

Chapter 74

Smartphone Guns

Shooting Tweets: Killing the “Other” in Palestine

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the increasing use of social media during a 2012 flare up in armed conflict between Hamas and the state of Israel. Through tweet and counter tweet, Israel, Hamas, and digital recruits engage in a duel as lethal to identity as kinetic projectiles. Internet connected devices such as smartphones have become hostile agents through the republishing of social media content. Such devices and social media content have material affects beyond the geographic battlespace. The advent of Internet connected devices and social media content concomitant with their use during armed conflict by hostiles beyond the geographic battlespace suggest that patterns of conflict are rapidly changing calling into question the notion of hostile, hostile acts, and battlespace. In a social media and smartphone saturated era, who and what counts as hostile (people, smartphones, and tweets) is increasingly ambiguous.

TECHNOLGY AND CONFLICT

Technology occupies an agentive role in shaping patterns of conflict throughout history. Herrera (2007), for example, reviews how the introduction of the pike (long spears wielded by foot soldiers) from Switzerland to France in the in the fifteenth century changed how war was fought. Knights in armor on horse-back suddenly became vulnerable, no longer lords of the battlefield or the manor with the introduction to conflict of a single object including new patterns of employing that object in conflict with knights. Similarly, the advent of new technologies such as rapid-fire rifles, machine guns, and more powerful explosives in the late nineteenth century radically altered warfare in the early twentieth century. War on the Western front during World War I became static as soldiers dug trenches and bunkers in response to the new technologies deployed on the battlefields of Flanders and France until the development of a new technology – the tank – returned warfare to an age of maneuver as observed in World War II. In

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the same vein, Singer (2009) argues that the robotics and information revolution will do for warfare and patterns of conflict in the twenty-first century what the industrial revolution did to warfare and patterns of conflict in the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century. While that may be so, perhaps the single most significant development of technology effecting patterns of international conflict is the splitting of the atom that facilitated the development of nuclear weapons and nuclear propulsion systems.

The introduction of nuclear weapons at the end of World War II began to change patterns of conflict between the remaining great powers – the United States and the Soviet Union. The advent of nuclear propulsion enabled the projection of power by naval force at greater distance over longer periods of time the limitations only being food for and fatigue of naval personnel. Combined, nuclear weapons and nuclear propulsion allowed for ballistic missile submarines to ply the deep with vigilance preserving the peace by threatening sudden destruction. War between the two remaining great powers, the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, in the post-World War II era became unimaginable for fear of escalation to the use of nuclear weapons that would end with the destruction of the world. The advent of nuclear weapons and propulsion systems meant that traditional patterns of conflict in which great powers directly challenged each other through force of arms became much more risky. Indirect conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union through proxies and insurgencies during the Cold War took the place of patterns of direct great power conflict. Indirect conflict between the Cold War great powers induced a period of hyperactivity among developing nations as former colonies began to rebel against their colonizers, resorting to guerilla, insurgent, or terror based asymmetric warfare to achieve strategic objectives. Asymmetric warfare became the strategic choice for subaltern revolutionary organizations against better armed, trained, and equipped imperialist masters. As Internet connected devices exploded in the post-Cold War era, a new domain and new tools emerged by which subaltern militants could wage hostilities against superior foes risking little in way of defeat, destruction, or death. Most critically, the emergence of internet connected devices animated by social media technologies enabled poorly armed, trained, and equipped subaltern revolutionary organizations to compete on par with superior foes for influence over conflict narrative.

Conflict narrative is especially critical to democratic politics for its aim is public opinion. Controlling, shaping, or simply influencing conflict narrative is to influence democratic deliberation and opinion formation as to the legitimacy, justice, and conduct of war. It is to undermine or lend support to political leaders that, in democracy, face periodic and regular accountings in the form of elections. A shift in public opinion, owing to a failure to influence conflict narrative, may prove fatal to the prospects for election or re-election of political leaders. Moreover, a shift in public opinion may alter the foreign policy of the state. Conflict narrative is salient to democracy. The fusion of matter, energy, and conflict in internet connected devices and social media speaks to the influence of technology on patterns of democracy, conflict, and the increasing ambiguity of hostile act and who and what counts as a hostile during periods of armed conflict. Shaping conflict narrative about who and what counts as hostile is necessary for influencing public opinion about the legitimacy, justice, and conduct of war waged in the name of a democratic people.

In what follows, the smartphone is relied upon as a useful heuristic device to make the point that the combination of smartphones (hardware) and social media (software) constitutes a new form of weapon in which ordinary people are drawn directly into conflict, as military sanctioned propagandists, through contesting conflict narrative. The smartphone heuristic should be read as a catchall for internet connected devices through which social media may be accessed and used. The choice to use smartphone as heuristic is based on research that forty-three percent of the world adult population owns a smartphone

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