



Same spelling different story: Comparing the conceptualization of Irregular Warfare across the Globe

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Irregular Warfare (IW) goes by many names and definitions across the world. While some differences are only minor semantic variances reflecting the history of specific countries or the local culture of a particular state's defense sector, other differences show widely divergent understandings based on who perpetuates and who are targeted by IW. Caught in the middle of these diverging views are U.S. warfighters, diplomats, and security cooperation professionals tasked with securing the United States from a myriad of IW threats that emanate far from America's shores. To help these stakeholders navigate the complexities of IW challenges, the Department of War's (DOW) Irregular Warfare Center (IWC) conducted a multi-regional and multi-year study series to explore how allies and partners across different regions view IW. This article systematically compares and contrasts the results of the regional studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the actors, threats and tools characterizing the IW environment.

U.S. Government Definitions – A Semantic Collision

Across the U.S. government, IW goes by multiple names and definitions. Congress [defines IW in the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act \(NDAA\)](#) as “activities not involving armed conflict that support predetermined United States policy and military objectives conducted by, with, and through regular forces, irregular forces, groups, and individuals.” In [Joint Publication 1 \(JP-1\)](#), the DOW defines IW 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, either as the primary approach or in concert with conventional warfare.” The U.S. State Department senior leadership uses the terms [hybrid warfare](#), [hybrid threats](#), [grey zone activities](#), and [irregular warfare](#) interchangeably to describe malign activities short of conventional war.

However, while multiple integrated country strategies (ICSs) refer to [hybrid warfare](#), or to a lesser extent [grey zone activities](#), no identified ICS has referred to IW. In fact, IW and related terms appear only a few times in other cabinet-level agencies’ public materials, making it difficult for stakeholders to ascertain which terms they prefer to use. Additionally, some [propose to shift away from the term](#) IW within defense circles in favor of “defense support to strategic competition.” This view narrows the focus to DOW activities, which

IWC MISSION: The IWC prepares the warfighter to conduct irregular warfare across the spectrum of conflict by bridging instruction to operationalizing IW using next-generation techniques and concepts that enhance the lethality of the force and positions the United States and key allies and partners to remain ahead of the threat.

could allow better communication with the inter-agency, allies, and partners about what the DOW can contribute short of large-scale combat operations. The definitional divergence becomes even more complicated when considering the concepts of allies and partners.

Exploring how others think - Surveys and Interviews

Between 2022 and 2025, IWC conducted a multi-regional and multi-year study series to explore how allies and partners conceptualize IW. IWC conducted each study with the same research methodology, based on surveys and subsequent semi-structured interviews with representatives of selected professional military educational institutions and defense establishment of allies and partner countries across [Europe](#), [Africa](#), [South and Central America](#), and the [Indo-Pacific region](#). The survey questions addressed: 1) the target institution's conceptualization of IW; 2) which irregular threats the institution considers and prioritizes; 3) how the institution teaches concepts related to IW; 4) whether the institution publishes on the topic; the level of the institution's connection to a broader community focused on IW; and 5) who makes up the institution's faculty, courses, and target audience.

IWC researchers shaped the interview portion of the study based on the survey responses, providing potential avenues of further exploration. The researchers divided each report into two sections: 1) a report of the study, assessing each institution and its responses; and 2) an analysis section, discussing the similarities and differences in thought regarding IW found through participant responses. In each regional report, while describing each country's IW outlook, IW authors used language as similar as possible to how the institution portrayed itself in the study to preserve fidelity to the original survey answers. The following comparison highlights the key similarities and differences IWC identified in the four regional studies to inform U.S. warfighters, diplomats, and security cooperation professionals working in the IW space with allies and partners.

Allies and Partners – Converging and Diverging Stories Across Regions

IWC studies found that defense thought leaders in Africa and the Indo-Pacific are most likely to use “ir-

regular warfare” while surveyed individuals in Europe primarily prefer the term “hybrid threats.” In Africa, none of the study participants from the five survey countries –Angola, Nigeria, Kenya, Liberia, and Zambia – proposed hybrid warfare as a preferred term. Some participants did note that while their countries lack a doctrinal definition of IW, they do have official definitions of related terms. For instance, the Nigerian Defence College (NDC) has handbook definitions of insurgency and terrorism. Additionally, Zambia uses Low-Intensity Conflict Operations (LICO), which the participant from the Defence Services, Command and Staff College said is defined as “localized [conflicts] between two or more states or non-state actors below [the level of] conventional warfare.” In South America, there was broad recognition of IW as a term, but participants also proposed the largest number of alternative terms to any other region. Participants proposed non-conventional warfare (*Guerra no convencional GNC*), asymmetric warfare, hybrid warfare, and operations other than war.

While the U.S. DOW definition of IW is clear that both “states and non-state actors” can employ IW, IWC's study series has revealed that this is far from a universal conclusion among allies and partners. Some study participants agreed with the U.S. understanding of IW, though most weighted their responses towards either state or non-state actors. Several respondents questioned whether states could be IW actors without a non-state proxy. Proximity to a state that the studied countries viewed as a conventional threat was also often identified as the key factor that drove the state/non-state use of IW debate. In Europe, for instance, the closer geographically a respondent was to Russia, the more they discussed state-based IW (although they used the term hybrid warfare).

Out of the four study regions, most participants from Africa, Indo-Pacific, and South America primarily viewed IW as the purview of non-state actors. Some study participants expressed doubt that state-based IW was possible without a non-state nexus. According to some of the African participants, this view is partially explained by the lack of inter-state war in their regions. On the other hand, each participant's nation had either experienced the impacts of violent non-state actors through domestic insurgency or participation in regional or UN peacekeeping. In the Indo-Pacific, participants similarly did not have a unified definition of IW but consistently pointed to non-state actors such

as violent extremist organizations (VEOs) or rebel organizations.

The European region is an outlier in the state vs non-state actor debate, where most study participants also identified state-based IW both as definitionally IW and as a threat. However, in Europe, a country's geographic proximity to the Russian Federation determined the extent a country identified state-based IW. Institutions further from Russia were more likely to discuss VEO threats.

Across the four regions, the largest two influences on IW conceptualization were the country's history and that of its region. In the [African Conceptualization Study](#), participants often pointed to irregular tactics in 20th century decolonization movements and post-colonial insurgencies as informing their view of IW. Similarly, in South America, participants primarily viewed IW through a [counterinsurgency \(COIN\)](#) lens based on their historical experience with anti-government insurgencies. For participants in Africa and South America, the overall region's experience with decolonization or insurgency seemed to drive IW conceptualization. In Africa, one participant from a country that had a comparatively non-violent experience with decolonization, pointed to counter-IW operations at the end of colonialism in the broader region as informing their understanding of IW. The historical approach isn't unique to non-U.S. institutions since some of the foundations of the U.S. IW concept can be traced back to its own struggle against a colonial master in the American Revolution.

Working Across Conceptualization(s) – A way forward

IWC research demonstrates that there is not a universal understanding of what IW is. Additionally, while there is broad awareness of the term, the U.S. position that IW is perpetuated by both "states and non-state actors" is in tension with large swaths of the world. This fact doesn't invalidate the U.S. position, rather it indicates that U.S. warfighters, diplomats, and academics should be prepared to work across diverse conceptualizations of IW to advance U.S. interests rather than assuming partners are willing to entirely adopt the U.S. definition of IW. Furthermore, it should not preclude the U.S. from publicly or privately calling out state-backed IW in Africa, South America, or the Indo-Pacific, but rather it indicates that the United

States should adopt a targeted approach to highlight state-backed IW that is most likely to shape U.S. key partners or allies understanding of the threat. On another note, forms of IW identified in this study series that are under-conceptualized in the current U.S. IW space should be reexamined, such as crimes against wildlife, illicit timber harvesting, illegal mining, narcotrafficking, and human trafficking. Even if every incidence of these activities does not strictly meet the JP-1 definition of IW, IWC research demonstrates that they are important to U.S. partners.

Finally, many of these activities provide IW actors as conceptualized in JP-1 the funding or cover necessary to perpetuate violent struggle that can threaten U.S. global interests, and warfighters abroad or in the homeland.

To date, the IWC surveyed defense thought leaders from 23 countries on the understanding of IW. While this effort represents a large, sustained study of global IW conceptualization, there are ample opportunities for researchers and security cooperation professionals to further explore and improve our understanding of IW. Further work on this topic could examine U.S. adversaries' conceptualization of IW and examine whether conclusions from each of the regional studies hold for additional actors. Additionally, IW conceptualization is not static. Since launching the study series, [multiple countries](#) have publicly announced or privately considered IW centers. High-profile state-based IW operations such as Israel's Operation Rising Lion, Ukraine's Operation Spiderweb, Russian IW across Europe post-2022, and an expansion of proxy conflicts in multiple regions may have also changed some individual perceptions of IW. As one of the study participants noted "irregular warfare is the new regular" and we have an obligation to study it at the same levels as we study conventional warfare.

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