla warfare, evasion and escape, and subversion against hostile states (resistance) (FM 31-21 1955, 2). GW, in the context of UW, was “that part of unconventional warfare conducted by predominantly indigenous forces organized on a paramilitary or military basis” (FM 31-21 1955, 2). From this point forward in the literature review, there appear to be two subtle, yet distinct, types of GW/IW.

The first type of GW/IW is conducted by those relatively small groups of predominately indigenous personnel operating in enemy-controlled territory, as part of a larger UW campaign on behalf of the U.S., employing guerrilla tactics to reduce the enemy's combat effectiveness by disrupting his offensive and defensive warmaking capability, threatening the security of his rear areas, and weakening his ability to resist. The overt militant element of a non-U.S. sponsored insurgency carrying out a war of harassment until the creation of its basic political structure is the second type of GW/IW. While buying time for this political structure to establish itself, those conducting GW/IW in this manner attempt to force the government to overextend its defensive activities, intentionally draw off enemy combat troops from commitments to their primary mission, increase the population's vulnerability through the selective use of terrorism, defeat small government forces and strike where government forces are not located, provide psychological victories and advantage to the movement, block or redirect resources that the government is trying to use for development purposes, and weaken the resolve of the government's military forces. Again, it is shown that GW/IW is applicable at the tactical level of war, and not primarily concerned with the population.

IW and the Larger Insurgency

Future revisions of FM 31-21, *Guerrilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations* (1958), *Guerrilla Warfare and Special Forces Operations* (1961), *Special Forces Operations* (1965), and *Special Forces Operations* (1969) would reinforce concepts contained in the 1951 and 1955 editions of the manual. However, in the 1961 printing of FM 31-15, *Operations Against Irregular Forces*, the U.S. Army broadened its definition of what forces, activities, and operations were deemed irregular. In the broad sense, irregular referred to "all types of nonconventional forces and operations. ...[and] includes guerrilla, partisan, insurgent, subversive, resistance, terrorist, revolutionary, and similar personnel, organizations, and methods" (FM 31-15 1961, 3). Furthermore, FM 31-15 explained the strategic purpose of the overall movement, in that "irregular activities include acts of a military, political, psychological, and economic nature, conducted predominately by inhabitants of a nation for the purpose of eliminating or weakening the authority of the local government or an occupying power, and using primarily irregular and informal groupings and measures" (FM 31-15 1961, 3). As a basic precept, this manual also codified the notion that the "growth and continuation of an irregular force is dependent on support furnished by the population" (FM 31-15 1961, 3).

FM 31-15 goes on to further state that guerrilla tactics are common to all irregular forces, whereby tactics used by the guerrillas are designed to weaken the enemy, and to gain support of the population. One goal of GW/IW is to undermine enemy morale by "constant harassment, exhibition of a violent combative spirit, fanaticism, self-sacrifice, and extensive use of propaganda, threats, blackmail, and bribery" (FM 31-15 1961, 9). Underground tactics are designed to gain the same results as guerrilla tactics, most significantly, "underground organizations attempt, through nonviolent persuasion, to indoctrinate and gain the participation of groups of the population who are easily deceived by promises and, through coercion by terror tactics, to force others to participate" (FM 31-15 1961, 9-10). It is the underground that is most concerned with the population, and is focused on the operational and strategic issues so critical to the insurgency's success

IW is *Not* an Environment

Having shown that GW/IW has historically referred to the nontraditional methods of warfare used by certain elements within an insurgency, the *IW JOC*'s proposed definition begins to show signs of weakness. The first sentence in the proposed definition describes IW as a "violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population" (IW JOC 2007, 6). From the historical doctrinal review, one can see that this "warfare" in IW has always been the method of warfare used by the single weaker party of a conflict, and was never used to describe an environment of struggle between two opponents. Guerrillas employing IW have never had the population as their primary focus, as issues surrounding the population are the prerogatives of the underground.

While traditionally not describing a struggle, the population has historically not been the principal focus of IW. While the overall insurgency needs the support of the population to grow and support its agenda, this attention given to the population is the focus of the underground portion of the resistance movement. While GW/IW may directly affect the population with its activities, attacking the military forces and infrastructure of an existing government that the insurgent movement is attempting to weaken, modify, or replace, has been the traditional focus of IW. The second sentence of the *IW JOC*-proposed definition, "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" (IW JOC 2007, 6), once put into the context of IW as the authors have described it to this point, is mostly correct. Guerrilla tactics are generally indirect and asymmetric approaches, although the insurgency must eventually develop and employ a more robust guerrilla force during the final stage of its strategy whereby a full guerrilla force conducts an offensive to create and extend liberated areas in a final push to reach the stated political goal (Molnar 1965, 1-3).

Back to the Future: IW as an Inappropriate Name for Old Concepts

Given that the current scope of IW has grown into something on the same magnitude as DoD core mission areas such as Major Combat Operations (MCO) (Department of Defense, 2008), the next logical question seems to be to determine where the proposed definition of IW has its origins. The search begins with counterinsurgency (COIN) operations. In order to begin the discussion, the authors will first define the terms COIN and counterinsurgency. The 1986 printing of FM 90-8, *Counterinsurgency Operations*, describes COIN as "the government's weapon to combat insurgency . . . the COIN mission includes a full range of measures used by a government to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, and insurgency. They are actions taken by a nation to promote its growth by building viable institutions (political, military, economic, social) that respond to the needs of the people (FM 90-8 1986, para 1-8). It is critical to note that there is also a difference in the terms COIN and counterinsurgency:

The internal defense and development (IDAD) program is geared to counter the whole insurgency. It does this through alleviating conditions which may cause insurgency. This program, which addresses both the populace and the insurgent, can be termed

counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgency operations are geared to the active military element of the insurgent movement only. To this end, counterinsurgency operations are viewed as a supporting component of the counterinsurgency effort (FM 90-8 1986, para 1-12).

To put into the perspective of a current conflict, COIN operations in Operation ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF) would be the whole of government initiatives for countering the Taliban insurgency, while counterinsurgency operations would be those military operations specifically designed to kill/capture the overt elements engaging coalition forces militarily.

Using this construct, the *IW JOC*'s discussion of targeting the strategic purpose, or why actors conduct IW, using the proposed definition, looks very much like the rationale for an integrated IDAD program developed to counter an entire insurgency. Using the model of the three-part COIN strategy, balanced development of the country and mobilization of the populace against the insurgents must occur simultaneously, and in conjunction with neutralization of the guerrilla forces, in order to defeat the insurgency (FM 90-8 1986, para 1-13).

COIN is also one of the four broad categories of US military operations formerly characterized as Low Intensity Conflict (LIC). Prior to the *IW JOC*'s removal of LIC from the DoD lexicon, LIC was defined as:

A political-military confrontation between contending states or groups below conventional war and above the routine, peaceful competition among states. It frequently involves protracted struggles of competing principles and ideologies. Low intensity conflict ranges from subversion to the use of armed force. It is waged by a combination of means, employing political, economic, informational, and military instruments. Low intensity conflicts are often localized, generally in the Third World, but contain regional and global security implications (FM 100-20 1990, 1-1).

The *IW JOC* stated, **“IW is a form of armed conflict. As such, it replaces the term “low-intensity conflict”** (IW JOC 2007, 6). In the footnotes of the *IW JOC*, the authors further explained their justification for this change by selectively quoting the DoD definition of LIC, further arguing that LIC was “too limiting because [doctrine] categorize[d]...LIC as being ‘below conventional war,’ confined to a localized area in the ‘Third World,’ constrained in weaponry and level of violence, and limited in objective” (IW JOC 2007, 6). What is missing from the footnotes, and key to any new definition of IW, are the qualifiers “often” when referring to localized and “generally” describing prevalence in the Third World, which are much less restrictive and unequivocal. It would be hard to argue that anything contained in the definition of LIC above would not adequately characterize the situation in OEF or Operation IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF).

Conclusion

Returning to the *IW JOC*'s difficulties in determining whether the focus of IW should be on the actors, methods, or strategic purpose, it is clear from the doctrinal review that there was an existing and relevant term to fit each category before IW was expanded to encompass them all. The critical actors in GW/IW are the guerrilla or irregular forces organized on a military basis,

and comprising the overt portion of a resistance movement or insurgency. The methods in such an environment are predominately the guerrilla tactics of a GW/IW campaign focused on keeping the enemy military off balance through harassment, delaying actions, and disruption of the enemy's military operations. The strategic purpose of GW/IW, however, is to draw the enemy's resources onto themselves and away from the underground portion of the insurgency, thus allowing the political structure of this larger insurgency to increase its strength, support, and legitimacy. The historical doctrine shows us that IW is the *method*, and is largely applicable only at the tactical level of war.

The *IW JOC* failed to invest adequate academic rigor to bounding the problem, then deferred the complexity of IW by claiming that IW is so complex and contextually different at each level of war, that those operating at the different levels of war must apply IW differently. Therefore, the authors of this paper conclude that the proposed definition of IW is not appropriate given that IW is not an environment, and is not historically population-centric. Through an analysis of the historical doctrine, the authors have determined that the definition of IW should be:

Combat operations conducted by the overt element of an insurgency in enemy-held territory, by predominately indigenous and irregular forces organized on a military or paramilitary basis, characterized by the extensive use of unorthodox tactics to reduce the combat effectiveness, industrial capacity, and morale of an enemy, usually an established civil and military authority.

This proposed definition of IW captures the essence of what IW has always been, and clearly outlines that IW belongs in discussion of activities at the tactical level of war. IW is a method of achieving an endstate, and the authors' revised definition makes clear that it is typically the weaker party in a conflict that resorts to such guerrilla tactics.

If DoD continues in its efforts to redefine LIC as IW, then the military will continue to struggle in ambiguity with a term that now means everything, yet nothing. The term LIC, however unpalatable or politically tainted, is a more suitable framework for describing the challenges faced by the ever-increasing numbers of noteworthy non-state actors. As the IW debate continues, DoD should adopt such a definition of IW, and limit the IW debate to those things that are germane to the argument.

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