



TRADITIONAL AND IRREGULAR WAR

Last Updated: 27 Feb 2015

The United States' overwhelming dominance in recent traditional wars has made it highly unlikely that adversaries, especially those state and non-state actors with less-robust military capabilities, will choose to fight the United States in traditional, force-on-force engagements. Thus, irregular forms of warfare have become attractive, if not the most preferred option for adversaries such as terrorists, insurgents, criminal networks, and non-friendly states to effectively challenge US interests and national security. Irregular warfare (IW) presents different challenges to our military and to the Air Force.

- ✦ **Traditional warfare** is characterized as “**a violent struggle for domination between nation-states or coalitions and alliances of nation-states.**”¹ This confrontation typically involves force-on-force military operations in which adversaries employ a variety of conventional military capabilities against each other in the air, land, maritime, space, and cyberspace domains. The objective may be to convince or coerce key military or political decision makers, defeat an adversary's armed forces, destroy an adversary's war-making capacity, or seize or retain territory in order to force a change in an adversary's government or policies.
- ✦ **Irregular warfare** is defined 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 to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will.

Both IW and traditional warfare seek to resolve conflict by compelling change in adversarial behavior. However, they differ significantly in both strategy and conduct. **Traditional warfare focuses on dominance over an adversary's ability to sustain its war fighting capability. IW focuses on population-centric approaches that affect actors, behaviors, relationships, and stability in the area or region of interest.** Therefore, IW requires a different level of operational thought and threat comprehension.

IW is not a lesser-included form of traditional warfare. Rather, IW encompasses a variety of operations where the characteristics are significantly different from traditional war. There are principally five activities or operations that are undertaken in sequence, in parallel, or in blended form in a coherent [campaign](#) to address irregular threats:

¹ Joint doctrine does not formally define traditional war. However, Joint Publication 1 contains this characterization.

[counterterrorism](#), [unconventional warfare](#), [foreign internal defense](#), [counterinsurgency](#), and [stability operations](#).

Traditional warfare and IW are not mutually exclusive; both forms of warfare may be present in a given conflict. Airmen should understand that the character of war may often change in the course of a conflict. This is especially true in IW where the conflict is often protracted and varies in intensity. Traditional warfare can rapidly evolve into an irregular war and vice versa, requiring the military force to adapt from one form to the other.

Refer to Annex 3-2, [Irregular Warfare](#), for detailed discussion on IW.
