



# Waging Wars Where War Feeds Itself

Col. Erik A. Claessen, Belgian Army



Members of Egypt's leading opposition group, the April 6 Youth Movement, light flares and shout anti-Muslim Brotherhood slogans 6 April 2013 during a rally in front of the prosecutor general's office in Cairo. Thousands of activists took to the streets to mark the fifth anniversary of the founding of the group and to push a long list of demands on then President Mohamed Morsi, including the formation of a more inclusive government, amid a worsening economy. (Photo by Amr Nabil, Associated Press)

In 2011, Robert Gates concisely answered the question, “Which of the world’s hot spots is the Army least prepared for?” In his opinion, “Any future defense secretary who advises the president to again send a big American land army into Asia or into the Middle East or Africa should ‘have his head examined,’ as General MacArthur so delicately put it.”<sup>1</sup> He furthermore stated that “the Army also must confront the reality that the most plausible, high-end scenarios for the U.S. military are primarily naval and air engagements.”<sup>2</sup>

Seven years have passed during which dramatic sociopolitical evolutions have swept through the regions Gates mentioned in his speech. This allows us to subject his observations to a reality check.

Regarding the nature of contemporary American military interventions, he has been spot on. These operations were primarily naval and air engagements, as shown by operations in Libya, Syria, and Iraq. They were also very effective and produced quick results at almost zero casualties. The only problem is that they did not achieve the results that the U.S. government desired. After Mu’ammarr Gaddhafi’s death, Libya descended into a civil war that spilled over to Mali. In eastern Syria and northern Iraq, the decision not to deploy U.S. Army forces in large numbers allowed Kurdish factions to act as proxies. The political and diplomatic recognition they derived from their successes on the ground greatly irritated Turkey, a key NATO ally. In western Syria, Iranian Pasdaran (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) and Lebanese Hezbollah fighters roam at will in support of Bashar al-Assad’s regime under the protection of Russian fighter jets. Of course, this does not necessarily mean that the presence of Army forces on the ground would have led to a more successful conflict termination.

The question is, “What is significant about the regions

Robert Gates mentioned in his speech?” The answer lies in the fact that in large swaths of Asia, the Middle East, and Africa, wars feed themselves.

## Crumbling Natural States

Most countries that constitute these regions

are not stable democracies but crumbling natural states. As Douglass North stated,

The logic of the natural state follows from its method for coping with the problem of violence. Individuals and groups with access to violence form a dominant coalition, granting one another special privileges. These privileges—including limited access to organizations, valuable activities, and assets—create rents. By limiting access to these privileges, members of the dominating coalition create credible incentives to cooperate rather than fight among themselves.<sup>3</sup>

Put simply, the regime of a natural state is blatantly corrupt. However, this simplification hides the subtle mechanisms that stabilize this type of social order. Contrary to a competitive open market economy, the primary objective of a rentier economy is not to maximize wealth but to stabilize the state. Commerce takes the shape of a juxtaposition of rent-generating monopolies that the regime grants to or withholds from individuals at its discretion. To enforce limitations on access to economic resources and opportunities, the regime fields “specialists in violence.”<sup>4</sup> The rents benefit a wealthy elite, who make up approximately 20 percent of the population, while the remaining 80 percent survive at subsistence level. Subsidies that keep the price of vital necessities low guarantee the acquiescence of this vast underprivileged majority.

Natural states emerge organically out of a more primitive social order based on tribes or warlords and do not need a constitution.<sup>5</sup> A person’s power and influence depends on his or her loyalty to the regime. Democracies and open access economies do need constitutions, because their development hinges on citizenship, the concept that everyone is equal under the law. As North stated, “The move from the natural state to an open access order is therefore a move from the world of privileges and personal exchange to one of rights and impersonal exchange.”<sup>6</sup> Decades of stability operations show that this move is not easy to make or to impose.

The events we now describe as the Arab Spring point to a crisis of the natural state. Mass demonstrations in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Yemen, and Syria shook the foundations of the political regimes ruling these natural states. However, the outcome of these events was not the eruption of democracy many expected but rather a descent into a more primitive tribal order.

**Col. Erik A. Claessen,** Belgian army, is the project manager for the Belgian army motorized capability development. He holds an MS from the Belgian Royal Military Academy and an MMAS from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.





The main cause of the crisis is that natural states are not adept at creating wealth. Their economic growth is much lower than the demographic expansion of their population and the increased cost of political oppression. Because elites enjoy privileged access to economic sectors, they have no incentive to stay ahead of competitors. The resulting inefficiencies stifle economic growth. Moreover, the subsidies, which are used to keep the price of vital necessities (e.g., food) within reach of the vast majority that live at subsistence level, eradicate employment in labor-intensive sectors like agriculture and small retail. The result is massive unemployment and migration from rural to urban areas. In turn, this increases the cost of keeping the masses at the subsistence level. While rural populations rely heavily on land to survive, urban dwellers depend on expensive services like sewage, running water, electricity, and trash collection. Because the quality of these services leaves much to be desired, the most entrepreneurial youth leave the country. The resulting diaspora provides the remaining population with social reformist ideas and remittances, leading to the emergence of resistance organizations. Consequently, the specialists in violence, in which the regime's power depends on,

Afghan dealers exchange currency at a money market 11 November 2012 in Kandahar Province, Afghanistan. Such money markets frequently employ *hawala*, a traditional system of money transfer used extensively in the Middle East and Africa, to move large amounts of money without transferring them either physically or via wire transfer through a formal institution such as a bank. Under the system, an agent receives money from a customer at one location, who then—for a small fee—instructs an agent at a different location to pay that amount to a designated recipient of funds at a different location. Since the system is relatively informal, consummated by a handshake, it is difficult to monitor. As a result, it is often used by terrorists or other nefarious agents to transfer funds globally. (Photo by Ahmad Nadeem, Reuters)

are increasingly overstretched. Urban mass demonstrations are much harder to suppress than rural unrest.<sup>7</sup>

### From Rentier Economy to Siege Economy

These evolutions are not new. The civil war that ravaged Algeria during the 1990s had similar causes. In the end, the regime prevailed because the rebels reached utter exhaustion. Based on sieges, a self-sustaining combination of fighting and commerce is the new, emerging development. The profitable character of modern siege warfare precludes the exhaustion of belligerents and



perpetuates the conflict. Put otherwise, the war feeds itself. This also changes the notions of “victory” and “defeat” as respectively being the successful and disastrous conclusion of war. In a war that feeds itself, victory means prospering during the war; and although the destruction of a belligerent still equals defeat for them, it does not end the war. As long as the war exists as a profitable business model, other belligerents will replace those destroyed. In this situation, the main problem of conflict termination is the opposition by spoilers. Spoilers are “leaders and parties who believe that the emerging peace threatens their power, world view, and interests and who use violence to undermine attempts to achieve it.”<sup>8</sup> Their actions protract conflicts and inflate force requirements. The Army is least prepared for campaigns and operations in regions where wars feed themselves because it is near impossible to maintain the permanence necessary “to conduct operations that make enduring the often temporary effects of other kinds of operations.”<sup>9</sup>

To prepare for operations in such hot spots, the Army must develop a strategy that invalidates the besiegers’ business model while requiring only a limited military

A man pours crude oil into a tank inside a make-shift refinery 13 January 2015 in the Aleppo countryside of Syria. From the outset of its early territorial expansion over parts of Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State (IS) funded itself largely by extracting and refining oil from fields it had seized and either selling it locally or exporting it over the Turkish border for international sale. The oil sale proceeds were used to support its military actions as well as its efforts to administer the territory it was trying to incorporate into its new caliphate. As a result, both Russian and U.S. forces made attacking IS oil refineries and convoys, as well as its financial offices, a high priority in order to undercut IS’s ability to sustain itself financially. (Photo by Nour Kelze, Reuters)

deployment. To substantiate this thesis, it is necessary to analyze the conceptual logic of modern sieges.

Throughout history, the military objective of sieges has been to force the besieged city into surrender. By contrast, present-day sieges aim at squeezing all forms of wealth out of the beleaguered area. Modern besiegers operate a set of checkpoints that constrain the transport of goods into and out of this territory. To motivate the fighters who guard the checkpoints, they allow them to extract bribes from people who want to cross. Because the fighters benefit personally, they defend their posts against



any form of attack and do not desert them. As such, the whole operation is low risk, costs next to nothing, and requires very little command and control.

Furthermore, the besieger creates profits by “licensing” smugglers. In Syria, for instance, “Businessmen can buy contracts from the highest levels of the regime in order to have an effective monopoly over the supply of a certain good into the besieged area.”<sup>10</sup> These smugglers bring vital, but cheap, products like fuel and food into the area and move expensive goods—like cars or electrical appliances—out of the area. One would expect the proceeds from the siege economy to be limited, but this is not the case in Syria. Besieged residents are “able to pay for these goods as a result of money transfers from relatives or connections living outside the besieged area.”<sup>11</sup> In Yemen, residents use similar systems:

Although the banking system has been severely damaged by the war, overland trade is facilitated by existing and new *hawala* money-transfer networks ... Businessmen involved in overland trade collect earnings and currency from expatriate Yemenis who hope to send money home.<sup>12</sup>

Modern money transfer systems allow the flow of funds to all corners of the world, even those under assault.

Paradoxically, the defenders of the confined area also benefit from the siege. Smugglers need security to prevent the looting of contraband they bring into the area. Defenders provide this in exchange for payment. Some defenders find niches in the smuggling business themselves by digging tunnels. Others divert international humanitarian aid. One resident of the Ghouta area concisely illustrated the changed character of siege warfare by stating,

There is no siege, this is a lie. How can there be a siege when the head of Islam Army [Jaish al-Islam] can go in and out of Ghouta several times this year and appear in Turkey and Saudi Arabia ... There are arrangements in place to suck the best out of this area, allowing certain actors to benefit, while civilians suffer.<sup>13</sup>

In the end, the focus of the conflict evolved from military to economic objectives.

The siege economy creates new elites and dynamics. Contrary to a rentier economy, managers do not gain positions of influence based on regime affiliation. In a siege economy, managers need real skill (or shrewdness) in

their trade. Likewise, faced with the threat of starvation, the trapped residents do everything they can to increase their productivity. In a functioning natural state, food is subsidized and therefore unprofitable to cultivate. During a siege, residents use every square foot of arable land and transform rooftops into vegetable gardens.<sup>14</sup> Sieges unleash the creativity of all the actors involved. To invalidate the siege warfare’s business model, the Army needs to find a way to leverage this unleashed creativity and self-organization with only a limited military presence.

## Breaking the Siege

The best way to limit military presence is to decline responsibility for wide area security in a conflict area. Although wide area security once figured prominently in Army doctrine, recent conflicts have shown that it is impossible to provide in vast, densely populated areas.<sup>15</sup> This reality dawned on Gates at the start of his tenure, when he had to make a decision he later called one of the most difficult in his career: the extension of “Army combat tours from 12 to 15 months, including for units that had spent less than a year at home.”<sup>16</sup> The strong demographic growth in Africa and the Middle East will only exacerbate this situation. The proliferation of sieges shows that land warfare is no longer about wide area security but controlling flows, corridors, and gateways. In an urbanized world, “territorial rule becomes a tactical option rather than a strategic necessity.”<sup>17</sup> This does not mean that the Army has to revert to sieges itself. On the contrary, the Army needs to develop the ability to break sieges by imposing open access.

Urbanization and global trade have changed the sociopolitical geography. The concept of imposed open access takes these changes into account. Deborah Cowen argues, “New boundaries of belonging are drawn around spaces of circulation. These ‘pipelines’ of flows are not only displacing the borders of national territoriality but also recasting the geographies of law and violence.”<sup>18</sup> A sense of belonging can be stronger in an urban neighborhood than its surrounding rural areas. The reason is that the circulation of people, information, goods, and funds between a mega urban neighborhood and the rest of the world is more important than the circulation between that neighborhood and the surrounding countryside.<sup>19</sup>

By laying siege, modern hostile forces restrict travel while cutting and simultaneously exploiting the physical link and informational and financial ties between

communities, their diasporas, and the global economy. Conversely, imposed open access encourages travel and restores the physical link between neighborhoods and the global economy while simultaneously leveraging a sense of belonging between communities and their diasporas.

Military control of gateways is crucial to the success of imposed open access. The gateway can be a seaport, an airport, a multimodal transport node, or a combination of these three elements. Its two main characteristics are first: (1) the high level of security in the area where logistic activities take place and (2) the massive volume of undisrupted throughput that it can handle between the urbanized conflict area and the global economy. Military control of gateways sets the material conditions for achieving the main objective: imposed open access.

The primary purpose of imposed open access is to lower and maintain contention at a level that local police forces can handle. In megacities, it is impossible to attain this objective by military power. It is, however, easily achievable by administrative effectiveness, or—put differently—by urban policies that make people happy. The way to achieve this objective is to reward emerging initiatives to restart or improve the provisioning of urban essential services. The source of these initiatives matters less than its speed and effectiveness in generating popular support. Initiatives that fail to generate popular support, or worse, require military protection during their development, are not worth pursuing. Worthwhile initiatives typically aim at essential urban services, social security, health care, education, and upward social mobility based on merit and hedonism.

They are best developed by people who are familiar with the local culture and language: the urban dwellers, returning refugees, and members of the diaspora. There are but three tasks that have to remain within the exclusive purview of the military: (1) the protection of the gateway, (2) the standoff targeting of checkpoints that hinder freedom of movement, and (3) the periodical dislocation of spoilers.<sup>20</sup> The reasons are simple. First, because megacities are too large to draw subsistence from the surrounding countryside, any disruption from its connection to the global economy represents a vital threat. Second, to allow the flow of goods through the gateway, it is necessary to ensure freedom of movement between the gateway and the city. Third, because

imposed open access hinges on leveraging creativity, which is unleashed by the urge to survive, the militarily superior actor has to enforce a mechanism that allows the creative to benefit from their talents. This implies the periodic dislocation of spoilers who attempt to turn this creativity into an easy source of rents.

The military requirement to perform these tasks is much lower than those for counterinsurgency or nation building because the gateway is the only area where land forces establish a permanent presence. The protection of the gateway involves providing security and averting any type of disruption to the flow of goods running through it. These goods make it possible to reward administrative effectiveness. Lavish funding and the steady inflow of vital necessities, building materials, machines, tools, and other products will allow fast reconstruction in urban conflict areas, where self-organization leads to administrative effectiveness. Reconstruction will provide jobs, visible progress, and hope for a better future. Neighborhoods where spoilers are active will fare much worse. Starved from funds and cut from the flow of goods, living conditions will remain miserable. This will encourage people to vote with their feet (i.e., move from poorly to well-administered neighborhoods). The resulting depopulation of the former neighborhoods will isolate spoilers from their recruiting and support base.

Dislocating spoilers is an intelligence-driven effort of the military to defeat hostile armed organizations without establishing a permanent military presence in the contested area. Such an operation takes the shape of a bold incursion, where spoilers are active with the objective to take out ringleaders and destroy critical infrastructure like weapon caches and arms production facilities, followed by a swift withdrawal back into the gateway. By definition, this effort is indecisive because defeated spoilers will reemerge in communities where contention levels remain high. Therefore, it is necessary to repeat this type of operation every time the spoilers reach a level of military effectiveness that allows them to disrupt reconstruction in urban conflict areas where contention levels are low.

The civilian requirements for imposed open access consist of an urban administration-in-exile, recruited from refugees and members of the diaspora. An administration-in-exile is necessary because the restoration of administrative effectiveness requires the

presence of many culturally aware, administratively capable, and willing people to stay indefinitely, or for years on end, in the area affected by the conflict.

## Preparation

The military capabilities for imposed open access do not differ much from what is already available. For the military control of the gateway, they consist of perimeter security; access control; and counter-rocket, -artillery, and -mortar capabilities. For the targeting of checkpoints, they consist of standoff precision engagement capabilities. For the periodical dislocation of spoilers, they consist of heavy armor and combat engineering capabilities.

However, the Army should divert resources to develop the administration-in-exile, the main civilian capability for imposed open access. In close cooperation with interagency partners, the Army should recruit a sufficient number of refugees to create a robust deployable urban administrative capability. To that end, the recruited need to receive training concerning the organization of public works, provision of essential services, policing, health care management, and other administrative skills. Preferably, they would receive training as a group with people from the same city of origin. As soon as the military conditions for imposed open access are met, they can return and leverage initiatives of postconflict urban self-organization.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

Rapid demographic growth and urbanization have led to a crisis of the political system that used to stabilize many countries in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. However, the first signs of its demise—known to us as the Arab Spring—have not led to democratization but a new type of siege warfare that is profitable to all belligerents involved and creates a situation wherein war feeds itself. This evolution turns the densely populated regions into the hot spots the Army is least prepared for.

To win such conflicts, the Army has to be able to break the siege. In close cooperation with interagency partners, the Army should divert resources to recruit refugees and members of the diaspora from megacities that are of strategic importance in countries ravaged by conflict. Training in the field of urban administration can transform the recruited into an urban administration-in-exile. By taking military control of gateways that link besieged megacities to the global economy, land forces set conditions for the administration-in-exile to return and leverage local initiatives of urban self-organization. By rewarding urban administrative effectiveness with funding, expertise, and materials for reconstruction, land forces and the returning administration-in-exile can thus trace a path toward peace by making it more profitable than war. ■

## Notes

1. Robert M. Gates, "Secretary of Defense Speech" (speech, U.S. Military Academy, West Point, NY, 25 February 2011), accessed 18 October 2018, <http://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1539>.

2. Ibid.

3. Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, "Violence and the Rise of Open-Access Orders," *Journal of Democracy* 20, no. 1 (January 2009): 55–68.

4. Ibid.

5. Douglass C. North, John Joseph Wallis, and Barry R. Weingast, "The Natural State: The Political-Economy of Non-Development," UCLA International Institute, March 2005, accessed 18 October 2018, <http://international.ucla.edu/media/files/PERG.North.pdf>.

6. Ibid.

7. Contrary to rural unrest, urban mass demonstrations can have the effect of a "run on the power bank." See Talcott Parsons, *Sociological Theory and Modern Society* (New York: Free Press, 1967), chap. 9. "Coercion is like the reserves of a bank. So long as the demands on it are limited, the reserves can be meted out effectively. When there is a run on the bank, however, the reserves are quickly overwhelmed."

8. Stephen John Stedman, "Spoiler Problems in Peace Processes," in *International Conflict Resolution after the Cold War*, ed. Paul C. Stern and Daniel Druckman (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2000), 178.

9. Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office, 2017), 1-8.

10. Will Todman, "Sieges in Syria: Profiteering from Misery," Middle East Institute [MEI] Policy Focus 2016-14 (Washington, DC: MEI, 14 June 2016), accessed 19 October 2018, [http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PF14\\_Todman\\_sieges\\_web\\_0.pdf](http://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/publications/PF14_Todman_sieges_web_0.pdf).

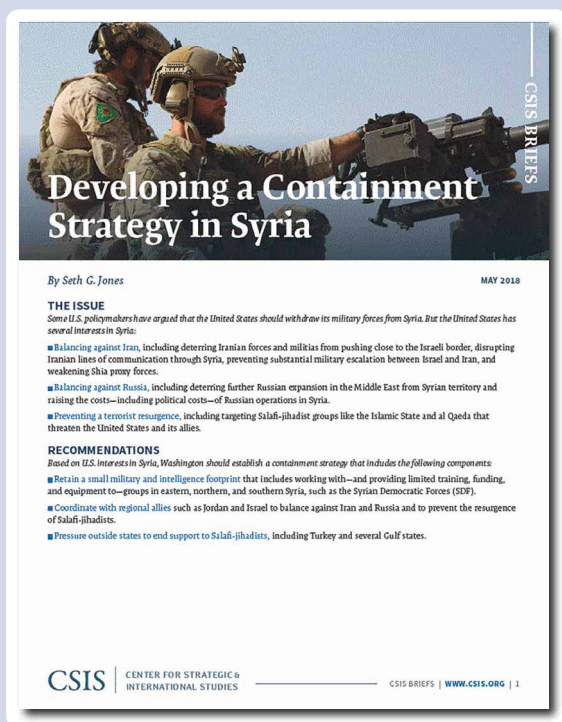
11. Ibid.

12. Peter Salisbury, *Yemen: National Chaos, Local Order* (London: Chatham House, 2017), 26, accessed 19 October 2018, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publication/yemen-national-chaos-local-order>.

13. Resident of Douma, quoted in Rim Turkmani et al., *Countering the Logic of the War Economy in Syria: Evidence from Three Local Areas* (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 30 July 2015), 36–37, accessed 19 October 2018, <http://www.securityintransition.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/Countering-war-economy-Syria2.pdf>.



## WE RECOMMEND



In the face of war weariness and frustration resulting from U.S. involvement in almost two decades of conflict in the Middle East, a distinguished scholar argues for active U.S. engagement and participation in Syrian stabilization and rebuilding operations. In doing so, the author addresses two essential questions: What are U.S. interests in Syria? What should a U.S. strategy consist of moving forward? The online version of the article provides several interactive maps that readers concerned with learning more details of the issues surrounding Syria may find very useful. To view this article, visit [https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/1805117\\_Jones\\_Containment\\_Strategy\\_Syria.pdf](https://csis-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/1805117_Jones_Containment_Strategy_Syria.pdf).

14. Kerina Tull, *Agriculture in Syria* (Leeds, UK: University of Leeds Nuffield Centre for International Health and Development, 26 June 2017) accessed 19 October 2018, <https://gssd.mit.edu/search-gssd/site/agriculture-syria-61425-fri-10-13-2017-1436>.

15. Army Doctrine Publication 3-0, *Unified Land Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2011 [obsolete]), 6. "Offensive, defensive, and stability operations each requires a combination of combined arms maneuver and wide area security; neither core competency is adequate in isolation."

16. Gates, "Secretary of Defense Speech"

17. Deborah Cowen, *The Deadly Life of Logistics: Mapping Violence in Global Trade* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 51.

18. *Ibid.*, 4.

19. Proximity used to facilitate the relationship between a city and its surrounding countryside. Since the advent of telecommunication and containerized sea transport, this no longer holds true. It is now easier for someone living in an African megacity to communicate with a family member who emigrated to Europe than to talk with an uncle who still lives in the village the family originates from. And it is cheaper for locals to buy a shirt shipped in from an Asian sweatshop than to buy one that is produced by local tailors, even though the cotton it is made of may be grown on African fields.

20. Because besiegers set up their checkpoints outside the urban area they control, they are vulnerable to standoff attacks.

21. International Organization for Migration, "Over 600,000 Displaced Syrians Returned Home in First 7 Months of 2017," press release, 11 July 2017, accessed 18 October 2018, <http://www.iom.int/news/over-600000-displaced-syrians-returned-home-first-7-months-2017>. Refugees are more willing to return than many people think. In 2017, for instance, more than six hundred thousand displaced Syrians returned home.