‘A Gift to Our People’: The Use of Drone Technology by Islamist Insurgents

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Abstract: There has been much speculation on the potential use of drones by terrorists, and, as this article details, Hamas, Hezbollah and ISIS have all, to some degree used drones in their recent actions. However, it is unlikely that such Islamist groups will ever be able to rival the tactical and technological sophistication of Western drone usage; even Hizballah’s relatively advanced drones have, for instance, been tracked and disrupted easily by the Israeli military. The authors of this article suggest, however, that drones have taken on their own cultural meaning – way beyond their mere technical capability. This developing cultural meaning is the subject of this article. What is it, and why has it driven three disparate Islamist insurgent groups to unite in their joint presentation of drones? What are they trying to achieve with this work, when the current tactical effect is, in reality, extremely limited? And, crucially, what does this body of work tell us about the nature of these insurgencies, and for the ways we may challenge them in the future?

Introduction

"The resistance in Lebanon sent a sophisticated reconnaissance aircraft from Lebanon...It penetrated the enemy's iron procedures and entered occupied southern Palestine…it is the party's natural right to send drones into Israel whenever we want and this will not be last time"

Hassan Nasrallah, televised speech 2013

Nasrallah's words are as pertinent today as they were in 2013. In early April 2015, Hizballah released another propaganda video showing their operational usage of drones. A couple of weeks later it was followed by a video of drone usage from another extremist Islamist insurgent group, ISIL. The videos displayed the full spectrum of drone usage in Islamist groups – while the Hizballah clip featured the professional targeting and destruction of rival Al-Nusrah Front fighters in Syria using their Iranian-backed military drones[1], the ISIL video was a rather more amateur shot of a commercial drone feeding back surveillance to a nascent Ops Room.[2] Even with the superiority of the Hizballah video, it was apparent that both groups were lacking in technological and tactical sophistication in comparison to those of more advanced drone actors, such as the US and UK. But the message they were broadcasting in the videos was the same - one of the most potent symbols of their enemies' technological supremacy was now part of their armoury, and with it, a powerful message about their own strength.

The release of these videos showed that, for these groups, the message around drones was as important as their actual usage. As if to emphasise this point, a third Islamic insurgent group, Hamas, posted a video on the Palestinian Al-Aqsa channel in late July demonstrating that they had hijacked an Israeli Defence Forces Skylark-3 drone and turned it for their own operational use.[3] Israeli media outlets were at pains to point out that the Skylark-3 was a tiny reconnaissance drone, utilised at up to battalion level, and certainly no threat to Israel.[4] But to Hamas, and their followers, the diminutive size of the drone did not matter - it was instead a subversion of technological dominance and a victory over a high-tech Goliath. A statement from the group claimed "this is a great achievement... and a gift to the Palestinian people… This demonstrates the strength of our people and its resistance".[5]

Despite the claims of this propaganda, and the continuing speculation from Western think-tanks (and the more alarmist media) on the potential use of drones by terrorists, it is unlikely that Islamist groups will ever be able to rival the tactical and technological sophistication of Western drone usage; even Hizballah's relatively advanced drones have, for instance, been tracked and disrupted easily by the Israeli military. To focus on their tactical, and potential tactical usage, such as the recent research by the Oxford Research Group,[6] is to miss the point. Drones are of course used tactically to enhance military operations; propaganda is a clear subset of such operations. But the body of political statements and propaganda about drone usage, or in which drones are used to film military operations, matter less for what they tell *us* about the operational capabilities of our opponents, but more for what they tell *them* – the

target audience of this propaganda – about the group, and so what we can learn about their own self-perception. What we can see is that, far beyond their use in surveillance or strikes, these drones are being used strategically to establish narratives around the technological capabilities of these insurgent groups, and their concomitant ability to contest the dominance of their rivals. This work has the precise aim to generate increased allegiance and legitimacy from their target audience and, in turn, to make them a much tougher, more embedded enemy to Western interests once achieved.

The Hamas video did not come in isolation, nor did those of Hizballah or ISIL. Each group has a large body of propaganda based around their drone usage, from Hizballah's twelve years worth of experience[7] using drone footage in speeches and propaganda videos, to the grainy videos on *Al-Aqsa* of Hamas drones flying over Israeli airspace. Perhaps most significantly are the opening shots of the propaganda video that launched ISIL, "The Clashing of Swords", are filmed from a drone hovering high above ISIL territory. That these groups are placing such high importance on the propaganda aspects of drone technology indicates just how important they have become within the tactical and strategic mindset of these Islamist insurgents, and quite how much part of our future wars they are likely to be. As Cody Poplin of the Brookings Institute states, "the appearance of drones in multiple jihadist propaganda videos would seem to suggest that drones have taken on their own cultural meaning, both here [at home] and abroad, in the wars against terrorism, and that meaning is something that terrorists now intend to trade in too".[8]

This developing cultural meaning is the subject of this article. What is it, and why has it driven three disparate Islamist insurgent groups to unite in their joint presentation of drones? What are they trying to achieve with this work, when the current tactical effect is, in reality, extremely limited? And, crucially, what does this body of work tell us about the nature of these insurgencies, and for the ways we may challenge them in the future?

In truth, we can only uncover this cultural meaning by looking at the cultural representations that stem from it. The representational work around drones has been in development for at least a decade, predicated on the lengthy usage of drones by Islamist groups. There is already a body of text and images available to study in order to examine the cultural meaning of drones. In this sense, the Hamas statement quoted earlier on provides an essential insight. For Hamas, turning the weapon of the enemy demonstrates the strength of Hamas and, most importantly for the group, the people it purports to represent; within their propaganda,the manipulation of drone technology has been transformed into a pure distillation of the relationship between the group and the people. Other propaganda videos from Hizballah and ISIL follow similar lines. In highlighting the importance of this link, they highlight the importance of allegiance and legitimacy to these groups. In the Hamas video the subversion of drone technology provides legitimacy for the group, its cause, and strengthens its relationship with its people. Each aspect of this has deep ramifications for the way that we interact with, and tackle, insurgent groups.

To shed further light on these issues, this article will argue that Hamas, Hizballah and ISIL have been extremely innovative in the usage and presentation of drones in response to the core position of drones in Western operational doctrine. It will go on to cover the cultural meaning that is being developed around this work, and highlight that the narratives in development are fundamentally about securing allegiance through demonstrating credibility, particularly through innovation, and legitimacy. The last point is highly relevant to Islamist groups, as they rely on deeply embedded narratives within Islamism about the challenge the current ideology can pose to current Western technological and cultural supremacy. The article will draw conclusions from these findings, highlighting the importance of understanding the use of drones by these Islamist actors in being able to fully combat their tactical usage, their strategic presentation, and understanding the ramifications for the UK of the contest for legitimacy with which drones are linked.

Insurgents and innovation

Once the purview of advanced states, drones are now increasingly used by less technical non-state actors. Globalisation has transformed the ability of a wide range of actors to obtain advanced technology, and has also transformed the process of technological innovation for these same actors.[9] Innovation, here understood as the adoption of a tactic or technology that the given organization has not used or considered in the past,[10] has, like the usage of drones, been little studied in insurgencies with the focus instead on the operational realities of insurgents. But as Ranstrop and Normark highlight, the idea that insurgents rely on bombs and bullets "masks increasing complexity and creativity and innovation within terrorist groups".[11] Focussing on drones, rather than the bombs and bullets, enables us to see exactly how innovate insurgent groups are and, in line with the previous definition shows how the very use of drones – a new technology for insurgents – is innovate in and of itself.

Innovation is not a new phenomenon for Islamist insurgents. Instead it has been at the heart of their struggle to overcome technological deficits. The recent history of insurgencies in the Middle East shows a marked emphasis on innovation, from the Airline hijacks of the Palestinian groups of the 1970s, through Al-Qa'ida's attacks and propaganda usage in the early 1990s and its fateful climax in 9/11, to the continued IED innovations of AQ-I in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq invasion. Today, Hizballah, Hamas and ISIL are the standard bearers of innovation, whether through innovative military tactics or innovative use of media and messaging. These three groups in particular reflect several of the central characteristics that Dolnik has argued influence an insurgency's ability to innovate: they share an ideology and tactical approach that stresses the desirability of inflicting mass casualties and the staging of spectacular events; they enjoy safe havens or some territorial security; and they have the support of state sponsors and the philanthropy of wealthy individuals (or social networks).[12] In addition, in what Creshaw terms the "dynamics of struggle", they have a static, stable enemy in the states' they fight against, and the existence of these state's counter-measures provide strong incentives to innovate.[13]

Incentives to innovate

The "dynamics of struggle" are, arguably, the most important factor in the adoption of drones by Islamist insurgents. Over the last decade, the rise of drones and their extensive use against insurgent non-state actors, means that all of Hamas, Hizballah and ISIL have suffered at the hands of drones, whether they be Israeli, American or British. This suffering has been instrumental in driving their recent adoption by insurgent groups. As with the usage of IEDs before them, the "well-documented operational procedures of Western military forces provides a clear picture for insurgents of the enemy they are facing".[14] The continual threat posed to these insurgent groups by drones, whether US, Israeli or British, and the devastating effect such systems have had on insurgent operations has forced these groups to analyse and modify their techniques, tactics and procedures to both develop counter-measures (as illustrated by recent AQAP advice about how to avoid drones[15]), and to begin to think about how to use drones themselves. Familiarity has bred innovation.

In this sense, the insurgent actors have first acted from a well-developed understanding of the threat, and then followed a classical innovation cycle where innovators identify a need, come up with a new idea to meet it, develop this idea into a product, and introduce it into the field.[16] The operational advantage granted to Western forces by drones has seen these insurgents identify a need to contest them, think innovatively on how to do this, and then introduce drone programmes designed specifically to do so. Faced by the consistent barrage of drones, their adoption by Islamist insurgent actors "suggests something about the place of drone technology in the jihadist mindset and betrays a desire to claim for themselves a weapon of war that has stalked them for a decade".[17] Profiling the way in which this claim is staked through their propaganda shows two emergent themes of innovation designed to confirm their place at the heart of Islamist insurgent operational doctrine; innovation in their tactical usage, and innovation in their strategic, symbolic presentation.

Tactical Innovation

Islamist insurgent tactical innovation with drones is nascent but developing. Recent research has focussed on the innovative ways with which Islamist insurgents may overcome the gulf in technological sophistication confronting their drone programmes, and concludes that insurgent groups will seek to use what technology they have for spectacular and destabilising ends, as with suicide bombers and IEDs. Elements of this innovation have emerged since Hizballah first flew a drone in 2004, with a Hizballah official boasting in 2008 "you can load the Mirsad plane with a quantity of explosive ranging from 40 to 50 kilos and send it to its target, . . . do you want a power plant, water plant, military base? Anything!".[18] This has the potential for disproportionate impact. The Oxford Research Group has asserted that "drones are a game changer in the wrong hands".[19] Put simply, Miaskanov argues that armed groups could leverage drone technology to do far more damage, real and psychological, than they could ever do with a suicide attack or a car filled with explosives.

Islamist insurgents are clearly putting some thought into this. A US Army study from the Foreign Military Affairs department argued that Iran was developing "suicide, kamikaze drones" which they planned to share with Hizballah and Hamas, and that utilising these drones was "an asymmetric strategy which both allows Iran to compete on an uneven playing field and poses a risk by allowing operators to pick and choose targets of opportunity over a drone's multi-hour flight duration".[20] Moreover, the US military is already reviewing what future form of tactics they could face, including swarming attacks, reflecting the proliferation of cheap, easily acquired drone technology, probably enabled by such simple manufacturing techniques as 3-D printing. The earlier Oxford Research paper has picked this up, starting that drones can "be used as simple, affordable and effective airborne Improvised Explosive Devices",[21] noting that ISIL are "reportedly obsessed with launching a synchronised multi-drone attack on large numbers of people".[22]

Innovation in Media Presentation

Concentration on the tactical issues alone misses the wider point of how the tactical is often subjugated to the strategic, and the symbolic, in insurgent warfare. In insurgencies and guerrilla warfare, "what matters most is the ability to shape the story, not the facts on the ground. This is how guerrillas are able to win wars even as they lose battles".[23] Propaganda victory is almost more important to them than military victory.

Islamist insurgents lack numerical superiority and have had, to date, limited purely military success; they certainly do not have more, or better drones than their opponents. What they do clearly have is a media strategy that enables them to present drone usage in the way they choose, and a freedom and willingness to do so in order to build support for their cause and group. As Thomas Rid stated in the aftermath of a spate of media profiles on Hamas drones in 2014; "They want to appear to be a sophisticated player… the drone makes a difference psychologically but not tactically. Look at the operational context in which it was used. Israel has complete military superiority. It's not a game changer."[24]

This innovation is achieved not just through all the various social and official media channels the insurgent groups use, but also in the themes of their presentation they present to Arab and international audiences. On studying the strategic presentation of drones, two further key themes emerge, both of which with far deeper impact on the trajectory of these groups than mere tactical innovation; the establishment of insurgent technological credibility and the deliberate linking of this technological credibility to popular legitimacy.

Key Themes: Credibility and Legitimacy

ISIL, Hamas and Hizballah all seek to portray themselves, first and foremost, as credible users of drone technology. Hizballah have the most developed body of propaganda on this theme, having used drones since early 2004.[25] The earliest statement from the group, in November 2004, signalled their early capabilities and intent, claiming after a UAV penetrated Israeli airspace that their drone "will fly in the airspace of occupied Palestine whenever the

Islamic resistance sees fit".[26] Statements following this have continually echoed this scale of intent, reaffirming the capability of Hizballah drones to penetrate heavily militarised Israeli airspace.[27] Frequently Hizballah has "buzzed the drones near Israeli air defenses and then used the footage in propaganda videos or during speeches".[28] These speeches are often from Hizballah Secretary General, Hasan Nasrallah, providing them with a huge level of exposure and investment in Hizballah's propaganda machinery. In 2012, Nasrallah claimed after a Hizballah drone was shot down by the IDF in the Negev Desert that Hizballah could fly drones "whenever we want" inside occupied Palestine, and furthermore that "this mission was not the first one, and will not be the last one, God willing.[29] After another drone was shot down near Dimona in 2013, Nasrallah stepped up his claims to credibilty, highlighting that "Possession of such an aerial capacity is a first in the history of any resistance movement in Lebanon and the region".[30] The arguable high point of Hizballah's demonstration of capability, and credibility, was reached in 2014 when they released video clips of its drones conducting surveillance of, and striking, Al-Nusrah front troops.[31] Drone propaganda continues today, with Nasrallah intimately linking them to Hizballah's military programme, following a precedent set in 2006 after a Hizballah drone struck an Israeli warship that if Israel "wanted an open war... we are ready for an open war".[32]

Hamas has echoed these themes of credibility through military capability, even going so far as to describe the penetration of Israeli airspace by Hizballah drones as "a great strategic achievement".[33] Since their first claimed flight in July 2014, Hamas has established an impressive body of propaganda in a short time. They have done so with little real capability, highlighting the disproportionate impact of propaganda. Since 2014, Drones have taken pride of place at Hamas rallies and, during their first statement after a flight in 2014, Hamas released images of its indigenous drone flights, claiming that engineers from its military wing, 'Izz al-Din al-Qassim Brigade" had built three different types of drone, each capable of carrying out "special operations" in Israel.[34] A core message of this propaganda has been that they can increase their own prestige by saying 'the IDF has an air force, we have an air force, the IDF penetrates our airspace, we penetrate their airspace".[35] Hamas's *Al-Aqsa* TV has frequently boasted of this, and following an initial surge of propaganda in 2014, leaflets [dropped in Gaza] boasted of dozens of drones being built in the territory, some for spying, others for firing missiles or "suicide missions",[36] shoring up home support. Like Hizballah, their propaganda and operational efforts continue, with several episodes on *Al-Aqsa* through 2015, one including the statement that Hamas "launched several unmanned aerial vehicles to perform special tasks deep within Israel" on a routine basis.[37] But like Hizballah, the high point of their credibility and capability came in the last year, with the recovery and renewing of the Israeli Skylark-1 UAV, and an Izz al-Din al-Qassam statement claiming that their "military wing... took control of the Zionist drone Skylark 1 and managed to make its services operational... this is a great achievement".

ISIL drone propaganda is perhaps the least developed, but as Polnik shows, drones have long been a part of ISIL's media operations, including aerial footage of the Syrian regime-held

Tabqa Airbase, being broadcast "from the drone of the Army of the Islamic State".[38] Their overt involvement in media ops quietly indicates a certain level of credibility. Further than that, their most recent video was at pains to show the way that ISIL have enmeshed drones in their operational doctrine, providing a military credibility like Hizballah before them. Recent footage of drones being used for spotting and surveillance during military ops, and video feeds back to an Ops room, sends a powerful message about ISIL credibility and capability, garnering international media attention.

Credibility fits in directly with key messages of the media strategy for these groups. For Hizballah, it links with a core propaganda theme which trumpets their "image of might and its "glorious successes" against Israel…which legitimises it's military infrastructure";[39] a similar theme emerges in Hamas propaganda which seeks to champion military capabilities and victories, highlighted by Cordesman as being specifically targeted against Israel;[40] while for ISIL this technological credibility interacts with one of their six core propaganda themes – War – designed to "routinely zoom in on the organisation's military successes…presenting supporters and sympathizers with a skewed understanding of its successes".[41]

But credibility is only half the equation. All propaganda, particularly Hizballah's, is about a battle for hearts and minds, achieved through repetition of key themes as highlighted above, but with a specific appeal to their target audiences; the linking of technological credibility to popular legitimacy. Hizballah and Hamas have paid particular attention to this work, consistently linking their drone programmes to a reassertion of the pride and glory of their people, and conflating their military programme with the resistance of the population of a whole against a more powerful enemy. From 2004 onwards, Nasrallah claimed that drones were "a form of legitimate confrontation to the Zionist violations of Lebanese sovereignty", and argued the technological advancements of Hizballah drones show the best of the Lebanese population, stating that their drones are "assembled by Hizballah teams. The Lebanese should be proud of that".[42] For Nasrallah, their drone flights into Israel from 2012 were a "very important operation in the history of the resistance in Lebanon and the region".[43] Hamas have been as vocal, with the 'Izz al-Din Al-Qassam claiming that their drone achievements "were dedicated to the Palestinian Youth", and that the turning of the Skylark-1 was a "gift to the Palestinian people.. and demonstrated the strength of our people and its resistance".[44]

Allegiance and Islamism

This conception of credibility and legitimacy is particularly important within the context of the Islamist-alignment of all three insurgent groups. The idea of political Islam (Islamism) at the heart of Hamas, Hizballah and ISIL (though radically different in application across each group), stems from powerful, historical internal narratives to the Arab and Islamic world. Islamism was born from a questioning of Western cultural, military, economic and technological supremacy in the late 19th Century, spurred on by the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. Since its birth, it emerged as a reaction to "the comparative technological and military supremacy of the West, and the relative decline of the Muslim world".[45] Islamist doctrine has sought to disrupt

this supremacy and its "doctrine holds that it alone provides an antidote to such decline".[46] Demonstrating technological credibility is an appeal based entirely on this notion of Islamism being this "antidote" to Western supremacy, and a way to arrest Islamic decline. Intertwining this credibility cleverly with appeals to the people they represent, through claims that it restores glory to their people is a specific, and fascinating, pitch for popular legitimacy. Continued innovation is an important element of this, providing new avenues from one simple theme to demonstrate credibility and claim legitimacy.

The quest for credibility and legitimacy partially explains why valuable propaganda time is spent on drones. Legitimacy is particularly key to insurgent groups. It is not simply a "moral or an ideological factor but has direct effect on the effectiveness of the force so used".[47] It does so, because, alongside credibility, it links directly to determining the "allegiance of target audiences", and thus the political support insurgent groups need to remain alive. Tugwell goes on to highlight that "allegiance is transferred from regime to revolutionaries by shifts in the popular conception of relative credibility and legitimacy. Credibility rests on demonstrated ability to control events by being in command, running a government or an alternative power structure, or perhaps by winning small battles, while legitimacy is the public's conception of a right to rule based on whatever values the public may associate with that right... Consequently the fight for allegiance consists of myriad small battles over credibility and legitimacy, in which the two issues become inextricably mixed".[48]

The Insurgent/Counter-Insurgent Battle for Legitimacy and Allegiance

The battle for legitimacy and allegiance is not just one way. It is instead a contest between two active participants - the insurgent and counter-insurgent - and the comparative legitimacy, and associated allegiance, "largely influences the outcome of the struggle"[49] as both the insurgent and the counter-insurgent require legitimacy and popular support to carry out their operations. The narratives from ISIL, Hamas and particularly Hizballah, around their use of drones are intimately part of this battle. They are designed not just to strengthen their own legitimacy,[50] but also to undermine the technological and military supremacy of Western actors in the eyes of their target audiences and, if possible, to a wider international audience.

The Hamas video of the Skylark-1, along with a recent video released by ISIL of a downed US drone, are critical artefacts in this form of propaganda, for they show the key weapon of the enemy able to be both defeated and subverted by these groups. When Hamas states that its usage of a Skylark-1 "demonstrates the strength of our people and its resistance", and that it will "lie in wait and surprise the enemy again", or when Nasrallah talks openly about their technological advanced drones and the threat they pose to Israel, or ISIL talks about their technological acumen, these actors are making it clear that drones are no longer solely the preserve of the West, and that Islamist insurgent actors have technological sophistication. It is a form of discourse that seeks to undermine Western technological supremacy, as much as trumpet their own.

Once again, this move relies on embedded Islamist narratives. Even while attempting to disrupt Western hegemony, and seeing large parts of the West as antithetical to Islamic culture, Islamism has also been devoutly pragmatic. As Shavit highlights, even the students of the extremely influential Islamist theologian and noted luddite, Hasan al-Banna, never ignored the "need for Muslim societies to narrow that gap [between Western and Muslim societies]… nor the impossibility of doing so without Western knowhow".[51] In light of this, contemporary established guidelines for adoption of technology that suggested any Western innovation could be adopted that was technical or universal in nature, did not contradict Islamic faith and was beneficial to Muslim society.[52] Military technology, and specifically drone technology, fits squarely in this bracket, being portrayed through the contest for allegiance as beneficial to Muslim society, enabling their usage and contestation to have a sound theological footing, and one rooted in the battle for legitimacy and allegiance.

That this argument is being recycled across all three groups, in regular propaganda videos, indicates the cultural meaning with which drones have become imbued. They have become both the symbol of oppression and of technological emancipation. The presentation of drones in the fashion discussed, as both a symbol of Islamist technological mastery and a disruption of Western narratives of supremacy, appeals to very deeply embedded narratives at the heart of Islamism, enabling groups to present themselves as being the vanguard of resurgent, renascent Islam, disrupting the hegemony of Western technology and mastering it for themselves, and thus a threat to technological and political supremacy of the West itself. These narratives, like legitimacy, are powerful and vital; they are sustaining the battle for allegiance at the heart of propaganda for the groups who can utilise them.

They are also innately political. The groups featured in this article have subverted the presentation of drones to their ideological advancement, and are busy portraying drones as "weapons of change... a technological product of ingenuity developed by the people who are fighting for political change".[53] In insurgent hands, even at a much lower technological level than those of government forces, drones have become a military tool for political change. For the counter-insurgent they are a contested military tool, often cited as damaging the chances of political change. As Islamist groups spend valuable propaganda time on drones they are imbuing these machines with a complex cultural meaning of innovation, technological credibility, popular legitimacy and renaissance, reliant on deeply embedded narratives in Islamism that supports the insurgent battle for allegiance against their enemy and, ultimately, the course of their battle in general.

Future Ramifications

This form of propaganda has ramifications that are only just starting to manifest themselves. Alongside claiming their own legitimacy, the goal of insurgent activity is always to "raise questions in the minds of the populace about the legitimacy of the state's actions".[54]
For drones, this can be writ larger; through the presentation of their own drone usage, the three insurgent groups are just starting to strengthen the contestation of Western usage of

drones, certainly in the Middle East and potentially in the West itself, with consequences for our own operational legitimacy and effectiveness.

The argument for drones in the West lies in their efficacy, and their ability to lower the risk of warfare. The increasingly widespread, and innovative, presentation of the insurgents' ability to imitate, subvert and master drone technology disrupts narratives of legitimacy around drones that hinge on these tactical arguments, particularly their "cost effective combination of stand-off attack capability, real time target intelligence data, exceptional strike precision, and lethality" that makes them "ideal weapons in a conflict against an unconventional enemy".[55] This part of the comparative legitimacy dynamic is therefore more complex – the broad use and presentation of drones in this fashion does not just bolster these insurgent groups, but also allows them to pose a conscious question; can they be the ideal weapons for the West against unconventional enemies, if they are used unconventionally by the same enemies?

This is a particularly effective argument when played to an international audience to whom narratives of technological supremacy and risk-free warfare associated with drones are a fundamental part of their public and military legitimacy and the wider counter-insurgency campaigns. Hizballah in particular has a great deal of experience in deploying this argument. Their media wing is extensive and extremely well attuned to the presentation of military deeds to its global Shi'a audience. Hizballah continually subverts the tactical to the strategic, as is exemplified in its use of its sizeable Katyusha fleet. This rocket, capable of large scale destruction, has been used extremely sparingly against Israel, despite the calls of more extreme members and the existential nature of recent wars against Israel; when they have been used, they have always been used for propaganda victories.[56] Hizballah has already trodden this path well in relation to drones. With fairly regular flights into Israel, Hoenig highlights that each drone flight into Israel is potentially a significant propaganda victory for Hezbollah, quoting Matthew Levitt of the Washington Institute as noting that Hizballah "love being able to say, 'Israel is infiltrating our airspace, so we'll infiltrate theirs, drone for drone'". In this fashion, their use need only be sparing – the strategic and symbolic presentation will do the rest. When Hamas or Hizballah flies an Ababil-3 into Israeli airspace and causes the scramble of IDF jets, it has already won a propaganda victory, even as its drone is shot down; similarly, when ISIL flies a drone over Kobane and releases the video, it is sending a powerful message about its capabilities and intent, that resonates deeply with those it intends to appeal to.

Accordingly, this has the potential to damage the legitimacy of our reliance on drones, the arguments for which hinge on their efficacy and supremacy. They will continue to have success, but their supremacy will also continue to be contested by the three insurgent actors; particularly ISIL. This issue of legitimacy touches on particular issues with technologically-driven warfare that are starting to emerge, in particular that advanced militaries engaged in counter-insurgency are increasingly "unable to control the battlefield through overwhelming violence or technological advances".[57] Despite the utility of drones, and western air power

in general, in both kinetic and non-kinetic roles across the Middle East, they are increasingly being seen as failing to make the correct dent in the growth of ISIL or other insurgent actors. As with other technologies, drones could become part of "the migration of military-technical initiative to insurgents and terrorists, the only actors readily able to use weapons to advance political goals and transform political expectations".[58] In fact, this article would argue that this situation is already occurring. As an example, the Israeli Defence Forces were not able to convincingly counter a Hamas media campaign in July 2014 that three of their drones had penetrated Israeli airspace, with two returning to Gaza. Despite IDF protestations that only one Hamas drone carried out any sort of flights, the Hamas media campaign over Twitter and Facebook was convincing and generated much media coverage, internationally and domestically.

Conclusions

"When you're fighting a political or psychological war, you don't have to defeat the enemy in military terms."

Drones are clearly part of the answer to insurgencies, but we should also be aware that they are becoming part of the problem, particularly due to the central role of legitimacy and allegiance in an insurgency. As insurgents use drones more, they enhance their own credibility and legitimacy with their target populations in a powerful internal fashion by portraying themselves as technologically capable and innovative. In enhancing their popular support and, in effect, taking the allegiance of their target audiences away from the states they are based in, or Western efforts to build support for counter-insurgent/terrorist operations, they make themselves a much more embedded, operationally effective and tougher counter-insurgency target. Hamas, Hizballah and ISIL are all already using drones to enhance their own technological credibility and popular legitimacy in the battle for allegiance. They are a political tool of great effect in insurgent hands; as Poplin states "It seems clear that militant groups are eager to celebrate their technological prowess both as a weapon of actual war and as a way to establish legitimacy in a propaganda war that has taken on increased importance".

But more than this, the three insurgent groups in this article are beginning to deliberately portray their technological advances as undermining Western drone usage, whether through Hizballah's presentation of its drones outwitting Israeli air defences, or ISIL revealing it has a downed Western drone. It is a deliberate attempt to damage our own legitimacy and battle for allegiance that may, in time, begin to have an increased effect on the ability to use drones operationally without seriously enhancing the legitimacy of insurgent actors and increasing popular contestation of our drone programmes in both the MENA region and the West.

Insurgent actors will likely never have a competitive advantage in drones, but they will never come to rely on them as we have and because of that, they will only ever generate legitimacy and support for them at each of the levels at which they wage insurgency. Ultimately, each of these developments challenges the supremacy and legitimacy of our own use of drones,

demonstrating we are increasingly moving towards a scenario where "high tech strategic superiority provides only an illusion of strategic superiority".[59] And so, we can see the beginning of Western drone usage, now being actively subverted in innovative fashions by those who have traditionally been their targets. In being presented by these insurgent actors as being a subversion and contestation of Western military hegemony, they both become political tools that enhance insurgent legitimacy, and undermine those of the counter-insurgent further.

Losses will not dissuade the groups in this article from continuing to use drones. If we, as the West and counter-insurgent actors, concentrate only on the aerial power drones provide, we will miss the challenges to this power from Islamist groups. In the future, we may see the actions of these groups elide with the burgeoning moral and ethical concerns in western societies around drone use to substantially undermine the legitimacy of drone usage by advanced militaries. Thus reliance on drones by the governments of advanced nations may well become a strategic weakness that will be easily exploitable by insurgents to bolster their own legitimacy. They are clearly a part of beating terrorists, but must be seen for what they are; machines with the potential to serve whichever narrative is most powerful in justifying and exploiting their usage. It is a battle that we cannot afford to let Hizballah, Hamas and ISIL win.

Notes

[1] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mo9yIxiWDnA last accessed 16 Mar 16.
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