

The Zeus complex: against air war - The limits of remote warfare

Sunday 27 August 2017, by [ROGERS Paul](#) (Date first published: 2 December 2016).

An innovative study of aerial bombardment brings history, state power, civilians and human rights into a single frame.

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The assault on Aleppo by Bashar al-Assad's forces continues, with appalling consequences. It may even now be reaching a climax, aided by the Russian air attacks that are proving even less discriminate than the much larger number of coalition airstrikes across Syria and Iraq.

The overall intensity of aerial bombardment in the two countries [[1](#)] combined is formidable. Airwars [[2](#)] calculates that in the two and a half years of the air war against ISIS, there have been 16,587 airstrikes, with 60,079 bombs and missiles dropped and 1,915 civilians killed.

CENTCOM [[3](#)] separately reported, as of the end of September 2016 and before the start of the Mosul operation, that airstrikes had hit 31,900 targets, including vehicles, buildings, staging areas, firing positions and oil installations. The number of ISIS paramilitaries and supporters killed appears now to be close to 50,000, given that a figure of "approaching 45,000" was published in August [[4](#)].

The extent of the actions, using both armed-drones and strike-aircraft, is scarcely reported in the western media, and the more recent air war in Libya is almost entirely ignored. What reporting there has been tends to emphasise the impact of air and drone strikes. But artillery bombardment is also significant, and not just by Iraqi or Syrian forces. The United States and France are both involved, especially in the fighting on the approaches to Mosul.

What is happening in all three countries is an enhancement of what is now called "remote warfare" [see article below]. It does include the use of special forces and private military companies, but most of the "fighting" is done from the air, with minimal consequences for the combatants from the coalition states. Accurate figures are difficult to come by, but by aggregating reports from diverse sources it would appear that less than twenty military personnel have been killed among the western coalition forces, a marked contrast with the probably 50,000 losses on the ISIS side.

This move to remote war is a core feature of the changing approaches of powerful states to "wars in far-off places" - waged by pursuing their interests and maintaining control. This may be relatively recent at the current level of intensity, but it is also helpful to put it in a much wider perspective of an historical trend in war: aerial bombardment, especially of the civilian population.

A valuable book which really does seek to do just this is Peter Nias's *The Zeus Complex: a manifesto against aerial bombardment of civilians* [5], recently published and available here at the remarkably low price for a substantial book of just £5 (\$6.30). It is genuinely helpful reading at any time, but especially so given what is happening in the Middle East.

As Nias explains, he is taking a very different approach to most books about the impact of war on civilians:

"There have been some writings on civilian 'collateral damage' in aerial bombardments and a lot, but mostly separately, on human rights in such onslaughts. However, very few have tried to link the two, and even less have been looking forward to what may be done in the future. This volume is an attempt to help reduce civilian bombing by increasing such 'rights of humans', and by making suggestions accordingly, mainly for the long term. We are talking decades. There are no easy answers and no panaceas here."

He does indeed try to link the two, but it is the way in which he goes about it that is both informative and thoughtful. For a start, he takes us on an exploration through history, including a thorough examination of the growth of aerial warfare from the 1914-19 war [6], through the destruction of cities in the 1937-45 war [7] and on to the nuclear age. In doing so he takes in multiple perspectives and differing cultural attitudes, which are illuminated by his extensive scholarship and sense of historical perspective.

Nias goes on to look at the very recent past [8], including so-called smart bombardment with precision-guided missiles and bombs. It is this element that makes the book such an unusual combination of historical perspective with contemporary relevance [9].

From 2001 to around 2009, aerial bombardment was used extensively in the so-called "war on terror". But this also involved many tens of thousands of western boots on the ground [10], especially in Afghanistan and Iraq. As that element turned out to be so ineffective if not counterproductive, there was a steady transition to "remote war", especially from the air, as the effective way forward. Yet, as work by the Remote Control Project [11] and others are showing, that is hardly producing the success that was anticipated.

At same stage, and hopefully soon, we will rise above the traditional control paradigm [12] and look for very different responses to security challenges. If such approaches do evolve then they will need to recognise the accelerating role of aerial bombardment. It is in this context that *The Zeus Complex* may well have a place in helping set the scene for genuinely new thinking.

Paul Rogers

* Open Democracy. 2 December 2016:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/zeus-complex-against-air-war>

Irregular war, and how to reverse it

A military-led response to violent movements such as ISIS and al-Qaida misses the wider global forces that are triggering their rise.

The long-awaited military assault on ISIS in Mosul began on 16 October, two years and four months since the movement seized the city in its advance across northern Iraq. Its initial moves were accompanied by much hype from western broadcasters, though this eased within a day amidst some confusion over the pace of operations. Iraqi government officials reported that Kurdish elements were seeking more time to complete the first phase of their operations, whereas Kurdish sources said that they had achieved their objectives and were waiting for Iraqi army units to advance. At the same time, sources point to extensive ISIS use of mortars, car- and truck-bombs and roadside devices, all of them capable of hampering the attackers' progress.

ISIS, with at most 6,000 fighters at its disposal in Mosul, faces much larger numbers – around 80,000 in all – arrayed against it. That imbalance could yet be a factor in the decision of the movement's leaders about whether to abandon the city. When Ramadi was retaken in 2015, the Iraqi attackers numbered around 10,000, while 15,000 were deployed in the battle for Fallujah earlier this year. Yet the early indications are that many of the ISIS paramilitaries will stay. If so, a pattern may emerge similar to Ramadi. There, a battle expected to last little more than a fortnight extended for four months, with much of the city severely damaged in airstrikes and artillery bombardments.

Some indication of the tenacity of ISIS paramilitaries is shown by what has happened in the much smaller stronghold of Sirte in northern Libya. The war to oust ISIS from Sirte started in May with high expectations, but quickly slowed to a crawl leading to extensive use of American airpower in August to support the government forces. That was expected to tip the balance markedly in favour of the United Nations-backed government of national accord (GNA), and by September it was reported that ISIS was making its final stand.

That has not happened, and the GNA forces have now lost hundreds of troops in their attempt to retake the city. Indeed the situation remains so fraught that American forces have increased their attacks, mounting 36 airstrikes over last weekend alone. Sirte may well be lost to ISIS in the coming days but there are already indications that many of its fighters have slipped away from the city to other parts of Libya.

Beyond Mosul

The experience in Sirte gives some indication of a potential 'worst case' outcome for Mosul – months of fighting, high levels of civilian casualties and widespread destruction. Against that prospect, the best hope is that ISIS evacuates the city at an early stage. But whether that is feasible also depends in part on the performance of the extraordinarily mixed and complex nature of the attacking forces (see "ISIS's squeeze, al-Qaida's return", 13 October 2016).

That mixture begins with Iraqi government regular troops and special forces allied with Kurdish militias, and includes US regular troops in a range of roles including artillery support, target acquisition, reconnaissance and integrated advisory actions with Iraqi units. The United States also has large numbers of forward-based special forces, and there are reported to be French forces also involved in artillery support as well as French and British special forces on the ground.

There are also Iraqi Shi'a militias, elements of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp and even some Sunni militias prepared to support the Baghdad government, as well as Turkish army elements said to be 'advising' some of the Kurdish units. Beyond that are the US, Iraqi, French, British, Australian and other air units, which might even include, though operating independently, elements of the Iranian airforce.

To further complicate matters, if Mosul does fall quickly and with little bloodshed – the best that can be hoped for in a terrible conflict – several of these groups have rivalrous post-conflict agendas. The

Kurds want to retain territory they take during the fighting, the Shi'a militias are determined to consolidate control, the Sunni militias equally intent on ensuring the security of their own people, and Iranian and Turkish elements are each vying for influence in a post-war northern Iraq.

Thus, after ISIS is suppressed, an outcome by no means assured, great political skill will be needed to steer a more peaceful way between the different factions. And this would still leave a further hard strategic issue which is no nearer being resolved. As ISIS declines, so a range of paramilitary groups allied to the original al-Qaida banner are making surprising progress, especially in Syria. Indeed it is beginning to look as though the supplanting of al-Qaida by ISIS in the early 2010s is now being superseded by the reverse trend: al-Qaida taking over from ISIS as the core focus of a widespread Islamist movement.

But even if both movements were eventually to be overcome in strict military terms, that is unlikely to be the end of the long 'war on terror'. The problem here, as suggested in many previous columns in this series, is that the direct military action to combat movements such as ISIS and al-Qaida cannot reach the underlying reasons why such movements thrive. These transcend religion, and relate not just to autocracy and repression but to the widespread marginalisation of increasingly educated and knowledgeable populations.

The phenomenon is not confined to one region, as is shown by the neo-Maoist Naxalite rebellion in India or the largely unreported but large-scale reactions from the margins in China. And it draws on the increasingly obvious failure of the global neo-liberal economic model and the growing societal risks posed by climate disruption.

Such factors may seem to exist beyond the immediate agenda of Mosul, al-Qaida, ISIS and the rest. But adjust the lens, and it becomes clear that this is the hot core of an interconnected reality that is about inequality as much as militarism. If this is understood and seriously addressed, the violent eruptions may cool and eventually wither. If not, then a destructive era of irregular war will stretch into the next decade and beyond.

Paul Rogers

* Open Democracy. 20 October 2016:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/irregular-war-and-how-to-reverse-it>

For the integrated links, see the original article.

Remote control: light on new war

Armed drones, special forces, privatisation and secrecy are the preferred tools of military campaigns from Iraq-Syria to the Sahel. Now, researchers are mapping this landscape in the public interest.

The United States-led operation against the Islamic State is already faltering. The media focus on the fight for Kobani, on the border between Syria and Turkey, has meant neglect of the important advances being made by IS across Iraq's Anbar province. There, two months of airstrikes have so far had little effect, as the paramilitaries quickly adapt to the challenge.

In itself this ability to respond to air power is hardly surprising. Much of the Islamic State's leadership is drawn from militias that survived the western occupation of Iraq from 2003-10, in the process gaining more experience of the impact of air-assaults than just about any other group since the mujahideen that fought against the Soviets in Afghanistan in the 1980s [13].

Patrick Cockburn [14], one of the best-informed western journalists, reports that the IS has taken over many towns and villages along the Euphrates west of Baghdad, saying they "fell in a few days, often after little resistance by the Iraqi Army which showed itself to be as dysfunctional as in the past, even when backed by US air strikes" (see Patrick Cockburn, "War against Isis: US air strategy in tatters as militants march on", *Independent on Sunday*, 12 October 2014). Several other despatches elaborate on further problems: the flight of army personnel from the city of Heet, in Anbar; the desperate siege of army units at Iraq's largest oil-refinery; even the prospect that the entire province is at risk.

Among many setbacks for the new Iraqi government, particularly damaging was the assassination on 12 October of Anbar province's police commander, Major-General Ahmen Saddam, when two roadside-bombs hit his heavily protected convoy (see Kirk Semple, "Bomb attack kills police chief in strategic Iraqi province", *New York Times*, 13 October 2014). The same day, three suicide-bombers attacked a security centre in Qara Taba district north-east of Baghdad, killing thirty people and injuring 140; the previous day, multiple bomb-attacks around Baghdad had taken more than lives and injured nearly a hundred.

A strategic shift

Barack Obama's stated aim is to use air-power to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the Islamic State. The creeping failure of the objective is already having an effect in Washington; the former presidential contender John McCain argues that "the United States should be sending targeted Special Forces troops and forward air-controllers..."

McCain may be speaking more as a politician rather than the military figure he once was, but he represents a view that is increasingly common inside the beltway. The implication is that the Obama administration now has to consider how to defeat the Islamic State without the incremental commitment of tens of thousands of troops. What is virtually certain is that the US will move in the direction of "remote control": that is, far greater use of air power, especially armed-drones, supplemented by a rapid expansion of the deployment of special forces. The latter would draw directly on the experience of the "shadow war" of 2004-07 fought mainly in Anbar province and the greater Baghdad area.

The combination - armed-drones, stand-off weapons, low-profile special forces - is initially attractive. At best, it guarantees little media coverage in the west, few of our boys getting killed, and useful results on the ground. After all, the Taliban regime in Afghanistan was terminated in late 2001 using special forces, air-power and proxy ground-troops (the Northern Alliance), and the rebellion in Iraq was curbed, in part, by Task Force 145.

A way around secrecy

It seems simple - but it isn't. The tools to make an informed judgment are increasingly available from a range of studies and projects now underway. This week, for example, sees the timely appearance of one of the first fruits of the Remote Control Project, an initiative of the Network for Social

Change. The project, started in late 2013, is in turn hosted by Oxford Research Group.

This publication is all the more valuable as detailed research on “remote control” warfare is still in its early stages. In this case the group has sought out academics and think-tank experts to commission a very interesting range of work, about half of which has already been made available. The material so far is summarised in a handy digest released on 13 October; it includes reports on the use of cyberwarfare, summaries of regular monthly reports on diverse remote-control developments from Open Briefing, and a series of studies with intriguing results. There is much more to come.

Many investigators are concerned that independent research in this area is made so difficult by the high levels of secrecy and singular lack of transparency that surround it. The Every Casualty group, for example, finds it extremely difficult to get accurate information on civilian casualties caused by drone-strikes. It is especially hard to get accurate information on the use of special forces.

Three individual studies give a flavour of the work being done, often by getting round the obstacles of official secrecy.

First, Crofton Black does some lateral research - data-mining publicly available information on US defence-budget contracts to private companies hired by the US special-operations command (USSOCOM). What he discovered was the very high level of privatisation, involving billions of dollars, and the range of activities contracted out, even including psychological operations and interrogation. From a security perspective, such privatisation may provide an extra layer of secrecy; but it also means far less public transparency and debate over what is being done.

Second, Wali Aslam of the University of Bath, in another report, examines some of the side-effects of large-scale armed-drone operations in north-west Pakistan. One of his results, hardly surprising to anyone with common sense, was that leading jihadists likely to be subject to targeted killing simply relocated, often to cities where they could remain highly active if largely hidden from view

Third, a report on recent developments in the Sahel, particularly Mali and Niger offers insight into areas which have largely disappeared from the western media. In perhaps one of the most interesting pieces of research, the report uncovers a very quiet but speedy escalation in the US military presence, joining with reinforced French forces. In some ways the Sahel region is becoming a model for the new style of warfare - even a clear example of “liddism”, that is, keeping the lid on conflicts rather than going for the roots of the problems (see “Beyond ‘liddism’: toward real global security”, 1 April 2010). This approach makes it necessary to work with some of the most autocratic regimes in the region, but always with the minimum of publicity.

A new direction

A common feature of much of this research is the conclusion that the various forms of remote warfare are leading to an increase in radicalisation and extreme actions, rather than the decrease they seek. This is part of a wider and uncomfortable conclusion that so much of the “war on terror” has not just failed but has made matters worse. Around 2010-12, especially after the killing of Osama bin Laden, a widespread view among western politicians and analysts was that al-Qaida and similar movements were way past their peak. Today, as in the military conference in Washington on 14 October, Barack Obama talks of a war lasting years.

An overall perspective suggests it is no longer possible to argue convincingly that drones, special forces and other forms of remote control are the answer to radical movements. The proper direction

is to look much more deeply at the conditions which have encouraged these groups to develop. Otherwise, the idea of a war lasting years may be superseded by one lasting decades.

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* Open Democracy. 15 October 2014:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/remote-control-light-on-new-war>

For most of the integrated links, see the original article.

P.S.

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A lecture by Paul Rogers, delivered to the Food Systems Academy in late 2014, provides an overview of the analysis that underpins his openDemocracy column. The lecture - "The crucial century, 1945-2045: transforming food systems in a global context" - focuses on the central place of food systems in human security worldwide. Paul argues that food is the pivot of humanity's next great transition. It can be accessed here:

<http://www.tansey.org.uk/news/PRtalk.html>

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 41853), [Ceasefire or not, the air war in Syria is an untold catastrophe - The geopolitics of a complex conflict](#).

[2] <https://airwars.org>

[3] <http://www.centcom.mil>

[4] <http://www.centcom.mil>

[5] <http://aerialbombardmentofcivilians.co.uk>

[6] <https://www.bl.uk/world-war-one/articles/aerial-warfare-during-world-war-one>

[7] <https://www.penguin.co.uk/books/53742/the-bombing-war/>

[8] <http://www.comw.org/pda/0201oef.html>

[9] <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/>

[10] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/thirty-year-war-still-on-track>

[11] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/remote-control-new-way-of-war>

[12] <https://www.opendemocracy.net/article/a-tale-of-two-paradigms-security-vs-development>

[13] see “The thirty-year war, continued”, 11 September 2014:

<https://www.opendemocracy.net/paul-rogers/thirtyyear-war-continued>

[14] <http://www.orbooks.com/catalog/jihadis-return/>