



What is Irregular Warfare?

...and why does it matter?

Irregular warfare (IW) is defined in several key U.S. government sources, each emphasizing distinct but complementary aspects. The list below offers a sampling of the IW definitions and just like IW itself, even defining it is a struggle:

Joint Publication-1 defines irregular warfare as *“a form of warfare where states and nonstate 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 **2020 Irregular Warfare Annex** describes it as *“a struggle among state and non-state actors to influence populations and affect legitimacy. Irregular warfare favors indirect and asymmetric approaches, though it may employ the full range of military and other capabilities, in order to erode an adversary's power, influence, and will.”*

Congress, in statute, defines irregular warfare as *“Department of Defense 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.”*

Congress also defined irregular warfare in **Section 1202 of the FY2018 NDAA** as *“provid[ing] support to foreign forces, irregular forces, groups, or individuals engaged in supporting or facilitating authorized ongoing military operations by United States special operations forces.”*

The Irregular Warfare Center does not seek to revise or add to these definitions. Instead, it works with them and identifies their common ground:

Each definition—explicitly or implicitly—acknowledges that IW involves a wide range of actors: states, non-state groups (such as insurgents, militias, and proxies), and individuals. This reflects the reality that IW operates across formal and informal networks, making it inherently complex and dynamic.

Each definition centers on influence—shaping behavior, perceptions, and legitimacy—rather than conventional military victory. This distinction is critical: IW is defined not by the presence of combat, but by its strategic effects, often achieved without kinetic force.

All definitions highlight the use of indirect, unconventional, or asymmetric methods. Activities such as information operations and cyberspace activities are central to IW and set it apart from traditional warfare.

Terms Associated with IW

Similar to the term “irregular warfare,” these terms have varying definitions among U.S. and international organizations.

Hybrid Warfare: “an interplay or fusion of conventional as well as unconventional instruments of power and tools of subversion. These instruments or tools are blended in a synchronized manner to exploit the vulnerabilities of an antagonist and achieve synergistic effects.” [NATO]

Gray Zone: “a realm of international relations between peaceful interstate diplomacy, economic activity, and people-to-people contact on one end of the spectrum and armed conflict on the other, and gray zone activities as coercive or subversive actions to achieve objectives at the expense of others in contravention or in the absence of international norms.” [ODNI]

Asymmetric Warfare: “Warfare in which belligerents are mismatched in their military capabilities or their accustomed methods of engagement.” [DOS]

Political Warfare: “the employment of all the means at a nation’s command, short of war, to achieve its national objectives” [CRS]

Resistance Operations: “a nation’s organized, whole-of-society effort, encompassing the full range of activities from nonviolent to violent, led by a legally established government (potentially exiled/displaced or shadow) to reestablish independence and autonomy within its sovereign territory that has been wholly or partially occupied by a foreign power” [ROC]

Strategic Resilience: the capacity, at national and collective level, to prepare for, resist, respond to, and quickly recover from strategic shocks and disruptions, across the full spectrum of threats. [NATO]