



PERSPECTIVES

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Deterrence Is Not Everything

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel's decisions a) to contain Hamas's continuous provocations rather than use them as a *casus belli* and b) to refrain from an immediate military response to the discovery of Hezbollah tunnels into Israeli sovereign territory in the northern Galilee highlight the issue of deterrence as a core factor affecting the Israeli image in the region. Assuming the current Israeli modus operandi is the product of rational and thoughtful staff work, it can be inferred that deterrence is no longer either a decisive factor or even a strategic goal in the asymmetric conflicts with Hamas and Hezbollah.

The recent round of hostilities between Hamas and Israel (November 2018) highlighted the question of whether or not deterrence remains a core factor affecting Israeli security along the border with the Gaza Strip.

Prevailing opinion among military commentators and the Israeli public alike suggests that Israel now has an image of eroding deterrence, perhaps even loss of deterrence. The fact that Israel couldn't stick to its commitment to provide full security to its citizens in the vicinity of the Gaza Strip and beyond, while Hamas was able to maintain a large arsenal of long-range rockets and launch almost 500 projectiles towards Israel within less than 48 hours, enabled the Islamist terror group to claim a victory.

The term deterrence is frequently used by the security establishment to define the ultimate goal of large-scale military operations, mainly when referring to asymmetric wars. Whenever a military conflagration occurs (either with Hamas or Hezbollah), the Israeli security leadership has it in mind to restore Israeli deterrence or to consolidate it.

This was the case in the Second Lebanon War (2006), which resulted in 12 relatively peaceful years to date, as well as Operation Protective Edge (2014) in the Gaza Strip. In both cases, the Israeli leadership proudly claimed that the IDF had managed to establish effective deterrence, notwithstanding the fact that neither enemy had been defeated.

But it is not a given that the main parameter in judging the effectiveness of deterrence should be the length of the period of non-belligerency. This is for the simple reason that such a period can be advantageous to the enemies. They may well prefer to bide their time while preparing for the next round, the timing of which they will decide in accordance with their own shifting interests.

From a purely military standpoint, the IDF failed to deliver the goods when confronting Hezbollah and Hamas on the battlefield despite Israel's supremacy in every parameter. The exit points from those rounds of belligerency came from external initiatives, not the enemies' pleas.

The paradox is that while Hezbollah and Hamas claim victory, the Israeli leadership extols the (supposed) deterrence achieved by massive strikes on enemy facilities and combat order of battle. This self-laudatory mood ignores the Middle East reality whereby the perceived "underdog" can leverage that image to indoctrinate and persuade supporters that despite Israel's military might, it failed to achieve its strategic goals.

The expectations gap in this respect could be the product of a kind of self-delusion within the Israeli leadership, which places emphasis on the notion of an existing, continuous, effective deterrence. This particularly applies to the Second Lebanon War. While the war is widely considered to have been a military-strategic missed opportunity to defeat Hezbollah, the decision-makers at the time, especially PM Olmert and FM Livni, claim to this day that the war was a shining success as it has boosted Israeli deterrence.

In a recent press interview (December 2018), Yehezkel Dror – a professor emeritus of political science at Hebrew University who was a member of the 2008 Winograd Commission, which harshly criticized government unpreparedness and the IDF's failures against Hezbollah during the Lebanon War – said: " Our message to Hezbollah was that it's possible to strike Israel with missiles without paying a price." His conclusion is that not only did the war fail to enhance Israeli deterrence, but that that deterrence is in fact nonexistent. According to Dror, deterrence should convince the enemy that any resort to violence will exact a disproportionately high price.

Deterrence implies that decision-makers of any given nation rationally examine the military balance and either attack if the balance is favorable or do nothing

if it is unfavorable. But the preoccupation with the immediate and short-term military balance is wrongheaded. History shows that nations seldom go to war simply because the opportunity for military gain presents itself. Rather, they have often gone to war in the face of certain “military suicide.” Logically, the onset of war constitutes a failure of deterrence and a potentially fatal failure of deterrence as a strategy.

Maj. Gen. (res.) Yair Naveh, former IDF Deputy Chief of General Staff, said in February 2015 that deterrence against non-state entities, especially Salafist terrorist organizations like Hamas and Hezbollah, differs from deterrence against states or even semi-state actors. His position was that deterrence against non-state actors that lack obligations towards the local population in their sphere of activities is possible only if the deterring nation shows a willingness to damage its enemies’ core strengths. That means targeting its leaders, military commanders, strategic assets, and sources of social support.

But the facts on the ground as far as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza are concerned – their massive rocket and missile arsenals, amassed after the Second Lebanon War and Operation Protective Edge, respectively – indicate a different situation. The “underdogs” are behaving as if they are the players doing the deterring, not Israel. Therefore, turning to deterrence as a rationale for the use of brute military force in these asymmetric conflicts now seems irrelevant as a strategy.

Israel deliberately chose to contain Hamas’s continuous recent provocations rather than use them as a *casus belli*. So too in the upper Galilee, where the IDF just uncovered offensive tunnels dug by Hezbollah into Israel’s sovereign territory. International law would have recognized a sovereign state’s right to respond militarily to such an offensive act, but to date, Israel’s response has been limited to a series of defensive measures conducted without crossing the Lebanese border.

Assuming the current Israeli modus operandi is the product of rational and thoughtful staff work, this could indicate that deterrence is no longer a decisive factor nor even a strategic goal in the asymmetric conflicts with Hamas and Hezbollah. This represents a significant reassessment of Israeli strategic thinking with regard to confronting semi-regular military forces.

The policy of Israeli decision-makers vis-à-vis the conflicts with Hamas and Hezbollah should be decided according to Israel’s national interests, not the preservation of regional ego. In other words, Israel needs to reestablish effective deterrence while taking the necessary precautions to prevent an all-out confrontation with Hezbollah or Hamas from turning into a Catch-22 situation due to the dense civilian population in the Gaza Strip and Lebanon and the high probability of heavy civilian casualties.

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