



The Perils of Remote Warfare: Finding a Political Settlement with Counter-Terrorism in the Driving Seat

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As the British Government grapples with the mistakes of the Iraq War, key among the priorities moving forward has been a commitment to ensure military efforts are focused on political goals. This has been evident in successive national strategies and doctrine, such as the [2011 Building Stability Overseas Strategy](#): “The chances of success are greatest when the international community gets behind a political settlement that lays the foundations for tackling the causes of conflict in a country.”

Major efforts have been made to institutionalise this commitment, most visible of which has been the creation of the [National Security Council](#) which brings together military, political, development, and economic stakeholders once a week to discuss national priorities. While these changes have been substantial, 18 months of interviews and roundtables with experts from academia, civil society, the government, and the military—both in the UK and on operation—suggest that many are skeptical about whether the UK can deliver real change.

This wariness may, in part, be explained by a recent [shift in military engagement](#). Faced with [declining military budgets](#) and continued terrorist threats abroad, the UK like many of its allies, has increasingly engaged through light footprint military intervention. This approach, which we refer to as [remote warfare](#) has been called a number of other things by academics and commentators, including [surrogate](#) and [vicarious warfare](#). It sees the UK and its

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allies playing a supporting role—providing air support, training, equipment, and intelligence to local and regional actors who do the bulk of frontline fighting against terrorist groups in places like Yemen, Somalia, Iraq, Syria, and Libya. These operations lack the same level of public and parliamentary oversight as conventional deployments and have allowed the UK to engage militarily with little external debate.

In an era of high political, military, and economic risk aversion this may seem like an appealing way to intervene against potential threats abroad. Added to this, the high-profile, territorial defeat of the Islamic State has done much to reassure critics that this model of engagement can work. However, these same campaigns also provide cautionary tales. Despite efforts to address the broader causes of instability, the current use of remote warfare has been predominantly military-focused and counter-terrorism oriented, often to the detriment of broader political efforts.

The Perils of Remote Warfare

At its most basic, remote warfare refers to the countering of threats at a distance, without the deployment of large military forces. In this sense, the remoteness comes from a country's military being one step removed from the frontline fighting—which tends to be carried out by local groups or regional coalitions. While it involves security force assistance, it is also focussed on countering an adversary; the UK provides a lot of assistance to allies that cannot be sensibly characterised as warfare—for example the majority arms sales, joint exercises, and so on are designed and delivered in relative peacetime for a whole range of reasons other than assisting frontline fighting.

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Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

| Unilateral operations (us) | Partner operations (us + them) | Train, advise, assist (them + us) | Security assistance (them) |
|--|--------------------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Targeted killing | 'Mentor' roles | Training local troops/armed groups | Arms sales/transfers |
| Limited strikes | Joint (blue/green) operations | Advising (ministerial or planning) | Political support |
| | 'Accompany' roles | | Financial support |
| | Targeting support (JTAC/ISR) | | |
| Local forces 'shadowing' UK operations | | | |
| | Air support | | |



Similarly, remote warfare is not necessarily carried out via remote weapons systems. While drone strikes, air strikes, cyber attacks, or autonomous weapons no doubt have the potential to increase the physical distance between operator and target, they can be used to support any sort of operation. In short, the *remote* in remote warfare speaks more to strategic than physical distance. In the following section we will sketch out what this means for where we can see remote warfare in action.

UK support to Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria can be seen as remote warfare, because the UK is supporting actions through the supply of arms, training,

advice, and assistance. In the event of a large scale deployment of British troops to combat IS, where troops were assigned combat roles and rules of engagement (ROEs) and undertake the bulk of frontline fighting this would cease to be remote warfare, at least for the purposes of our work.

In some senses, this approach may appear to support broader British efforts to build sustainable peace in places it intervenes; certainly, the logic of the Building Stability Overseas Strategy appears to be that building partner capacity *now* will allow local forces to provide security in their countries and regions more autonomously in the future. The [strategy states](#), “Effective and accountable military and police forces can also play a role in regional and global stability” but notes that this will require “support to build the capacity of security forces [to] be matched with efforts to build accountability, legitimacy and respect for human rights.”

Recent campaigns against the Islamic State indicate that it is here that there is a tension with the current use of remote warfare: most of the military activity in contemporary campaigns—including the training and equipping of local forces—is focused on countering terrorism and, thus, short-term objectives are likely to take priority. This incentivises British decision-makers to pick local partners based on their ability to counter terrorist groups like Islamic State rather than assessing of which groups might help to build an effective, accountable, legitimate force that might improve long-term prospects for peace and security. This certainly appears to be the case in anti-Islamic State efforts in Iraq and Syria.

THE FIGHT AGAINST ISLAMIC STATE: IN SEARCH OF A POLITICAL SETTLEMENT

The British government has long emphasised the need for a long-term political solution to combat Islamic State in the Middle East. Former Defence Secretary, [Sir Michael Fallon](#), said of the air campaign: “Airstrikes are only one component in a military strategy which must be accompanied by a political solution to deliver long-term peace and security to the region.” Indeed, alongside providing the second-largest military contribution to the anti-Islamic State coalition (behind the U.S.), the UK has shown leadership on broader issues of the conflict.

In Iraq, the U.S., [the UK](#), and [Germany](#) led talks on Peshmerga reform in 2017, aiming to strengthen the process of unifying Peshmerga brigades—which are split along party lines between the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan—under one Ministry of Peshmerga. The [Conflict, Stability and Security Fund](#) also reports a spend of £10,650,000 on programmes in Iraq for 2017-18, with efforts focusing on stabilisation, community reintegration, advisory, and governance support. In Syria, the UK was one of the first to respond to the humanitarian crisis caused by the civil war and has since [committed to spending £271 million](#) on the country in its 2018/19 planned budget. Even with an entrenched Assad government and the Iranian-Russian-Turkish counterforce in the region, [the UK and France](#) have called on the U.S. to “form a long-term strategy aimed at a cease fire and a political settlement.”

However, alongside these political efforts, military operations in both countries have been short-term, militarily-orientated, and predominantly focused on counter-terrorism. At times these efforts have not only been in tension with the political objectives set by the UK Government but appear to be actively undermining them.

Military operations have dramatically cut the territorial gains of the Islamic State; however, as [Robert Malley](#), vice president for policy at the International Crisis Group, notes the gaze of the local and regional partners that the UK and its allies worked with to achieve these aims “was fixed on the wars after the war against the Islamic State.” Thus, in emboldening these groups to defeat the Islamic State, the West may have sewn greater instability in the region, especially as these partners begin to refocus on their long-term goals.

IMPACT ON IRAQ

In Iraq, the UK has provided extensive support to Peshmerga forces “[a]s part of ... the [Global Coalition to counter Daesh](#).” In evidence to the UK Foreign Affairs Committee, the [Foreign Office describes](#) how the UK has trained 57,000 members of the Iraqi Security Forces, including 9,000 Peshmerga fighters; gifted £3 million of arms and ammunition to the Peshmerga; and provided air support to the Peshmerga as part of the Coalition. In [field research for the Oxford Research Group’s most recent report](#), many high-level officials complained that there was insufficient focus on the post-Islamic State phase throughout the campaign, including when it came to the impact of this support.

An effect of this short-sightedness was evident in the violence in [Kirkuk in October 2017](#), when Iraqi forces retook the city in response to the Kurdish independence referendum. This has threatened to push national divisions back to pre-Islamic State levels. Strong support for both the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party in the May 2018 general elections ([allegations of voter fraud notwithstanding](#)), plus their [strong performance in September’s](#) (again contested) Iraqi Kurdistan parliamentary elections, suggest that neither party will feel under pressure to move forward with Peshmerga reform in the near future. Similarly, [accusations that Patriotic](#)

Union of Kurdistan forces had abandoned Kurdistan Democratic Party leader and then-President of the Iraqi Kurdistan Region Masoud Barzani during the violence in Kirkuk and, more recently, threats from smaller Kurdish groups like Gorran to create their own armed self-defence forces risk undermining nascent unity between Kurdish groups.

Groups like the Peshmerga have been essential to the fight against Islamic State; however, their empowerment throughout the course of the campaign now threatens to weaken the unity of an already fragmented Iraqi security sector. Now, many Iraqis had begun claiming that the Iraqi Army “is lucky if it can be considered the fourth-strongest army in Iraq—behind, Kurdistan’s Peshmerga forces, the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF, largely Shia paramilitaries) and Iraqi tribal fighters.”

IMPACT ON SYRIA

Similar problems are evident in Syria where the UK and its allies have supported the Syrian Democratic Forces. The Syrian Democratic Forces began life as the Kurdish-dominated People's Protection Units (*Yekîneyên Parastina Gel* or YPG), who forged a relationship with the international anti-Islamic State coalition when the Islamic State moved to take Kobani, a Syrian Kurdish town on the border with Turkey, in September 2014. With allied air support to Kurdish fighters on the ground, Islamic State suffered significant casualties and the siege of the town was successfully broken. As commentators note, this was the moment when “an operational relationship was born. The midwife was tactical necessity. Larger issues of national security objectives, overall strategy for Syria, and an important bilateral relationship with a NATO partner were made subordinate to the singular focus on attacking ISIS.

While working with these local groups has greatly helped U.S. and UK efforts in the fight against Islamic State, with some senior U.S. officials saying that many of its operations would not have been possible without local eyes and ears on the ground, it has had a number of broader implications. Within Syria, this relationship has increased tensions between Kurds and Arabs. As Haid Haid, of Chatham House, notes, “Many Syrian Arabs saw the Syrian Democratic Force’s attack on rebel-held areas ...as a Kurdish pretext to take advantage of U.S. support and expand their territories in areas where Arabs are a majority.” The Syrian Democratic Forces and its political affiliate, the Syrian Democratic Council, have set up bureaucratic structures in liberated territory; however, Crisis Group argues, “Outside majority-Kurdish areas ... [the People's Protection Units] governance model appears fragile.” They describe efforts “to achieve Arab buy-in to its project” as “partial and haphazard” rather than “meaningful.” Haid goes further, stating: “Reported violations committed by some Kurdish groups against Arab communities, have led to ethnic tensions between local communities.”

CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR DEBATE

Recent campaigns in Iraq and Syria reveal both the drivers towards, and the dangers of, remote warfare. In Iraq and Syria, this approach has allowed Western governments to greatly reduce the territorial gains of the Islamic State with a limited military footprint and lower political and economic cost; however, in doing so, it has, at times, appeared to undermine political efforts at building lasting peace.

While forces in both countries have rolled back the Islamic State they have left behind a fragmented Iraqi security sector struggling to provide security to the population and exacerbated the fracturing of Syrian society, with few prospects

for uniting those that defeated the Islamic State with the population they now plan to control. Added to this, the [U.S. Department of Defense](#) stated in August 2018 that the Islamic State retains nearly 30,000 fighters across Iraq and Syria, which continue to threaten fractured national security sectors.

This indicates how choosing partners most able to tackle terrorist groups—rather than most likely to provide accountable and legitimate security—will do little to operationalise the objectives of documents like the Building Stability Overseas Strategy or deliver on UK ambitions of achieving a longer-term, political settlement in the places the UK intervenes. And, in fact, even before these bold ambitions the worsening instability and continued threat of terrorism in the region raise serious questions about the full cost of this approach, in both blood and treasure.

Conversations with those in and around Whitehall and the National Security Council, indicated that they were not unaware of the complexities of the situations they were intervening in, nor did the negative consequences of British action appear unforeseen. Rather, many spoke of the fact that the UK did not have enough political mandate or influence over coalition operations to do anything differently. Whatever the truth, when military and political efforts not only appear in tension but at odds this is surely bad strategy—and does not build much confidence in new mechanisms like the National Security Council that are meant to synchronise efforts across government.

Moreover, the solution is rarely the route of least political resistance. The limited footprint and almost complete lack of British casualties of remote warfare has, for the most part, spared the UK government from intense scrutiny or public protest, but, this relative opacity also appears to be hindering attempts to reform the British strategic decision-making process. A frank and

honest debate about the risk of intervention is essential to avoiding mistakes of the past. This is the only way to ensure key stakeholders—such as the military, departments within Whitehall, Parliament, non-governmental organizations, and civil society—can speak truth to power when British objectives diverge.

It is an enduring truth that there are only hard-won political solutions to conflict and this is no less true when empowering local forces to fight than when using our own—recognising this should be the starting point for UK foreign policy, both on paper and on the battlefield.

Image credit: U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Lisa Soy/Wikimedia Commons.

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