

# Analysis of Clausewitz's Conception of the Relationship between 'War' and 'Politics' for Warfare in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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## 1: Introduction

One of the main themes of Clausewitz's (1832) book *On War*, is that war is an "act of violence intended to compel our opponent to fulfil our will" conducted on the premises of political agendas. This generates the idea that war is a "true political instrument" used by the state to achieve their political ambitions and is often used in western strategic literature (Waldman, 2010). War is inextricably linked to policy and political intercourse and though Clausewitz acknowledges that war itself can sometimes adapt the policy of the state, "the political objective is the goal, war is the means of reaching it". The image of war that Clausewitz is portraying is that its existence derives from a political purpose, which is also the "supreme consideration in conducting it". Therefore, political policy is the primary influence of military operations and this desire to fulfil our will in conflict leads us to the extremes. In contrast, Mary Kaldor (2010, pp274) suggests that Clausewitz's notion that war is a "contest of wills" is no longer relevant in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and that warring parties need each other for "mutual enterprise", such as economic gains, leading to wars being long lasting and inconclusive.

This essay investigates if Clausewitz's conception of the relationship between war and politics is useful for understanding warfare in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I argue that Clausewitz's concept of war and politics is still relevant in the study of contemporary warfare, particularly in conflicts stemming from the Arab Spring. The main argument of this essay is that the principle of "contest of wills" and war as a continuation of political intercourse, still play vital roles in contemporary warfare. The destabilising effects of the Arab Spring sparked a series of civil wars in the Middle East. These conflicts have seen the rise of non-state actors, proxy warfare between Saudi Arabia and Iran and terrorism. To illustrate my arguments, I will analyse three post-Arab Spring conflicts, the Yemen, Iraqi and Syrian Civil Wars.

## **2: Yemen Civil War**

The ongoing Yemen Civil War erupted in 2014, stemming from the 2011 uprisings and saw the ascendancy of the Shia rebel group known as the Houthis. The Houthis now control large parts of Northern Yemen and the capital city. The scale of the conflict has caused “the largest humanitarian crisis in the world” according to the United Nations. A Saudi-led Sunni coalition of forces, known as the GCC, has made the conflict significantly worse. Unnerved by the rise of a Shia rebel group at the border of Saudi Arabia, the GCC began aerial bombing campaigns against the Houthis and naval blockaded vital Yemeni ports in 2015. To date, the GCC has conducted 23,627 air raids in Yemen, resulting in the death of 8,780 civilians according to the Yemen Data Project and the naval blockades of Yemeni ports have put the lives of millions of people at risk due to food shortages. Saudi Arabia’s motivation for military intervention in Yemen reflects their desire to be the leading power in the Middle East and plays a role in the Kingdoms larger geopolitical struggle with Iran (Darwich, 2018). The political chaos caused by the Arab Spring provided regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Iran an opportunity to spread their political and sectarian beliefs across many of the impacted states. This caused a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran, with Yemen being one of the theatres of this proxy war.

The Clausewitzian conception of war and politics is fundamental in understanding Yemen Civil War and the proxy conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran. The destructive actions of Saudi Arabia are motivated by their desire to annihilate the Houthis which in turn would restore the former Sunni government and block Iranian influence in the country, irrespective of civilian casualties. Therefore, the escalation of the Yemen Civil War by Saudi Arabia in 2015 can be seen as what Clausewitz would describe as the “extreme” and the “continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means” between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

Furthermore, from the perspective of the Houthis, their political ambitions are at the forefront of their military actions. The violence from the Houthis is driven by political marginalisation against Shia citizens prior to the Arab Spring, resulting in Houthis declaring a new government after they captured Sana’a (Alkaff, 2015). This contradicts the idea of Kaldor, who argues that war in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a mutual enterprise rather than a contest of wills, particularly in the case of non-state actors. As portrayed in this section of the essay, it’s clear in the case of the Houthis and Saudi Arabia, the war is not being fought for mutual economic enterprise, but their political objectives, and this has been symbolised in any attempts of peace negotiations. This idea was outlined by Clausewitz, stating that:

*“Military objective must be adopted that will serve the political purpose and symbolise it in peace negotiations”.*

This is reinforced by Saudi Foreign Minister, who claims that Saudi Arabia’s “support for efforts to reach a comprehensive political resolution” with a proposed peace deal with the Houthis (Wamsley, 2021). This highlights the political nature of this war.

### **3: Syrian and Iraqi Civil Wars**

The Syrian Civil War and its spill over into Iraq is far more complex and destructive. The war in Syria has a confusing web of belligerents and has resulted in the death of over 350,000 people according to the United Nations and caused the outbreak of the Iraqi Civil War. Though many state and non-state actors are involved in these conflicts, I will focus on Islamic State (ISIS) and Kurdish forces. This section of the essay will show how these non-state actors relate to the trinitarian conception of war and how they engage in war as a contest of wills, rather than Kaldor’s notion that new wars are “mutual enterprises”.

#### **3.1: Kurdish Forces**

Kurdish forces find themselves in a unique position in relation to the Clausewitz’s Trinitarian Conception of war that concerns the people, army and government. The Syrian and Iraqi Civil Wars provided the Kurdish people an opportunity to push for an independent state. Clausewitz states that “war is a true chameleon that slightly adapts its characteristics to the given case”. My interpretation of this is that war is adaptable to the given circumstances of the conflict and its surroundings. This interpretation would explain the phenomenon of the wave of Kurdish nationalism that arose during the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars. The primacy of Kurdish self-defence of Islamic State’s political expansionist goals, that will be discussed in section 3.2 of this essay, started as the most influential condition to war for the Kurds. However, the unpredictable behaviours among elements of the trinity, primordial violence, hatred and enmity have usurped Kurdish rational policy, laying the foundations for the wave of Kurdish nationalism since their entry to the war. This adaptation in the nature of the war for Kurdish forces also links with Clausewitz’s idea on the contest of wills as the Kurds and ISIS have the political and military objectives of destroying the enemy. Therefore, there is no mutual enterprise between Kurdish forces and ISIS as the war is fought on the premises of territorial integrity and state-building.

#### **3.2: ISIS**

Mary Kaldor (2010, pp279) claims that new wars are not about specific policy aims, but “are about capturing power rather than pursuing political programmes”. In the case of ISIS, this point is very debatable. Islamic State’s pursuit of power in the Middle East was based on political programmes

designed by their desire for extremist Islamic policies. The main objective of ISIS is not of economic gain, but to achieve an Islamic caliphate under the principle of “God’s government” that upholds their interpretation of Sharia law (Kahn, 2014). Under this principle, ISIS have implemented a policy of coercion and terror to force the population of their controlled territory to obey their interpretation of Sharia Law. This has involved mass executions and slaughter of different religious groups, such as the genocide of the Yazidi minority in northern Iraq in 2014 (Schweltzer, 2014). Additionally, ISIS mobilised thousands of foreign fighters to great effect, to help their political and military objectives. For example, “Jihadi John”, a British citizen who was recruited by ISIS and became a target to western states after he appeared in a series of cruel propaganda video’s such as the beheading of American journalist, James Foley. ISIS has recruited 29,762 foreign fighters to fight on the front lines of the Syrian and Iraqi Civil Wars according to the Soufan Group (Barret, 2017). This has helped ISIS wage what in some respects mirrors conventional war against its enemies, giving ISIS the appearance of a state actor. This is supported by the fact that ISIS has to some degree internally funded their war effort through taxation and has engaged in controlled violence, establishing de facto state lines, and capturing cities such as Mosul or Aleppo. The use of foreign fighters for propaganda and front-line conflict shows a clear alignment between the political and military objectives of Islamic State, a concept that Clausewitz discusses on page 21 of *Our War*. The expansive nature of ISIS and the spreading of propaganda demonstrates how the political objective was “sole determinant” of ISIS in their attempts to establish an Islamic Caliphate.

However, in Clausewitz’s terms, this same political objective to some degree has been an “unsuitable military objective” for ISIS and could explain their downfall. The expansive nature of their armed forces across Syria and Iraq has often left ISIS overstretched and their threat of terrorism and propaganda towards the west has resulted in ISIS being under constant aerial attack from western allies. This leads into another shortfall of Kaldor’s argument, who claimed new wars are indecisive. Though the war against ISIS has been long and is still ongoing, their defeat is inevitable. Having lost all their remaining strongholds to Kurdish, Iraqi and Syrian government forces, and the likely victory of Al-Assad in the entirety of the Syrian Civil War, it’s clear that the war will reach a decisive end. However, due to the complex nature of the Syrian Civil War and the degree of hatred between the warring parties, just as Clausewitz points out that the result of war is never final, it’s unlikely that a Kurdish and Syrian Government victory would be a total end to hostilities in Syria.

Nonetheless, Islamic State has used war as an instrument towards their political objective of establishing “God’s government” through an Islamic Caliphate. Some may suggest this objective bodes outside the sphere of rational thought, relating to Kaldor’s idea that new wars are unreasonable and unheroic. However, from the view of an ISIS soldier, their religious struggle with the “infidels” is a

heroic contest of wills against their enemies. This alludes to a Clausewitzian principle of warfare as the political goal of ISIS and equally their adversaries is the total destruction of the enemy and not mutual enterprise. This would explain the level of brutality in which the Syrian and Iraqi Civil Wars have been fought.

#### 4: Conclusion

In Kaldor's defence, the Arab Spring was an unprecedented event, taking place a year after her article was published. However, the nature of the Arab Spring changed the dynamics of "new wars" in the Middle East, as the power vacuums it left open in the region provided state and non-state actors an opportunity to claim power for either state building or state capturing. Thus, giving many of the subsequent civil wars an "old war" appearance as both state and non-state actors boasted popular support for either ideological or territorial goals, particularly in the case of the Houthis and Kurdish forces in their respective conflicts. This highlights why Clausewitz's conception of war and politics, such as the principle of the contest of wills is still relevant in contemporary warfare and to a degree is more important to understand in post-Arab Spring conflicts rather than Kaldor's idea of mutual enterprise.



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