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# **Putting Irregular Warfare in Perspective**

Preparing for the New Norm of Conflict

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## Preparing for the New Norm of Conflict

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## Introduction

Declared wars start and stop, but the conflicts between nations and groups around the world simmer continuously and boil over frequently. Speaking to the Air War College class in 1992, then CIA Director Robert Gates said, “We must expect continuing radical change and upheaval around the world – at times promising, at times frightening – before the form and patterns of a new era settle into place.” Two decades later, it is not entirely clear what the form and patterns of this new century are.

Nevertheless, the development of policies, strategies, and instruments of power require U.S. and allied leaders to make some sense out of these still radically changing times. The Department of Defense (DoD) is considering a range of conflict types, including hybrid

warfare—the combination of irregular and conventional methods of warfare. This is a logical consideration of what some nations may do to confront the U.S. with an irregular threat tightly integrated with conventional force operations.

Three primary factors will challenge any attempt to institutionalize irregular warfare capabilities, however. First, the conventional force factor in the portfolio equation and attendant analyses tends to eclipse any serious preparation for irregular threats. As an example, despite the clear problems with irregular threats during Operation Desert Storm, the U.S. defense community essentially focused on re-fighting the conventional aspects of that war for the decade leading up to the terrorist attacks of 9.11. Second, the irregular warfare problem has roots in the dynamic and complicated changes ongoing in the world. The economic, social, and political upheaval in much of the world’s populations make it difficult to even recognize and articulate a form or pattern that lasts more than a year or two. Additionally, if one believes that national security in an irregular warfare era is largely a function of interagency strategies and operations that influence the perceptions and behaviors of other nations and groups, then solutions are inherently more complex than defeating a conventional army, not that that is ever simple. Finally, the federal budget process always looms large and especially so in the current fiscal crisis.

“This range of security challenges – from global terrorism to ethnic conflicts; from rogue nations to rising powers – cannot be overcome by traditional military means alone...Instead, ultimate success or failure will increasingly depend more on shaping the behavior of others – friends and adversaries, and most importantly, the people in between.”

Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates  
Air War College  
April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2008

To assist leaders in thinking about what emphasis to place on irregular warfare strategies and capabilities, this article explores irregular warfare from four perspectives. First, it summarizes three battles fought by U.S. forces during the major combat operations phase of the war, between 21 March and 6 April 2003. These battles demonstrate that the Iraqis engaged in irregular warfare – at times to serious effects on U.S. forces – during the major combat operation phase of the war.

Second, irregular attacks during major combat operations leads to a hypothesis that one of the primary strategic threats to U.S. and allied security could be a well prepared hybrid threat, meaning a threat that deliberately prepares and employs conventional and irregular forces together in coordinated operations. Third, some of the gravest individual threat types today are irregular in nature. If tightly integrated with conventional force capabilities and operations, these grave irregular threats could enable foreign armies to rival U.S. and coalition capabilities. Finally, military operations since 1990 suggest that U.S. forces will spend far more time operating in the phases of conflict wherein insurgent and other irregular threats are likely to emerge.

Given these four perspectives on irregular warfare, the article concludes by suggesting that U.S. and coalition security leaders must ensure that their strategies and capabilities adapt to what has become the new norm of conflict.

## **Irregular Warfare in the Major Combat Phase of the 2003 Iraq War**

### **Irregular air defense**

During the early morning hours of March 24, 2003 the 11<sup>th</sup> Attack Helicopter Regiment (11 AHR) flew across the desert to strike at elements of the Iraqi Medina Division, part of Saddam's vaunted Republican Guard. In this plan, thirty Apache helicopters would reach deep into the Iraqi positions in vicinity of Karbala and smash tanks and infantry fighting vehicles to prepare the way for attacking U.S. ground forces of the 3rd Infantry Division (3ID). The engagement unfolded much differently than U.S. planners and commanders anticipated, with 29 of 30 of the advanced aircraft badly damaged by gunfire of various types in what was a failed attempt to leverage a robust deep attack capability. The force that mauled our helicopters was not an advanced integrated air defense. Rather, the Apaches ran into an irregular force that integrated civilian and paramilitary participants that put up a fierce small arms-based defense of the area the 11 AHR targeted. This story provides some bit of context for how our enemies can adapt and should serve to waken us to the potential for adversaries who "break the rules" when it comes to conventional combat.

The Medina Division was a mechanized fighting force comprised of three brigades. The Republican Guard, of which the Medina was a part, included some of

Iraq's best-trained soldiers and best available equipment. Striking a blow to Medina and the other Republican Guard divisions was an important part of the ground campaign. Armed with T-72 tanks and BMP infantry fighting vehicles the unit had the ability to put down potentially damaging fires against U.S. forces.

In the official Army history of the ground campaign, it is clear that the intelligence was incomplete and ambiguous on the precise positions and status of the Medina Division in the run up to the attack. Medina had two armored brigades, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup>, each with numerous T-72s in the organization. The units had not moved far from their home garrisons but were in field positions. Per the official history, the 10<sup>th</sup> Brigade was accurately located. But, the 11AHR was directed to attack the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade which was reportedly perched astride the U.S. 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division axis of attack north of Karbala.

The planned routes of the helicopter regiment would carry them into urban areas to strike at the Medina Division. Rather than encountering a conventional air defense with radars linked to weapon systems and with communications links to relay target acquisition data back to key nodes, the Iraqi system was unconventional. Visual observers were watching for the US forces and as the helicopters were observed or heard, the Iraqis used telephones to pass word of the attack. According to the official history documents, as the Apaches closed toward their objective, the Iraqis flashed the electrical system off and on to alert participants in the defense, and then a hailstorm of small arms fire and anti-aircraft artillery lit up the sky around the helicopters. All the Apaches were damaged and one was shot down.

### **Irregular and paramilitary forces attack on the ground**

The experience of the 11AHR was matched on the ground as elements of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division fought an enemy determined to come at them unconventionally. In fact, as the 11AHR struck deep, the 3<sup>rd</sup> ID was attacking in vicinity of An Najaf to secure bridges over the Euphrates River. The force they encountered was heavily weighted to paramilitary and irregular fighters, often racing to the scene in pick-up trucks and fighting in civilian clothing. Set in urban environments, this presented a difficult combination of terrain and enemy inter-mixed with a civilian population in settings that restrict visibility and create more opportunities for the enemy to generate surprise.

When profiling the situation in An Najaf, the 101<sup>st</sup> Air Assault Division staff assessed over 1,000 irregular fighters in the city. Per the official history, they were able to associate these to several different groups, each operating with its own loose structure. These included Saddam's Fedayeen as well as Ba'ath Party Militia amongst others. Typically equipped with small arms and rocket propelled grenades, the groups were able to move freely in the urban areas with a relatively low profile. As was proved in An Nasiriyah earlier when Transportation Company was ambushed and suffered heavy casualties, these forces were fully capable of inflicting significant damage using irregular warfare tactics.

As one of the Brigade Combat Teams of 3ID along with 3-7 Cavalry attacked to seize bridges, the irregular forces held defensive positions while at the same time bringing reinforcements to the scene. These Iraqis attacked with abandon, in some instances ramming US armored vehicles with civilian automobiles or trucks. They attacked from buildings and alleyways as well as from prepared positions. From an intelligence perspective, the fact that these forces wore civilian clothes and did not use conventional communications posed a distinct challenge. The U.S. forces could not rely on classic targets and signatures to anticipate enemy strength and actions – they simply were not available.

### Conventional forces fighting unconventionally

Shortly after these actions, another U.S. engagement with the Medina Division characterized the new operational response of the Iraqis. While they actually had more main battle tanks—including upgraded versions of the T-72—compared to the U.S. ground force, the Iraqi Army carried the hard memory of the first Gulf War and the devastation brought to it by Coalition air elements. The Iraqis' primary learning was that digging their forces into positions in the desert invited sure destruction. This round, they would fight the US and Coalition forces in cities and where they could find the concealment of palm groves and trees.

One of the more memorable experiences that stemmed from this Republican Guard strategy played out in the small city of Mahmudiyah, just south of Baghdad. Here, armored elements of the Medina Division took up positions in the city, hoping to catch US forces approaching across more open stretches north of the city. A brief but sharp battle erupted at very close ranges between tanks in this urban terrain.

U.S. elements of two companies from Task Force 1-64 had been ordered to move south toward Mahmudiyah to find Iraqi tanks and kill them. However, intelligence was sparse; the commander of the effort had little idea where exactly they might find the Iraqis. Unaware of the Iraqi tanks oriented to the north in the city, the U.S. commander happened to swing his force around to the west of the city and enter from the southern end. Having found no enemy yet, the US force was turning back to the north through Mahmudiyah to rejoin its battalion task force when it made contact with portions of the Medina Division.

In a five-minute fight at ranges often less than 50 meters (compared to the traditional training ranges of 1500-2000 meters), crews in M1A1 tanks of Charlie Company 1-64 destroyed seven T-72s and two BMP infantry fighting vehicles. In training both in Kuwait and in the United States, our gunners regularly prepare to find and engage enemy vehicles near maximum ranges. They train for environments where each opponent is working to capitalize on the maneuver advantages that can come with a mechanized, armored force. The Iraqis refused to take this battle, however, choosing instead to use their armored force unconventionally. In this case, they hid in urban terrain to negate or mitigate the effects of airpower while hoping to create opportunities to take the first shot on U.S. forces in their vicinity. This

engagement went very badly for them, mostly because US forces ended up looping in from behind - not by design, but by luck.

Urban environments around the world continue to grow. Modernized ground forces that show well for internal security tasks are not obligated to take a battle on ground favoring decisive maneuver and combined arms operations. By now, other potential conventional adversaries may have learned similar lessons on how to fight a U.S. force should that eventuality ever arise. From an intelligence perspective, finding enemy forces lodged in urban areas requires a flexible and high resolution intelligence apparatus as opposed to featuring broad area, lower resolution collectors prominent in other periods.

## The Hybrid Warfare Threat

Iraq's use of irregular warfare during major combat operations should have been expected. In the 1990 – 1991 Gulf War, "Operation Desert Storm", U.S. and Coalition forces decimated what was at the time the 4<sup>th</sup> largest army in the world. Robert Work, formerly the Vice President of the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment and currently the Under Secretary of the Navy, asserted that Operation Desert Storm was the defining battle of the guided weapons warfare revolution. What the Soviets envisioned in the Reconnaissance Strike Complex – guided weapons and surveillance and reconnaissance sensors all integrated in a combined arms battle network – was perfected and demonstrated in combat, ironically, by the American military. A conventional military force could not win against this reconnaissance strike complex. Thus, a new era of warfare was bound to emerge.

In 2003 Iraqis employed irregular warfare tactics in ad hoc defenses and attacks. Nevertheless, while this irregular warfare produced some serious effects against the conventional American forces, these efforts failed to prevent American military forces from decisively winning the major combat operations phase of the war. National security leaders should avoid dismissing these battles as merely speed bumps on the road to victory. One can expect that other adversaries are watching, learning, and adapting. Thus, the more problematic threat may be the deliberate integration of irregular warfare with conventional forces.

Some nations maintain robust conventional forces, but also strong special operations, paramilitary, and internal security forces. Some states go as far as to fund and equip paramilitary forces permanently based and operating in different countries. In the more repressive regimes, paramilitary and internal security forces are well organized, equipped, and led since they are extensively used for security operations inside the country.

What strategies and tactics might a thoughtful adversary use by integrating irregular and conventional forces into a hybrid threat? Western militaries can at times think of problems in a linear fashion – the deterrence phase of conflict gives way to

major combat operations which, after a decisive win, gives way to stability and reconstruction operations. In these latter phases, the thinking goes, U.S. and coalition forces may need to deal with an irregular threat, such as the foreign fighter and insurgent threats faced in Iraq. However, what about the scenario in which an adversary's conventional force deliberately uses irregular forces to confuse, attrite, demoralize, and bog down American and coalition forces in orchestrated campaigns with the adversary's conventional force? How could such a hybrid threat defeat American forces in the major combat operations phase? What strategies, capabilities, and tactics are necessary to counter a hybrid threat?

The fact of the matter is that most adversaries will struggle to meet U.S. and coalition forces with classic conventional operations, even if they include some ad hoc irregular attacks. It seems reasonable to believe potential adversaries are thinking hard about alternative strategies and preparing their forces accordingly. The uses of irregular warfare in Iraq present the broad indicators for how adversaries may choose to find advantages or totally change the game in the future by employing conventional and irregular forces in a tightly integrated strategy. Thus, the questions posed earlier seem worthy of serious analysis, planning, and preparation. In doing so, there are three types of irregular forces that pose grave concern and therefore deserve special attention.

## Grave Irregular Threats in Hybrid Warfare

### Weapons of Mass Destruction

Select countries around the world truly have the ability or are on the cusp of creating the ability to field weapons of mass destruction. Whether nuclear, chemical, or biological, all the threats in this family cause us to pay special attention. Our focus here is not limited to the prospect of strikes on our homeland—while possible, that may prove too difficult for many groups. However, strikes against critical infrastructure or U.S. interests abroad could be equally or even more problematic. Envision contamination or destruction of global oil-related facilities. Ponder the impact of devastating strikes against a key ally. The deterrent effect of massive destruction may be lost in the calculus of some outlying leadership groups—particularly when they do not prize tight affiliation with the broader, global economy. Leaders should be mindful that use of these weapons might not come in declared wars, but rather as a covert part of a broader conflict. In this context, countries possessing such capabilities have the potential to change the proverbial “game.”

### Cyber

All leaders have at least some awareness of the cyber threat at this point. However, U.S. leaders should not limit their concerns solely to cyber threats against the U.S. military. We must also specifically pay attention to the cyber threat against other elements of our economy and national power as a potential hybrid strategy an adversary might employ. Clearly advanced cyber attack capabilities exist and can be

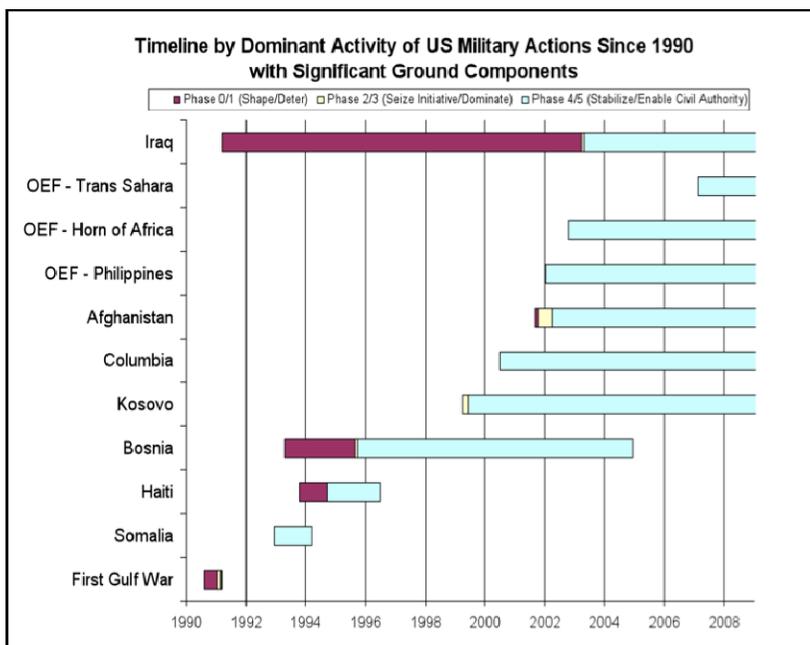
bought. The threat here is not only attacks initiated and executed as a conflict is ongoing, but also attacks that are prepared well before a conflict and are executed as part of a hybrid strategy. Cyber operations give an adversary alternatives to facing off against U.S. forces on the conventional battlefield. Additionally, since the U.S. often goes to war in the context of a Coalition, we cannot overlook the potentially powerful effect cyber operations could have if directed against U.S. allies.

### Special Operations Forces—Coordinated Direct Action Campaign

Some of the same countries potentially able to generate WMD capabilities also sustain special operations forces with the wherewithal to operate abroad. In some instances, these forces are quite large and might likely be used in neighboring countries. In other instances, the capability is more sophisticated and could be used to create far-reaching problems for the U.S. or Coalition partners. In this context, direct action could take the form of attacks on critical infrastructure (e.g., power, water), government facilities, or even on U.S. and coalition leaders. While the latter may sound far-fetched, these efforts need not be focused on the most senior leaders of a country to have a strategic effect. The point is that our adversaries are not demonstrating any adherence to the “rules” of conventional conflict and this evolution will likely continue. In that context, a broader use of special operations forces against key targets should not be a surprise.

### The Prevalence of Irregular Warfare

The U.S. military conceptualizes warfare or conflict in five phases (see U.S. Joint Publication 3.0 for more information). As highlighted in the perspectives above, it is unwise to focus on irregular warfare threats only in the latter phases of conflict, after the major combat operations have concluded. Cunning adversaries are just as likely to employ irregular warfare capabilities at any time. Some of these capabilities may manifest themselves similar to the irregular forces during Operation Iraqi Freedom 1—meaning as an adjunct to an adversaries’ conventional forces. The U.S. must recognize, however, that some of the most dangerous irregular capabilities might be



Data: Richard Grimmet, *Instances of Use of US Armed Forces Abroad, 1798-2007*. CRS Report to Congress, 1/24/2008.

invoked earlier in an evolving conflict. For example, as U.S. and coalition forces are staging and positioning in early phases of a conflict, a sophisticated enemy might employ cyber attacks not on the deploying forces but against critical targets in the homeland, while at the same time striking at the deploying forces.

While irregular threats must be anticipated through all phases of conflict, it is important to recognize that the longest phases of conflict, over the last 20 years, are irregular in nature. Consider the probability of U.S. forces facing irregular threats as a function of the amount of time U.S. forces spend in phases four and five, “stabilize” and “enable civil authority”, of the Joint Publication 3.0, “Joint Operations”. Figure 1 is an analysis of data, compiled by the Congressional Research Service, on the time U.S. forces have spent over the past 20 plus years in the Joint Publication 3.0 phases of conflict. The yellow bars indicate the minimal time U.S. forces have spent in major combat operations, phases two and three in U.S. joint warfighting doctrine. The burgundy and blue bars indicate the amount of time spent on the deterrence and shaping (burgundy), and the stabilize and enable civil authorities (blue) respectively.

It is not a given that operations in these phases will experience irregular warfare. However, insurgents, terrorists, and criminals can threaten the security of U.S. forces – as well as the results they seek to deliver – during these phases. Moreover, operations during these phases are essential to shaping the behaviors that then Secretary Gates spoke of in April, 2008. As the U.S. and coalition’s experience in Iraq painfully demonstrated, there are tremendous human and fiscal costs to be paid by a nation that is not well- prepared for the phases of operations following major combat operations.

## A Perspective on Adapting to the New Era

American military forces in combat adapt marvelously to the situation at-hand. After U.S. forces fought their way through the Normandy defenses, they undertook major adaptations to successfully fight through the bocage, heavy forests, and other situations standing in the way of victory in the European campaign of World War II. Similarly, the U.S. military – and especially the U.S. Army – magnificently transformed its strategy, tactics, and critical materiel support in the face of what the Iraq Study Group deemed a “grave and deteriorating” situation in late 2006. National security and defense leaders should not limit adaptation, however, to changes their forces make in the midst of a war. In fact, one might argue that the highest form of adaptation occurs before war begins, when the elements of national security prepare for future conflicts through thinking, investment, acquisition, and training.

Entering the Iraq war in 2003, U.S. forces did not have the doctrine, materiel, or training for the scale and scope of the irregular warfare they would encounter. In summary, they were unprepared. Generals Petraeus, Odierno, and others led the development and execution of a new counterinsurgency doctrine in the middle of the war. The Secretary of Defense personally drove major changes to materiel

acquisition, establishing three dedicated task forces to accelerate the Services' acquisition cycle, in response to specific needs in force protection, medical evacuation, and intelligence. These and other adaptations resulted in major results between 2007 and 2010. It is fair to say, however, that the lack of preparation for the irregular threat came at a heavy cost, almost to the point of a strategic defeat in the war.

This article is not suggesting that the U.S. and allied nations minimize preparations to engage and decisively defeat conventional military forces. It is suggesting much greater preparation for irregular threats to the point of institutionalizing the doctrine, capabilities, leadership, and training required to defeat a hybrid threat; the gravest irregular threats; as well as deliver success against irregular problems in the phases prior to and following major combat operations. This requires a difficult rebalancing of security capabilities, which is further complicated by the fiscal constraints facing the U.S. and other governments' national security budgets. U.S. security forces have undertaken truly remarkable adaptations in the midst of multiple wars since 9.11. Global conditions continue to dynamically change. National security would seem to be best served by intense focus on irregular warfare and continued adaptation.

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Prior to joining IBM, Mr. Strickland co- founded Edge Consulting, a consulting firm that achieved national recognition for pioneering work in the application of operations research methods and IT to quantify the value of intelligence. He helped lead Edge Consulting from a start-up to significant annual growth, culminating in its acquisition by National Interest Security Company.

Mr. Strickland was a career intelligence officer with 24 years experience in the Central Intelligence Agency's Senior Intelligence Service and the U.S. Marine Corps, where he led programs focused on developing innovative solutions and methodologies to measure and analyze mission performance. In recognition of his accomplishments, the CIA Director awarded him with the National Intelligence Medal of Achievement. Mr. Strickland also received the National Reconnaissance Office's Medals of Distinguished and Superior Service. Mr. Strickland is the co-creator of "Edge Methods," a unique blend of consulting, scientific methods, and IT used to assess the value of information from empirical data. Edge Methods has been used to advise national security principals and commanders on the optimal use of billions of dollars of operational and fiscal intelligence resources. He is a recognized teacher, public speaker, and published author. He holds a BA in Business Management, MS in Technology Management, and the CIO University's Certificate in Federal Executive Competencies.



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Chris Whitlock has worked defense and national security issues for the past 30 years. For the last 20, he focused primarily on strategy consulting on intelligence issues from an analytic perspective. He co-founded and was the CEO of Edge Consulting, which applied empirical methods and management consulting techniques to advise on major programmatic issues confronting DoD and the Intelligence Community. He holds a B.A. in History (Mississippi), an M.A. in National Security (Georgetown) and an M.B.A.

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