

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 47
Number 2 *Parameters Summer 2017*

Article 9

Summer 6-1-2017

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Recommended Citation

Lionel M. Beehner, Benedetta Berti & Michael T. Jackson, "The Strategic Logic of Sieges in Counterinsurgencies," *Parameters* 47, no. 2 (2017), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol47/iss2/9>

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The Strategic Logic of Sieges in Counterinsurgencies

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the strategic logic of siege warfare in counterinsurgencies and questions the perception that siege warfare as an effective and relatively low-cost form of counterinsurgency. Sieges do allow the besieging side to conserve its military resources, avoid direct contact with the enemy, and minimize a rapid escalation of civilian casualties. Yet, on a strategic level, siege warfare is ineffective without major outside military support or the willingness to use overwhelming force.

Sieges, among the oldest and most recognized forms of warfare, are often poorly understood by military planners and policymakers alike. Siege warfare is almost completely absent from current US military doctrine. From the Joint perspective, the term “siege” does not appear in, and is not defined in, either the Joint capstone document discussing Joint operations, the Joint doctrinal publication providing the fundamental principles of Joint operations, or the *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*.¹ Similarly, siege is not included or defined in the US Army Doctrinal Reference Publication 1-02 *Terms and Military Symbols*. Nor does the term appear in the Army doctrinal publication discussing Army operations or the specific doctrine covering offensive and defensive operations.² There is some discussion of siege warfare in the US Army Field Manual 3-06 *Urban Operations*; however, the majority of that discussion is in an appendix focusing on a single case study regarding the siege of Beirut in 1982.³

Interestingly, that discussion indicates a list of factors deemed central to the success of siege warfare that include understanding the importance of information and psychological operations, preserving close combat capability, avoiding the attrition approach, minimizing collateral damage, controlling essential services and critical infrastructure, separating noncombatants from combatants, and transitioning control to civil authorities as quickly as possible.⁴ Even so, these lessons have

The authors would like to thank Jillian Kutner for her research assistance as well as Alexander Downes, Liam Collins, John Spencer, Devlin Winkelstein, and the International Studies Association 2017 participants and panelists who provided helpful feedback incorporated in this article.

1 US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), *Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States*, Joint Publication (JP) 1 (Washington, DC: JCS, 2013); JCS, *Joint Operations*, JP 3-0 (Washington, DC: JCS, 2011); and JCS, *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms* (Washington, DC: JCS, March 2017).

2 Headquarters, US Department of the Army (HQDOA), *Terms and Military Symbols*, Army Doctrinal Reference Publication (ADRP) 1-02 (Washington, DC: HQDOA, 2016); HQDOA, *Unified Land Operations*, ADRP 3-0 (Washington, DC: HQDOA, 2012); and HQDOA, *Offense and Defense*, ADRP 3-90 (Washington, DC: HQDOA, 2012).

3 HQDOA, *Urban Operations*, Field Manual (FM) 3-06 (Washington, DC: HQDOA, 2006), A1–A7.

4 *Ibid.*, A4–A7.

not been well integrated into the doctrinal frameworks of offensive or defensive urban operations. In fact, sieges are not included as a form of offensive maneuver or a type of urban offensive operations.⁵ Similarly, little academic research theorizes about the tactical and the strategic advantages of siege warfare as a tool of counterinsurgency. Moreover, most of the existing literature on siege warfare hails from strategic studies or military historiography and focuses primarily on the use of sieges in the context of conventional interstate wars.⁶

This article fills that gap by addressing the logic, motivations, and some of the internal contradictions of siege warfare in modern counterinsurgencies. The authors predict siege warfare will become even more relevant in the future if urban migration patterns persist since counterinsurgencies will be carried out increasingly in dense urban environments or megacities, not in the jungles of Southeast Asia or the empty deserts of Mesopotamia.⁷ Still, few academic studies have looked at sieges in the context of modern counterinsurgencies, which are increasingly asymmetrical, urban, and fought with methods—including the use of chemical weapons or the deliberate targeting of civilians—that are blunt violations of international humanitarian law.

Siege Warfare and Counterinsurgencies

A siege is any attempt by an adversary to control access into and out of a town, neighborhood, or other terrain of strategic significance to achieve a military or political objective. The military objective of a siege during the Middle Ages was to drive out enemy forces by weakening their defenses and denying them access to reinforcements. In effect, sieges provided a way to subdue an enemy while limiting direct hostilities and reducing one's own casualties. Whereas strong fortifications during medieval times favored the defense, more infantry weapons from cheaper iron in modern warfare favored the offense.⁸ But in the contemporary era, given the greater density of urban terrain, siege warfare is arguably more challenging for the offense. Even with the assistance of Russian arms and aircraft, for example, the stronger Syrian military was unable to dislodge the modest Syrian rebel forces from entrenched positions in Aleppo for most of 2016.

The typical modus operandi of siege warfare dating back to Roman times has been one of conquest. In counterinsurgency, however, the military objective is often not conquest but control of territory. Counterinsurgency is largely seen as either enemy-centric—focused on defeating the foe militarily—or population-centric—focusing on separating the insurgents from the civilian population.⁹ In the latter case, the use of force does not typically revolve around a large concentration

5 Ibid., 7–12.

6 See Harrison E. Salisbury, *The 900 Days: The Siege of Leningrad* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969); P. F. Purton, *A History of the Early Medieval Siege, c. 450–1220* (Woodbridge, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2009); and J. Bowyer Bell, *Besieged: Seven Cities under Siege* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2006).

7 On these urbanization trends, see David Kilcullen, *Out of the Mountains: The Coming Age of the Urban Guerrilla* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

8 Stephen Van Evera, "Offense, Defense, and the Causes of War," *International Security* 22, no. 4 (Spring 1998): 5–43. doi:10.1162/isec.22.4.5.

9 Efraim Inbar and Eitan Shamir, "What After Counter-Insurgency? Raiding in Zones of Turmoil," *International Affairs* 92, no. 6 (November 2016): 1427–41. doi:10.1111/1468-2346.12751.

of firepower per se, but rather lighter foot patrols and targeted attacks that deny the enemy their center of gravity: the population.¹⁰ This type of counterinsurgency has been framed as a fight between the state and the insurgency over the allegiance of the population.

Accordingly, counterinsurgency does not require killing as many of the enemy as possible or retaking all the contested territory, but rather winning the population over to the state's or counterinsurgent's side. Put otherwise, winning battles is less important than effective governance that pacifies the population and provides public goods. A core tenet of US counterinsurgency doctrine practiced over the past decade has indeed been to selectively target hostile parties and forcibly separate them from the local civilian population.¹¹ Under this logic, insurgencies are seen as armed competitions for locals' allegiance. Greater control over territory provides counterinsurgents with greater information about the enemy, which allows the counterinsurgent forces to avoid indiscriminate violence and deny the insurgents a base of popular support.¹²

The origins of this strategy date back to the British counterinsurgency in Malaya (1948–60) as well as the Strategic Hamlet Program from the Vietnam War (1954–75).¹³ Then, as now, the philosophy was to isolate entire villages—to separate insurgents forcibly from civilians. Even for counterinsurgencies employing a more punishment-driven strategy heavy on firepower, the aim is not to eliminate the population per se but rather to control and to prevent it from supporting the insurgency.

The military objective of enemy-centric and population-centric counterinsurgencies overlaps with that of modern siege warfare, which is to isolate the population by force. Also like siege warfare, population-centric counterinsurgencies require patience. Data collected from 1900 show the average siege lasts longer than 12 months.¹⁴ In Aleppo, for example, the campaign of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's regime to besiege the eastern side of the city lasted for over three years, with little movement in the lines of control, before the Russian intervention in September 2015 facilitated the full encirclement of the rebel-held pockets there, speeding up the eventual capitulation.

A key difference between population-centric counterinsurgency and siege warfare, however, is the geography of force: in the former, security and the insurgency's clearing and holding areas begin at the center of a city, before slowly moving outwardly, much like a spreading oil spot.¹⁵ By contrast, siege warfare generally takes an outside-in approach whereby

10 Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

11 Sir Robert Grainger Thompson, *Defeating Communist Insurgency: The Lessons of Malaya and Vietnam* (New York: F. A. Praeger, 1966).

12 Kalyvas, *Logic of Violence*. This logic provides the intellectual backbone of the “clear, hold, and build” model applied in Iraq after 2006, as US soldiers moved out of forward operating bases (FOBs) and engaged in smaller-scale military patrols to liberate and expand security in areas previously held by insurgents.

13 For more on the intellectual origins of US counterinsurgency, see Conrad C. Crane, *Cassandra in Oge: Counterinsurgency and Future War* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2016).

14 Data varies but counterinsurgencies typically last over nine years. Seth G. Jones, *Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan*, RAND Counterinsurgency Study Volume 4 (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008).

15 Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr, “How to Win in Iraq,” *Foreign Affairs* 84, no. 5 (September/October 2005): 87–104.

counterinsurgents seize territory along a city's outskirts and slowly enclose the enemy.

Not unlike counterinsurgencies at large, siege warfare introduces a number of perverse incentives among combatants and noncombatants alike.¹⁶ First, siege warfare may be advantageous for the besieged side as it allows it time to regroup and rearm, to hold key terrain under stalemate conditions, and to signal strength to outside powerbrokers capable of pushing for a ceasefire. Paradoxically, a siege can lead to strengthening the level of dependency and control a rebel group has on the civilian population. Moreover, a siege can perversely generate economic benefits for the besieged group by creating self-sustaining "siege economies" created by actions such as aid manipulation and smuggling.¹⁷ Siege warfare thus holds some strategic logic for both besieged and besieger.

Siege warfare, while tactically attractive to counterinsurgents, is strategically ineffective unless two conditions are met: first, the counterinsurgency must be willing to use overwhelming force, which includes indiscriminate violence or scorched earth tactics. Second, there must be a forceful military intervention on behalf of the besieger by an outside power.¹⁸ Otherwise, the siege effectively becomes a protracted war of attrition that favors the side with sufficient will and resources to outlast the other. Considering the dense terrain of today's cities and the unwillingness of democracies to sustain heavy losses, siege warfare to gain territory is only advantageous to the besieger who enjoys the support of outside backers or who is willing to use overwhelming force.¹⁹ Thus, siege warfare, whether to protect the population from harm or to prevent it from joining the fight, should only be used to isolate a territory similar to Sadr City, a Shiite slum in Baghdad (2004–2008).²⁰

The Strategic Logic of Siege Warfare

Western military strategists debate counterinsurgency tactics and strategies that focus on winning over the population's loyalty. Primarily nondemocratic states have sought the opposite objective—to starve an enemy populace into capitulation—thus robbing the insurgency's base of popular support. This approach is driven by a common set of assumptions. First, laying siege to an area appears a cost-effective way to be perceived as staying on the offensive, conserving resources for battles elsewhere, and avoiding a large-scale atrocity that might provoke an outside intervention on behalf of the besieged.²¹ Sieges allow armies to keep the enemy geographically contained in urban areas and to prevent their resupply while minimizing the besieger's own casualties by avoiding direct combat. These benefits can be especially important when

16 See Stathis N. Kalyvas and Matthew Adam Kocher, "How 'Free' Is Free Riding in Civil Wars?: Violence, Insurgency, and the Collective Action Problem," *World Politics* 59, no. 2 (January 2007): 177–216.

17 Peter Andreas, *Blue Helmets and Black Markets: The Business of Survival in the Siege of Sarajevo* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

18 Alexander B. Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

19 For a challenge to this logic based on the argument that democracies may be more willing to engage in indiscriminate violence because it is perceived as winning the war more quickly given the costs democratic leaders face if they do not win a war, see Downes, *Targeting Civilians*.

20 "The April 2004 Battle of Sadr City," US Army Center of Military History, April 21, 2014, http://www.history.army.mil/news/2014/140421a_sadrCity.html.

21 Downes, *Targeting Civilians*, 158–59.

a great parity of military power exists between the opposing sides and the advancing army does not possess the human, financial, or military resources to seize and control the city outright.

Second, siege warfare seems an attractive option for both types of counterinsurgencies when civil wars drag on for years, becoming a stalemate; thus, the counterinsurgency becomes a war of attrition, redolent of World War I trench warfare. In Syria, for example, dozens of cities suffered prolonged and repeated sieges between 2012 and 2016. Infamous examples include the brutal siege of Madaya, a town in the rural Damascus governorate, where a Syrian and Hezbollah-backed siege culminated in the complete lock-down of the city in June 2015 and led to a severe humanitarian crisis.²² With military checkpoints and antipersonnel landmines preventing the delivery of goods into, and civilians' departure from, the besieged area, Syrians in Madaya were literally starved to death.²³ A similar account emerged in the Palestinian refugee camp of Yarmouk that former UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon described as the "deepest circle of hell."²⁴

Moreover, sieges can displace the populations of key embattled areas. This depopulation deprives the insurgency of human resources and demoralizes the rebellion, while it renews manpower and international assistance for the government. It can also strengthen a regime's claim to legitimacy by allowing it to rule over the majority of the population.

To be sure, technology has also changed the intensity, lethality, and length of siege warfare. Besieging forces now rely more on heavy and indiscriminate bombardment by air and artillery as a form of psychological warfare and as a method of increasing the risk and cost of rebel and civilian refusals to surrender. These mechanisms also blunt the tools counterinsurgents have at their disposal, especially when there is poor intelligence on the enemy.²⁵

But this can be counterproductive—for instance, indiscriminate targeting of civilians, despite international rules barring such uses of force, remains widespread but arguably, counterproductive, especially in non-expeditionary counterinsurgencies. In the siege of Grozny, "indiscriminate bombing and shelling turned the local population against the Russians" largely because the Russians were attacking their own people who were living in the center of the city.²⁶

Other exogenous conditions of modern warfare that should favor the defense exist. First, the increasing density of urban areas, subterranean infrastructure, and suburban sprawl, along with the role of networked populations, can increase connections between the insurgency and the population, allow undetected mobilization of insurgent forces, and provide a buffer zone advancing armies must penetrate to advance.

22 Editorial Board, "The Siege of Madaya Casts a Shadow on Syrian Peace Efforts," *Washington Post*, January 9, 2016; and Human Rights Council (HRC), *Report of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, A/HRC/33/55 (New York: United Nations, 2016).

23 "Syria: Siege and Starvation in Madaya," *Medecins Sans Frontieres*, January 7, 2016, <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/article/syria-siege-and-starvation-madaya>.

24 AFP, "U.N. Chief: Yarmouk Camp Now 'Deepest Circle of Hell' in Syria," *Al Arabiya English*, April 10, 2015.

25 Kalyvas and Kocher, "How 'Free'?"

26 Timothy L. Thomas, "The Battle of Grozny: Deadly Classroom for Urban Combat," *Parameters* 29, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 87–102.

Second, the glacial pace of sieges can effectively freeze a conflict, since lines of control rarely budge much during the operational phase: a siege is mostly an all-or-nothing campaign of attrition, not one to gain ground or shift momentum. This dynamic can allow insurgents time to regroup, mobilize the population, and boost morale even though food and ammunition may be in short supply. Civilians in cities can weather severe hardships almost indefinitely.

Third, a siege can foster the development of dysfunctional, yet self-sustaining, siege economies. In Sarajevo, a small core of Bosnian soldiers relied heavily on ordinary citizens who took up arms to protect the city. These ad hoc groups of citizen-soldiers organized around existing social structures with little or no immediate access to military materials or resources. They relied heavily on supply routes the Bosnian Serbs purposefully left open.²⁷ The most notable was a tunnel system connecting Sarajevo to Bosnian-controlled territory beyond the city's limits. This underground network became the Bosnian army's main way of transporting food, humanitarian supplies, and weapons into the city and prevented Sarajevo from deteriorating to the point of complete chaos and worsening the humanitarian crisis.²⁸

Finally, a siege can signal resolve, determination, and commitment to an insurgency's goals at a fairly low cost to both outside parties and potential recruits. This advantage can also provide perverse incentives for the modern insurgent who may, even at the risk of great civilian suffering, favor hunkering down to fighting their enemy, retreating, or melting into the countryside to fight a Maoist-style guerrilla war.

In sum, despite its growing popularity as a counterinsurgency strategy, siege warfare rarely is effective to defeat an enemy, seize or control important terrain, or change the balance of power to end a war—barring a major outside intervention or a willingness on the part of the counterinsurgent to nearly level the area under siege. To better illustrate this point, two short case studies of the sieges of Aleppo and Grozny counterintuitively reveal some of the tactical and strategic limitations of siege warfare, short of relying on overwhelming indiscriminate force and external backing.

Case Study: Aleppo (2013–2016)

Beginning in 2013, the Syrian regime of President al-Assad attempted to lay siege to eastern Aleppo, a small enclave that gradually became choked from all sides by government-controlled forces. With about 25,000 troops initially, the regime lacked the material strength to occupy the area and struggled to take and to hold territory, especially in this dense urban terrain, without sustaining high casualties and carrying out an extensive house-to-house counterinsurgency campaign. So, instead of attempting a ground assault to retake eastern Aleppo, the regime began a series of offensive maneuvers aimed at encircling the rebel-held pockets of the city, cutting off their supply lines, and restricting their

²⁷ Michael Jackson, Samuel Ruppert, and David Stanford, *Contemporary Battlefield Assessment—Bosnia and Herzegovina* (West Point, NY: Modern War Institute, 2015).

²⁸ Andreas, *Blue Helmets*.

access to basic services such as electricity and water.²⁹ At the same time, through systematic airstrikes and artillery shelling, the regime focused on targeting civilians and combatants alike, traumatizing Aleppo's civilians into a mass exodus. Meanwhile, through fortified positions and airpower, the regime strengthened its own positions in the city, creating a static frontline.³⁰ By encircling eastern Aleppo, Assad's forces gained control of the surrounding governorate with aerial bombardments, laying the foundation for the movement of ground forces composed of Syrian army and militias.³¹ While destroying civilian infrastructure, these operations also complicated the work of international and local humanitarian actors on the ground.

But, the push to encircle and besiege eastern Aleppo also revealed the Syrian military's weaknesses. Siege operations alone were unable to force capitulation even though the enemy's advance was halted and an incredibly high price tag was imposed on the rebels and the civilians living under their control. Despite the high reliance on foreign and domestic militias, the encirclement operations proceeded slowly and suffered from repeated setbacks, revealing just how overextended the regime and its allies were. Yet, while not decisive, the encircling maneuvers contained the opposition and forced a painful stalemate, all while conserving force and avoiding the high cost of storming and holding the rebel neighborhoods. Moreover, the siege, combined with sustained aerial attacks, forcefully displaced the population, which effectively reduced the number of people under rebel control.

The Russian military intervention in Aleppo during September 2015 as well as its active and increased air support for the Syrian Army and its allies—especially after December 2015—was, in this context, highly valuable to the regime, allowing the balance of power in the battle to shift. Rebels accused the Russians of carrying out a “scorched earth” policy of counterinsurgency redolent of the siege of Grozny.³²

For the regime, Russia's intervention was a game changer facilitating a key breakthrough. In February 2016, the regime and its allied forces cut off the rebels' northern supply lines to the Turkish border, known as the Azaz corridor, further restricting goods and people to and from rebel-controlled pockets in Eastern Aleppo.³³ The complete encirclement, in the summer of 2016, cut off the last rebel supply line, Castello Road, trapping roughly 300,000 civilians.³⁴ Over the following months, Russia's heavy bombing of eastern Aleppo, including its civilian infrastructure, combined with the tight siege and the withholding of humanitarian assistance eventually led to the regime's advance into the embattled city, the rebels' capitulation in December 2016, and the forced displacement of tens of thousands of people.

29 Caerus Associates, *Mapping the Conflict in Aleppo, Syria* (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Caerus / American Security Project, 2014).

30 Christopher Kozak, *An Army in All Corners: Assad's Campaign Strategy in Syria*, Middle East Security Report 26 (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, 2015).

31 HRC, *Report*.

32 “The Agony of Aleppo,” *Economist*, October 1, 2016.

33 Fabrice Balanche, “The Battle of Aleppo Is the Center of the Syrian Chessboard,” Policywatch 2254, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, February 5, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-battle-of-aleppo-is-the-center-of-the-syrian-chessboard>.

34 HRC, *Report*.

Case Study: Grozny (1999–2000)

The five-month-long siege of Grozny by Russian forces during the early phase of the second Chechen war isolated the city, which was an indigenous separatist enclave in the North Caucasus region, as a way of compelling local Chechens to forego their struggle for separation. The Russians had suffered a humiliating defeat during the first Chechen war (1994–96), and the force they brought to bear in the final months of 1999 against 3,000 to 6,000 Chechen rebels reflected the challenges they faced during the previous ill-fated campaign.³⁵ At the time, foreign witnesses described Grozny as the most leveled city they had ever seen.³⁶

The plan included an intensive and indiscriminate bombing campaign with airstrikes and heavy artillery barrages from a nearby ridge to wear down the Chechen defenses and isolate the city; then Russian ground troops would initiate a ground offensive with small units. In December 1999, the commanding officer on the ground, General Viktor Kazantsev, said the city was fully blockaded on all sides.³⁷ The campaign sparked a great deal of controversy as there were still some 40,000 civilians holed up in central Grozny without supplies and subjected to the violence and chaos “despite pledges from senior military figures . . . that there would be no Russian assault on Grozny while ‘a single civilian’ remained.”³⁸

In the previous siege of Grozny, similar “indiscriminate bombing and shelling turned the local population against the Russians” largely because there were Russian civilians living in the center of the city and so the Russians were attacking their own people.³⁹ Before the second attempt, the Russians dropped pamphlets over the city that warned civilians of the imminent force and even encouraging rebels to accept “safe conduct passes” allowing them to leave the city without punishment.⁴⁰ Yet, there were widespread reports of Russian soldiers firing upon refugees who were leaving the city and invading while civilians were still present.⁴¹

The Chechen forces were surprisingly strong and resilient, even in the face of heavy air strikes, forcing Russian ground forces to engage the rebels within the city itself. Much of this resilience stemmed from successful application of previous tactical experience from the first Chechen war. The rebels were also well armed and, having used the bombardment period to build up various bunkers within the city, well fortified.⁴² These preparations enabled the Chechen rebels to ambush the initial ground force invasion and destroy an entire Russian convoy.⁴³

The Russian forces quickly learned from their initial underestimation of the rebel capabilities, increased their bombardments, and leveled huge

35 “Grozny to fall ‘in days,’” BBC News, December 15, 1999.

36 Jeremy Bowen, Doris Meissner, Lina Sergie Attar, and Joshua Landis, interview with Joshua Johnson, *How to Turn Things around In Syria*, 1A, WAMU broadcast, January 30, 2017, <http://the1a.org/shows/2017-01-30/how-to-turn-things-around-in-syria>.

37 “Russia denies killings during Grozny assault,” BBC News, December 5, 1999.

38 Ian Traynor and Amelia Gentleman, “Russians in Grozny Bloodbath,” *Guardian*, December 15, 1999.

39 Thomas, “Battle of Grozny.”

40 Michael R. Gordon, “Russians Issue an Ultimatum to Rebel City,” *New York Times*, December 7, 1999.

41 “Russians Fired on Refugees” BBC News, December 4, 1999.

42 “Russians Ambushed in Grozny” BBC News, December 16, 1999.

43 Traynor and Gentleman, “Russians in Grozny Bloodbath.”

swatches of the city. The Chechen fighters they encountered resisted, exploiting the terrain while luring the Russians into interconnected firing positions. Aslambek Ismailov led the Chechens to fortify the city with antitank ditches, trenches, and landmines along the perimeter. The rebels boarded up and booby-trapped buildings pockmarked from the previous war.

Allegations of Russian war crimes, including the use of chemical weapons, linger in the decades since the second Chechen war, and contribute to inconclusive estimates of civilian deaths during the siege. Ultimately, the combination of complete isolation, air strikes, and overwhelming and unrestrained force proved too much for the Chechen rebels, who fled into the mountains in early February 2000.⁴⁴ Unfortunately for the Chechen forces, the Russians created a false sense of safety that allowed small groups to escape through a mined escape route. Some Chechens did survive the minefield, swearing to one day recapture the city they left to the Russians. While there were small-scale skirmishes with guerrillas in the years that followed, the Russians firmly controlled the city and actively began reconstruction in 2006.⁴⁵ Though strategically counterproductive and blatantly disregarding international humanitarian law, especially regarding nonexpeditionary counterinsurgencies, the use of scorched-earth tactics during the siege derived a tactical “victory” for Russia.

Applications to US Military Doctrine

Neither Russia nor Syria possessed an operational doctrine for siege warfare in the context of carrying out nonexpeditionary counterinsurgency. Similarly, US military forces are unprepared to fight in dense urban environments against violent nonstate actors who have deep networks, possess superior knowledge of local terrain, use civilians as human shields, and fight indirectly. A recent case illustrates this point: US-backed Iraqi forces failed to cordon off a strategic corridor west of Mosul in 2015, which allowed Islamic State militants to escape and resupply. Although the importance of megacities in modern warfare has been emphasized, US Army doctrine should also address the critical aspects of siege tactics to urban warfare as a first step in correcting the lack of training, organization, and matériel for urban or siege warfare. Moreover, the current body of knowledge contains surprisingly few rigorous studies on the conduct of siege warfare in modern urban environments that are dense, networked, and reliant on informal economies. As a greater risk of civilian casualties arguably exists on these battlespaces, identification and mitigation of the specific challenges of siege warfare should also be undertaken.

The short cases outlined above highlight some of the challenges with siege warfare in the modern era that justify the Clausewitzian admonition that the worst policy is to attack a fortified city.⁴⁶ In Aleppo, the siege may have lasted indefinitely or failed without the strong external intervention from Russian airpower as well as Hezbollah, Iranian, and

44 Human Rights Watch, “World Report 2000: The Russian Federation,” Human Rights Watch, 2001, <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/wr2k1/europe/russian.html>.

45 Andrew E. Kramer, “Chechnya’s Capital Rises from the Ashes, Atop Hidden Horrors,” *New York Times*, April 30, 2008.

46 Bell, *Besieged*, 1.

Iranian-backed forces. The siege of Grozny achieved the Russians' military objective, but only through overwhelming force that included immense bloodshed and leveling the city. Some might quibble that these two cases are not generalizable given the fact they were carried out by authoritarian regimes who were unconcerned with protecting civilian lives or using indiscriminate force. But these examples do highlight the challenges every military force faces when laying siege to a piece of complex or unfamiliar urban terrain.

The United States, rightly unwilling to conduct scorched-earth campaigns such as Russia's and frequently unable to rely on allied support, faces unique challenges when conducting urban military operations in the context of counterinsurgencies. Since such types of warfare cannot always be avoided, the US military should not only include but prioritize siege warfare as part of its Joint doctrine. Notably, the doctrine should establish best practices to seal off terrain, provide humanitarian aid, avoid civilian casualties, and ultimately break a siege to prepare the military for future urban combat operations in complex terrain.

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Michael T. Jackson

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