TO DESTROY AN URBAN AREA IN ORDER TO SAVE IT SHOULD NOT BE AN OPTION FOR ANYONE!

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*E*ach age has its wars. War is not just a social phenomenon, but rather a result of politics. History confirms that, in general, wars have been used to correct or to impose certain political decisions.

Wars considered "classical" have been conducted in each important stage of human history, and the element of novelty for each of them was related to the economic development of society at that particular moment in time as well as to the application of scientific discoveries in the production of weapons with improved characteristics, which decisively influenced the fate of military confrontations.

War is a complex phenomenon that undergoes continuous evolution. Thus, in its both vertical and horizontal dynamics, new forms of warfare have emerged, from guerrilla warfare to information warfare, from geophysical warfare to asymmetrical or atypical warfare, from total warfare to network-centric warfare. Post-World War 2 military conflicts have shown that, regardless of possible labels such as "peripheral", "local" or "limited" attached to them, political, economic, cultural and military interdependencies rapidly globalise both interests and consequences. Hence the dynamics of war has become extremely complex in the age of digitalisation and information, which knows no border.

Whatever the type of war, the mechanisms that trigger conflict situations, some hidden or disguised in realities that can be declared as such, polarise the interests of some centres of power. Their support for some of the protagonists generates imbalances/asymmetries, opening the way for interferences aimed at gaining overt or camouflaged privileges, consolidating and broadening dominant positions that, in fact, can be the real causes of either new conflicts or manifest ones' persistence.

*R*ecent history, including the current "special military operation" in Ukraine, shows that, although we are in the 21st century, any type of war, classical one included, is possible, and that urban combat will be present to some extent in a war. It is made very clear by a large number of historical, demographic, socio-political and military analyses. Therefore, armed forces must be prepared to conduct urban operations, both offensive and defensive. Starting from the opinion expressed by military theorists

that defence is the most effective form of combat, there are many reasons why armed forces should go into defence in a campaign – to create the necessary conditions for the offensive and regain the initiative, to destroy the enemy outright, to retain decisive terrain, or simply to slow the advance of a technologically and numerically superior force. On the other hand, a well-planned and constructed urban defence could lead to the success or failure of a strategic objective and could influence the outcome of a war.

The main reason why today's big cities are vulnerable to conflict is because they are key centres of society, thus having strategic value. As central landmarks of society, power, economic activity, social institutions, history and culture, and embodiment of national identities, the control of cities and their inhabitants is seen as strategically critical by the belligerents. Secondly, the rapid growth of urbanisation also strengthens the strategic value of cities. Nowadays, globally, more people live in urban areas than in rural areas. With the vertical development of cities, the population density has also increased, urban centres becoming more and more crowded, complex and interdependent. Thirdly, it may be the strategy of the belligerents to conduct fighting in an urban area. The physical terrain and the human factor of a city can offer advantages to the defender and can attenuate the technological superiority of a stronger opponent. Attackers can also try to block defenders in a city and use siege tactics to thwart their escape. Regardless of the situation, against the chaotic backdrop of cities in conflict, humanitarian, legal and military challenges as well as ways to overcome them become possible.

Urban warfare is, without a doubt, one of the most intense and destructive tactics of war. It is devastating for the civilian population, for the injured and sick, and for those deprived of their liberty; it is also extremely challenging for the attacker and defender. Urban combat is so dangerous that it is not surprising some military may try to avoid it. The urban battlefield is multidimensional. Unlike other environments, such as wooded or mountainous areas, urban terrain contains unique features that allow for a very strong and lethal defence to be conducted. The density, construction and complexity of man-made physical terrain in urban areas allow the military to rapidly use or shape the environment to further strengthen a defence plan. Such plans should be aimed at breaking apart an attacking formation, separating enemy forces, limiting the attacker's ability to manoeuvre, degrading military technologies such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance capabilities, air strikes,

maximising surprise and either defeating attackers or buying time for other tactical, operational and strategic actions.

Urban battlefield also requires extensive resources, in terms of efforts to both defeat the enemy and meet humanitarian imperatives, such as establishing safe escape routes for civilians wishing to leave voluntarily, ensuring the needs of internally displaced civilians, providing medical care to injured civilians and combatants alike, handling human remains and clearing unexploded ordnance. These challenges result in a complex set of dilemmas for commanders, especially in terms of command, control, communication and information, surveillance and reconnaissance. For example, the terrain and the multitude of actors that conduct their activities within an urban area can make it difficult for operational commanders to directly influence the tactical battle once it has begun. Moreover, these challenges can be sometimes exacerbated in resistance or coalition operations. Because of these dilemmas, it is common for subordinates to be allowed to fight in a decentralised manner during urban operations, either alone or in small groups, and to make key decisions independently and without advice. However, the decentralisation of authority goes hand in hand with great responsibility. Therefore, among other aspects, senior commanders must ensure that their subordinate leaders and military personnel are prepared, trained and equipped to make decisions and conduct their operations in the right manner from a legal and humanitarian perspective. As a result, urban combat presents several legal, moral, and strategic challenges to the belligerents.

The number of injuries and deaths among civilians as well as the damages to civilian and other critical targets can grow dramatically. Far too often residents are deprived of food, water, sanitation, electricity and healthcare. Reductions in these basic needs are exacerbated when cities are besieged, when impartial humanitarian organisations are denied access to the civilian population, or when urban conflicts become protracted.

While some civilians may be prevented from leaving a besieged area, fighting in urban centres often leads to mass displacement, constantly changing the landscape and social fabric of many cities around the world. Civilians have no choice but to flee and often do so putting their lives in great danger. They may be targeted or even caught in a crossfire, mistreated by the parties involved in the armed conflict and separated from their family members.

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Once combat is over, unexploded ordnance and other forms of contamination resulting from the bombings, as well as the lack of essential services prevent many displaced people from returning, often for a long period of time. Many of these consequences are not unique to urban warfare, but they do occur on a significantly larger scale in urban warfare because of the sheer density of population and civilian objects, the large number of displaced people, the tactics and weapons used by the belligerents.

Therefore, the doctrine and preparation of urban warfare must be realistic. For example, the US Marine Corps conduct training in Military Operations In Urbanized Terrain (MOUT) and the Royal Marines Commandos conduct training according to the Fighting In Built-Up Areas (FIBUA) doctrine. Appropriate emphasis should be placed on the ways in which large-scale civilian presence has an impact on operations, target engagement or other aspects of combat, and, conversely, on how urban warfare affects cities and their populations. In particular, taking precautions to avoid or at least minimise civilian casualties and damage to civilian property must be a priority, as an integral part of any urban combat training programme. The armed forces must be able to understand, anticipate and mitigate the variety of long-term harmful effects of urban warfare on city dwellers, including relocation, lack of access to essential services or loss of livelihood, as well as the way such risks can be amplified by military tactics such as sieges.

The military must also be trained to identify risks and opportunities and to ensure better respect for human rights during associated military operations. Mention should be made that, once the action is started, if the rules, tactics and procedures that are specific to urban warfare are not very well known, and the morale/mental state of the attackers is not solid and adapted to the situation and the characteristics of urban warfare, excesses, abuses and even atrocities are likely to occur.

In order to avoid damages and tragedies among the civilian population, firstly, commanders should model the battlefield at the strategic, operational and tactical levels in a way that minimises urban combat, favouring as much as possible those strategies and tactics that entail fighting outside the cities. Secondly, recent conflicts have emphasised a resurgence of sieges and other siege tactics, which raise many legal, political and humanitarian issues. Today, sieges are legal only when they are aimed exclusively at an enemy's armed forces. The situation of civilians deprived of essential supplies

for their survival in a besieged area can no longer be used by a besieging party as a legitimate means of subduing the enemy. The implementation of several precautionary rules also requires both parties to allow civilians to leave the besieged area whenever possible. Thirdly, all belligerents that plan and decide on attacks in an urban area, whether besieged or not, must know how to anticipate the direct and indirect effects of their attacks. The mentioned aspect entails understanding the vulnerabilities, strengths and resilience of the population, based on a multidisciplinary human-centred assessment. Belligerents must pay particular attention to the specific features, vulnerabilities and interconnection of urban infrastructure and civil services that are critical to the survival of civilians (e.g., water, sewage, electricity and healthcare).

The expertise of humanitarian organisations working on the front line to respond to the consequences of urban warfare could be particularly useful in terms of information for belligerents and commanders when planning military operations, as well as when enacting standard operating guidelines and procedures, to anticipate and avoid causing such civil damage.

Last but not least, belligerents must be able to recognise when an attack in an urban area will violate the prohibitions on non-discriminatory or disproportionate attacks and must refrain from such attacks.

In conclusion, urban agglomerations benefit the belligerents in defence and/or those who have poor equipment in terms of both quality and quantity. The effects of imagological and information warfare in the urban environment will be extremely favourable.

Despite all possible efforts to avoid urban combat, we cannot ignore the fact that armed conflicts in populated areas will continue to exist in the future. For many people, the names of Grozny, Aleppo, Mosul, Sana'a and, more recently, Mariupol or Kharkov evoke images of the devastation and desolation of the once historic and imposing cities as well as of death, injury and suffering among the population. Such devastating humanitarian consequences should lead the belligerents to stop and consider how to ensure that the protection of civilians is at the heart of all urban operations and whether a change in mentality is needed on how to approach such operations. To destroy an urban area in order to save it should not be an option for anyone!

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