



MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT IRREGULAR WARFARE HAVE WASTED U.S. INFLUENCE IN THE SAHEL

By Capt. Juan Quiroz, Civil Affairs Officer

MALI • BURKINA FASO • CHAD • NIGER

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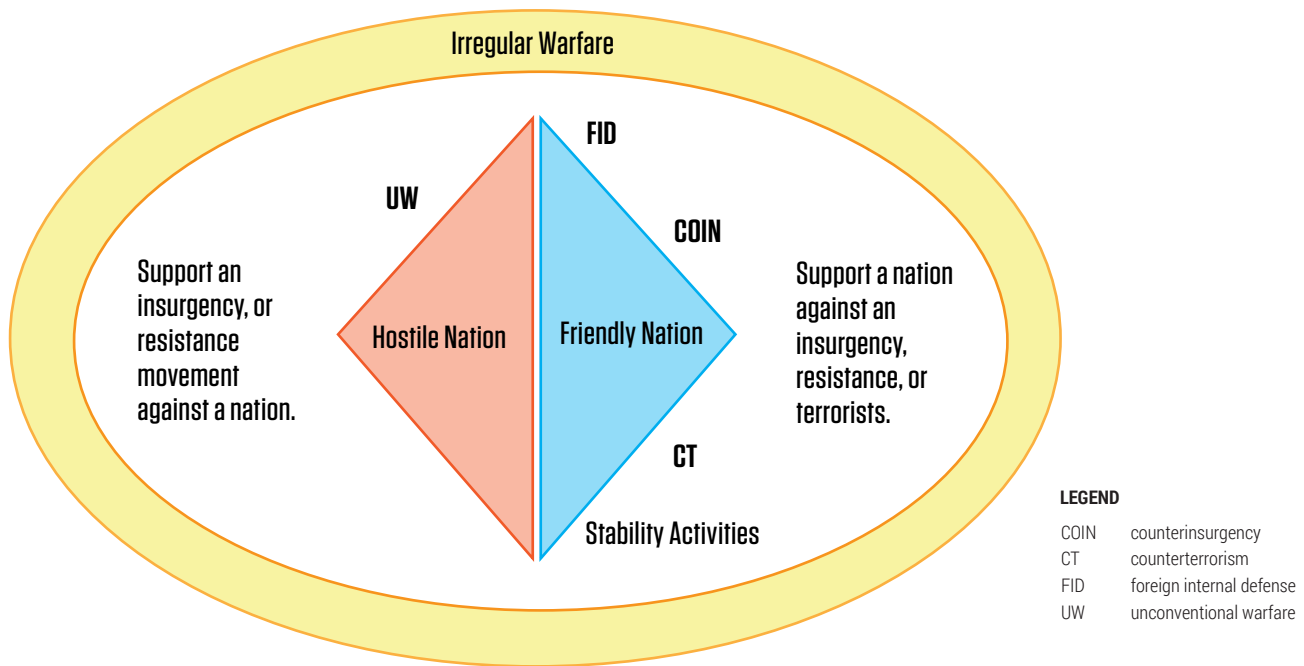
The number of violent episodes in the Sahel region of Africa, centered around Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, has quadrupled from 700 incidents in 2019 to over 2,800 incidents in 2022.⁰¹ Despite providing years of training and assistance to these countries' militaries, U.S. Army special operations forces (ARSOF) efforts to contain the territorial expansion of violent extremist organizations have proven ineffective. This has been due largely to a one-dimensional approach to irregular warfare, whereby well-meaning outside actors, including ARSOF, attempted to root out violent extremist organizations but inadvertently reinforced central governments' misperception that their first priority was public safety, clean water, food sources, and so on. The local governments emphasized the military's focus on security over stability tasks undermined the other essential forms of support to governance. The people of the Sahel require less security and more governance – that is, the provision of clean water and a stable food source. The result has been declining U.S. influence in the region since 2020 as these states' armed forces have overthrown their democratically elected governments and turned to Russia for diplomatic support and military aid. To utilize Irregular Warfare more effectively in a while-of-government effort, ARSOF practitioners must reexamine the purpose of Irregular Warfare and coordinate a more impactful range of operations and activities. This includes the use of interagency partners as the

lead agency. The U.S. federal agencies, such as the Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development, should take the lead on this total effort. When using conventional or special operations forces, the Irregular Warfare-related activities and operations should focus more on provision of essential services and less on physical security against terrorist or criminal threats.

REEXAMINING IRREGULAR WARFARE

The ARSOF's narrow conceptualization of how to conduct Irregular Warfare can be attributed to the lag in updating doctrine to reflect the dynamics ARSOF Soldiers encounter in the current operational environment. Field Manual 3-05, Army Special Operations, still defines Irregular Warfare as “a violent struggle among state and nonstate actors for legitimacy and influence over relevant populations.”⁰² The manual elaborates that influence can be exercised through “political, psychological, and economic methods,” but its predominant focus is on kinetic activities such as terrorism, insurgency, criminal activity, and raids.⁰³ Joint Publication 3-05, Joint Doctrine for Special Operations, does not improve our understanding, and presents a reductive view of Irregular Warfare that bins different types of kinetic activities according to whether a nation is classified as friendly or hostile.⁰⁴

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SPECIAL OPERATIONS ACTIVITIES SUPPORT FOR OR AGAINST A NATION DURING IRREGULAR WARFARE



These out-of-date publications and associated figures (above) fail to convey the real reason state and non-state actors participate in conflict—failure to achieve economic, political, or social objectives through nonviolent means. Additionally, a simple fix to the above model might make “stability activities” the main effort by its position on the slide; this would reflect a preeminent role of nonkinetic versus kinetic activities. Carl von Clausewitz, a Prussian general and military theorist from the 1800s, described these objectives as “the original motive for war,” and any changes to belligerents’ objectives or concessions made to opponents can affect the need or desirability to continue waging war.⁰⁵ In contrast to current special operations doctrine, JP 1, Volume 1, Joint Warfighting, offers a more expansive description of Irregular Warfare as a form of warfare, where states and non-state actors campaign to “assure or coerce states or other groups through indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetric activities.”⁰⁶ Conventional Army doctrine has also been updated to reflect the essentially political character of IW. FM 3-0, Operations, and FM 1-02.1, Operational Terms, define Irregular Warfare as “the overt, clandestine, and covert employment of military and non-military capabilities across multiple domains by state and non-state actors through methods other than military domination of an adversary, either as the primary approach or in concert with conventional warfare.”⁰⁷ In conjunction with the theory presented by Clausewitz, these new definitions grant leeway to ARSOF Soldiers to think more creatively about Irregular Warfare in terms of simultaneously assuring partners and coercing belligerents through military and nonmilitary means to accept and adhere to political settlements advantageous to U.S. interests. This new Irregular Warfare concept is especially relevant in the Sahel, where the complex web of partner and adversary objectives demonstrate that the old Irregular Warfare tug-of-war for populations’ loyalties is impractical and counterproductive.

CONFLICT DYNAMICS IN THE SAHEL

Desertification in the Sahel region has intensified historic resource competition between nomadic and sedentary tribes. Because this competition occurred far from their capitals, central governments engaged in “benign neglect,” tacitly condoning the marginalization of nomadic pastoralists by sedentary communities who seek exclusive control of fertile land.⁰⁸ This inequitable arrangement caused disputes when the two sides came into contact, but government apparatuses, while limited, were usually able to mediate resolutions. This arrangement has now become so inequitable that tribal clashes are becoming larger and more violent. Central governments have done little to address the resource shortfalls due to their limited governance capability and reach into this region. To give this historical context, France, the region’s former colonial power, had 89 civil servants per 1,000 inhabitants. Today, by comparison, it is estimated that Burkina Faso has only eight civil servants per 1,000 inhabitants, Mali six, and Niger three.⁰⁹

Because these governments have little to no presence outside their capitals, military action is relied upon to project authority and act as the face of government to peripheral communities. Rather than acting as impartial security guarantors, these government forces tend to support certain tribal militias who are focused on settling tribal rivalries instead of providing any form of governance in the region.¹⁰ This measure has backfired significantly, however, as marginalized communities prefer to align with violent extremist organizations considered to be less dangerous than government forces.¹¹ This local alliance and introduction of violent extremist organizations into the conflict creates a vicious cycle in which participants overinvest in temporary security at the expense of enduring governance. With most assistance coming in the form of military training

and support, which tends to gravitate toward a physical threat, these governments fail to develop a governance capacity that looks to developing essential services in tandem with military capacity. This environment, absent of the unique skillset resident in U.S. Army Civil Affairs, ultimately results in the military coup scenarios witnessed in Mali, Burkina Faso, Chad, and Niger.¹²

In the aftermath of these coups, Russia positioned itself as the security partner by default. Playing on this contradiction, Russia leverages disinformation to turn public opinion against Western assistance and deploys Wagner mercenaries who inflame government forces' worst instincts to commit even more atrocities, which further increases support for violent extremist organizations.¹³ As Sahel governments become more complicit in human rights abuses against their own people, the rift between them and former international and Western partners widens. With these governments becoming increasingly dependent upon Russia to maintain their hold on power, any plausible avenue to exert U.S. influence in the region becomes increasingly problematic.

HOW TO WAGE IRREGULAR WARFARE IN THE SAHEL

To date, although well intended, ARSOF and U.S. interagency partners efforts through and with regional and central governments to bolster their security and governance capacity had little effect. Instead, an increase in violent extremist organizations activity in the periphery and Russian influence in the capitals persists. This unintended effect is due to wrongly equating strong central governments with stability and security. Some communities in the periphery may be wary of, or even outright hostile to, the idea of being drawn closer to central governments that ignore them in the best of times and commit atrocities against them in the worst of times. They may feel similarly about the violent extremist organizations with whom they occasionally ally. The ARSOF, which prides itself on its indigenous or irregular approach to challenges such as this, can add value by engaging directly with communities in peripheral regions. They can engage adjacent tribal groups to discover their motivation for waging war against each other, violent extremist organizations, or government forces, and establish the United States as an honest broker between belligerents. Perhaps their idea of stability is contingent on economic security or mending intercommunal relations rather than a greater government presence and the use of military force.

Once ARSOF elements have established trust with belligerents and understand their motivations, the U.S. interagency can also adopt a more indigenous and irregular approach to correct the imbalances that sparked conflict. Development and trade agencies can assure communities that violent resource competition is no longer necessary by working directly with their leaders to furnish humanitarian aid, foster commercial activity, and develop an indigenous capacity to independently sustain economic security. ARSOF could leverage ties with government and indigenous forces to deescalate tensions and, if needed, to implement stability mechanisms and target irreconcilable elements. Diplomatic personnel would have to broker power-sharing arrangements between local communities and central governments and then hold central governments accountable if they violate the agreements.

CONCLUSION

By reframing Irregular Warfare as the shaping of partner and belligerent behavior through simultaneous assurance and coercion, ARSOF can employ a wider range of activities like foreign internal defense, stability, and Civil Affairs operations to be more effective in achieving a political settlement favorable to U.S. interests. This is especially crucial in support of integrated deterrence where ARSOF offers a military option of relative advantage. In these conflicts, ARSOF would be best employed in support of interagency and host-nation counterparts who possess the appropriate mandate to address the issues driving conflict at the local level. Their diplomatic, economic, and governance effects could change belligerents' strategic calculus concerning whether instability and conflict should persist.

If ARSOF is to be successful in the application of Irregular Warfare across the competition continuum, especially in the Sahel, ARSOF must update its special operations and associated Irregular Warfare doctrine to reflect the oversized value of the nonkinetic aspects of a whole-of-government integration of the military across the competition continuum. Violent extremist organizations and the threat that they pose are not the result of failed physical security protocols. Instead, violent extremist organizations thrive in an area where there is a real or perceived lack of water, food, and general economic security. If ARSOF were to focus more on its Civil Affairs and military information support operations and use them in support of a larger interagency effort, ARSOF would then be more successful and provide greater value to the joint force and the U.S. country team. In the ubiquitous DIME model DoD uses to explain the four elements (Diplomacy, Information, Military, and Economics) of U.S. national power, ARSOF must shrink the large M down to a small m. If ARSOF are to be successful in the Sahel and other areas like it, then ARSOF must adjust the DIME spelling to DImE.¹⁴

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