



Royal United Services Institute  
for Defence and Security Studies

Conference Report

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Past, Present, Future

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RUSI Conference Report, March 2018



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# Urban Warfare: Past, Present, Future

**R**USI CONVENED A conference on urban warfare on 2 February 2018, in conjunction with the Institution of Royal Engineers and the Royal Engineers Historical Society. The conference took place on the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the German capitulation at Stalingrad and used the battle as an anchor for discussions. The conference was designed to stimulate a discussion over the nature of urban warfare for the British Army, to determine whether engagements in this environment had changed and if so, how. Army personnel participated in the conference along with around 180 international delegates from the academic, government, military, non-government, charity and industrial sectors.

## The Enduring Nature and Truths of Urban Warfare

The conference identified some key eternal truths of urban warfare, common to the siege of Troy (1250 BC), Sadr City, Iraq (2007), Aleppo, Syria (2015) or the Donbas, Ukraine (2018). The brutal, feral and destructive nature of combat in urban environments was clear from remarks made about Stalingrad by historians and survivors. Furthermore, it was possible to draw parallels between historic urban conflicts and other facets of modern warfare. Professor David Betz, of King's College London's War Studies Department, contrasted the battles of Buenos Aires (1807) and modern hybrid warfare techniques in compelling detail.

Common to all instances of urban warfare is the way in which the environments typically draw in vast amounts of human and material resources. It was also a notable historical trend that armed forces conveniently forgot this factor when designing force structures between major wars. Thinking about urban warfare in a systematic way and with a systems approach was not often undertaken, making armies ill-prepared for conflict and interventions in urban areas.

Given the wide recognition of this factor, it was peculiar that the following debate over whether urban warfare was somehow discretionary was inconclusive. The lure and promise of technological solutions and the genius of armed manoeuvre have not historically allowed states to avoid fighting in urban environments simply because it is the most complex, demanding and risky domain. The battlegrounds on which armies have fought adversaries are rarely those chosen to suit convenient models. They are more often dictated by the enemy and the political objectives of the campaign.

A key characteristic of urban warfare that emerged was the way in which boundaries, rules, behaviours and presumptions of the acceptable in such circumstances are broken and remade. The descent to the lowest levels of warfare techniques and procedures was evident from historical record and contemporary examples in Iraq, Syria and Ukraine. Given such background,

it appeared as if success in urban warfare was dependent on: the political and military will to fight whatever the cost; the availability and use of precision firepower; and the belligerent best able to leverage all aspects of combined arms warfare against the adversary.

Yet the conference also heard that urban warfare was rarely binary, with resistance movements and factions within forces, and third parties attempting to mitigate impacts for the common good or to perpetuate the conflict for their own ends. While the fluidity and chaos of urban warfare did not demonstrate marked differences from modern experience in terms of lethality, destructive impact or challenges associated with resupply and weapon usage, the conference heard that there were ways of thinking about urban warfare that indicated that this unique and most challenging warfare environment had changed.

## Is There Anything New Under the Sun?

Delegates disagreed over whether the rise of digital access and the penetration of information across the urban domain made warfare in that environment significantly different from historical examples or from other areas. There was no dispute over whether more information was available, or that knowledge of urban fighting spread regionally and globally. Numerous cases were also cited of aiming conventional firepower against targets using mobile connected devices and commercially available apps. However, there was no compelling case that this single facet had changed urban conflict.

Other factors that the conference examined included the centralised processing and remote control of infrastructure in cities that was relatively new. Many considered this to be just another data point, while others thought the ability to exercise control over infrastructure could be decisive.

It was also clear that third-party actors continued to operate in urban environments during conflict. Historically, these have always existed and despite new names being applied to them, such as conflict entrepreneurs, militias and profiteers have been recorded as actors wherever fighting occurs. The arrival of charity workers and NGOs that sought to relieve suffering and mitigate the impact of fighting on civilians was a decidedly twenty-first century phenomenon. However, the consensus was that these organisations shaped the political environment in Western states more than they did in altering the nature of fighting itself.

The ability of political decision-makers to take a more active and detailed role in dictating the fighting styles in urban warfare has been apparent since the late twentieth century. The advent of real-time visual communications and the spread of media availability, both mainstream and social media, appear to present politicians with ways of becoming more closely engaged in tactical actions, and appear to lead more dynamically to the electorate. There was no evidence presented to delegates that indicated a positive result from externally triggered political scrutiny.

## Future Opportunities

The conference was told that conceptualising urban warfare as a series of systems and flows could make combat quicker and more exact, enabling the precision firepower available to modern forces to be leveraged to greater effect and impact against the adversary. Beyond the physical and kinetic aspects, considering the urban as an environment itself could be a constraint on the targets of warfare more broadly. Rarely – at least in contemporary warfare – are targets as broad as the general population. Modern warfare, certainly in the urban environment, does not appear to be about civilians. They may assist or hinder fighting and will certainly require attention, but the focus today is on adversaries and participants, not the bystanders.

## Conclusions

The key facets to urban warfare are survivability, lethality and sustainability. These are no different from the core competencies of all combat, nor have they changed markedly for 3,500 years of recorded war histories. The emergence of certain elements, for example the rise of conflict entrepreneurs, ethnic militias and native threats, might appear to make urban warfare different. However, that is not necessarily the case if urban warfare is reduced to part of the wider cognitive objective. In this case, reflexive control of the enemy is key, and the urban environment represents an opportunity to modulate an enemy's behaviours and responses, not just in built-up areas but also in the peri-urban (the areas immediately around urban conurbations), the transitional zone between urban and rural, and the urban hinterland.

As many commentators of modern warfare make clear, declarations of war are unusual, yet states of non-war or un-peace have seemly spread more rapidly since 2003. Compression of conflict levels, as well as compression of political control measures might be changing the character of contemporary warfare, but the enduring truth remains that leaders, warriors and ideas are the decisive elements in this form of combat.

The unpredictable and irrational decisions by leaders and people add an element of uncertainty to a chaotic and fluid warfare architecture. It seems probable that building/creating people and teams capable of antifragile behaviour<sup>1</sup> will be decisive in the future, and professional military education, conditioning and training are key to that.

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1. Antifragile behaviour was defined by Nassim Nicholas Taleb as the ability to thrive in chaos, not simply adaptation to uncertainty and change. Nassim Taleb, *Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder* (London: Penguin, 2012).