

Canadian  
Forces  
College

Collège  
des  
Forces  
Canadiennes



## IRREGULAR WARFARE THREATS AND CANADA'S FUTURE RESPONSE

Maj R.A.J. Meades

**JCSP 40**

***Exercise Solo Flight***

**Disclaimer**

Opinions expressed remain those of the author and do not represent Department of National Defence or Canadian Forces policy. This paper may not be used without written permission.

© Her Majesty the Queen in Right of Canada, as represented by the Minister of National Defence, 2016.

**PCEMI 40**

***Exercice Solo Flight***

**Avertissement**

Les opinions exprimées n'engagent que leurs auteurs et ne reflètent aucunement des politiques du Ministère de la Défense nationale ou des Forces canadiennes. Ce papier ne peut être reproduit sans autorisation écrite.

© Sa Majesté la Reine du Chef du Canada, représentée par le ministre de la Défense nationale, 2016.

EXERCISE *SOLO FLIGHT* – EXERCICE *SOLO FLIGHT*

**IRREGULAR WARFARE THREATS AND CANADA’S FUTURE  
RESPONSE**

Maj R.A.J. Meades

*“This paper was written by a student attending the Canadian Forces College in fulfilment of one of the requirements of the Course of Studies. The paper is a scholastic document, and thus contains facts and opinions, which the author alone considered appropriate and correct for the subject. It does not necessarily reflect the policy or the opinion of any agency, including the Government of Canada and the Canadian Department of National Defence. This paper may not be released, quoted or copied, except with the express permission of the Canadian Department of National Defence.”*

Word Count: 3059

*“La présente étude a été rédigée par un stagiaire du Collège des Forces canadiennes pour satisfaire à l'une des exigences du cours. L'étude est un document qui se rapporte au cours et contient donc des faits et des opinions que seul l'auteur considère appropriés et convenables au sujet. Elle ne reflète pas nécessairement la politique ou l'opinion d'un organisme quelconque, y compris le gouvernement du Canada et le ministère de la Défense nationale du Canada. Il est défendu de diffuser, de citer ou de reproduire cette étude sans la permission expresse du ministère de la Défense nationale.”*

Compte de mots: 3059

## **IRREGULAR WARFARE THREATS AND CANADA'S FUTURE RESPONSE**

All men dream, but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds, wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act on their dreams with open eyes, to make them possible.

- T.E. Lawrence

Through the ages, irregular warfare has been a constant aspect of conflict among mankind in one form or another, from spontaneous tribal feuds, to deliberate divergence from convention to fill niche requirements. Irregular warfare across the millennia and in all its forms has been the realm of the under-resourced, the disenfranchised, the audacious, or simply the creative. Even in Canada's history, "irregulars" such as skirmishers, scouts, saboteurs, raiders, and assassins emerged as important warfare ingredients, complementary to the conventional methods of the day. But if history describes irregular warfare as a common necessity in the waging of war about the globe and if irregular warfare persists as a key dimension of conflict, to what extent and in what manner will Canada engage in the irregular war of tomorrow?

This paper asserts that irregular warfare will become an increasing global trend due to state-sponsored terrorism and insurgency, the instability caused by failing states, the efforts of non-state actors, and the burgeoning cyber threat, and that Canada will, therefore, require the capacity to meet such irregular threats alongside its allies, while maintaining a robust irregular capability itself.

While a comprehensive analysis of irregular warfare is beyond the scope of this short work, it is nevertheless intended to touch on a number of areas for consideration to bolster the above argument, namely: irregular warfare in the last seventy-five years, the contemporary environment (including Islamic extremism and failing states), and the cyber threat.

The impetus for employing irregular warfare activities are many and varied, but include: an effort to keep the enemy off balance, to goad him into early attack, to engage him in less favourable terrain, to eliminate key targets, to gain vital information, or to sway popular opinion. Some, including so-called civilized countries, have also used irregular means to enable less savoury activities at arm's length; activities that would likely be deemed at odds with the accepted rules (conventions) of the day (perhaps now referred to as *deniable operations*).<sup>1</sup>

Canada's early history saw units like Rogers' Rangers begin to use highly-unconventional tactics during the Seven Years War to counter the terror activities that the French and their native allies had already been using for decades. Since 1690, the French policy had been to "scourge the borders and embroil the savages with the English" and units like that of Robert Rogers were a means to respond in kind.<sup>2</sup> Through the experiences of that war and subsequent conflicts such as the War of 1812, the Fenian Raids, the Northwest Rebellion, and through the Boer War, two World Wars, and of

---

<sup>1</sup> John Keegan, "A History of Warfare" (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1993), 5. The term used in the US is "plausible deniability".

<sup>2</sup> John Arquilla, "Insurgents, Raiders, and Bandits: How masters of Irregular Warfare Have Shaped Our World" (New York, Ivan R. Dee Publishing, 2011), 18.

course Afghanistan, Canada has experienced irregular conflict, large and small, domestically and internationally, as both an employer of such methods and as a recipient of the effects of the same.

The Second World War in particular provides perhaps some of the starkest and most memorable examples of Canada's capacity to wage irregular warfare. The First Special Service Force (the "Devil's Brigade") harried the Germans through Italy with such effect as to gain grudging admiration from the enemy, while Canadian commandos raided along the Atlantic Wall to effectively keep the enemy off-balance and deny him vital resources.

While these organizations were among many similar Allied special units, they nevertheless contributed to the ample demonstration that highly-trained and determined, mobile, light organizations could accomplish impressive feats disproportionate to their size and often against much larger conventional enemy forces. Elsewhere, among Canada's Second World War allies, units like the Special Air Service, Wingate's Chindits, the Long Range Desert Group, Merrill's Marauders, and the Lovat Scouts, contributed immensely both to the war effort of the time and to the forging of the foundation, culture, and heritage of today's irregular capabilities.

The decades following the Second World War and through the Cold War, however, saw Canada somewhat removed from irregular warfare, albeit that irregular conflicts abounded globally. Great Britain engaged in numerous "small wars" throughout

her shrinking empire, particularly across Africa and Asia and largely against communist (or at least communist-inspired) incursion,<sup>3</sup> while the United States fought the communists in Vietnam. But Canada's global contribution at the time was essentially conventional. Even with the formation of the Canadian Airborne Regiment in the late 1960s, a rather conventional mentality persisted.

In modern terms, irregular warfare is described as encompassing “insurgency, counterinsurgency, terrorism, and counterterrorism” and in the early 1970s Canada not only witnessed the upsurge of terrorist organizations and activities in Europe and the Middle East, but experienced the October Crisis in Quebec. The response was the formation of the RCMP's Special Emergency Response Team (SERT) as an anti-terrorist unit. Unfortunately, for most SERT members, the role was a secondary task to their regular duties, which affected both their availability and the quality of the team overall. Canada's military, meanwhile, engaged in peacekeeping missions and conventional Cold War training, while their corporate memory of irregular warfare faded to almost nothing.

Finally, in the early 1990s responsibility for counter-terrorism was transferred from the RCMP to the military with the establishment of Joint Task Force 2. The unit was assisted in its selection and training of its first members by the British Special Air Service and would soon become a world class tier one special operations unit. A decade later, the Minister of National Defence, Art Eggleton, announced that JTF2 would engage

---

<sup>3</sup> Michael Dewar, “Brush Fire Wars” (London, St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1984).

in the war on terror.<sup>4</sup> This marked a significant shift of mindset at the strategic level that would not only see Canadians engaging in irregular combat, but a subsequent rapid expansion of corporate knowledge of Canadian irregular warfare, both from Canada's allies and from its own experiences.

While the quality of Canadian troops was never in doubt, their role in Afghanistan would provide a catalyst for immense change and development of irregular capabilities, not only within the SOF community, but even among Canadian Army line units as the mission expanded. For instance, during Operation Apollo, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry employed classic airmobile light infantry tactics, working closely with U.S. units, including SOF against Al Qaeda targets. The battalion's officers and NCOs from that initial tour would prove vital in both capturing lessons learned and as instructors for subsequent tours and courses.<sup>5</sup>

As Canadian involvement in coalition operations against the Taliban continued throughout the mission in Afghanistan, SOF and light infantry tactics of necessity became the daily grind against the wily, ill-defined enemy. Experience gained by the Canadian military in that conflict was vast and the lessons learned numerous. The conflict also resulted in significant institutional growth in many areas; perhaps most notably in special operations capability. The establishment of CANSOFCOM, for instance, included

---

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/elite-jtf2-goes-into-kandahar-war-zone/article4296629/> This move was due in no small measure to the immense pressure exerted by the U.S. upon its allies, specifically with George W. Bush's oft-declared, "Either you are with us or you are with the enemy."

<sup>5</sup> For example, 3 PPCLI company commander Major Mike Blackburn subsequently taught on the Dismounted Company Commander Course in Valcartier in July, 2003.

the creation in 2006 of the Canadian Special Operations Regiment (CSOR). Other benefits of the Afghanistan experience included a general maturation and operationalization of the Primary Reserve, especially the Army Reserve, greater integration between Canada's Reserve and Regular Forces, vastly improved equipment and policies, and (more importantly) the acquisition of a far more enhanced corporate understanding of the irregular threat and the irregular environment overall. Of course at the center of this new knowledge resided the threat of Islamic extremism; a world away from the Canadian experience of Cold War trench-digging and UN peacekeeping of previous decades.

The proliferation of Islamic extremism may be traced to the post-First World War actions of the victorious Western industrial powers who gave little regard to religious and cultural sensibilities when the maps were re-drawn.<sup>6</sup> The events of the intervening years, not least of which being the establishment of Israel and the post- Saddam Hussein disenfranchisement of Sunni Muslims in Iraq, have compounded to promote the evolution of Islamic extremism, which not only persists but which dominates the current climate as the main single threat to the West. Indeed the present threat environment cannot be adequately articulated without alluding heavily to Islamic Jihad.<sup>7</sup>

Western intelligence and operations activities have become very focused on countering this global threat, both domestically and abroad. Of particular note is the rise of ISIL and the disturbing, ultra-violence that organization has perpetrated upon anyone

---

<sup>6</sup> Keith Nightingale, "ISIS for the Common Man" in *Small Wars Journal*, March 22, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Or perhaps at least the political and/or criminal perversion and exploitation of the notion of "Jihad".



they deem to be out of step with their cause or beliefs. Gaining control of vast tracts of Iraq and Syria, as well as exercising significant influence in areas of Libya and Nigeria, ISIL poses a clear and present threat to the West and to Western allies. ISIL's production of numerous videos of their violent excesses being committed against foreigners, captured Iraqi and Syrian military, as well as civilians (even from other branches of the Muslim faith) has caused outrage about the globe.<sup>8</sup>

Canada's current joint response to the ISIL situation (Operation Impact) as part of the overall coalition effort is the provision of combat and support aircraft, plus ground support assets. In addition, almost seventy Canadian special operations troops have been working in the region as advisers to Kurdish Peshmerga forces since September 2014.

But while ISIL is presently the most poignant aspect of Islamic extremism, it is but a single facet within the rather fluid and complex broader phenomenon. There are multiple layers and facets to so-called Jihadism, both organizationally and conceptually. They include the radicalization of Muslims, the planning and conduct of terror acts and the prompting of others to do likewise, the raising of funds, and the more various methods of promotion, expansion, and control. The Muslim Brotherhood, for instance, once condemned by some Muslim countries for their overt militancy, has in recent years attempted to apply a moderate face to Islamic Jihad. Thus, despite the Muslim Brotherhood's current favourable allusion to the concept of "Islamic democracy",

---

<sup>8</sup> Such ultra-conservative Islamic militants are often known as "Wahhabists" due to the extreme teachings of the founder of the original 18th century Wahhabi movement, Muhammad ibn Abd-al Wahhab, who espoused a strictly uncompromising interpretation of the Qur'an with severe penalties for those who strayed.

pessimists might suspect an underlying agenda and that this new, gentler face of the Muslim Brotherhood is but a tactical expedient to dupe the West into acceptance of a “lesser of two evils” scenario.<sup>9</sup> Could such an elaborate scheme of convincing the West of an apparently gentler alternative to the ultra-violent ISIL really exist?

The sheer complexity of Islamic extremism includes potential overlaps between terrorism, insurgency, and basic Islamic culture and the task of Western intelligence agencies in tracking and deciphering such complex phenomena is daunting. The phenomenon is perhaps the ultimate in asymmetric warfare, not only crossing traditional boundaries between military, government, society, industry, and culture, but blurring and, in some cases, blending them.

Of the four major threat categories (traditional, irregular, disruptive, and catastrophic) identified by the US National Defense [sic] Strategy paper of 2005, insurgency and terrorism were identified as the predominant irregular threats.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the 2006 US Quadrennial Defense Review stated:

[I]rregular warfare has emerged as the dominant form of warfare confronting the United States, its allies and its partners; accordingly, guidance must account for distributed, long-duration operations, including unconventional warfare, foreign internal defense, counter-terrorism, counterinsurgency, and stabilization and reconstruction operations.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> Lorenzo Vidino, “The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West” (New York, Columbia University Press, 2010), 58.

<sup>10</sup> Eric Larson, Derek Eaton, Brian Nichiporuk, and Thomas S. Szayna, “Assessing Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Intelligence Analysis” (Santa Monica, RAND Corporation, 2008), 47.

<sup>11</sup> Larson, et al, “Assessing Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Intelligence Analysis,” 48.

Thus, it must be said that if one of the aims (or at least benefits) of irregular warfare is to produce effects disproportionate to the size of the organization perpetrating such tactics, then Islamic extremism has been quite successful. Clearly, such organizations (even ISIL) could not defeat the forces of the industrial West in open combat and so the aim becomes to influence by means of terror and propaganda. They have effectively used modern technology and communications media to massively leverage the impact of their relatively small physical actions to cause international shock and draw attention to their philosophy and demands, while spreading their philosophy worldwide.

This, then, is essentially an irregular war on the political/ideological front, using religion as the vehicle for its prosecution; a war where the enemy seeks to be seen to be able to assault his foes with impunity by proxy attacks in the hearts of Western societies. The profoundly asymmetrical nature of such a threat dictates that the ability to defend against it, let alone defeat it, becomes not only immensely costly to a nation in terms of resources, but extremely difficult especially when “home grown” terrorists are taken into account. The fact is that terrorist organizations are able to strike and fade back into the shadows, even if they are bloodied in the process through minor tactical successes on the part of security forces/services. As US diplomat, Dr. Henry Kissinger, once said of the war in Vietnam, “The guerrilla wins if he does not lose.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Andrew Mack, “Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict” (Cambridge Journals, volume 27, issue 2, January 1975), 178.

In Canada, so-called “lone wolf” attacks in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu and Ottawa in October 2014, during which two soldiers died, were a direct response to Canada’s earlier-stated commitment to engage with the US-led coalition against ISIL. The attacks reverberated internationally and had a profound effect domestically. Security on CAF bases was increased to the highest level seen in decades, joint staffs became hives of activity, media outlets were abuzz, and the resultant institutional and policy changes have been profound.<sup>13</sup> Such is the ultimate effect of the ideological rhetoric spouted not only from radical imams in Western countries, but via the internet and other communications means even from third world nations amenable to harbouring such organizations.

It perhaps comes as no surprise that ideologies such as that espoused by extreme Islam are able to take root in weaker or “failing” states. Destabilizing factors, such as poor governance (including corruption, nepotism, kleptocracy, and heavy-handedness), poverty, tribalism, and sectarianism, provide fertile ground for the sewing of extreme religious ideology. While such ideologies appear as a reasonable alternative to those suffering from poverty or oppression, to the Islamic extremist organization it is a means of both extended recruiting, control, and a pathway to the broader projection of their philosophy.

In the years since shedding the shackles of their former masters, many post-colonial and former Soviet satellite states have struggled feebly and even foundered. The drive for independence of these states, while understandable, has nevertheless often

---

<sup>13</sup> Bill C-51, the Anti-terrorism Act, 2015, being the most visible and sweeping. The bill amends other acts such as the Criminal Code, while affording broader powers to certain agencies, including CSIS.

resulted in their extremely limited capacity to gain even a modicum of socio-political integrity, let alone generate a viable economy or infrastructure. This has tended to lead to an inherent vulnerability from unsavoury forces, both external and from within, with many of these fragile nations descending into virtual anarchy and becoming a hotbed for criminal activity and political subversion in the process.<sup>14</sup> The list of such states, even a dozen years ago, was sobering and in the intervening years has seen a realization of fears that such state instability can and does translate into an accommodating environment for the growth of insurgency and terrorism.<sup>15</sup> Even Iraq, a country propped up by the West which injected billions of dollars in the country for a decade-and-a-half crumbled in the face of ISIL without Western help. Thus it seems the definition of “failing state” is broad indeed.

But if failing states and the disenfranchised people thereof are prime physical environments for potential growth for terrorism and insurgency, there is yet another domain that presents immense potential for exploitation by terrorist organizations: cyberspace.

The technology explosion of the last quarter century has seen the advent of the internet, satellite communications, and the ability to communicate and therefore influence globally like never before. While there are of course commercial and societal benefits to

---

<sup>14</sup> Unattributed, “Where life is cheap and talk is loose,” *The Economist*, March 17, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> LaVerle Berry, Glenn E. Curtis, John N. Gibbs, Rex A. Hudson, Tara Karacan, Nina Kollars, and Ramón Miró, “Nations Hospitable to Organized Crime and Terrorism: A Report Prepared by the Federal Research Division, Library of Congress under an Interagency Agreement with the United States Government” (Washington, D.C., Library of Congress – Federal Research Division, October, 2003).

such technology, so too are such abilities capable of being exploited by states, organizations, and individuals for their own ends.

Already in recent years, we have seen significant evidence regarding state-sponsored and crime-syndicate-centered malicious cyber threats. China, for instance, is believed to have developed a unit of the People's Liberation Army specifically to hack into Western government and industry networks.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, they have thus far successfully hacked into the Canadian Government and Canadian businesses, as well as US defence suppliers and the government networks of several other countries, including India, Australia, and Vietnam. Network exploitation and IP hijacking has gleaned immense industry information for China, including from Google, Dow Chemical, Lockheed Martin, and Telvent. Such cyber-attacks are not stand-alone phenomena, but constitute an advanced, persistent, malicious threat. It is not by chance that China's new weaponized drone is an exact copy of the US's Predator UAV.

The apparent vast funding available to ISIL is now partly gained from oil sales, but such immense financial aid to ISIL and other terror organizations also smacks of state sponsorship. Specifically, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have been accused of massive sponsorship of both ISIL and other Sunni Muslim extremist organizations.<sup>17</sup> Despite cordial surface relationships with the West, especially of course in the oil business, both

---

<sup>16</sup> Believed to be PLA Unit 61398.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Fisk, "War with Isis: If Saudis aren't fuelling the militant inferno, who is?" *The Independent* (online edition), 4 February, 2015.

Saudi and Qatar nevertheless are accused of being essentially fundamental at the heart of their true philosophy and indeed adherents to Wahhabism.<sup>18</sup>

Thus it is not too great a stretch of the imagination to deduce that if the funding is available and the technology exists, that terror organizations could presumably at some stage use cyberspace as their next weapon of choice. Certainly the motivation to do so already exists. It makes absolute sense therefore that terror groups would seek to capitalize upon the potential that the cyber domain offers. While Canada and her allies already have robust organizations in place to both counter potential threats and develop strategies for focused cyber-attacks themselves, it does rather become a cat-and-mouse game in the virtual world to see who blinks first.

## **CONCLUSION**

Irregular warfare, while perhaps having changed significantly in nature over the last few decades, remains not only a viable avenue for both state and non-state actors, but is clearly a preferred approach for Canada's enemies due to its expediency and potential for disproportionate returns in various forms. Indeed, from the perspective of many of Canada's enemies, irregular warfare is often not simply an expedient choice, but at times the only viable choice.

Within the militaries of developed countries, irregular warfare is likely to continue to be employed within a hybrid context to counter the future irregular threats.

---

<sup>18</sup> David Blair, "Qatar and Saudi Arabia 'have ignited time bomb by funding global spread of radical Islam'," *The Telegraph*, 4 October, 2014.

Canadian SOF and HUMINT efforts, combined with PSYOPS, CIMIC and cyber activities, will undoubtedly expand commensurate with the complexity of the threat and in a manner harmonious with the conventional thrust. Just as Robert Rogers designed the means to countering the dastardly efforts of the French two-hundred-and-fifty years ago, so Canada must now embrace the necessity to develop agile, coherent responses conducive to both our defence and the necessary support to our global partners.



## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arquilla, John. "Insurgents, Raiders, and Bandits: How Masters of Irregular Warfare Have Shaped Our World." New York. Ivan R. Dee Publishing, 2011.
- Berry, LaVerle, Glenn E. Curtis, John N. Gibbs, Rex A. Hudson, Tara Karacan, Nina Kollars, and Ramón Miró. "Nations Hospitable to Organized Crime and Terrorism: A Report Prepared by the Federal Research Division, Library of Congress under an Interagency Agreement with the United States Government." Washington, D.C. Library of Congress – Federal Research Division, October, 2003.
- Blair, David. "Qatar and Saudi Arabia 'have ignited time bomb by funding global spread of radical Islam.'" *The Telegraph*, 4 October, 2014.
- Boot, Max. "Invisible Armies: An Epic History of Guerrilla Warfare from Ancient Times to the Present." New York. Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2013.
- Dewar, Michael. "Brush Fire Wars." London. St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1984.
- Elmer, John. "Growing Insurgencies, Irregular Warfare." *The Dominion*, March 27, 2007.
- Fisk, Robert. "War with Isis: If Saudis aren't fuelling the militant inferno, who is?" *The Independent* (online edition), 4 February, 2015.
- Gash, Jim. "Physical Operating Environments: How the Cyber-Electromagnetic Environment Fits." *Canadian Military Journal*, volume 12, no. 3.
- Gross, Michael. "The Ethics of Insurgency: A Critical Guide to Just Guerrilla Warfare." New York. Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- "Institutionalizing Irregular Warfare Capabilities." Hearing before the Subcommittee on Emerging Threats and Capabilities of the Committee on Armed Services, House of Representatives, One Hundred Twelfth Congress. Hearing held November 3, 2011.
- Jones, Seth G. "The Future of Irregular Warfare." The RAND Corporation, March 2012.
- Keegan, John. "A History of Warfare." New York. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1993.
- Larson, Eric, Derek Eaton, Brian Nichiporuk, and Thomas S. Szayna. "Assessing Irregular Warfare: A Framework for Intelligence Analysis." Santa Monica. RAND Corporation, 2008.

- Mack, Andrew. "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars: The Politics of Asymmetric Conflict." *Cambridge Journals*, volume 27, issue 2, January 1975.
- Mattis, Gen. James N. "Irregular Warfare, Hybrid Threats, and the Future Role of Ground Forces." Address to the Military Strategy Forum. Center for Strategic & International Studies. June 1, 2009.
- Mockaitis, Thomas R. "The Phoenix of Counterinsurgency." *The Journal of Conflict Studies*, volume 27, no. 1. The Gregg Centre for the Study of War and Society, University of New Brunswick, 2007.
- Murray, Williamson (Editor) and Peter R. Mansoor (Editor). "Hybrid Warfare: Fighting Complex Opponents from the Ancient World to the Present." New York. Cambridge University Press, 2012.
- Nightingale, Keith. "ISIS for the Common Man." *Small Wars Journal*, March 22, 2015.
- Saul, John Ralston. "A New Era of Irregular Warfare?" *Canadian Military Journal*, volume 5, no. 4.
- Unattributed. "Where life is cheap and talk is loose." *The Economist*, March 17, 2011.
- US Army Irregular Warfare Center. "Irregular Warfare: A Clear Picture of a Fuzzy Objective." *Small Wars Journal*, October 22, 2013.
- Vidino, Lorenzo. "The New Muslim Brotherhood in the West." New York. Columbia University Press, 2010.