

THE WRITTEN WORD

Irregular Soldiers and Rebellious States: Small-Scale U.S. Interventions Abroad

by Michael P. Noonan

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HE US MILITARY'S SHIFT FROM FIGHTING IRREGULAR CONFLICTS TO preparing for Great Power competition has tremendous logic in the face of China's continued rise as a modern military power with a significant economic base. Although this rise has been steady, and slogans about pivoting to the Pacific are not new, the US pullout from Afghanistan has inspired some to claim that now is the time to move on, and that nothing we learned over the past two decades is very relevant to the large-scale combat operations that would be necessary in a US-China war. This would be a mistake for many reasons, but mostly because there is a real possibility that the United States will be drawn back into conflicts in the irregular war space, albeit for different reasons than the ones that prevailed after 9/11.



Noonan's operating assumption

is that, in the near future, US allies and partners will require US assistance in order to counter irregular threats such as subversion, terrorism, and internal unrest.

With perfect timing, Michael Noonan's *Irregular Soldiers and Rebellious States* enters the debate with a well-written examination of (mostly) US irregular warfare practice, its current institutions, and possibilities for the future. Noonan has a doctorate in War Studies from King's College London, and served as an advisor during Operation Iraqi Freedom. He argues that, despite the inclinations of US military and political leaders to focus on the challenges of near-peer rivals in multiple theaters, future conflict might look more like the last two decades of irregular warfare than like World War II.

Noonan's operating assumption is that, in the near future, US allies and partners will require US assistance in order to counter irregular threats such as subversion, terrorism, and internal unrest. He points out that providing such assistance would support US national interests, and he affirms that current doctrine and practice are sufficient foundations on which to build. He begins the book with a thorough assessment of how US military leaders think about the best ways to address "indirect" threats, uses case studies of what he terms "offensive" and "defensive" interventions to demonstrate past practices, and ends the book with a realistic appraisal of the future of irregular warfare. He adeptly utilizes a wide range of historical case studies and the best scholarship on irregular warfare in a way that should appeal to academics, policymakers, and practitioners alike.

The strongest parts of this book are the clear thinking on irregular warfare (defined doctrinally as a violent contest for power among populations using non-traditional actors and means) and the way that Noonan makes a complex topic understandable to readers outside of the special operations community. Foreign internal defense, unconventional warfare (support for foreign insurgencies), and direct action are different tools that can be used to leverage US knowledge, expertise, and resources to support important US interests in competitions short of war. In this space, Noonan argues, “the U.S. arsenal of ‘big stick’ military tools must also be complemented through the maintenance of a smaller and more nimble stick that is both sharp and smart.”¹

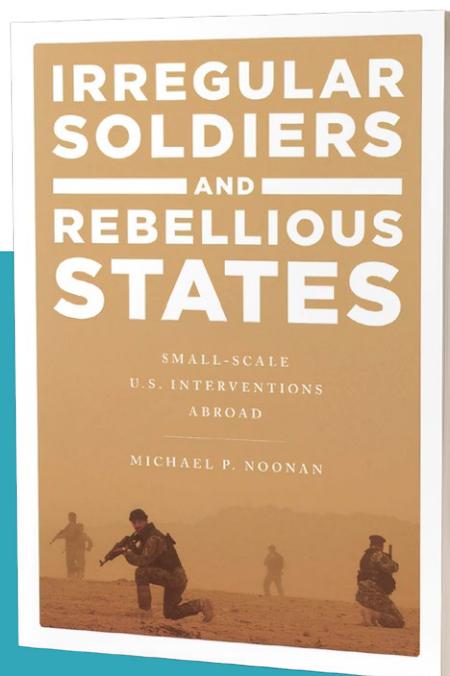


A WZ-8 unmanned reconnaissance drone on display in Zhuhai, Guangdong Province, China, on 29 September 2021.



Soldiers with Qwat al Khasah, Iraqi Special Forces, train at Camp Taji, Iraq, on 7 March 2020.

Noonan divides US experience into defensive and offensive “indirect interventions,” which translate into efforts to, respectively, shore up partners that are facing internal and/or external subversion, and create problems for US adversaries—usually significant powers—on their peripheries. This is a helpful typology for the reader since it clarifies when particular irregular capabilities and forms are used, and for what reasons. Building Iraqi



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Ministry of Peshmerga drivers leave the Forward Logistics Element yard in Erbil, Iraq.

special forces to tamp down the Islamic State insurgency is quite different from rolling back the Caliphate with a proxy force in Syria, even if they are occurring in the same theater. The international coalition's ability in the last few years to achieve favorable results against the Caliphate with irregular formations (supported ably by general-purpose forces) supports Noonan's overall argument as to the value of these missions.

The use of irregular soldiers in these campaigns, and others in Africa and Southeast Asia, have led critics to blame these exquisite formations for the tendency of administrations to conduct an endless war against terrorism, devoid of strategy and endstates. This argument, however, ignores the many Congressional authorizations and ongoing funding for irregular warfare that have supported four consecutive US administrations in their efforts to use these capabilities to bolster strategic partners and manage smaller threats to stability and security, thus keeping the problems local rather than letting them become global. The growth of the Islamic State in Africa, and its efforts to conduct its own type of unconventional warfare to support nascent and aspiring franchises, indicate that our continued engagement will only grow. The importance of Africa to global stability and prosperity is becoming more obvious as well, and Noonan correctly notes that this reality is sure to "drive the level of U.S. involvement going forward."²



Shops burned down by suspected members of the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) during an attack on 9 February 2020.

My only disagreement is with Noonan's second policy prescription, in which he describes concepts of war and peace as a false dichotomy. This is a popular notion but nonetheless incorrect.

The final chapter, in which the author offers findings and policy prescriptions that are convincing and straightforward, is strong. My only disagreement is with Noonan's second policy prescription, in which he describes concepts of war and peace as a false dichotomy. This is a popular notion but nonetheless incorrect, and he doesn't put forward an argument for why war and peace are no longer distinct so much as wants us to accept it uncritically. War is an exceptional state of relations between two parties (often states); blurring lines between war and peace and

confusing non-violent competition for war are far more dangerous than believing that holding distinct notions of peace and war “limits choices and reduces American flexibility,” as Noonan asserts.³ His description of war and peace as being on a spectrum of conflict is not incorrect; however, the claim that they also somehow overlap undermines his own argument that we should counter irregular threats to partners in an indirect manner (i.e., outside of direct conflict between large powers). These operations, done in politically sensitive environments, happen more often during peace than in war. There is a bit of irony in this observation, because the very Congressional authorities that Noonan cites allow the US military to advise and assist allies and partners, sometimes in combat conditions, to secure our interests. The United States can be at war with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, and at peace with great power rivals, all while competing (sometimes forcibly) for influence and power in the international system. To conflate *all* activities in the irregular space as war—whether against the Islamic State or in support of proxies fighting great powers, as in Ukraine—is not only a conceptual error, but could unintentionally cause a conflict to escalate into a very conventional (and easily recognized) form of war.⁴

The Trump and Biden administrations’ mutual embrace of Great Power competition (in varying degrees and with different strategies), and the resultant reorientation of the armed forces for near-peer threats—combined with the fading need for trained irregular warriors in active combat zones and the poor results in Afghanistan and Iraq—might lead potential readers to ignore this book.⁵ That would be a great mistake. Noonan is right when he notes that, despite the discomfort with the topic, “small wars are not going away.”⁶ As painful as it may be, this is the time to think about recent experience, contrast it with others from the past, and continue to refine doctrine and praxis for the next intervention, wherever that may be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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NOTES

1. Michael P. Noonan, *Irregular Soldiers and Rebellious States: Small-Scale U.S. Interventions Abroad* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2021), 159.
2. Noonan, *Irregular Soldiers*, 89. For more on this topic, see Haroro J. Ingram, Craig Whiteside, and Charlie Winter, “The Routinization of the Islamic State’s Global Enterprise,” The Hudson Institute, 5 April 2021: <https://www.hudson.org/research/preview/16798-the-routinization-of-the-islamic-state-s-global-enterprise>; and Michael V. DiPietro, “Unconventional Warfare: An Islamic State Way of War,” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2019): <https://calhoun.nps.edu/handle/10945/64138>
3. Noonan, *Irregular Soldiers*, 155. For more on my counterargument, see Donald Stoker and Craig Whiteside, “Blurred Lines: Gray-Zone Conflict and Hybrid War—Two Failures of American Strategic Thinking,” *Naval War College Review* 73, no. 1 (2020): 12-48: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26868211>
4. Chiara Libiseller and Lukas Milevski, “War and Peace: Reaffirming the Distinction,” *Survival* 63, no.1 (2021), 101-112.
5. White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, 2017); White House, *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, DC: White House, 2021).
6. Noonan, *Irregular Soldiers*, 150.