Problematizing Cyber Warfare

Helga Tawil-Souri

New York University

The Middle Eastern region is currently implicated in all kinds of wars - conflicts that in some cases have been going on for decades, others more recent; some involving actors across a global geography; some fought with and through the latest military technologies; some with an extraordinary presence in global media; some compromised in larger ideological battles. There are important geopolitical, structural and technological differences in what is happening in Israel/Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Afghanistan for example. But the region's conflicts all undoubtedly bring into focus changing conceptions of war, which the essays in this issue contend with.

First, these wars are neither fought along "traditional" battlefields nor (only) between state actors. Second, the technological advancement of the tools of war (drones, remote-controlled warships, surveillance mechanisms, to name a few) have further blurred where and how war is manifested, even as these take place simultaneously to low-tech means which further bring into question what warfare is constituted of: the control over the flow of foods and medicines, the building of enclosure mechanisms, or the practice of (mostly extra-judicial) "precision targeting." Third, the justification of wars and the stories of their battles, survival, and hardships are part and parcel of an ever-wider media landscape in which these are created, disseminated, and consumed: newspapers, TV channels, mobile phones, and the internet. If there is anything conclusive in the convergence of these changes is that national boundaries and national institutions do not define where war ends or begins. As such one question that emerges is how various technologies transform the spaces, practices, experiences, and representations of war.

Corresponding author: Helga Tawil-Souri, New York University, 50 S Washington Square, New York, NY 10012, USA. E-mail: helga@nyu.edu

Donatella Della Ratta takes as her object of analysis the Syrian village of al Ghouta and traces its development from a politically charged, symbolic site of anti-colonial struggle in the 1920s to its role in the TV series *Bab al Hara*, to its eventual destruction and use as a battleground between the Syrian army and anti-Assad rebels. She analyzes how space itself becomes cross-referenced, remixed and remanipulated across mediums and technologies, blurring boundaries between fictional and real, between cyber and territorial, between historical and imagined. Al Ghouta is an "expanded place," she argues: an endlessly networked version of an actual physical, territorial site as it has been destroyed, regenerated, claimed and reclaimed in multiple layers of signification, resulting in new andcontested meanings, realities, and histories.

Technology's role in the expansion of places and meanings of war reverberates in Emily Fekete's piece. Building on the notion of "everywhere war," Fekete looks at Internet uses among various actors. As she touches on examples of viruses, website hacks, vandalism, and disruption of systems, and highlights that these are undertaken for different purposes - legitimizing one's ideological position, recruitment, training, or propaganda - it becomes clear that any definition of cyber warfare is problematic.

Fekete's media-centric analysis is shared with the other three articles. Ruth Tsuria examines on-line English- and Arabic-language news outlets such as *Al Jazeera* and Jordan's *ad-Dustour* and their representations of what is a very Western and Orientalist term "Islamophobia." She suggests that as the term circulates and is problematized - linguistically and otherwise - conveying multiple readings and meanings, that a plurality of "Islamophobias" may be a more appropriate term. In the following piece, Attila Kovacs looks at the influence of the Internet on Palestinian Islamist culture, and how new technologies such as websites and Twitter have been used as a vehicle for visual production and dissemination. Finally, Christoph Günther analyzes the Islamic State's English-language magazine, *Dabiq*. Analyzing the publication's visual and linguistic semantics and presentations, he argues that the magazine's "glossy" look - which helps it reach a global readership - does not compromise the group's ideological intents and worldview.

ISIS's use of new media, so to speak, is deployed within the confines of its strict interpretation of Islamic scriptures.

This special issue of CyberOrient engages with the relationships between "cyber" and "real" battlespaces, the mediatization of war, the need to expand our definition of warzones, and the importance of asking who participates in wars, to what ends, using what kinds of technologies, and for what purposes. Taken together, the five essays demonstrate the expansion and blurring of the spaces of war. As importantly, they highlight that even warfare that is "only" fought in the virtual realm is laced with violent intents and real-life repercussions. Not only can we not separate the cyber from the real so neatly, but we must not overlook that no matter how we wish to classify "new" or cyber wars, it is citizens, along with their ways of life and their cultural records, that continue to be by far the largest losers.