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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL - Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies



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# SICUREZZA, TERRORISMO E SOCIETÀ

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# SICUREZZA, TERRORISMO E SOCIETÀ

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# Contemporary irregular conflicts: new and old ideas

ANDREA BECCARO

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## Abstract

Contemporary international system is at a political turning point due to security issues partially related to the concept of irregular warfare. Over the last three decades, several theories have emerged around the idea that war has changed and should no longer be considered in some areas and contexts state versus state. The goal of the essay is to analyse the nature of contemporary irregular warfare, showing, on the one hand, the continuities of the current debate with old strategic ideas (mainly related to the notion of insurgency) and, on the other hand, its consequences for politics and security.

## Keywords

Irregular Warfare, Transformation of War, Security Studies, Hybrid Warfare, Terrorism.

## 1. Introduction

At least since the end of the Cold War (Krause and Williams, 1996), a huge debate over the transformation of war has arisen, that is, how and why war is changing, what the triggers are, and what features are most affected by the change. Although scholars have provided different conceptualizations to

describe conflicts over the last three decades, everyone has stressed the idea that modern conflicts are irregular wars, i.e. not state versus state wars. This finding is also confirmed by empirical data. In fact, according to SIPRI data from between 2001 and 2011, 69 inter-state wars were fought, but non-state wars amounted to 221 (SIPRI, 2012: 5); while more recent SIPRI data stated: “[T]here have been signs of increasing non-state violent conflict since 2010 in Africa and the Middle East” (SIPRI, 2015: 7).

This essay focuses on irregular conflicts, their interpretation, and their nature, because it is imperative to study the kind of violence that drives the political change of contemporary international system. However, the paper does not want to infer that regular wars fought by States do not represent a threat to international system. The focus of this essay is just armed violence of non-state actors, which is very different from state versus state ones in terms of strategy, tactics, and social consequences. As Steven Metz (2015) wrote in *World Politics*, a form of “new-feudalism” is emerging, and it “will have profound effects on the global security system, since the latter’s norms, laws, practices, and procedures are based on sovereign nations that control their territory and are held responsible for what happens there. [...] By contrast, the emerging global security system is a heterogeneous one that includes traditional sovereign nations but also feudal states, whose formal national governments only control the capital and, in some cases, a few resource-producing regions”.

This study does not suggest any new conceptualization of irregular conflicts; its goal is to offer, instead, a sort of history of ideas related to the debate on irregular warfare in order to figure out common characteristics, thereby creating a more accurate and comprehensive picture of contemporary armed violence. The essay adopts a theoretical approach but it considers typical contemporary cases of irregular warfare, for instance, the ISIS warfare in Iraq, Syria, Libya and even in Europe, the insurgencies linked to Hezbollah and Hamas in the Middle east, the operations of Al-Qaeda.

The paper is organized into three sections. The first one offers a definition of war, explains the Western dichotomy between regular and irregular wars, describes their features and offers some historical examples of the latter. The second section takes into account some of the buzzwords used to describe contemporary armed violence and aims both at conceptualizing contemporary irregular conflicts highlighting their key features and at singling out the lack of historical background because the majority of them seems to suggest some kind of break with the past. However, this break seems to be more the result of the scholar will to differentiate him/herself from other scholars offering a new definition than the result of a serious historical study. The third section takes a historical point of view both to highlight the shortcomings of contemporary ideas on irregular conflicts giving at least tentative answers to

them and to study some crucial characteristics that may have important consequences, such as urban battlefield. As a result, the paper highlights the lack of historical awareness in the Western strategic thought in confronting and analysing contemporary irregular conflicts.

## 2. War and irregular warfare

Defining the notion of war is a very complex, multifaceted, complicated and challenging task even for the simple reason that a precise definition of war has proved elusive. However, for the sake of this paper, it is a key step to offer a definition to adhere to even to show in which way it differs from the concept of irregular warfare. For instance, Clausewitz defines war as “an act of violence to compel our opponent to fulfil our will” (Clausewitz, 1984: 75). Although such a definition takes into account at least three central elements of war, i.e. “violence”, “opponent”, and “will”, it appears to be too loose. In order to suggest a more accurate definition, in the present study, war is defined as a conflict among independent political groups that is resolved by means of organized and armed violence (Bobbio, 1997). In this definition, three elements stand out. First of all, war is a conflict, which is a less specific term that includes situations often excluded in the definition of war, i.e. guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and similar contingencies. Secondly, the definition entails the political element because actors of the conflict could be both State and different polities, the key point is that such actors are independent and they represent politically organized units. Finally, this kind of political conflict is not resolved in a democratic parliament, by elections, and by other political means but using “organized and armed violence”. The notion of “organized and armed violence” is important for two reasons. To begin with, violence is the trading mark of every war, as Clausewitz put it: “War is a clash between major interests, which is resolved by bloodshed—that is the only way in which it differs from other conflicts” (Clausewitz, 1984: 149). Secondly, the adjective “organized” signals that the violence is not random, casual, or arbitrary, but on the contrary it is organized both in terms of means (fighting units, weaponry, chain of command and so on) and in terms of goals. Moreover, the violence must involve dealing out death and destruction to the other. That does not mean that both actors might be able to reach such a level of violence to destroy or annihilate the enemy; it means, instead, that an actor must be able to generate a level of organized and armed violence that might threaten at least one of the following: enemy’s policy, strategy, security, economy, or way of life. For instance, despite the fact that ISIS is often defined as a “terrorist group”, it has waged a war in Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Sinai that has threatened local security and stability. In Europe ISIS uses a different

approach but due to its attacks it compels Western governments to invest more in security, and to intervene in Middle East and North Africa. A further example of this kind of organized and armed violence is the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington. As a consequence of this blow al-Qaeda did not aim at destroying the US, nevertheless it was able to influence US foreign policy and security.

After having defined in such a way the notion of war, the paper needs also to tackle the issue of the dichotomy between regular and irregular warfare. While a variety of definitions of the term 'irregular warfare' have been proposed, this paper uses the definition suggested by Charles Edward Callwell, who defines it as 'all campaigns other than those where both the opposing sides consist of regular troops' (Callwell, 1996: 21). Moreover, the dichotomy between the notions of regular and irregular warfare is closely linked with the Western concept of State. For the Western military professionals the State represents the second element of the definition of war aforementioned, i.e. the politically organized units that in Western political thought since XVI century are the State. As a consequence, according to Carl Schmitt, the terms 'regular' and its opposite 'irregular' have to be understood within the framework of modern state regularity: 'The distinction between regular and irregular battle depends on the degree of regularity [*Präzision des Regulären*]. [...] the force and significance of his irregularity is determined by the force and significance of the regular that is challenged by him' (Schmitt, 2004: 3). Accordingly, this paper uses the term 'irregular warfare', which, on the whole, refers to non-state actors' warfare. As a consequence, irregular warfare is a Western concept based on the primacy of the state, and thus not applicable to most parts of the contemporary world. This also explains why Western strategic thought, which is closely related to the notion of State, finds it difficult to define irregular warfare as the transformation of war debate summarized below demonstrates.

Despite these Western limitations, irregular warfare has a long history, and, from the 18th century onwards, several authors have reflected on the phenomenon. Andreas Emmerich, Johann Ewald, and Carl von Clausewitz in Germany, Carlo Bianco in Italy, and Callwell in Great Britain are just a few examples of that hugely multifaceted and long tradition (Laqueur, 1977; Heuser, 2010, 2013; Rink, 1999; 2010; Arquilla, 2011; Beccaro 2016). During the 20th century the notions of insurgency and counterinsurgency (COIN) have started to be used to describe such contingencies (Shy, John, Collier, 1986; Rid, 2009; 2010).

Although throughout history irregular warfare has been named in different ways, such as guerrilla warfare, insurgency (and its opposite counterinsurgency), small war, *kleiner Krieg*, Guerra per bande, colonial warfare, partisan warfare, hybrid warfare, asymmetric warfare and so on, it is possible to

single out several common elements such as the fact that irregular warfare is fought by non-state actors, it tries to find different way to confront with the enemy, it does not seek a frontal battle, it has a different relation with the local population.

According to Beatrice Heuser, in order to understand modern irregular warfare, and as a consequence the debate on transformation of war, two different conceptualizations of irregular warfare are crucial: the 18th century concept of *kleiner Krieg* and the military experiences during the 19th and 20th century. As far as *kleiner Krieg* is concerned, it is a notion closely linked to regular warfare and armies, even though it had its own rules (surprise and mobility). Since, eighteenth-century armies were large and had limited manoeuvring capabilities, lighter troops were necessary to manoeuvre, to move quickly and freely throughout the battlefield and to accomplish surprising attacks and reconnaissance (Lüh 2005). Therefore, their weaponry and equipment were lighter than that of regular troops. Moreover, the *kleiner Krieg* hallmark is the element of surprise, which is possible due to great mobility in time and space (Beccaro 2016). *Kleiner Krieg* troops are important for two reasons. First, they represent the ancestor of contemporary Special Operations Forces who operate linked to regular armies using unconventional approaches. Secondly, the *kleiner Krieg* tactics epitomize the general rules of irregular warfare: light troops, attacks conducted during the night or when it rains, snows, or with fog, the troops must be masters of the use of terrain and of disguise with local clothing or camouflage.

Those features represent the background of the next phase of irregular warfare pinpointed by Heuser, that is the 19th and 20th century during which irregular warfare has been waged by fighters with political (mainly nationalism and Marxism) or religious (mainly Islam) motivations (Heuser 2013: 20). Irregular fighters of this kind are different from the previous ones because they are not linked to regular armies. On the contrary they are totally 'irregular' because they are the opposite of the State regularity that they fight using the aforementioned tactics.

Is the irregular warfare a kind of war? The answer to this question must be positive because irregular warfare includes every elements of the definition of war. Irregular warfare is a conflict between political groups that use organized violence. However, irregular warfare is a kind of warfare that differs from the regular one in at least six strategic/tactical aspects. The first difference is related to time, since irregulars tend to prolong conflict, while regular army operations aim to shorten it. Time becomes a twofold weapon for irregular fighters: on the one hand, it is used to gain population support, while, on the other hand, it is useful for sapping the strength of the government. Western strategic thinking has focused on the possibility of concentrating forces over time and

space in order to get a quick win, on the contrary the irregulars try to disperse forces, prolong operations, and avoid direct confrontation. Moreover, this contrast explains the importance of the counterinsurgency doctrine in contemporary politics, because it assumes the necessity of long-term military and political involvement and a strategy able to take into account the military and political side of a conflict, which is the second difference that concerns the duality of the insurgent strategy: military and civilian. The government confronting an insurgency must win in both fields (with a consequent problem of resource allocation), while insurgents could simply prevail in just one.

The third difference is the political organization that characterizes the insurgents. It is often a shadow government or a network, but it has a key role in collecting and transmitting information, providing financial support and recruitment, and organizing terrorist attacks.

The fourth difference is irregularity. Insurgents do not seek confrontation with the army; on the contrary they avoid and wear down it with quick actions and without giving precise targets. As a result, in such contexts, there is no defined front; the battlefield and the enemy can be anywhere, thus forcing regulars to divide their forces, making them more vulnerable. As a consequence, insurgents operate in small and scattered units, thus denying fire-power superiority to a regular army and forcing it to adopt similar tactics and to employ infantry. While regular forces are designed to obtain the mobility of large units, irregulars point to the mobility of small units (or even the individual soldier in the case of terrorism), avoid direct confrontation with the enemy, and accept it only when they have a numerical advantage in attacking and can disappear as quickly as possible. Thus, terrorism is often the preferred tactic, not only because it is cost-effective, but also because it allows one to terrorize the population and to advertise through actions, the old concept of propaganda by the deed, that immediately attract the media.

The fifth difference lies in logistics, because the supply flow of a regular army follows its advance, enabling interdiction operations with infiltrated troops, with artillery, or from the air. In an insurgency, the population supports insurgents, and, as a consequence, the concept of interdiction loses much of its value. The last difference is the centre of gravity, whose destruction is the regular army's main objective. In an insurgency, both sides have the same centre of gravity: population (Simpson, 2012).

Having defined what is meant by war and irregular warfare, the paper will now move on to discuss in more detail the transformation of war debate, which on the one hand helps to understand contemporary strategic landscape; on the other it will show how these buzzwords are simply an attempt to re-conceptualize the old Western dichotomy between regular and irregular warfare using more charming name but referring to the same kind of conflict

that the essay has already described. This result will be then confirmed in the last paragraph.

### 3. Irregular warfare: contemporary buzzwords

At least since the end of the Cold War the Western strategic thought has been confronted with the problem of irregular warfare, as a result several conceptualizations have arisen. Martin van Creveld's *The Transformation of War* (1991) was one of the first book to pose the problem of how the war has changed at the end of XX century. The book criticizes the Clausewitzian ideas of the war as a continuation of politics, and a trinity of people, government, and military, because these are typical distinctions of the modern European state (Strachan, Herberg-Rothe, 2007). In order to describe the kind of organized violence likely in the future, Creveld uses the definition of LICs, Low Intensity Conflicts, which was probably introduced in 1971 by British General Frank Kitson (1971). In the eighties, the term LIC referred to a number of operations, from peacekeeping to counterinsurgency (Charters, Tugwell, 1989) and included even international terrorism and hostage-taking.

As a consequence LICs represent well the problem of defining irregular warfare because they are neither peace nor war, so they must be everything that stands between the two poles (Klare and Kornbluh 1988). The concept of LICs, therefore, does not stop at military operations alone, but also includes civilian ones. The problem is that soldiers have to handle this multiplicity of tasks, and, for this reason, they would have to be highly skilled and trained to rapidly change their approach and behaviour.

Considering the same issue, General Charles Krulak (1999) developed his "Three Block War" theory stressing two elements. In the future, the population will be concentrated in rather poor, coastal cities with little infrastructure. Within the same city and during the same day, soldiers could lead three different types of military interventions: distribution of humanitarian aid, small fire fights, and higher intensity battles.

According to Creveld, LICs have been the most common warfare since 1945, arguably the only one able to change the international system and are "by far the most important form of armed conflict in our time" (Creveld, 1991: 22). There are four differences between LICs and regular wars: LICs take place mainly in less developed countries; they do not involve regular armies on both sides; they are not fought with advanced weaponry; most LIC victims are civilians.

There are two reasons for the development of this kind of warfare: the huge cost of regular conflicts, and the inversely proportional relationship between the technological complexity and high costs of modern weapons

and weapons like RPG7s, mortars, and firearms, which are lethal and easy to operate and find on the market.

According to Holsti (1996) and his “wars of the third kind” theory (1), innovation, surprise, and unpredictability are necessary; irregulars use crime to raise funds, and terrorist attacks are useful for advertising, not for defeating the enemy. Unlike regular wars, LICs are not fought over interests, but instead about and for people. This is a common feature of the entire debate – even Rupert Smith (2009) stresses the point with the idea of “war amongst people”.

Regular armies might be ineffective against these threats, because they are weighed down by too much logistics and by too much technology. Irregular foot troops have proven to be as mobile as modern mechanized vehicles and have been able to make better use of terrain (Schultz, Dew, 2006).

Described in this way LICs appear to be a kind of “insurgency”. For this reason some scholars used the same notion and pondering on the development of international terrorism and urban warfare (McInnes, Sheffield, 1988; Beckett, 1988).

The same ideas related to the term insurgency then formed the background of the fourth generation warfare theory (Lind et al., 1989, 1994, 2001, 2004) that divides the modern history of war into four distinct generations. The first is related to the tactics of the musket era, line and column formations, and its main characteristic is the use of mass. The second generation responds to new inventions (breech-loading, barbed wire, the machine gun) and is based on tactics that are still linear but more related to fire and movement. In particular, artillery and indirect fire acquire importance so fire-power has the central role. The third generation is mainly driven by ideas that have allowed the development of new tactics such as *Blitzkrieg*. Scholars refer to those ideas implemented in the second part of the First World War as infiltration of troops behind enemy lines with the aim of carrying out an in-depth advancement and avoiding the strongest enemy points of resistance.

The fourth generation blurs traditional distinctions between civilians and the military, between war and peace, and it is characterized by five different elements: the battlefield includes the entire society; it emphasizes operations of small contingents; it gives less importance to logistics; since forces are small, the manoeuvre is a central element; destroying the enemy morale becomes more important than doing it physically.

The fourth generation can be driven by technology, that is, equipping small groups of soldiers with more and accurate fire power (contemporary Special Operations Forces, for example), or by ideas particularly from non-Western cultures, giving rise to forms of warfare that are less linear (Brun, 2010), like the “new” form of ISIS terrorism (Lewis, 2014; Kurth Cronin, 2015).

Thomas Hammes (2004; 2005) stresses these non-linear aspects, comparing the latest generation to a modern insurgency, designed as an advanced form that uses all available networks (political, social, economic, and military) to convince enemy policy-makers that their strategic goals are too expensive considering the benefits that might be obtained. Unlike previous forms of warfare, fourth generation does not aim at destroying enemy forces, but at striking and breaking their political will.

According to Hammes (2004), there are four elements that lead to the change from the third to the fourth generation. In addition to the crisis of the state, as well as the emergence of international organizations (the UN, NATO, the EU, etc.) and non-state actors (both transnational, like Al-Qaeda, and drug cartels, and sub-national, like many ethnic communities), he includes the development of international financial markets that can instantly move billions of dollars all over the world. In the past, state power was measured in terms of military, economic, political and industrial raw materials; today, however, information and knowledge are the real strengths, and they are often developed in one country and then used in another. That model reflects that of contemporary conflicts, which develop a strategy of attack in one country, and then this knowledge is combined with the resources of another country so as to have the means of attacking a third state.

Therefore, the interconnectivity and globalization of communications and of transportation are crucial elements. As a result it has also been used the notion of "Open-source Warfare" (Robb, 2005, 2007), which is derived from information technology and, in particular, the Unix/Linux operating systems that are free and developed, compiled, and corrected by users themselves. Contemporary irregular conflicts are then open-source, because irregulars are not included in a hierarchical structure, but in a network allowing them to be very skilled and fast at adapting due to information that can be shared very quickly and effectively through the Internet and media. In this type of war, it is essential that anyone has the ability to buy devices that can be easily turned into weapons or useful intelligence tools (Charette, 2007). For example, in Iraq, some IEDs (Improvised Explosive Device) have been constructed with primers simply derived from domestic electric bells. In addition, the techniques used are immediately shared with the community through manuals and websites allowing every irregular fighter around the world to study a tactic and change it according to his ability, equipment, and local situation. For example, this open-source feature is a key element of ISIS warfare that should be viewed as an eclectic mix of learned TTP that mostly draw from those used by insurgents during the 9/11 Wars (Cancian, 2017).

The most relevant shortcomings of fourth generation theory is its historical inaccuracy, in particular regarding the construction of the entire theory,

which leads to the count of four generations. While agreeing with the fact that the fourth generation is a kind of insurgency, it is difficult to understand how this kind of war might represent a fracture and a novelty in the history of war. Fourth generation does not represent a break with the past, but it is one of the stronger symptoms of continuity (Echevarria, 2005).

The argument about a supposed break with the past is a key theoretic foundation of several theory on contemporary warfare. One more example is illustrated by Mary Kaldor (1999) in *New and Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, in which she analyses the Yugoslav Wars, inferring that the main cause of the war change lies in the erosion of state prerogatives, both from above, through the trans-nationalisation of armed forces, and from below, with the privatization process. This gives rise to a revolution in war's social relations, largely due to the effects of globalization. Therefore, new wars differ from old ones in three fundamental elements.

New wars have different purposes because they would not be driven by ideological motives or geopolitical interests but by identity politics – that is, the claim of power on the basis of an alleged identity. The identity element is a key one to understand ISIS, even though the clash between Sunni powers and Shiite Iran in the Middle East also correspond to paramount geopolitical and economic interests related to oil and regional hegemony (Wehrey, 2013; Israeli, 2013).

Moreover, new wars use different combat methods: they seek to meet their goals not through fighting, i.e. a frontal clash between two regular armies, but through controlling the population, which occurs with the elimination of those who have different ideas and identities. The strategic aim is the expulsion of the population via killing, deportation, and broad violence: rape, mass murder, torture, confiscation of property, denial of political rights, and segregation. Therefore, rape and violence against women represent a calculated strategy not the result of indiscipline (Münkler, 2002). This was true in the Yugoslav wars, and it is also true today looking at “Siraq”, where ISIS uses every kind of violence to subdue the local population and to expel or eliminate the non-Sunni population. However, this tactic is not new, because the same kind of violence could be found in the context of civil wars and in the use of terrorism (Kalyvas 2006).

The economy of war is also different because is decentralized, with low participation in the conflict, with high unemployment. Furthermore, it is closely linked to external resources because, at the beginning of hostilities, domestic production collapses, leaving room for looting, the black market, external aid, and various illegal trades. Since the warring parties benefit from this same environment, it is not uncommon that one supports the other in order to perpetuate a state of war wherein they can prosper.

Kaldor (2003) describes a kind of conflict that basically crosses boundaries, involves a set of global actors, is concentrated in areas where the modern state is failing and where diaspora plays a predominant role. At the same time she stresses the complex relationship between Western advanced technology and local troops, recalling Shaw's *risk-transfer war* (2005), in which collateral damage is minimized by controlling media.

Unlike Kaldor, Herfried Münkler (2005) emphasizes the idea that "new wars" resume conflict paradigms of early modern Europe and of the Thirty Years War in particular: different actors took part, the battle was not a central element, violence against civilians was normal, as well as ravaging the country, stealing, and looting.

From an economical point of view, Münkler (2006: 83-86) describes new wars as "kleptocratic" – that is, they benefit parasitically from humanitarian aid and are inextricably linked to the global economy through drug production or the trade of raw materials (LeRiche, 2004). Wars between states have always been rather expensive, but new wars are cheaper because they are based on small arms (machine guns, mines, RPGs), exploit civilian vehicles (pick-ups, trucks), employ untrained staff (civilians, child soldiers), and, finally, track down the necessary funds through theft, extortion, and looting.

It is clear that these conceptualizations stress the idea that contemporary conflicts mix different ways of fighting and different phenomena. Around this problem some scholars have started to use the term hybrid warfare, which today is become a common but problematic term because it could refer to two very different kinds of conflicts. Russia's operations in Ukraine and Crimea in 2014 have been labelled by some Western scholars as hybrid warfare. On the other hand, more than ten years ago, the notion of hybrid warfare was suggested in order to describe the way in which non-state actors fought: a mix of regular infantry tactics using modern anti-tank weapons, guerrilla tactics with small groups of fighters, and terrorist tactics. The latter is the notion explored in this paper.

Indeed, the idea that contemporary conflicts may mix different approaches was already suggested in the nineties, because the idea of unrestricted warfare supports the erosion of the traditional boundaries of war and the advance of a warfare that eludes them and enters the world of economics and finance, or employs those weapons in unexpected ways (Liang, Xiangsui, 1999). However, the theory of hybrid warfare comes from the Israeli conflict with Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006 (Glenn, 2008). Hezbollah is interpreted as an example of the new enemy because it is structured in a network, is related to the local population, and is irregular in its tactics. At the same time, Hezbollah has employed anti-ship and anti-tank missiles and has developed effective tactics for halting the advance of the IDF (Biddle, Friedman, 2008).

Moreover, hybrid warfare is a useful concept for describing the military operations of ISIS, which uses terrorism, guerrilla tactics, and more conventional weaponry. However, Russell Glenn (2009) is quite critical both of the definition of hybrid warfare, considered not precise enough because it has been applied at different levels of war (tactical, operational, and strategic), and of the use of Hezbollah as an ideal type. It should also be noted that historically hybrid war has been the norm (Echevarria, 2016).

Hybrid warfare is characterized by the concept of *synergy*, that is, the simultaneous application of a multiplicity of ways of fighting to reach the goal (Hoffman, 2007; 2009a). In essence, contemporary conflicts cannot be characterized by a simple dichotomy of black and white, but they have more nuanced characteristics, losing the perception of boundaries between different forms and concepts. Therefore, the war is hybrid because the enemy's way of fighting combines different methods, tactics, and tools, including conventional capabilities, irregular tactics, terrorism, indiscriminate violence, and criminal acts with the most modern technologies (Hoffman, 2006).

The situation is further complicated by the fact that the hybrid warfare battlefield is threefold: conventional; linked to the indigenous population; international. Only by prevailing in all three battlefields is it possible to win. Moreover, what distinguishes hybrid warfare from other types of struggle is that it must be fought on all three battlefields simultaneously and non-sequentially, and a "counter-organization" strategy is needed (McCuen 2008).

#### 4. Critical approach to irregular warfare

The aforementioned debate on the transformation of war may be understood as an attempt to conceptualize irregular conflicts in the contemporary and globalized international system. Those different ideas on contemporary armed violence may be considered just a post-Cold War way to describe irregular warfare, which is as old as human history, and is a phenomenon that took several names during history due to its protean nature. It should be said that LICs, fourth generation warfare, and new wars are just different ways of expressing the notion of insurgency.

As a consequence, the modern and western strategic thought seem to have removed history from the study of war. Each of the mentioned conceptualizations describes modern conflicts as asymmetric conflicts; however, this kind of war has and will always be a part of warfare. All those buzzwords (LIC, New Wars, Hybrid Warfare and so on) essentially describe attempts to find ways of defeating the opponent, but add little to the understanding of the nature of such conflicts. They are an attempt to update the concepts of

insurgency and counterinsurgency (COIN) for contemporary political and strategic environment.

However, in this way they highlight the poor historical background of the debate that is also demonstrated by the dozens of studies over the terms of insurgency and counterinsurgency (Beckett, 2001; Nagl, 2002; Boot, 2003; Ucko, 2009; Rid, Keaney, 2010). Those scholars have the merit to describe the history, evolution and experiences related to irregular warfare. Some of them also try to update the notion of insurgency to the modern strategic environment. For example, Steven Metz (1993) identifies two forms of insurgency: spiritual, driven by a religion; commercial, a widespread and prolonged criminal activity with a proto-policy that threatens the security of a state.

According to David Kilcullen (2004), today, we are witnessing an “Islamic global” uprising, “a popular movement that seeks to change the *status quo* through violence and subversion”. These groups share financial constraints, family and personal histories, common ideology, i.e. Saudi Wahhabism, the pursuit of a pan-Islamic caliphate, cultural and linguistic traits, the propaganda, procedures, techniques and doctrines (Springer et.al., 2009). Moreover, globalization allows the exchange of information, money, tactics, tips, and expertise between regional movements, which became part of a global Jihad.

Another common feature of the aforementioned conceptualizations and of irregular warfare is related to the role of criminal activities, which offer means of financing. Creveld stresses that LICs arise as banditry, and, in order to survive and finance, the irregulars use methods close to those of criminal groups, such as robbery, kidnapping, and drug trafficking, thinking. However, this is hardly a novelty, since, for instance, Hobsbawm in his study on banditry drawn the same conclusions (Hobsbawm, 1985). The mix between criminal activities and kinds of irregular warfare is further demonstrated by looking at the security landscape in Latin America (Bunker, 2011; 2012; 2013; 2014).

Creveld shares with fourth generation warfare theory the idea of modern war as insurgency. In contrast, Creveld foresees low-tech conflict, while fourth generation warfare emphasizes new technologies like hybrid warfare, which merges high technology with irregular elements.

On the whole, technology plays an important role in such conflicts. Hybrid warfare and “Open-Source Warfare” theories emphasize the role of new technologies in contemporary wars, especially as concerns media, communication, and the ability to build IEDs, suicide vests (Beccaro, Bertolotti, 2015), and similar weapons that are trademarks of contemporary conflicts. ISIS is a very representative example of such trend – not only is it able to use the media and the Internet to spread its propaganda around the globe, thereby terrorizing Western society and recruiting young fighters (Farwell, 2014), but it is also able to build more and more complex suicide vehicles in

order to destroy defence positions (Knights, 2014; Price et al., 2014; Ubaydi et al., 2014).

New wars are new not because of some new military aspects but because of the social and political context in which they are fought. New wars conceptualization underscores the ways in which globalization shapes war: the lesser importance of state borders, the new economy, and the increasing role of identity and religion are all crucial elements for understanding contemporary armed violence. Moreover, globalization has important consequences on space and time, two key strategic dimensions, because it reduces reaction time and distances. Due to the global media, over the course of a few hours, a minor, tactical problem may become a strategic one, that is the meaning of “strategic corporal” theory.

Whereas Kaldor is right in highlighting the link between the central role of cultural/religious targets and ethnic conflict, her conclusion that this explains the extensive use of rape, mass murder, torture is misleading. Unfortunately, military history is rich of such brutal actions in both regular and irregular wars and carried out by both regular armies and irregular fighters. Moreover, sexual violence has been increasingly understood as weapon of war (Eriksson Baaz, Stern 2013) suggesting that it is an element more of continuity than of novelty in warfare.

Although every scholar suggests that war is changing, they seem to presume that the battlefield will remain the same as in past wars or they do not take into account adequately the possible consequences of different battlefield. Today, the battlefield is more indefinite, and, according to Evans (2003) it seems “evaporated”. Furthermore, the battlefield is becoming more complex due to the global trend of urbanization. The “urbanization of conflicts” is an important research topic (Desch, 2001; Spiller, 2001; Hills, 2002; Robertson, 2003; Glenn et al., 2007; Jardine, 2010; Kilcullen, 2013) and a key element of contemporary armed violence. However, changing the actors of armed violence and the places where they fight also changes strategy and tactics of conflicts. The “urbanization of conflicts” is a global trend rooted in “rapid population growth, accelerating urbanization, littoralization (the tendency for things to cluster on coastlines), and increasing connectedness” (Kilcullen, 2013: 25), as the 2011 Arab Springs showed when the use of cell phones, social media, and text messaging emerged as organizing tools (Kilcullen, 2013: 32).

However, in addition to urbanization, technology, and globalization, progressive ideologies; youth population bulges; unemployment; climate change; and scarcity of food, water, and medicine are among the reasons that explain why human migration to urban areas is a trend expected to continue.

Furthermore, the urbanization of conflicts is a key element to understand one feature of contemporary armed violence, i.e. the increasing role of terro-

rism, which has always represented a way to fight within cities, where it can find several targets, simple ways to conceal, and media coverage. The idea of using media as proposed by fourth generation warfare and hybrid warfare is well linked to the use of terrorism as a tactic. Terrorism is a controversial feature, because not all scholars agree in considering it solely a tactic, and because not all terrorist groups are protagonists of an insurgency. However, every insurgent group has used terrorist tactics (Byman, 2008).

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has conceptualized the notion of irregular warfare in contemporary international following three steps. The essay started with a definition of war, which is a central factor in order to understand the Western dichotomy between regular and irregular wars. Then it offers some historical examples of irregular warfare and describes its six features that differentiate it from regular warfare. Having defined what is meant by irregular warfare, the essay moved on to discuss more recent buzzwords used by scholars in order to describe contemporary irregular warfare. This second step has highlighted to which extent the six features of irregular warfare are crucial in contemporary conflicts and as a consequence it has singled out the lack of historical background in the current strategic debate that too often appears to suggest some kind of break with the past. However, this break seems to be more the result of the author will to offer a new definition than the result of a serious historical study. The third step took a historical point of view and went further to highlight the shortcomings of contemporary ideas on irregular conflicts giving at least tentative answers to them and to study some crucial characteristics that may have important consequences, such as urban battlefield. As a result, the paper has highlighted the lack of historical awareness in the Western strategic thought in confronting and analysing contemporary irregular conflicts.

Another shortcoming is that, looking at the conflicts that every scholar has taken into account (Creveld the Israel-Palestinian conflict; Kaldor Yugoslav Wars; fourth generation warfare and hybrid warfare the Iraqi insurgency and Hezbollah in Lebanon), the central role of the Mediterranean region in the debate emerges clearly. However, focusing just on Mediterranean conflicts those conceptualizations have taken into account neither irregular conflicts in other part of the world such as Asia or Latin America where, for instance, criminal activities, such as drug trafficking, kidnappings, black market, extortions, play a key role nor the persistence of the risk of state vs state war.

Although several scholars stress an idea of novelty, it is evident that there are several strong continuities between contemporary irregular warfare and the history of strategic thinking. One of the most important continuities is re-

lated to the strategic dimension of time: insurgencies, LICs, or whatever these kinds of warfare are called, are long wars. According to Daase, there are two factors that distinguish regular, state versus state wars, from the kind of armed violence described in this essay and that have a decisive political influence: time (irregular conflicts are longer than regular one) and space, because irregular conflicts do not limit their battlefield (Daase, 1999: 96-97). As a consequence, contemporary armed conflicts should be expected to be long and not limited in one single theatre of war. ISIS operations are a perfect example because the group has indifferently operated in Mediterranean countries such as Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt and in Europe, Russia or Philippines.

## Notes

- (1) Wars of the first kind are the modern wars of the 18th and 19th centuries, while wars of the second kind are the 20th century total wars.

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