

Advancing the SOF Profession: The future of IWI's SOF Focus Area

Description

Since launching in August 2024, the Irregular Warfare Initiative (IWI) "SOF in Competition Project" has aspired to serve as the intellectual home for Special Operations Forces (SOF). As a retired Army Special Forces officer and leadership scholar, I am proud to have taken over this initiative from its founding director, Adam Darnley Stuart, to continue our collective pursuit of understanding the complex role of SOF in irregular warfare. In assuming this new role, we have reframed the "SOF in Competition Project" as the IWI "SOF Program," providing an opportunity for us to outline our updated vision and present calls to action for the community.

The Significance of SOF in Irregular Warfare

The need for an intellectual home for SOF has been reinforced by the significant amount of content generated across the SOF enterprise exploring SOF activities and contemplating its role in a complex strategic environment. This activity demonstrates that the SOF community is a learning organism—we seek to quickly capture lessons learned, rigorously analyze their implications, and then share our findings with the broader community so we can move forward together to improve our craft and its relevance for achieving national and strategic objectives.

A similar dialogue has emerged regarding irregular warfare, enabled by IWI's core mission statement to bridge the gap between policymakers, practitioners, and academics. SOF play a significant role in the discussion and the implementation of irregular warfare. While SOF are not the only actors in irregular warfare, irregular warfare is the central activity of SOF.

However, irregular warfare is a team sport and SOF do not compete or campaign in a vacuum. Irregular warfare is often played out in Title 22 environments and in the gray zone where collaboration is crucial, and building dynamic networks across sectors is key to success.

Vision: A Virtual Team House for SOF Thinkers

The shift in this initiative is more than semantic; it is necessary to promote a long-term vision for the future of the SOF profession.

SOF professionals, seeking to sharpen their understanding of irregular warfare and their role in attacking complex national security challenges, need a home where they are afforded opportunities to build community and networks across the joint force, interagency, industry, and research base; to engage in professional discourse as both consumers and influencers; and to grow professionally.

The purpose of the IWI SOF Program is to curate a virtual “team house” where we explore the big ideas impacting SOF and engage in constructive discussions and substantive debate. While acknowledging the past to understand our present, our primary focus will be on conceptualizing the future of SOF in an ever-changing global landscape. The team house is not just for operators, but for all stakeholders in the SOF enterprise.

The SOF Program will continue to serve as a one-stop shop for SOF-related professional growth, cognitive exploration, and the development of SOF concepts that drive public dialogue, while also offering opportunities for community members to volunteer with IWI or participate in meaningful leadership opportunities.

Call to Action 1: Build the Community

IWI recognizes the power of human networks and bridges the gaps between our different professional and academic communities. But the strength of IWI’s human networks and the effectiveness of IWI in fulfilling its mission statement depend on active participation across our community. As part of the SOF Program, I invite you to consume website content regularly and engage with content creators and team members. Although the first objective of IWI is to build a community, merely creating a community is not the end goal. Lasting success and relevance will result from proactive engagement by individuals across the IWI community with relevant backgrounds and expertise. That is how the SOF Program will unearth game-changing insights to advance the profession.

Call to Action 2: Give Voice to Your Passion

The SOF Program website is a digital flagpole for our professional community. It is dedicated to our pursuit of knowledge sharing, spirited discussion, and opportunities for refining these ideas through professional discourse. We encourage you to view the program as an opportunity for members of the SOF community of interest to offer a published voice to our collective passion for the SOF profession. In this program, you can write an article, propose a podcast episode, or plan/co-plan an event with the IWI SOF community. We welcome all submissions as opportunities for motivated individuals to have a platform for sharing new ideas and innovative recommendations.

We are seeking thought leadership that offers meaningful insights into all aspects of SOF and IW as we embark on a new chapter in the program's development. Areas of exploration include, but are not limited to:

- Exploring each of the SOF core activities in the modern national security context
- Showcasing the impact of the SOF profession on the future of irregular and conventional warfare
- Exploring SOF's complex nexus between the human domain and emerging new technologies
- Shaping the SOF Identity
- Discussing and defining requirements for SOF Education
- Reflecting on SOF organizational structures
- Identifying and conceptualizing historical experiences into meaningful lessons learned
- Recruitment, training, and sustainment challenges

The possibilities are endless, and we encourage you to think creatively and contribute your unique perspectives.

Call to Action 3: Join the Team

The IWI SOF Program will feature all team members on the IWI website, enabling them to gain valuable thought leadership experience within the SOF community and contribute meaningfully to shaping the SOF profession. As a member of the team, we will not only showcase your expertise on social media platforms but also encourage your own initiative in promoting new topics and shaping existing discussions.

The SOF Program aims to have a significant impact across the entire SOF world, and we cannot achieve this without participation from talented and experienced scholars, practitioners, and industry professionals who make up the SOF community. We invite you to join us on this exciting journey to advance the future of SOF. Reach out and help us make a difference!

[Dr. Joseph Long](#) is the Director of the IWI SOF Program. He is also a retired Green Beret officer, leadership scholar, author, and public speaker. Dr. Long currently works as a the Program Manager and Senior Policy Analyst in support of the Office of Information Operations Policy (OIOP) for the Assistant Secretary of War for Special Operations and Low Intensity Conflict (ASD SO/LIC), and serves as a 2025 IWI Non-Resident Fellow, Special Operations Association of America (SOAA) Advisory Board Member, and former Professor of Leadership and Ethics at the Joint Special Operations University (JSOU).

The views expressed are those of the author and do not reflect the official position of the Irregular Warfare Initiative, Princeton University's Empirical Studies of Conflict Project, the Modern War Institute at West Point, or the United States Government.

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