



Conduct of Operations in Limited Scale Conflicts

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Executive Summary: Observing “Operation Protective Edge” against Hamas in Gaza lead to the conclusion that a revision of Israel’s conceptual strategic compass is needed, particularly regarding the concepts of ‘deterrence’ and ‘decisive victory’.

Limited-scale, asymmetrical conflicts have become the norm. All-out wars between states where both parties invest all of their national resources in an attempt to achieve a decisive victory have become less relevant.

Theories of warfare or conduct-of-operations doctrines that have been studied over the course of decades are no longer relevant to the new military situation. David Ben-Gurion’s conceptual trinity of ‘deterrence’, ‘early warning’ and ‘decisive victory’ is no longer fully valid. These concepts should no longer be used as the only or main criterion when evaluating military and political moves made in the context of the new situation.

While ‘deterrence’ remains relevant to preventing total war, we may lose the ability to deter violence in specific situations, such as launching rockets at Israel by terrorist organizations.

As far as ‘early warning’ is concerned, an intelligence setup may be prepared for a total war with a list of warning indicators compiled to indicate an intention by the other side to initiate a confrontation. However, these precautions and indicators may not be relevant in the event of suicide bomber terrorists.

The 'decisive victory' concept, in accordance with Clausewitzian thinking, posits that the losing side can be compelled to negotiate terms of its surrender. For this reason a modicum of governance is to be allowed to the losing side to assure the implementation of the terms of surrender. But in the context of limited-scale conflicts, partial military victories are attainable even if no decisive victory is achieved.

Negotiations may be arranged under international or superpower sponsorship for the purpose of reaching ceasefire agreements. Or a situation may emerge where it will be in the best interests of both parties to hold their fire with each party claiming certain political accomplishments, without the fundamental conflict coming to an end and without decisive victory.

In the 2006 Lebanon War, military victory was unclear and no decisive victory was achieved. Yet the severe blow inflicted on the Dahiyeh suburb of Beirut and the destruction of Hezbollah's long-range missiles were significant achievements. However, during the last day before the ceasefire came into effect, Hezbollah launched some 250 rockets into Israeli territory. Hezbollah declared this as a victory and subsequently acquired a dominant role in the politics of Lebanon. This political role contributed to the subsequent calm along the Israel-Lebanon border.

The deterrence of the last eight years seemingly achieved in Lebanon was not achieved because of the accomplishments of the Israeli military. It was not the result of the Israeli military blow, but the result of Hezbollah's fears of losing their political accomplishments in Lebanon in the event of another conflict with Israel. Indeed, Hezbollah has not stopped preparing forces, materiel and arms for a future war. Instead, deterrence resulted from other developing interests over which Israel had no control or influence, such as the Syrian civil war.

Since the large rocket attacks occurred after Israel invaded Lebanon in the 2006 war, it may be right to stress that the 2006 Lebanon War led to the loss of deterrence with regard to rockets – which encouraged the massive acquisition of rockets by the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip. However, the Iron Dome system has partly restored Israeli deterrence in this area – as seen during Operation Pillar of Defense and most certainly during Operation Protective Edge. Since we use concepts and theories that are no longer suitable to the existing conflicts, there are endless arguments on the subject of achieving either deterrence or decisive victory. The conclusion here is that Israel should update its combat doctrines to match the current situation and conflict.

Currently, even a brilliant military victory can lead to a political fiasco or to diplomatic damage. In some cases, deterrence can be achieved without using military force. Such deterrence can be achieved by creating a situation where the parties are not interested in a military confrontation, as each party stands to lose something.

Today, in limited-scale and asymmetrical conflicts, the presence of the media and the video photography options available on the battlefield along with the ability to broadcast the footage almost in real time can restrict the use of force.

Additionally, there is the need for domestic national consensus – widespread conviction that the employment of the military is really necessary. There is also a need for international backing, at least on the part of certain superpowers. The intensity of this backing will determine the duration of the fighting and the scale of the use of force. Finally, there is the sensitivity to losses among civilians, and the sensitivity to casualties sustained by Israel's military forces.

Under these conditions, achieving a decisive victory is close to impossible. A proportionate victory may be achieved according to the aforementioned parameters, but hard-to-watch images, operational errors or diminished international backing may lead to a situation where the combat operations have to be stopped.

The lessons to be learned regarding the force structure are highly significant. Investments should be made in active and passive defense so as to enable discretion regarding the offensive operations. The better protected the rear area is, the less we will be dragged into unreasonable or insufficiently prepared scenarios.

It is desirable to plan for short-term confrontations lasting no more than a few days. In this way, the IDF can bring its superior firepower to bear in concentrated fashion, making a powerful psychological impact on the enemy, and doing so before international political backing wanes (as it inevitably does when the images of destruction broadcast by the media begin to gnaw away at support for Israel). Israel must strike swiftly and determinedly while the casualty parameter is still within the range regarded as proportionate.

The purpose of a military operation is to gain political achievements. Fighting should stop the moment we realize that we are beginning to lose politically. At

times, declaring a unilateral ceasefire will maintain the initiative, while regaining the chance of political backing.

The conduct of wartime operations does not have to be continuous. We must constantly monitor the trends of the parameters outlined above. In every confrontation, different parameters become dominant. In some cases it is our own losses, while in other cases the dominant parameter is the domestic public opinion. Other times it may be an operational error or the perception of the conflict within the international context.

If Israel decides that continuous military activity is not mandatory, it will be able to define the objectives of military operations in a more precise and attainable manner. Such an approach allows Israel to progress in the stages of military intensity in a controlled manner, so as to prevent situations where Israel loses the initiative and is forced to execute unwise moves.

One additional point: Achieving deterrence is not the most important objective. The national defense interest transcends deterrence. By way of example, consider the 1991 Gulf War. Under the leadership of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir, Israel refrained from responding to the missiles launched by Iraq into Israel, thereby leading many observers to claim that Israel suffered a deterrence failure. However, the other national strategic interests Israel upheld were more important. The decision that deterrence is not the dominant strategic goal is definitely a determination to be made in the political realm rather than in the military sphere.

Moreover, deterrence is not always achieved through a decisive military blow, but rather by creating common political interests that both parties would like to maintain or would be afraid of losing.

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