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The Reemergence of the Siege: An Assessment of Trends in Modern Land Warfare

by

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Introduction

Two major events marked a shift in attitudes toward the conduct of future war—the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and al Qaeda’s 11 September 2001 attacks on the U.S. homeland (9/11). The end of the Soviet Union was supposed to portend a peaceful future in which America would move beyond maintaining readiness to fight high-end, major land wars and instead reinvest in its future.¹ The 9/11 attacks triggered a fundamental shift in how the United States would think about and execute war. They all but verified the decision to move beyond high-end, major land wars, resulting in an increased role for precision weaponry and the employment of a variety of special operations forces. Smaller, more agile forces could make due where larger, ponderous forces had once operated. War would be less lethal, cleaner and far easier to manage.

Books such as Thomas Ricks’ *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2003 to 2005* and Michael E. Gordon and General Bernard E. Trainor’s *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* lament many of the outcomes and effects of these decisions as they pertain to the United States’ involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq. The resulting insurgencies and guerrilla warfare in both countries are some of the principal derivatives of many of these decisions. Early failures to pacify disgruntled and unaccepting societies gave rise to counterinsurgency thinking and the development of an associated doctrine. Proponents of this movement, such as Dr. John Nagl, opined that counterinsurgency is the graduate level of war.² These movements gained traction in light of continuing troubles in the Middle East; meanwhile, America sank further into the abyss of countering global terrorism and forecasting future operating environments. As a result, fundamental shifts occurred within the U.S. military.

The U.S. military, in light of the hope that accompanied the end of the Soviet Union, coupled with the anticipated operating environments dominated by counterinsurgency activity and precision-strike, decided to decrease its high-end conventional capabilities and capacity across the globe; increase its investment in the concept and resources associated with precision warfare; and continue to focus on counterinsurgency doctrine.³ Additionally, the idea that restraint and prudence would play a larger role in the conduct of war also took hold—at least from a U.S. perspective—resulting in a mindset more socially-minded in relation to the employment of force.

However, almost all of this overlooks an uncomfortable truth. The truth is that while high-end wars between nations have decreased, war has certainly not gone away, nor is it getting any less violent. Furthermore, when

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looking at the conduct of warfare since the end of the Soviet Union, one thing becomes very clear—the siege is a defining feature of modern warfare across the globe. When hearing the word *siege*, it is easy to let one’s mind wander to the time of kings and castles, trebuchets and battering rams, but that is to overlook the frequency of sieges in modern warfare. In fact, a brief survey of history illustrates that the siege is a defining feature of the late 20th and early 21st centuries; perhaps today is the siege’s golden era.

This essay suggests that the modern siege, perhaps slightly modified from that of a bygone era, is alive and well today. Starting with a definition of the siege, it then briefly scans military history and on-going wars since the dissolution of the Soviet Union to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of the siege. Finally, it concludes by stating that the modern siege is not only extant, but that it shows the continued relevance of land forces and highlights the increasing role proxy forces play in modern warfare.

Defining the Siege in Modern Warfare

Conventional U.S. Army and joint doctrine do not define the siege or siege warfare; that said, a common definition for siege is, “A military blockade of a city or fortified place to compel it to surrender, or a persistent or serious attack.”⁴ This definition is a bit too narrow for modern sieges, but serves as a point of departure for discussing the present-day sense of the concept and how it fits within modern warfare. The term *siege* is used throughout this essay instead of *siege warfare* because the terms imply different ideas. The singular use of a siege or unconnected uses of a siege throughout a campaign or war warrant the use of the term *siege*. The tethered use of sieges throughout a campaign to achieve an effect is *siege warfare*. More to the point, *siege warfare* implies a way of battle, whereas a *siege* implies one tool of many in the kitbag of warfare.

The contemporary siege is a blending of the traditional definition with concentric attacks. The modern siege is not necessarily characterized by a blockade, but more by an isolation of an adversary through encirclement while maintaining sufficient firepower against the besieged to ensure steady pressure. The modern siege can be terrain-focused, enemy-focused or a blending of the two, depending on the action of the besieged and the goal of the attacker. The goal of the siege is either to achieve a decision, whether politically or militarily, or to slowly destroy the besieged. The modern siege also bears a semblance to the old German *kesselschlacht*—literally, “cauldron battle.”⁵ The *kesselschlacht* was highlighted by an attacking army encircling an opponent and then devouring the belligerent through concentric attacks.⁶

The Siege: A Defining Feature of Modern War

The Bosnian War followed quickly on the heels of the Soviet Union’s dissolution. The Siege of Sarajevo, 5 April 1992 to 6 February 1996, was one of defining events of that war.⁷ As the longest and most destructive siege since the Siege of Stalingrad in World War II, it resulted in over 10,000 people killed. At the time, it was likely seen as an anomaly, but in truth it turned out to be a portent of future war.⁸

A few short years after Sarajevo, the North Caucasus region—Chechnya, Dagestan and Ingush— found themselves involved in a series of wars with Russia.⁹ The wars became known as the First and Second Chechen Wars, December 1994 to August 1996 and August 1999 to April 2009, respectively. The wars resulted from the convergence of the fall of the Soviet Union, increased nationalism and the rising tide of radical Islam within the region.

The Battle of Grozny (25 December 1999 to 6 February 2000) served as the high-water mark for major combat operations in the Second Chechen War. The battle of Grozny, which pitted Russian forces against ensconced Chechen insurgents and guerrillas, brought the siege to the fore yet again. The Russian siege relied on heavy shelling, mixed with bombing and concentric ground attacks, to root out the rebel force. The siege, once lifted on 6 February 2000, revealed a city pulverized at the expense of 1,000 Russians killed in action and over 3,000 wounded.¹⁰ The casualties from Chechen forces and population are often lost in the high cost of the war, which resulted in over 200,000 military and civilian casualties.

Large-scale sieges have again emerged with the Russo-Ukrainian War (April 2014–present). Most notably, the Battles of Ilovaisk, Second Donetsk Airport and Debal’tseve have further illuminated their role

in contemporary war.¹¹ The Battle of Ilovaisk, a Russian force-oriented siege of Ukrainian ground forces, resulted in the Minsk Protocol. The Second Battle of Donetsk Airport, a terrain- and force-oriented siege, resulted in the Donetsk International Airport and the connecting hamlet of Pisky being reduced to little more than rubble.¹² The Battle of Debal'tseve, a siege in the traditional sense, was a decisive victory for the Russian-backed separatists and resulted in the Minsk II Agreement. The Russo-Ukrainian War, dominated by siege warfare in its early stages, has resulted in over 10,000 Ukrainians killed, another 35,000 injured and an unknown number of Russian casualties.¹³

Sieges create an impact beyond their immediate target. Basing is required to conduct a siege. These basing locations, once known to the adversary, create ripe targets at which to strike. Pisky, Ukraine, provides an instructive example of this idea. Pisky, formerly a wealthy suburb of Donetsk, provided an excellent perch to over-watch and support action at Donetsk Airport—it quickly became the prime tactical basing location to support operations at the airport. As the battle within the confines of the airport raged, the town changed hands several times while each side jockeyed to control it. In the end, Pisky, a town of two thousand residents prior to the siege of Donetsk airport, was reduced to rubble; recent reports suggest that fewer than 20 people remain among the ruins.¹⁴

The modern siege is not exclusive to Europe. The rise of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) has led to a significant spike in sieges throughout the Middle East and Southeast Asia. The collective fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, in conjunction with the Syrian civil war, has yielded several sieges. The most well-known of these include:

- Aleppo, Syria: 19 July 2012 to 22 December 2016;
- Raqqa, Syria: 6 November 2016 to 17 October 2017 (part of the battle for Raqqa);
- Kobani, Syria: 13 September 2014 to 15 March 2015;
- Deir ez-Zor, Syria: 14 July 2014 to 10 September 2017;
- Mosul, Iraq: 16 October 2016 to 20 July 2017; and
- Ghouta, Syria: 7 April 2013 to 14 April 2018.

On the Syrian side of the contest, the Sieges of Raqqa and Aleppo have been the most devastating, while the Siege of Ghouta generated considerable international attention due to Russia's staunch military assistance to Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and because of the Assad regime's wanton use of chemical weapons during the siege.¹⁵ Meanwhile in Iraq, the siege of Mosul devastated not only ISIS but also the city and the local population.¹⁶ The reported death toll in Mosul exceeds 9,000–11,000 dead and 75 percent of the city destroyed.¹⁷ The battle, decisive in the traditional sense of the term, resulted in ISIS shifting its main effort elsewhere, reverting to an economy of force in Iraq and doing its best to remain just under the radar of the U.S.-led Coalition and Iraqi security forces in Iraq.¹⁸

Beyond the Middle East, the siege of Marawi brought Philippine defense forces and their U.S. partners into contact with Islamic State forces in the Philippines. In commenting on the siege of Marawi, Shawn Snow reported, "The images (of Marawi) are eerily reminiscent of the destruction of other major cities in the Middle East like Raqqa, Syria, and Mosul, Iraq." The siege of Marawi, fixed on exterminating ISIS in the Philippines, also resulted in vast swaths of the city being destroyed, displacing over a million people and killing upward of 1,000 ISIS fighters.

Making Sense of Siege Utility on the Modern Battlefield

What does the data tell us? First, in the Information Era's high-tech approach to warfare, the political map and relief map still matter. To be sure, as the sieges of the past several years illustrate, warring parties have again found the utility and power of restrictive terrain. The siege is often the result of an inferior force, seeking to counter the superiority of an opponent, entrenching itself within restrictive terrain. At this point the

attacking force faces the decision of cost—does digging the opponent out of the terrain come at an acceptable cost? More to the point, does the attacking force possess sufficient capital, time, people and munitions to break the defender’s spirit; if so, are they willing to pay that cost? Will the superior opponent, seeking to destroy the ensconced enemy, then invest the opponent’s position? If the answer is yes, meaning that the attacking force does indeed invest the defending force’s position, then a siege is underway. In most cases, the goal of the defender is to drive the attacking force’s costs so high that it is unable to continue its investment. This is important to note because an attacking force’s bill sky-rockets if they rely on precision munitions and other high-end technology instead of “dumb” munitions and conventional artillery, rocket and missile fire, as was noted by General Joseph Votel and Colonel Eero Keravuori in a recent *Joint Forces Quarterly* essay.²¹

Second, a siege that flattens a city in the name of destroying the defender within the city can make the attacking force, whether they are on the side of justice or not, lose credibility with both the local populace and the international community. This is especially true in proxy environments—in which a principal is fighting through a proxy to destroy a common enemy—because the damage to the proxy’s infrastructure can generate substantial social and political effects. While a direct corollary might not exist, the effects of the Siege of Mosul have likely played an indirect role in Iraqi Prime Minister, Dr. Haider Abadi, coming up well short in Iraq’s May 2018 national election. Prime Minister Abadi, the United States’ favored candidate, finished third in the election, coming in behind Muqtada al-Sadr’s Shia-nationalist bloc, who finished at the top of the election, and the Iranian-aligned Hadi al-Ameri’s bloc, who finished second.²² As a result, leaders must be mindful that destroying a city to destroy an enemy, such as the U.S.-led coalition did to ISIS in Mosul, often comes at a social and political cost. Furthermore, leaders must understand the related operational and strategic risks of being lured into a tactical siege; tactical victories, like those in Mosul, quickly become pyrrhic when they result in changes that sour the political relationship between partnered nations.

On the other side of the coin, modern sieges have also proved useful at the operational and strategic levels. For example, through battles at Ilovaisk, Donetsk Airport and Debal’tseve, Russia was able to achieve beneficial political decisions as a result of those sieges. At the tactical level, the siege allows the aggressor to physically isolate an opponent and bludgeon it into submission while simultaneously controlling the battle’s tempo. Given modern sieges’ destructiveness and sharp impact on the populations on which they are waged, almost all actors (to include the United States) demonstrate a clear willingness—politically and militarily—to flatten cities and inflict massive suffering on besieged populations in order to capitalize on the opportunities associated with having their adversaries centralized.

Zooming out from the tactical and operational level to the strategic and political level reveals endorsement of the siege in modern warfare—in some cases tacitly and in others explicitly. The siege, to its purveyors and proponents, appears to fall under the “ends justify the means” category. The siege’s unofficial endorsement, from the tactical to political levels, lends legitimacy to its current and continued use in warfare. It appears that the siege has caught the eye of the Army Chief of Staff (CSA), General Mark Milley. General Milley has gone on record on more than one occasion positing that in coming war the United States will find itself on far more rigorous battlefields than those of the recent past; that, “Being surrounded will become the norm, the routine, the life of a unit in combat. In short, learning to be comfortable with being seriously miserable every single minute of every single day will have to become a way of life for an Army on the battlefield that I see coming.”²³ The siege has left an imprint on the mind of the U.S. Army. What the Army does with that imprint is not yet defined.

Decisiveness Returns to the Battlefield

The traditional sense of decisiveness has been mentioned several times within this work. Army or joint doctrine should be the first place one looks when attempting to gain an understanding of decisiveness. However, their use of the term is inconsistent and not clearly defined. In fact, neither doctrine provides a baseline definition of *decisive*, but instead each provides several conceptual definitions which incorporate the term *decisive*. In almost every case, none of those concepts apply *decisive* or its derivatives in the same manner.

This work draws from an older text to define decisiveness. Specifically, J.F.C. Fuller's *The Foundations of the Science of War* provides a useful and clear definition. He defines decisiveness in war as military action that directly impacts military and/or political leaders intent to continue with a given course of action. An event is decisive only if it causes a leader to make a decision—continue doing what they are doing, or do something else.²⁴ With that understanding, the decisiveness associated with the siege quickly comes to light—the Siege of Sarajevo resulted in the end of the Balkans War, the Siege of Ilovaik resulted in the Minsk Protocol, the Siege of Debal'tseve resulted in the Minsk II agreement, and the list goes on. However, the United States, the international coalition and the Iraqi Security Forces' hard-fought victory over ISIS in Mosul provides an instructive lesson in the role that the siege plays in relation to decisiveness.

The Siege of Mosul was decisive in the traditional sense of the term in that it had a direct impact on ISIS' political and military will. The impact of the siege caused ISIS to change its will—to challenge the government of Iraq for supremacy in the region, maintain a physical state and conduct conventional military operations to maintain support for both of these political ends—to that of a strategy of evasion in order to maintain the last vestiges of its fighters and physical support base. As a result, ISIS' military operations shifted from conventional flavor to guerrilla tactics. Their operations after Prime Minister Abadi's declaration of their military defeat support this argument, as subsequent operations in the Tal A'far, Hawijah and the Middle Euphrates River Valley failed to come close to matching the intensity or character of the counter-ISIS campaign up to Mosul.²⁵

With that said, it is important to remember that decisiveness, like almost everything else in war, is temporal and fleeting. Few decisive events in war are lasting unless they are packaged and nested with the strategic and political ends they are supposed to support. Tactical floundering, disconnected from military strategy and political objectives, is arguably the quickest way to waste tactical and operational decisiveness.

Proxy Forces and the Siege

A defining feature that has accompanied the major sieges following the demise of the Soviet Union is that almost all of them, especially those discussed within this article, feature the employment of proxy forces. The Russians in Ukraine rely on separatist armies in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts to form the foundation force in the Donbas.²⁶

In the Middle East, a variety of actors are employing a variety of proxies. Russia, arguably the arsonist and the fireman in Syria, is propping up Assad's pro-regime forces while simultaneously using Chechen proxies to keep the region inflamed.²⁷ Iran's use of proxies throughout the region is well-known and far exceeds that of other actors vying for influence in the region.

Further, the U.S. military's "by, with and through" approach in Iraq, Syria and the Philippines is another example of proxy forces being coopted and utilized to achieve one's own ends. Speaking on the liberation of Marawi, reporter Shawn Snow stated, "U.S.-backed fighters spent months liberating the cities from ISIS militants with the aid of U.S. air and artillery power."²⁸ While the United States attempts to distance itself from the use of the term *proxy*, and often instead sides with *partner*, the two terms are methodically and effectively the same.

Ultimately, as long as intermediaries are doing the majority of fighting and dying within a siege—or holding the line for the siege—it is a tactic that will continue to populate current and future battlefields.

Land Warfare is Here to Stay

Finally, it is important to note that the modern siege has reinvigorated land warfare. It has led to tanks, artillery, infantry and rockets playing a very active role on the battlefield. Each of the sieges discussed here has depended on hard-slogging—combined arms land forces, in some cases working in conjunction with joint fires, encircling their adversary, holding the line and pounding away until they broke their adversaries will to resist. Tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, artillery and multiple-launch rocket systems populate the contemporary battlefield; they are currency of the modern siege.²⁹

As mentioned previously, this has caught the attention of the Army, resulting in CSA Milley's comments about the battlefields of the future. In truth, however, the battlefields of the future as he describes them are already the battlefields of today. Additionally, the siege and the increased role of land warfare has caught the attention of those outside the U.S. Army. While it might be lurking under the veneer of a new concept like hybrid warfare, the siege's connection to land warfare is indisputable; as long as sieges persist, land warfare will play a central role in the overall conduct of warfare.

Conclusion

The modern siege holds a powerful position in modern warfare. Growing out of the fall of the Soviet Union and 9/11, sieges' frequency and place in the practice of warfare have steadily increased. Beginning in the Balkans War with the Siege of Sarajevo and continuing to present day, the siege has brought a level of decisiveness to war that had been missing.

Additionally, technology's impact on war promised to make warfare clear, clinical, precise and quick. The Gulf War in 1991 provided a false positive to the manner in which wars could be waged. These prophetic prognostications were empty promises. Clausewitz's fundamental argument that the nature of war is immutable seems to stand in spite of today's technocratic future of war. Clausewitz claimed that war is a human endeavor; by extension it is also therefore political. It is a contest of wills, and uncertainty remains extant. The siege personifies the Clausewitzian characterization of the nature of war; with its torrent of bludgeoning power, it has flattened cities and increased civilian suffering across the globe.

In contemporary warfare, although it may be unacknowledged, sieges are often hidden just below the surface of major conflicts. The modern siege often appears where proxy forces dominate the battlefield, whether that be in Ukraine, where Russian proxy forces are fighting Ukrainian defense forces, in the Middle East, where a variety of proxies are employed by multiple actors, or in any other number of places around the world. The siege is likely to be accompanied by lethal land forces, dominated by the traditional combat arms—armor, infantry and artillery—while being augmented by a variety of other enabling capabilities.

As nations, actors and their proxies continue to clash across the world, the siege is unlikely to fall out of use in the foreseeable future. The continued conflagration in Syria possesses great potential for additional sieges to develop. The Syrian civil war has all but turned into a regional war as Syria, pro-regime forces, anti-regime forces, Kurds, ISIS, Turkey, Israel, Iran, Russia and the United States all jockey for their own interests within what was once the country of Syria. The Siege of Ghouta is not likely to be the last siege of the Syrian civil war, nor is it likely to be the last siege of modern warfare.

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