

Challenging the mindset of war



Destroyed tank in Iraq

Stuart Parkinson critically assesses new UK and Western military initiatives, and how engineers and scientists can be involved in challenging the cycle of violence.

An article¹ published in early 2014 in *The Guardian* pointed out that, since the outbreak of World War I, Britain forces had been at war, somewhere in the world, in every year since. With the parliamentary vote in 2013 not to intervene militarily in Syria and the planned withdrawal of UK troops from Afghanistan (finally completed in October 2014) there was hope that the country would, at least for the immediate future, manage to avoid armed conflict.

But this was not to be. With the rapid rise of IS forces in Iraq, Britain has allowed itself to be sucked into yet another open-ended war in the region. In addition, the ongoing Ukraine conflict has demonstrated that old rivalries between Russia and NATO remain close to the surface, while Western 'military intervention' in Africa and elsewhere in the Middle East continues. All this is being used to encourage the governments of NATO countries that they should increase military spending, continue to give priority to military action, and develop and deploy even more new weapons systems.

But there are alternatives. In trying to understand which alternatives might be most effective, this article draws on research in peace studies to try to understand how past activities by the UK and other Western countries – including their engineers and

scientists – have contributed to the current problems, and what could be done differently in future.

The rise of IS

IS – or Islamic State (though most Muslims unsurprisingly will not use this name) – has developed from Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI),² itself formed in response to the US-led invasion in 2003. Its extremely violent methods – including vicious public executions – have dominated media coverage (and even helped cause a split between it and AQI), but much less attention has been given to how it has been able to build significant support in Iraq in the last few years. A key reason was the poor human rights record of the Western-backed Maliki government, which was responsible for torture and arbitrary detentions, and used brutal militias to help maintain control.³ A further reason was Western involvement in secret torture programmes – recently admitted, for example, in a US Senate Intelligence Committee report. So IS has been able to gain support, not just from hard-line jihadists and former members of Saddam's regime who fought the US-led coalition, but also many disaffected Sunni Muslims who have fallen foul of the regime or Western agencies since. In addition, by building links with jihadist groups fighting in the Syrian civil war, it has also rapidly gained ground in that country. According to a UN report,⁴ it has seized weapons mainly from the Iraqi military, which has of course been recently well supplied by the US. It is also possible that some of the arms that went missing in Libya after the NATO-supported toppling of Colonel Gaddafi have found their way to IS.

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The aim of the new US-led coalition formed to fight IS has moved rapidly from protecting fleeing refugees to a comprehensive strategy to "degrade and ultimately destroy" the militia.⁵ Air-strikes are, at the time of writing, the tactic of choice with over 1,000 carried out so far causing much destruction.⁶ The coalition is also arming sympathetic militias, such as Kurdish groups, and deploying thousands of 'military advisors' to train them and the Iraqi army. It is also likely that US and UK special forces are operating in

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the region. Other Western military deployment is being contemplated. Another long war – which will likely last years – is in prospect.

The UK's role has so far been relatively small, but it is increasing. Dozens of air-strikes have been carried out by Tornados and Reaper drones since October⁷ and in December the government announced several hundred more troops will be sent to carry out training.⁸

One problem with the West's military response is how it is being used by IS and other extremists for propaganda purposes. Footage of Western aircraft again bombing in Muslim countries is being posted on social media to recruit new foreign jihadists to fight for their cause. There is evidence that the resultant influx of new fighters is more than offsetting the number killed.⁹ Meanwhile, radicalisation can also, of course, lead to terrorist acts within Western countries themselves – not least the Charlie Hebdo murders. So the West's military strategy seems likely to prolong rather than shorten the wars in Iraq and Syria and fuel violence further afield.

War in Ukraine

The current crisis in Ukraine dates back to early 2014 when President Yanukovich was pushed out of power following pro-Western protests against his decision to build closer links with Russia rather than the EU.¹⁰ Within days, pro-Russian insurgents took control of government buildings in the region of Crimea – home to Russia's Black Sea fleet. A hastily arranged public referendum then resulted in a vote in favour of joining Russia, and Crimea was duly annexed by its neighbour. Western countries protested and imposed economic sanctions. Pro-Russian protests spread to other Russian-speaking regions in Eastern Ukraine, and armed insurgents took control of regional government buildings there. The Ukrainian military began an offensive against the insurgents and the fighting has, at the time of writing, led to over 5,000 deaths despite repeated attempts to implement a ceasefire.¹¹ Evidence that the Russian military is providing support to the insurgents is hard to deny.¹² Commentators have begun to talk of a 'New Cold War'.

While many have been quick to blame Russia solely for the conflict, it is important to bear in mind NATO's role in fuelling Russia's security fears. At the end of the Cold War in 1991, the Warsaw Pact – the Russian-led military alliance – was dissolved. However, NATO responded simply by expanding east. 13 new countries in Eastern Europe have since joined, and military exercises have been conducted with other non-NATO countries, including the

Ukraine.¹³ With the Ukraine sharing a 2,000km border with Russia, this has proven especially controversial. Added to this, NATO countries have had a combined military budget of approximately \$9,700,000,000,000 over the last decade – more than 15 times that of Russia.¹⁴ So it is no surprise that Russia feels very vulnerable.

Gaza and beyond

UK and Western involvement has also been key in recent trouble spots in other parts of the world.

Israel's seven-week military attack on the territory of Gaza – after tensions had risen, and Hamas had fired rockets into Israel – left over 2,100 Palestinians dead (mostly civilians including over 500 children). 71 Israelis (mostly soldiers) also died in the conflict.¹⁵ Both sides claimed a victory of sorts – but the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights was very critical of both sides, especially Israel for disproportionate action and possible war crimes.¹⁶

Israel mainly imports military equipment from USA. However, since 2008, the UK government has also issued over £8 billion of export licenses for components for a range of military systems and dual use technology to the country.¹⁷

Western countries also provide much military equipment to Arab countries in the Middle East – which fuels regional rivalry. For example, after Israel, the UK's second and third largest customers are the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.¹⁸ Added to this is the recent expansion of Western military bases in both the Middle East and Africa. One recent example is a 'permanent' base in Bahrain for Royal Navy activities.¹⁹ This despite the brutal suppression of pro-democracy protests there in 2011.

Meanwhile in Libya, the country has fallen further into chaos in the wake of the NATO-backed toppling of Gaddafi's regime in 2011. Militia groups affiliated to IS are now gaining ground.²⁰

Key themes

There are some key themes arising from the above:

1. That the West is seen to have double-standards – condemning IS for killing many civilians, while doing little to prevent Israeli's killing of civilians or curbing the supply of weapons to brutal Arab governments;
2. That the West's actions are doing little more than perpetuating cycles of violence – and this is clearly not working; and
3. That sufficient effort/ resources are not being put into tackling underlying injustices – which is essential if we are to bring about peace.

An important and controversial development within the Western military approach is the rise of 'remote control warfare'.²¹ This is the attempt to counter threats at a distance without the deployment of large military forces. This involves:

- drones – both unarmed surveillance craft and those capable of launching weapons;
- special forces – which can covertly attack 'enemy targets';
- private military contractors – who are less accountable and whose deaths are attract less public sympathy; and
- cyber-warfare – which can damage and disrupt 'enemy' computer systems.

The military role of UK engineering and science

Although total military spending in the UK has fallen since 2010, the budget for military equipment has not been reduced. The most recent Defence Equipment Plan has a budget of more than £160bn over the next 10 years.²²

The first thing to note is the prominence of Britain's traditional 'big ticket' weapons systems. These include new nuclear-armed submarines, planned to succeed the current Trident system, and with a similar capability to cause destruction on an unprecedented scale. Billions of pounds' worth of 'preparatory work' for this system is being carried out by a British consortium led by BAE Systems, Rolls-Royce and Babcock. Secondly, there are the two new 'Queen Elizabeth' class aircraft carriers – the first of which was named last July and which is due to become fully operational by 2020. They will be the largest ships in British naval history: three times the size of the previous class of Royal Navy aircraft carriers.²³ The main industrial partners responsible for this project are BAE Systems, Thales and Babcock. A third major programme is the new Lightning II fighter-bombers – built mainly in the US (and called F-35's there).

Another thing to note is the growing resources being devoted to equipment for remote control warfare. Both drones and cyber-warfare are being given rapidly increasing budgets. This trend follows on from increased military R&D spending in these areas in recent years – identified by SGR in our report, *Offensive Insecurity*.²⁴

Of course, all these technologies have a clear offensive capability, and the export potential of military technologies remains a government priority.

Alternative strategies

There are many alternative strategies to tackling these security problems which do not prioritise

military action. The most obvious action Western governments could take would be to end military exports to countries with poor human rights records, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. Other international action includes:

- more concentrated effort to enforce arms embargoes in regions of conflict, as well as much stricter controls more generally of the international arms trade;
- improving international financial controls to shut down funding routes for groups such as IS;
- stricter border controls to prevent new combatants entering conflict zones, e.g. in Turkey;
- continued negotiation to create more humanitarian corridors to help refugees fleeing from war zones;
- providing adequate funding and resources for refugee camps, food aid and other support services;
- rapid reaction mediation teams (composed of neutral parties) to help defuse political conflicts before fighting breaks out;
- defusing international tensions by reducing military exercises, co-operating in arms control and disarmament programmes, and cutting military spending;
- more national and international processes for tackling underlying grievances, such as political exclusion, human rights abuses, inequality, poverty, and environmental damage.

Some of these options are being pursued at a limited scale – with the essential involvement of science and technology professionals – but they need to be expanded and/or provided with more resources. It is particularly shocking that the UN's World Food Programme was forced to halt its food voucher scheme for Syrian refugees in early December due to lack of funds.²⁵ This meant aid for 1.7 million refugees was put in jeopardy as the harsh winter weather set in. Given the huge military spending summarised above, nothing illustrates the distorted set of priorities better.

No one is under any illusions about the difficulty in solving the security problems in the Middle East, Ukraine, Africa or elsewhere, but it is clear there are many alternatives to military action and these remain poorly funded.

Signs of hope

There are some hopeful signs which, with concerted political pressure, could lead to a more promising future.

Global military spending has fallen from its recent peak, with NATO military spending 12% lower than

its peak.²⁶ Continuing international economic problems are helping to curb military spending in countries as diverse as the UK and Russia – and this could restrict international military deployments. In addition, the most recent statistics on annual R&D spending by the Ministry of Defence show that it has fallen below £1.5bn – its lowest level on record (in real terms).²⁷ Meanwhile, the UK government continues to protect overseas aid from cuts, and has pledged over \$1bn for the Green Climate Fund, aimed at helping developing countries adapt to climate change.²⁸

There are also some less well-known statistics from academic research that show marked declines in the rates of violence and war in many parts of the world in the last few decades and, in some cases, longer. Psychologist Steven Pinker has gathered a wide range of datasets in a recent book²⁹ showing that, once factors such as population growth and the patchiness of historical records are taken into account, clear downward trends can be seen. Although the reasons for the trends are complex, he highlights the importance of factors such as the spread of democracy and a growing humanitarian ethic.

But, as current international events show, there is no room for complacency. One particularly challenging problem for the science and engineering community is their role in the exponential increase in the destructive capability of weapons which occurred over the last century – not least due to developments in the nuclear field.³⁰ Ongoing modernisation of nuclear weapons, coupled with new developments in areas such as military robotics and artificial intelligence, show that this problem continues to be urgent. And, at the same time, we are failing to apply sufficient scientific and technical effort to tackling global environmental problems which threaten the security of all.

Highlighting these problems and arguing for change continues to be an important focus for SGR activities – as the news section on pp.2-6 shows. Your ongoing support is vital in enabling this to happen.

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