

Remote Warfare: A Critical Introduction

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2021/02/11/remote-warfare-a-critical-introduction/>

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In the twenty-first century, remote warfare has been the most common form of military engagement used by states. But, it remains a poorly understood concept. To some it may even be an unfamiliar term. This opening chapter acts as a critical conceptual primer on remote warfare. The chapter first outlines the key techniques involved in remote warfare. It then provides a glimpse of what it looks like in practice, where it is being used and by whom. After this, the chapter proceeds to examine remote warfare's relationship with the changing character of the war debate. Drawing upon research by Oxford Research Group (ORG), the penultimate section critically engages with some of the key challenges with its use. The chapter then offers some concluding remarks.

What is remote warfare and what does it consist of?

As the name hints, remote warfare refers to an approach used by states to counter threats at a distance. Rather than deploying large numbers of their own troops, countries use a variety of tactics to support local partners who do the bulk of frontline fighting. In this sense, the 'remoteness' comes from a country's military being one step removed from the frontline fighting (Knowles and Watson 2018).

Importantly, remote warfare is not carried out solely via remote weapons systems, which is sometimes dubbed 'remote control war' (Gusterson 2016). Remote technologies play a role, but remote warfare encompasses a broader set of actions. Ultimately, the activities which make up remote warfare are undertaken to counter an adversary, which often takes the form of non-state armed groups (Knowles and Watson 2018).

Remote warfare normally involves states using and combining the following measures:

- Supporting local security forces, either official state forces, militias or paramilitaries; for example, through the provision of training, equipment or both
- Special operations forces, either training or sometimes even working alongside local and national forces
- Private military and security contractors undertaking a variety of roles (which are discussed in greater detail in the chapter by Christopher Kinsey and Helene Olsen)
- Air strikes and air support, including unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) or 'armed drones' and manned aircraft
- Sharing intelligence with state and non-state partners involved in frontline combat (explored in Julian Richards' chapter)

How and where is it being used?

There are several instances where states have shied away from deploying large numbers of 'boots on the ground' and opted for remote approaches. The 2011 NATO-led intervention in Libya is an illustrative case of this. With the desire to avoid the costly consequences of occupation seen in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration and its international allies supported Libyans to do the bulk of the fighting against Muammar Gaddafi. Faced with what, at

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the time, seemed to be a looming humanitarian crisis, UN Resolution 1973 was passed and called for the protection of civilians against threats by the Gaddafi regime. Initially, this was confined to several air strikes (see Mueller 2015). But it shifted to small numbers of boots being deployed on the ground (for good overviews see O'Hanlon 2011; Chesterman 2013; Murray 2013; Engelbrekt, Mohlin and Wagnsson 2013). Despite the initial goal of protecting civilians, the intervention became focussed on regime change. French, British and Qatari special forces were sent to assist and train the Libyan rebels and intelligence assets were used to support the rebels as they advanced (Mueller 2015). Overall, the use of remote warfare was crucial in overthrowing Gaddafi. But as explored later, Libya is a compelling example of some of remote warfare's serious problems.

Another salient example of remote warfare in practice is the US-led coalition's support to local forces in Iraq and Syria to counter the Islamic State (commonly known as ISIS) in Iraq and Syria. In Syria, the US trained and equipped units of the Free Syrian Army and Harakat al-Hazm. In northern Iraq, US Special Forces and others trained and supported Peshmerga fighters. Air strikes were conducted heavily throughout these campaigns to support efforts on the ground (Airwars 2016). These actions were undertaken with minimal financial and human costs for the Western militaries involved and, for the most part, successfully pushed back ISIS (Krieg 2016, 109). But the lack of long-term planning for the post-ISIS phase of the conflict has had grave and lasting consequences.

The activities which make up remote warfare are often, but not always, undertaken in secret. Though they can attract media attention, remote warfare's engagements are largely kept out of the public eye. They are often part of 'grey zone conflicts', which describes hostile and aggressive activities that remain 'above and below' the threshold of what is perceived as war (Carment and Belo 2018).

Remote warfare's generally opaque character makes it difficult to gain a complete picture of its use around the globe. But its presence is discernible in many continents. It can be seen in counter-terrorism campaigns in the Middle East, the Horn of Africa, the Sahel and South-East Asia. It is also part of efforts to address near-peer threats, with many states developing a strategy of 'persistent engagement' which sees small numbers of forces around the world working with local partners to build influence and local knowledge to gain an edge over their adversaries (Watson 2020a).

A Western way of war?

Remote warfare has come to define the Western style of military engagement in the first quarter of this century. The US has certainly led the way on this, and many other Western states have followed suit. For example, in the 2015 Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR), the UK Government pledged to double investment in UK Special Forces and to double the size of the armed drone fleet (HM Government 2015). The UK has also developed a new approach to responding to countries affected by conflict, which includes an increased focus on security sector reform. This activity now makes up a third of the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund's (CSSF) spending (DFID 2019, 28).

Elsewhere in Europe, France, Germany, Italy and even several smaller European states such as the Netherlands, Belgium and Denmark have turned to remote warfare. For instance, several of these states have trained local forces in parts of Africa and the Middle East and conducted air strikes as part of the anti-ISIS Coalition (McInnes 2016). Outside Europe, Australia provided aerial refuelling for the Coalition, shared intelligence and helped train and arm local forces in the fight against ISIS (Airwars 2015, 32).

However, this trend of remote military engagement is not confined to 'the West.' Russia used an assemblage of remote approaches, including special operations forces, military advisers, private militaries, intelligence sharing and local militias to annex Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine in 2014 (Galeotti 2016). In Syria, the Russians have used a mix of remote methods to stabilise the Assad regime. The Russians also have light footprints in Libya, Venezuela, Mozambique, and the Central African Republic (Kuzio and D'Anieri 2018; Ng and Rumer 2019). Elsewhere, the Iranians have for some time worked with local forces to pursue national objectives across the Middle East through the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps' Quds Force (Krieg and Rickli 2019, 164–193). Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain, Jordan, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates have all used local proxies to counter regional threats

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(Rondeaux and Sherman 2019). Some African states have a long history of using regional militias to counter non-state armed groups (Craig 2012) and more recently they have employed the services of PMSCs to do this (Varin 2018). Across the globe, then, there is a discernible trend of states engaging militarily from a distance.

A new way of warfare?

Though there are nuances between accounts, several writers have used different terms to describe this type of military engagement. Some of these expressions include 'surrogate war' (Krieg and Rickli 2018), 'risk transfer war' (Shaw 2005, 1), 'vicarious war' (Waldman 2018), 'liquid warfare' (Demmers and Gould 2018), 'network war' (Duffield 2002), 'coalition proxy war' (Mumford 2013), 'postmodern warfare' (Ehrhart 2017) and 'transnational shadow wars' (Niva 2013). Demmers and Gould (2018) have described these terms as attempts to capture the "new newness" of interventionist warfare'. But there are questions about whether this approach means warfare 'has entered a new era, significantly different from what we have known in the past' (Gat 2011, 28).

Analyses of remote warfare, or other expressions of the phenomenon listed above, are often framed with reference to the 'changing character of warfare' debate. This long-running discourse and associated research enterprise has been trying to 'identify whether war is changing, and – if it is –how those changes affect international relations' (Strachan 2006, 1).

The *character* of war should not be confused with the *nature* of war. The character of warfare is understood, in simple terms, as the ways in which wars are fought. The nature of war, on the other hand, refers to war's enduring essence – or what it is. There is some consensus with conflict researchers and historians that the nature of war has not changed. If we understand warfare as a violent contest of wills between parties (Clausewitz 1832, 1940), then this is seen to still hold true in remote forms of engagement. Nevertheless, the dawn of new technologies, such as artificial intelligence, does represent a significant challenge to the human element of warfare (Johnson 2011; Allen and Chan 2017). Christopher Coker (2002) even speculated that in the future we may witness 'post-human warfare' where machines have replaced humans on the battlefield.

There is a strong case to be made that it is the *character*, rather than the *nature*, of warfare that has changed through the use of remote warfare. From a certain point of view, remote warfare challenges traditional understandings of battlefields and soldiers. 'Intervening' states are now far from the frontlines, providing training in fortified bases or support from the air through technology. Indeed, the technological leaps seen in the most recent revolution in military affairs has provided the means for states to wage warfare from a distance. Arguments have been made that the use of remote warfare has caused a 'temporal and spatial reconfiguration of war' (Demmers and Gould 2018). From this perspective, the lines between war and peace are seen to have become blurred, because there are now often few clear-cut declarations of war, and the geographical borders and legal frameworks that define conflicts have become hard to discern (Gregory 2010; Banasik 2016; Ehrhart 2017). Scholars have noted that we now see environments in 'fragile states' where there are perpetual conditions of conflict, sometimes named 'forever wars' (Filkins 2009), and shifting mosaics of actors involved with conflicting goals (Badescu 2018).

Yet although the environments of conflicts may be shifting and military technologies evolving, it is noticeable that many of the facets of remote warfare are not necessarily new (Moran 2014, 2–4). The training and arming of local forces by external powers, for example, has been used since antiquity (Williams 2012, 61–63; Krieg and Rickli 2019, 16–18). During the Cold War, the superpowers regularly competed with one another by using locally trained and equipped forces (Mumford 2013). This practice continued well after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Research has found that from 1945 to 2011, external actors provided explicit or alleged support to 48 percent of 443 rebel groups engaged in armed conflict (Cunningham, Gleditsch and Salehyan 2013).

Another aspect of remote warfare, the private military and security industry, emerged in the 1980s and began to play a significant role in global security affairs in the 1990s (Krieg 2018, 1). Today, it is a global industry estimated to be worth somewhere between £69 billion and £275 billion a year (Norton-Taylor 2016). Governments are some of the biggest contemporary clients and have found considerable use for the services offered by security contractors (see Kinsey 2006). In 2012, *The Economist* reported that the US Government had 20,000 contractors in Iraq and

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Afghanistan alone (The Economist 2012). But, as the chapter in this volume by Christopher Kinsey and Helene Olsen shows, this trend of states using 'mercenaries' has been charted back to as early as the sixteenth century and possibly before (see also Parrot 2012).

In many countries, especially the US, special forces 'have grown in every possible way – from their budget to their size, to their pace of operations, to the geographic sweep of their missions' (Turse 2018). Yet despite their recent global proliferation, special forces' origins, at least conceptually, are often seen to lie with the use of the Desert Rats in the First World War (Moreman 2007). They were officially established as part of the British military in the Second World War, with the Special Air Service (SAS) (see Finlan 2009; Karlshøj-Pedersen 2020).

Even the use of UAVs as an instrument of armed conflict is not necessarily as new as some might think. Hugh Gusterson (2016) documents how the first 'armed drone' aircrafts were developed in the First World War as crude radio-controlled biplanes intended to be bombers. It is true that their regular usage has only been in effect for the last decade and a half and this continues to proliferate. For example, they have now become a method employed by non-state actors (Abbot, Clarke and Hathom 2016). Nevertheless, UAVs were used in some form in twentieth-century conflicts, including the Vietnam War (1955–1975), the Yom Kippur War (1973), the Gulf War (1990–1991) and the NATO intervention in Kosovo (1998–1999) (Chamayou 2007, 28).

There are historical examples of states combining some of the methods associated with remote warfare while maintaining a degree of distance from the frontline. The British Empire used local authorities and military auxiliaries, as well as technological tools such as airpower as a form of 'colonial policing' (see Omissi 2017; Marshall 2016). The US employed several approaches associated with remote warfare – such as support for paramilitaries and intelligence sharing – in the Cold War as part of its covert activities in Latin America and elsewhere (Grow 2018; O'Rourke 2018). More recently, in the NATO-led Kosovo campaign at the end of the nineties, Western forces did not deploy large numbers of their own troops and instead used air strikes to support regional troops (see Ignatieff 1998, 169). As Jonathan Gilmore has argued on Kosovo 'there were indicators of a desire amongst Western interveners to have less skin in the game' (Oxford Research Group 2018).

Before 9/11, Donald Rumsfeld believed the US would counter threats in the post-Cold War world with the 'use of airpower, special forces and expeditionary units rather than boots on the ground' (see Rogers 2012). Elements of this 'Rumsfeld Doctrine' were seen in Afghanistan in late 2001 where a combination of sustained air attacks, deployment of special forces and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) operatives, and strategic support of the Northern Alliance warlords was used to overthrow the Taliban (Rogers 2016, 24–35). What we are seeing now, though, is an increasing reliance on remote warfare by states, which has arguably not been seen on this global scale before.

How did we get here?

There are several reasons why states have employed this approach. Focusing on Western democracies, the next chapter by Demmers and Gould explores this in greater detail. But it is worth noting that the Iraq and Afghanistan wars have been important drivers.

These conflicts, which began at the start of the century, never truly ended. Nearly two decades on from their inceptions, the costs of these interventions in lives, money and prospects for peace, made many legislatures and publics sceptical about the utility of military force abroad (Gribble et al. 2015; Bilmes 2013; Crawford 2018; Holmes 2020).

By the late 2000s, many political leaders promised the end of heavy military interventions and withdrew troops from some theatres (BBC 2011). Yet at the same time, these leaders continued to fear the presence of non-state armed groups. The Arab Spring, which began in late 2010, also caused anxiety. With the instability created by the violent reactions to protest movements, analysts warned that non-state armed groups would thrive (Bokhari 2011).

Faced with the dilemma of wanting to confront perceived threats to national and international security against the backdrop of low popular support for military engagement, the Obama administration sought a different approach to

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large-scale, 'boots on the ground' interventions. The chosen path was a shift to light-footprint methods (Goldsmith and Waxman 2016, 8-9; Goldberg 2016).

In 2012, following a major strategic review of US security, then-President Obama formally declared 'the end of long-term nation-building with large military footprints' and a move towards 'innovative, low-cost, small-footprint approaches' to achieve America's security objectives (Obama 2012). In light of this, America's general preference in the era of 'Iraq and Afghanistan syndrome' (K.P. Mueller 2005 and 2011) has been to fight its wars by supporting local, national and regional forces and limiting the exposure of its own military to harm.

Concerns about public war-weariness also seem to be an important driver behind the UK's decision to use remote warfare. A leaked Ministry of Defence document from 2013 suggested how to maintain military operations despite a 'risk-averse' public (Quinn 2013).

For risk-averse politicians, then, the use of remote warfare is appealing. It appears to get around military, political and economic restrictions by removing a country's own forces from the frontline. This minimises the scrutiny over military engagements abroad. It allows states to deny responsibility because they are often not directly involved in combat operations or their special forces operations are clouded in secrecy. But there are significant problems with this use of remote warfare. The next section explores this in more depth, focusing mainly on the UK's use of the practice.

The perils of remote warfare: some observations from the British experience

While remote warfare has become increasingly relied upon by the UK, research conducted on its use over the last six years by ORG has shown that it carries significant risks. It often shifts the burden of risk onto civilians; exacerbates the drivers of conflict; and undermines democratic oversight on the use of force abroad. These problems are interconnected.

Protection of civilians

The fact that states like the UK intervene on a light footprint does not mean that the risks of military intervention are removed, or even mitigated against (Knowles and Watson, 2018a). In fact, by shifting the burden of responsibility to partner forces, the UK is increasing the risks to civilian populations because they support partners who may lack the capabilities, willingness or training to sufficiently protect civilians (Walpole and Karlshøj-Pedersen 2019, 2020).

The anti-ISIS coalition's activities in Iraq and Syria highlight this clearly. For example, in both Raqqa and Mosul, where the anti-ISIS coalition was assisting the Iraqi Security Forces and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) respectively, 'the coalition largely sat back and provided fire support' in the form of artillery and air strikes to uproot ISIS fighters who had 'years to prepare defensive positions' (Rempfer 2019). This strong reliance on air support for a partner force, which proved unable to implement strong protection of civilian mechanisms, had dramatic consequences for the cities of Mosul and Raqqa.

In western Mosul, for instance, around 15 neighbourhoods were destroyed. These districts previously housed around 230,000 residents, leaving large numbers of internally displaced people who will not be able to return in the short to mid-term (UN News 2017). Three-quarters of Mosul's roads, all of its bridges, and most of the electrical network were also destroyed, and many buildings rigged with explosives and booby traps by retreating ISIS fighters (Kossov 2017). UN estimates suggest that 8 out of 10 buildings damaged in Mosul were residential buildings, with 8,475 houses destroyed – more than 5,500 of which in west Mosul's Old City (Rodgers, Stylianou and Dunford 2017).

British Major General Rupert Jones, who was part of the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, made the following observation when giving oral evidence to the Defence Select Committee in the British parliament:

I don't think any military in living memory has encountered a battle of this nature. I have said regularly – I stand ready to challenge – that I cannot think of a more significant urban battle since the Second World War (Jones 2018).

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In Raqqa, despite being described by US General Stephen Townsend as 'the most precise campaign in the history of warfare' (US Department of Defense 2017), the bombardment left eighty percent of the city destroyed and more than 11,000 buildings uninhabitable (Amnesty 2018).

Ultimately, remote warfare makes the tracking of civilian casualties difficult. Western countries have less capacity to place their troops on the frontlines to carry out the same level of pre- and post-strike assessments that proved to be crucial for reducing civilian casualties in the Afghan theatre (Walpole and Karlshøj-Pedersen 2019). Relying exclusively on ISTAR (intelligence, surveillance, target acquisition and reconnaissance) from UAVs to track civilian harm, as it is so often done now, is ineffective because this approach cannot provide the eyes and ears on the ground needed to conduct thorough investigations (Ibid.). Overall, the UK Government has shown a lack of will to either acknowledge the distinct risks to civilians in these recent military campaigns or to adapt its approach to tracking civilian harm (Walpole and Karlshøj-Pedersen 2020).

Long-term drivers of instability and conflict

Remote warfare also risks exacerbating, rather than resolving, the drivers of conflict. Most of the problems in the places where the UK is engaged are deeply political and require political solutions. Yet remote warfare tends to be short-term and militarily focussed (Knowles and Watson 2018b). So, when the users of remote warfare fail to properly check the background of prospective partners, as they often do, they risk making matters worse by building the capacity of predatory, sectarian or unrepresentative armed groups or national militaries. This can prolong violent conflicts and help create the 'forever wars' that have come to define today's international security environment (Watson and Karlshøj-Pedersen 2019).

Libya is a notable example of this. Following Gaddafi's fall, the country descended into chaos. Within this disorder, ISIS took Sirte and expanded its presence into several surrounding towns and villages. In response, some Western countries, such as France, the US and the UK, engaged in a second, though underreported, round of remote warfare to push ISIS from the country. Part of this process involved empowering non-state groups, including militia from Misrata and the Libyan National Army led by the controversial Khalifa Haftar. At the same time as providing military support to these groups, the West publicly supported the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA). While some of these groups were nominally aligned with the GNA, the Government had no meaningful control over them. In fact, Fayez al-Sarraj, the Prime Minister of the GNA, lamented in November 2016: 'They do as they please [...] Whenever they want to go out and fight, they don't ask us and we end up firefighting these battles' (quoted in Zaptia 2016). So, by supporting these groups, the US, France and the UK undermined the GNA's legitimacy and strengthened direct threats to its authority – to the detriment of peace and stability (Watson 2020b forthcoming). Despite pushing ISIS back, Libya remained polarised and fragmented (Wehrey and Lacher 2017).

Field research in post-Gaddafi Libya by Alison Pargeter (2017, 3) noted that the international approach had 'alter[ed] the balance of power on the ground, which has the potential to further undermine the prospects for peace.' This diagnosis was proved correct when, in April 2019, just a few days before the UN was due to hold a conference to establish Libya's 'path to reconciliation and elections', Haftar's forces launched a military campaign, named 'Flood of Dignity' to take Tripoli from the GNA (Trauthig 2019).

The fighting in Libya is still ongoing, but it is a different conflict to one which started nearly a decade ago, with international actors now backing various sides (Allahoum 2020) and various armed factions competing for control over land and resources (Megresi 2019). The conflict between the LNA and the Tripoli-based government is made even more complicated and protracted by the involvement of external actors such as Russia, Egypt, France and the United Arab Emirates. Similarly, third-party security contractors and mercenaries have played an increasingly important role in the conflict (Vest and Clare 2020; Lacher 2019). The UN recently warned that this has contributed to the escalation of the conflict in Libya (OGHCR 2020).

Libya's chronic instability has had huge implications for civilians. A UN Official recently remarked that the impact of Libya's nine-year war on civilians is 'incalculable', with rising casualties and nearly 900,000 people now needing assistance (Lederer 2020). Despite UN mediation efforts, the conflict shows no signs of being resolved soon.

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Libya's plight is by no means the only example of how remote warfare contributes to instability and prolongs conflict. The Western footprint during the anti-ISIS coalition in Iraq and Syria was small because states relied on local groups. Some of these have real or perceived ethnic, geographical or community bias, such as the Peshmerga in Iraq and the SDF in Syria. This has undermined the legitimacy of these groups among local and regional actors (Knowles and Watson 2018a). By working with them, international forces exacerbated local, regional, and international tensions and, arguably, created more fragmentation and instability in the future.

In Iraq, empowering the Peshmerga throughout the campaign now threatens to weaken the unity of an already fragmented Iraqi security sector (Knowles 2018a). Now, many Iraqis claim that the Iraqi Army 'is lucky if it can be considered the fourth-strongest army in Iraq – behind, Kurdistan's Peshmerga forces, the Popular Mobilisation Forces and Iraqi tribal fighters' (Mansour and al-Jabbar 2017).

In Syria, working with the SDF pushed back ISIS and established enduring governance structures in Kurdish majority areas, but it was not seen as legitimate by Arab communities (Watson 2018a). Moreover, the perceived links between the SDF and the Kurdish Workers Party (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê, PKK) – a group leading an armed insurgency against the Turkish state – has meant that support to the group remains unacceptable to the Turkish government (Watson 2020). This has worsened relations between the West and NATO ally Turkey.

Serious problems are also evident when states provide support to other state forces (Watson 2020b). The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project noted:

Governments continue to pose the greatest threat to civilians around the world, with state forces responsible for more than a quarter of all violence targeting civilians in 2019 – the largest proportion of any actor type. Of the top five actors responsible for the largest share of civilian targeting in 2019, four of them are state forces, and the fifth is a progovernment militia. (Kishi, Pavlik and Jones 2020)

Given this trend, the international community should not respond to instability by providing light- footprint training (which is militarily and technically focussed) for national armies (Kleinfeld 2019). Yet, they often do; the US Stabilization Assistance Review noted:

In support of counterterrorism objectives, the international community is providing high volumes of security sector training and assistance to many conflict affected countries, but our programs are largely disconnected from a political strategy writ large, and do not address the civilian military aspects required for transitional public and citizen security. (Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations 2018)

Activities that focus on 'defence and security institutions' but allow oversight to remain 'weak and ineffective [...] can lead to a situation where rights-violating security forces become better equipped to do what they have always done' (Caparini and Cole 2008). Many governments in Africa, the Middle East and elsewhere have used international support to increase the capacity of their security sectors but have failed to address corruption and abuses by predatory state forces (Transparency International 2019). This 'risk[s] further undermining human security' when populations are trapped 'between increased violence of abusive security forces and the terror of non-state armed groups' (Knowles and Matisek 2019). This, in turn, risks further alienating the civilian population and pushing them towards extremist groups (Watson and Karlshøj-Pedersen 2019). In Somalia, field research found that that the abuses of the Somali National Army are 'a big recruitment tool for Al Shabab' (Knowles 2018b). Similarly, an International Alert study on young Fulani people in the regions of Mopti (Mali), Sahel (Burkina Faso) and Tillabéri (Niger) found 'real or perceived state abuse is the number one factor behind young people's decision to join violent extremist groups' (Raineri 2018, 7).

Transparency and accountability

Efforts to address these risks are undermined by the poor transparency and accountability of remote warfare. Over the last two decades in the UK, there has been an increased recognition that the decision to use force abroad should not sit solely with the Prime Minister (Knowles and Watson 2017). This recognition drove the development of the War

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Powers Convention, a constitutional convention mandating the House of Commons to accept or reject proposed deployments of the British Armed Forces on combat operations abroad (Walpole 2017).

However, in many ways, remote warfare falls through the gaps in mechanisms designed to oversee the use of force abroad. Train and assist operations are often not designated as 'combat missions' (even when they are in contested areas or close to the frontline) and so do not necessarily fall under the War Powers Convention (Karlshøj-Pedersen 2018b). This is despite the fact there is no official definition of combat and non-combat operations or a set list of criteria (Blunt 2018). Further, Ministry of Defence and CSSF annual reports discuss these activities but usually only release headlines for some programmes and are inconsistent year to year (Karlshøj-Pedersen 2018a).

Like many states, the UK has seen the number and remit of its special forces increase since 9/11 (Moran 2016, 3–5). The ease with which prime ministers can deploy special forces, without recourse to Parliament, has increased the appeal of their use. This sees them increasingly deployed not just in support of conventional forces, but also as 'instruments of national power' in many parts of the world today. Despite these developments, UK Special Forces have continued to lack sufficient scrutiny because of the government's long-held blanket opacity policy that precludes any form of external oversight (Walpole and Karlshøj-Pedersen 2018). While committees have a long history of overseeing British action abroad, including the actions of the secretive intelligence agencies, they are unable to scrutinise the actions of Special Forces and information about their use is specifically exempt from the Freedom of Information Act (Ibid.). Special Forces are the only piece of the UK's defence, security, and intelligence apparatus to continue to fall outside of any parliamentary oversight. It has long been accepted that 'the MoD's long-held policy [...] is not to comment on Special Forces' (Knowles 2016). As Earl Howe, a Conservative House of Lords front-bencher, remarked in 2018, 'It is this Government's, and previous Governments', policy not to comment, and to dissuade others from commenting or speculating, about the operational activities of Special Forces' (UK Parliament 2018).

This deniability around the use of UK Special Forces may bring flexibility, which creates opportunities when it comes to dealing with the fluid and complex security threats animating today's global security landscape. But this is not a simple relationship whereby more secrecy automatically brings greater strategic advantages. As noted, the prevailing tendency towards secrecy is creating an accountability gap that challenges the UK's democratic controls over the use of force. In addition to being democratically precarious, it restricts the government's ability to set its own narrative for British military action overseas. Shaping the narrative around conflicts has always been important for parties, but the growing interconnectedness that the information age brings has elevated the significance of this in military and political debates (Knowles and Watson 2017, 5). The 2010 SDSR made this point very clearly when it said 'the growth of communications technology will increase our enemies' ability to influence, not only all those on the battlefield, but also our own society directly. We must therefore win the battle for information, as well as the battle on the ground' (HM Government 2010, 16). However, secretive policies risk 'exacerbating the low levels of public trust in government' and preventing the UK from effectively shaping public narratives (Knowles and Watson 2018, 28).

The frequent reports of UK Special Forces in the media have created an uneasy coexistence of official opacity and sporadic leaks of information (Knowles and Watson 2017). This has led to discrepancies between official statements and media revelations. Such media reports include the 2011 incident in which an SAS team was arrested by Libyan rebels (Jabar 2011), the BBC's 2016 publication of images showing SAS forces fighting in Syria (Sommerville 2016), the reports in 2019 that British troops had been fighting alongside a Saudi-funded militia in Yemen who allegedly recruited child soldiers (Wintour 2019), and the recent allegations of UK Special Forces executing unarmed civilians in Afghanistan (Arbuthnott, Calvet and Collins 2020).

Furthermore, the shroud of secrecy that covers UK Special Forces operations means it is unclear how consistently strategic concerns about their impact on long-term stability are factored into decision-making around their use. UK Special Forces are not immune to such dangers, especially if they are often engaged in more kinetic activities than regular soldiers. The Foreign Affairs Committee made the following comments in 2016 when it emerged that UKSF had been on the ground in Libya:

Special Forces operations in Libya are problematic because they necessarily involve supporting individual militias associated with the [UN-backed Government of National Accord] rather than the GNA itself, which does not directly

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command units on the ground [...] Special Forces missions are not currently subject to parliamentary or public scrutiny, which increases the danger that such operations can become detached from political objectives. (House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee 2016)

A lack of oversight, then, does not necessarily make UK Special Forces more effective. Instead, the fact that none of these concerns could be alleviated may mean that fatal assumptions and bad strategy are not properly checked. The blanket opacity also makes it impossible to assess the effectiveness of their approach to civilian harm mitigation. When operations go wrong and civilians are harmed it is unclear whether lessons are being learned and steps being taken to avoid the same mistakes from recurring. There is further uncertainty over whether there are adequate processes in place to ensure allegations of wrongdoing are met with the same due process which applies to the rest of Britain's Armed Forces (Walpole and Karlshøj-Pedersen 2020). A failure to promptly and adequately hold UK forces to account for transgressions is likely to have serious reputational consequences with both its international allies and local populations in the theatres where the UK is engaged (Ibid.).

In a world of smartphones, social media and burgeoning access to the internet, controlling the flow of information on UK military action abroad and keeping special operations secret – including scandals around their involvement in civilian harm – has become even harder (Knowles and Watson 2017). These realities make the culture of comment remarkably outdated.

The UK's approach to special forces oversight contrasts heavily to many of its allies. Some countries – the US, France, Denmark and Norway – have adopted some form of legislative scrutiny, with Denmark's system being the most expansive and France's the most limited (Walpole and Karlshøj-Pedersen 2018, 18). Others, Australia and Canada, have adopted a policy of releasing unclassified briefings on the activities of their special forces, which can then be used by the media, the public, and their legislatures as a basis for debate (Ibid.).

Even when it comes to British involvement in the US-led air campaign against ISIS, which was approved by a parliamentary vote, discussion of the UK's impact has remained poor (Watson 2018b). For instance, while the Ministry of Defence claims to have killed or injured 4000 ISIS fighters, they have only admitted to killing one civilian (Knowles and Watson 2018b). This account has been proven to be implausible by several studies (Amnesty International 2019; Walpole and Karlshøj-Pedersen 2020). In Mosul, for instance, of the 6,000 to 9,000 alleged civilian deaths estimates suggest that between 1,066 and 1,579 of those deaths were caused by Coalition actions (Airwars 2018, 7). In Raqqa, local monitors have placed the civilian death toll at upwards of 2,000. Investigations suggested at least 1,400 civilian fatalities could be tied to Coalition activities (Ibid., 8).

The lack of transparency around the UK's remote warfare leads to ineffective accountability, with adverse consequences for the protection of civilians. A significant scrutiny gap means that the government does not understand the short- and long-term impact of its operations. These interlinked problems can help perpetuate the cycles of violence seen in the many theatres of remote warfare.

Conclusion

In an era where there is a greater emphasis placed on state-on-state competition, remote warfare seems to be here to stay. Yet, many states – evidenced in doctrines, budgets and practical deployments – show a future commitment to light-footprint interventions even with this rise of great power competition. It is troubling that such developments look likely to continue given that there is little appreciation of the political, ethical and legal implications. This makes a broader debate about the risks of this type of intervention essential going forwards. The remaining chapters in this book bring together a range of experts from various backgrounds who provide a deeper dive into the pitfalls of remote warfare.

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