The Unique Features of the Second Intifada

Zaki Shalom and Yoaz Hendel

Introduction

Over a decade has passed since the eruption of the second intifada, a grueling period for Israel with the long, sustained, and intensive series of terrorist attacks launched by terrorist organizations against civilians and soldiers of the State of Israel. Most difficult were the suicide attacks, generally carried out in urban centers and causing large numbers of casualties − dead and wounded − among the civilian population. Predictably, therefore, the terrorism phenomenon became a dominant issue on Israel's national and popular agenda. It reshaped the walk of Israeli civilian life, affected politics, and to a significant extent damaged the country's economy. In addition, for many years the intifada was accompanied by the Israeli public's sense that the defense establishment had no response that would put an end to terrorism, or at least drastically reduce it. Those times have not receded from the nation's collective memory and still affect how Israeli society formulates its positions on current political and security issues.

Since its establishment, the State of Israel has known difficult periods of war, bereavement, and casualty. The severity of each conflict may be evaluated through various criteria such as the balance of forces between the sides, the perception of the dangers to Israel, risk assessments, the numbers of dead and wounded, the ratio of civilian to solider casualties,

Professor Zaki Shalom is a senior research associate at INSS, a researcher at the Ben-Gurion Research Institute for the Study of Israel and Zionism, and a lecturer at Ben-Gurion University. Dr. Yoaz Hendel is a researcher at the Begin-Sadat Center at Bar Ilan University. The article is based on their comprehensive study *Let the IDF Win: The Self-Fulfilling Slogan* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2010).

motivation during the campaign, the level of political support for or against the campaign, civil-military relations during the fighting (agreements versus disagreements), and others. It is difficult to draft an agreed-upon scale of criteria to rank the severity of the campaigns Israel has fought, and sets of criteria for assessing the severity of a war are largely subjective.

That said, when examining the public discourse about the military's confrontation with suicide terrorism in the first years of the second intifada, one encounters a unique phenomenon − the question of capability. Against the background of explosions and the stream of suicide bombings, the dominant argument within Israel touched on whether the IDF was capable of defeating suicide terrorism, and more generally, whether a regular army was at all capable of defeating a guerilla or terrorist organization. This question is an underlying element in the essay that follows, which argues that the intifada was one of the most severe military campaigns Israel fought since attaining its independence.

The Strategic Dimension of the Terrorism Threat

Over many years, in essence since the War of Independence, a fixed feature of Israel's security doctrine was the distinction between two categories of threat against Israel: threats at the strategic level versus threats at the tactical level. Threats at the strategic level were attributed to neighboring Arab countries, especially Egypt. The starting assumption was that the armed forces of neighboring Arab states could threaten the very existence of the State of Israel by territorial conquest and eradication of Jewish settlement. Threats at the tactical level referred primarily to the activities of the various terrorist organizations. According to this school of thought, the activities of terrorist organizations represented a bothersome nuisance but lacked the features that would define them as strategic threats.

This distinction was blurred in recent years, especially during the second intifada, which assumed the nature of a strategic threat in the public consciousness. Intensive activity by terrorist organizations, particularly suicide terrorism, changed the essence of the country's civilian routine. It had a severely negative impact on economic development in Israel, and on the scope of immigration and tourism. In addition, terrorism also affected the structure of the political system in Israel. Indeed, in virtually

every election campaign in the last two decades, terrorism and how to cope with it politically and militarily became hot issues in the contest for the public's vote. Most prominent in this regard were the May 1996 Knesset elections, held six months after the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Although polls predicted a devastating defeat of the right wing parties, Likud leader Binyamin Netanyahu was elected prime minister (albeit by a small margin). The Israeli media, with much justification, attributed his surprising election to devastating terrorist attacks, two of them in the heart of Tel Aviv, in the months leading up to the elections.[1] During the second intifada, however, the impact of terrorism was sharper, more sustained, and more acute.

The second intifada began while the Labor Party, headed by Ehud Barak, held the reins of government, the peace process seemed promising, and there was public support for compromise. It was succeeded by a government led by the right, which in turn spawned a new leadership based on a new centrist party supportive of peace, but using means of combat at a time when public support for the Oslo approach to compromise had declined. At the same time, the intifada sparked changes within the right wing camp regarding Israel's interests, which led to territorial withdrawals and as such, changes in borders and lines of control. These changes among the right were of major significance.

Likewise on the strategic level, the intifada served as a platform for the genesis of a new type of struggle − the delegitimization of the State of Israel and an influential anti-Israel campaign. This campaign brought together Palestinian organizations, leftist groups, and far right movements from across Europe as well as anti-Semitic circles, all taking advantage of the new momentum to advance their interests. Thus it is clear that terrorist activity during the second intifada had a strategic impact on Israel in a wide range of areas at least as much as have the wars waged by regular armies.

Defining the Enemy
Of Israel's campaigns, the second intifada was singular in that during most of its stages there was no clear, agreed-upon definition of the enemy Israel was fighting and who was responsible for the terrorist attacks against the state.

At the leadership level, the dilemma started with Arafat. Suspected by some decision makers as the dispatcher of a significant number of the suicide terrorists into the heart of Israel's urban centers, the leader of the Palestinian Authority had previously been portrayed as an ally of Israel. The Oslo Accords were seen by a part of the Israeli public as proof of his willingness to end the long conflict between two national movements – the Zionist movement and the Palestinian movement. Despite information gathered about his involvement in terrorism, there were people who believed that the man who spoke from every dais and into every microphone about his desire to implement "the peace of the brave" together with Israel and its leadership, the man who had no qualms about denouncing terrorist acts against Israel and the killing of innocents, had sincere intentions.[2] However, the growing intelligence file and the many attacks raised the question whether he was engaged in duping the whole world. As a result, Israel's leadership found itself between a rock and a hard place, between the desire to preserve its new-found friend on the one hand and the data that indicated that the friend was actually an enemy, on the other.

Within Israel, Arafat's intentions were examined time and time again. Was he worried about jeopardizing his achievements by closing his eyes to terrorism or being involved in terrorism? Was he prepared to jeopardize admiring public opinion, evident throughout the world and within large segments of Israeli society? Perhaps, said some, he too, like the moderate Israeli government, was caught in a difficult struggle against extremist groups trying to keep him from advancing towards true peace with Israel. Would Israel want to act against him in response to the attacks? Would Israel want to weaken him? And what would happen if, as a result, the extremists in the Palestinian camp were to gain the upper hand?

Israel had never faced such pointed questions about a leader for so long a period of uncertainty. Even when clear cut evidence of Arafat's personal involvement in terrorist activities accumulated, many felt that this was simply an element Israel had to accept. In any case, many Israelis opposed the idea of attacking the PA chairman in response to the terrorist attacks on Israel, its civilians, and soldiers, because of doubts regarding his personal involvement in terrorism and because Arafat was, in any case, the lesser of the evils.

The dilemma of identifying the enemy grew more acute when it came to activists on the ground. As the intifada continued, the IDF found it hard to decide on tactical moves such as instructing soldiers when to open fire. How was the IDF to relate to the PA police force, with which Israel supposedly had agreements and understandings? Was it allowed to act against a policeman in uniform by day if he was also carrying out terrorist activity by night? Should PA police be permitted to carry weapons? Where does one act against terrorists? Were PA regions to be considered cities of refuge with immunity or enemy territory where one must operate?

In practice, only the January 3, 2002 interception of the gun-running ship *Karine A* carrying major quantities of materiel from Iran to the PA put to rest any lingering doubts that the PA and Yasir Arafat were active participants in terrorist activity directed against Israel. This assessment gained a greater foothold in Israel once Arafat's credibility with the American administration evaporated as a result of the interception of the ship. Until then, the first task facing Israel's leadership was to identify, to itself and the Israeli people, the enemy before it.[3]

Can Terrorist Organizations be Defeated?

One of the critical questions of the intifada was if it was possible to defeat terrorist organizations attacking Israel, just as it was possible to defeat regular armies of sovereign nations. Many claimed it was not, and reasoned as follows: The circles Israel was calling "terrorist organizations" were just various factions of the Palestinian national movement. All Palestinians wanted to realize their right to self-determination. Among them, naturally enough, were disagreements about how to achieve that goal. Some supported waging the struggle through diplomacy and political action, while others favored violent means. A national movement striving to realize independence in the face of a conquering state would not rest until the fulfillment of its ambition.

In an attempt to persuade others of the justness of their position, many of this school claimed that history "proved" that in the end, conquering states were forced to concede control of conquered territories and allow the local population to achieve their independence. Examples from the first Indochina war through Algeria and Vietnam to the Soviet war in Afghanistan proved − according to those who denied the possibility of

a military victory − that it was impossible to defeat a terrorist or guerilla organization militarily. Therefore, and because the final result of the struggle against Palestinian organizations is known ahead of time, the cost in victims that both sides were being forced to pay for the struggle had no justification. The only way to stop Palestinian violence was by means of a political settlement. No military action would be able to end the violence against Israel.

Many public figures, media personalities, academics, and various experts expressed these opinions through modes of discourse typical of democratic states. A similar process, though with different levels of intensity, had taken place in Israel in its previous struggles. However, what distinguished the intifada was that this time doubts crept into the very heart of the security-military establishment. The State of Israel had known public disagreements in previous wars, but the defense establishment had always been able to argue convincingly that victory would be achieved. This is what David Ben-Gurion declared in the War of Independence: Israel will pay a steep price, but in the end it will win. Similar statements were made by Chief of Staff Yitzhak Rabin on the eve of the Six Day War. Six years later, during the Yom Kippur War, the determined voice of Chief of Staff David Elazar thundered that Israel knew how to overcome the circumstances and win the war that was forced on it.

During the intifada the situation was very different. Senior officials within the security establishment and the IDF, including commanders commended for their bravery and excellence whose integrity and professional abilities were deemed impeccable, called on the country not to indulge in fantasies of victory. It was imperative, they said, to aim for a political settlement, as only that could put an end to Palestinian violence. The most prominent among these figures was Major General Amram Mitzna, GOC Central Command at the outbreak of the first intifada. On many occasions, he gave prominent expression to his clear cut stance that it was impossible to arrive at a military decision in a confrontation with "terrorist organizations" and that only a political settlement would result in calm being restored to Israel:

> The Palestinian conflict, which today is actually the heart of the military-terrorist confrontation we are facing, has over recent years been demanding all our energies. Not only our financial resources, but actually all our energies...It seems to me that today most residents of the State of Israel under-

stand, maybe better than they did two years ago…that there is no military solution to our conflict with the Palestinians. It's important that we understand this. Slogans such as "let the IDF win," which are primarily political, though they purport of course to have some kind of professional, to-the-point significance, are empty. There is no military solution. Similarly, terrorism will not succeed in bending the State of Israel or in forcing on it and its citizens certain settlements, agreements, or solutions detrimental to Israel's security and its critical interest. The army and military force have a great deal of meaning and a great deal of importance also in this struggle against Palestinian terrorism, as well as in many other issues connected to the security of the State of Israel. However, it is also important that we understand that there is no military solution. There is no solution of pure aggression.[4]

Mitzna was not the first to speak in this way. During the terrorist attacks of the 1990s Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin said that "there is no real deterrence against terrorism," and according to Amnon Strashnov, the Chief Military Prosecutor during the first intifada, "Shomron quickly understood that a military solution to the intifada was nowhere to be found."[5] And subsequently, throughout the intifada, Israel was faced with an unprecedented phenomenon: the fact that even prominent members of the military establishment had doubts with regard to Israel's ability to defeat the challenge confronting it, i.e., terror. This had not occurred in Israel's prior confrontations.

Doubting the Justness of the Cause

In addition to these challenges, Israeli society was beset by doubts about the justness of the cause. Many asked: were we, the descendants of a nation that had fought for its freedom and independence for thousands of years, conducting a moral war against the Palestinians? Was it fair of us to deny them the right of self-determination? Many Palestinians had been living as refugees for decades after having been expelled from their homes during the War of Independence. Could Israel, the descendant of a nation that had lived in the Diaspora as often-persecuted refugees, afford to ignore the Palestinians' plight? These questions created deep fissures in Israeli society about the justness of the struggle against terrorist organizations during the intifada.

Similar types of public protest were not unknown to Israel during other military confrontations. The first significant instance of public protest about the justness of war occurred during the War of Attrition in 1968-70. The static presence on the Suez Canal and daily exposure of IDF soldiers to heavy fire and ambushes from the Egyptian side combined with the sense that the Israeli government, headed by Golda Meir, was not demonstrating enough flexibility in the attempt to arrive at an Israeli-Egyptian settlement generated a wave of protests that continued until the August 1970 Suez Canal ceasefire agreement. Among the prominent expressions of this protest wave were "Shir Lashalom" ("A Song for Peace") performed by the IDF Nahal Entertainment Troupe and the play *The Queen of the Bathtub*. The central motif in both was the real possibility of attaining peace with the neighboring Arab states, especially Egypt, even while the Meir-led government undermined this possibility because it wanted to continue controlling the territories captured in the Six Day War.[6]

Similarly, during the First Lebanon War and during the extended fighting in southern Lebanon that followed, public protest swelled the longer the combat continued. The protest was expressed mainly with songs directed especially at Ariel Sharon and, starting in 1997, with the establishment of the Four Mothers movement. This protest movement had a decisive impact on the growing popular support for withdrawing from southern Lebanon even without an agreement with the Lebanese government. Ehud Barak, then head of the Labor Party, was the first to understand the electoral appeal of this movement and its demand for withdrawal and leveraged it in his May 1999 election campaign. Indeed, his commitment to withdraw from Lebanon was one of the decisive elements in his victory over Binyamin Netanyahu. A year later, in May 2000, he made good on his promise to withdraw the IDF from Lebanon within one year of his election.

By contrast, the protest that swelled in Israel during the second intifada was of a different kind, far more intensive and extended than previous protest movements. The claims that it was impossible to attain a victory and that therefore harsh military moves against the Palestinians were useless became major issues in the debate on the legitimacy of the fighting.

For example, Palestinian terrorist organizations to a large extent conducted their war from within the Palestinian population. This required the security services in Israel to conduct their campaign with the awareness that Palestinians who were not necessarily directly involved in violence against Israel might easily be harmed. Targeted assassinations, which on more than one occasion cost the lives of innocent civilians, provided a major example of this phenomenon, and they often generated widespread public criticism within Israel, in addition to international condemnation. The so-called "dissenting pilots' letter" was especially prominent in this context: twenty-seven Israel Air Force fighter pilots, headed by renowned IAF pilot Brig. Gen. Yiftah Spector, signed a letter in which they stated their refusal to continue harming innocent civilians. The letter was published on September 24, 2003.

In the letter, the pilots protested IAF activity against wanted terrorists that involved the killing of innocents:

> We, Air Force pilots who were raised on the values of Zionism, sacrifice, and contributing to the State of Israel, have always served on the front lines, and were always willing to carry out any mission to defend and strengthen the State of Israel.
>
> We, veteran and active pilots alike, who have served and still serve the State of Israel for long weeks every year, are opposed to carrying out attack orders that are illegal and immoral of the type the State of Israel has been conducting in the territories.
>
> We, who were raised to love the State of Israel and contribute to the Zionist enterprise, refuse to take part in Air Force attacks on civilian population centers. We, for whom the Israel Defense Forces and the Air Force are an inalienable part of ourselves, refuse to continue to harm innocent civilians.
>
> These actions are illegal and immoral, and are a direct result of the ongoing occupation which is corrupting the Israeli society. Perpetuation of the occupation is fatally harming the security of the State of Israel and its moral strength.
>
> We who serve as active pilots − fighters, leaders, and instructors of the next generation of pilots − hereby declare that we shall continue to serve in the Israel Defense Forces and the Air Force on every mission in defense of the State of Israel.[7]

The letter did not express outright opposition to targeted killings; rather, it rejected the outcome whereby innocent bystanders would be harmed in the course of such actions. However, it is in fact impossible to ensure that any targeted assassination will not harm bystanders. Sincere attempts can – and are – made by the IDF to avoid harming civilians, but there is no guarantee that this will not happen in practice. If the demand to avoid killing civilians is absolute, it would necessarily abolish the practice of targeted assassinations, viewed by the IDF as very effective in the war against terrorist organizations.[8]

IAF pilot Yigal Shohat was more explicit in his criticism of the IAF in the war against terrorist organizations:

> Pilots have to decide, every day anew, and sometimes from hour to hour, what they are morally and legally allowed to do...In my opinion, pilots have to look very closely at the commands they're given, ask a lot of questions about the target, and refuse to obey commands that are legally problematic in their opinion...I think that F-16 pilots should refuse to bomb Palestinian towns. They have to think about what such a bombing would look like where they themselves live...I'm talking about eliminating entire main streets... When a jet bombs an inhabited city you take into account the killing of civilians even if you're talking about precision armaments. In my opinion, this is intentional killing of civilians. That's a war crime.[9]

Alongside these pilots and organizations such as "Breaking the Silence," civilian movements were also established that viewed the IDF's campaign against Palestinian terrorism as crossing permissible lines. Their claims changed as the campaign developed. If at the outset they explained that there was no point in fighting because in any case there would be no victory, from the moment the terrorism abated thanks to IDF activity the claims became based on morality. While in their view the goal was rational, the manner was not justifiable.

Conclusion

Typical of warfare against a guerilla or terrorist organization, the second intifada started with uncertainty and with no clear front or rear. Unlike smaller wars throughout the world, during the intifada Israel was at the mercy of a host of suicide terrorists and the problem of defining and identifying the enemy. These difficult starting conditions were

compounded by widespread skepticism regarding the ability to score a victory against terror and guerilla organizations, and ultimately by questions undermining the legitimacy of Israel's fight against the terrorist organizations, i.e., the loss of belief in the justness of the cause. This convergence of elements made the second intifada one of the most complex campaigns Israel has had to undertake, both militarily and civilly. Nonetheless, Palestinian terrorism in general, and suicide terrorism in particular, was defeated militarily and the IDF earned its victory. This is a significant achievement not only for Israel, but also for many other democratic states that have to cope with terrorism over a long period of time.

Notes

1 Mazal Muallem, "The Voices of War," *Haaretz*, January 4, 2009.
2 The term "peace of the brave" was coined by Yasir Arafat. It is usually associated with Yitzhak Rabin with whom, according to Arafat, he signed, "the peace of the brave." See Zvi Barel, "Neighbors," *Haaretz*, November 3, 2005.
3 Zaki Shalom, "Defining the Enemy in an Asymmetrical Confrontation: The Case of the Second Lebanon War," *Strategic Assessment*. 12, no. 3 (2009): 7-18, http://www.inss.org.il/upload/(FILE)1259664194.pdf.
4 Address at the Third Herzliya Conference, December 4, 2002, http://www.herzliyaconference.org/_Articles/Article.asp?CategoryID=87&Article ID=2247.
5 Amnon Strashnov, "Between Two Chiefs of Staff, Dan Shomron and Moshe Levy, Israelis of a Different Species," *Haaretz*, February 28, 2008.
6 The lyrics of "A Song of Peace" were written by Yaakov Rotblit and set to music by Yair Rosenblum. It was first sung in 1969 during the War of Attrition by the IDF Nahal Entertainment Troupe in its routine called "A Nahal Settlement in the Sinai." The satire *Queen of the Bathtub* ran in early 1970. It was meant to serve as a platform for satirizing the euphoria and nationalistic fervor that characterized Israeli society after the Six Day War. Source: Wikipedia.
7 "Courage to Refuse," http://www.seruv.org.il/english/article.asp?msgid=55&type=news.
8 Neri Livneh, "If the IDF Does Not Change, the Deterioration Will Continue," *Haaretz*, December 8, 2007.
9 Yigal Shohat, "Israel En Route to The Hague: War Crimes and Israel's Security," *Gush Shalom Conference*, Tzavta Hall, Tel Aviv, January 9, 2002, at http://gush-shalom.org/archives/forum.html.