Remote Warfare and its Discontents

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In recent years, Western states have increasingly resorted to remote warfare to govern 'threats at a distance' across the Middle East and Africa often outside conventional warzones. Remote warfare is a form of military interventionism characterised by a shift away from boots on the ground towards deploying light-footprint military operations. It generally involves a combination of drone strikes and airstrikes from above, special operation forces, private contractors and military training teams on the ground (Watts and Biegon 2017:1). Although remote warfare is partly about distancing, it also involves close contact through M2M trainings, political alliance formations and collaboration, but also through material manifestations such as bases, compounds, airfields, trucks, ships, supply depots, and bunkers.

While successful at times in terms of defeating enemy combatants, these operations also have led to new and shadowy forms of militarisation, high numbers of civilian casualties and undermined a democratic check on government. The state's war machine is increasingly off the public's radar. Remote technologies and forms of organisation allow Western military to largely physically withdraw from the battlefield. Returning body bags are increasingly a thing of the past, and so too is public outcry and scrutiny. And if civilian deaths from airstrikes do incidentally appear on our screens, a lack of political transparency on who is involved and why, and the repeated claim that interventions are 'precise and clean', blurs any public debate on responsibility, and accountability.

This is problematic, because without tracing how creating security-ness for some, may lead to a heightened insecurity for others we run the risk of overseeing the interconnectedness of today's war zones, and, importantly, how clusters of conflict cross-infect and exacerbate each other. In our digital age, it is impossible to wage a secret war or commit atrocities without being seen. And, ultimately, without having to suffer the consequences of some sort of blowback.

Setting a new research agenda: 'making strange' the 'new normal'

The conference *Intimacies of Remote Warfare*, held on the 6 and 7th of December 2017 at Utrecht University and supported by KMF, aimed to address a lack of evidence on the production, dynamics and impacts of remote warfare. The seminar facilitated an exchange of ideas, evidence and data-gathering strategies between academics, journalist, lawyers, politicians and representatives of watchdogs and NGO's. Participants discussed what analytical vocabularies are helpful to capture remote warfare: how current wars differ from earlier (colonial) military interventions: how (alliances of) 'global' and 'local' actors aim to pursue their objectives through war and militarization; how remote warfare upsets the notion of 'war as duel', as a form of reciprocal violence; how remote warfare is publically legitimized and (un)accounted for; and finally what research strategies and methodologies may help to gather reliable data on covert operations.

The Netherlands as among the least transparent members of the US-led Coalition

One overarching question that arose during the conference, and that was deemed especially important within the context of the Netherlands, was how citizens can address the lack of transparency and accountability that goes hand in hand with this type of warfare.

The director of Airwars, a journalist-led transparency project that monitors international airstrikes and civilian casualties in Iraq and Syria, warned the audience that the renewed Dutch participation in the US-led coalition airstrikes against ISIS (started on the 1st of January 2018) "risks the lowest levels of public transparency and accountability among allies in a very different war".

As demonstrated in a recent Airwars report, the Netherlands is re-entering a war that is essentially different from the lower-intensity conflict it initially joined between 2014 and 2016. The current stage of the war has largely involved targeting urban strongholds within territory claimed by ISIS, resulting in a sharp rise in civilian casualties. This risks losing sight of the coalitions stated goal of protecting civilians from ISIS and is casting a dark shadow over its operations.

Airways argues that in such an environment, transparency of action by individual belligerents is vital if Iraqi and Syrian civilians are to hold to account those who potentially harmed their loved ones. Dutch citizens are also entitled to know what is being done in their name.

Official data suggests that between 2014-2016, the Netherlands may at times have been the fourth most active member of the Coalition – after the US, UK and France, while at the same time being one of the least transparent members of the Coalition. Citing potential national security or operational security concerns, the Dutch Ministry of Defence did not publicly share the location, dates, and targets of the airstrikes it executed, therefore it is presently not possible to track Dutch actions against almost 500 publicly reported civilian casualty events during that period. At present, almost nothing is known about Dutch strikes between October 2014 and July 2016, even though Dutch F-16s fired more than 1,800 munitions. All freedom of information requests for information on the Dutch campaign have so far been refused. This has left Dutch citizens with no room for public scrutiny. This lack of transparency has also provided Dutch MPs with little information to help decide on what terms the Netherlands should re-enter the fight against ISIS in 2018.

The Dutch government has placed the responsibility for transparency at the Coalition's doorstep. However, the Coalition's civilian casualty monitoring team is often poorly equipped to make assessments of harm and according to the Coalition: it is for each partner nation to decide individually what information it chooses to disclose and each nation is individually liable for the civilians it kills or injures. This places a strong investigatory onus on the Netherlands itself.

After the Dutch parliament passed a cross-party motion calling for greater government airstrike transparency in December 2017, the weekly reports accompanying the renewed Dutch campaign marked a relative improvement in transparency.

Despite these important improvements, for airstrikes conducted during 2014-2016 the Netherlands is sticking to its former levels of poor transparency and accountability. This obscurity –in the long run- is corroding democratic principles of transparency and accountability. In turn, it highlights the need for building an independent, evidence-based expert field which is able to inform the public about the impacts and intimate realities of the remote wars that are waged in their names. The *Intimacies of Remote Warfare* project is a step in this direction.

Sources

Watts T and Biegon R (2017) *Defining Remote Warfare: Security Cooperation*. Remote Control, November 2017.

Airwars (2017) *The renewed Netherlands mission against ISIS risks the lowest levels of public transparency and accountability among allies in a very different war*, November 2017. https://airwars.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Airwars-Netherlands-briefing-Nov17-NL-EN.pdf