



PERSPECTIVES

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The Decision to Go to War Is More and More Difficult

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The phenomenon of a growing reluctance to go to war and commit ground troops to combat can be seen around the world, not only in Israel. Citizens are increasingly demanding clarity on the purpose of the wars their armies are expected to fight.

"In the Netanyahu era," argued a recent article in the monthly Hebrew magazine *Liberal*, "we are unable to launch a real war in Gaza. The leadership has no way to sell its cost to the public."

Although Netanyahu's reluctance to go to war may be related to his own quintessential decision-making pattern, it is consistent with a global trend. Something fundamental in the phenomenon of war has changed, particularly with regard to ground forces, and it is a concern for all armies. Even Russia is showing restraint in its use of ground forces in Syria.

The change has to do with two main factors:

- Ground warfare has gotten more complicated because of the growing focus on built-up, heavily populated areas and the emergence of new threats to attacking forces: advanced antitank missiles, areas booby-trapped with explosives, and fortified underground recesses.
- It is increasingly difficult to use ground forces to achieve a clear-cut and feasible strategic goal.

These two factors are intertwined and intensify leaders' vacillation about going to war. They may know how to initiate a war, but they don't know how it will develop or how it will end.

A reluctance to go to war was evident as long ago as the ancient world, but in the modern era, with the change in the nature of war, it is significantly more prevalent. The proliferation of advanced weapons among non-state quasi-military organizations (e.g., cruise missiles in the hands of the Houthis in Yemen) has made winning a war and achieving its objective less of a certainty even for the armies of the great powers.

With the weakening of the connection between actions on the battlefield and the desired strategic outcome, recent decades have also seen an increased possibility of losing control of a war. For example, the IDF, by conquering southern Lebanon and reaching Beirut in the First Lebanon War (1982) enabled Israel to achieve the desired ouster of PLO forces from Lebanon—yet that very achievement created the conditions for the advent of Hezbollah, which has become the dominant force there. The Americans, too, in Afghanistan and Iraq, found themselves contending with a complex reality that spun completely out of control.

The key challenge has thus become the formulation of a clear objective for the maneuvering ground force. The IDF's basic combat doctrine regarding the goal of the offensive is this: "The offensive seeks a change in the enforcement of the existing political-strategic reality through the imposition of the conquering state's sovereignty on the conquered territory." But is that goal sufficiently clear when the terms of the conquest are not?

Seeking to conquer territory in order to annex it is a simple objective. In the Falklands War (1982), which was aimed at restoring the islands to British sovereignty, the connection between the military achievement and the political objective was unambiguous and concrete. That was also how most Israelis perceived the war in Jerusalem in June 1967.

But when the conquest of territory is considered temporary, questions arise about its purpose and the benefit that can be expected to stem from it. In the words of Syrian president Bashar Assad:

Israel has greater destructive ability but less ability to achieve its military goals, and hence less ability to achieve its political goals. As a result, it goes from failure to failure.... Today there is no Israeli battle in the lands of others.... Today the Israeli battle is domestic.

The increased complexity of reaching a feasible objective in a ground offensive makes it far more difficult to make the decision to launch such an offensive. For while populations may be prepared to pay the price of a war, they demand clarity and agreement on the basic question: for what?

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