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Civilians, Urban Warfare, and US Doctrine

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ABSTRACT: The US military must prepare for the realities of densely populated areas as it plans and conducts campaigns. This planning must include considerations of soldiers' health and well-being. An engaged analysis of urban battlespaces in the mid-twentieth and early twenty-first centuries highlights the need for essential updates to US military doctrine and training, particularly in the areas of civilian mass casualties and civilian noncombatants in the urban battlespace.

The accelerating urbanization of human society and the locations of recent conflicts indicate future combat will likely occur within urbanized environments or even in a rising megacity.[1] Spurred by the Army's Asymmetric Warfare Group and the United States Military Academy's Urban Warfare Project, the US military is beginning to identify the implications of such warfare and the effects of the use of force in urban environments.[2] As the 2017 Joint publication *Urban Operations* recognizes, military operations in cities are now "both inevitable and the norm."[3]

Despite this increased focus, the military has largely neglected an engaged analysis of the most salient aspects of this emerging warfare challenge: the presence of large-scale civilian populations within the battlespace, the likelihood of mass civilian casualties resulting from such warfare, and the implications of these factors for military operations. In addition to the battles of Manila (1945) and Grozny (1994–95), the campaigns in Fallujah, Mosul, Raqqa, and Marawi remind us of the inherent harm to civilians and to civilian infrastructure resulting from urban warfare.[4] The increasing population density of future urban battlefields, therefore, increases the probability of mass civilian causalities.

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1 Kevin M. Felix and Frederick D. Wong, "The Case for Megacities," *Parameters* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 20.

2 William G. Adamson, "Megacities and the US Army," *Parameters* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 45–54; Marc Harris et al., *Megacities and the United States Army: Preparing for a Complex and Uncertain Future* (Arlington, VA: Chief of Staff of the Army, 2014); and "Urban Warfare Project," Modern War Institute, United States Military Academy (USMA), accessed December 17, 2019.

3 Headquarters, Department of the Army (HQDA) and Headquarters, Marine Corps (HQMC), *Urban Operations*, Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-06/Marine Corps Techniques Publication (MCTP) 12-10B (Washington, DC: HQDA/HQMC, 2017), 1-1.

4 Emma Gilligan, *Terror in Chechnya: Russia and the Tragedy of Civilians in War* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), 45; and Robert Ross Smith, *Triumph in the Philippines* (Washington, DC: US Army Center of Military History, 1963), 307.

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Moreover, current US military guidance generally fails to examine fully the possibility adversaries waging conflict in cities will leverage the asymmetric advantage of at-risk civilians to counter America's superior military firepower and technology.[5] Instead, the presence of civilians and civilian infrastructure is treated as a secondary complication that can be adequately mitigated through campaign planning and execution.

The guidance also neglects direct and sustained investigation of the specific impacts civilian presence and harm on the battlefield pose to America's operations and its fighting force. As one analysis of urban warfare explains, "the human dimension of cities" is essential to discussions of urban operations.[6] Thus America's military must begin preparing for the potential impacts of large-scale civilian populations on the military's ability to initiate and maintain city-based campaigns. This preparation includes planning and conducting strategic, tactical, and combatant operations that preserve the health and well-being of servicemembers.

Urbanization

The demographic trends resulting from global population growth and migration have been well cited. The United Nations estimated more than 54 percent of the world's population (4 billion people) resided in cities during 2015 and predicted the figure to increase to two thirds of the world's population by 2050.[7] By 2050 populations in global cities are expected to increase by 2.5 billion people, with close to 90 percent of this urban growth taking place in Africa and Asia—a daunting fact for US security planning.[8]

This growth is transforming the scale and space of human geography. Urbanization increases population densities and city sprawl as more people and structures expand from the centers of cities. The area of urban land in developing countries is predicted to triple by 2030, greatly outpacing city population growth.[9] Indeed, in just over a decade, the number of megacities with 10 million inhabitants is predicted to increase from 33 to 43.[10] Given this growth in urban density and scale, US forces will likely be called upon to conduct major operations in urban environments that include small-sized towns or ultra-large megacities.[11]

This trend coincides with another important aspect of US military operations—the shift in doctrinal focus from population-centric to

5   Charles J. Dunlap Jr., "Lawfare 101: A Primer," *Military Review* 97, no. 3 (May–June 2017).

6   John P. Sullivan and Adam Elkus, "Command of the Cities: Towards a Theory of Urban Strategy," *Small Wars Journal*, September 26, 2011, 10.

7   United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), World Cities Report 2016: Urbanization and Development–Emerging Futures (Nairobi: UN-Habitat, 2016), 6; and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-EconSocial), *2018 Revision of World Urbanization Prospects* (New York: United Nations, 2018), 23.

8   UN-EconSocial, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2018).

9   UN-Habitat, *World Cities Report 2016*, 7.

10   UN-EconSocial, *World Urbanization*.

11   Michael Evans, "The Case against Megacities," *Parameters* 45, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 35.

enemy-centric operations as embodied in the Army's emerging focus on lethality and multidomain operations. The population-centric model of counterinsurgency, illustrated by the Army's Iraq War–era adoption of *Counterinsurgency*, focused explicitly on protecting civilians as the key center of gravity for achieving victory.[12]

Lessons developed from this period were based in a counterinsurgency environment characterized generally by small-unit actions, often conducted outside of populated areas, in which US forces largely held operational initiative. In this environment, combined strategic, ethical, and legal imperatives led to prioritizing civilian protection, which resulted in relatively low numbers of civilian casualties from US operations.

In a post–Iraq War era increasingly focused on near-peer adversaries, the US military is shifting emphasis from victory through civilian support to victory through high-intensity, kinetic operations. In this new era, the US Army—the branch most likely to be called upon to carry out large-scale urban ground operations—has embraced a vision of warfare that is, in the words of former Army Chief of Staff and current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff General Mark A. Milley, "a perfect harmony of intense violence."[13]

Under this new operational focus, US commanders emphasize "sharp" war, force, and speed to annihilate the enemy even when it is embedded in civilian populations. Civilians, conversely, are no longer perceived to be the enemy's center of gravity but are secondary to kinetic-based efforts.[14] Such a shift is exemplified in the 2017 Army publication of Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, which envisions future campaigns to be "more chaotic, intense, and highly destructive" than the conflicts of recent decades.[15] In short, in the post-counterinsurgency era, civilians are no longer the primary consideration for US forces on the battlefield, and US commanders will likely conduct operations accordingly.

Such a shift will exacerbate the harm already experienced by civilians in urban operations. The battles of Mosul (2016–17), Ramadi (2006), and Raqqa (2017) reveal even conflicts in which combatants attempt to limit civilian casualties inherently generate high levels of noncombatant fatalities. These conflicts demonstrate limitations advanced, professionalized militaries face in protecting civilians in high-intensity urban combat. As these examples show, precision strike capability and law of armed conflict (LOAC)-based operational planning can reduce

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12   HQDA/HQMC, *Insurgencies and Countering Insurgencies*, Field Manual (FM) 3-24/Marine Corps Warfighting Publication (MCWP) 3-33.5 (Washington, DC: HQDA/HQMC, 2014).

13   Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., "'A Perfect Harmony of Intense Violence': Army Chief Milley on Future War," Breaking Defense, October 9, 2018, https://breakingdefense.com/2018/10/a-perfect-harmony-of-intense-violence-army-chief-milley-on-future-war/.

14   Daniel R. Mahanty and Annie Shiel, "Protecting Civilians Still Matters in Great-Power Conflict," Defense One, May 3, 2019, https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2019/05/protecting-civilians-still-matters-great-power-conflict/156723/.

15   HQDA, *Operations*, FM 3-0 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2017), 1-2.

but not prevent significant harm to civilians in densely populated urban terrain.

Despite a focus on limiting civilian casualties in the campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), independent estimates have found 8,000 to 13,000 civilians have been killed by US-led coalition operations since 2014 (coalition forces have confirmed the deaths of 1,359 civilians).[16] Similarly, a report by the International Committee of the Red Cross found urban operations in the counter-ISIS campaign accounted for eight times more civilian fatalities—78 percent of all civilian deaths—than nonurban combat.[17] These examples preview urban conflicts to come, revealing the extent to which high-intensity urban warfare inherently produces harm for civilians and destroys civilian infrastructure.

Implications

The infliction of harm on civilians in urban warfare creates significant strategic, operational, and tactical implications for US operations and has specific effects on the mental and psychological well-being of the military's fighting force.

Strategic Implications

High-density populations and the likelihood of mass civilian harm have the potential to constrain the military's ability to initiate and sustain urban campaigns.[18] This effect has been well-documented and is outlined only briefly here: large-scale civilian casualties influence global public opinion and can shape strategic decision making for the use of force.[19] Such influence has been exemplified in the Israeli Defense Forces campaigns in Gaza, for instance, or in the US military's first Fallujah campaign during the Iraq War.[20]

In Fallujah the potential for mass civilian casualties and concerns about Iraqi leadership support contributed to the George W. Bush administration's April 2004 decision to halt the Marine Corps' push into the city, delaying operations and ultimately necessitating a second major campaign in November 2004.[21] Additionally, in an increasingly legalized global environment, civilian casualties will be the subject of greater

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16 "US-Led Coalition in Iraq & Syria," Airwars, accessed January 9, 2020, https://airwars.org /civilian-casualties/?country=iraq,syria&belligerent=coalition.

17 "US-Led Coalition"; and "New Research Shows Urban Warfare Eight Times More Deadly for Civilians in Syria and Iraq," Red Cross, October 1, 2018.

18 Russell W. Glenn, *Managing Complexity during Military Urban Operations: Visualizing the Elephant* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2004), 9.

19 Dunlap, "Lawfare 101," 9.

20 Raphael S. Cohen, *From Cast Lead to Protective Edge: Lessons from Israel's Wars in Gaza* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017), 178–79; and William Knarr, Robert Castro, and Dianne Fuller, *The Battle for Fallujah: Al Fajr–the Myth-Buster*, Institute for Defense Analysis (IDA) Paper P-4455 (Alexandria, VA: IDA, September 2009), 24.

21 Peter R. Mansoor, *Surge: My Journey With General David Petraeus and the Remaking of the Iraq War*, 1st ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 15, 21; and Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 342.

reviews by international legal actors—and the use of "lawfare"—to constrain increasingly US strategic operations.[22]

With US forces operating more frequently in urban environments, the potential for mass civilian casualties—and the resulting domestic and international opposition such casualties can produce—will constrain the military's capacity to initiate and sustain major urban campaigns.

Operational and Tactical Implications

More directly for US military personnel, the presence of civilian populations and the potential for mass civilian casualties will impact the military's ability to conduct kinetic operations. These impacts include repercussions for operational planning, intelligence collection and analysis, targeting, and legal review. Additionally, high-density civilian populations shift the balance of risk in force employment for commanders and combatants, influencing the operational pace and freedom of maneuver.

Urban warfare requires combined arms integration of ground and air forces at all levels of operations, which necessitates intricate coordination that is difficult to achieve in the easiest of operational environments.[23] Because legal, ethical, and political factors generally lead US commanders to limit civilian casualties, dense civilian populations significantly complicate operational and tactical planning necessary for such integration. Thus the congested nature of the urban battlespace requires commanders devote significant resources and time to determine appropriate, feasible courses of action to minimize loss of civilian life.

Such operations also place high demands on intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance collection and analysis capabilities required to map the urban battlespace and accurately distinguish civilians and civilian objects from enemy combatants and objects. The intricate infrastructure of cities combined with complex human terrain further increases these demands.[24]

The complex battlespace of urban warfare, including the density of structures and line-of-sight obstructions, similarly complicates targeting and executing ground- and air-based fires, creating challenges for target identification, communication, and command and control.[25] Urban settings hinder positive identification of targets, and the dense infrastructure increases the propensity for collateral damage. Such infrastructure creates particular problems for close air support and indirect fire.

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22   Bryan Frederick and David E. Johnson, *The Continued Evolution of U.S. Law of Armed Conflict Implementation: Implications for the U.S. Military* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2015), 12.

23   Russell W. Glenn and Gina Kingston, *Urban Battle Command in the Twenty-First Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005).

24   US Army Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*, TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1 (Fort Eustis, VA: TRADOC, 2018), 28.

25   ATP 3-06/MCTP 12-10B, I-8, I-9.

Additionally civilian-dense environments test the military's capability to conduct effective operational legal review. Under the "precautions principle" of LOAC, commanders are obligated to conduct operations in a manner that minimizes civilian casualties.[26] The sheer number of civilians and civilian objects in the urban battlespace, along with the fast-paced, decentralized nature of tactical urban combat, can strain the ability of judge advocates general to provide effective legal guidance for targeting and operations.

Finally, the potential for high levels of civilian casualties in densely populated areas can fundamentally influence the ability of US commanders and combatants to balance the risks of employing force—a balance I call the combatant's trilemma. Every commander and combatant faces a crucial force employment calculation based on balancing three fundamental values: military advantage, force protection, and civilian protection. Military advantage, as defined under LOAC, is the goal of achieving military objectives during combat. Force protection is the goal of protecting friendly forces from attack or loss. And civilian protection is the goal of protecting civilian lives by limiting direct targeting and indirect, collateral damage.[27] These principles lie in inherent tension with each other, making it impossible to prioritize one without impacting the other.[28]

Civilian-dense environments hold major implications for influencing this trilemma—balancing civilian protection against the goals of military advantage and force protection. Force employment calculations derived in less dense environments, such as those that predominate in Afghanistan and Iraq, shift significantly in urban, civilian-dense environments where operations can inflict much greater harm on civilian populations.

The presence of large numbers of civilians in the urban battlespace may influence operational and tactical US commanders and combatants in varying ways. Embracing the values of military advantage and force protection, some commanders and combatants will prioritize military objectives and security over civilian protection, accepting increased risk to the civilian population. Anecdotal evidence and combatant surveys have revealed combatants generally prioritize force protection over military advantage and civilian protection, and combatants in

26   Geoffrey S. Corn, "War, Law, and the Oft Overlooked Value of Process as a Precautionary Measure," *Pepperdine Law Review* 42, no. 3 (2014): 437.

27   Robin Geiss, "The Principle of Proportionality: 'Force Protection' As a Military Advantage," *Israel Law Review* 45, no. 1 (March 2012): 71–89; Gary D. Solis, *The Law of Armed Conflict: International Humanitarian Law in War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 252, 259, 284; and Lorenzo Zambernardi, "Counterinsurgency's Impossible Trilemma," *Washington Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (July 1, 2010): 21–34.

28   Zambernardi, "Impossible Trilemma," 22; and Maurice Obstfeld, Jay C. Shambaugh, and Alan M. Taylor, "The Trilemma in History: Tradeoffs among Exchange Rates, Monetary Policies, and Capital Mobility," *Review of Economics and Statistics* 87, no. 3 (August 1, 2005): 423–38.

high-threat environments often revert to using firepower to reduce risk to friendly forces.[29]

During the Iraq War, for instance, US forces in Fallujah responded to stiff insurgent resistance by shaping the battlefield with direct and indirect fire, clearing insurgent threats by preemptively destroying everything in the path of US infantry forces.[30] Such tactics can limit US losses but increase risk to civilians on the ground, ultimately creating further strategic and operational impacts.

Conversely, other commanders and combatants will oppose increasing risk to noncombatants, instead placing greater priority on civilian protection and reducing emphasis on military objectives or force protection. In the former case, US commanders will alter or forego military actions with high risk of collateral damage to shield civilians from harm. In the latter case, US commanders will expose friendly forces to greater risk to mitigate collateral damage.

In both cases, these outcomes can reduce freedom of maneuver or operational pace, impacting the military's ability to achieve battlefield objectives. Both responses—prioritizing or de-emphasizing civilian protection—show large-scale civilian populations and the potential for mass civilian casualties produce significant impacts for commanders and combatants that complicate operations.

These factors—complexity of city environments; demands of planning, targeting, and operations in confused urban warfare; and balancing risk between civilians and combatants—together significantly impact US military tactical operations in urban battlespaces.

Combatant Implications

Finally, civilian populations and the potential for mass civilian casualties can directly affect the mental and psychological well-being of the military's fighting force.[31] It has been almost 50 years since large numbers of US combatants have been exposed to warfare with engagements resulting in hundreds or thousands of civilian casualties. The mass civilian casualties inflicted during the Vietnam War produced significant psychological trauma for a generation of servicemembers. Future urban combat operations and resulting civilian casualties have the potential to produce similar trauma.[32]

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29   Fiona Terry and Brian McQuinn, *The Roots of Restraint in War* (Geneva: Red Cross, June 2018); Andrew Bell, "Leashing the 'Dogs of War': Examining the Effects of LOAC Training at the U.S. Military Academy and in Army ROTC," *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting-American Society of International Law* 108 (2014): 370–73; and Amos C. Fox, "Precision Fires Hindered by Urban Jungle," Association of the United States Army, April 16, 2018.

30   Jake Miraldi, "Podcast: The Spear—The Second Battle of Fallujah," Modern War Institute, USMA, May 8, 2019.

31   Todd C. Helmus and Russell W. Glenn, *Steeling the Mind: Combat Stress Reactions and Their Implications for Urban Warfare* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2005).

32   Robert S. Laufer, Ellen Frey-Wouters, and Mark S. Gallops, "Traumatic Stressors in the Vietnam War and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," in *Trauma and Its Wake Volume I: The Study and Treatment of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder*, ed. Charles R. Figley (Bristol, PA: Brunner/Mazel, 1985), 73–89; and Bruce P. Dohrenwend et al., "The Psychological Risks of Vietnam for U.S. Veterans: A Revisit with New Data and Methods," *Science* 313, no. 5789 (August 18, 2006): 979–82.

Recent medical and psychological studies outline the psychological trauma produced by the killing of civilians or the exposure to civilian casualties. Such harm manifests in two different dimensions. First, harm to civilians can cause significant mental trauma and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in combatants: such trauma has been widely documented in US veterans from conflicts in Vietnam, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and this trauma generates long-lasting effects for the psychological well-being of many servicemembers.[33]

Second, urban warfare can produce moral trauma, or moral injury, which can result from exposure to civilian casualties or acts that "transgress deeply held moral beliefs."[34] While this class of mental harm is only beginning to be understood, emerging research shows it can produce negative health effects similar to PTSD. The potential for this harm is exacerbated by the Army's failure to prioritize training in the ethics of killing, which can result in subsequent confusion over the morality of participating in violent acts in combat.[35]

Military campaigns and mass civilian casualties in urban environments may produce significant psychological harm for large many servicemembers—harm that potentially lasts for years or even decades following combat. Thus the US military must prepare for the impact of mass civilian casualties on operations as well as its combatants.

Military Guidance

Military doctrine on urban warfare generally inadequately examines the impact of dense civilian populations and civilian harm directly. Doctrine is a vital aspect of how military organizations conceptualize operations and the employment of force, helping to develop common perspectives and frames of reference that serve as guidance for action.[36] Doctrine is not intended to establish fixed rules or one-size-fits-all checklists for action; instead, the goal of doctrine is to foster intellectual tools for accomplishing organizational tasks that respond to challenges in security environments.

Reflecting this, current US military operational guidance primarily emphasizes maneuver and operations within urban environments, with an obvious focus on achieving military objectives and some discussion on protecting US forces. The picture such guidance paints, however, is one where civilians are secondary considerations

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33   Alan Fontana and Robert Rosenheck, "A Model of War Zone Stressors and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 12, no. 1 (1999): 111–26; and Shira Maguen et al., "The Impact of Reported Direct and Indirect Killing on Mental Health Symptoms in Iraq War Veterans," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 23, no. 1 (February 2010): 86–90.

34   Brett T. Litz et al., "Moral Injury and Moral Repair in War Veterans: A Preliminary Model and Intervention Strategy," in "Posttraumatic Stress Disorder and the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq," ed. Brian P. Marx, special issue, *Clinical Psychology Review* 29, no. 8 (December 2009): 695–706; and Joshua E. Wilk et al., "Relationship of Combat Experiences to Alcohol Misuse among U.S. Soldiers Returning from the Iraq War," *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* 108, no. 1–2 (April 2010): 115–21.

35   Pete Kilner, "A Moral Justification for Killing in War," *Army Magazine* (February 2010): 55–60.

36   HQDA, *Operations*, FM 3-0 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2008), D-1.

on the battlefield, if considered at all. (Importantly, this article primarily examines US military doctrine on combined arms operations, particularly operations involving the application of ground forces in urban warfare.)

The current Army-Marine Corps urban warfare manual, ATP 3-06/MCTP 12-10B, avoids an in-depth review of the civilian-dense battlespace, limiting its brief guidance to advice on analyzing risk to civilians, minimizing collateral damage, and separating combatants and noncombatants.[37] Similarly, Army manual *Combined Arms Operations in Urban Terrain* echoes the brief focus of ATP 3-06/MCTP 12-10B on minimizing collateral damage, omitting a direct, sustained examination of the role of civilians in operations, targeting, or other aspects of combat.[38]

While not focused specifically on such warfare, ATP 3-21.8, *Infantry Platoon and Squad*, does examine tactical aspects of urban operations. Such review, however, focuses on small-unit tactics and does not directly examine the role of large-scale civilian populations in urban combat.[39] The Army training circular *Training for Urban Operations* does proscribe the use of civilian in specific training exercises.[40] But as noted elsewhere, existing US military urban warfare training sites lack the scale and density to simulate adequately realistic urban operations scenarios.[41]

This neglect is also evidenced in the Army's newest version of its capstone doctrine publication Field Manual 3-0, *Operations*, which similarly reflects the shift from population-centric to enemy-centric warfare. The new version of the manual eschews direct exploration of civilian harm or collateral damage, eliminates a section on the law of war and rules of engagement, and decreases its references to noncombatants from 21 in the 2008 edition to 5 passing references in the 2017 edition.[42]

Perhaps more tellingly, the newest Army guidance on conflict, *The U.S. Army in Multi-Domain Operations 2028*, similarly overlooks the role of civilian populations in influencing US operations. The document devotes some analysis to urban operations, focusing on developing "the capability to conduct Multi-Domain Operations in dense urban terrain."[43] It fails, however, to address civilians, collateral damage, or other vital aspects of combat in civilian-dense environments. In 102 pages of analysis, the document makes only minimal reference to civilians on the battlefield.

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37   ATP 3-06/MCTP 12-10B, 2-4, 2-7.
38   HQDA, *Combined Arms Operations in Urban Terrain*, Army Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures (ATTP) 3-06.11 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2011), 2-4, 2-9, 3-13, 3-14.
39   HQDA, *Infantry Platoon and Squad*, Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-21.8 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2016).
40   HDQA, *Training for Urban Operations*, Training Circular (TC) 90-1 (Washington, DC: HQDA, 2008).
41   John Spencer, "The Army Needs an Urban Warfare School and It Needs It Soon," Modern War Institute, USMA, April 5, 2017.
42   HQDA, *Operations*, 3-0; and Mahanty and Shiel, "Protecting Civilians."
43   TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-1, xi, D-1–D-6.

The Marine Corps Reference Publication 12-10B.1, *Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain*, likewise provides limited guidance. The chapter on "Noncombatant Considerations in Urban Operations" does note civilians "can have a significant impact on the conduct of military operations" and "greatly impede tactical operations."[44] But it sketches only brief operational guidance on conduct regarding civilians and the mitigation of civilian harm. It similarly eschews any discussion of the impact of mass civilian casualties on US forces in urban operations.

Of all existing US military doctrine on urban operations, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joint Publication 3-06, *Joint Urban Operations*, places the greatest emphasis on discussing the role of civilians in urban warfare. This publication devotes attention to civilians on the battlefield, addressing their role in planning, targeting, intelligence collection, and other aspects. While it does note "combat operations in urban areas may result in large ratios of civilian to military casualties," it provides little guidance as to the implications of such mass civilian casualties for commanders and combatants.[45] Notably, the publication is silent on the impact of large-scale civilian casualties on US operations or US forces as well as other aspects in which mass civilian harm can affect combat.

In total, existing doctrine provides minimal direction for handling the challenges of the populated urban battlespace. It provides almost no guidance on the impact of mass civilian casualties for US forces engaged in urban operations. How should US forces react to situations in which civilians are drawn to the battlefield and interfere with operations and fires? How should US combatants respond to the use of human shields, both voluntary and involuntary? How should tactical units handle mass civilian casualties, including those with life-threatening injuries, in the midst of combat operations? How should US forces prepare and implement population-control practices in "feral" cities in which basic governance structures have dissolved?[46]

These are just a few examples of the complications large-scale civilian populations present on the battlefield. While doctrine is not designed to provide specific recommendations for every foreseeable operational context, civilian-related issues such as these and others vital to the urban battlefield cannot be found within current US military guidance.

Recognizing this situation, a 2017 RAND analysis of US Army readiness for urban warfare assessed the Army's "doctrine, tactics, and training have not absorbed the lessons" of previous urban operations.[47] The source of such neglect, according to the report, is the general

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44   HQMC, *Military Operations on Urbanized Terrain (MOUT)*, Marine Corps Reference Publication (MCRP) 12-10B.1 (Washington, DC: HQMC, 2016), 6-1.

45   Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (CJCS), *Joint Urban Operations*, Joint Publication 3-06 (Washington, DC: CJCS, 2013), I-6, III-5–III-6.

46   Kyle Rempfer, "Why Us Troops 'Flattened' Raqqa and Mosul, and Why It May Herald an Era of 'Feral City' Warfare," *Military Times*, April 29, 2019.

47   Gian Gentile et al., *Reimagining the Character of Urban Operations for the U.S. Army: How the Past Can Inform the Present and Future* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2017).

perception within the military that urban combat is "messy and destructive" and "something to be avoided."[48]

Indeed, high-intensity warfare among civilian populations is messy and destructive. For this reason, substantive doctrine and guidance are required to guide US forces in such contexts. Instead, US doctrine appears to be based on assumptions that US forces can generally avoid the problems of large-scale civilian populations by either bypassing population centers or, conversely, evacuating city residents prior to combat operations.

Such assumptions are flawed; history shows US forces must often fight where urgent crises require, and urban infrastructure, human behavior, and the fog of war often combine to limit forces' ability to disperse civilians from cities before fighting begins.[49] As such, it is increasingly likely adversaries will seek out combat in urban settings to maximize asymmetrical advantages, such as the presence of human shields, provided by urban environments. In light of such realities, urban warfare experts have increasingly raised the alarm at the deficient state of current warfighting doctrine.[50]

Unfortunately, current US military guidance provides little direct analysis to forces that must confront the challenges of dense civilian populations in conflict, thus affirming the assessment by RAND: "The Army is not ready to fight in urban combat."[51]

Recommendations

Ultimately, this analysis paints a picture of a military coming to terms with growing security challenge for this century. While the combined services can be commended for beginning to push urban warfare thinking forward, the central challenge of such operations—the presence of large-scale human populations—remains beyond direct and sustained analysis within US military operational guidance.

In light of the challenges examined above, what is the way forward? How can the US military begin to better prepare its forces to handle the challenges of operating in civilian-dense city environments? While there are a number of initiatives that can help mitigate the multifaceted problems presented by city warfare, three policy foci will produce the greatest benefit.

First, US military doctrine and guidance, particularly within the Army and Marine Corps, must be updated to apply the hard-won lessons of recent and historical cases of urban combat. As noted by defense

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48   Gentile et al., *Reimagining the Character*.

49   Yuna Huh Wong, *Ignoring the Innocent: Non-Combatants in Urban Operations and in Military Models and Simulations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2006); and Rory Beaumont and Peter McCarthy, "Civilian Cost of Battle for Falluja Emerges," *Guardian*, November 13, 2004.

50   John Spencer, "Crossing the Street," Modern War Institute, USMA, October 30, 2018; Margarita Konaev and John Spencer, "The Era of Urban Warfare Is Already Here," Foreign Policy Research Institute, March 21, 2018; and John Spencer, "Army Doctrine and the Urban Battlefield," Modern War Institute, USMA, January 1, 2020, podcast, accessed January 10, 2020.

51   Gentile et al., *Reimagining the Character*, xiii.

experts, the military's lack of understanding cities and their human architectures will eventually lead to strategic incoherence and operational failure.[52] Importantly, the most salient aspects of city environments—high-density human populations and the likelihood of mass civilian casualties—must be directly and systematically incorporated into such warfighting doctrine. To provide effective guidance, US military doctrine on urban warfare must systematically address the various impacts outlined in this article and, in particular, the operational and tactical challenges civilians present in conflict.

Second, the US military must rapidly develop operational and tactical training that emulates as realistically and authentically as possible the challenges posed by urban operations in population-dense environments. Current training environments such as the Asymmetric Warfare Training Center at Fort A. P. Hill, the Shughart-Gordon training complex at Fort Polk, or even the Atterbury-Muscatatuck Urban Training Center in Indiana are too small and sparsely developed to simulate the true complexity and demands of large-scale urban operations.[53]

As part of this initiative, the Department of Defense must allocate major resources to ensure training reflects the operational and tactical challenges of urban combined arms operations. Such training must be conducted in a large setting densely populated with enough "civilian" and "enemy" actors to approximate the chaotic urban terrain of global cities. Above all else, scenarios must provide intensive and realistic urban training to US forces.

Third, the military must begin systematically preparing servicemembers for the psychological and moral challenges complicating combat in civilian-dense environments. Far beyond annual PowerPoint briefings on LOAC, the Defense Department must develop programs that integrate the efforts of commanders, chaplains, behavioral health specialists, and even ethicists, philosophers, and other salient actors to prepare combatants for urban combat. Such programs will mitigate psychological harm resulting from combat operations. Additionally, US military leadership must prioritize reintegration efforts that mitigate psychological and moral harms combatants face upon returning home from urban warfare.

Conclusion

American military planners are beginning to understand that continued engagement in major combat operations is a matter of when, not if. In the words of General Stephen J. Townsend, former commander of the Combined Joint Task Force–Operation Inherent Resolve, "We're going to see battle in megacities and there's little way to avoid it."[54]

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52   Alice Hills, "Deconstructing Cities: Military Operations in the Urban Era," *Journal of Conflict Studies* 22, no. 2 (August 1, 2002): 99.

53   John Spencer, "The Army Needs an Urban Warfare School and It Needs It Soon," Modern War Institute, USMA, April 5, 2017.

54   Stephen J. Townsend quoted in Joe Lacdan, "Warfare in Megacities: A New Frontier in Military Operations," US Army, May 24, 2018.

Given this growing likelihood of urban conflict in the coming decades, large-scale human populations and the potential for mass civilian casualties have significant implications for the US military. Strategic, operational, tactical, and combatant impacts will affect the military's ability to achieve victory on the battlefield and the health and well-being of the fighting force. Current doctrine, however, omits the impacts of civilian populations and the potential for mass civilian casualties. The military has begun to focus on these new operational realities.[55] But for the success of the military, US commanders must incorporate the information into their military doctrine and training before America is again called to engage in grueling urban combat.

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55 Todd South, "The Future Battlefield: Army, Marines Prepare for 'Massive' Fight in Megacities," *Military Times*, March 6, 2018.