"Employing Indigenous Forces: Doctrine and Concepts for the Future"

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FUTURE WAR PAPER

"Employing Indigenous Forces: Doctrine and Concepts for the Future"

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MCDP 1-0 Marine Corps Operations

Over the past ten years of counterinsurgency warfare, the Marine Corps has employed irregular indigenous soldiers to achieve both tactical and operational objectives in Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite over one-hundred years of institutional experience employing irregular forces in warfare, the Marine Corps was wholly unprepared for the challenge when it arose during operations IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF) and ENDURING FREEDOM (OEF).\(^1\) The failure was not a result of stifled initiative or poor creativity, but of inadequate doctrine. Regardless of its experience, the Marine Corps' formal doctrine does not address how and under what circumstances conventional Marine forces might employ irregular forces. In order to adequately prepare for future conflict, which will almost certainly include interaction with irregular forces, the Marine Corps must adopt irregular force employment concepts in its formal doctrine.

This essay will begin with some brief background and explanation of how irregular force employment became necessary for the Marine Corps between 2007 and 2011, and why similar challenges are likely to arise in the future. Next, it will demonstrate why a change in formal doctrine is necessary to prepare the Marine Corps for that future. Third, it will use historical examples to describe three potential concepts of irregular force employment the Marine Corps should consider for the future. Finally, this essay will address potential challenges, both internal and external, the Marine Corps will likely face.
**Background**

During the recent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, conventional U.S. Army and Marine Corps forces were forced to adapt to a mission set they were unprepared for. Specifically, operating, and sometimes training and fighting, alongside armed irregular forces. A mission set usually reserved for Special Operations Forces (SOF), the scale of irregular force employment and the in both OIF and OEF eventually exceeded the capacity of Special Operations units alone. As the size and capability of armed paramilitary forces in Iraq and Afghanistan increased, they began to have a significant impact on the “conventional” operating environment. As the lines between conventional and irregular warfare began to blur, militia forces transitioned from a small isolated anomaly to a widespread norm. In fact, the more “irregular” and dynamic the conflict became, the more irregular forces played a significant role. In total, irregular forces affected the operating environment as much, if not more, than the either the enemy or friendly forces.

Beginning in late 2006 in Al Anbar Province, Iraqi tribal leadership began to ally with Coalition forces to defeat Al Qaeda. One important feature of this “awakening” was the establishment of local self-defense forces to secure tribal areas and assist U.S. forces in some tactical operations. The youth in the majority Sunni province proved eager to defend their ancestral homeland but remained reluctant to join the Shia dominated Iraqi National Police and Iraqi Army. Even before the program received official sanction and support from both the U.S. military and the Iraqi government, Marine forces in Al Anbar began to partner closely and in some cases train and equip local militia forces. The Afghan Local Police (ALP) program in Afghanistan began in similar fashion and for many of the same reasons. In some cases, SOF units were able to assist and advise conventional units in their efforts to effectively partner with
local militias. In other cases, learning took place through a repeated process of trial and error. Regardless of circumstance, both in Iraq and Afghanistan, Marine Corps units were unprepared for the realities of an operating environment heavily influenced by irregular forces, and they were even more unprepared for the challenges of partnering, training, and operating alongside them.

**Experience with Irregular Forces**

The Marine Corps’ experience with irregular forces dates back at least to the Philippine Insurrection where irregular units like Lieutenant Matthew Batson’s Macabebe Scouts played a significant role in the U.S. Army’s defeat of Emilio Aguinaldo’s Republican Army. Although the Marine Corps played a small role in the Philippines, they nonetheless witnessed the Army’s firsthand experience in irregular warfare. The Marine Corps’ first large scale experience employing irregular forces came in 1916 in Haiti. There, Marine Captain Smedley Butler organized a 1,200-man constabulary. By 1919, the Marine Corps sponsored *Gendarmerie* was capable of conducting independent operations. As with the Macabebe Scouts, the concept of employing Haitians against other Haitians had a tremendous psychological impact on the enemy.

The Marine Corps would employ irregular forces with similar success during the next decade. In the Dominican Republic, Marines partnered with the *Guardia* and the *Civil Guards* between 1917 and 1921 to defeat a rebel force. In Nicaragua, the Marine Corps established the *Guardia Nacional* to similarly defeat Augusto Sandino. By the end of the “small wars” era, the Marine Corps fully appreciated the value of forming local militias and the pivotal role that irregular forces played on the battlefield.
Employing irregular forces is not a technique unique to the 1920s. The British employment of the Home Guard during the Malayan Emergency and the American “Phoenix” program in Vietnam are two more recent examples of successful employment. Likewise, the value of irregular forces is not limited to counterinsurgency or unconventional conflicts. As the American military experience has shown, rarely can conflicts be accurately described as as purely “conventional” or “unconventional.” In reality, aspects of both usually exist in a given operating environment. Conflicts usually labeled as conventional, are often interwoven with unconventional aspects. During World War II, for example, conventional campaigns were supported by irregular “partisan” organizations in France, Italy, Japan, the Philippines and Burma. Of the many military principles that have proven timeless and applicable across the spectrum of conflict, employing irregular forces is one conspicuously absent in both Marine Corps and Joint Doctrine.

The argument that partnering with irregular forces has made a significant contribution is historically undeniable. Indeed, Al Qaeda has admitted as much in Iraq. The question is, why was the Marine Corps unprepared to partner with local militias in Iraq and Afghanistan? The answer is inadequate Marine Corps doctrine. Despite claims to the contrary, the requirement to employ irregular forces in low intensity and conventional combat operations will continue in the future and Marine Corps doctrine must reflect this reality.

**The Case for Formal Doctrine**

When doctrine fails to provide guidance, the force suffers the pain of "on the job learning." Joint Publication 1-02, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* describes doctrine as: "Fundamental principles by which the military forces or elements
thereof guide their actions in support of national objectives. Stated more simply, it is a set of principles that commanders use to guide their decision-making. Doctrine reflects the way an organization like the Marine Corps views a range of problems and their potential solutions. Those solutions must be consistent with the organization’s values, roles, and capabilities. Military doctrine specifically seeks to encapsulate those lessons of the past most relevant to prepare the force for future conflict. Therefore, it is reasonable to assert that commanders faced with a particular problem set, like counterinsurgency, will turn first to doctrine for appropriate solutions. When doctrine is inadequate to the problem at hand, commanders must adjust and adapt in stride, sometimes at great cost. While the Marine Corps develops its commanders for just such eventualities, doctrine should strive, when possible, to eliminate the dilemma. By not including irregular force employment concepts in formal doctrine, the Marine Corps ignores important historical lessons and creates the very dilemma doctrine is designed to alleviate.

"Informal doctrine" is an insufficient medium to capture enduring operating concepts and principles. Even an institutionalized means of capturing lessons learned, such as the Marine Corps Center for Lessons Learned (MCCLL), falls short of ensuring past experience informs future decision making. Although the Marine Corps had an abundance of irregular force employment principles in informal doctrine prior to 2006, the lessons contained therein did not shape the Marine Corps’ preparedness for OIF in any meaningful way. Informal doctrine lacks the authority to force the allocation of resources necessary to ensure competency does not atrophy post-conflict. Moreover, by its nature, informal doctrine is dispersed and usually not complete in one single source. In his book Mars Learning, Keith Bickel describes the limitation of informal doctrine in preparing the Marine Corps for the small wars of the 1920’s:
One problem with this approach, however, is that by failing to provide for a relatively comprehensive doctrine—which the informal doctrine most certainly was not—Marine Officers wound up “reinventing the wheel” in each of the three insurgencies they encountered.  

One potential reason the Marine Corps does not include irregular force employment concepts in formal doctrine is because it does not want it there. Evidence of this can be found in the steps the Marine Corps took both during and immediately after OIF and OEF. In addition to revealing how an organization views potential problems and solutions, doctrine also reveals how an organization views itself and its role. During and after the conflict in Iraq, the Marine Corps began to encapsulate lessons learned and preparing for the future by updating its formal doctrine. In December 2006, the Marine Corps published an update to its twenty-five year old Counterinsurgency Manual. In 2010, MCWP 5-1, Marine Corps Planning Process was updated. In 2011, the Marine Corps published a new MCDP 1-0 Marine Corps Operations. Despite capturing many of the valuable lessons learned from a decade of counterinsurgency, neither manual addresses the significant role irregular forces play in winning a conflict.

Likewise, the Marine Corps has shifted its major training exercises away from counterinsurgency towards larger conventional and amphibious operations. Increasing emphasis goes to “large scale exercises” and perfecting brigade size amphibious assaults. The Marine Corps’ Vision and Strategy 2025, focuses on returning the Marine Corps to its tradition of a combined arms Marine Air Ground Task Force (MAGTF), embarked on amphibious shipping. None of the emerging training exercises focus on maintaining the proficiency learned over the last ten years of employing irregular forces, nor do they indicate that such a skill set might be valuable to the Marine Corps in the future.
While exercises and doctrine may indicate how the Marine Corps views its role in the future, the historical record suggests a significant contradiction between what the Marine Corps wants to do and what it likely will do. Marine Corps doctrinal publication 3-0, chapter, “Crisis Response and Limited Contingency Operations,” indicates perhaps a more realistic vision of the future when it states:

The vast majority of the Marine Corps’ expeditionary service has involved crisis response and limited contingency operations, usually conducted in periods while the nation has ostensibly been at peace. Some of these were relatively short-term rescue or punitive expeditions. Others involved rapid crisis response operations into contingencies that were limited in force size, but not duration, complexity, and level of integration with the other instruments of national power. Such expeditions provided the source of our institutional “small wars” expertise, so much so that a previous generation of Marines was often referred to as “State Department troops.”

The purpose of this essay is not to argue that the Marine Corps has erred by shifting its focus to more conventional competencies. It is simply to point out a reality based on historical fact: if the Marine Corps fails to encapsulate the appropriate “fundamental principles” in doctrine, the inevitable consequence will be that the Marine Corps will find itself similarly unprepared to employ irregular forces in the future as it was in 2006.

Irregular Force Employment Models

A review of recent and past history suggests three effective models for employing irregular forces. The first model is enabling irregular forces to defeat their adversary by providing a capability that gives them a significant asymmetrical advantage; that is, providing them fire support, aviation support, or certain technologies that offer them an overwhelming advantage. The second model is to provide irregular forces with the leadership necessary to organize an otherwise disjointed and unfocused effort. This may include providing limited training and equipment. The third model is derived from the OIF and OEF experience.
Conventional units fight alongside and in conjunction with irregular forces to achieve tactical or operational objectives.

All three of the above models represent potential employment concepts that the Marine Corps should consider for inclusion in formal doctrine. Although all three of the above models have proven effective, the circumstances and conditions were unique to each. While the models may overlap, they are not interchangeable. Each has its own advantages and limitations in terms of both risk and payoff. Likewise, the appropriateness and feasibility of each model must be considered in relation to the threat and the existing political and strategic realities. Nevertheless, taken together, the models provide a comprehensive set of options for employing irregular forces in the future.

**Model One: Filling the Gap**

The American relationship with Northern Alliance forces in Afghanistan began well before the September 11, 2001, attacks by Al Qaeda. In fact, the relationship began six years earlier when the Taliban arrived in Afghanistan to challenge the legitimacy of the U.S. backed Massoud government. When the Taliban succeed in ousting Massoud and his supporters from Kabul, the U.S. supported the Northern Alliance’s insurgency to forestall the Taliban’s efforts to control all of Afghanistan. Through covert operations providing material and technological support, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and the U.S. military supported the Northern Alliances’ efforts to resist Taliban control. Thus, when the Taliban government refused to surrender Osama Bin Laden after September 11th, the U.S. had a ready and willing ally already at war with the Taliban.
Before the month of September was over, U.S. SOF and CIA personnel began flowing into Afghanistan to capitalize on the relationship with the Northern Alliance. With the support of less than 450 U.S. and Coalition personnel on the ground (including CIA personnel), the North Alliance launched a withering offensive in November 2001, against the Taliban.\textsuperscript{23} Between 10 November and 6 December, the Northern Alliance drove Taliban out of their strongholds of Mazar-e-Sharif, Kabul, and Kandahar.\textsuperscript{24} Supported by coalition aircraft dropping providing precision munitions and SOF advisors on the ground, the Northern Alliance was able to force the Taliban and Al Qaeda into the Tora Bora Mountain Range by early February.\textsuperscript{25}

However, within the Tora Bora mountains the Northern Alliance began to show its vulnerabilities. The Taliban had established well-entrenched mutually supporting defensive positions and egress routes throughout the mountain range. Eager to continue the North Alliance’s previous success, the U.S. government insisted that the Northern Alliance lead the attack into Tora Bora. Faced with a seasoned adversary in prepared defensive positions, the Northern Alliance proved unequal to the task of destroying the remnants of the Taliban Army. The Coalition air support that earlier provided an insurmountable asymmetrical advantage was severely limited in the challenging terrain, and as a result, large elements of the Taliban and Al Qaeda were able to inflict significant casualties on the Northern Alliance and escape into Pakistan.\textsuperscript{26}

Nevertheless, the early days of the war in Afghanistan demonstrate the effectiveness of providing an asymmetrical advantage to an irregular force to defeat an adversarial regime. The case described above is not unique. It has occurred often throughout American military history. The U.S. military conducted similar operations to assist the Mujahideen to defeat Soviet forces in the 1980s in Afghanistan as well as the Contras in Nicaragua.\textsuperscript{27} The United States Marine Corps
carried out similar operations on Luzon during World War II. In March of 1944, a six man Air Liaison Party (ALP) inserted behind Japanese lines to coordinate close air support for Colonel Russell Volckmann's Pilipino guerrilla force. On Luzon, the air support provided the guerrillas with a capability even the well-trained Japanese could not account for. 28

U.S. efforts to defeat the Taliban in the early days of OEF are correctly categorized by Thomas Henriksen as the “offensive Indirect Approach.” 29 Essentially, the U.S. military used indigenous forces to achieve political objectives with a relatively small commitment of personnel and resources. 30 The key to success was providing an asymmetrical advantage that the enemy could not overcome. That said, Marine Corps publication 3-0 contains one paragraph dedicated to supporting an insurgency like the Northern Alliance:

“The United States may support an insurgency against an oppressive regime. Because support for an insurgency is often covert, many of the operations connected with it are conducted by special operations forces. Marine Corps forces may be called upon to conduct or support these operations, providing logistic and training support as they did for the Mujahidin resistance in Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation in the 1980's.” 31

The offensive indirect approach used in Afghanistan does not, however come without limitations as the Tora Bora experience demonstrated. Specifically, the Northern Alliance failed to prevent the Taliban and Al Qaeda from escaping. When the asymmetrical advantage was mitigated by terrain, Northern Alliance fighters proved ill equipped to fight a “regular” threat. 32

The lesson for the Marine Corps is twofold. First, the MAGTF is well suited to support similar operations in the future. The combination of ground forces with aviation in the MAGTF is unique in the American military arsenal and remarkably similar to the force composition that supported the Northern Alliance. Secondly, the Marine Corps must appreciate and plan for the inherent limitations such an arrangement can provide. As the Northern Alliance experience in
Tora Bora indicates, irregular forces cannot fight a regular force without significant support from other regular formations.

**Model Two: Lawrence of Arabia**

During World War II, nationalist Arab leader Sherif Hussein began his fight against the Turkish army without support from external sources. Although Hussein had significant influence over the Arab tribes in revolt, he lacked the ability to unify them sufficiently for sustained military operations. While Hussein and his supporters managed to seize Mecca in the summer of 1916, they had little capacity to withstand the inevitable counter-attack by the Turkish Army. While full of enthusiasm and zeal, the Arabs under Hussein's command lacked military organization and cohesion. As a consequence, the Arab revolt stalled after success at Mecca.  

In October 1916 a British intelligence officer named T.E. Lawrence arrived in Mesopotamia to meet with Sherif Hussein's son, Serif Feisal, to determine if the Arab Revolt with British military support might be mutually beneficial. An advocate of Arab independence and a student of Arab language, custom, and culture, Lawrence was well suited for the task of assessing their capabilities. After his meeting with Feisal, Lawrence was optimistic about the potential capabilities of the Arab irregular force and reported this to his superiors. Lawrence remained with Feisal's army to coordinate British and Arab efforts to defeat the Turkish Army.  

Lawrence's first test came when the Turkish army at Medina attempted to stamp out the Arab revolt at Yenbo. Supported by British naval gunfire, Feisal's army was able to stop the Turkish advance. In March of the following year, the British Army, through Lawrence, enlisted the support of Feisal's army to contain the Turkish force at Medina. Recognizing that success by
direct assault against a strongly held fortress was unrealistic, Lawrence adopted guerrilla tactics to disrupt and destroy lines of communication and rail networks feeding the forces at Medina.  

Throughout 1917 and later, Lawrence continued to act as a liaison between the British Army and Feisal’s irregular force, often straddling the difficult lines between his official duties as a British officer and supporting the Arab revolt. Perhaps Lawrence’s most significant role was to create a sense of trust and understanding between two cultures not predisposed to agreement. After the combined Arab and British defeat of the Turkish Army at Aleppo in 1918, Lawrence was out of a job.  

In modern American military parlance, T.E. Lawrence’s service before 1916 can be described as a Foreign Area Officer (FAO). He understood Arab culture and his knowledge proved invaluable to both the Arabs and the British. In short, when the Arab Revolt arose in 1916, Lawrence was well positioned to take advantage of the Arabs as an irregular partisan force. Understanding their strengths and limitations, Lawrence served successfully as a tactical advisor to both the Arabs and the British. The same capabilities and requirements exist today in the both the United States Army and the United States Marine Corps’ regular force components. What is required is a shift in mindset and a change in doctrine to bridge the gap between today’s FAO and the tactical and operational capability demonstrated by Lawrence of Arabia.

Model Three: OEF and OIF

The third model has already been described earlier this essay. It involves a conventional force and militia forces working closely together in the same battlespace to achieve a common objective. OIF and OEF provide numerous examples of how this model can be effective. In
some ways, this sort of coordination between Coalition and indigenous forces is similar to what Lawrence achieved in World War I. However, the American experience in OIF and OEF was unique. First, although the Arabs and British coordinated their efforts, they never truly formed a partnership. Outside of Lawrence himself, the two forces had little interaction. In fact, the British and Arab commanders did not meet face to face until 1918. For the Americans in OIF and OEF, partnership down to the squad level was commonplace. Secondly, although the British and Arabs operated in conjunction with each other, they maintained separate battlespace. Most British soldiers never met their Arab counterparts. For the U.S. military experience in OIF and OEF, interaction with irregular forces was daily.

**Conclusion**

Of the three models described above, the OIF/OEF model is the one U.S. conventional forces are most likely to employ in the future and therefore the most important for inclusion in formal doctrine. That said, all three are potentially viable solutions that the Marine Corps should consider. In order to properly equip commanders of the future to take advantage of these or any other irregular warfare model, the Marine Corps must include them in formal doctrine. Relying on informal doctrine or lessons learned alone is insufficient. 39
Notes

1 The assertion that the Marine Corps was unprepared to employ irregular forces in OIF and OEF is based primarily on the author’s experience. However, the claim is also supported extensively in numerous after action reports and the personal accounts of other Marine Corps officers.


3 This statement is based on the authors experience with the Afghan Local Police (ALP) as a stabilizing force in Marjah, Helmand Province, Afghanistan from December 2010 to June 2011.


5 Ibid.


11 Joint Chiefs of Staff, Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms JP 1-0 (Washington D.C. 15 November 2012).

12 Keith Bickel, Mars Learning: The Marine Corps’ Development of Small Wars Doctrine, 1-10.

13 Ibid.

14 Bickel, Mars Learning, 6.

15 Ibid, 10.


17 This assertion is based on a review of the doctrinal and Warfighting publications the Marine Corps has updated since OIF and OEF began.

18 This is in specific reference to First Marine Division’s Large Scale Exercise “Steel Knight.” More information can be found on the First Marine Division website:
The Brigade size amphibious exercises referenced are "Bold Alligator" and "Dawn Blitz."

19 Marine Corps “Vision and Strategy 2025.”


27 Thomas Henriksen, Afghanistan, Counterinsurgency and the Indirect Approach, 10-12.


29 Thomas Henriksen, Afghanistan, Counterinsurgency and the Indirect Approach, 12

30 Ibid, 39

31 MCDP 1-0, 4-8.

32 Marilyn, Warfare Center for Strategic Studies, "Experiencing the Fog of War: Operation Anaconda Overview"


34 Ibid, 35-40.


36 Ibid, 50-60.

37 Ibid, 68.

38 Ibid, 50-65.

39 This assertion is based primarily on the authors’ experience in OIF and OEF.
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