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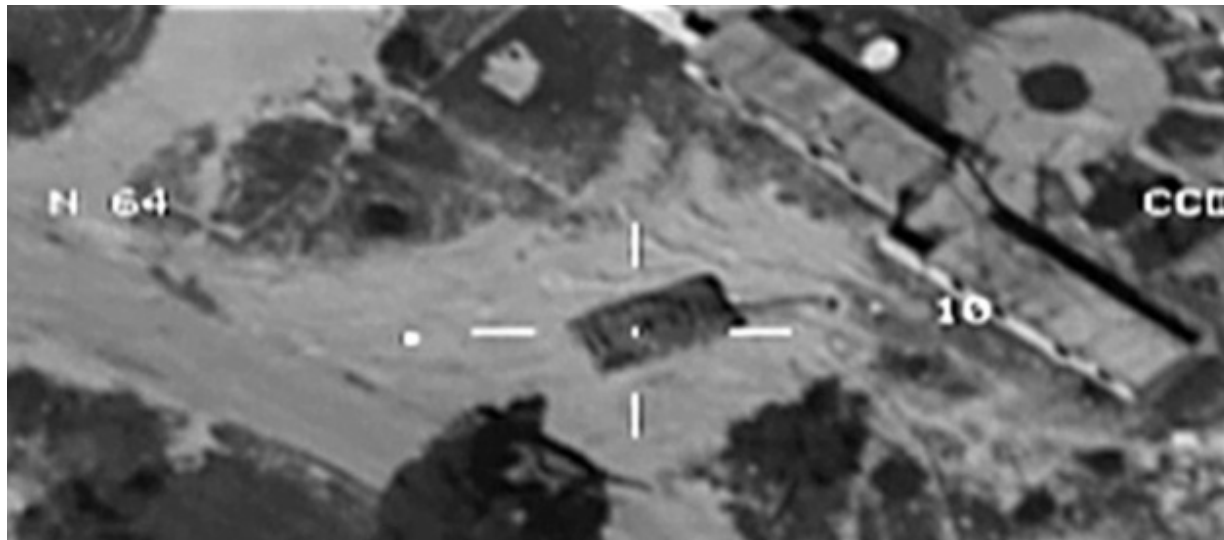
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Event Report: Remote Warfare - Theory, Practice and Ethics

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10 March 2015

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Last month, the **Remote Control project** in collaboration with **Dr Jon Moran** from the **University of Leicester**, held a **one day conference** on remote warfare (RW).

Three panels, made up of academics, researchers and investigative journalists looked at the history of remote warfare (from empire to the war on terror) and assessed its ethics and effectiveness.

History and context

The historical context of remote warfare was the subject of the first panel. RW – with a focus on technology, surveillance and targeting – is not a new type of warfare but dates back to the days of empire. The British Empire used local power authorities and military auxiliaries as well as distant weapons via the latest technology (airpower in the 1920s can be seen as the equivalent of drones today) as a tactic of stabilising its empire. The US also used RW, relying on special forces and air warfare, to expand its power abroad.

An example of this empire-era remote warfare was the use of ‘stay behind’ networks set up across Europe by the MI6 and CIA after World War II aimed at countering a possible Soviet invasion. These networks were defined by their covert, secretive and highly undemocratic nature (decision making took place at the ‘deep state’ level by intelligence agencies, away from the public domain), relying on fear rooted in a perceived threat (a Soviet invasion). A further historical example of remote warfare was the US’s role in seeking to prevent Allende coming to power in Chile in 1970. A variety of RW tactics were used by the Nixon administration to prevent Allende from initially winning elections (through various propaganda campaigns), then to prevent him taking office (through the encouragement of a military coup and assassination of Chilean army commander General Schneider) and finally through attempting to remove Allende from office through covert economic warfare, diplomatic pressure and hostility. Contemporary concerns with remote warfare tactics, such as the lack of accountability and issues of blowback and effectiveness, were all echoed in these historical examples.

Questions over how to define remote warfare were also debated. RW was found to be distinct from ‘coercive diplomacy’ or ‘covert actions’ due to its inherent “warfare” nature: The panellists agreed RW must take place within the context of an armed conflict and involve some use of military force. As well as the emphasis on “warfare”, for an action to be considered remote warfare requires the use of not just one remote tactic on its own, but a combination of these tactics (defined by Dr Jon Moran as the use of flexible expeditionary/policing forces, local auxiliary forces who have knowledge and less accountability, ‘killing at a distance’ techniques based on new technology, elite special units,

Remote Control Report: Remote Warfare (RW): developing a framework for evaluating its use

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increased emphasis on intelligence/surveillance and information operations) in a concentrated way, over time.

Remote warfare in the war on terror

The second panel went on to look at various tactics of the war on terror and their impact within a remote warfare context. Intelligence – gained from interrogation – is essential for fighting counter insurgency campaigns as the political nature of insurgencies means finding out who and why aspects of society support a campaign is crucial. Interrogation, used by the British in Iraq between 2003 and 2008, was useful in painting a general picture of “who’s who”, as well as determining the overall mood and environment in the country at the time. Useful intelligence, it was argued, is reliant on boots on the ground as large number of personnel are required in order to arrest, interrogate, guard, interpret and analyse information. Other sources of intelligence (such as informants) and low level intelligence (understanding people’s concerns and attitudes that can pave the way for other forms of intelligence) also require ground troops as these techniques involve getting amongst, and building trust with, the general population. Furthermore, obtaining intelligence remotely would be severely limiting as would rely on public statements and intercepting communications of those in the UK. Furthermore, using special forces or private military companies for interrogation would be equally ineffective as these agents lack the capacity or authority to carry out these roles. Interrogation and other forms of intelligence gathering, used to fight effectively against insurgents, is thus reliant on boots on the ground.

Another aspect of intelligence gathering are informant networks, favoured by remote warfare tacticians as they seek to avoid the large scale deployment of troops. The use of informants come with a host of serious implications, from incentivizing violence (to recruit informants methods of detention, torture, threats and blackmail are used) to deprioritizing civilian casualties (terrorism can increase in order to de-incentivize becoming an informant, and civilian casualties from informant networks are not seen as important or the incumbents responsibility and thus depoliticised and deprioritized). These informant networks are also increasing (they’re cheap, foreign and unregulated) and the quantity of informants is favoured over their quality. Indeed, concern was raised over the quality of information gained, with 50-70% of this information estimated to be disinformation or misinformation.

Ultimately, the panel were deeply concerned with the move towards remote warfare methods for intelligence gathering, both in terms of its effectiveness (boots on ground needed for effective intelligence and quality of intelligence is reducing as quantity increases) and the ethics of this war lite approach, in terms of its impact on local communities and potential for civilian casualties.

Ethics and beyond

Ethics was the focus of the final panel, with a look at the ethical debate around drones specifically. Firstly, a look at drone strikes in Pakistan and Afghanistan with regards to civilian casualties and the contrast between conventional and non-conventional battlefield arenas. In Afghanistan, drones are part of a war fought on strict rules of engagement and seen as a solution to the high number of civilian casualties in the conflict. By contrast, in Pakistan a different reality set in as strikes were carried out covertly, away from the traditional battlefield arena and it is here that the ethics around drone warfare and civilian casualties come into play most starkly. For example, in Pakistan, **domestic buildings have been hit by drone strikes** more than any other type of target, whilst in Afghanistan drone strikes on buildings have been banned since 2008.

A slightly different approach to ethics was discussed next. Based on extensive research with Reaper pilots, the idea that drones are a “less ethical” mode of warfare was challenged. A drone pilots concerns, it was found, were prompted by a complex interplay of rules of engagement, commander’s intent and a desire to act ethically. Killing by drone was, it was found, no easier for a pilot than using a traditional aircraft – drones did not dehumanize their target. The panel agreed, however, that a broader debate was needed with regards to drones that focused on their wider impact and effectiveness. Blowback, radicalisation and the inability to defeat terrorism were issues that were raised, extending beyond the ethics debate.

Finally, a potentially “more ethical” alternative to drone strikes was explored. Deportation with Assurances (DWA) enables the UK to deport foreign nationals suspected of terrorism abroad whilst mitigating the risk of torture or an unjust criminal process. This, it was proposed, is an ethical alternative to targeted assassinations as, not only are specific and transparent human rights safeguards in place, but it also ends uncertainty in the life of the terrorist suspect and pursues a legal process and respect for the victims. The risk of an individual being treated badly and the reputation of a countries legal system are, however, still at stake.

The conference confirmed that the way we conduct warfare has changed. Drones can no longer be looked at in isolation, instead they must be seen as part of the changing nature of warfare along with special forces, private military and security companies and cyber and surveillance activities. And this debate must be opened up further still. Rather than focusing on the ethics and legality of emerging technology, a look at the impact and effectiveness of this warfare as a whole is essential. Does remote warfare work? Are drones stopping terrorists? To date, there is little empirical measure as to whether they do. What other impact might this warfare be having? Blowback, in the form of increased radicalisation and its broader impact on affected societies (psychological, material, territorial) are all likely consequences that are so far under explored. Finally, what impact is this mode of warfare having on our own societies? The shift to remote warfare has taken place at the exclusion of the public and the lack of transparency and open debate around these methods cut to the core of a

democratic society. Warfare has changed, the public must enter the debate to better understand its implications, or risk being left behind.

The Remote Control project is a project of the **Network for Social Change** hosted by **Oxford Research Group**. The project examines changes in military engagement, in particular the use of drones, special forces, private military companies and cyber warfare.

Image: Still image taken from an RAF Tornado GR4. **Source:** UK Ministry of Defence

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Top

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Annual Reports
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Events
Books
News

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A Standing Conference Table for the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict
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Israeli Strategic Forum
National Dialogues and State-Building
Palestine Strategy Group
The Palestinian Citizens of Israel

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