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## Perfect war and its contestations

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### Introduction

War is a time at which violence is legitimized, institutionalized and deployed against a constructed enemy. Apart from horrific and atrocious, war is essentially a social phenomenon (Jabri 1996). It repeats and reproduces itself through imaginaries which render it acceptable and necessary and through institutional forms and social practices which serve as war-making machinery. As we will argue in this chapter, the ‘normalization’ of war needs constant work. War, truth and power are intimately related. State institutions and their coalitions and private advocates have vested interests in the shaping of knowledges and truths about war. ‘Not only are effective militaries, and the knowledges required to constitute, govern, and use them, necessary for the survival and flourishing of polities, but political orders entail narratives regarding the authoritative and legitimate command of armed force’ (Barkawi and Brighton 2011: 142). In particular because war is always a highly uncertain enterprise, fraught with failure, humiliation and defeat, ‘public perceptions and public support can never be left to chance’ (Griffin 2010: 8). In this chapter, we highlight how twenty-first century remote warfare campaigns, such as the US-led anti-Islamic State intervention named Operation Inherent Resolve, although fought from a distance and shrouded in secrecy, do not remain insulated from the machinations of war propaganda.

Drawing on Foucault's notion of 'regime of truth', we aim to investigate the ways in which 'war' actors negotiate, utilize and compete over media spaces. More specifically, we examine the spaces of contention through which watchdog organizations such as Airwars make counterclaims to the anti-IS Coalition's legitimations of remote warfare as ethical, that is, as remote killings as 'moral acts of care'.<sup>1</sup> Although we here contribute to investigating the 'war of spaces' through the analysis of a particular case, we very much realize how important it is to look beyond the specific historicity of 'this war' (Balibar 2008) and to place this case in debates on the ontology of war as the (always uncertain) (re)working of meaning, truth and order through violent means.

## The spatial reconfiguration of warfare and its conceptualizations

Over the past decades, remoteness in all its modalities (e.g. as distancing or outsourcing) has become a characteristic feature of warfare. Western democracies in particular have resorted to remote warfare to govern perceived security threats from a safe distance. From the 2011 NATO bombings in Libya, the US Africa Command's counterterrorism training of Ugandan soldiers, to the US-led coalition airstrikes against Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq, violence is exercised from afar. Remote warfare is characterized by a shift away from boots on the ground. It involves coalition drone and air strikes, while on the ground military training teams assist local forces to fight and die on behalf of Western interests (Biegon and Watts 2017: 1). Violence is thus executed and facilitated, but without the 'exposure' of Western military men and women to opponents in a declared warzone under the condition of mutual risk. This spatial reconfiguration of war has been conceptualized in a range of ways from 'globalized war' (Baumann 2001) to 'everywhere war' (Gregory 2011), and more recently as 'coalition proxy warfare' (Mumford 2013), 'transnational shadow wars' (Niva 2013), 'surrogate warfare' (Krieg and Rickli 2018), and 'vicarious warfare' (Waldman 2017). What these conceptualizations have in common is an attentiveness to how conventional ties between war and space have become undone. Gregory (2011) emphasizes how we have to rethink late modern war in terms of space and territoriality. Whereas wars in the past were conducted in 'resolutely territorial terms', we now have to 'supplement cartographic reason by other, more labile spatialities' (2011: 239). War has become mobile. The concept of the battlefield in US doctrine is replaced by a multi-scalar, multidimensional battlescape (Graham 2010: 31). For Chamayou (2015), the geocentric concept of war is now opposed to a target-centred one, attached to the bodies of the enemy prey. Contemporary

Western-led military interventionism shuns direct control of territory and populations and its cumbersome order-building and order-maintaining responsibilities, focusing instead on flexible, open-ended operations, supported by remote technology and reliant on local partnerships and private contractors to promote and protect interests – a shift that we termed ‘liquid warfare’ elsewhere (Demmers and Gould 2018). What we emphasize in this chapter, however, is not the question of space/territoriality but an analysis of the war of spaces: how particular ‘war’ actors produce authoritative knowledges and ‘truths’ around remote warfare and civilian deaths. As we will discuss in more detail below, for Foucault (1980: 133):

‘Truth’ is to be understood as a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements. ‘Truth’ is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces, and which extend it. A ‘regime’ of truth.

We will outline for the case of Operation Inherent Resolve how particular actors (embedded in the army, media and civil society) became engaged in the production of what Barkawi and Brighton (2011: 140) name ‘War/Truth’: the making and contesting of statements on, or around, the ‘true’ meaning of the violence enacted under Operation Inherent Resolve, in particular the violence done to civilians in these zones of war. Aiming to reinvigorate a focus on war as social phenomenon we aim to do three things in this chapter. First, we emphasize the relevance of the term ‘regime of truth’ as a useful tool to investigate the war of spaces.

Second, we lay out how in the case of Operation Inherent Resolve watchdogs such as Airwars are afforded a narrow space of contention to contest the anti-IS Coalition’s discourse of precision and care for civilian casualties, largely due to their reliance on new digital technologies. Thirdly, in the conclusions we highlight how the emphasis on a ‘politics of numbers’ and techniques of counting is part of a de-politicization move and a further sanitization of war. With this we come to what perhaps is the essence of remote warfare: its ability to ward off political questions on how it has transformative effects, that is, on the capacity of remote military violence to be constitutive and generative, and how ‘war making’ also always includes ‘world making’. We now first turn to a further unpacking of the concept of regime of truth.

## Regime of truth

In his work on pogroms and riots, Paul Brass (1996) suggests focusing on the interpretative processes in the aftermath of violent practices. The core idea

underlying this approach is to not simply identify the multiple contexts in which violence occurs ‘because it can occur anywhere and can be organized or random, premeditated or spontaneous, directed at specific persons, groups, or property, or not’ (1996: 2). Brass acknowledges that these aspects of violence must be identified insofar as possible. However, he claims that we also need to examine the discourses on violence and the ways in which participants and observers seek to explain incidents of violence. In his work Brass aims to go beyond analysing the violent struggle to investigate as well the struggle to interpret the violence. That is, ‘the attempts to govern a society or a country through gaining not only a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, but to gain control over the interpretation of violence’ (1996: 45). For Brass, the contest for gaining control over the interpretation of violence is ‘at least as important, and probably more important’ than the outcome of specific struggles themselves (1996: 45):

The struggle over the meaning of violence may or may not lead to a consensus or a hegemonic interpretation. It will certainly not lead to the ‘truth’ but at most to a ‘regime of truth’ which will give us a pre-established context into which we can place future acts of a similar type into the same context and for the reinterpretation of previous acts of violence in history.

Evidently, Brass’s work is an attempt to translate and apply Foucault’s notion of ‘regime of truth’ to concrete settings of violent conflict. In his interview on Truth and Power Foucault offers the following refined definition of the notion of regime of truth:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the *mechanisms and instances* which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is *sanctioned*; the *techniques and procedures* accorded value in the acquisition of truth; *the status* of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

(1980: 131, our emphasis)

In our analysis of the war of spaces we will select and operationalize aspects of this broader notion to investigate: (1) which techniques and procedures are accorded value in the acquisition of truth around civilian deaths as caused by Operation Inherent Resolve; (2) what are the mechanisms and instances utilized by ‘war’ actors to distinguish true and false statements about civilian deaths; (3) what are the means by which each are authorized or sanctioned; and (4) what status is afforded to those who are charged with

saying what counts as true? In tracing the above dynamics of interaction, we use a variety of sources. We draw on a small body of academic work (Bonds 2019; Chamayou 2015; Schwarz 2016; Schweiger 2019) as well as human rights reports, US military statements, and newspaper accounts to map the ascendancy of a discourse of ‘precision and care’ accompanying the US-led anti-IS airstrikes between 2014 and 2019. In addition, information was gathered through interviews held with various actors within watchdog organizations, in particularly Airwars and Amnesty International; through participant observation at workshops, roundtables, public events organized and attended by both ‘military’ and ‘watchdog’ actors; and through a range of primary sources (press releases, evaluation reports, briefings, military magazines).

## Operation inherent resolve and the machinations of war propaganda

In 2014, a new player in the Middle East increasingly drew the attention of Western media. A group of jihadi fighters, referred to as Daesh and later the Islamic State (IS), was quickly expanding their territorial control across Iraq and Syria (Cockburn 2015: x–xi). By mid-2014, they had successfully captured the city of Raqqa in Syria and Mosul in Iraq. In September 2014, shortly after IS released a video of the beheading of American journalist James Foley, president Barack Obama declared that the United States had to act:

There can be no reasoning – no negotiation – with this brand of evil. The only language understood by killers like this is the language of force. So the United States of America will work with a broad coalition to dismantle this network of death.

(cited in Friis 2015: 737)

This broad coalition came to be known as the US-led anti-IS coalition, or simply the Coalition, and included over sixty countries and partner organizations. Its military division was named the Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve. Herein, the United States, UK, France, Belgium, Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands and twenty other states forged a military alliance in the name of ‘destroying ISIS’s parent tumour in Iraq and Syria, combating its worldwide spread, and protecting all homelands’ (McInnis 2016: 2). Led by the US Central Command (CENTCOM), it set out to achieve its goals by using ‘coordinated airstrikes, training and equipping local security forces, and targeted special operations’ (McInnis 2016: 2). Since its establishment Operation Inherent Resolve has engaged in extensive

security cooperation with local partners such as the Iraqi military, Kurdish Peshmerga and the Syrian Democratic Forces, and engaged in over 34,000 strikes, firing over 100,000 munitions across Syria and Iraq.

Although a largely riskless, remote and mobile intervention, Operation Inherent Resolve still requires (and facilitates) particular spaces of war in which legitimizing narratives are produced, sanctioned and valued. Those in favour of the operation contrast the brutal and barbaric violence perpetrated by IS against local as well as Western innocent civilians, with the surgical precision with which its strongholds were targeted. Former US Secretary of State John Kennedy described IS as ‘ugly, savage, inexplicable, nihilistic, and valueless evil’ (Friis 2015: 735), while former US Secretary of Defense James Mattis emphasized, ‘We are the good guys [...] We do everything humanly possible consistent with military necessity, taking many chances to avoid civilian casualties at all costs’ (CBS News 2017). This distinction between ‘their’ violence as vicious and barbaric and ‘our’ violence as clean and precise fits the classic tropes of war. Such statements suggest a good deal about how war actors like to understand their own violence. They establish a highly appealing contrast between borderland traits of barbarity, excess and irrationality, and metropolitan characteristics of civility, restraint and rationality (see: Duffield 2002: 1052). To reinforce the latter image, representatives of the Coalition also draw on a set of medical metaphors. In this, IS is represented as a cancer that needs to be cut out of the sick body of the Middle East. As former US Secretary of Defense Ash Carter (2016) asserted: ‘ISIL is a cancer that’s threatening to spread. And like all cancers, you can’t cure the disease just by cutting out the tumor. You have to eliminate it wherever it has spread, and stop it from coming back.’

The Coalition presents surgical strikes as one of the key ‘cures’ that is being executed with utmost care – by applying the principles of military necessity, humanity and proportionality and the most advanced smart technology (see Bonds 2019: 11). Taken together, this sanitized discourse to legitimize Western state violence is what Chamayou (2015) calls ‘necroethics’ (killing as a moral act of care) and Bonds (2019) refers to as ‘humanitized violence’.

## Precision warfare and spaces of contestation: Producing an alternative truth

As with any official story on certain acts of violence, this war discourse of ‘barbarianism’, ‘humanitarianism’, ‘care’ and ‘precision’ intersects with alternative interpretations and forms of public contestation. In the wake of

the launch of Operation Inherent Resolve, we have witnessed the advent of a set of Western civil society organizations that monitor the harmful impact of this (and now other) international remote interventions. Not satisfied with how the Coalition assesses the number of civilians killed by its airstrikes through relying on internal military visual intelligence recorded from the sky, watchdog organization Airwars for instance has developed new remote sensing techniques and procedures to count the number of civilian casualties from Coalition airstrikes. Airwars teams of journalists, graphic designers, architects, humanitarian aid workers, and refugees from Syria and Iraq use open-source intelligence (such as social media posts and satellite imagery) to track, triangulate and geolocate, in real-time, local claims of civilian casualties. Concurrently, Airwars monitors and archives official military reports on munition and strike statistics to measure them against the public record and grade the reliability of the claims made. This grading ranges from 'discounted' to 'contested', 'weak', 'fair' (according to Airwars) and 'confirmed' (by the Coalition).

Crucial to being able to reach a 'confirmed' grade that represents instances where Airwars statements about civilian casualties are sanctioned by the Coalition as true is an exchange between Airwars' team of investigators and the civilian casualty (CIVCAS) cell at CENTCOM. The CIVCAS cell was officially organized in 2016 after intense lobbying efforts by Airwars for a central point of contact to submit allegations to. CIVCAS consist of a small team of analysts that assess allegations of civilian deaths based on flight logs, strike records and visual intelligence gathered by Coalition aircraft. Initially, the responses Airwars received were similar to the periodic press releases of the Coalition, containing little information, only indicating what incidents were credible. Over the year that followed, the team at Airwars worked to standardize their exchanges with CIVCAS. This included assigning each incident a unique code and supplying the CIVCAS analysts with extensive spreadsheets with detailed information, such as the exact coordinates and an explanation of how they collected and corroborated the open-source information. By comparing its database of allegations with the records of the Coalition, Airwars was able to improve its online archive and discovered that over time they became the source of two-thirds of all assessed allegations by the Coalition.

Although it is clear from the above that the knowledge produced through Airwars' new civilian harm assessment procedures has been increasingly shared with the Coalition, the statements made by each actor about the 'true' number of non-combatant body bags is still astonishingly disparate. Airwars current 'fair' estimate is that between 8,214 and 13,125 civilians have likely been killed in Coalition actions – with the Coalition itself presently 'confirming' only 1,335 non-combatants deaths from its air and artillery strikes (Airwars n.d.).

Another illustrative example of how watchdog organizations ‘make visible’ the hidden local realities of remote warfare and produce contrasting statements on its precise and surgical nature is the joint initiative by Airwars and human rights organization Amnesty International to assess the Coalition’s campaign to retake the Islamic State-held city of Raqqa. In the four-month remote *Battle for Raqqa* (June–October 2017), the United States, United Kingdom and France fired over 40,000 air and artillery strikes that were called in by their local allies the Syrian Democratic Forces by identifying targets on iPads. The then Secretary of Defense, James Mattis said in an interview with CBS that the Coalition would adopt ‘annihilation tactics’ (CBS News 2017) and Sargent Major John Wayne Troxell boasted that ‘they fired more rounds in five months in Raqqa than any other Marine artillery battalion since the Vietnam War’ (Snow 2018). In the immediate aftermath the Coalition acknowledged just twenty-three civilian casualties yet refused to conduct any on-the-ground investigations. In response, Airwars and Amnesty International joined forces and set up a crowdsourcing data project called *Strike Tracker*.

This online project engaged over 3,000 digital activists from across 124 countries to help them trace and geolocate how the Coalition’s bombings destroyed almost 80 per cent of Raqqa. This was supplemented by two years of on-the-ground investigations conducted by Amnesty’s Senior Crisis Response investigator Donatella Rovera. Airwars and Amnesty compiled their evidence and built a database of more than 1,600 civilians reportedly killed in Coalition strikes. They were able to name 641, of which the Coalition has since acknowledged 159.

Reflecting on the ground evidence she collected on civilian casualties as well as the notoriously imprecise artillery ammunition fired by the Coalition, Rovera (2019) argued at a launch of the report:

The Coalition was using technology, but they did not put enough resources into using it properly and they were not using other technology that exists for them; namely more sophisticated smaller impact radius weapons which would have had a less detrimental impact on the civilians. In future wars we would like them to use technology in a more responsible way, in a way that focuses on the protection of civilians, not just technology that allows them to wage a war less expensively, or in a way that only protects their own forces.

This narrative is in line with what Bonds found in his qualitative content analysis of human rights and media reports on Operation Inherent Resolve, namely that leading non-governmental critics call on Coalition members to be more precise and exercise more care when striking enemy targets and to improve their investigation techniques and acknowledgement of civilian casualties (Bonds 2019, 9).



## Sanctioning techniques, status and procedures

Challenging the ‘truth’ about the precise and careful nature of Operation Inherent Resolve with alternative statements on the number of civilian casualties and the type of technology used has not been without consequences. A clear example of how watchdog organizations were undermined by the Coalition occurred while the Battle for Raqqa described above was in full swing. On 31 August 2017 Samuel Oakford, an in-house investigative reporter with Airwars, published a report in *Foreign Policy* criticizing the United States for being in denial about the high number of civilian casualties in Syria. Two weeks later (15 September 2017) the then commander of Operation Inherent Resolve, Lieutenant General Stephen Townsend, published a response in the same magazine in which he discredited Oakford’s claims by stating that Airwars’ statements about civilian casualties were ‘hyperbolic’ and in which he questioned the value of Airwars’ techniques and procedures and its status through saying: ‘Assertions by Airwars [...] and media outlets that cite them, are often unsupported by fact and serve only to strengthen the Islamic State’s hold on civilians, placing civilians at greater risk.’ In his response Townsend emphasized that the Coalition dealt in facts and that he challenged anyone to find a more ‘precise air campaign in the history of warfare....The Coalition’s goal is always for zero human casualties’.<sup>2</sup>

The Coalition not only undercut Airwars discursively, but shortly after actively obstructed Airwars’ vital knowledge production procedures after another critical article called ‘The Uncounted’ was published in *New York Times* in November 2017 (Khan and Gopel 2017). Herein, investigative journalists Azmat Khan and Anand Gopal address the large discrepancy between Airwars estimates and those of the Coalition concluding that, contrary to Townsend’s claim, the United States has caused far more civilian casualties than it is willing to acknowledge. Soon afterwards Airwars received a message from the Coalition that all communication between CIVCAS and Airwars would end immediately, thereby terminating the exchange of information which was critical for Airwars to identify the credibility of the civilian casualty claims under investigation (Dyers 2019).

## Co-opting an alternative truth

After months of lobbying and a change of spokesperson at CIVCAS, contact was re-established and the sharing of techniques, procedures and knowledge between the CIVCAS team and Airwars improved once again (Dyers 2019). When Airwars launched its new website in December 2018, the team noticed that CIVCAS was proactively visiting their website and

contacted them with questions, making it no longer necessary for Airwars to send in allegations (Awater 2019). Furthermore, in February 2019 a declassified ‘Civilian Casualties Review’, commissioned by the Chairman of the Joint Chief of Staff, recommended systematically including NGOs in the reporting on civilian casualties and identified Airwars as an important source of information as it was ‘the only NGO that provided consistent reporting’ (2018: 11). The Pentagon even invited NGOs, including Airwars, to provide information on civilian casualty assessment procedures and to discuss the possibility of setting up *ex gratia* payments for victims of US airstrikes (Woods 2019). In its 2018 annual report on Civilian Casualties, the US Department of Defense defines *ex gratia* payments ‘as a way to convey feelings of condolence or sympathy toward the victim or the victim’s family’ but underlines these are not ‘(1) required by law; (2) an admission of wrongdoing; or (3) for the purpose of compensating the victim or the victim’s family for their loss’ (2019: 17–18). This is what Gilbert (2015) refers to as the sharp difference between ‘accounting’ and ‘accountability’. In her work on US military payments in Afghanistan and Iraq, Gilbert shows how ‘it is precisely through affective appeals to sympathy and condolence that the needs and interests of the victims are suspended, and the imperial noose tightened’ (2015: 405).

The shift away from dismissing civilian casualty reports as ‘hyperbolic’ towards acknowledging the value of the techniques and procedures developed by NGOs such as Airwars, thereby granting it status as a reliable source of information, is in the interest of the Pentagon. CENTCOM’s previous claims about civilian casualties were, as Airwars researcher Sofie Dyers (2019) stated, ‘simply not believable’ and thus undermined its credibility. Co-opting Airwars’ remote sensing technologies and proposing to set up *ex gratia* payments allows the Pentagon to continue to maintain its distance from the battlefield, but it can now claim not only to be using smart technology to wage war, but also to count and offer financial gifts for the civilian casualties it has caused. These expressions of ‘compassion’ and ‘regret’ add value to its discourse of ‘precision’ and ‘care’, further emphasizing a hierarchical relationship of benevolence between remote violent perpetrators and their unintended local civilian victims on the ground in Syria and Iraq. This way, status is enhanced, without having to acknowledge or be held accountable for the remaining 90 per cent of Airwars and Amnesty’s allegations.

We conclude that the above ‘politics of truth’, or in this case ‘politics of numbers’, opened up a constrained space of contention in which watchdog organizations were able to contest the Coalition’s discourse of precision and care for civilian casualties by producing contrasting numbers on civilian casualties. They did so by relying on smart technologies that allowed them to connect to the battlefield from a safe distance and extract local images and allegations of civilian casualties. In some cases, such as the Amnesty Raqqa investigation, this was accompanied by on the ground investigations.

Rather than question the logic of the violence and offer opposition, the knowledge produced by these watchdogs was subsequently used to call on the Coalition to take *more care* of civilians by using *more precise* technology when striking enemy targets as well as when counting non-combatant deaths. At first the Coalition resorted to thwarting the contesting numbers by questioning the value of the techniques and procedures used, undermining the status of those who developed them, and constraining vital information sharing practices. By early 2019 the Pentagon gradually shifted to co-opting Airwars' specialist remote techniques and procedures and opening the way for ex gratia payments. Hereby they further the production of a 'regime of truth' in which the constant application of new smart technologies allows for a form of perfect warfare, which saves and cares for the lives of both Western military personnel and friendly civilians on the ground.

## Contesting the logic of the violence

This perfect war narrative, however, directs our attention away from what is essentially a political act: coalition state violence needs to be accounted for both legally and politically. This is what Duffield calls the 'paradox of connectivity' (2019: 191). The reliance on technoscience by both military and watchdog actors sidesteps complex political problems and fundamental questions, such as why and how was IS able to emerge in the first place? How was the West involved in creating the conditions for IS' explosive success? What was the international legal mandate for Operation Inherent Resolve? And, more complicated and painful perhaps, if the Coalition airstrikes are legally justified through references to 'collective self-defense', is this how Western democracies best protect their citizens against armed attacks in the future? What are the potential boomerang effects of destroying 80 per cent of a city such as Raqqa and killing thousands of civilians with 'utmost precision'?

Rather than addressing these political, legal and strategic problems they are transformed into more concrete and 'do-able' technical challenges, such as how can we make sure local proxies know how to use iPads to call in coalition airstrikes more accurately? How can we make sure our guided ammunitions do not have a 50- but 10-meter impact radius? How can we geolocate what buildings were destroyed by 40,000 artillery shells? How can we identify how many civilians were in those buildings? Duffield (2019: 191) observes that this displacement marshals the positive energy and empathy of innumerable actors in a quest for a technical solution – in our case human rights activists, journalists, geolocation experts, graphic designers, architects and thousands of digital activists. Yet the hard political problems remain.

The case of Colonel François-Régis Legrier further shows that those who do openly question the political and strategic logic of the Coalition's state violence executed during Operation Inherent Resolve are coercively sanctioned as traitors. In January 2019, Colonel François-Régis Legrier published an op-ed in the *National Defense Review* – *The Battle for Hajin: Tactical Victory, Strategic Defeat?*. Taking the battle of Hajin, one of the last strongholds of IS in Syria as an example, he argues that the use of excessive coalition air force will leave a 'disgusting image of what may be a Western-style liberation' and plant the seeds for an 'imminent resurgence' (2018: 71). Shortly after the op-ed was removed by the journal and Colonel Legrier was reportedly punished. When questioned about the colonel's critique in the *Assemblée Nationale*, the Chief of Staff of the French Army General François Lecointre responded as follows (2018: 29):

I do not understand it. I try to put myself in the shoes of those soldiers who, for four months, obeyed his [Colonel Legrier] orders and implemented a strategy and then find that their leader publicly declares in an article that what they are doing is contrary to common sense, ethics, morality and military efficiency. If I were in the place of these men, I would be absolutely upset. It is for this reason, for this feeling of treason, that I punished Colonel Legrier. It was I who wanted to punish him and I maintain this point of view.

## Conclusion

The spatial reconfiguration of contemporary warfare as remote and mobile intersects with the ways in which 'war' actors contest and negotiate the meaning of violence. For one, the distancing of warfare and the shift to 'riskless war' reduces the urgency of public scrutiny and debate within societies in whose names the violence is exercised. Yet our case study illustrates that remote warfare, like any war, still requires particular spaces of war in which authoritative knowledges and legitimizing narratives are produced, sanctioned and valued.

The dynamics of interaction outlined in this chapter demonstrates how for the case of Operation Inherent Resolve (media) spaces are carefully channelled and controlled. Engaging to negotiate, utilize and compete over media spaces of war, watchdog organizations largely relied on remote sensing and a 'politics of numbers'. Contestation centred around war's most painful and inconvenient 'truth': the bodies of innocent civilian casualties. As it turned out, however, it was exactly this focus on the 'counting of the dead', which in the end allowed for the encapsulation of critique by

state institutions representing the Coalition such as CENTCOM and the Pentagon. The Coalition's sanctioning of information, its discursive embracement of the counterclaims of monitoring agents as 'not caring enough', as well as its adoption of specialist knowledge allowed for the enhancement of the technological 'perfecting' of warfare as precise, effective and caring. Ironically, and unintentionally perhaps, watchdog organizations are gradually brought inside the perfect war-making machine. We argue that it is this encapsulation of critique together with the moralization of violence as 'care', that is, as life-preserving practice and as medicine, which is furthering the de-politicization of this type of war.

Looking beyond the historicity of 'this war', we see how a regime of truth about remote warfare as precise and caring works to promote war rather than limit it. This should prompt us to look at the ontology of war as the (always uncertain) (re)working of meaning, truth and order through violent means, and the particular quality of remote violence to ward off political questions on how it has transformative effects. That is, on the capacity of remote military violence to (re)produce and sustain regimes of power which render war an act of benevolence.

## Notes

- 1 Despite our repeated reference to the 'Coalition' we aim to refrain from representing it as a unitary body or actor. Rather, we understand the Coalition as assemblage: as a social formation of governance consisting of heterogeneous elements that forge alliances to exercise power (see also Demmers and Gould 2018: 367–77). In our analysis we at times refer to CENTCOM and the Pentagon as the main 'spokespersons' of this assemblage.
- 2 In a similar fashion, members of the Coalition tried to undermine the techniques, procedures and status of Amnesty after it made the evidence of its Raqqa investigation public. When questioned about Amnesty's findings, the UK Secretary of State for Defence Gavin Williamson replied: 'I must say that I was deeply, deeply disappointed by the Amnesty International report, which was not only disappointing, but disgraceful.[...] If it is going to produce reports, we want them to be accurate. We certainly do not want them to be calling into question the amazing professionalism of our Royal Air Force' (UK Parliament 2018).

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