

Interview: Jon Moran

29 September 2016

This interview was conducted by the [Remote Control](#) project.

In this interview, Dr. Moran discusses the use of remote warfare in Libya, its effectiveness and some of the key problems yielded by the use of this tactic.

Q. In 2011, the UK took part in the NATO military intervention in Libya which led to the overthrow of Gaddafi. Official government statements suggest that the UK's military operations in Libya both began and ended with this campaign. Since then, however, evidence has gradually surfaced suggesting that the UK has been conducting 'remote warfare' in Libya. What is remote warfare and how has this tactic been used in the case of Libya?

Remote warfare is a term used to describe a group of tactics that allow states to prosecute military activities from a distance rather than using conventional warfare. These tactics include:

Latest

[An Update on the Security Policy Change Programme](#)

[Chances for Peace in the Third Decade](#)

[A Story of ORG: Oliver Ramsbotham](#)

[A Story of ORG: Gabrielle Rifkind](#)

1. the use of special operations forces (SOF) either directly, or as trainers or mentors to local forces
2. the use of airpower (including drones)
3. the use of intelligence assets to direct forces on the ground and
4. the use of local security forces, either official forces or militias or paramilitaries.

One important thing to note about remote warfare is that it is a set of tactics that can be very effective. Remote warfare was employed in Libya in 2011. United Nations Resolution 1973 called for the protection of civilians against threats by the Gaddafi regime. However, the use of airpower for this purpose was then expanded by Western and other powers into remote warfare in order to overthrow the Gaddafi regime.

In 2011 the civil war between Gaddafi and the rebels was in a stalemate. It was not just airpower that made the difference to the rebels. In addition to airpower, special forces from France, the UK and Qatar were deployed not just for forward air control, but to help the rebels become a more professional force. Special forces and UK intelligence assets were used to support the rebels as they advanced. This involved assistance to them in developing combat plans, gaining tactical skills, identifying Gaddafi forces, and supporting them with air strikes on Gaddafi forces. Foreign intelligence support was particularly important in the final operation to take Tripoli. It is my assessment that without this remote warfare support the rebels would have been unable to defeat Gaddafi.

However, this also highlighted one problem with remote warfare. Although as a set of tactics it can be very effective, it cannot by its nature involve long term planning. Following the overthrow and execution of Gaddafi, Libya descended

Most read

The Role of Youth in Peacebuilding: Challenges and Opportunities

Making Bad Economies: The Poverty of Mexican Drug Cartels

ORG's Vision

Remote Warfare: Lessons Learned from Contemporary Theatres

into chaos. This chaos, involving the development of militias, organised crime, widespread general crime and the collapse of public services led to such instability that Islamic State (IS) identified Libya as a suitable base for its operations outside Iraq and Syria. Such has been the instability in Libya since 2011 that the West is now engaging in a second round of remote warfare to defeat IS forces in Libya and promote one of the competing governments as a stable political actor. This is having success in defeating IS but it still leaves the future of Libya in doubt.

Remote warfare can have strategic effect (in overthrowing Gaddafi and defeating IS) but it is not a strategy in itself. If it is not part of a long term strategy it may end up creating more problems than it solves.

Q. So what are the problems that remote warfare can create?

Remote warfare can have a short term strategic effect (e.g. in stabilising or overthrowing a regime). But by its nature it cannot have a long term strategic effect. Remote warfare involves small numbers of specialist troops (special forces, intelligence, air control) and air power which by their nature cannot be deployed over the long term and can only have a limited effect. Even if remote warfare operatives work with local security forces or militias they cannot control them over the long term since they are small in number and that is not the point of a remote warfare mission. With this in mind remote warfare can create a number of problems:

- **Long term instability.** The overthrow of Gaddafi in Libya in 2011 was a classic example of a successful remote warfare operation. But the operation had no plans for the aftermath. Libya descended into political and security chaos with rival governments, militias and criminal groupings all

contributing to a situation in which citizens became more insecure. By 2016 Western and other states were again engaging in remote warfare in Libya, this time to try and stabilise the area and defeat IS – aiming to solve the problems created by the first phase of remote warfare in 2011.

- **Perpetuating conflict.** In places such as Yemen remote warfare may assist local forces but not in a game changing (strategic) way. It may end up creating a stalemate where no side is strong enough to prevail and ongoing conflict continues to cost civilian lives and create insecurity.

Overall, remote warfare is no substitute for a long term commitment, either politically (though aid and diplomacy) or militarily (large scale deployment in conjunction with local forces – itself a serious decision).

Q. Given the problems that remote warfare can create, why is the use of remote warfare by states on the rise?

For a number of reasons. One is the lack of success of long term deployments of regular troops by Western countries in Iraq and Afghanistan. In Iraq approximately 4500 US military troops were killed and over 30,000 wounded. In Afghanistan the casualties were fewer but the conflict dragged on for a long time. Both conflicts have to be judged as a failure. Iraqi security was only evident for a period after the surge in 2007 and then the rise of Islamic State showed how weak public security was, and is, in Iraq. In Afghanistan the Taliban remain undefeated and indeed the period after 2010 saw the UK and US negotiating with the Taliban and redefining them as insurgents rather than terrorists in the global jihad against the US. Remote warfare is a way for the US to maintain its pressure on jihadist groups without necessitating massive troop deployments and long term counter insurgency operations. It saves money also – both wars cost the US perhaps \$3 trillion dollars.

For the UK, remote warfare is way of keeping up its security profile and assisting the US as its conventional power has declined. The UK military was, in a sense, exhausted after Iraq and Afghanistan and then military cuts imposed by the Coalition government further reduced its capacity for large scale deployments. Further, the UK public would not support any large scale ground force deployment for the next few years or in the absence of direct major terrorists attacks on the UK. They are more inclined to support remote warfare.

The French have used remote warfare in Mali and Libya because again it is way to maintain a security presence without the large deployment of troops that the French public might not support even after the IS attacks in France. The French already had a crucial experience with large scale troop deployments and drawn out conflict in Indochina and Algeria in the 1950s and 1960s, and since then have often relied on airpower and paratroopers to support friendly local regimes in Africa.

It should also be pointed out that although remote warfare by Western states has been patchy in its success, elsewhere countries are using remote warfare very effectively. The Russians have used remote warfare very effectively in Ukraine. They have used special operations forces, military advisers and local militias supported where necessary to take the Crimea and parts of eastern Ukraine under effective Russian control. Remote warfare seems to have been a success in Syria. The Iranians developed remote warfare against the Coalition forces in Iraq after 2003 and have been involved in remote warfare in the Lebanon supporting Hezbollah for a long period. Recently, they have joined with Russia in using local or other forces (such as Lebanese Hezbollah) and their own operatives to stabilise the Assad regime, while Russia has employed surveillance, reconnaissance and airpower to batter the rebels. These are

successful operations because they have been used by Russia and Iran not as an antidote to the failure of large scale operations – they have seen what disasters this can bring and they also want to avoid direct conflict with the USA. Rather, for them, remote warfare allows them to achieve their objectives – it's a useful way of achieving foreign policy objectives. For the West, remote warfare is often a reaction to previous failures at invasion, occupation and nation building.

Q. So is remote warfare better at achieving political stabilisation or destabilisation?

I think overall remote warfare is better at destabilisation. This is not to say that remote warfare cannot stabilise countries. There are examples including the US in Afghanistan (2001-02), the UK in Sierra Leone (2001), and the French in Mali (2011) where remote warfare successfully defeated local militias or terrorist groupings and prevented the further development of conflict. In Afghanistan the Taliban, never viewed as legitimate and not in full control of the country, was deposed and a fragile democracy imposed; in Sierra Leone remote warfare helped to defeat the militias who were opposed to the UN brokered peace agreement; and in Mali remote warfare prevented the overthrow of the government by a combination of insurgent and terrorist groups.

However, remote warfare only started these processes. In all three cases extra support in the areas of security, aid, civilian assistance etc. was provided to make sure the stabilisation was secured in the longer term. In areas where remote warfare has been the start and the finish of the operation it has created far more instability. Libya is the prime example, where intervention successfully overthrew Gaddafi but left the country in anarchy. In Yemen it is also the case

as is the remote warfare conducted on the Pakistan-Afghanistan border. Remote warfare operations in these two areas have 'managed' conflict and have not reduced it.

Remote warfare is only the start of any process of intervention. It might be seen as useful tactic but it cannot operate in a vacuum. Russian remote warfare has been effective because the Russians have been working with strong local forces to effectively wrest parts of the Ukraine away; these territories will now need continuing Russian support (like other breakaway areas such as Transdnistria). In Syria the Russians (and Iranians) have been able to bolster Assad's exhausted but still coherent national army. But a long term peace process will determine the future of Syria and Russia and Iran realise this – they have just used remote warfare to ensure Assad will be a big player in this and that rebel forces will not be negotiating from a position of strength. In Iraq, the rise of IS exposed the weakness of the Iraqi security forces. The US could only work with the Kurdistan Peshmerga and the reliable US-trained Iraq Special Operations Forces, assisted by Shia militias. The disparate group of local forces has been able to stop Islamic State's advance but with far more difficulty than should have been the case. US and UK remote warfare support has allowed this but this is not any long term solution to the weakness of the Iraqi state.

Q. Taking into consideration the mixed results of remote warfare, how do you see its use evolving in the future?

Remote warfare will not replace conventional warfare but it is likely to be the dominant form of warfare for the next decade at least. There are differing reasons for this depending on the country involved. In the USA, the UK and France there is little public support for any large scale conventional intervention

in other countries. So remote warfare remains the main way that countries such as these can maintain some sense of control. Taking into consideration the limits of remote warfare, this will probably remain reactive and have limited success. (It will remain a response to the long term problems of the West 'Losing Control' of international security as Paul Rogers pointed out in his book of the same name some years ago). For other countries such as Russia and Iran remote warfare has been effective and is a sign of their gaining more control as the West loses it. Russia used remote warfare effectively in Ukraine and now controls a substantial part of the east of the country and will likely use remote warfare to intervene where it feels necessary to protect its security interests. Iran effectively used remote warfare to destabilise the US intervention in Iraq after 2003 and to support the Assad regime in Syria. Other countries like Saudi Arabia and Qatar have employed remote warfare techniques in Yemen and Libya. It is possible that countries like China in its territorial disputes in Southeast Asia may use remote warfare to gain control of the islands involved.

Dr. Jon Moran is Reader in Security and the School of History, Politics and International Relations at the University of Leicester. He is interested in the role of the state and military and intelligence agencies both domestically and internationally. He has conducted field research with police and security agencies and civil society activists in Western Europe, Eastern Europe, South Africa and East Asia. For three years he conducted training for the EU for security professionals on the reform of intelligence agencies as part of a programme on Security Sector Reform. He wrote a Briefing Paper on understanding and evaluating Remote Warfare in 2015 for the project. It is available [here](#) and organised a conference on remote Warfare in conjunction with the Remote Control project in February 2015.

Dr. Moran's last book was '*From Northern Ireland to Iraq: British Military Intelligence Operations, Ethics and Human Rights*' which covers the role of army intelligence and special forces since the 1970s. He is currently working on a book concentrating on the use of intelligence and special forces in the most recent phase of the War on Terror.

Share this page



Contact

Unit 503
101 Clerkenwell Road London
EC1R 5BX
Charity no. 299436
Company no. 2260840

Email us

020 3559 6745

Follow us



Registered with
**FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR**

Useful links

[Login](#)
[Contact us](#)
[Sitemap](#)
[Accessibility](#)
[Terms & Conditions](#)
[Privacy policy](#)