

War 2.0

Irregular Warfare in the Information Age

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Preface

Two sweeping changes have occurred in the past decade. Life now has a digital touch: we search new jobs online, find old friends on the Web, and plan vacations; we spot new restaurants, read the news and our favorite blogs, shop, and keep in touch with parents, children, and colleagues through mobile phones, texting, and video-chat. We send them digital images of our weddings and getaways. We collaborate, engage others, and sometimes flirt by instant messaging. Arcane communities meet online, for example, young Mormon families in Utah or amateur butchers in England. Even fraud and crime and hate are hooked up. Once in front of a screen, be it on a desktop, laptop, or increasingly a handheld device, we “log in”—not into a system, but into a community. The new media, in short, have become social.

The second revolution concerns armed conflict: only a few years back, the world’s best armies saw themselves as lethal fighting machines, networked at the joints through signals and satellites. Such forces were capable of striking down on any foe rapidly and with crippling firepower, anywhere, even piercing through sandstorms and thick clouds, thanks to the wonders of modern sensor technology. Then came a surprising kink: new irregular enemies were hiding among the people, where sensors could not find them. Here religious motivations mattered, as well as ideology, sectarian hatred, close-knit social ties, language, dialects, cultural affinities, trust, and deep-seated grievances. These were pushing fighters to join the resistance, to form cells, to commit suicide attacks, and to lay roadside bombs. The new wars, in short, have become more social.

The first trend, we argue, is affecting the second. Historically, military applications gave birth to novel media technologies, such as radio, television, and even the Web. And these innovations have widened the corridor of action for the state and its regular armed forces more than they did for irregular bands of rebels. Sophisticated information infrastructure was simply too expensive for mutineers.

That asymmetry has been reversed. Now it is the new media that shape warfare, and technology has increased the options for irregulars more than it has for governments and armies. But it does so in rather counterintuitive ways. For some groups, irregular warfare in the information age is becoming less, not more, “population-centric.” Not only the benefits, but also the costs have increased immensely for the irregular side. Successful insurgency, as a result, may be more difficult to pull off today than in the past. And counterinsurgency, as presently understood, may not offer the best methods to tackle irregular political violence in the twenty-first century.

War 2.0 is written for a general audience as well as for experts. Scholars of modern armed conflict, political advisors, officers, and journalists will, we hope, benefit from its analysis and the details it provides. The book opens by adding much-needed historical depth to the “new media.” The reader is taken back to the beginnings of telecommunication at the end of the eighteenth century. Only a long historical view can keep a calm eye on current uses of media technology by both militants and militaries. The opening chapter can be read as a stand-alone essay on the much-neglected question of how guerrillas have used telecommunication over time (first as a target, then as a weapon, and now as a platform). Then we introduce two competing visions of how information technology can be used on the battlefield, by both regular and irregular forces: one is centered on technological grids, fast strikes, and military power; the other is focused on cultural links, protracted resilience, and political power. “War 1.0”—as we shall call the first ideal—guided regular armies in their relationship to the use of force and the public, as we show in three detail-rich case studies on the United States, the United Kingdom, and Israel. Numerous interviews in these countries and access to many unpublished documents were essential to write the three chapters. Yet that paradigm crashed into the dry desert of Iraq—and later in Afghanistan—when these conflicts morphed into nasty “guerrilla-type” operations. For non-state irregular fighters, and to a certain extent for regular officers, too, the competing template of battle then became what we call “War 2.0.” Hezbollah, the Taliban, and al-Qaeda approximate this template to a varying extent. The three case studies are based on government and policy reports, extensive research in French, German, Dutch, and Arabic, as well as numerous expert interviews. The conclusion offers a novel angle on new media trends and their relevance for armed conflict, an assessment of the media operations and “strategic communication” of both sides, and a set of fresh recommendations. A chronology at the end gives a combined overview of landmark events in the recent history of telecommunication as well as irregular warfare.