



## INTRODUCTION TO IRREGULAR WARFARE

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The Department of the Air Force (DAF) provides essential capabilities to the joint force across the [competition continuum](#) and range of operations. This air force doctrine publication (AFDP) provides operational level doctrinal guidance for [irregular warfare](#) (IW) and presents fundamental IW principles and core IW activities in the context of challenges to US national security. This AFDP defines IW and highlights the role of Air and Space Force forces in it. The AFDP discusses the main characteristics of IW that should be taken into account when developing IW-related strategy, plans, assessment, and command and control. This AFDP concludes with how Air Force forces are organized, presented, and employed to support IW operations.

### STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Air and Space Force operations are often the same regardless of the type of warfare or category of mission activity. However, Service members should be able to clearly articulate how unique Service capabilities may be applied to create effects useful in an IW context. Generally, the distinction between IW and traditional warfare arises in how capabilities are applied to achieve different ends and how missions have different challenges. For example, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) demands for IW can be different from traditional warfare, requiring distinctive capabilities. [Preparing for activities in IW](#) begins with this understanding and shapes perspectives on operational [execution](#).

The speed, range, and flexibility of airpower play a critical role in helping state and non-state actors earn and sustain legitimacy and influence with relevant populations – the primary objective of IW. Airpower can extend reach and bring rapid response and improved situational awareness. These in turn help nations establish the physical and virtual infrastructure essential for internal growth and well-being. Airpower also bolsters all instruments of national power and provides visible, practical, and effective means to consolidate governance and provide for the populace, and allows a nation to:

- ★ Provide political leaders immediate, largely unimpeded access to all operational domains (air, land, maritime, space, and cyberspace) to demonstrate governance and legitimacy by delivering goods, services, and humanitarian relief.
- ★ Support military and civil ground forces in providing security and rapid response.
- ★ Deny adversaries access to ungoverned, under-governed, and remote areas.
- ★ Patrol and help secure borders.
- ★ Promote civil sector advancement, especially in air, space, and cyberspace infrastructure.
- ★ Deter and defeat external aggression.
- ★ Inhibit hostile forces from moving openly or in large numbers without fear of detection and attack.
- ★ Strengthen internal security.

The term “irregular warfare” evolved from efforts to define those conflicts that manifest in adversarial actions, but typically lack large-force-on-force peer adversary confrontations. Irregular warfare has been an aspect of conflict throughout history and will likely continue in the foreseeable future for two primary reasons: stability challenges due to weakly governed nations, and the prohibitive cost of waging traditional war. In many cases, IW-based strategies are a function of limited capability, and are often the only option available to a weaker force.

In IW, a less powerful adversary seeks to disrupt or negate the military capabilities and advantages of a more powerful military force, which usually serves that nation’s established government. IW can apply between both state and non-state actors and across the competition continuum. Some objectives within the context of state competition might be sought through IW, such as imposing costs, gaining access and freedom of action, gaining support of key allies and partners, enhancing deterrence, or setting the environment. One example could be the conduct of a counterinsurgency between a US partner nation and an insurgent group backed by a state competitor.

Airmen have a history of conducting IW, beginning with the Carpetbagger and Air Commando operations in World War II, soon followed by the use of US Airmen advisors to the Greek government during the Greek Civil War (1946-1949) and to the Philippine government in their suppression of the Hukbalahap Rebellion (1946-1954). The Air Force gained further experience in conducting and supporting IW in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Irregular warfare has dominated the scope of conflict for US forces since 2001. While the focus of US strategy may change, the DAF will remain a key contributor

to US IW capabilities. Today, our national strategic guidance requires the military to maintain the capability to conduct IW.

Irregular warfare is not a “lesser” form of warfare in terms of sophistication or effectiveness and may be conducted stand-alone, or alongside traditional forms of warfare. The US must maintain the capacity to not only defend against IW operations, but conduct offensive IW operations against enemies ranging from insurgents to peer adversaries across the competition continuum.

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