Exploring African Perspectives on Irregular Warfare

Description

Across Africa, â??conventional warfare [â?¦] is irregular and irregular warfare is conventional.â?• That is how a Nigerian general officer described the state of warfare in his region to the United States Department of Defenseâ??s (DoDâ??s) Irregular Warfare Center (IWC). While key U.S. strategy documents call on U.S. forces to â??institutionalize irregular warfare as a core competencyâ?• across much of Africa, irregular warfare (IW) is already the main modality of warfare. Given the prominence of IW on the continent, understanding how African allies and partners view IW is vital for the United States to ensure warfighter effectiveness in the region. This is where the IWC comes in. The IWCâ??s third iteration of the Centerâ??s *Conceptualization of Irregular Warfare Study Series* builds on previous work conceptualizing IW in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. After recent engagement with five thought leaders across Angola, Nigeria, Kenya, Liberia, and Zambia, the IWCâ??s study provides four key lessons on IW in Africa:

1. The concept of IW resonated with study participants, but there is not a unified conceptualization of IW across Africa.
2. Participants primarily considered IW as the focus of violent non-state actors.
3. Colonial and post-colonial experience influences IW understanding.
4. IW in a participant stateâ??s neighboring countries has an outsized impact on national perspectives.

We reached these conclusions after conducting an open-ended survey followed by semi-structured interviews and reviewing presentations by study participants on irregular warfare. The survey questions included asking about definitions of IW, primary irregular threats, types of IW education, and primary audiences for IW education. During the interviews, we asked participants to elaborate on their survey responses using both scripted questions and follow-ups tailored to their individual answers.

We approached studying IW conceptualization in Africa in the same manner as IWCâ??s two previous studies on IW conceptualization in Europe and the Indo-Pacific. For this iteration, we chose five countries based on their relevance to U.S. interests in the region, security posture, and openness to engaging with the U.S. DoD. We focused on interviewing instructors at professional military institutions or key individuals inside respective defense ministries. The African Conceptualization of IW Study included one assistant minister of defense, one lieutenant general, two brigadier generals, and one major. Except for the assistant minister of defense, all participants were either instructors or had

recently served as instructors.

Why Study IW in Africa

Irregular warfare on the African continent provides ample case studies that test IWâ??s key attributes of â??indirect, non-attributable, or asymmetricâ?• methods. Threat actors often channel IW campaigns aimed at core U.S. interests through multiple regions without respecting national borders, especially in Africa. Violent extremist organizations and state actors leverage IW techniques to overtly and clandestinely develop influence across a continent replete with natural resources and human talent. The continent is full of cases including proxy conflict, foreign internal defense, and asymmetric capabilities to offset conventional combat power. In the case of direct great power conflict in other regions, Africa could be a region for U.S. adversaries to pursue horizontal escalation.

Horizontal escalation occurs as belligerents use IW outside of a primary conflict theater to raise the costs of continuing to fight. This model has already been partially demonstrated in Africa through Ukrainian support to Tuareg rebels targeting Russian mercenaries in Mali.

How the Pentagon thinks about IW in 2025

Joint Publication 1 Volume 1: Joint Warfighting lays out the DoDâ??s definition of IW as: â??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 warfareâ?• (emphasis added). While JP 1 applies across the joint force, the U.S. Army added its own understanding of IW in Field Manual 3-0 in the March 2025 update.

According to the Army, IW is the â??overt, clandestine, and covert employment of military and nonmilitary capabilities by state and non-state actors to achieve policy objectives other than military domination of an enemy, either as the primary approach or in concert with conventional warfare.â?• This understanding focuses less on IW as a means of assurance or coercion than as a set of tactics. The Armyâ??s view is further supported in a Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Instruction asserting five core IW activities: counterterrorism, unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, counterinsurgency, and stability operations. The IWCâ??s *Irregular Warfare 101* course provides an in-depth exploration of the definition of IW beyond this.

U.S. and partners share a term but not a definition

As a term, irregular warfare resonated with each study participant, and all participants were familiar with the term. Unlike in the European Conceptualization of IW study, participants did not propose â??hybrid threatsâ?• as an alternative.

However, there was also no unified definition of IW. While many of the surveyed institutions and individuals were aware of the U.S. definition, none had fully adopted it. In Kenya, IW is seen as a type of conflict where â??belligerents utilize asymmetric tactics,â?• according to a participant from the Kenyan Counter Insurgency, Terrorism, and Stability Operations Organization. The Angolan participant described IW as a way of waging war without conventional means. The definition that most closely mirrored the U.S. understanding of IW came from the Zambian participant, who noted that while Zambia does not have a formal definition, their description of â??low-intensity conflictâ?• was close. In the Zambian understanding, low-intensity conflicts are â??usually localized between two or more states or non-state actors below [the level of] conventional warfare.â?• Nigeria does not currently have a formal definition of IW, but it does define insurgency and terrorism.

Participants highlighted forms of IW that either the IWC had not identified in previous portions of this study series or are under-conceptualized in U.S. or western security studies. These include crimes against natural resources, such as poaching, which Nigeria, Kenya, and Zambia identified. Kenyan and Nigerian participants also included organized crime against livestock, such as cattle rustling. Participants from Nigeria and Kenya also identified piracy and sea robbery as IW threats.

Participants who identified organized criminal activity as IW did not clearly delineate between ordinary criminality and IW. This may come from a recognition that organized criminal activity in the region can often be connected to violent non-state actors. For instance, [transnational livestock rustling] funds Jamaâ??at Nasr al-Islam wal-Muslimin (JNIM) in West Africa while Al Shabaab collects taxes and has encouraged piracy amidst [increased collaboration] with the Houthis in Yemen. Additionally, violent non-state actors have threatened [counter-poaching] and [wildlife management efforts], while [illicit timber harvesting] funds violent non-state actors. Alternatively, these activities may arise from a perceived lack of alternative economic opportunities, as the Kenyan participant noted.

Participants primarily saw IW as the domain of violent non-state actors

Irregular warfare was most closely associated with violent non-state actors. Each participant pointed to at least one violent non-state actor as their countryâ??s primary IW threat. Participant-identified groups included U.S.-designated terrorist organizations such as al-Qaâ??ida and ISIS affiliates, plus organized crime actors and insurgent groups. Overall, participants did not consider state-based actors in their definition of IW or in their list of primary IW threats. When pressed on state-based IW, some participants suggested that state-based IW would, at a minimum, leverage a non-state proxy.

Colonial and post-colonial experience influences IW understanding

While decolonization varied across participant countries, each country experienced elements of pro-independence IW and colonial counter-insurgency operations. Each participant highlighted colonial-era counterinsurgency campaigns and the irregular warfare tactics employed by pro-independence movements as shaping their current understanding of irregular warfare, but all advised against drawing universal conclusions due to different independence processes across the region. Nigeria achieved independence gradually through successor constitutions amid relatively fewer pro-independence IW actors. Alternatively, Angola won independence following more than a decade of violent struggle.

Colonial counterinsurgency campaigns informed each participantâ??s understanding of both successful and unsuccessful methods for countering IW. In Nigeria, colonial authorities often embedded administrators into their regions. Colonial authorities deployed a criminal justice model following an assassination attempt on the Colonial Chief Secretary, which was the most major pro-independence act of IW. Conversely, in Angola, Portuguese authorities sought to suppress the independence movement with support from the South African Defence Forces. This brutal counterinsurgency campaign likely informed the countryâ??s understanding of violent IW and counter IW.

Independence from colonial control changed the character of IW over time throughout the region. Following independence, one participant argued it would have been reasonable to expect that IW would cease since the main factor causing IW, colonial occupation, had ended.

Quite the opposite occurred in the decades following independence. Political factions led to civil war dominated by irregular tactics in Liberia and Angola. Secessionist movements arose in Nigeria and Angola, while religiously motivated violent non-state actors took up arms in Kenya and Nigeria. Instability in neighboring countries led to IW spilling over national borders for Angola, Kenya, Nigeria, and Zambia. Each represented country experienced elements of IW in the struggle for independence and saw former IW actors needing to suppress IW threats from violent non-state actors following independence.

IW in a countryâ??s immediate neighbors has an outsized impact on national conceptualizations of IW

When participants discussed ongoing and future IW threats their countries face, each study participant pointed to IW threats emanating from a neighboring country. Participants from Angola, Nigeria, Kenya, Liberia, and Zambia each pointed to the presence of IW in neighboring countries as a potential risk. Most commonly, these presenters identified violent extremist organizations, separatist movements, or

coups in neighboring countries as potential sources of IW in their country. Additionally, Liberia, Nigeria, and Zambia identified transnational criminal organizations as a cross-border IW threat. Participants from these three countries also highlighted cybercrime as an emerging potential IW threat.

This conclusion is partially a selection effect of choosing five relatively stable countries that border countries experiencing civil war, crisis in governance, or insurgency such as Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC), and Somalia. However, it points to how crisis in one country informs the understanding of defense thought leaders in the broader region.

These remarks underscore border security's role in preventing the spread of IW threat actors. Participants argued that IW threat actors often exploited porous borders and periods of instability to thwart successful counter-IW campaigns. Some participants, including from Angola and Zambia, which share a land border, pointed to collaboration on security in border regions as a proven means to reduce IW threats.

Conclusion

Engagements on IW threats in Africa should consider the unique circumstances that affect how regional partners conceive of IW. The U.S. government would benefit greatly by highlighting state-led IW campaigns to increase exposure of other non-traditional threats while recognizing that partners and allies on the continent may disagree on terminology. Case studies on the destabilizing impacts of state-led IW campaigns carried out by regional powers in the DRC or Sudan could overcome some reluctance to see states as IW actors.

Africa's security situation is not a monolith. But IW is a common threat across our surveyed countries. Additionally, IW as a concept resonated with defense thought leaders from Angola, Nigeria, Kenya, Liberia, and Zambia and their immediate regions. At its core, this study supports the conclusion reached in the previous two regions: IW conceptualization is heavily dependent on local context rather than following international models or copying U.S. doctrine. Participants saw IW, as they understood it, as a threat. They were receptive to future engagements both with the United States and regional partners on IW. One of the participant countries, Nigeria, recently created its own Irregular Warfare Center to better understand the threat.

Professional military institutions, ministries of defense, and defense thought leaders across Africa will ultimately craft understandings of IW best suited for their political, strategic, and tactical operating environments. U.S. and allied definitions and educational material will inform this process. But expecting a universalization of the U.S. understanding of the threat is naive. Rather, the U.S. DoD should continually reassess both the actual IW operating environment in Africa and surveying how key

partners and allies understand that environment on the continent.

Western militaries pivot back and forth between preparing for great power conventional war and irregular war against state or non-state opponents. IW existed in Africa long before the term came into vogue in the West. America's African partner forces offer a deep well of experience in irregular campaigns. The DoD can more effectively counter joint threats in Africa with the highest impact and minimized costs only when working alongside partners and allies on the continent.

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