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IDENTITY WARFARE. THE NEW FACE OF WARFARE: THE BALACLAVA

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A mask tells us more than a face.
-Oscar Wilde

INTRODUCTION

Rows of British red coat soldiers lined up on the battlefield, knights riding with heraldic crests and banners, and large swastikas or roundels painted on aircraft. Identification plays and has fundamentally played a pivotal role in warfare. These indicators of either affiliation with a group or individual identification, such as the knight's crest, permits the identity of the combatant and defines their meaning in that particular conflict. While this is a fairly superficial understanding of 'who' is the enemy or antagonist, it is mainly used for means of immediate engagement. Once this rudimentary understanding or ability to know your enemy is achieved, the question becomes, 'what more do I need to know?' The great tacticians and military minds throughout history have acknowledged this importance and endeavoured to know or understand the 'enemy' in whatever form they may present themselves.

> *If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.*
> *- Sun Tzu*

Sun Tzu identifies the criticality of knowing the enemy. Within that era and the continuing centuries, including current conventional operations, the understanding of the enemy force structure, capabilities and motivations were fundamental in the understanding of warfare. Part of the capabilities component may even focus on key

individuals such as general officers or political figures. Although these individuals can be

critical to the enemy war machine, historically their personal identities were known. In

the example of the knight, their helmets shielded their faces for physical protection;

however, the lack of visible personal identity was offset with personalized heraldic crests

for individual identification. The post-Cold War evolution into a predominantly unipolar

world is driving the continued emergence of irregular warfare as the modus operandi of

current combatants. The result: the ability to know the enemy is taking on a new

dimension. Various forms of *identity* play a role in warfare and contribute to the source

and nature of the conflict. The choice of *identity* amongst the belligerents is very

contextual and fluid. The selection of a particular *identity* and the resultant conflicts

throughout history are inextricably intertwined. If *identity* is at the heart of conflict, how

in depth must the understanding of *identity* be and which *identity* is in play? Although

there are times when hidden individual identity is normal, the now regular image of

combatants blatantly and openly wearing balaclavas or other guises does not align with

commonly understood warfare identification. If *identity* is important to warfare, how has

it evolved to hide one's personal identity? The types of questions now posed are those

such as: 'Who is Jihadi John?' The resultant focus on trying to find out the personal

identity of these fighters is not without some value, but it is possibly to the detriment of

understanding the *identity* conflict.

THESIS

Despite the importance of *identity* as a foundation of warfare, the wearing of

balaclavas or similar guises is a negative by-product of the current Western methods of

combating irregular warfare and has created a new avenue of exploitation available to wage unconventional or 'hybrid' warfare.

APPROACH

Through an analysis of *identity* and the linkage to warfare, this paper will highlight the fundamental position of *identity* as a part of warfare and by overlaying the *identity* driver with the methodologies and technologies of combating irregular warfare in a modern context, show the evolution of hidden personal identities and the resultant negative effect on current warfare. The Crimea and Ukraine conflicts will be used as the main case study of the emerging and varied uses by groups beyond classical masking.

WHAT IS *IDENTITY*?

In order to delve into the topic of *identity* warfare, the idea of *identity* in this context needs to be addressed. *Identity* derives itself from Latin and the concepts of likeness and repetition.[1] This identification or association with something is either from a personal perspective or an external perspective. Each of these viewpoints tends to encapsulate *identity* from differing approaches – plural or singular.[2] An individual inherently perceives their *identity* as pluralistic. For example, a person may be a Roman Catholic, French Canadian with Jamaican heritage, a lawyer and avid golfer. At any point in time their choice of affiliation with any of these identity factors will be based on the context of the situation. The elevation or prioritization of an identity factor can drive a naturally pluralistic individual to a generalized singular approach and cause friction with

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[1] http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/identity
[2] Amartya Sen, *Identity and violence: The illusion of destiny* (Penguin Books India, 2007), xii.

the other *identity* groups.[3] From an external perspective, outside of own-group *identity* associations, *identity* tends to be singularly assigned.[4] Regardless of the internal or external stance, these singular categorization factors are usually within the bounds of culture, ethnicity, religion, ideology, language and even state or national associations. The concept of categorization is very mainstream; however, it has been commonly characterized and labelled by the *identity* factors and not the broader overarching concept of an *identity*.

The next part of the *identity* prioritization is choice.[5] An *identity* may be choiceless such as nationality or language of the individual at birth. Other factors may become a choice throughout life and either stay in sync with the choiceless factors or move away from their starting point. In some cases, choice may be hindered by external factors in repressive environments – family or government. The categorization factors previously mentioned are usually tied to historical events or association with a primary social group such as family.[6] Although the primary group factors are the starting point, personal *identity* can change over time based on individual experiences. From a historical standpoint, the evolution or development of an *identity*, such as a culture or ethnicity, takes place over an extended period of time and during this period significant events help forge the *identity*. This evolution is referred to as the *identity* narrative.[7] The types of significant events play a role in how the *identity* is formulated. Some types of

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[3] Amartya Sen, *Identity and violence: The illusion of destiny* (Penguin Books India, 2007), 4.

[4] Jay J Van Bavel and William A. Cunningham, "A Social Identity Approach to Person Memory Group Membership, Collective Identification, and Social Role Shape Attention and Memory." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 38, no. 12 (2012): 1567.

[5] Amartya Sen, *Identity and violence: The illusion of destiny* (Penguin Books India, 2007), 4.

[6] Michael Vlahos, *Fighting identity: sacred war and world change* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009), 32-33.

[7] Michael Vlahos, *Fighting identity: sacred war and world change* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009), 55.

development have a more profound and unifying effect. One of these weighty effects is victimhood.[8] A victimhood *identity* results when a grievance is used to create a collective *identity*.[9] The initial thoughts about victimhood invoke victimization and potentially physical abuse. Although physical oppression is a form of victimhood, the creation of a victimhood *identity* is more prevalent in democratic societies[10] and is becoming even more prevalent in today's "increasingly rights-based international culture."[11] Because of the requirement to have a democratic system that can be influenced by a victimhood *identity*, the victimhood *identity* is inherently political[12] which is reflective of the political nature of war.

IDENTITY IN WARFARE

Historically, *identity* tended to be focused around religion, language, and ethnicity, which were also centered on state ideals. The states were more homogeneous in their *identity*, albeit sometimes the *identity* was not by free choice. "When states seize territory from each other, they will seek to change the demographic situation in the conquered area…"[13] Regardless of the level of choice, the state *identities* over time were solidified through war or momentous events.[14] Through war, the *identity* narrative received validation with a prevalent framing of the battle between good versus evil. This is repeatedly illustrated in the renaissance era paintings of leaders and battles surrounded by angels and God. The acts of victory validate the nation's actions as favoured by higher

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[8] Tami Amanda Jacoby, "A Theory of Victimhood: Politics, Conflict and the Construction of Victim-based Identity." *Millennium-Journal of International Studies* (2014): 513.

[9] *Ibid.*

[10] *Ibid.*, 519.

[11] *Ibid.*, 513.

[12] *Ibid.*, 512.

[13] Alexander B Downes, *Targeting civilians in war* (Cornell University Press, 2011), 4.

[14] Michael Vlahos, *Fighting identity: sacred war and world change* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009), 55.

entities; therefore they are justified and an endorsement the national *identity*. Although

national *identities* prevailed, other *identities* existed and were often downtrodden or

marginalized. Forcing of a singular *identity* in a pluralistic *identity* world may be

dangerous. In these cases, the friction caused by differences of *identity* can lead to unrest

or civil war. Most civil wars tend to be waged by an ethnic [*identity*] group.[15] The basis

of *identity* and the fact of its non-material foundation, leads to protracted conflicts.

Negotiating a settlement means negotiating or compromising an *identity* – not simple.

When a conflict is *identity* based, the moral driver is strong[16] and provides the spirit and

the true source of military power over the potential material power of the opposition.[17]

What is to be achieved by a non-state actor in a civil or insurgent war?

"Legitimacy is the sacred non-state prize;"[18] or, in other words, validation of the chosen

group's *identity*. "Identity is the essence of shared human meaning and that war has often

been its electric ritual of celebration and realization."[19] In a focus on irregular warfare,

revolution or insurgency, the act of uprising and possible victory not only garners

legitimacy it also starts or proliferates the *identity* narrative. This rise up and overcome

story is ever present in history and encompasses the start of some great empires including

some of the current world powers. A prime example is the American *identity* and its

strength that feeds the idea of American exceptionlism. This strong national *identity*

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[15] Elaine K. Denny and Barbara F. Walter, "Ethnicity and civil war." *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 199.

[16] Michael Vlahos, *Fighting identity: sacred war and world change* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009), 24. Discusses the concept of Napoleon's nose and that 'the moral is to physical as 3 is to 1'.

[17] *Ibid*., 30. Mentions Clausewitz's 'geist' or spirit as a source of military power.

[18] *Ibid*., 26.

[19] *Ibid*., 75.

includes its position as the world superpower and as such any degradation of that position is an attack on its *identity*. This is still a very state based *identity* perspetive.

In spite of human migration and state or empire expansions throughout history, the movement of humans in parallel to the rise of globalization is unprecedented. The current globalization and the drive among disenfranchised groups have lead to a rise in an overall global *identity* crisis.[20] These crises are at the heart of the irregular wars of today. On some levels, globalization unites but at the same time it breaks down traditional *identities*, primarily national, and creates a void leaving a new *identity* selection dilemma.[21] The selection or reprioritization of various *identity* factors is changing the landscape of *identity* and causes friction among *identity* groups.

THE COVER-UP

If the idea of *identity* is so important and intertwined with warfare, why is part of the *identity* formula, personal identity, being hidden by masking in today's conflict areas? In order to select an *identity*, the individual chooses a group with a similar collective *identity*. As an example, in a peaceful political demonstration, the protesters overtly associate both themselves and the cause or collective *identity*. The level of association or identification of the personal identity or the group varies depending on the level of overtness or covertness. This can be summarized by four scenarios: known personal identity and known group *identity*, known personal identity and unknown or no group *identity*, unknown personal and unknown group *identity*, and unknown personal and known group *identity*. These various scenarios are easily depicted with examples. The

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[20] Michael Vlahos, *Fighting identity: sacred war and world change* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009), 12.
[21] *Ibid*., 13.

protestors as well as the classic conventional soldier wearing a distinctive uniform represent the first case. Although the personal identity is not immediately available, the soldier is unmasked (excluding camouflage) and identifiable by name or ID tags. The 'lone wolf' scenario captures the known personal and unknown or no group affiliation. A spy or special-forces operative would represent the double unknown situation. The final pairing is the current situation of a masked individual overtly declaring affiliation with a collective *identity* (ISIL or Ukrainian militia).

The concept of masked individuals conducting activities is not new; however, it is normally associated with criminal activities. There have been times in war such as partisans in World War II conducting covert operations with handkerchiefs over their faces but mostly under the cover of darkness. The difference between irregulars now and then is the overt display of affiliation rather than trying to remain hidden. This type of historical and criminal context of masking revolves around the avoidance of prosecution. The concerns over prosecution are only a concern if the ability exists to execute the enforcement on the chosen individual [target]. The fundamental idea of individual prosecution is prevalent in current irregular warfare and Counter Insurgency (COIN) operation methods.

The combination of technology and the move away from fighting a conventional state enemy has leaned heavily on the ability to prosecute, in particular, individuals. The realization that insurgent groups or terrorist organizations are systems with critical nodes[22] and that without classical infrastructure or material based systems they are

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[22] United States. Department of Defense. *Irregular Warfare: Countering Irregular Threats. Joint Operating Concept V2.0.* (Washington: Department of Defense, 17 May 2010), I-4.

inherently people centric. Within the collective *identity* of the group, a leadership

hierarchy exists and striking individuals is a means to target the human structure. With

armed Unmanned Air Vehicles (UAV), voice recognition and the plethora of information

in cyberspace, the ability to conduct a targeting cycle on an individual can prove

valuable. The United States (U.S.) and Israel have both focused heavy attention on the

targeting of individuals and those methods have affected the insurgent tactics.[23,24] The

devolution of targeting not only of high-level individuals but also the middle and lower

levels has had a major effect on the prevalence of masking.[25] In conjunction, the

perfidious means used to gain intelligence for targeting purposes has also changed the

insurgent tactics to include personal masking.[26] As an overarching sociological concept,

the inability to discriminate between individuals in our non-group is proven to be true.[27]

With this approach, all members of the group can be deemed equal and the continuance

of targeting all individuals of the group is accepted as having the same effect. Although

the recognition of the identity factors exists during prosecution, the focus is on using the

identity or behavioral knowledge solely for targeting purposes.[28] The focus on the

individuals as key nodes across all theatres ignores the *identity* friction and the particular

narrative. "The absence of ideology reflects a presumption that all insurgent groups are

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[23] Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann. "Washington's Phantom War: The Effects of the U.S. Drone Programs in Pakistan." *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 4 (July/August 2011): 12-18.

[24] Luft, Gal. "The Logic of Israel's Targeted Killing." *Middle East Quarterly* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 3.

[25] *Ibid*., 8-9.

[26] *Ibid*.

[27] Jay J Van Bavel and William A. Cunningham, "A Social Identity Approach to Person Memory Group Membership, Collective Identification, and Social Role Shape Attention and Memory." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 38, no. 12 (2012): 1567.

[28] United States. Department of Defense. *Irregular Warfare: Countering Irregular Threats. Joint Operating Concept V2.0.* (Washington: Department of Defense, 17 May 2010), I-4.

alike: whatever the differences in rhetoric…"[29] Part of the problem may lie in our own ability to understand an *identity* conflict. Western nations, US and NATO members are still predominantly rallied around national *identity*. It can create the situation where "American exceptionalism blocks empathy for any other identity struggle."[30]

From the kinetic targeting and perfidious means of gaining intelligence for targeting, the focus came off the group and shifted to the personal identity. This shift changed the dynamic from classic warfare where both the personal and group were known. Even though in the previous classic soldier example, the personal identity was known, it was not the predominant categorization both from an internal or external perspective. While the soldier is a known person, they were somewhat anonymous by the nature of the structured military and the identification with the group by a distinctive uniform (nation or state). The evolution of targeting individuals for prosecution or information, even at the lowest levels, removed that pretense of anonymity and the irregular fighter is now forced to regain their personal anonymity by wearing masks.

While the wearing of masks now hinders the current planning and targeting cycle for positive identification (PID) and engagement,[31] it should for all intensive purposes focus the effort back to the group *identity* and its contribution to the conflict. Regardless of the continued western focus on targeting individuals, the resultant masking is also empowering the adversary's collective *identity*. The masking re-focuses the participants onto the *identity* narrative and the removal of the individualism from the collective group

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[29] Francisco Gutiérrez Sanín and Elisabeth Jean Wood, "Ideology in civil war Instrumental adoption and beyond." *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 215.

[30] Michael Vlahos, *Fighting identity: sacred war and world change* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009), 35.

[31] United States. Department of Defense. *Irregular Warfare: Countering Irregular Threats. Joint Operating Concept V2.0.* (Washington: Department of Defense, 17 May 2010), II-21.

maintains the perception of a shared 'us'.[32] As long as the leaders and the participants

show actions and motives with a group focus, the maintenance of the group *identity*

factors can be maintained.[33] In order to garner anonymity and freedom of movement in

an individual targeting environment, the masking has not only hindered COIN tactics but

also indirectly strengthens the adversary. Furthermore, by using the same tactics across

multiple theatres of operations, the prevalence and acceptance of masked fighters is now

commonplace. As with anything new, creativity is not far behind.

UKRAINE

   While the current central conflict of *identity* in warfare seems to be associated

with radical Islam or, as more commonly generalized, Muslims versus non-Muslims.

Despite this current development, COIN tactics and methods have mainly evolved around

this fight and the 'Global War on Terror,' it is too easy to default to a very polar and

definitive religious *identity* as the basis of a conflict. Religions now span various

continents and cannot be used singularly to categorize people, or to determine *identity*

based exclusively on religious affiliation. To better display the effects of choice, the

evolution of *identity* and the effects of the emergent trend of masked warriors, the

Ukrainian history and current crisis (which better suited to the topic) will be examined.

Furthermore, Ukraine is a location where irregular warfare and state actions blend in a

more 'hybrid' environment.

   This paper will by no means try and capture the complex history of the Ukraine

and the overarching Slavic history; however, some history is required to illustrate the

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[32] Diana M. Grace and Michael J. Platow, "Showing Leadership by Not Showing Your Face An Anonymous Leadership Effect." *SAGE Open* 5, no. 1 (2015): 3.
  [33] *Ibid.*, 7.

Ukrainian *identity* narrative. The Ukrainian history is a myriad of events with the geographic area being a crossroads of conquest. During the seventeenth and eighteenth century, Ukraine was 'parceled out' to Poland, Russia, Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Empire.[34] Repression by and later inclusion into the Russian empire, and the 1932-33 famine[35] during this time period, contribute to a strong Ukrainian victimhood *identity*. During this time, the geo-political divisions developed an Eastern and Western Ukraine. Even though the 'two' Ukraines existed, the collective victimhood narrative, the Ukrainian national *identity* and independence took precedence after the dissolution of the former Soviet Union.[36] There was much ado about the Ukrainian national *identity* yet the *identity* development was polarized. Internally and politically this duality of the Ukrainian *identity*, framed mostly around language and Russian culture, led to government favouritism, which resulted in disenfranchised areas.

Currently, the *identity* duality is being solidified by the new language grievance or perceived as an official cultural [*identity*] assault on Russian speaking and ethnic citizens.[37] This is a case where the focus on a national *identity* and historical collective victimhood is losing priority and the other identity factors are being prioritized. The result, "Ukraine is a frozen conflict"[38] just like other civil wars around ethnicity [*identity*] that usually become protracted.[39] From this re-prioritization, Russia is enticing and

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[34] Rajan Menon and Eugene B. Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post--Cold War Order* (MIT Press, 2015), 5.

[35] *Ibid*., 11.

[36] *Ibid*., 22-23.

[37] C.J Chivers and Noah Sneider. "Behind the Masks in Ukraine, Many Faces of Rebellion." *New York Times*, 3 May 2014.

[38] Rajan Menon and Eugene B. Rumer, *Conflict in Ukraine: The Unwinding of the Post--Cold War Order* (MIT Press, 2015), 86.

[39] Elaine K. Denny and Barbara F. Walter, "Ethnicity and civil war." *Journal of Peace Research* 51, no. 2 (2014): 199.

supporting the ethnic Russian populations in Ukraine with a larger Slavic *identity* choice

with Russia as the natural leader. However, at this time, even within the 'rebel militias'

the end state differs and is unknown except that the new victimhood narrative of the

Eastern Ukrainians prevails.[40]

The Russian *identity* crisis is an overarching and ever present issue. The

fact that Russia has an *identity* crisis since the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of

the former Soviet Union[41] plays a factor in the Ukrainian situation. As well, the Ukraine

is viewed as the buffer zone between the old empire and the west. Taking into account all

of these factors, the propensity for Russia to assist the Ukrainian rebels is not

unfathomable. What is profound are the methods of unconventional or even 'hybrid'

warfare being conducted.[42] The 'little green men' or Russian troops without insignia in

the Crimea were by the nature of lacking insignia somewhat symbolically 'masked' yet

overt in their actions.[43] The next step was to use actual masking to support the rebel

militias in the follow-on Eastern Ukraine crisis.

The classification of the rebels as militias adds a non-state and almost non-

combatant aspect to the situation. The label of militias seems to be a catchall for groups

not categorized by terrorist, insurgent or criminal organization.[44] However they are

labelled, they fit well with the concept of a chosen *identity* since they are 'sociopolitical

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[40] C.J Chivers and Noah Sneider. "Behind the Masks in Ukraine, Many Faces of Rebellion." *New York Times*, 3 May 2014.
[41] Oksana Antonenko, "Russia and Central Asia," in *Rewiring regional security in a fragmented world* (US Institute of Peace Press, 2011), 315.
[42] Adrian Croft and Sabine Siebold. "NATO and EU to work together to counter Crimea-style "hybrid" warfare." *Reuters*, 14 May 2015.
[43] *Ibid*.
[44] Ches Thurber, "Militias as sociopolitical movements: Lessons from Iraq's armed Shia groups." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, no. 5-6 (2014): 902.

movements.'[45] While it refers to them as non-state fighters, it also highlights them as regular citizens. In Crimea, the Russian troops wore uniforms without insignia, but on the Eastern Ukraine scenario, the masking breaks down any distinction between citizen and foreign soldier. Even though the militias with support from Russia could be categorized as a foreign proxy militia,[46] actual Russian regulars cannot be readily differentiated from civil uprising troops. The difficulty now with masked troops, not only hinders targeting at an individual level but more so, the ability for the international community to act. Regardless of intelligence sources and government knowledge of the true personal identities of the Russian troops, the masking creates enough plausible deniability among the international public. This level of doubt in today's increasing culture of lowered likelihood of targeting civilians[47] precludes the targeting of individuals, especially from a third party nation. The result is state on state 'hybrid' warfare including the direct use of state troops without a clear avenue for international intervention.

SUMMARY

Seemingly, the reasons for conflict tend to be many. Although conflicts have been labelled as ethnic, religious, etc., what is really at work is an *identity* choice with some factor or commonality with others. Sometimes this *identity* choice can lead to economic disparity or differing views on religion or law, all resulting in friction. When the friction increases to the point of armed conflict, the fact that the conflict is now usually non-state means that the moral drivers are predominant. The desire for self-determination and ultimately legitimacy of the *identity* of the aggrieved group presents a difficult people

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[45] Ches Thurber, "Militias as sociopolitical movements: Lessons from Iraq's armed Shia groups." *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, no. 5-6 (2014): 902.
[46] *Ibid*., 903-904.
[47] Alexander B Downes, *Targeting civilians in war* (Cornell University Press, 2011), 244.

centric adversary. The shifting meanings of *identity*, national to other types, in the world are changing the landscape of the battlefield.

The application of conventional warfare methods to a human centric system comes with some downfalls. In spite of our robust considerations, during our operational planning process, for second and third order effects, without a thorough understanding of the exact *identity* conflict, we produce undesirable developments. The current situation where the 'West' is involved in global hotspots continually challenges our understanding of the adversary. In particular, the ability to relate to an *identity* conflict that is not national or state centric is proving to be a challenge. The current methods of fighting all *identity* conflicts with the same technology and methods around the US "religiously machina"[48] ethos of war will not prove wholly successful.

A detrimental by-product created from the combination of technology, methodology and narrow perspectives used by the predominantly Western nations in the latest counter insurgency operations of the past twenty years, is the requirement for personal identity anonymity among irregular fighters. In most cases, with irregular fighters, it manifests in the use of the balaclava or some derivative. This development opens an avenue for the use of this general acceptance for purposes beyond those of the irregular fighter and in addition creates a self-defeating focus on specific personalities rather than the root cause of any *identity* conflict. Although the balaclava fighters make their way onto the media outlets, the current regularity of the balaclava fighter has progressed into a blasé situation where it is now the norm for irregular warfare fighters to

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[48] Michael Vlahos, *Fighting identity: sacred war and world change* (Westport, CT: Praeger Security International, 2009), 21.

not reveal their personal identities. Until the methods of combating irregular fighters or

terrorist organizations change, the new face of warfare will be the balaclava.

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