

Guest Editors' Foreword

By Eyal Ben-Ari & Karl Ydén*

The time may have come to reflect upon the issues raised by the military experience of Western (and other) nations in Afghanistan over the last fifteen years – its successes, failures and repercussions – in light of the substantive topics and theoretical insights that are central to the social science study of armed forces and society. This is what this third ERGOMAS issue of *Res Militaris* modestly attempts to do.

Since the end of the Cold War, a large number of military institutions around the world have participated in a variety of armed conflicts, ranging from peace support operations to protracted wars “amongst the people” against the background of a rising tide of international terrorism. The interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, which involved substantial troop levels, stand out in retrospect as long and costly wars of choice whose outcomes fell well short of their declared initial objectives.

From the perspective of the industrial democracies, the period after 9/11 has been one in which suddenly “everyone” is fighting. For some militaries like the American, British, French or Israeli armed forces, current conflicts are a continuation of previous armed engagements. But for many others, such as most European countries, deploying troops to Iraq or Afghanistan (and other places) represented a first after the end of the Cold War (or even during it). Thus we can talk about a significant enlarging of a “family” of fighting militaries. From the perspective of this special issue, then, the significance of the various articles' contentions extends beyond any one specific empirical case and is relevant to all of the members of this “fighting family”. Each member-State has, to some extent, been affected by the experience of being engaged in protracted combat activities. For the “new players”, the Afghanistan intervention has been a formative, almost transformational experience for politicians and their militaries.

If that assessment proves correct, then the lessons learnt in Afghanistan and from the war's domestic aftermath – militaries-in-action and their relations with their “host” and “home” societies in such circumstances – are well worth looking at.

The kind of military action that prevailed in Afghanistan has had numerous implications at the micro-, meso- and macro-levels. Indeed, the topics covered in the individual contributions to this issue – casualty avoidance and legitimacy, Provincial Reconstruction Teams, the professionalization of indigenous forces and the place of veterans coming home – all centre on the linkage between the use of armed force and parent or local societies (Ducheine, van der Meulen & Moelker, 2010).

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Much has indeed been learned along the way, but not only positives. The very extensive Chilcot report on the considerations that led to Britain’s participation in the Iraq war in 2003 will no doubt be read with great interest in relevant British circles – and far beyond. It is highly unlikely that political leaders, for the foreseeable future, will attempt large-scale military interventions in the Middle East, hoping to remake the political structures in the region. The initial expectations of swift military victories followed by “soft-hat nation-building” have given way to weariness. A rapidly deteriorating security situation, indeed an ongoing human disaster, in the Middle East now forces the West to revisit battlespaces that, not long ago, were thought to be best left to the local population to handle.

New massive interventions on the model of the second Iraq war, premised on regime change, are indeed highly unlikely (at least until a new generation of ruling elites, oblivious to its political consequences and pain, show willing to dare the devil again...). Operations reminiscent of Afghanistan, albeit on a lesser scale, may be imposed on a reluctant international community by dangerous strategic developments – for instance, a looming stronghold of radical, violent revisionism, threatening whole continents – which would require major powers and possibly yet another *status quo* coalition to step in and help fragile (and/or corrupt) States to resist it: France’s ongoing experience in the Sahel region is a case in point.

For all their differences, many of today’s armed conflicts in other parts of the globe indeed have much in common with Afghanistan already: most are intra-State (ethnic and/or religious) conflicts where the boundaries between insurgency, terrorism and war are blurred (Osinga & Lindley-French, 2010). The same applies to the operations mounted on such other theatres by the armed forces of the industrial democracies – the international community’s main tool when it comes to intervening in conflict-ridden areas (Ben-Ari, Michael & Kellen, 2009): all – possibly except Syria⁴ – seem to lack the special intensity of urban combat⁵ and intractable civil war⁶ that set Iraq apart.⁷

The primary aims of these operations are to reduce the level of violence, (hopefully) address its causes, shield the local populations from it, deny international terror a resource and territorial base, strengthen the local State and nation, and somehow manage the conflict until its political termination. Indeed, since 1991 a majority share of armed conflicts occur in weak or failed States where political systems no longer function. These are often States where local politics proceeds under the patronage or backing of different militias serving a diversity of

⁴ The civil war in Syria from 2011 onwards can certainly be termed “intractable”, and urban fighting is one of its key features. However, the outside powers active on the Syrian theatre have so far refrained from intervening on the ground on the Iraq war model.

⁵ Especially during the first five years (2003-2008): the second battle of Fallujah was reportedly described by the US Military as “*the heaviest urban combat since the battle in Hué City in Vietnam*”.

⁶ The chaos in Iraq was created by the 2003 outside intervention itself, which ousted Saddam but proved unable to generate enough political consensus to bolster the successor regime so as to guarantee civil peace, and fostered civil war instead. In most other instances elsewhere, the roots of armed conflict are pre-existing and endogenous to the nation or region concerned.

⁷ Cf. Nelson, Leed & Freier, 2009 ; Luckenbach, 2015.

interests, including economic ones (Kaldor, 2001). In such situations, conflict often escalates and local violence travels across State borders to endanger regional or even global stability and security.

As Cronin (2008, p.1) elaborates, these conflicts are all profoundly political, intensely local, and protracted. In other words, today’s conflicts have become what Hoffman (2007) calls “*complex irregular warfare*” or “*hybrid wars*”, combining differing elements – such as conventional, irregular, or disruptive warfare – in ways that blur their purportedly discrete nature. Moreover, such conflicts may have different timelines: some call for rapid intervention while others necessitate long processes of trust-building or reconciliation. No less important, while in older wars victory is the end-state to be achieved, in many of the newer conflicts there is no decisive victory, nor is it the aim of the mission (Dandeker, 1998).

“After” Afghanistan does thus not mean that the last chapter is written. Roughly fifteen years of continuous military operations mean that various events and experiences in Afghanistan will affect a large number of countries in terms of internal military decisions and processes, civil-military relations and debates and/or conclusions about the utility of force.

The Contributions to this Issue

Freeman and **Levy**’s essay takes issue with a central tenet of much popular and academic theorizing about casualty avoidance and tolerance (Gelpi, Feaver & Reifler 2005/2006). They focus their analysis on what they call the force/casualty trade-off – that is, trading force for casualties – that characterizes the interplay between governmental decisions to pursue armed missions and the legitimacy of these missions. Through a comparative analysis of three national cases – the United States, the United Kingdom and Israel – they show that this trade-off is dynamic and influenced by the way the conflict emerges and develops. Specifically, they demonstrate that high legitimacy for using aggressive force interacting with society’s high level of casualty sensitivity yields this trade-off. Their focus is on the interplay of national (or domestic) norms and global ones and the exchanges between them.

Wikman continues the focus on legitimacy and the theoretical argument with previous research to offer another complex view of casualty aversion: namely, with the rather commonplace view among social scientists and policy-makers that high rates of casualties will lead to a lowering of legitimacy for deployment and operation of forces. What he shows – based on the Dutch case and public opinion polls – is that the diverse bases of legitimacy and support for armed missions are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Thus legitimacy of participating in international military mission based on considerations of security or on nation-building interlink in complex ways. Theoretically, he develops an analytical framework centred on “principal policy objective” and in an interesting way he hints at the multiple objectives that policy makers and decision makers must pursue in the New Wars. Moreover, his findings underscore that the public is more sophisticated than may appear to leaders.

Babcock-Lumish's analysis tackles the intricacies of the coalition warfare which characterizes contemporary missions. He does so in a distinct manner by showing how complex in them are command structures and allegiances. The New Wars are always pursued by multinational forces and marked by multiple loyalties and accountability structures. Indeed, what lies behind his analysis is the realization that while collaborative operations and coalition forces usually enjoy higher legitimacy than go-it-alone ventures, they are apt to lead to organizational problems of coordination, but also of allegiance and command. The thrust of his theoretical argument is that the incentive structures commanders are faced with – long-term prospects for promotion (at home within the national context) *versus* short-term provision and availability of resources for accomplishing missions (within the multinational coalition) – are key to loyalty. In our reading, he seems to argue that as action-oriented individuals, commanders tend to prefer the nation placing the resources at their disposal in order to get their missions done.

The case analyzed by **Porter** prompts us to look at civil-military relations not only in regard to the *home* society but to the *host* as well. He explains that in Afghanistan – and by extension we can suggest elsewhere – Western notions of “proper” civil-military relations were at the base of post-9/11 attempts to create democratic security forces. Yet despite the investment of huge amounts of resources, these failed miserably. His sociological explanation is that this failure owes much to the perpetuation of traditional authority structures in the country: that is, what took precedence was loyalty not to the nation or the State but to the clan, tribe or village. Theoretically, Porter derives his analysis from the Weberian view of legitimacy and authority to show how Western endeavours proceeded from very different assumptions about how States are formed and run than the ones that characterize Afghanistan. Finally, in contrast to most American political scientists, he does not provide normative prescriptions but, in a sophisticated manner, shows that different kinds of authority and legitimacy are related to what one wants to achieve – stability and security for traditional forms of ties between leaders and armed militants and for modern forms of democratic civil-military relations.

Gibb takes some of these issues in another direction in his investigation into the Provincial Reconstruction Teams established in Afghanistan and the reasons for their (limited) successes and failures. His analysis points to the inherent tensions that marked the PRTs and how in the New Wars problems of security and development are inextricably linked. Analytically, Porter complements his analysis by pointing to the lack of resources granted to the PRTs and their internal organizational problems of coordination (military-civilian, government-NGOs) as reasons for their failure, with an important focus on the cultural side of the success of coalitions led by the United States. Prescriptively, his argument is that the policy of the US should take into account the local authority structures or what he calls the “cultural terrain”. From the point of view of this journal, his contribution complements Porter by emphasizing that civil-military relations do not solely concern the rapport established by Western militaries with their own societies and political elites, but also local militaries vis-à-vis local and international civilians.

Tomforde's analysis provides a good ending for this special issue by bringing the link between organized violence and the armed forces back “home”. Specifically, she focuses on the German veterans who have come back to tell their story – perhaps replicated in other countries – of a transformation from stigmatization to normalization as the actors and targets of violence (Sorensen, 2015). Germany, like many other industrial democracies (if a little later than most), found itself deploying troops on an active and violent mission for the first time since the Second World War. Tomforde's micro-level analysis bears macro-implications because it shows how military violence is no longer sequestered but very much at the forefront of public debates. However, she shows that the foregrounding of violence inflicted by and against soldiers is much less stigmatized than in the past, and its personal impact on those concerned less often treated as a medical/psychiatric issue. Rather, the use of military force is becoming a normal part of societies in Western Europe. In this way, her analysis extends beyond the huge scholarly literature on the psychological and social-psychological effects of war on soldiers. As she suggests, rites of homecoming purification are crucial for they work not only to normalize the veterans but are experienced by them as a concrete way to reintegrate wider society – one that in the present circumstances badly needs to face the issue of the use of force.

Happy reading !

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