

## Where the Lion Can't Reach: Unconventional Warfare in Major War

### Description

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Episode 153 examines the role of unconventional warfare and special operations forces in conventional major war.

#### Summary

This conversation explores how unconventional warfare can support, shape, and sometimes substitute for conventional military operations in large-scale combat. Our guests examine what unconventional warfare is and why it matters beyond the special operations community. In addition, they discuss how support to resistance forces can create strategic and operational effects for joint force commanders. The discussion draws heavily on the 2003 invasion of Iraq. During that campaign, U.S. Special Forces partnered with Kurdish Peshmerga forces to create a northern front and tie down Iraqi forces. They also generated intelligence and supported the broader conventional campaign. The episode also examines the limits and risks of unconventional warfare. These include partner alignment, feasibility assessments, and political constraints. Furthermore, there is a need for policymakers and commanders to understand both the value and the limitations of this tool.

#### Takeaways

- Unconventional warfare is best understood in simple terms as support to resistance movements or insurgencies.
- Unconventional warfare is not just a SOF issue; conventional joint force commanders and civilian policymakers need to understand how it can support broader campaigns.
- UW can supplement conventional forces by shaping the battlefield, imposing costs, generating intelligence, and creating dilemmas for the enemy.
- UW can also substitute for conventional forces when geography, politics, or access prevent a conventional formation from operating in a particular area.
- The 2003 invasion of Iraq provides a powerful example of UW supporting a conventional campaign. In that scenario, a small number of U.S. SOF personnel helped mobilize Kurdish Peshmerga forces to create pressure in the north.

- Working with local forces is not the same as replacing U.S. infantry with indigenous infantry. Resistance forces have their own strengths, limits, interests, and operating areas.
- Successful UW depends on feasibility. Competent local leadership, survivable terrain, contested space, political conditions, and at least some alignment of objectives are all required.
- Interest alignment is rarely perfect, but major divergence between U.S. objectives and partner objectives can create serious strategic risk.
- Relationships matter. Long-term credibility, prior engagement, and trust can make UW options more viable when crises emerge.
- Policymakers should not assume UW can be created instantly in a crisis. In fact, the best options often require years of preparation, relationships, infrastructure, and understanding.
- SOF practitioners need to explain UW in terms conventional commanders care about. These include operational effects, risk, timing, authorities, and contribution to the broader campaign.
- Special Forces must remain excellent at working by, with, and through partners—not just at unilateral tactical tasks.

[Lieutenant General \(Retired\) Ken Tovo](#) served as the commanding general of U.S. Army Special Operations Command. A career Special Forces officer, he commanded at multiple levels and has extensive experience in special operations, unconventional warfare, and irregular warfare. He is currently the president and CEO of DOL Enterprises, Chairman of the Green Beret Foundation, and a senior partner at National Security Capital Partners.

[Mark Grdovic](#) is the author of [Those Who Face Death: The Untold Story of Special Forces and the Iraqi Kurdish Resistance](#). He served as a battalion operations officer during the 2003 invasion of Iraq while working alongside Kurdish resistance forces in northern Iraq. After retiring from the Army, he has continued to support the special operations community. His work has included assignments with SOCCENT and USSOCOM.

[Kyle Atwell](#) and [Alexandra Chinchilla](#) are the hosts for episode 153. Please reach out to them with any questions about the episode or IWI.

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