

Basem Aly

The Use of Strategic Bombing against Non-State Actors in the Middle East

Objectives and Limitations of Air Power
in the Cases of Hezbollah, Houthis and ISIS



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Aly, Basem: The Use of Strategic Bombing against Non-State Actors in the Middle East. Objectives and Limitations of Air Power in the Cases of Hezbollah, Houthis and ISIS, Hamburg, Anchor Academic Publishing 2016

PDF-eBook-ISBN: 978-3-96067-608-9

Druck/Herstellung: Anchor Academic Publishing, Hamburg, 2016

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek:

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographical Information of the German National Library:

The German National Library lists this publication in the German National Bibliography. Detailed bibliographic data can be found at: <http://dnb.d-nb.de>

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Hermannstal 119k, 22119 Hamburg
<http://www.diplomica-verlag.de>, Hamburg 2016
Printed in Germany

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Chapter 1

Introductory Chapter

In the last decades, states revealed a tendency for expanding their dependence on so-called strategic bombing in wars against other states, an approach that raised questions on whether it is possible to reduce the involvement of ground and naval forces in future military confrontations. It is usually hard to find a specific definition for “strategic bombing” in either academic publications or declassified military documents, but one definition states that this concept applies to:

“those operations intended to directly achieve strategic effects by striking directly at the enemy’s centers of gravity. These operations are designed to achieve their objectives without first having to directly engage the adversary’s fielded military forces in extended operations at the operational and tactical levels of war.” (Air Force Doctrine Document 2-1.2 1998, p. 1)

The successful employment of strategic bombing as the major pillar of military operations that took place within different geographical areas and terrains encouraged states to limit, or even avoid altogether, resorting to campaigns that involve putting their “boots on the ground.” As a matter of fact, one can claim that improvements in the military aircraft industry—including persistent research on issues of technology, effectiveness and accuracy—have pushed for this result. Another set of reasons, however, that are indirectly connected to developments in aerial capabilities of militaries should not be ignored, including demands by governments for shorter, less costly wars, concerns about public opinion and electoral implications, fear of high rates of casualties, or even all of them.

Airmen, meanwhile, were also called to implement strategic bombing operations against non-state actors. Perhaps the clearest examples in the meantime time can be found in those of external military interventions in war-torn states. Yet, the outcome is certainly an issue of debate, especially that most aerial campaigns are targeting non-state actors, implementing the traditional principles of air power on their cases is a challenge for even the most advanced armies in the world. In general, launching air strikes on states differs on many levels from aurally attacking militant organizations, terrorist groups or local tribes. Armies are fundamentally trained to

fight against other armies, in addition to the difficulties of differentiating between civilians and militants, the so-called principle of discrimination. This study seeks to examine both the rationale and objectives of states in resorting to air power against non-state actors in the Middle East, focusing on the three cases of aerial operations on Hezbollah in Lebanon, ISIS in Syria, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen .

Nature & Changing Nature of Warfare

Ahead of discussing the research questions and main assumptions of this research project—which will be presented in the next chapter in addition to the conceptual framework—it is crucial to examine the development of the theoretical literature on war. Air power, as it has been stated, is just one way of using military force. Therefore, it cannot be separated from broader academic debates on war. This part of the introductory chapter will tackle some of the key traditional views on the so-called nature of warfare and its dynamics, as well as showing the contemporary arguments about a change in its nature, or “character” as some authors describe it.

As it will appear throughout the following part of the chapter, major military concepts of air power—as well as the literature on war’s nature—were created at a time when targets were easily identified, states were fighting other states and technology—especially in terms of weapons and means of communications—was still at its early stages of development .The challenge for air power, in the meantime, involves maintaining its efficiency and effectiveness when states are aerially attacking non-state groups—accumulating knowledge of guerilla tactics throughout long years of warfare—and technology of weapons and communication is developed to a higher extent than any other previous, historical eras. Perhaps—when combining the arguments in this section with the conceptual framework part—one can complete his understanding of the ongoing challenges facing air power, especially when employed in Middle Eastern war zones, for the latter is an example of all of such problems that were tackled in many academic and military texts.

Throughout history, states had largely counted on a series of mechanisms in order to achieve their foreign and security policy goals, which ranged from diplomatic and economic means to military ones. The decision of a state to choose the third option, involving the use of military force, is related to seeing it as the best possible channel through which a political outcome can be reached while assuming that other channels are less effective. Such emphasis on the strong interrelation between war and politics has been suggested in studies on the topic. (McMaster 2015, p. 7)

However, in the conceptualization of war, what exactly a favorable “political outcome” entails and the definition itself of a “military victory” remain subject to a substantial debate. One, as an example, can possibly highlight disagreements among the diverse traditions of the International Relations (IR) theory, although they mostly accept war as a “large-scale organized violence between political units.” (Levy 1998, p. 141) For the neo-realist school of thought, for instance, war is the end result of an international system that is characterized by a state of anarchy, which results from the absence of an international-central government to handle conflicts and settle disputes among states. As Kenneth Waltz had put it, “war occurs because there is no automatic adjustment of interests. In the absence of a supreme authority there is then the constant possibility that conflicts will be settled by force.” (Fearon 1995, p. 384) This argument rests on drawing a distinction between politics on the domestic level and politics on the international level. Domestic governments are commonly authorized—whether politically, legally, constitutionally or through means of using force—to maintain order within all territorial areas of their states. The absence of a similar condition in terms of inter-state relations leads eventually to a decrease in chances of peace and increase in prospects of war. (Rosenberg 1990, p. 285-286)

Realists also argue that war is less likely to happen whenever a balance of power—which is military-based by nature—takes place between states, a situation that can partially explain, for instance, the non-occurrence of a direct confrontation between the United States and the Soviet Union during the Cold War decades. Within such context, one can understand the logic of Thucydides—one out of several classical political thinkers and philosophers that realists claim that their assumptions are historically rooted in their texts—in his so-called theory of hegemonic war. A hegemonic war, for Thucydides, begins with an economic, technological and military

transformation in the “hierarchy” of the international system, motivating some states to get engaged in a war against the existing hegemon in a bid to create a new system. Yet, the theory does not rule out the fact that some changes in the international system can be too minimal to influence the superpower status of certain states. In that case, war is less likely to happen. (Gilpin 1988, p. 592-594)

On the contrary, scholars of the Marxist tradition focus on the economic benefits of war that motivate states to be involved in them, or at least play a role in the eruption of conflicts. War, based on this perspective, offers an opportunity for states to test new weapons produced by their domestic companies, open new markets for their products, gain access for raw materials required for industrial purposes or even human capital that comes on lower costs. As an example, it is most likely that Marxists will argue that Nazi Germany adopted a military interventionist approach because of its need for *lebensraum* (living space), a situation that can also be traced in the case of Mussolini’s Italy that described itself as a “proletarian nation.” (Geier 1999)

There is no doubt that classical Marxists and neomarxists have some disagreements. For example, the classical Marxist theory argues that capitalism is the major cause of international conflicts, pointing out that “capitalist states battled each other as a consequence of their incessant struggle for profits and battled socialist states because they saw in them the seeds of their own destruction.” For neomarxism, its scholars are precisely concerned with the relationship between the developed, capitalist countries and the developing ones, stressing that the former became richer and economically stronger as they are supported by the ruling elites of the latter. (Walt 1998, p. 32-33)

Yet, both Marxists and neomarxists share a common ground in terms of their conceptualization of war, which is generating wealth through the use of military force. Moreover, they generally believe that a military action offers an opportunity to enhance the economic interests of the ruling class and social and political elites—such as the “monopoly capitalists” of Lenin or “military-feudal elites” of Schumpeter—although this situation should not necessarily have the same positive impact on the rest of the society. Instead, the presence of war implies that the society will pay its price, which comes in the form of an increase in taxation, reduction of spending in

healthcare, education and other domestic priorities for the people or—on a politico-military level—extraordinary measures such as the imposition of conscription policies. (Levy 1998, p. 156-157)

Such realist and Marxist arguments, nevertheless, pose such a long list of questions on the nature of war that answering them might require examining further academic literature that worked on surpassing the limited scope of the two camps. Both realist and Marxist theories provide an explanation for international phenomena within the boundaries of their basic assumptions and theoretical logic. The above-mentioned ideas can most likely offer an explanation for the way through which states can stay aside from the war option, or at least present a perspective on causes of war, though offering little insight on the nature of warfare itself. One can hardly argue that any of these theories did present a comprehensive, well-structured theory of war. The same problem can also be seen in other IR traditions. For example, a feminist perspective on war will show preoccupation with its implications on women and children, as well as refer to the “gendered nature” of states, cultures and the international system as the reason behind the continuation of wars on the international arena.

There is no doubt that interpreting “nature of war” differs from one scholar to the other. Scholars who use such term to label their work are normally preoccupied—of course among several issues—with the objectives of war, definition of military success and amount of force required for accomplishing the targets of a military mission. Nonetheless, the US Marine Corps’ basic doctrine manual, Fleet Marine Force Manual 1, states that “the basic nature of war is constant.” Moreover, it stresses that such nature signifies “a violent clash between two hostile, independent, and irreconcilable wills, each trying to impose itself on the other.” According to such document, the “violent essence of war will never change. Any study of war that neglects this characteristic is misleading and incomplete.” (Meilinger 2010, p. 25)

Whether to critique their work or to give them credit for their contributions in enhancing the academic understanding of war, scholars of war studies do rarely ignore the ideas of Carl von Clausewitz and Sun Tzu when reviewing the evolution of the literature on the topic. In *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu and *On War* by Clausewitz, both

authors had managed to develop their own theories on the nature of war, which continues to be used in most—if not all—research projects in the meantime. Hence, it is important to clarify the key aspects of the arguments provided by Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, in addition to underlying the current, counterarguments about a transformation in the nature of war as a second stage. For Clausewitz, he conceptualized war as :

“Not only a genuine chameleon, since it alters its nature somewhat in each particular case, it is also, in its overall manifestations, a wondrous trinity in with regard to its predominant tendencies, which consist of the original violence of war’s nature, namely hatred and hostility, which can be viewed as a blind natural force; of the play of probability and of chance, which make it into an unpredictable activity; and of the subordinating nature of a political instrument, since it submits to reason itself.” (Echevarria II 2003, p.321)

Clausewitz, who was a Prussian general in addition to being a military theorist, asserted in his book that war is a violent clash of opposing wills, being “not waged against an abstract enemy, but against a real one who must always be kept in mind.” On basis of such conceptualization, Clausewitz structured his so-called trinity, which encompasses the government, the military commander and the army and the people. Throughout his book, Clausewitz examines the relationship and the interactions among those three elements, which some of its major aspects will be explained in the coming paragraphs. Meanwhile, perhaps not included in the above-mentioned definition, Clausewitz showed concern with two major dimensions of war. On the one hand, although stressing that war “is merely the continuation of policy by other means”, Clausewitz portrayed fighting as one of the most—if not the most—significant part of the war equation. (Waldman 2009, p. 19-23)

He believed that the political framework and objectives of war will never remain the same, for they will always be in change, whereas “physical violence” is unchangeable: a war means that fighting will inevitably occur. This argument should not lead to a conclusion about a marginal importance for politics in war in Clausewitz’s theory—especially amid his emphasis about the need for establishing a clear objective for war—but rather indicate that he believed that a political end result of war is related to the anticipated impact of using force. (Waldman 2009, p. 19-23) Clausewitz described fighting—or “combat” in accordance with the terminology he used—as:

“the only effective force in war... That holds good even if no actual fighting occurs, because the outcome rests on the assumption that if it came to fighting, the enemy would be destroyed...All action is undertaken in the belief that if the ultimate test of arms should actually occur, the outcome would be favourable. The decision by arms is... in war what cash payment is in commerce...regardless how rarely settlements occur, they can never be entirely absent.” (Waldman 2009, p. 26)

On the other hand, war is an action that is conducted by humans, a perception that Clausewitz attempts to prove throughout his text by explaining and giving recommendations on the way through which political and military leaders should act in times of war. For example, although Clausewitz insisted that politicians are entitled to lead the war, he admitted that this is not always an applicable process. It is worth noting that, by the time Clausewitz was writing his incomplete text, a series of logistical and technological problems hindered the presence of quick and effective means of communication between the army leaders and politicians. Accordingly, he stated the army commanders should, when forced to do so, have the right to take decisions based on the conditions they are encountering. However, Clausewitz is often criticized for not elaborating on the conditions under which the leadership rights should be transferred to the military commanders, including the ability of the enemy to impact the flow of events in a war through its military strategies and moves. (Handel 1991, p.40-43)

Pertaining to Sun Tzu, he believed that a war should occupy the shortest possible time span, with the lowest possible losses in terms of human casualties and effort, a perception that Clausewitz would not disagree about to a great extent. Sun Tzu, yet, had a firm belief in keeping resorting to war as the last option, or at least combine it with other diplomatic and intelligence mechanisms in order to reduce dependence on using force as much as possible. As the Chinese general and military strategist puts it, “to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the supreme excellence.” Since “victory is the main object in war”, the matter should be examined and investigated carefully, a situation that might not necessarily suggest— which Clausewitz had called for—a need for an excessive use of force in all cases. Instead, the “supreme excellence in war” requires “to attack the enemy’s plan; next best to disrupt his alliances; next best to attack his army; the worst is to attack his cities.” (Kuo 2007, p. 7-9)

In order to apply this strategic thinking in real-life wars, Sun Tzu focused on resorting to diplomatic, economic and psychological tools—which Clausewitz ignored despite his emphasis on morale-related elements such as the opposing wills of fighting parties—ahead of getting involved in a war. Moreover, which Sun Tzu is highly credited for discussing and Clausewitz is critiqued for underestimating their importance, Sun Tzu tackles a number of concepts that are all related to intelligence and deception such as “surprise”, “speed” and “maneuver.” Deception necessitates an understanding of an enemy’s ideas, plans and anticipations, a target that can be achieved through competent intelligence skills and “penetration of the opponent’s side by one’s own spies.” Aside from its military aspect—which also includes spreading false news about one’s military and the approach of “when near, make it appear that you are far away; when far away, that you are near”—deception can also occur on a political level. Sun Tzu, at such point, focused on endeavoring to cause disagreements and tensions between an enemy’s military and its allies. (Critzler 2012, p. 8-12)

It is true that these techniques will possibly be considered as naïve and outdated for wars in the meantime, But Sun Tzu—who wrote about war almost two millennia before Clausewitz—gained prominence due to his concern with shaping the surrounding conditions of a war in order to reach the highest possible degree of guaranteeing a victory. Most of these techniques were to be perceived by Clausewitz as useless and adopted only by the weaker parties in a war. But Sun Tzu—agreeing with Clausewitz in most of his assumptions such as those related to the need for leadership skills, quick victories and inevitability of putting competent and strong commanders on top of the military—understood the need for examining the other side of the story. Sun Tzu thought it is strongly important to “know your enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be in peril. When you are ignorant of the enemy but know yourself, your chances of winning or losing are equal. If ignorant of both your enemy and of yourself, you are certain in every battle to be in peril.” (Critzler 2012, p. 8-12)

In the last decades, a number of scholars developed a series of arguments in order to highlight a change in the nature of warfare, while seeking to prove that the classical perceptions on war can no longer serve as an appropriate analytical framework for wars in the 20th and 21st century. One can simply argue that these