

REMOTE WARFARE

Lessons learned from contemporary theatres

Emily Knowles and Abigail Watson



This report has been written by staff at the **Oxford Research Group's Remote Warfare Programme**, formerly known as the Remote Control Project. We were set up in 2014 to examine changes in military engagement, with a focus on remote warfare. This is the trend in which countries like the United Kingdom choose to support local and regional forces on the front lines rather than deploying large numbers of their own troops.

Emily Knowles is Director of the Remote Warfare Programme

Abigail Watson is a Research Officer at the Remote Warfare Programme

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Alison Pargeter, Ben Lovelock, Chris Kolenda, Chris Swallow, Clive Blount, Ewan Lawson, Frank Ledwige, Jack Watling, James Davis, Julian Salusbury, Keith Dear, Louise Tumchewics, Peter Roberts, Vanessa Meier.

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Remote Warfare Programme
Oxford Research Group
Development House
56-64 Leonard Street
London EC2A 4LT
United Kingdom

+44 (0)207 549 0298
org@oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk
<http://oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk>

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Introduction

The failure of two costly military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan to establish expected levels of stability has led some commentators to announce the “death of the nation-building project”.¹

Placing comparable numbers of Western boots on the ground, except in the case of a direct threat to state survival, is not likely – at least for another generation when memories and national budgets may have healed.²

For the UK among others this has meant rethinking approaches to military intervention abroad. NATO commitments in places like Afghanistan have been reduced down to 10,000 troops from a height of 100,000 and priorities in many European states have been refocussed on homeland defence – a shift that has been intensified by fears of a resurgent Russia and a string of IS-inspired attacks in European cities.

Nevertheless, governments continue to acknowledge that terrorist activity can thrive in the world’s ungoverned or weakly-governed spaces, and that this threatens their security. In order to deny terrorist groups safe havens some unilateral counter-terrorism strikes and raids continue – like the strike against IS propagandist and British citizen Reyaad Khan who was killed in Syria in August 2015,³ or the April 2018 UK-U.S.-French strikes against Assad regime targets following a chemical attack in the Damascus suburb of Douma.⁴ The exploitation of Western technological superiority – particularly from the air – has allowed states like the UK to engage in the fight against groups like so-called Islamic State (IS) without putting large numbers of their own boots on the ground.

This is perhaps the most visible aspect of what we have come to term ‘remote warfare’. However, Western troops are also increasingly working by, with and through local and regional allies in important areas for global security. While local troops are now expected to do the bulk of the frontline fighting against groups like Boko Haram, al-Qaida, IS, and al-Shabaab, small teams of

special forces and military advisers, as well as security assistance and intelligence support are often provided by Western partners.

By maintaining a light footprint, some of the risks of exposing British troops to another series of gruelling wars appear to have been kept to an acceptable minimum. There have been no high-profile anti-war protests on the streets of London, and – bar the embarrassing defeat in Parliament on the principle of military action in Syria in 2013 – the UK has been able to lend support to its allies relatively unhindered. The high-profile liberations of Mosul and Raqqa from IS control have done much to reassure critics that this model of engagement can work, and that with the right support local fighters can prevail.

However, our interviewees each told variations on the theme of a reality on the ground that doesn’t match up to the expectations of policy-makers. In many theatres where the UK is currently engaged, troops that were meant to be training, advising and assisting local forces were not allowed off their bases due to restrictive rules of engagement, political dynamics on the ground were so complex that any exercise set to replicate them would be vetoed for being unrealistic, and the influence that soldiers were instructed to foster appeared elusive in the absence of clear political direction.

Back in London, grumblings about military options being hamstrung by high political risk aversion and limited permissions peppered the many conversations, workshops and interviews that have informed this report. Comments about the decisions being made in Whitehall ranged from descriptions of strategic sleepwalking to a risk-averse process of elimination whereby remote warfare was all that was left once the list of permissions and restrictions had been run through. The overwhelming diagnosis was one of limited commitment, minimum risk appetite, and a triumph of short-term thinking over long-term strategic thought.

Low risk appetites in Whitehall and Westminster, a challenging financial climate, and the enduring weakness of many Western partners in areas where terrorist groups operate suggests that remote warfare is likely to be called upon again in the future. Indeed, it will perhaps remain the “most likely” form of British military engagement overseas for the foreseeable future. This means that pulling lessons from contemporary campaigns and feeding them into force design, doctrine, concepts, and training is hugely important. This report is a first attempt to identify some of the factors that have helped or hindered the UK’s current approach to remote warfare.

It is structured around two main sections:

- Practical challenges for British forces engaged in remote warfare.
- Military myths around remote warfare that are feeding strategic incoherence.

This report is aimed at military decision-makers and speaks to skills, training, and doctrinal gaps in the British armed forces. It does not cover the political or grand strategic levels, or the legal environment that also shapes British approaches to modern warfare. Those aspects are covered by two other reports - for release between May and July 2018 – which will complete this series.

What is remote warfare?

Remote warfare, at its most basic, is a term that describes approaches to combat that do not require the deployment of large numbers of your own ground troops. In contrast to the extensive NATO operations in Iraq and Afghanistan that characterised 2001-2014, a second wave of post-9/11 wars has seen the mobilisation of ad-hoc coalitions of the willing to counter groups like IS, al-Qaida, Boko Haram, al-Shabaab, or the Taliban.

In contrast to the formal NATO structure of recent campaigns, these contemporary operations are made up of a mosaic of activities designed for different purposes, on different timeframes, and against different strategies. For example, the UK may choose to use special forces or armed drones to target specific members of a terrorist network for national self-defence, while using the same assets under the banner of broader

counter-terrorism or stabilisation operations that bring in extensive Western air support, or the training and equipping of both local (state/non-state) and regional allies.

A note on history

Many aspects of remote warfare are not new. Wars have been fought alongside and integrated with allies and partners since antiquity.⁵ The arming and supporting of rival factions reached fever pitch in the Cold War, when proxy wars enabled great powers to clash indirectly and – crucially – below the threshold for nuclear retaliation. Air power has also historically been used to avoid placing British forces on the ground.⁶

However, contemporary British operations have moved on from these past templates of waging war – not least in terms of the UK’s own restricted reach and influence over the forces it fights alongside, who are partners rather than merely ‘proxies’. Political, legal, and ethical landscapes have also shifted. This raises a number of new challenges that need careful attention.

This can be bad news from a conceptual clarity perspective because it means that remote warfare can encompass many different moving parts that normally fall under other headings – counter-terrorism, partner operations, stabilisation, train/advise/assist, security assistance, defence engagement, and building partner capacity to name a few. We are therefore analysing military components holistically that may never have been designed holistically. That may seem unfair. However, these are all activities that can and do overlap in today’s contemporary defence environment, whether you see them as an expression of remote warfare or not. Understanding how they are currently interacting in theatres where the UK is militarily engaged is essential to improving strategy, particularly while there is a prevailing tendency for Western governments to seek to address security concerns without deploying large national military contingents.

It is worth unpicking how different British military activities sit within what is a broad range of options for intervening militarily without placing boots on the ground or on a

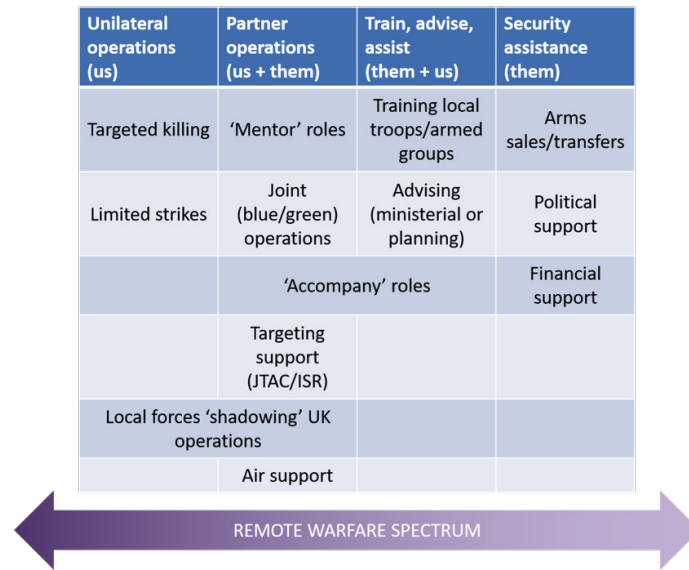


Figure 1: different approaches to light-footprint warfare

light footprint. For example, if we think about contemporary campaigns in terms of whether the British armed forces are directly or indirectly participating in operations you can plot activities on a spectrum that runs from unilateral action on one end to the provision of material, political, or financial assistance on the other.

Another way to think about this is a split between combat and non-combat roles, with some grey zone in between. Direct action on the part of the UK – for example the lethal strike against British citizen and IS-fighter Reyaad Khan who was killed in Syria in August 2014 – is a clear example of a British combat role. An example of non-combat support to partner operations could be the case of British arms sales to the Saudi-led Coalition in the context of their operations in Yemen. In the middle would sit joint combat operations with partners, like the air support that the UK has been providing to the counter-IS campaign, and the training and advising activity that characterises the bulk of NATO Resolute Support’s non-combat activity in Afghanistan.

There is obviously some overlap, particularly when it comes to train, advise, assist activities that include an accompany element that places British trainers close to – and potentially in – the frontline fight alongside the troops that they are training. In a similar vein, operations that are shadowed by local troops may occupy a grey zone between

being a UK-led operation and a partner-led one. However, in general terms it is clear that there is a broad spectrum of assistance that the UK is able to provide to partners short of deploying large numbers of their own troops.

An important point to emphasise here is that remote warfare is aimed at countering an adversary – it cannot just be activities designed to support partners. The UK provides a lot of assistance to allies that cannot be sensibly characterised as ‘warfare’. For example, the majority of short term training teams, 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. This means that activities on the security assistance end of the remote warfare spectrum – arms sales, political support, financial backing – only come under the remit of this study when they are contributing to an active campaign.

The last point to emphasise is that 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.

Where is remote warfare being used?

Remote warfare is an approach that allows countries to intervene militarily to confront a specific threat without placing large numbers of your own boots on the ground. This creates a few clear indicators that can be used to track where remote warfare is the prevailing approach. For example – and with the usual caveats about the reliability and comprehensiveness of open source data – it is possible to track where countries have deployed training teams, advisers, special forces, or air/ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) support to local groups engaged in frontline fighting, but have refrained from deploying their own forces in significant combat roles. If you do so for the UK you get a map like the one below:

However, there are many overlapping strands to the contemporary defence environment, which can complicate matters. British involvement in a country may oscillate in and out of remote warfare, or remote warfare may be taking place concurrently with other defence activities. For example, train/advise/assist (TAA) activities in Nigeria in support of the broader capacity-building of the Nigerian armed forces are not designed to counter a specific threat, unlike special forces or intelligence support to counter Boko Haram. To what extent counter-Boko Haram activities drew on or became temporarily embedded in the broader training effort, or to what extent training goals were adjusted to serve shorter-term counter-terrorism goals, is a grey zone that blurs the divide between British activity in support of a particular campaign and longer-term British support to partners.

BENGAZI

Jul-16 A multinational military operation involving British, French and US forces is recorded coordinating air strikes from a base near Benghazi.

MISRATA

Feb-16 UKSF reported working alongside their US counterparts.

May-16 UKSF fire on, and destroy, an ISIS suicide-truck. UK SF heading from Misrata to Sirte come under fire.

Jul-16 UKSF reported to be running intelligence and surveillance from a base in the city.

SIRTE

Jul-16 UKSF attack ISIS suicide vehicles, direct assaults and provide life-saving equipment to Libyan troops, killing 3 UK-born ISIS fighters.

Aug-16 UKSF reported helping Libyan fighters drive ISIS out.

Aug-16 Elite US personnel are reported operating alongside British troops.

Oct-16 UKSF support to US air strikes against ISIS is reported. Feb-2017 Following a US air strike, UK SF reported gathering intelligence.

RAQQA

Aug-15 David Cameron announces that Reyaad Khan, a UK national was killed in a "precision airstrike". Nov-15 Jihadi John is killed in what is believed to be a US drone strike led by a UK surveillance drone.

MOSUL

May-16 UKSF reported leading a mission to capture ISIS commanders. Oct-16 250 UK Troops deployed onto the front lines with ISIS.

ERBIL

Oct-16 250 UK troops deployed to assist the Joint Force training the Kurds. Apr-18 The US, UK and France launch more than 100 missiles against chemical weapons facilities after a chemical attack against civilians.

AL-TANF

Jun-16 Reports begin that UKSF are fighting on the Syrian frontline from al-Tanf. This is backed up by reports in July 2016 of a Russian attack on the base in June, apparently only a day after UK SF had crossed back into Jordan. In August 2016, the BBC publishes images of what it says are UK SF at al-Tanf back in June.

Aug-16 UK SF capture a senior ISIS commander after a battle in support of the New Syrian Army.

HELMAND

Oct 2017 - 30 UKSF reportedly returned to hunt down a bomb-maker responsible for roadside attacks in Kabul

RIYADH

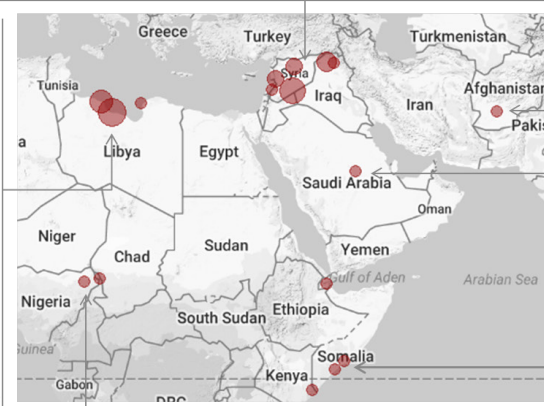
Jan-16 MOD admits British forces present in Saudi operation room for strikes in Yemen

MOGADISHU

Apr-16 UKSF reported training local groups against al-Shabaab.

BONI NATIONAL RESERVE

Feb-17 UKSF reported assisting US allies on border.



N'DJAMENA

2016-2017 300 UK troops deployed to provide training to Nigerian Armed Force and counter Boko Haram operations. The included providing the chief of the Intelligence Fusion Cell and the Liaison and Coordination Cell (CCL) in N'Djamena for a six-month period.

MAIDUGURI

2016-2017 The UK maintains a Liaison and Support Team co-located with the Nigerian Army in Maiduguri, north eastern Nigeria.

Operation SHADER (counter-IS)

Around 1,350 UK personnel deployed as of MOD 2016-17 annual report. As at 30 March 2017, the UK had over 20 aircraft deployed on and had conducted 1,279 air strikes. By March 2017 the UK had helped to train over 37,500 Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and 7,500 Peshmerga in preparations for operations against IS.

AMISOM (counter-al Shabaab)

UK committed to deploy up to 100 troops at any one time to support EU and UN operations in 2017, up from around 20 before 2016. A new headquarters was established in Mogadishu, with a more senior Commander in place.

NATO Resolute Support (counter Taliban and IS)

450 UK personnel deployed as of MOD 2016-17 annual report. 400 additional troops suggested for deployment in May 2018. Core outputs remain mentoring the Afghan National Army Officer Academy (ANAOA), advising the Afghan Security institutions and providing key enabling support to the NATO mission through the Kabul Security Force and a helicopter detachment.

Figure 2

In a similar vein, NATO activities in Afghanistan officially transitioned from combat, counter-terrorism roles under International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) to training activities under Resolute Support (RS). However, separating out training activities designed to build the wider capacity of the Afghan security forces from those designed to help them to counter the Taliban or ISIS-K (the IS affiliate in Khorasan, Afghanistan) can be a bit arbitrary. This is not helped by the fact that NATO activities in the country are double-hatted, with a counter-terrorism remit and a training remit running out of the same headquarters and headed by the same commander. Indeed, even in Somalia, where training activities are carried out under the umbrella of the African Union mission to counter al-Shabaab (AMISOM) there is doubtless a longer-term intention among Western partners to build the broader capacity of the African Union (both as an entity and as separate national contingents) and of the Somali National Army.

Despite this complexity, remote warfare is a way in which the UK's military responses to instability have been shaped by the prevailing political climate and the contemporary threat environment. Understanding how the British military can perform better at tasks that are invariably partner-led, lighter-footprint, and under more restrictive (often non-combat) rules of engagement than the high-intensity warfighting that characterises much of what the military sees as its 'core tasks' is essential.

Why use remote warfare?

We have a separate report that deals with the political and strategic drivers for remote warfare in the contemporary defence environment and will not cover them in depth again here. However, they can be broken down into a series of different strands as below:

The rationale behind remote warfare: a summary

The ideological and budgetary death of the nation-building project
 +
 Technological innovation
 +
 Low public and parliamentary trust in defence decision-makers
 +
 High political risk aversion
 +
 The perceived security threat of safe havens
 +
 The weakness of local partners
 +
 Pressure from international allies
 =
 A strong incentive for the UK to engage discretely and without putting large numbers of their own boots on the ground.

This broad spectrum of involvement, from arms sales to joint operations, presents a challenge when it comes to determining the scale and type of the British role in contemporary theatres. It also suggests that there is no such thing as a clear 'remote warfare strategy'. Instead, driven by a mixture of technological advances, low government risk appetites, shaky defence budgets, low public trust, and a complex threat picture for both the UK and its allies, remote warfare appears to be a piecemeal approach to confronting threats to British and allied security. This has implications for the coherence of British defence strategy, but also feeds a number of practical challenges for British forces in these environments.

Section 1: practical challenges

Our research suggests that a cocktail of low risk appetites, poor expertise in working with local forces, and limited international footprint in contemporary theatres is presenting practical challenges for British forces.

This matters because the prevailing climate of political risk aversion, financial constraint, and enhanced public and parliamentary scrutiny over UK warfighting suggests that this style of operation is likely to dominate British military engagement in the foreseeable future. Notwithstanding increasing agitation about a rising near-peer or Russian threat to UK security, adversaries continue to have a strong strategic interest in avoiding direct, large-scale confrontations with NATO troops. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that UK forces are more likely to find themselves challenged in the open field by Russia in Syria than in the Baltics.

A failure of British forces to perform well at their most likely tasks will invariably have knock-on effects. At home, declining confidence in UK defence is unlikely to yield the sorts of resources or permissions that the armed forces need to sustain their operations. Abroad, dents in the UK's reputation as a reference force for partners and allies could have long-lasting consequences for British influence overseas. On this basis, failing to optimise British approaches for their most likely military tasks may mean that the defence sector finds itself hamstrung before it gets out of the short- to mid-term – even if a most dangerous threat does materialise.

This means that pulling lessons from contemporary campaigns and feeding them into force design, doctrine, concepts, and training is hugely important. This report has been informed by a series of roundtables held in London from March 2017-June 2018. Much of the material is based on field research undertaken in Kabul, Baghdad, and Basra in 2017, as well as on interviews conducted between 2016 and 2018 with British and international military personnel involved in operations in Somalia.



Figure 3: 3 Scots and ANA Troops en route to Upper Sangin Valley (Image credit: Defence Images/Flickr Creative Commons)

Risk appetite

The controversy surrounding the 2003 decision to go to war in Iraq has cast a “long shadow” over British foreign policy, and has had implications for parliamentary and public trust in the decision-making process surrounding the deployment of British troops.⁷ Over a decade of engagement in Afghanistan has also created a certain war-weariness among politicians, parliamentarians, and public alike.

Because remote warfare can offer the government military options that don't require recourse to Parliament under the War Powers Convention,⁸ it makes it an attractive option for risk-averse governments who fear losing a vote. The Cameron government's failure to gain parliamentary authorisation for the principle of military action in Syria on 29th August 2013 has compounded this fear. Rt Hon Alistair Burt MP, Minister of State for the Middle East and North Africa, stated that “the Syria conflict has illustrated that... there is public hesitation about the use of armed force... We don't know as a Parliament what we would take action on now.”⁹

In 2013, a Ministry of Defence (MOD) study discussing how to maintain operations despite a “risk averse” public was leaked. The document suggested, among other things “investing in greater numbers of SF [special forces].”¹⁰ This advice appears to have been followed. In the 2015 National

Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) the government pledged to double investment in special forces and to double the UK's armed drone fleet.¹¹

As we have written elsewhere, we suspect that the case for high public and parliamentary risk-aversion has been exaggerated within government.¹² However, it does seem clear that the experiences of Iraq and – to a lesser extent – Afghanistan have increased the appetite to scrutinise government strategy for military intervention more closely and without the benefit of the doubt that was accorded to the Blair administration. During the parliamentary debate on Syria in 2013 “evidence” was mentioned 114 times and “intelligence” was mentioned 83. As Conservative MP James Arbuthnot articulated: “I personally believed Tony Blair when he said that he believed that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.”¹³

Nevertheless, whether claims of public and parliamentary sensitivity to the idea of deploying British troops abroad are overblown or not, it is clear that there is a prevailing climate of risk aversion that is permeating British overseas missions. This is having an impact – both in terms of the limited permissions that troops are given when they are deployed, and in terms of the roles that they are deployed to fulfil in the first place. Here we focus on the impact



Figure 4: Tony Blair protest - Chilcot Iraq Inquiry - Westminster, London, 21 January 2011 (Image credit: Chris Beckett/Flickr Creative Commons)

of limited rules of engagement and the prevalence of a short-term training team model on chances of mission success in contemporary theatres.

Limited rules of engagement

There does not appear to be a groundswell of political support for British military engagement overseas at the moment. Low popular support for, or awareness of, enduring NATO commitments in Afghanistan were one of the factors that interviewees in Kabul cited for frustration on the ground, while extreme political risk aversion was cited as leading to a very low appetites for accepting casualties on the NATO side.¹⁴ This is leading to two key restrictions on troops – the first being that the majority (including the UK contingent) are not allowed to accompany Afghan troops on the ground, and the second being that even troops deployed in training roles are feeling their activities are being constrained.

When we were in Kabul in March 2017 it was only the American contingent who had expeditionary rules of engagement (RoEs) that allowed them to accompany the troops that they were training, and they had only had those permissions since June 2016. Before that point, accompany roles had to be done ad-hoc by a U.S. reserve force. While special forces are able to operate with more latitude, they are a finite resource. There is a small counter-terrorism mission (SOJTF-A/NSOCC-A) that runs parallel to NATO's Resolute Support (RS) mission but sits under the same Commander, but a lot of their attention is necessarily dedicated to supporting Afghan special forces units while keeping Kabul under 24/7 surveillance under the Kabul Security Force to help Afghan units respond to the increasing tempo of attacks in the capital.¹⁵

This is leading to a disparity in support between Afghan regular troops and their special forces counterparts. Interviewees noted that if Afghan special forces are attacked they are pretty much guaranteed air support and U.S. support. When a local regular force comes under fire, sometimes they will get support, sometimes they won't.¹⁶

Attrition rates among the regular force have been consistently sky-high,¹⁷ and territorial control is now being ceded to the Taliban.¹⁸

The value of having international forces operating alongside their local counterparts was emphasised again and again to us in interview. In Afghanistan, many NATO contingents were locked in to train, advise, assist roles in Kabul or advisory roles at the ministerial level. As one interviewee remarked, "[while] we still have a fairly large footprint – [it's] at the wrong levels."¹⁹ The U.S. administration has recently started leaning on allies to boost their commitments following a Taliban resurgence in the country, but this looks set to focus on troop numbers rather than permissions. Current statements suggest that the UK is considering increasing its troop numbers from 600 to around 1000, but that they will be restricted to training rather than combat roles.²⁰

Parallels can be drawn across to the anti-IS effort, where a low risk appetite appears to have been a key factor when deciding on the British contribution to the campaign. When asked whether a reliance on British air power and special forces was being driven by strategy or by risk aversion, an official suggested that it was the former. They went on to say that the U.S. would probably have appreciated a British combat contingent in the fight to retake cities like Mosul if it had been offered. Another suggested that the fact that advisers to the Iraqi Kurdish force the Peshmerga had to stop short of the frontlines was akin to abandoning them.²¹

Aside from the question over accompany permissions, even troops that are restricted to training roles are feeling the effects of high risk aversion in their national capitals. Stringent restrictions on troop movements is having a huge effect on the ability of troops to get out and build relationships with the people that they are meant to be training. One described how even to go to the Afghan MOD – which is down the road from RS HQ – they would need to be accompanied by armoured cars, and given cover. Even walking to the U.S. Embassy, which is opposite RS HQ, would have required top armour and escort.²² The change from

earlier points in the mission seemed stark. Interviewees talked about how staff who had been out in Afghanistan before, who were deployed back to RS HQ asked them why they weren't speaking to their old contacts. The conclusion seemed to be that it was because the current contingent hasn't been able to build those relationships because they can't get out there.²³

This appears to be a problem shared by other Western troops operating in today's 'remote' wars. While interviewing recent returnees from the British training mission to AMISOM, Somalia, it was clear that troops were very aware that if anyone had got shot the mission could have been ended as a result. However, this led to a dilemma on the ground for those that wanted to have a meaningful effect and saw that they wouldn't be able to do so on their current permissions. Some recounted how they had operated outside of their authorities in order to do their jobs – obviously a high risk considering the potential implications had anything had gone wrong.²⁴

There is a tension here over whether full 'accompany' permissions are essential to effective partner operations or whether more effective training could adequately support local troops on the front lines. This is a question that deserves greater attention than we have space for here. However, what seems clear is that risk assessments that emphasise 'risk to life' appear to be winning

over those that emphasise 'risk to mission'. While protecting troops against harm is rightly a priority, it must be acknowledged that allowing these concerns to outweigh assessments of mission success can be counterproductive. Troops on deployment are at far greater risk than when they are in barracks across the UK. There is little to no point putting them there if they are unable to do their jobs.

Short term training teams (STTTs)

Low risk appetites are also exacerbating a problem that already exists in UK defence strategy – the tendency towards short-term thinking rather than long-term strategy. Interviewees from the British mission in Somalia were worried about the limited ability to maintain budget and interest over the long-term,²⁵ and the fact that appetites tended to wane if immediate improvements weren't immediately seen.²⁶ One interviewee explained that while everyone wants things to happen quicker than they can do, you have to take very small steps in order to achieve something big and significant.²⁷

Given the 'short' nature of STTTs, it is perhaps unsurprising that many interviewees reported that they felt incentivised to pick small problems against which they could demonstrate progress during their deployment rather than to embroil themselves in complex issues that couldn't be fixed quickly. Many talked about spending



Figure 5: Signs of Return to Life in Somali Capital (Image credit: United Nations Photo/Flickr Creative Commons)

the first few weeks discovering that the handover report they had received from their predecessor was optimistic to the point of being inaccurate – suggesting that reporting is being affected by a pressure to demonstrate short-term improvement.

Indeed, many expressed concerns that there was an unwillingness to sacrifice short-term goals to see longer-term progress.²⁸ This incentive structure seems backwards given that STTTs, as part of the government's wider Defence Engagement strategy, are used to build the capacity of partners who are facing complex and long-term security challenges. With a standard rotation of troops every 4-12 weeks and limited – if any – handover time, they are simply not designed to deliver long-lasting capacity building.

In addition, STTTs are secondary tasks of the units deployed out to run them. The British Army is currently divided into two divisions: 1 Division (1XX) leads on non-combat functions and 3 Division (3XX) is maintained at continuous operational readiness to deploy on combat operations when required. However, despite its non-combat expertise, the primary role of 1XX is to provide support to 3XX. Activities like STTTs sit squarely in a second tier of tasks.

This can be felt on the ground. For example, many of the troops we spoke to about their time on STTTs in Somalia didn't feel like they had been particularly well prepared for the challenges they would face before they deployed. The political dynamics of AMISOM were talked about in some depth, as was the fact that trainers had to quickly learn how to operate in a hierarchical environment with troop contributing countries that had very low levels of trust in one another. As one put it, this made it "a political balancing act",²⁹ and a challenge that their previous years in the military weren't particularly applicable to. We had reports of non-logistics officers being tasked to set up logistics hubs, military staff managing significant FCO funding pots, captains being sent to mentor colonels, and people being sent out without basic vocabulary crib cards. The "very generic"³⁰ pre-deployment training, plus the language and seniority gaps between the British soldiers and their local counterparts, made mentoring troops in a meaningful way a real challenge.³¹

Despite these shortcomings, the number of STTTs deployed overseas in 2016-17 increased by 50% compared to 2015-16, while Central MOD funding for Defence Engagement was reported as around £80 million in 2017 and rising over the next four years.³² In addition, defence programmes supporting broader government strategies are also funded from the cross-government Conflict, Stability and Security Fund (CSSF), which had a budget of £1.2 billion for 2017-18.³³

Progress under the Specialised Infantry Battalion model:

When we asked General Nick Carter (then-Chief of General Staff, now Chief of Defence Staff) for a strategic review of remote warfare at an event in January 2018, he quoted Antonio Giustozzi back at us:

“Every age has its follies; perhaps the folly of our age could be defined as an unmatched ambition to change the world, without even bothering to study it in detail and understand it first.”

He went on to explain that the Army’s new Specialised Infantry Battalions (originally referred to as SPIBs and now the Specialised Infantry Group) were a way of being more persistently engaged, with troops embedded to train local soldiers. To get over the short-term objective problem of the STTT, the Specialised Infantry Group would break problems into 2-3 year tasks that are served by a number of 8 month deployments. Deployed troops would be encouraged to think beyond their immediate handover, instead thinking “two back” – i.e. to their successor’s successor. In addition, because there will be personal relationships between the battalion members, it’s hoped that handover will be facilitated and honesty encouraged.

There are currently two battalions (4 RIFLES and 1 SCOTS), which will be stepped up to four (4 RIFLES, 1 SCOTS, 2 LANCS, 2 PWRR) by the end of 2019. Given the long-term nature of the change that they are seeking to support in partner forces, as well as a certain level of natural military resistance to new initiatives, it is likely that the Specialised Infantry Group will take about ten years to mature as an entity. This means that right-sizing expectations and ambitions will be key – as will attracting broad support from the rest of the armed forces and some level of funding. Given General Carter’s support for the group, his recent promotion from Chief of General Staff to Chief of Defence Staff should ensure some high-level support. However, support from the broader armed forces may be less assured.

Many conversations about the Specialised Infantry Group with personnel from outside the infantry have ended in questions about whether this deserves to be a new concept, or how it is different to other training activities. Some of this is no doubt a simple indication of the PR challenge faced by a small group within a large military, and the persistent engagement of Specialised Infantry personnel at external events over the last year will hopefully begin to have a positive impact as the word spreads. However, given the finite funding for training activities – which are currently run by a large number of units across all three services as well as the UK’s special forces (UKSF) – some level of competition of resources should be expected.

This will remain the case even if Army training activity is well coordinated – which hasn’t always been the case. Nevertheless, the integration of the Joint Counter Terrorism Training and Advisory Team (JCTTAT) under the Specialised Infantry Group is a good start when it comes to making the delivery of training coherent at the tactical level. In a similar vein, the position of the Specialised Infantry Group under 1XX means that its activities will be well integrated with the activity of the Regionally Aligned Brigades (RABs). Better links between the Specialised Infantry Group and the 77th Brigade – which focusses on non-combat capabilities – would also help. Encouraging MOD departments like International Policy and Plans (IPP) and Defence Attachés to devise country training plans that divide objectives between all of the units responsible for training could be a way of ensuring that this progress is replicated across the broader armed forces.

As we explore in more depth in the political report in this series, tactical level training can have a strategic effect. Training empowers groups both in comparison to their adversaries, which is often the explicit aim in a remote warfare context, and in comparison to their local, national, or regional peers. This can have unintended or intended consequences for the balance of power between groups. Linking tactical training with strategic ends – including broader whole of government priorities – is a complex task. The greater coordination of training will not automatically result in greater strategic coherence – although it will help.

The Specialised Infantry Group will specialise in advising and will benefit from a better grasp of local languages and politics than standard training teams might. However, they will not be cultural or linguistic specialists who are there to ‘understand’ these dynamics in depth. Instead, they will be drawing on Defence Engagement staff officers in 1XX who sit under the Regionally Aligned Brigades. These officers are subject matter experts on their regions who liaise with defence attachés and International Policy and Plans (IPP) in the MOD.

However, the task of making training activities strategically coherent is more than just a question of effective coordination – it requires the careful integration of different training efforts into their relevant country and regional strategies, which should draw together tactical, operational, and strategic aims as well as broader whole of government priorities. Finding a mechanism to integrate expertise from the Defence Cultural Specialist Unit, the Stabilisation Unit and civil affairs into the planning and delivery of training might be one way to bring in specialist knowledge, and standardising the monitoring and evaluation information collected about training teams so that activities can be regularly analysed and adjusted by those with sight on broader strategic priorities might help broaden the lens past the tactical level.

In addition, improving the strategic coherence (as well as the tactical delivery) of training partner forces will require a shift away from regarding it as a secondary task. Providing good training to partners embroiled in front-line fighting may make the

difference between a successful and a failed campaign, and local troops could benefit hugely from the advice of experienced British forces. However, the incentives for highly-capable combat forces to dedicate time to training roles are not obvious, nor are the career rewards for highly-capable trainers. Interviewees noted that training takes the right character, and it’s very different to usual military activities.³⁴ In turn, these skills are only useful if they are then valued by the military going forwards, with one remarking that “it’s all good fun, but it doesn’t do your career [prospects] any good.”³⁵ It remains to be seen whether the creation of new Defence Engagement and Specialised Infantry career streams will start to produce good trainers who are also good fighters.

There is also a wider risk that the success of these units may hinge on them getting something that is out of their control – namely, the permission to accompany the troops that they train in the field. This appears particularly crucial in terms of attracting and retaining motivated personnel – many of whom were very enthusiastic about the opportunity to deploy abroad. It is clear that groups like Specialised Infantry are thinking about this, and their employment of troops who have previous combat experience may help to convince policy-makers to allow them to take more risks. However, it may not. Working out how to maintain support for the model if these permissions don’t appear should be a core concern for those involved in its development.

Partner forces

While many British military operations may have a component of training, advising, or assisting partner forces, remote warfare is an approach that relies on the provision of assistance to allies in a way that other forms of warfare do not. This is because of the absence of large numbers of British boots on the frontlines, which incentivises the UK to take more of a supporting role when it comes to working with local ground troops. While this may seem a lower-political risk option for the British government than deploying its own forces, it is an approach that is not without its practical challenges. In particular, much of British doctrine, training, and force

design is not set up to integrate partner forces – especially when local groups have different interests, priorities, skills, and approaches.

Instead, we have been urged to give up on the term ‘remote warfare’ and return to the older phraseology of ‘proxy warfare’ so often that we are beginning to worry that this really is how the British armed forces view local contributions – often in leading ground roles – to the fight against terrorist groups in contemporary theatres. Many of the lessons that can be drawn from these campaigns should focus on preparing international troops better for this scenario – whether that comes through training them to plan in an environment where a local group has veto power, preparing them for the challenges of uniting competing partner priorities, or understanding the potential long-term implications of partnering decisions better.

Mixed capability coalitions

Following concerted international efforts against IS, the territorial gains of the group have been dramatically cut – with the Iraqi government announcing the liberation of Mosul in July 2017,³⁶ followed shortly by victory in Raqqa in October 2017.³⁷ Many people are now switching their attention to



Figure 6: EU Delivers Aid Inside War-Ravaged Mosul (Image credit: EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations/Flickr Creative Commons)

the post-IS future of both Iraq and Syria, and all of the associated fears of a weakened but not destroyed IS guerrilla force melting back into the Sunni community from which it was originally formed.

However, valuable lessons for future operations need to be drawn from the experience of providing support to a partner force on the ground that is inexperienced in clearing and holding urban terrain from a determined enemy. Iraqi forces had been deeply traumatised by the experiences of 2014, and in many cases were reluctant to advance without heavier levels of international air support than might otherwise have been considered ideal in densely populated urban terrain.

The consequences of this can be seen clearly in western Mosul, the final stronghold of IS in the city, where around 15 neighbourhoods have been completely destroyed. These districts previously housed around 230,000 residents, leaving large numbers of internally displaced people (IDPs) who will not be able to return in the short to mid-term.³⁸ Three-quarters of Mosul’s roads, all of its bridges, and most of the electrical network have also been destroyed, and many buildings have been rigged with explosives and booby-traps by retreating IS fighters.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

Current efforts to improve urban warfighting capabilities focus on how to train and equip British troops better for this complex environment. However, it is unclear how helpful this is for preparing British forces to support partner troops. Careful thought about how best to support the next partner operation might yield solutions to an over-reliance on international airstrikes to clear territory. The March 2018 Army Field Manual *Tactics for Stability Operations Part 5: Military Support to Capacity Building*⁴¹ provides some good tactical lessons learned from the STTT deployed to support the Kurdish Peshmerga, but does not touch on broader lessons from the joint campaign. This is an opportunity missed, and is perhaps something that deserves greater doctrinal attention in the future.

Building special forces capacity

One solution when working with a lower capability partner may be to focus on training up a small, elite group of special forces. As we have seen in contemporary operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, these units can be brought up to a high standard of combat effectiveness in a much shorter timeframe than whole partner armies. The success of these elite units in countering terrorist groups in contemporary theatres in Iraq and Afghanistan is to their credit. However, recent experience also presents some cautionary tales.

Iraq's special forces (ISOF) were largely considered to be a professional, sustainable force by the time international trainers left in 2011. They had received considerable training time and attention, most notably from U.S. special forces, and had gone from shadowing American troops to leading the planning and coordination of missions. They had accrued considerable combat experience, and had troops drawn from all segments of Iraqi society.⁴²

However, even in the early days after the international withdrawal it was clear that being the exception to the rule of low Iraqi National Army capacity had its downsides. Tasking began to come directly from the prime minister's office, mostly for activities not suited to an elite counter-terrorism unit like securing voting centres, guarding convoys, and manning checkpoints. Experienced officers began to be replaced by people with connections to the prime minister, and the promotions system began to revert to a system based on loyalty rather than competence.⁴³ They were also removed from the MOD chain of command to sit under its own ministry – CTS (Counter-Terrorism Services), but were not allocated money from the Iraqi defence budget.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, by the time that IS had occupied Fallujah and parts of Ramadi, ISOF remained the most capable part of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and was used for clearing operations in Anbar as well as for seizing urban terrain. This territory was then turned over to the ISF to hold, although as one commentator notes "the Army was usually repulsed the next day and the terrain was lost..."⁴⁵

ISOF found itself conducting large-scale conventional operations for which it was neither trained nor equipped. Operations were scaled up from company level and below to battalion level and above, including the integration of artillery, close air support, and coordination with other ISF units.⁴⁶ This high tempo and expanded mandate exacted a high price, with one senior Pentagon official suggesting that the 1st ISOF Brigade – popularly referred to as the Golden Division – were suffering "upwards of 50% casualties."⁴⁷

The U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) budget request for 2018 reported ISOF battle losses as 40% of their total strength, costing an estimated \$329 million in 2018 to resupply combat operations and equipment battle losses on top of the \$409.8 million already dedicated to this task in 2017.⁴⁸ Over the next three years it appears that international efforts will be put to doubling the size of ISOF from 10,000 to 20,000 troops.⁴⁹

In a similar vein, the Afghan 2020 Roadmap has called for a doubling of numbers of Afghan Special Forces (ASOF),⁵⁰ responding to fears that the current force is being burned out through overuse on regular tasks to fill gaps in Afghan National Army (ANA) capacity.⁵¹ A report in March 2017 suggested that special forces were carrying out 70% of operations in the country,⁵² which our interviewees acknowledged was raising difficult questions for international special forces who accompany them.

Our interviewees spoke of the overreliance on special forces as a result of a lack of capability among their regular counterparts. For example, the Afghan National Police (ANP) simply left Kunduz when it came under attack, and while the ANA was able to surround the area they weren't able to clear it. This left it to ASOF to go in and clear the area – a regular task.

The bind is that our interviewees also acknowledged that the weakness of regular forces is connected to the disparity in international support for these units. In Afghanistan, regular troops were mostly being advised at a ministerial level and were suffering horrifying attrition rates, whereas special forces units were pretty much guaranteed air support and U.S. support if they got into trouble. Pulling back to a position of focussing international support on partner special forces is likely to exacerbate this divide. The question is – with the lack of broader funding and appetite for wider support, is this a risk worth taking?

Strategic control

Operating on a light footprint has implications for influence on the ground. As one interviewee put it in the context of Somalia, “when you’re there as a team of 15 you don’t have automatic influence.”⁵³ The concept of needing skin in the game in order to have influence is a tricky one. As some interviewees in Somalia suggested, if you measure success based on demonstrable improvements in AMISOM, you wouldn’t see much improvement. But to see this in isolation is a mistake.⁵⁴ Instead, we must look to the longer-term relationships that are being developed despite the difficulties that troops are encountering.

At the time of interviews, the UK was the only country to have secured a Memorandum of Understanding that allowed their troops to operate under UK rather than Somali law which – rather crucially – meant they could carry weapons. They were also the only ones allowed into the operations and intelligence room at AMISOM.⁵⁵ Influence through partner operations could come down to getting the High Commissioner or the Defence Attaché an audience with the local Chief of Defence Staff, or greater access to the coalition (i.e. American) hierarchy, rather than setting the strategic direction for the conduct of a campaign.

“It is difficult to build local forces willing to fight for objectives incongruent with their own ambitions. Second, the enabling of local forces, capable of achieving narrowly defined military goals, does not necessarily mean that they are congruous with broader foreign policy goals.”⁵⁶

Nevertheless, NATO allies have been discovering the perils of having a less dominant position on the battlefield than before. In Syria, NATO-member Turkey has been engaging in active military operations against the Syrian Democratic Forces – an amalgamation of Kurdish and Arab fighting units strongly supported by countries like the U.S. and the UK. As one commentator noted:

“Right now U.S. troops, particularly special operations forces, are on the ground as advisers leading an advise and-assist mission against ISIS, but they are not leading the way into battle.

This policy means that most of the several thousand American forces operating inside Iraq and Syria do not face the same risks and dangers U.S. troops faced when there were more than 160,000 in Iraq and 100,000 in Afghanistan fighting and dying by the thousands. It also means that... American forces are operating from a distance and without the same level of precise control of either operation or outcome. This makes the messy fight on the ground between the Turks and the Kurds – both U.S. allies in the American-led fight against ISIS – easy to anticipate but harder to resolve once it occurs.”⁵⁷

As a British member of the anti-IS Coalition noted, countries putting in ground troops invariably bear the greater risk, and have the final say over operational plans as a result. In Iraq, he reflected that there was little point being inflexible in your planning as an international coalition. If you developed an excellent plan for going West, but the Iraqis wanted to go East, they were going East.

Following clashes between Turkish and Kurdish forces in Syria, then-U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter called for both sides to play nicely as he tried to negotiate calm among the key American allies:

“We’ve called on both sides to not fight with one another, to continue to focus the fight on ISIL. That’s the basis of our cooperation with both of them. And specifically, not to engage one another and to retain those geographic commitments that they’ve made,” he said at the Pentagon. “We do understand that they have historical differences with one another, but American interests are quite clear. We are — we, like they, want to combat ISIL and we want — we’re calling on them all now. Let’s keep our priorities clear here in helping them to deconflict, so to speak, on the battlefield.”

General Joseph Votel, Commander of U.S. Central Command which oversees the war and former commander of U.S. Special Operations Command, followed with his own comments:

“Generally speaking, I do believe our approach, which requires that we work by, with, and through the indigenous forces, is working,” Votel said, before acknowledging the intra-coalition fight. “What we are trying to do is ensure that we keep all of our partners focused on ISIL at this point. It’s not helpful to — in-fighting among themselves, we don’t want that. We’re working to prevent that.”⁵⁸

We deal with the broader questions of strategic outcomes and competing interests in the political report in this series and will not repeat the material in depth here. However, it is also clear that there is a dilemma for the military between making quick decisions about who to partner with based on narrow counter-terrorism objectives, and making slower but perhaps more sustainable decisions that make for a longer, messier, perhaps intractable campaign.

Operations in Afghanistan should serve as a cautionary tale, when the initial operations to counter al-Qaida and topple the Taliban government placed a light footprint of Western special forces alongside fighters from the Northern Alliance while supporting a whole host of irregular or semi-regular forces like the Afghan Local Police, essentially a community protection force that had 29,000 men deployed at one point in 29 of 34 provinces.⁵⁹ Decisions were made on the basis of which groups had the motivation and capacity to counter the Taliban, with the additional incentive to keep things simple given that plans were being drawn up to invade Iraq. These groups were then rebranded as the Afghan National Security Forces (after spending some time being referred to — more accurately — as the Afghan Militia Forces) after the Bonn peace agreement was essentially drawn up by a coalition of the victors.

Fast-forward to 2018 and there have been some improvements in Afghan capacity, most notably among their special forces but also increasingly among their Air Force. However, Kabul continues to resemble a miniature version of the fiefdoms that surround the capital. As just one example, Abdul Rashid Dostum, the now-exiled Vice President and militia leader, has a sprawling compound that covers multiple blocks of downtown Kabul. While we were in country he was nominally under house arrest for ordering the kidnap, torture, and rape of a political opponent, but it was his own militia who controlled all roads in and out of the compound, with local residents turned back from approaching their own properties by his guards.⁶⁰

Despite the pressure on the Afghan government to uphold the rule of law and prove that the string of warlords that has been incorporated into the political system cannot operate with impunity, the rhetorical stand-off between Dostum and Ghani was hugely undermined by the overwhelming public belief that neither the Afghan National Army, nor the police, had the power to compel Dostum to submit to custody. Rumours abounded that Dostum’s Uzbek militia (the Junbish) were withholding their usual support to Afghan National Army operations in the region despite incursions by ISIS-K, and that this may be as a direct result of the accusations.⁶¹

This should unsettle those now looking at the likely impact of the counter-IS campaign on the security sectors in both Iraq and Syria. As one senior official involved in the anti-IS Coalition remarked, if you tried to write an exercise scenario as complicated as the situation on the ground in Syria, it would be rejected for being too difficult for training purposes. However, it is increasingly acknowledged that both direct international military support in the case of Kurdish forces, and the indirect benefits that the counter-IS campaign have offered the Assad regime in Syria and a range of Shia militia in Iraq, may have long-term negative consequences for security. Integrating these longer-term strategic perspectives into military planning is a challenge – but is necessary if these operations are to have a long-term benefit to security.

Light footprint

While acknowledging that ultimately it is the job of the military to carry out the political mandate, we were reminded again and again that ideally any force should have its size based on the conditions on the ground, and the end you are trying to achieve.⁶² The plea was clear. “The lighter you go, the more dangerous it becomes for your troops.”⁶³ In Afghanistan we were told that 25% of advisors could not currently advise because they didn’t have force protection. While it was acknowledged that contractors can help fill gaps in international military staff, the consensus seemed to be that it was better to reduce activity than put contractors where they shouldn’t be.⁶⁴

The March 2018 Army Field Manual *Tactics for Stability Operations Part 5: Military Support to Capacity Building* notes that one of the advantages of using capacity building as part of combat operations is that it allows UK forces to overcome “the problems of achieving sufficient mass”⁶⁵ when British troops cannot be deployed in combat roles. However, there are a number of practical challenges that spring from the resulting light footprint of British troops – particularly when it comes to maintaining a good level of situational awareness and ensuring that intelligence is not open to manipulation.

Limited situational awareness

Given the ailing security situation in the country, the relatively small numbers of international troops able to assist their Afghan counterparts is leading to real difficulties in the field. One soldier remarked that “we don’t have the visibility we’d like – we’re very Kabul-centric.”⁶⁶ Conducting campaigns from the air presents several challenges for situational awareness. While improving drone technology has allowed for more persistent ISTAR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Target, Acquisition and Reconnaissance), relying on air-only assessments is still a difficult shift for Western militaries used to having a steady presence of their own troops or NATO allies on the ground to complete the intelligence picture.

While there may be a limited supply of Western special forces directing strikes from forward positions in contemporary theatres, the ratio of international troops in the air to those on the ground is still much more skewed than it would have been in Iraq (2003-2011) or Afghanistan (2001-2014). An area where this becomes particularly problematic is the monitoring of civilian casualties. One of the most important shifts for ISAF operations in Afghanistan came in after 2007 when it became evident to successive ISAF commanders that civilian casualties were severely undermining ISAF’s legitimacy in the eyes of the Afghan population and that this was undermining the mission.⁶⁷

ISAF’s reliance on aerial assessments of civilian harm was named as one of the key weaknesses by commanders seeking to improve performance. In a study by Dr Larry Lewis, it was revealed that air-video BDAs (Battle Damage Assessments) had missed civilian casualties later discovered during ground-led investigations in 19 out of 21 cases.⁶⁸ The solution in Afghanistan was to create a civilian tracking cell,⁶⁹ support leadership and increase openness to civil society inputs.⁷⁰ These efforts had a dramatic impact on civilian harm from the international air campaign, reducing civilian deaths from one every 5.71 strikes in 2009 to one every 15.67 strikes by 2012.⁷¹

If ISAF commanders were worried about an overreliance on air assessments in Afghanistan at a period when there were an estimated 35,460 NATO troops on the ground in 2007,⁷² the air campaign over Iraq and Syria now has a dramatically reduced pool of international ground troops to call on. As of its December 2017 report, the international coalition had confirmed 817 civilian deaths since the start of operations in August 2014.⁷³ The number of coalition strikes stood at 28,562, meaning that current coalition calculations suggest that one civilian death is occurring every 34.95 strikes. If correct, this would indicate a halving in civilian casualties per strike when compared to Afghanistan, despite the shift from largely open rural terrain to densely-populated urban environments.

Perhaps more likely is that it is proving extremely difficult to collect enough information to support credible reports of civilian casualties in a predominantly air-based campaign. This would fit with findings by the civilian casualty counter Airwars, whose 2016 transparency and accountability assessment of the coalition partners uncovered a troubling “semi-passive approach to casualty monitoring” with Coalition officials admitting that they were “very very limited in what data we can gather as a Coalition.”⁷⁷

Operation SHADER is the UK’s contribution to the air campaign against IS in Iraq (since September 2014) and Syria (since December 2015). As of February 2018, the UK had flown 5,474 missions over Iraq and Syria, launching 3,599 weapons.⁷⁴ A 2017 parliamentary report suggested that around 850 British personnel were supporting Operation SHADER – which, when combined with the roughly 500-strong training contingent in Iraq – makes the UK the second-largest contributor to anti-IS operations behind the U.S.⁷⁵

Other countries that have been engaged in this air campaign are the United States – which has been leading the international coalition – France, Australia, Canada, The Netherlands, Jordan, Belgium, Turkey, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. NATO has been providing airborne radar and command and control support since October 2016, but did not consider itself a member of the coalition until May 2017.⁷⁶ Russia has been running its own air operations in Syria, largely in support of the Syrian regime.



Figure 7: Mosul strike aftermath (Image credit: Coolloud/Flickr Creative Commons)

Intelligence open to manipulation

Another area affected by the light footprint of British and international forces on the ground is intelligence. Without trusted partners to triangulate information received from local sources, there is an increased risk that intelligence is manipulated to support local conflict aims. As the precision strikes that Western powers can provide in support of their partners are only as precise as the intelligence that informs them, this should be an area of considerable concern.

Several stories have surfaced that suggest Western support is being misused in this way. For example, on 25th August 2017, a joint U.S.-Somali counter-terrorism raid was conducted near Bariire.⁷⁸ The aim of the operation was to track down al-Shabaab militants. However, residents claim that al-Shabaab had already been driven out by government forces and that only civilians were killed.⁷⁹ Following protests from the village and its surrounding area, Somali officials admitted that there had been civilian casualties – blaming this on a “miscommunication” between security forces and local farmers.⁸⁰ Following its own investigation into the operation, AFRICOM maintains that no civilians were killed.⁸¹

Local sources concluded that the August raid showed the U.S. had once again been drawn into local clan dynamics by whoever supplied their intelligence. The area had seen rising tensions between two clans, revolving around land and power.⁸² These disagreements have frequently turned violent; in fact, when villagers first heard gunshots during the raid they thought it was the other clan.⁸³

While this rivalry had been going on for the last two decades, the U.S. counter-terrorism operations have presented the clans with new opportunities to make gains against each other.⁸⁴ It appears this was once again the case with the raid in August last year. In an investigation led by Christina Goldbaum for Daily Beast a number of interviewees claimed that the group the U.S. had worked with in the lead up to the raid had links to one of the clans.⁸⁵ She also argued that “the Americans were using a translator who had a history of suspected manipulation of U.S. Forces.”⁸⁶

Following the strike, Abdi Sheikh, for Reuters, quoted “a veteran Western expert on the security situation in Somalia” who said it seemed likely that the U.S. troops had “been drawn into local clan dynamics” by whoever supplied their intelligence.⁸⁷ He said: “The real question is, what was the source of the intelligence and why did they believe it?”⁸⁸ A villager also said: “We don’t believe the Americans have any agenda to kill us... [But the] clan used misinformation and propaganda to wrongly kill us. They persuaded the Somali government and the Americans that we are al-Shabaab, which we are not.”⁸⁹

As we commented for a media story following AFRICOM’s investigation:

“There... should be real questions asked about the vulnerability of Western-supported operations to manipulation – particularly now that there are fewer international eyes and ears on the ground to verify local intelligence... Whether or not civilians were killed in this particular operation, the allegations alone may have already done lasting damage to local opinion.”⁹³



Figure 8: The 1st Battalion The Royal Welsh (Royal Welch Fusiliers 23rd Foot) and assigned units including Afghan National Army, Afghan National Police, Estonian Forces and French Army carry out ongoing training and preparation for OP Moshtarak, in Helmand Province, Afghanistan. (Image credit: ResoluteSupportMedia/Flickr Creative Commons)

Section 2: military myths of remote warfare

It is clear from the first half of this report that British efforts to counter groups like IS, al-Shabaab and the Taliban remotely are producing mixed results. While successful operations in Mosul in July 2017 and later in Raqqa in October 2017 have proven that remote warfare is a viable option for campaigns with narrow objectives, the broader picture is less positive.

“The purpose of war is to fulfil policy - policy should aim for some sort of peace. Warfare exists to serve itself. So if uncoupled from policy, it can be meaningless”

- military interviews, SOJTF-A/ NSOCC-A

By attempting to marshal groups involved in wider national and regional conflicts behind a shared set of priorities that places countering terrorism at the top, international partners may now find themselves in the unenviable position of having empowered groups and hastened outcomes that are not in their strategic interests. This is largely a failure of Britain’s strategic decision-making machinery, which does not appear to be delivering on post-Chilcot promises of a whole-of-government approach to defence and security. As this is the central theme of our political report in this series, we won’t repeat those arguments here.

However, there are myths that surround remote warfare that are currently – sometimes inadvertently – being perpetuated by the military that are feeding this strategic incoherence. Speaking truth to power is vital even – and perhaps especially – in climates where the military feels under budgetary and political pressure. Debunking these myths within the military will be an important part of improving responses to conflict:

1. It is possible to do remote warfare in secret;
2. It is possible to do remote warfare cleanly;
3. It is possible to do remote warfare cheaply;
4. A military optimised for major warfighting will be able to do remote warfare;
5. In some cases, it is a myth that remote warfare will be able to achieve anything at all.

Myth 1: it is possible to do remote warfare in secret

For politicians facing the dilemma of how to confront threats to national security when they have a low risk appetite, the opportunity to engage in discreet military activity abroad must be attractive. Indeed, in 2013 an MOD study discussing how to maintain operations despite a “risk averse” public was leaked. The document suggested, among other things “investing in greater numbers of [special forces] SF.”⁹¹ This advice appears to have been followed. In the 2015 National Security Strategy and Strategic Defence and Security Review (SDSR) the government pledged to double investment in special forces and to double the UK’s armed drone fleet.⁹²

Indeed, because remote warfare offers decision-makers options that do not require the same levels of scrutiny that surround other forms of military engagement overseas, this creates a strong incentive for its use. In March 2017 we launched a report called “All quiet on the ISIS front: British secret warfare in an information age”⁹³ where we explored the ways in which much of remote warfare slips through the net when it comes to the normal mechanisms for accountability and transparency that surround British military activity:

The opacity of remote warfare

Where the UK is using armed drones to conduct intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance missions rather than combat missions, these deployments are not disclosed or voted on in Parliament. This is in line with the treatment of other 'non-combat' missions, which do not fall under the War Powers Convention. However, there is now also a precedent for the UK to use these armed drones to carry out targeted strikes, such as the one that killed Reyaad Khan in Syria, when parliamentary authorisation had not been given for British military engagement in the country.⁹⁴

Where the UK carries out operations with special forces rather than with regular troops, parliamentary authorisation or notification is not required. This allows them to operate in combat roles in countries where Parliament has not voted on military action,⁹⁵ as well as in places where the relevant authorisations specifically preclude the deployment of UK troops in ground combat operations.⁹⁶ Scrutiny is also severely restricted by the MOD's long-held policy not to comment on special forces.⁹⁷

In addition, where the UK provides capabilities to allies rather than taking an active lead in operations, it does not necessarily need to report them to Parliament. For example, in 2015 it was revealed that a small number of UK pilots embedded with the U.S. military had carried out airstrikes in Syria against IS targets before parliamentary authorisation was given.⁹⁸ As Ross Hawkins, BBC correspondent, asked: "Why weren't we told? ... That's the question troubling many MPs, not all of them on opposition benches."⁹⁹ This allows the government to have troops involved in combat without having to declare a UK role in offensive missions, and without having to bring their engagement to a vote in Parliament.

Finally, there is little information in the public domain about the military's advise and assist activities, even when they take place in close proximity to frontline conflict. While some narrative is given in the MOD's annual reports,¹⁰⁰ this only gives a snapshot of activities in a selection of countries where the UK works. Because budgetary information is rarely given, and because the information given is not necessarily comparable or consistent between countries or over time, it is very difficult to get a sense of how much time and effort the UK is putting in to capacity building and engaging with its local allies. This makes attempts to understand what approaches are working very difficult.

The military has not done much to dispel the belief that greater secrecy equals better strategy, despite the 2010 SDSR speaking of the need to "win the battle for information, as well as the battle on the ground" and acknowledging that "a more transparent society" aided by "the speed and range of modern global communications" would submit British operations to intense scrutiny.¹⁰¹

There is a wealth of military activity going on to improve British approaches to information warfare, yet little debate about how the UK's current restrictive policies around releasing information about remote warfare may undermine this. At its most basic level, refusing to comment on UK military

actions even once a significant amount of information is available in the public domain means that the government ends up handing over the narrative of UK military engagement to others. This puts direct constraints on the government's ability to put across its own counter-narratives in the face of uncontrolled leaks and media speculation. Forfeiting the ability to discuss, justify, or disprove accounts that appear in the public domain is a significant handicap, and may also serve to erode the legitimacy or credibility of UK military action abroad.

This is perhaps most pronounced in the case of the UK's special forces (UKSF), who operate under a long-standing policy not to comment on their activities to either press or Parliament:

- In February 2016, claims surfaced that UKSF were spearheading a “secret war” against IS in Libya, including covert discussions about supplying weapons and training armies and militias. The MOD responded that it is a “long-held policy... not to comment on Special Forces.”¹⁰²
- In March 2016, when a leaked memo confirmed that UKSF had been operating in Libya since at least the beginning of 2016, this was repeated: “It is our long-standing policy that we don’t comment on Special Forces operations.”¹⁰³
- In June 2016, it was reported that UKSF were on the front line in the fight against IS, this time in Syria. The MOD responded that “It is our longstanding policy that we don’t comment on Special Forces operations.”¹⁰⁴
- In response to seven separate questions that the Rt. Hon. Emily Thornberry MP raised about UKSF in April 2016, the same answer was provided to each: “This Government has demonstrated its commitment to our Special Forces by announcing a £2 billion programme of investment over the course of this Parliament... However, as it is the longstanding policy of the Government not to comment on our Special Forces, or to release information relating to them, I cannot comment on specific questions about personnel, equipment, discussions or activities in relation to these units.”¹⁰⁵
- In December 2017 Paul Flynn MP asked, “whether the National Audit Office has inspected the account of the office of the Director of Special Forces since it was established in 1987.” The government responded: “The National Audit Office has a thorough process for inspecting all aspects of the Department’s accounts. The Department does not routinely comment on any aspect of Special Forces.”¹⁰⁶
- In response to a question raised in November 2017 by Crispin Blunt MP, former chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee, who asked if the MOD would “undertake a review of access to information on Special Forces by Parliament to enable effective scrutiny,” the Department responded: “Given the sensitivity of their activities, oversight of Special Forces is exercised through the Prime Minister and Defence Ministers. We have no plans to change the current arrangements.”¹⁰⁷

There is a balance that needs to be struck between the need for secrecy to provide security and the need to open up the choices of government to scrutiny and debate. However, the assumption that removing war from public and parliamentary debate allows governments to counter threats regardless of public opinion is prefaced on the increasingly outdated premise that governments can control access to information about UK military action abroad. In a world dominated by smart phones, social media, and burgeoning access to the internet, the current policy of limited transparency may end up exacerbating the low levels of public trust in military interventions that secretive warfare is assumed to avoid.

Our research shows that the UK is currently performing worse than many of its allies when it comes to publicly commenting on its actions, or opening up its policies to scrutiny.¹⁰⁸ In doing so, the government is neglecting the strategic advantages that greater transparency can bring, in favour of narrowly looking at greater access to information as a security concern. The military – as part of its ongoing development of information warfare capabilities – could do much to emphasise the strategic case for greater dialogue about contemporary military engagement. This could also serve to mitigate the risk that the next myth – that remote warfare equals clean warfare – becomes the dominant narrative following recent experiences in Iraq and Syria.

Myth 2: it is possible to do remote warfare cleanly

Perhaps the most worrying narrative to come out of the anti-IS Coalition is that the civilian impact of the campaign has been negligible. The only member state to have systematically reported on civilian casualties as a result of their bombing campaign is the U.S. who have reported that, as of the end of April 2018, 883 civilians have died as a result of airstrikes. Until recently, the UK maintained the line that there was no conclusive evidence to suggest that their strikes have resulted in specific cases of civilian death.¹⁰⁹ They recognised the first – and so far only – confirmed civilian casualty in early May 2018, after a man on a motorbike entered a strike zone and was killed along with three IS militants.¹¹⁰ What is less clearly stated is the extent to which the UK accepts that its current mechanisms for obtaining and analysing evidence of civilian casualties are flawed or insufficient.

Over the past 3.5 years the RAF has dropped more than 3,700 bombs and missiles in the campaign against IS in Iraq and Syria. Estimates for the number of civilians killed in the nine-month battle for Mosul range from 1,000-10,000. The U.S. dropped or fired 29,000 munitions in and around the city, with the UK second to the U.S. in terms of the dozen countries conducting airstrikes in Mosul. According to independent data approximately 6-8% of those killed by American strikes have been civilians.¹¹¹



Figure 9: Dire Need as People Flee Mosul Fighting (Image credit: EU Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations/Flickr Creative Commons)

A source inside the coalition has said that it is 'impossible' to conduct a bombing campaign in highly populated areas like Mosul without killing civilians and said he had seen evidence that British airstrikes had caused civilian casualties "on several occasions". "To suggest they have not – as has been done – is nonsense" he added.¹¹² Indeed, the tactics used by IS militants are specifically designed to lead to civilian casualties from Coalition attacks.¹¹³ They operate mainly in densely populated urban environments and rely on civilians as human shields.¹¹⁴

The MOD has been careful in choosing their words around civilian casualties, sticking to the line that they have seen 'no evidence' of causing civilian casualties rather than ruling out that casualties may have occurred. However, senior officials within the anti-IS coalition that we spoke to warned that this could be giving the impression that intensive urban combat like this could be carried out completely 'cleanly'. There is a real danger that this lack of an open public debate about the actual challenges of warfare feeds exactly the sort of risk-aversion and low risk appetite that undermine chances of military success.¹¹⁵

The unwillingness of the British government to engage sensibly on the issue of civilian casualties weakens its credibility even among audiences sympathetic to the need to use military force to counter a group like IS. Among more sceptical audiences, it is easy to see how sticking to a statistically impossible figure of just one civilian casualty throughout the course of the campaign feeds mistrust and bolsters perceptions that the government is unwilling to be held to account for its use of force abroad. As the institution that stands to suffer most from increasing expectations of warfare being 'clean' the military could do much to push back against the political narrative of zero civilian casualties by arguing for a more nuanced policy line. It cannot simultaneously argue that it needs greater investment to operate in urban terrain because of how complex it is, while sticking to a line of 'clean' operations in Iraq and Syria.

Myth 3: it is possible to do remote warfare cheaply

At a time when defence is under pressure to show value for money, it is extremely difficult to get a clear picture of how much remote warfare is actually costing. Part of this is a down to a lack of consistency in what information is provided which makes tracking trends or analysing costs and benefits very difficult. For example, the MOD annual report provides a snapshot of the different countries where regular UK personnel are engaged, but only provides budget lines for some operations.

For example, in the Annual Report and Accounts 2013-2014 the only operation that was given a budget was Afghanistan (£2,269 million). A £25 million commitment from the Deployed Military Activity Pool (DMAP) and a £55.79 million commitment from the Conflict Pool (the predecessor of what is now the cross-department Conflict Stability and Security Fund)¹¹⁶ are also given, but no budgetary details are given on activities that sound like they might have been in support of partners on the front lines listed in the report – for example in Somalia, Malawi, and Sierra Leone.

In the Annual Report and Accounts 2014-2015 the counter-IS operation joins operations in Afghanistan in being given a budget line (£46 million). DMAP gets another £25 million commitment – this time with the note that this covers "military activity in support of the search for the missing Nigerian schoolgirls, NATO reassurance measures, and elements of countering ISIL activity in Iraq and Syria."¹¹⁷ Somalia, Malawi and Sierra Leone each get mentions in the text, but still without budgets attached.

By the Annual Report and Accounts 2015-2016 we get a rough breakdown of deployed regular personnel by region, but still only budgets for operations in Afghanistan (£75 million) and counter-IS (£204 million). Enhanced ISR (£19 million) joins DMAP (£25 million) as a budgeted task without any real explanation, and we get a note that DMAP has been used to fund "the training of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, the provision of security for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Malta, the UK contribution to the

EU counter human smuggling mission in the Mediterranean, the NATO mission in the Aegean, military planning assistance to allies and International Organisations and counter Daesh activity.”¹¹⁸ Somalia, Nigeria, and Mali are all described in ways that suggest the UK is providing support to frontline troops, but no specific information is given on how much that costs or how those costs are categorised.

The most recent report – which at the time of press was 2016-2017 – improves on the previous report’s model of providing only headline regional figures for deployed regular personnel by also providing a breakdown of the numbers of troops deployed on key global military operations against IS, in Afghanistan, Ukraine, Estonia, Poland, Romania, Cyprus, the Southern Mediterranean, Somalia, South Sudan and Nigeria.¹¹⁹ However, budgets are again only supplied for Afghanistan (£70 million) and counter-IS operations (£474 million). ‘Enhanced ISR’ has disappeared. DMAP remains steady at £25 million to cover “additional costs of elements of counter-Daesh and overseas C-Terrorism activity, support to the Egyptian government in the search for the missing EgyptAir flight MS 804 in the Mediterranean, UK contribution to the planning of an international security assistance mission, UK strategic air transport support to an international ally in Africa, NATO enhanced Forward Presence in Estonia and Poland and NATO counter migrant smugglers in the Aegean.”¹²⁰


You can piece together a bit – although not a lot – more information if you combine MOD reports with the cross-department Conflict Stability and Security Fund (CSSF) annual reports, although only a partial list of the countries in which the CSSF operates is released.¹²¹ For example, one of the countries highlighted in the 2016/2017

annual report was Afghanistan which received £89.75 million, making it the largest recipient of CSSF funds. Projects included training of 999 recruits from the Afghan National Army Officer Academy, as well as reforms to police salary payments to reduce corruption.

We also submitted a series of Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to get more budgetary information on CSSF spending, but at the time of publication we had only received a response from the FCO, which broke down their CSSF allocated funds in Middle Eastern countries for the 2017/18 financial year as follows:

| Country | FCO CSSF Allocation (£m) FY 17/18 |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Iraq | 30.28 |
| Jordan | 24.75 |
| Lebanon | 29.04 |
| OPTs [Occupied Palestinian Territories] | 7.94 |
| Syria | 66.27 |
| Yemen | 4.99 |

As you can see, trying to track the cost of contemporary British military activity in any meaningful way is extremely hard if you have to rely on open source data. To complicate matters further, assets like UKSF have classified budgets, meaning that while the UK government has recently committed to increasing their budget, we do not have a baseline to compare increases to that we could use to get any sense of whether this is a significant increase or not. In response to a written parliamentary question about the SDSR 2015 funding commitments for UKSF, then-Armed Services Minister Penny Mordaunt MP said:



Rt. Hon. Penny Mordaunt MP

“This Government has demonstrated its commitment to our Special Forces by announcing a £2 billion programme of investment over the course of this Parliament. All military operations, including the activities of the Special Forces, are discussed and scrutinised at the highest levels of Government, including at the National Security Council. However, as it is the longstanding policy of the Government not to comment on our Special Forces, or to release information relating to them, I cannot comment on specific questions about personnel, equipment, discussions or activities in relation to these units.”

Source: HC Deb 14 April 2016 C 32773W

Figure 10: Former Armed Forces Minister, Penny Mordaunt responding to a written parliamentary question about UKSF funding.

This lack of clarity on budgets, particularly when it comes to providing details of specific projects and programmes, makes it incredibly hard to estimate how much remote warfare actually costs and which activities are showing the greatest signs of being good value for money. This not only hurts the external accountability of the UK's military engagement overseas, but also the internal process of improving programmes by learning lessons. If defence wants to show true value for money, it must be more transparent about how money is being spent. Consistent data released in MOD annual reports would be a good start.

Myth 4: a military optimised for major warfighting will be able to do remote warfare

Conceptual force development faces a bind when it comes to looking out to 2035. Should force design focus on confronting the most dangerous threat on the horizon, or the most likely? Of course, the gold standard would be to design a force that would be adaptable enough to face a range of both likely and dangerous scenarios. However, this is a daunting task that does not lend itself to the clear predictions of resourcing, training, equipment, and numbers that much force design rests upon. What tends to happen instead is that this desire gets translated into a decision to design narrowly for the most dangerous threat, with the assumption that it will be easier to 'scale down' than to 'step up'.

Recent experience in Iraq and Afghanistan suggests that this assumption is flawed. The skills and approaches needed for population-centric COIN were not easily conjured out of existing British Army training or equipment. Instead, they required a dramatic (and at times, traumatic) rethink at all levels while the UK was in the midst of a fight. Our research on contemporary British military operations – which are taking place on a light footprint and with a heavy emphasis on working by, with, and through local and regional allies – suggests that this type of engagement also requires a skillset that is distinct from, rather than a scaled-back version of, major warfighting operations.

This matters because the prevailing climate of political risk aversion, financial constraints, and enhanced public and parliamentary scrutiny over UK warfighting suggests that this style of operation is likely to dominate British military engagement in the foreseeable future. Notwithstanding increasing agitation about a rising near-peer or Russian threat to UK security, adversaries continue to have a strong strategic interest in confronting our armed forces off the open battlefield. It does not seem unreasonable to suggest that UK forces may be more likely to find open confrontation with Russia in Syria than in the Baltics.

Many activities that fall under remote warfare – be that training, advising, and assisting or providing air support to local forces, are secondary tasks of the units deployed to do them. We have explored how this feels on the ground in the case of STTTs in the first section of this report, but it is also in evidence when it comes to the design of doctrine, concepts, and training.

For example, research for this report has left us with a suspicion that the UK is not a natural coalition operator. At a force development conference in March 2018, the UK and allies from the Netherlands, Germany, Canada, Australia, and the United States each presented their future force concepts. The UK and the U.S. were the only two that didn't place working in coalition at the heart of their concepts. While the size and strength of the U.S. armed forces means that it can afford to take a discretionary approach to coalition working, the British attitude is harder to defend. Efforts to be a good partner appear to hinge on 'reference force' status – i.e. a good international reputation. This could be characterised as a sovereign approach whereby if the UK is good at what it does allies will want to work with it. However, interviews we conducted with international allies involved in Somalia painted a different picture.

Far from appreciating British support, an interviewee from the EU training mission in Somalia (EUTM-S) criticised the UK for running a parallel national effort while nominally contributing troops to the EU mission. Rather than submitting to EU command structures, the British contingent

was accused of “actively undermining”¹²² the EU effort by trying to operate under their own rules. When asked whether other national contingents were doing the same, the answer was a blunt “no”.

A narrow approach to partnerships is also evident in British strategy documents. In the 2010 SDSR the UK government committed to “focus on areas of comparative national advantage valued by key allies, especially the U.S., such as our intelligence capabilities and highly capable elite forces.”¹²³ This was echoed in the 2015 SDSR which stated: “our special relationship with the U.S. remains essential to our national security. It is founded on shared values, and our exceptionally close defence, diplomatic, security and intelligence cooperation.”¹²⁴

This falls far short of directly training, planning, or preparing British forces to work alongside partners. Indeed, at a strategy workshop, soldiers recognised the importance of the coalition question but weren’t able to find ways to connect it practically to discussions on how the British army should conceptualise or train for the future. Questions of what roles and capabilities British forces would willingly relinquish to local forces as part of a joint urban operation went unanswered, with the conversation inevitably returning to how British forces could field the full suite of capabilities they would want in an urban environment.

Even if the British armed forces were to become better at delegating tasks to local forces when they are planning an operation, this betrays an assumption that the UK will be in a superior position in the chain of command. The reality of course is much more complex, with decision-making authority linked to ‘skin in the game’. If it is a partner force who is putting troops on the front lines while the international coalition sits back out of harm’s way it changes the dynamic. A high-level member of the British anti-IS contingent remarked that if we do not draw lessons from that campaign about how to have influence within a coalition setting, the experience will have been a waste.

It is clear that joint exercises with U.S. and European allies are improving interoperability, and this is welcome. In addition, British experiences in Estonia sound like they are finally yielding British/Estonian units that are fully interoperable – with the caveat that the major lesson drawn by the Estonians appears to be that this takes a long time to embed. Nevertheless, much of this activity is focussed on interoperability at the tactical level, and will not in and of itself result in a better coalition mindset for the British armed forces. Working with partners is a skill and is something that each level of the armed forces needs to be trained in. Assuming that turning up and being (at the very least) competent and (aspirationally) excellent at your own tasks is not enough.



Figure 11: Army Reservist Training Ugandan Soldiers (Image credit: Defence Images/ Flickr Creative Commons)

Myth 5: in some cases, it is a myth that remote warfare can achieve anything at all

Over 15 years after the United States entered Afghanistan, the country is showing signs of returning to its pre-September 11 status as a safe-haven for terrorist groups. Following the NATO drawdown in 2014, early dramatic proof of a terrorist resurgence came when a joint U.S.-Afghan special forces operation uncovered the largest al-Qaida camp ever found in the region in October 2015. The multi-day battle killed more than 160 jihadist fighters in a training camp facility that spanned 30 square miles.¹²⁵ While SIGAR were asked not to release their usual figures on Taliban and IS control of Afghan territory in their January 2018 report,¹²⁶ a BBC study during the same month estimated that Taliban fighters are now openly active in 70% of the country.¹²⁷

A member of staff at Kabul University, who used to teach history, argued five years ago that:

“In spite of some 150,000 well-equipped foreign troops and over 300,000 Afghan military and police, security is deteriorating in Afghanistan. People are not safe in their cities and villages, the government is ineffective, judges, police and government

bureaucrats are corrupt and above all Pakistan and Iran are sabotaging whatever the coalition forces are building.”¹²⁸

One of our interviewees reflected that “if all you’ve got in the toolbox is kill/capture, that might be better than nothing – but are you going to do it forever? Kill all the people?”¹²⁹ There was general consensus that, not only was it going to be impossible to eradicate the Taliban in four years, but that attempting to kill your way out of the problem was never going to work. Many of the functions that the military are currently doing are not inherently military tasks – troops just find themselves filling the vacuum left by other actors and agencies.¹³⁰ As one interviewee reminded us, those things don’t have an exit strategy, nor can they.¹³¹

Instead, interviewees spoke of the need to bring pressure to bear on states like Pakistan to restrict assistance flowing to the Taliban, to start supporting the delivery of a functioning economy alongside the provision of security, and to build the trust necessary between NATO troops and their Afghan counterparts so that more roles and responsibilities can be handed over.¹³² None of these problems are easily tackled by remote warfare – they require a larger defence, development, and diplomatic strategy.



Figure 12: Afghan soldiers patrol Kabul Military Training Center (Image credit: Georgia National Guard/ Flickr Creative Commons)

In Somalia, British political will was derided as “a yoyo,”¹³³ with one soldier calling the operation a waste of time because you’re either all in or you’re not in at all.¹³⁴ As another put it, British military support can’t be tap on, tap off without handing space to groups like al-Shabaab to grow and exploit the chaos.¹³⁵ Over twenty years of conflict and a history of fractious relationships between the semi-autonomous federal member states has left the Federal Government in control of less than half of the country. By the end of 2017, around 20% of the country was estimated to be under the control of al-Shabaab.¹³⁶

Despite concerted international backing since the September 11th attacks in 2001, neither the Somali National Army (SNA) nor the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) has been able to dislodge terrorist groups with any permanent effect. Worried that al-Qaida would use Somalia as a safe haven after operations began in Afghanistan, the U.S. sent a small team of Special Operations Forces (USSOF) to the country, liaising with local forces in a similar model to the early days of the Afghan conflict.¹³⁷ Over a decade later, operations appear to be stepping up rather than winding down. In 2017, the total count of 34 U.S. drone strikes equalled if not exceeded the cumulative number of attacks over the previous 15 years.¹³⁸

At the same time, AMISOM has begun to withdraw its own troops from the country.¹³⁹ Budget pressures,¹⁴⁰ including some disquiet over the disproportionate risks borne by regional troops versus their international backers,¹⁴¹ appear to be taking their toll. This should be a red flag for those that believe that light footprint remote warfare will automatically result in durable improvements in partner capacity while incurring low monetary and political costs. Instead, without sustained investment – albeit perhaps at lower levels than if large numbers of British troops were to be deployed – gains can quickly be reversed.

It is a truth rarely acknowledged that we are fighting alongside and against groups in regions where they have entrenched interests and complex strategic priorities. This invariably means that, in a battle of enduring political will, Western militaries are

unlikely to come out on top. However, there seems to be a lack of willingness to accept the consequences when the UK chooses to engage in a limited way in support of narrow counter-terrorism aims when many of its allies and adversaries are embroiled in much wider conflict.

As analysts at an LSE event on post-IS Iraq emphasised in May 2018, it is really only the international IS Coalition that ever saw – and continues to see – countering IS as the dominant strategic priority in the region. All other groups – including the Kurds, Assad’s forces, Russia, Iran, the Gulf, and Turkey – all have a long list of concerns and priorities that far outstrip the perceived threat of IS. If the UK’s political objectives in the region surpass limited counter-terrorism aims, it would appear that remote warfare alone is not capable of delivering them. The military must become better at speaking truth to power about the limits of remote warfare.

Conclusions

By maintaining a light footprint, some of the risks of exposing British troops to another series of gruelling wars appear to have been kept to an acceptable minimum. There have been no high-profile anti-war protests on the streets of London, and – bar the embarrassing defeat in Parliament of a government motion to begin air strikes in Syria in 2013 – the UK has been able to lend support to its allies relatively unhindered. The high-profile liberations of Mosul and Raqqa from IS control have done much to reassure critics that this model of engagement can work, and that with the right support local fighters can prevail.

Indeed, our analysis has shown that with appropriate support to capable partners remote warfare can help to destroy or degrade terrorist targets. However, it also presents a number of practical challenges around working in a highly risk averse environment, on a light footprint, through local forces who may have different capabilities, interests, and approaches to warfare to their British counterparts. The trajectory of current conflict suggests that future success will depend on our ability to quickly identify and learn lessons from these contemporary campaigns. Despite high-level discussions about a Russian threat, a huge increase in risk appetite in London or a shift towards more unilateral British military intervention abroad still seem unlikely. It is becoming clear that the UK is going to have to get used to working with groups of ad-hoc regional allies and local partners as well as in established NATO coalitions.

If in the right circumstances partner operations can be successful, it is imperative to understand what those circumstances are rather than just applying the template elsewhere in the hope that it will continue

to deliver results. A failure of British forces to perform well at these tasks will invariably have knock-on effects. At home, declining confidence in UK defence is unlikely to yield the sorts of resources or permissions that the armed forces need to sustain their operations. Abroad, dents in the UK's reputation as a reference force for partners and allies could have long-lasting consequences for British influence overseas. If this sort of activity is always seen as a secondary task, it is unlikely that British forces will excel at it.

Above all, there is a need to see remote warfare as a limited tool for limited aims. Without a wider strategy for the security in the areas in which it is being employed, there is a risk that British and allied actions empower groups and hasten outcomes that are not in their long-term interests. While some of the responsibility for this lies with the political decision-makers in Whitehall, there are myths that surround remote warfare that are currently – sometimes inadvertently – being perpetuated by the military that can feed strategic incoherence. These include the arguments that remote warfare can be done cheaply, cleanly, discreetly and well by a military that has been optimised for major warfighting.

Speaking truth to power is vital even – and perhaps especially – in climates where the military feels under budgetary and political pressure. Conducting activity for the sake of protecting budget lines, proposing structures for the sake of protecting cap badges, or accepting innovation only in the case that it means doing more rather than doing less all hurt British strategy. Debunking these myths within the military will be an important part of improving responses to conflict. This report is just the first step for us when it comes to supporting this conversation, and we look forward to the discussions to come.

Recommendations

There is currently a tendency for the British armed forces to prepare narrowly for the most dangerous threat, with the assumption that it will be easier to 'scale down' than to 'step up'. Our research suggests that remote warfare requires approaches and skillsets that are distinct from – rather than a scaled-back version of – major warfighting operations. In order to perform well at what remains a likely task for British forces, doctrine, training, and career streams need to be rethought. This could include:

- Making sure that best practice from contemporary remote warfare operations is drawn into joint doctrine – either by creating specific guidance, or by integrating material into existing doctrine.
 - This should involve developing new approaches to civilian casualty monitoring that improve the ability to conduct post-strike assessments in areas where there are limited or no ground troops.
 - This should also ensure that appropriate safeguards and training are in place to mitigate against the risks of intelligence manipulation by local sources.
- Integrating broader expertise – for example from the Defence Cultural Specialist Unit, the Stabilisation Unit and civil affairs – into the planning and delivery of training to ensure that training is conflict-sensitive and strategically appropriate.
 - This might include encouraging IPP and defence attachés to devise country training plans that divide objectives between 1XX, the marine corps, special forces, and other units responsible for training to ensure coherence across military and civilian training efforts.
 - It might also include standardising the monitoring and evaluation information collected about training teams so that their strategic coherence can be regularly analysed and material adjusted accordingly.
- Rethinking the incentives for highly-capable combat forces to dedicate time to training roles, and the career rewards for highly-capable trainers. This may require removing barriers for personnel to opt to stay in post for longer than a two-year cycle, including removing elements of the promotions process that penalise this.
 - A starting point for this could be identifying skillset priorities as part of conceptual force development, and then encouraging troops to specialise in these key areas.
- Updating training to simulate the conditions of remote warfare.
 - This should include improving pre-deployment training for troops so that they arrive aware of the political dynamics of the areas they will be working in.
 - This could also include simulating the dynamics of an ad-hoc coalition by including partner forces, militias, international allies, local civil society and civilian agencies into the exercise.

There are myths that surround remote warfare that are currently – sometimes inadvertently – being perpetuated by the military that can feed strategic incoherence. These include the arguments that remote warfare can be done cheaply, cleanly, discreetly and well by a military that has been optimised for major warfighting. Debunking these myths within the military will be an important part of improving responses to conflict:

1. The government is currently neglecting the strategic advantages that greater transparency can bring, in favour of narrowly looking at greater access to information as a security concern. The military – as part of its ongoing development of information warfare – could do much to emphasise the strategic case for greater dialogue about contemporary military engagement.
2. As the institution that stands to suffer most from increasing expectations of warfare being ‘clean’ the military could do much to push back against the political narrative of zero civilian casualties by arguing for a more nuanced policy line.
3. If the military wants to show true value for money, it must be more transparent about how that money is being spent. Accurate assessments of special forces budgets, the money spent on training partner forces, and cost-benefit analyses of contemporary operations are all needed, but consistent data released in MOD annual reports would be a good start.
4. Many activities that fall under remote warfare – be that training, advising, and assisting or providing air support to local forces – are considered to be secondary tasks of the units deployed to do them. This can be felt on the ground and seen in terms of the time and commitment dedicated to training and rewarding British forces for these roles. Working with partners is a skill and is something that needs to be prioritised if it is to be done better.
5. It is a truth rarely acknowledged that we are fighting alongside and against groups in regions where they have entrenched interests and complex strategic priorities. The military needs to speak truth to power about the consequences when the UK chooses to engage in a limited way in support of narrow counter-terrorism aims when many of its allies and adversaries are embroiled in much wider conflict.

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Oxford Research Group
Development House
56-64 Leonard Street
London EC2A 4LT
United Kingdom

+44 (0)207 549 0298
org@oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk

<http://oxfordresearchgroup.org.uk>