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Information and Warfare: The Israeli Case

Gideon Avidor and Russell W. Glenn

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ABSTRACT: Much as Israel's 1967 Six-Day and 1973 Yom Kippur Wars served as lenses on the evolution of warfare in the latter half of the twentieth century, so too do its more recent experiences cast light on war's early twenty-first-century character. This article uses the Israeli experience to discuss the challenges inherent in designing, promulgating, and sustaining a strategic narrative today and, ideally, a comprehensive approach to operations.

War's inherent complexity requires political and military decision-makers to manage its challenges holistically, orchestrating resources in the service of sought-after objectives. Difficult even during short contingencies, those challenges are magnified by extended conflicts such as in Iraq and Afghanistan. Yet, the duration of these undertakings pales in comparison with Israel's decades of continuous regional tensions. This article draws from the Israeli case to illuminate the nature of twenty-first-century conflict and its lessons for US security policymakers.

After considering several of the components that assumed increased importance to Israel's security interests, we look more closely at one element in particular: the increasingly recognized but little understood influence of the virtual domain on modern conflict, specifically in terms of the strategic narrative and targeted messaging. Social media, partly responsible for the restrained character of wars fought today, has also expanded theaters of conflict both geographically and temporally. Restraint has made decisive victory a relic of the past while rendering definition of ultimate end states an exercise in futility. Moreover, new ways of targeted messaging also provide opportunities.

Israel's security environment encompasses three primary spaces:

- The close-combat realm in which fire and maneuver are the primary means of engagement
- Broader, traditional warfighting environs encompassing the close-combat space while incorporating physical elements farther afield that influence competitors' effectiveness on the battlefield—manmade infrastructure, underlying terrain, and populations that potentially impact reinforcing or sustaining the forces
- The virtual space critical to command, control, and information exchange among those associated with military and extra-government activities, which are impacted by the laws of war, ethical constraints, ideology, religion, and the strategic narrative.

Persistent conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq suggests new doctrine—or more effective application of existing doctrine—is called for. This

guidance must look beyond the physical battlefield to prepare commanders for effective orchestration of activities both within and across the three primary spaces. Populations continue to expect decisive victories despite compelling evidence most conflicts end differently. Israel is among the countries finding themselves in conflicts characterized by an evolving blend of activities across the three conflict spaces, any or all of which are susceptible to Clausewitz's play of chance and friction. Newer conceptualizations of conflict may reveal as-of-yet little understood opportunities.¹

Brief Observations on Israeli Conflict

Israel has been a petri dish for cultivating thinking on future conflict much as was the case after its 1967 and 1973 wars. Three evolutions in approaches recently employed by Israel's nonstate opponents are notable. Subterranean excavations in the form of adversary firing positions for missiles, rockets, and mortars; hideouts for headquarters, munitions, or other facilities; and cross-border means of smuggling or attack have increasingly challenged the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). Secondly, urban areas are more evident as primary—even preferred—physical spaces for waging combat when the threat finds itself at a technological disadvantage.

The last of our three environmental spaces—the virtual—has seen the most expanded influence on the conduct of warfare, particularly on the strategic narrative via the increased ability for parties to target specific audiences through social media. It is a realm in which even impoverished nonstate actors have access to capabilities on par with those of their otherwise more advantaged opponents. Targeted messaging via social media and other platforms is responsible for a dramatic expansion in what constitutes Israel's theaters of conflict. It has also emerged as a key element in a comprehensive approach to modern conflict that melds elements of national power with those of other countries, nongovernmental and intergovernmental organizations' capabilities, and commercial resources that might also be used in the service of these entities' overlapping objectives.

Competition in the Virtual Space

Common to the increasing impact of targeted messaging on the strategic narrative is the role of noncombatants as willing, unwilling, or unwitting participants. The willing are especially influential when students and other information technology-savvy individuals man the social media barricades. Israel is one of the world's most technologically proficient countries. Yet, such talent is not limited to its citizenry. Gaza, too, has a plethora of knowledgeable youths who are willing to support Hamas or other opponents of Israel. These freelancers—we might label them "cybermilitias"—bolster social media efforts via text messaging,

¹ Some might question the security significance of social media and other forms of targeted messaging, seeing little difference between it and the CNN effect attributable to more traditional mass communication. The differences are ones of magnitude and form, a reasonable analogy being that of dumb and smart bombs. It often took 10, 20, or more dumb bombs to destroy a target during World War II and the Korean War. Bombs missed their target despite their numbers. Today, a single smart munition can accomplish its task. Traditional media blankets large segments of a population in hopes of influencing key social nodes. It may miss those nodes altogether. Targeted messaging can instead directly engage select individuals or groups to achieve desired effects.

image posting, and other methods in support of those combatting Israel.² They have Israeli volunteer counterparts who complement a 24/7 formal IDF capability that includes Facebooking, Tweeting, Instagramming, and communicating in six languages across an equal number of social media platforms.³

The impact of official and informal domestic social media capabilities now competes with physical force for primacy in the service of political objectives. The influence exercised by geographically distant social media participants on combat operations and political leaders helps explain the disappearance of decisive victory in but the rarest of cases.

This competition in the virtual environment primarily involves struggles over legitimacy.⁴ One might imagine an audience being pulled in opposite directions by two competitors for its attention, each having an arm in grasp. The reality is far more complicated. There are often more than two parties competing for a population's attentions. The most influential of these parties may be thousands of miles from where armed forces compete in combat. A theater of conflict without physical boundaries results.

Consequences of Social Media Influence

Social media competition muddies several traditional conceptualizations inherent in conflict, the character of *victory* among them. Decisive victory is inherently objective: an opponent need not admit defeat.

Israel is not alone in finding its wartime achievements measured in degrees rather than absolutes. Its adversaries can, with some legitimacy, declare themselves victors in light of stated objectives—objectives that admittedly, but largely irrelevantly, may have been loosely defined originally or undergone dramatic revision during or after cessation of hostilities. Proclamations of victory by Israel's opponents after fighting in southern Lebanon (2006) or in Gaza (2009, 2012, and 2014) were not without merit. Hezbollah's and Hamas's claims were accepted as more legitimate than those of Israel by some international audiences despite the IDF's perseverance in the close combat and broader traditional warfighting spaces.

The gulf between this subjective form of victory and the objective (decisive) victory Israel's citizenry expects is a considerable one. How is it, Israelis ask, that the country's enemies return to kidnappings, cross-border raids, and the firing of rockets given the punishment meted out during their last handling by the IDF? The answer lies in what Israel's citizens fail to grasp.

2 Use of the term "militia" reflects the less-regimented nature of social media user relationships while also recognizing both the need for and difficulty of maintaining control over these individuals and groups. The authors thank Andrew T. Glenn for suggesting this metaphor.

3 For further discussion of social media challenges during recent IDF operations, see Russell W. Glenn, *Short War in a Perpetual Conflict: Implications of Israel's 2014 Operation Protective Edge for the Australian Army*, Army Research Paper 9 (Australia: Australian Army, 2016).

4 There have been instances of cyberattacks against physical targets, influencing centrifuges in Iranian nuclear weapons development facilities being the best known as described by Kim Zetter in her *Countdown to Zero Day: Stuxnet and the Launch of the World's First Digital Weapon* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2014). The broader impact of such capabilities on warfare, however, has to date been limited.

Battlefield dominance with lasting consequences was achievable when the opposition chose to fight conventionally. Unfortunately for Israel, its advantages in the arts of conventional war do not have an equal in those less traditional. Conflict has proven to be lengthier as a consequence. We have already noted that knockouts—decisive tactically and operationally, if not strategically—such as those of 1940 France, 1967 and 1973 Israel, or 1991 Iraq have become the rare exception.⁵ Spikes in Israel’s extended conflicts with Hezbollah, Hamas, and other regional foes—spikes labeled “wars” by media and political officials—are more accurately described as operations or campaigns within the context of these long competitions. The Second Lebanon War and Operations Cast Lead (2004), Pillar of Defense (2012), and Protective Edge (2014) in Gaza exemplify this development.⁶ One can argue the same is true for Russia’s simmering, yet ongoing, dispute with Chechnya and the previously cited US-led coalition undertakings in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Dramatic as these evolutions are, their consequences leave the character of war unchanged. It remains, in the familiar words of Clausewitz, “an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will.”⁷ Yet the above makes it only too clear that the inconclusiveness of recent wars limits the ability to impose one’s will. Hezbollah and Hamas remained intact and effectively uncowed in the aftermath of violent conflict. Taliban resurgence and the emergence of ISIL demonstrate a similar indecisiveness in Afghanistan and Iraq. Foes sustain support from essential population segments at home and abroad, a vital precondition for the all-but-inevitable next uptick in hostilities. Acceptance of Hezbollah’s proclamations of victory after Israel’s albeit limited military—but not political, social, or economic—success at the end of the 2006 Second Lebanon War and Hamas’s obstinate declarations in the aftermath of recent peaks in aggression demonstrate the point. Targeted messaging via social media did much to support acceptance of both.

This near disappearance of decisive victory undermines the effectiveness of state militaries relying on traditional destruction-oriented war-fighting methods. Superiority in close combat and broader traditional warfighting spaces almost ensures Israel, the United States, and other nations with similarly advanced armed forces maintain a general advantage in tactical combat. That same imbalance does not exist in the virtual realm.

Announcing overly ambitious or unrealistic political objectives compromises the ability of political leaders to declare victory convincingly. Detailed intentions such as those stated by Israeli political leaders at the outset of fighting in Lebanon in 2006—“the return of the hostages, Ehud (Udi) Goldwasser and Eldad Regev,” “deployment

5 Contrarily, Charles D. Freilich argues “even in ostensibly decisive wars, Israel only succeeded in destroying a comparatively small percentage of enemy capabilities . . . but not enough to deliver a knockout blow, or to turn the military achievements into concrete diplomatic ones.” See Charles D. Freilich, “Why Can’t Israel Win Wars Any More,” *Survival* 57 (2015): 81. Freilich asks too much of 1967 and 1973: the country had neither the intent nor capability to decisively defeat the combined forces of Egypt, Iraq, and their allies. Remaining with the metaphor of boxing, the IDF won those meetings by a knockout with subsequent meetings constituting a rematch. The Second Lebanon War and Operations Cast Lead and Protective Edge, among others, are instead rounds in a single, very lengthy boxing match.

6 Israel denoted the 2012 spike in violence as Operation Pillar of Defense.

7 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), 75.

of the Lebanese army in all of Southern Lebanon,” and “expulsion of Hizbullah from the area”—proved unwise in retrospect.⁸ Little wonder those leaders justified later operations in Gaza with more amorphous ends, seeking objectives that included “weakening Hamas,” “reducing smuggling and rocket attacks,” and “reinforcing deterrence.”⁹ Specificity precludes deniability. Vagueness, the habitual tool of the campaigning politician, is no less valuable when decisive victory lies outside the province of the possible.

Strategic Narratives and Targeted Messaging: Beyond Social Media

Convincingly, denying an enemy’s triumphal declarations takes on a significance unnecessary in the aftermath of decisive victory. Success requires accurately assessing the expectations of a foe’s key audiences and undermining these anticipations. Achieving this type of success imposes a form of defeat even in the absence of battlefield domination, although less so in the face of significant combat reverses. Competition comes to incorporate dimensions both inclusive of and well beyond confrontations between forces in the field.

It is evident that shaping outcomes during these wars, and over the course of the extended conflicts of which they are a part, demands approaches traditionally outside those found in an armed force’s quiver. This was amply demonstrated during Operation Protective Edge in 2014. Deliberately limiting the depth of its ground incursions into Gaza to avoid becoming enmeshed in urban fighting and unable to completely interdict indirect fires into Israel, Jerusalem sought a way to halt two months of fighting. Resolution would lie less in the contest of arms than the destruction of a few apartment buildings housing the residences of middle- and upper-class Gazan civilians. Bombing of the structures after Israeli evacuation warnings triggered protests from the buildings’ influential former residents. Hamas officials found these impossible to ignore, a significant factor in ending the war. The implication is clear: a military and its government must incorporate the full range of an enemy’s objectives, capabilities, and bases of support into its strategic narrative campaign.¹⁰ They must treat components as a whole rather than parts as does Israel when it overly focuses on its enemy’s armed forces.

The Virtual Domain and a New Indirect Approach

The previous discussions make it clear today’s wars may be less amenable to traditional military conceptualizations of battle. That need not preclude application of proven approaches in innovative ways. J. F. C.

8 “Address to the Knesset by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, July 17, 2006,” Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Speeches+by+Israeli+leaders/2006/Address+to+the+Knesset+by+PM+Olmert+17-Jul-2006.htm> (accessed April 26, 2007).

9 Matt M. Matthews, “Hard Lessons Learned: A Comparison of the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War and Operation CAST LEAD: A Historical Overview,” in *Back to Basics: A Study of the Second Lebanon War and Operation CAST LEAD*, ed. Scott C. Farquhar (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2009), 29–30.

10 Israel should also seek to enhance the effectiveness of their employment of the ever-increasing means available for communicating their strategic narrative. As is apparent from the example of the bombing of Gazan apartment buildings, direct messaging in support of that narrative should meld capabilities from all three security environment spaces, not just the virtual.

Fuller, Basil Liddell-Hart, and Giulio Douhet developed their concepts of the indirect approach in the first decades of the twentieth century. Their construct was meant to aid in breaking stalemates confronted on World War I European battlefields by finding alternatives to frontal attack such as deep and broad maneuver against strategically vital objectives in an enemy's rear or flying over resistance to undermine the morale of populations remote from the battlefield. The concept originated in the junction of need (cracking the stalemate) and capability (mechanization, radio communications, and powered aircraft).

The indirect approach seeks to overcome defenses through the application of familiar concepts using new capabilities. An expanded conceptualization of the indirect approach provides routes into an adversary's rear—its popular support base—via WhatsApp, Twitter, and other social media platforms that complement traditional means of mass communication. Ways of addressing centers of gravity or decisive points (e.g., people living in those targeted apartment complexes in Gaza) increase in number.¹¹ In the wake of recent campaigns, Israel increasingly recognizes activities on the three-dimensional battlefield may be relegated to a supporting role when an enemy's vulnerabilities are better addressed via the virtual sphere. No longer does knowledge of a foe's battlefield capabilities and intentions suffice. The implications for information collection and management—like those for intelligence—are clear. Other implications regarding international law and international public reaction may be less so.

A Broader Approach to Conflict Resolution

Expanded targeted messaging is but one of the additional capabilities Israel should bring to bear for conflicts in the twenty-first century. Only with steps toward a more comprehensive approach, too rarely taken as of yet, can the country's involvement with continuous conflict give way to the possibility of lasting resolution. The solution will have to come from outside the military. Service parochialism remains too strong to hope otherwise.

The Israeli Air Force has long boasted of sophisticated air-strike capability. As a result: Israel's warfighting has at times too greatly relied on air power to achieve political objectives. This reliance has repeatedly disappointed as was the case with efforts to subdue Hezbollah with air power alone in the opening phase of the Second Lebanon War and early dependence on air strikes to put the Hamas genie back in its Gazan bottle in 2014. History supports the application of multifaceted capabilities rather than overreliance on one arm, service, or armed force alone. Today, a single-service focus is doubly flawed, first in its inherent presumption that armed force should be the primary means to apply the service of Israel's national security; second in its emphasis on the resources available only to one arm.

¹¹ US joint doctrine defines center of gravity as “the source of power that provides moral or physical strength, freedom of action, or will to act” while a decisive point is “a geographic place, specific key event, critical factor, or function that, when acted upon, allows commanders to gain a marked advantage over an adversary or contribute materially to achieving success.” US Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, Joint Publication 1-02 (Washington, DC: JCS, June 2015), 29, 61.

Israel has not yet taken the systems approach essential to prevail in the type of conflicts confronting the country today. The result is “mowing the grass”—periodically calling on military might—sufficient to return the security situation to an acceptable status with the assumption similar applications of force will be necessary when threats again exceed an unacceptable threshold of violence. The ability to influence during operations can be envisioned as a four-tiered pyramid: From initiative, influence continues to escalate into superiority and supremacy, ultimately peaking with control.¹²

Israel’s military has repeatedly demonstrated it can seize and hold the initiative virtually anywhere on a battlefield thanks to advantages in training and technology. The armed forces can achieve superiority at least locally, and—given sufficient commitment of resources—attain local supremacy during periods it is effectively unchallenged. The armed forces cannot establish more than fleeting control—the capacity to dictate behaviors and decisions. Achieving any of these states is beyond Israel’s capacity in the strategic narrative sphere other than when it addresses its citizenry, a population with a predisposition to favorably respond to its government’s messages.

Systems of Campaigns: Integrating the Strategic Narrative

Regardless of the moniker chosen, Israel’s recent “wars,” “operations,” or “campaigns” have introduced a new spin on *operational art* (and strategy). Given the employment of targeted messaging as a means of communicating state and nonstate strategic narratives, the application of this art—the sequencing of operations or campaigns in the service of strategic ends—further increases complexity when the circumstances of continuous conflicts involve a series of interim end states.¹³ Sequencing has no well-defined, long-term route to follow given the transient nature of the ends sought. Any such end is nothing more than another fork in the road, one with an unpredictable number of tines, the character of each revealing itself only vaguely as preceding operations advance.

Yet despite Israel’s shortfalls in applying a comprehensive approach, Operation Protective Edge validated what had become apparent during Operation Cast Lead: other-than-military organizations external to the government are essential to effective operations. United Nations’ intergovernmental bodies and nongovernmental organizations have a legitimate call to coordinate with the IDF. All parties benefit from orchestrating activities. Without that cooperation, Israel’s effectiveness

12 These four levels are defined as follows in US doctrine: initiative—setting or changing the terms of battle by action . . . forc[ing] the enemy to conform to our operational purpose and tempo while retaining our own freedom of action; superiority—that degree of dominance in battle by one force that permits the conduct of its operations at a given time and place without prohibitive interference from threats; supremacy—that degree of superiority wherein the opposing force is incapable of effective interference within the operational area; and control—physical or psychological pressures exerted with the intent to assure that an agent or group will respond as directed. For the definitions of initiative as well as superiority and supremacy (adapted from air superiority and air supremacy), see JCS, *DoD Dictionary*, 49, 10, and 10 respectively. The definition for control is from the Headquarters, US Department of the Army (HQDA), *Field Manual 100-5, Operations* (Washington, DC: HQDA, 1986), 15.

13 The authors favor this more straightforward definition of operational art in lieu of the more complex one that currently appears in US joint doctrine: “The cognitive approach by commanders and staffs—supported by their skill, knowledge, experience, creativity, and judgment—to develop strategies, campaigns, and operations to organize and employ military forces by integrating ends, ways, and means.” JCS, *DoD Dictionary*, 174.

at any of the four influence levels will remain limited to the security arena alone. The country's recent experiences reinforce the need to focus on a systems approach, one incorporating resources beyond a government. It is an approach, perhaps the only approach, with the potential to move the country away from interminable conflict.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The foregoing discussion makes it clear today's conflicts demand cooperative efforts broader in function, character, and societal reach. IDF leaders organized operations in Gaza during 2014 much as their predecessors did during the Six-Day War a half-century before. Conditions have changed. Those fighting before 2016 were less challenged by social media concerns. Nor did they confront substantial requirements to synchronize their actions with inter- and nongovernmental organizations already on the battlefield to the extent found in Gaza or Afghanistan.

This need to orchestrate resources permeates virtual spaces no less than close combat and broader traditional warfighting ones. Operation Protective Edge drew the attention of thousands of traditional network reporters; firsthand observers employing social media; and followers, bloggers, and additional retransmitters that left few actions unmonitored. Social media was a camera perched on every IDF soldier's, adversary's, and noncombatant's shoulder. Factual feeds had plentiful, fabricated, and deliberately biased accompaniment. Anyone resending transmissions magnified messages' impacts regardless of validity. The United States and other nation-states currently find themselves similarly competing with misleading yet effective ISIL messaging. Ariel Sharon's and George Patton's media confrontations pale in comparison—likely fortunate given what smartphone messages would have contained.

Israel's ongoing conflicts illuminate alternative approaches to future US challenges in this regard, revealing obstacles that thus far prove too bureaucratically encumbered to surmount. The United States knows far more of social media's challenges than ways to employ it effectively.

A comprehensive approach is an obvious first step toward addressing future US security challenges. Efforts to construct and conduct effective whole-of-government operations—much less incorporate comprehensive approaches—have proven elusive. Regardless, the Department of Defense should be more proactive in incorporating less-traditional participants to plan, rehearse, and conduct operations in-theater. Working through organizations that coordinate diverse activities of nongovernmental organizations could reduce the burden of cooperation in the field and in orchestrating deployment activities.¹⁴

Some form of coordinating targeted messaging activities—at least those from users sympathetic to US and coalition partner efforts—

14 For examples of coordinating organizations and their needs and implications, see Russell W. Glenn, *Band of Brothers or Dysfunctional Family? A Military Perspective on Coalition and Alliance Challenges During Stability Operations* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2011). United Nations organizations have at times provided coordination of multiple NGO and IGO representatives. There are NGOs that habitually choose not to cooperate with government representatives; others will have objectives but fractionally overlap with those of military organizations and correspondingly limit willingness to orchestrate their activities. It behooves all involved, however, to ensure at least a minimum level of coordination takes place in the service of avoiding inadvertent NGO, IGO, or other groups' casualties due to combatants' ignorance of their locations on a battlefield.

would similarly benefit from operational objectives. *Coordination* rather than *control* is the realistic objective. As the IDF found when well-intended noncombatants sought to assist in promoting Israel's efforts during Operation Cast Lead, dictating rules of behavior is a social media nonstarter. Unfortunate mistakes such as platform users prematurely and inaccurately reporting casualties, to include releasing the names of wounded as killed in action, can at best be minimized. Often, the most effective way of limiting such events is for other social media participants to police their own, perhaps at the behest of an overarching, and loosely coordinating, body. No such entity yet exists. Logic dictates it would be better to support the efforts of an external organization willing to take on the responsibility rather than creating one within government given the taint official communications can assume in the minds of many.

Development of technological solutions for dealing with urban and subterranean challenges is already underway. US efforts would benefit from continued study of recent and ongoing Israeli experiences in these areas. Solutions for dealing with growing demands on intelligence implied by targeted messaging capabilities receive less attention. Pinpointing key, and perhaps decisive, individuals and groups able to influence notably influential segments of domestic and international populations could be vital to operational success and coalition cohesion.

Lessons taken from Israel's 1967 and 1973 wars informed US practitioners of war who defended Europe, offering lessons, that, when melded with economic, diplomatic, and other initiatives, helped to bring an end to 40 years of Cold War. Is it not conceivable insights from the ongoing struggles at the far eastern end of the Mediterranean might once again inform both US and partner nation leaders regarding solutions to the Gordian knot of continuing conflict?

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