

IRREGULAR WARFARE: A CASE STUDY IN CIA AND US ARMY SPECIAL FORCES OPERATIONS IN NORTHERN IRAQ, 2002-03

THE MIDDLE EAST INSTITUTE

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Cover photo: Soldiers of Joint Special Operations Task Force stay alert on the front line of the northern front of the war in Iraq on April 7, 2003 in Pir Daud, northern Iraq. [Photo by Patrick Barth/Getty Images.](#)



CONTENTS

4	Introduction
5	Background
6	Reestablishing Contact with the Kurds
6	Working with the Kurds: First Steps
8	Arrival of 10th Special Forces Group
9	The Fight
10	Key Takeaways
12	The Strategic Landscape: US Policy
12	The Strategic Landscape: Our Competitors (or Adversaries)
14	Conclusion
16	Endnotes



Photo above: U.S. Special Forces team (ODA 013) in Kurdish Refugee Camp, Isikveren, Turkey, April 1991.



While conventional warfare is an episodic interruption of the normal security environment, some level of IW is the norm.



Introduction

In the early hours of March 19, 2003, cruise missiles fired from U.S. Navy ships and precision munitions dropped from U.S. Air Force F-117 stealth aircraft struck Dora Farms, a cluster of buildings in a rural area just outside of Baghdad. This was an attempted decapitation strike targeting Saddam Hussein and his top leadership team. If successful, it could have averted the need for the war that followed. Saddam escaped the attack, but the targeting information was accurate: Despite all of his security precautions, his precise location had been identified.¹

The information that enabled this near-miss strike was not the result of some marvel of technology. Rather, it was the product of a complex human intelligence network. These were the first Americans to enter Iraq prior to the start of the Iraq War in 2003.²

“The United States must learn from its successful IW experiences and apply those lessons to great power competition.”

Pinpointing Saddam’s location in early 2003 was only one of several significant irregular warfare (IW) tasks accomplished by this combined team. American intelligence officers and special operators practice IW constantly around the world; IW is both a set of missions and a mindset. These missions include counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, foreign internal defense, stabilization operations, and unconventional warfare. Rapid, mission-focused adaptability and the ability to work closely with others — whether from another agency, an ally, or a partner — constitute the IW mindset.

According to most histories, the Iraq War was executed in two distinct phases: a conventional war and then an irregular counterinsurgency war. In fact, IW began prior to the onset of conventional combat, continued through the ground war against the Iraqi Army, and continues today against the Islamic State. This paradigm — a mostly irregular, regular war — has always been dominant and is increasingly important to understand given the renewed U.S. focus on great power competition.

Conventional wars in the 21st century are typically high intensity and quick, or lower intensity and protracted. In the first case, irregular operations almost always precede and support the conventional war. In the latter case of protracted conventional struggle (e.g. Ukraine and Kashmir), irregular actions like proxy attacks, intelligence operations, security force assistance, and unconventional operations are typically far more common than high-order combat.

We propose nothing new by stating that IW is, in fact, far more frequent than conventional warfare. In fact, while conventional warfare is an episodic interruption of the normal security environment, some level of IW is the norm; consequently, the United States must learn from its successful IW experiences and apply those lessons to great power competition. This is exactly what the IW Annex³ of the National Defense Strategy (NDS) of 2018⁴ requires. For the past two decades the CIA and Army Special Forces have demonstrated how to leverage interagency relationships

and apply complementary capabilities to achieve successful IW outcomes. The CIA/Army Special Forces partnership in Northern Iraq during the invasion of Iraq demonstrates the value of this interagency team and provides lessons and a model for the conduct of IW in the future.

Background

Ethnic Kurds make up the majority in the three provinces in Northern Iraq (known as Iraqi Kurdistan) and around 20% of Iraq’s population as a whole. They fought against every regime in Baghdad from 1960 until Saddam was removed. In 1970 the government of Iraq announced a peace plan that included Kurdish autonomy, but instead started an Arabization program in Kurdish areas and launched a new military offensive against them. Iraq eventually signed a deal with Iran, known as the Algiers Agreement, in 1975 in which Iran cut all trade to Iraqi Kurdistan. Between this agreement and the start of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980, over 200,000 Kurds were forcibly relocated from their homes in key Iraqi cities, such as Kirkuk.

In 1988, the Iraqi government of Saddam Hussein launched a direct attack using chemical weapons on Kurdish civilians in an “operation” called *Anfal*, or “spoils of war.” An estimated 100,000 Kurds were killed in this genocide, around 2,000 villages were completely destroyed, and landmines were emplaced to prevent anyone from returning. Per the *Frontline* documentary on the subject, the international community was muted on these atrocities.^{5 6}

In March 1991, in the aftermath of the coalition expulsion of Iraqi forces from Kuwait, the Kurds, together with the Shi’a in the south of Iraq, rebelled against Saddam. Despite early success in gaining control of the key cities in Northern Iraq, by April 1991 forces loyal to Saddam had crushed the rebellion; 1.5 million Kurdish refugees fled to Iran and Turkey.^{7 8}

In April, the U.S. and coalition partners deployed military forces to Turkey to assist in humanitarian relief operations.⁹ The U.S.

Army's 10th Special Forces Group deployed elements to nearly every major refugee camp that had sprung up on both sides of the Iraq-Turkey border. For two months, they lived side by side with the refugees, facilitating life-saving support until the coalition established a no-fly zone over Northern Iraq and cleared Iraqi forces from the area.¹⁰

These actions set the conditions for the return of refugees to their homes in Iraq. For the Special Forces soldiers, this would be the beginning of a long association with the Iraqi Kurds. They provided combat search and rescue support to the coalition taskforce that patrolled the no-fly zone in Northern Iraq until 1996, a mission that included a ground presence in the Kurdish Autonomous Zone. The relationships and goodwill developed over these years of association would prove invaluable when the Special Forces soldiers returned to Northern Iraq in 2002 to begin preparation for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The CIA also had a lengthy association with the Kurds in Northern Iraq. As reported by *The New York Times*, the CIA began to work with Kurdish organizations in 1993 to establish an intelligence agency called *Asayish* (or "security" in Kurdish).¹¹ The goals of the organization were counter-terrorism, counter-espionage, intelligence gathering, and analysis, and it had jurisdiction over economic crimes, espionage prosecution, and political corruption.¹²

Reestablishing Contact with the Kurds

In February 2002, the Northern Iraq Liaison Element (NILE) team¹³ entered Northern Iraq.¹⁴ A CIA published review of a book on the topic stated, "In Iraqi Kurdistan during 2002-2003, the U.S. Intelligence Community had the advantage of experienced hand picked teams of CIA and Special Forces personnel who knew the terrain, culture, language and people."¹⁵ The NILE team's mission was primarily to reestablish contact with the two main political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which at the time had been in an official state of war with each other since 1996. The attacks of September 11, 2001 had occurred a few months earlier and U.S. national security leaders were concerned that Iraq might become another theater in the War on Terror.

The intent was to link up with both parties and work with them to prepare the north for a potential war with Saddam in coordination with the Turkish government.

The first NILE team deployed to Salah ah Din and Qalah Chulan in February 2002, to reestablish contact with the leaders of the KDP and PUK. Kurdish leaders were pleased to receive the team, but skeptical of the U.S. government's intentions. They were reluctant to believe the U.S. was back to stay. With much effort, the team was ultimately successful in re-establishing trust with the Kurds. It was a very difficult sell, especially with the KDP. The team departed Northern Iraq after 10 days, assuring the Kurds that they would return in the near future.

Working with the Kurds: First Steps

The team set up small operations bases in KDP-controlled Salah ah Din and PUK-controlled Qalah Chulan in July-August 2002. These bases were established to prepare for a potential upcoming U.S. military direct action operation against an Ansar al-Islam base of operation in and around the village of Sargat, near Khormal in the Halabja region.¹⁶

For approximately six weeks, the team worked closely with PUK Peshmerga forces in planning and preparing for a U.S.-Peshmerga combined arms operation against Ansar al-Islam in Khormal. Detailed and extensive, this entailed not only producing a plan for Peshmerga ground forces but also for the introduction of U.S. special operations troops and aircraft with substantial strike capabilities.

In preparing for the operation, the PUK Peshmerga Command was an enthusiastic partner. The Kurdish troops were experienced in mountain guerrilla operations fighting against Saddam's Iraqi Army, against the Iranians, and against each other for decades. The Kurds did not shy from the coming fight in Sargat; Ansar al-Islam was a serious threat to PUK control of northeastern Iraq. The Peshmerga leadership worked tirelessly to support planning and potential operations, while constantly advocating for the deployment of conventional U.S. military forces (which were unlikely to be deployed for this action).¹⁷

On-the-ground planners worked very closely with counterparts in the United States to prepare U.S. forces for entry into Northern Iraq and execution of the operation. Particular



Photo above: NILE team member conducting reconnaissance operations.

attention was paid to establishing close working relationships with Peshmerga forces, which were to provide the critical manpower for the operation. Interagency coordination was extremely close in this planning. Unfortunately, the operation was called off at the last moment — and to make matters worse, news of the cancellation was leaked to the press. Both the CIA and the Kurds learned of it from cable news programs.

Although the planned operation was canceled, it proved to be an excellent dress rehearsal for the coming fight against Ansar al-Islam and the Iraqi Army. While the NILE team and U.S. military were able to show the Kurds what was possible and to demonstrate that they were a cohesive U.S. government team, the unseemly way in which the operation was canceled and in which the team and the Kurds learned of the decision left a bad taste with the Kurds. It necessitated extensive confidence-building measures to once again regain their trust.

On the heels of the canceled operation, the NILE team departed Iraq in late August 2002; in mid-October 2002, two

NILE teams with Special Forces augmentees and additional U.S. Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) operators returned to Salah ah Din and Qalah Chulan. The teams, with already established close relationships with Kurdish political and Peshmerga leaders following the previous deployments to Northern Iraq that year, began preparations in earnest for the coming fight.

The NILE teams were tasked with strengthening the relationship with Peshmerga commanders, strategically and geographically mapping out Kurdish strengths and weaknesses, and providing extensive intelligence products to warfighters back in the U.S. to prepare them for deployment to Iraqi Kurdistan. These efforts entailed daily close coordination and constant travel to the frontline areas of Peshmerga *fermandes* (battalions) for meetings with commanders, capability assessments of various units, and terrain studies of potential operational areas.

The small NILE team traveled constantly to frontline areas



Photo above: Air infiltration via MC-130 from Jordan, March 22, 2003.

facing Iraqi Army and Ansar al-Islam forces and provided a constant stream of intelligence derived from these reconnaissance operations. In carrying them out, the team built lasting relationships with Peshmerga commanders and their soldiers and set the stage for eventual combat operations against Saddam Hussein and Ansar al-Islam. The Kurds saw a consistent, seamless relationship and their confidence in the partnership with the United States grew as a result.

In addition the team performed critical preparatory work for subsequent operations in the north. They served as a direct conduit of information about the Peshmerga, the terrain, and operational environment back to the 10th Special Forces Group leadership in Fort Carson, Colorado, which informed the group's ongoing planning and pre-deployment training activities. They were also able to share the broad strokes of the group's operational approach with their Kurdish counterparts, which helped align operational goals and concepts, as well as reinforcing Kurdish confidence in the seriousness of the U.S.¹⁸

They contracted for the completion of an unfinished airstrip just outside the city of Sulaymaniyah, which would be critical to infiltrating the main body of Special Forces soldiers in the PUK sector, as well as the subsequent delivery of arms, ammunition, and supplies. Additionally, they coordinated for billeting and workspace for the headquarters, as well as contracting for the construction of latrines and showers, and the provision of food services. In short, they paved the way for the successful establishment of subsequent elements of the U.S. Army's 10th Special Forces Group, who would become the primary U.S. military contingent in Northern Iraq.

Arrival of 10th Special Forces Group

A company-sized advance force element of the 10th Special Forces Group arrived in Northern Iraq in February 2003 and immediately began planning with the NILE team in Salah ah Din and Qalah Chulan and preparing Peshmerga forces for the pending fights with both Ansar al-Islam and with Saddam's Army in Northern Iraq. The Iraqi military force included three

“Any Kurdish or Peshmerga leaders who may still have had misgivings about the American intent up to that point no longer harbored any doubts. There was going to be a lot of action in Iraqi Kurdistan.”

Iraqi Corps, composed of 13 Iraqi Army and Republican Guard divisions, representing two-thirds of the Iraqi military’s total ground forces. Additionally, a well-equipped, armored division-sized force of Iranian dissidents sponsored by Saddam, the Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK), was located within the Iraqi II Corps sector and assessed as likely to fight alongside them.

Lastly, the Badr Corps, an Iranian-sponsored Iraqi Shi’a paramilitary force, had elements in PUK territory and directly across the border in Iran. Though they enjoyed a cordial relationship with the PUK, their response to U.S. military forces was considered a wild card. Though the Kurdish leadership was already on board with the teams’ efforts by this time, the arrival of the 10th Special Forces Group advanced force element, coupled with the arrival of the battalion commanders and operations officers of the 2nd and 3rd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group several weeks later, represented a huge boost to the planning and preparation efforts.

Any Kurdish or Peshmerga leaders who may still have had misgivings about the American intent up to that point no longer harbored any doubts. There was going to be a lot of action in Iraqi Kurdistan. It was at this point that much more effort by U.S. leadership went into ensuring the Kurds would not make the mistake of flooding into either Kirkuk or Mosul with the commencement of combat operations — so as to assuage the Turks, who were, per the overall Iraq plan at that time, to allow the U.S. Army 4th Infantry Division (4th ID) to traverse Turkey on its way to engage the significant number of Iraqi units based in the northern provinces of Iraq.

As time went on, however, the American position on this issue, which was of high importance to the Kurds, gradually weakened as the Turkish government made it clear that it would not allow the 4th ID to move through Turkey to invade Iraq from the north. Eventually, CIA and U.S. military leaders on the ground became convinced that despite their best efforts — and Kurdish assurances that they would not take physical control of Mosul and Kirkuk — that the Kurds had

every intention of taking both cities, which they saw as theirs, especially Kirkuk. Both Kurdish parties considered Kirkuk to be an integral part of a future Kurdish autonomous zone, given the traditionally strong demographic presence of Kurds (prior to Saddam’s Arabization program) and the importance of its oil wealth.

Despite these political machinations, the Kurds approached the planning and preparation effort very seriously; they worked tirelessly with the U.S. leadership to ultimately realize the destruction of Ansar al-Islam and Saddam Hussein. Through this period, the team worked feverishly to collect relevant intel reporting to provide to the senior U.S. policymakers, U.S. military commanders, and in particular, to the 10th Special Forces Group units. The NILE team and 10th Special Forces Group, as well as other USSOCOM specialists, collected important information, formatted it, sent the reporting, and went out for more.

At the same time, they worked with their colleagues in the newly arrived 10th Special Forces Group to link them up with the Peshmerga formations, establish critical command relationships with Peshmerga commanders, and to the degree that they could, train Peshmerga troops for impending coordinated action. Unfortunately, there was little time for much training, and the Kurds often didn’t believe they were in need of training, given their long and storied record of fighting the very foes on which we were concentrating.

The Fight

On the evening of March 21, 2003, two days after the Dora Farms strike initiated hostilities, NILE team members of the 10th Special Forces Group advance forces and PUK Peshmerga leadership watched from the roof of a Peshmerga battalion headquarters near Halabja as more than 60 Tomahawk cruise missiles impacted against Ansar al-Islam targets that they had selected. The original plan had called for a ground assault to

follow soon after the missile strike. However, Turkey's refusal to provide basing or overflight rights had stymied the entry of the main body of Special Forces troops. They would begin to arrive the following night, flying from their intermediate staging base in Romania to Jordan, and then successfully infiltrating Iraqi airspace in Air Force Special Operations MC-130 aircraft, despite significant air defense fires from Saddam's forces.¹⁹

After several subsequent days of airstrikes and AC-130 fires, a combined force of several thousand Peshmerga, approximately 100 Special Forces soldiers, and members of the NILE team, launched Operation Viking Hammer at dawn on March 28, 2003. After two days of intense ground combat operations, supported by episodic tactical air-ground attacks by coalition aircraft, Ansar al-Islam was routed. Approximately half of its members who survived the action escaped across the adjacent border into Iran.

Though Operation Viking Hammer was planned as a deliberate offensive operation with extensive close air support sorties allocated, in execution, not nearly as much close air support materialized due to several factors. Located in the northeastern corner of Iraq, it was the furthest point away from coalition air bases and aircraft carriers, and out of the reach of most of the coalition aircraft. Additionally, the fight in the south, and "troops in contact" calls along the Green Line siphoned off sorties planned for Operation Viking Hammer before they reached the Halabja area.^{20 21}

In a 2004 *U.S. News and World Report* article, "A Firefight in the Mountains," the author states: "Viking Hammer would go down in the annals of Special Forces history—a battle fought on foot, under sustained fire from an enemy lodged in the mountains, and with minimal artillery and air support."²²

Leaving a small contingent of U.S. personnel and Peshmerga to mop up any remaining members of Ansar al-Islam and their affiliates along the Iranian border, the bulk of the PUK Peshmerga forces, with Special Forces support, turned their attention to operations along the Green Line, stretching from Kirkuk eastward through Tuz Khurmatu, Khanaqin, and Jalula. In the meantime, KDP Peshmerga forces facing Mosul Province engaged in heavy fighting. Across the 350-km front, Special Forces soldiers with advanced training, anti-tank missiles, mortars, and close air support proved decisive in dislodging the Iraqi Army.

On April 10, as U.S. leadership was engaged in a meeting with Kurdish leaders and outside Iraqi anti-Saddam representatives to plan the assault on Kirkuk and Mosul, PUK Peshmerga forces, Sulaymaniyah police units, and thousands of Kurdish civilians flooded into Kirkuk as the Iraqi Army conducted a fighting withdrawal. 10th Special Forces Group and NILE team members were with PUK forces as they liberated the city and began efforts to control the chaos, return basic services, and stabilize the city.

With Kirkuk under Kurdish control, the fight to secure Mosul — considered a Sunni stronghold and home to many Iraqi Army officers — was more difficult. But ultimately Mosul fell to the KDP Peshmerga, accompanied by the NILE team and 10th Special Forces Group soldiers. The major fighting for Kirkuk, Mosul, and other smaller cities south of the Green Line was concluded within a few weeks of the initiation of combat operations. It culminated with the Kurds and the U.S. military in solid control of the areas of historically strong Kurdish presence.

Key Takeaways

The experience in Northern Iraq in 2002 and 2003 provides ample lessons that should inform U.S. IW practitioners and policymakers as they navigate the challenges and complexities of the emerging national security landscape.

Develop and maintain long-term relationships. Success in Northern Iraq in 2003 was built on an established relationship with the Iraqi Kurds. While the history of the U.S. government (USG)-Kurdish relationship up to 2002 was somewhat checkered, a couple of events provided a solid foundation for the partnership. First was the humanitarian relief effort in 1991. The second was the maintenance of the no-fly zone over Northern Iraq that provided relative security and stability to the Kurdish region. The relatively rapid development of the Kurds as a key partner²³ for Operation Iraqi Freedom would have been difficult without this shared history. Maintaining the relationship continued to pay dividends even after the successful invasion.

The Kurds were excellent partners in the U.S.-led counterinsurgency period, maintaining security in the north while assisting in the fight against al-Qaeda. Their leadership



Photo above: Operation Viking Hammer March 28, 2003.

and participation in the creation of the Iraqi special operations forces were also critical. When al-Qaeda reemerged as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the U.S. government leveraged its long-term relationship with the Iraqi Kurds to quickly develop a partnership with the Syrian Kurds (People's Protection Units, or YPG) in the middle of that crisis.

Operating through and with partners works ... in the right circumstances. For a relatively small U.S. commitment, operations in Northern Iraq returned significant results. U.S. efforts tied down two-thirds of the Iraqi military; destroyed Ansar al-Islam; neutralized the threat of the MEK; and liberated a significant portion of Iraq.

At the strategic level, the agreement to partner was built on shared objectives: removal of the twin threats of Saddam and radical Islamic terrorists. While there was a potential divergence in post-conflict objectives (control of Kirkuk, the status of the Kurdish region in a unified Iraq, etc.) both parties were willing to subordinate their differences and focus on

the immediate, and common, objectives. At the tactical level, the U.S. effectively enabled their Kurdish partners with key capabilities that they needed: intelligence, command and control, precision fires, weapons, and technology.

U.S. personnel fought alongside them; this was a demonstration of U.S. commitment, but also a means of maintaining situational awareness and exerting a level of influence and control. The Kurds supplied the necessary mass, knowledge of the terrain and the adversaries, and existing networks to collect information and exert influence. As the U.S. grapples with the task of addressing a burgeoning array of (potential) global adversaries with a relatively small military and intelligence community, leveraging partners will be increasingly important.

Natural teammates. The CIA and Army Special Forces are similar, yet complementary organizations in the IW environment. They both specialize in working with indigenous partners in difficult environments, with a small, low-visibility

footprint. Their employment is generally “below the radar” — politically acceptable at home and more palatable to a partner than a large, overt military presence. Yet they bring different capabilities, training, education, and experiences to an operational environment, and they are often focused on solving different aspects of a problem. Neither is a replacement for the other in an IW environment; consequently, it is imperative that the two organizations maintain an understanding of each other’s capabilities, preserve relationships that cross organizational boundaries, and proactively seek ways to work together. If we are “competing” effectively against our adversaries in great power competition, we should be operating together 24/7/365.

Leadership without ownership or ego is crucial in the interagency and partner environment. In U.S. military doctrine, unity of command is enshrined as a principle of war, with the unity of effort as the fallback position.²⁴ In IW, unity of command is a Holy Grail while the unity of effort is at best ephemeral. The primary team in Northern Iraq consisted of the NILE team and 10th Special Forces Group, two major Kurdish political parties (with separate militias), and other smaller Kurdish political parties. Unified action was a result of constant leader dialog and investment in the relationships. Despite potential pitfalls, the collective partnership remained focused and committed to the common goals.

Creating and maintaining the unity of effort through the most critical phases of operation places a premium on leaders with high emotional intelligence and the ability to influence and cooperate with people they have no authority over. Looking forward, it will be especially important that U.S. agencies and departments develop and promote these kinds of leaders. In a security environment marked by great power competition, operations will be in blended Title 10, 22, 50 environments, and alongside partners and allies. The nation must be represented by leaders with the ability to persuade and influence those they do not command, or risk failure.²⁵

The Strategic Landscape: US Policy

The NDS of 2018 was the first in over a decade. As described by then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis, the strategy has three main parts: building a more lethal force, strengthening

alliances and attracting new partners, and reforming the Department of Defense (DoD) for greater performance and affordability. Strengthening alliances and attracting new partners was considered crucial to the ability to shift resources to match our new priorities.²⁶

The NDS prioritizes the great power competitors of China and Russia, the rogue state actors of North Korea and Iran, and then countering the threat of terrorism against the homeland and our interests, allies, and partners aboard. The belief was that after 20 years of warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq against mostly unconventional forces and terrorist organizations (with the exception of Saddam Hussein’s Republican Guard at the beginning of the war in Iraq in 2003), that the U.S. needed to focus on more significant threats to the nation

This includes threats like China and Russia, which have undertaken to develop advanced weapons that could defeat our ability to counter; threats like North Korea, which has developed a nuclear weapons capability, and possibly the means to deliver it; and threats like Iran, which has mastered the use of proxy warfare in the Middle East to meet its objectives with grave destabilizing consequences.

The NDS included an IW Annex, which articulated that IW is “as strategically important as traditional warfare and the DoD must be equally capable in both.” It also highlighted that the U.S. must ensure its IW capabilities remain robust and do not atrophy; that IW preparedness applies to the entire joint force, not solely special operations forces; and that the U.S. must use the skills and capacity developed over 20 years of fighting in the global war on terror against the higher priorities of great power competitors and rogue state actors.²⁷

The Strategic Landscape: Our Competitors (or Adversaries)

Perhaps because of the conventional overmatch that the U.S. has over these adversaries, Russia and Iran have developed robust IW capabilities of their own and have been active in Syria and Libya and Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, respectively. The U.S. needs to evolve and adapt our IW capabilities to match them. An IW overmatch that complements our conventional

Photo right: NILE team and 10th Special Forces with Peshmerga along the Green Line, April 2003.

“Russia and Iran have developed robust IW capabilities of their own ... The U.S. needs to evolve and adapt our IW capabilities to match them. An IW overmatch that complements our conventional overmatch should be the goal.”

overmatch should be the goal. The skills identified in this case study are the very skills that this strategy envisions being utilized in all of the identified priorities.

Valery Gerasimov, the chief of the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Russia, a position comparable to our Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, articulated the so-called Russian “Gerasimov Doctrine” in a speech and an article in February 2013.²⁸ Gerasimov says that the rules of war have changed and that the role of nonconventional options has increased in importance.²⁹ The approach uses internet hackers, private companies as a cover, false media outlets, “private” security contractors, and proxy forces to create chaos while avoiding attribution. A win to them is if everyone else loses more. While the U.S. (who the Russians have identified as their main adversary) and its allies possess conventional overmatch, IW is Russia’s preferred means to meet its national security objectives. It is cheap and has proven effective in Ukraine, Libya, and Syria, though their operational conduct at best contravenes international norms and arguably violates international law.

The lessons learned working with the Iraqi Peshmerga in 2003 were an example to follow in building our relationship with the

YPG, which became the backbone of the Syrian Democratic Forces. This force defeated ISIS, captured its so-called caliphate in Syria, and secured Baghouz, the last piece of territory held by the group on March 23, 2019. Reportedly, they also assisted in the operation that killed ISIS’s leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, on Oct. 26, 2019, in Idlib, Syria.³⁰

Iran also made the calculation that they would be soundly defeated in any conventional conflict with the U.S.; consequently, they utilize unconventional means to meet



The nation must be represented by leaders with the ability to persuade and influence those they do not command, or risk failure.





Photo above: Viewing Ansar al-Islam positions. One of the authors and Sheik Jafar, Peshmerga commander of the assault force.

their strategic goals. They have done this primarily through proxies such as the Houthis in Yemen, Lebanese Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, and the Hashd al-Shaabi units in Iraq. They have been effective in projecting their influence through these means, albeit to the detriment of the populations in the countries in which they operate. The use of surrogates allows Iran to wield influence in these countries with very limited costs. The model of pairing with a unit like the Iraqi Peshmerga for a common purpose to liberate rather than subjugate people (as the Russians and Iranians do) is a positive version of this type of warfare and one that should be emulated.

Conclusion

Inter-agency cooperation was the key to success in the Northern Iraq theater before and during the early stages of the Iraq War. With the reestablishment of the USG-Kurdish relationships in early to mid-2002, the Kurds needed confidence and the steel of U.S. military backing. When they knew they had that backing, they were effectively unstoppable.

In the early days of the effort, before the arrival of Army Special Forces and airborne troops, NILE team members on the ground found every possible Peshmerga formation, learned about it, reported on it, and talked extensively with its commanders to ensure they understood the nature of the coming operations and the importance of their roles in them. NILE team members worked very closely with the 10th Special Forces Group and other USSOCOM operators every day and night for several months — prepping the Kurds for operations. At the same time, these combined teams provided exhaustive intel material to the CIA and, more importantly, U.S. military commanders and operators for their eventual roles.

When the 10th Special Forces Group did arrive in the country, they were immediately joined at the hip with Peshmerga commanders commensurate with their levels of command. Group and battalion commanders were linked up with Peshmerga General Command leaders and A-detachments were positioned with geographic tactical Peshmerga formations. NILE teams and 10th Special Forces soldiers

made the best of a difficult situation and executed extremely complicated tactical operations employing large numbers of under-trained and poorly equipped indigenous fighters. The result is now a matter of record in the history books. A few officers in the 10th Special Forces Group and NILE team members, with extremely courageous Peshmerga troops, achieved mightily and liberated a huge population that had suffered greatly through the previous decades.

Today the U.S. faces a range of threats across a multi-polar security environment that is arguably unprecedented in the post-World War II era. Coupled with the likely impacts of technological trends in data analytics, machine learning, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and bioengineering (to name just a few) on warfare, the future security landscape looks to be incredibly complex and challenging. The threat of conventional great power conflict, IW, and a hybrid of the two will be present for the foreseeable future.

The current NDS has appropriately emphasized maintaining conventional capabilities to fight and win against a peer adversary, sustaining a world-class capability to wage IW, and working with allies and partners for our collective security. Whether in competition, confrontation, or conflict with our adversaries, the U.S. will need to field a cohesive and effective interagency team. A look back at our past successes will show the way forward in the future. This chapter in our IW history provides an example to follow and a partnership to use as a model.

**“It is amazing what you can accomplish if you
do not care who gets the credit.”**

- Harry S. Truman

This paper was approved for publication by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Department of Defense. A classified version was submitted to an appropriate journal for consideration of publication to an approved audience.

ENDNOTES

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