The Challenges of Fighting in Densely Populated Areas: The Israeli Case

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Since the middle of the twentieth century there has been a process of dramatic change in the history of warfare. The change in the landscape, i.e., natural landscapes turning into urban areas, requires a change in the nature of war, both on the part of the defender and on the part of the attacker.

Every day some 190,000 new people stream into the urban areas around the world – 70 million each year. Half of the human race already lives in cities, and out of the general population, the percentage of city dwellers is growing. Longstanding rules among military experts to avoid entering cities unless absolutely necessary are no longer relevant given the changing reality. Today, areas that in the past were open have become urban, thereby not leaving the attacker any choice but to conduct urban warfare. Moreover, decisions are no longer taken on the open battlefield, rather in the offices of the decision makers, relatively few in number, who are generally tucked away in city centers (often near TV studios and other communications centers shielded by massive numbers of hostages).

Until recently it was only developments in weaponry and troop maneuvers that necessitated changes in military doctrine. Today the situation is different. The model of World War II, where it was necessary to cross all of Europe in order to reach Hitler's bunker, is no longer relevant. Battles in the streets of Berlin and house-to-house fighting are behind us, though battles of this sort have occurred in recent years as well (Gaza, Nablus, Beirut, Grozny, Fallujah, and Baghdad).

The modern city is larger and more central than ever, in terms of population, area, and range of political, economic, communications, and

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social activities taking place within. The size of major cities is 5-30 million people. It is impossible to conquer cities of this size and control them, but it is precisely these cities that serve as the bases for the decision makers and are the sites of most of the economic, political, and national strength.

What would happen in such a city a day after its conquest? The army would have to deal with hundreds of women giving birth and millions of hungry and wounded people. Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of guerillas would be active in the city, both underground (in public transportation and infrastructure tunnels) and above ground, in thousands of skyscrapers standing hundreds, even thousands, of feet high. Should a skyscraper collapse, all traffic in the area would stop because of the mounds of rubble that would block the roads. Guerrillas would traverse the area, and be present in residential buildings, sewers, shops, factories, hospitals, and public parks. All of this would take place within a human density unknown in the past.

Density in such cities ranges from 5,000 per sq km to 100,000 per sq km, in the extreme case of Hong Kong. Hundreds and thousands of bored lawyers and media people wander these cities, capture the events on camera, and publish photos all over the world. They offer their legal and media wares to every hostile individual or institution in order to cast blame on every soldier, officer, and leader. Their activities are supported by a large international "cartel" of organizations defending terrorists, criminals, and illegal immigrants. These are the "rights organizations," clearly distinguishable from rights organizations that do laudable work in defending the disabled, persecuted, tortured, and oppressed, such as, e.g., the Red Cross.

The physical size of the new cities is comparable to entire nations. For example, the size of Los Angeles, Beijing, Mexico City, and Tokyo is almost that of all of Israel and double that of Lebanon. How does one conquer a city of such proportions? How does one besiege it or impose a curfew on it?

Defining the physical size of a city is quite tricky. Consider a familiar area: are Rosh Ha'ayin, Kokhav Ya'ir, Netanya, and Ashdod part of Tel Aviv? The very best geographical and statistical minds struggle with this question, because the physical size of a city defines the size of its population, and that is no small matter. It plays a decisive role in physical and social planning and taxation, and it is certainly significant in wartime.

What is the population of Tel Aviv – 400,000, 1.3 million, 2.5 million, or 4 or maybe 7 million? All of these answers are right. The municipal entity of Tel Aviv consists of 400,000 people; the so-called Gush Dan (Dan bloc) has a population of 1.4 million; the greater Tel Aviv metropolitan area, which includes Rishon Lezion, Nes Tziona, Rehovot, Ramla, Lod, Petah Tikva, Kfar Saba, Raanana, and Herzliya, has 2.5 million people; if one adds a fourth ring – Netanya, Hadera, western Samaria settlements, and Ashdod – the total is 4 million; and if one views the entire coastal strip, from Rosh Hanikra to the Gaza Strip as a megalopolis, the population reaches 7 million.

By what means is a city of this size conquered? Does the conqueror try to capture the leader or leaders hiding throughout the city and in communication with one another? Does the conqueror try to occupy the media centers, airports, military camps and centers of the other security services, power stations, water installations, stock exchange and central banks, government ministries, economic centers? It may be that all the conqueror needs to do is starve the populace or close or poison the water sources of a city of 20 million. It is very easy to do and the results are liable to be much worse than the outcome of a nuclear bomb. Is the conqueror's goal to destroy the population of an enemy city? Leaving aside the moral question, would such an act be acceptable to the international community?

Let us return to the question of the means by which a city of millions is conquered. It is enough to harm the decision makers: eliminating them would change the structure of the regime, its outlook, desires, and abilities. In may be that in addition to eliminating one leader or ten, the conqueror would also have to damage the enemy's communications capabilities and some hundreds of fighters and thereby end the nightmare.

This would appear to be the answer in our time, and the tools to carry it off exist. Still, it has recently become evident that it is necessary to conquer the whole city despite the ramifications, as was the case in Grozny and the near Middle East. In the case of the cities mentioned above, it became clear that in order to attain a victory, there was no choice but to capture large areas of the cities.

Urban Warfare in the Middle East

In the axis parallel to the Jewish city-in-the-making along the entire coast of Israel (with a population of some 4-5 million), an enormous Palestinian

city (of some 4.5 million) is developing, starting in the Galilee, continuing through Samaria, the Jerusalem district, the Hebron hills, Beer Sheva, and ending in Gaza. Its suburbs to the east penetrate the Jordan Valley, but more significantly, its western suburbs interface with the Jewish city along the coast. Thus the Palestinian city gradually reduces the already narrow waist of the Jewish city. This reality is far from simple.

What is the map of urbanization in the second circle around Israel? Today, Cairo's population is about 15 million and its suburbs approach the Suez Canal and beyond, towards El Arish. The city of Gaza has a population of more than half a million; in 2011 there were 1.6 million people in the Gaza Strip, and this number is expected to rise to 2.5 million by 2025. Damascus has a population of 5-6 million and its suburbs stretch to Quneitra and Sheikh Maskin, a phenomenon that is clearly visible from the observation post on Mt. Bental. The greater Amman area has 4-5 million people, the greater Nablus area approaches half a million, and the Hebron hills have a population similar to that of Nablus.

What would Israel have to do were it forced to arrest fire coming from these cities? Would it have to conquer one of these areas or just threaten it? Would Israel set out to conquer cities of millions? Would it attempt to besiege a city of 2-3 million or even 6-15 million? Would it perhaps only occupy the strategic centers (political, economic, media, and military centers) of cities such as Damascus, Beirut, or Gaza?

It may be that from Israel's perspective, the optimal solution would be targeted killings. This would mean locating the individual terrorist hiding in a home surrounded by thousands of non-involved civilians serving as human shields or finding him hiding under a hospital and neutralizing him while risking possible harm to doctors and patients in the area.

In my opinion, targeted assassinations are the most moral option because they entail harm to hundreds of non-involved civilians rather than hundreds of thousands in a city under attack. The method is also less destructive of property, and spares unnecessary deaths and mass suffering as the result of an ongoing conflict. And in this context, we are allowed to take into account the citizens of Israel, located on this side of the line: here, too, it is necessary to avoid bloodshed, destruction, and terror. We are allowed to think about ourselves, and not just the other.

The United States army cleared Fallujah, Iraq, while destroying some 50 mosques and massacring some 5,000 people (terrorists and non-involved

civilians). The UN Security Council did not convene to discuss it, and no one accused any American officer of war crimes, and rightly so. The Russian army carried out two horrendous massacres in Grozny, Chechnya, and caused great destruction to the city. Hafez Assed and his son Bashar perpetrated horrific acts in Syria, and the Security Council had nothing to say. Even as the number of dead in Syria in the last two weeks of 2011 hit a new high, the Security Council in its December 20, 2011 meeting did not discuss it, but chose to spend its time on condemning construction in the Jewish settlements in the West Bank and on the "price tag" phenomenon. The initiators of this cynical resolution – at least in terms of its timing – were Portugal, Great Britain, Germany, and France. One may assume that there will be a severe reaction to anything Israel does, unlike what takes place in other war-torn areas such as Iraq, Syria, Grozny, Afghanistan, and elsewhere.

The "cartel of righteous among the nations," i.e., nations such as Great Britain, France, Russia, and China, backed by the "cartel of rights organizations," do not in fact care about the murdered, suffering, persecuted, and desperate Syrians, Iraqis, Egyptians, or Tibetans. The sole purpose of these cynics is to wage a campaign of delegitimization against Israel and condemn it around the world for any and every deed it has done and will do in its war on the terrorist organizations surrounding the nation.

The conclusion is clear: in the urban warfare that has been imposed on it, Israel must attack every terrorist even if he has surrounded himself with dozens or hundreds of hostages. The elimination of these terrorists and their human shields will save a great deal of suffering to the populations on both sides of the conflict. It must be done, while over and over again exposing the cynicism of the hypocritical moralists.

Cartel Representatives in Israel

There is no need to go far in search of cynicism, ignorance, and hypocrisy. Consider what is happening here in Israel. Some leading jurists in academia preach endlessly to the IDF on how to fight. My claim is that these people are out of touch with reality, geographically and culturally, and with the Middle East experience.

One of these individuals is Prof. Mordechai Kremenitzer, who in an essay published in *Hamishpat* (January 2008), claimed: "In order to succeed in battling terrorists it is necessary to isolate them physically and mentally

from the population from which they come."[1] In other words, in his opinion it is possible to isolate from the site of fighting 95 percent of the population of a city under attack and focus on the 5 percent of the area and the people that are the source of terrorism against Israel. From this proposal it is unclear how to identify and later isolate the terrorist from his family and the hostages shielding him (e.g., several dozens of preschool children). It is unclear what can be done when it transpires that there are snipers and an enemy command post or a missile launcher under a residential building. Only someone out of touch with the Middle East, its culture, religion, and worldviews, only someone who is unaware of its attitude to women and human life in general or democratic values, can suggest so clueless a notion. Such experts don't only give advice, but they also sit on the half-baked stage of every peace, democracy, and media institute for people who consider themselves peace-loving and preach morality from there.

Another such jurist is Prof. Menachem Mautner. In his book, *Law and Culture in Israel at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century*,[2] he deals with the liberal Western nation and writes: "[It is necessary] to strengthen Israel's link to Western liberalism, [and this can be done by] regulating the relations between the nation and the central cultural groups living within it in the spirit of multiculturalism." Here, in Israel, Mautner constructs himself a liberal, multicultural society – uniting Hizbollah and Syria in the north, Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood in the south, Raed Salah and the extremist Muslims in Israel, and another two million Hamas supporters in Judea and Samaria. As if that were not hard enough, how would he construct a multicultural society with the ultra-Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox nationalists? In order to live in a multicultural society, Mautner would grudgingly accept female genital mutilation alongside male circumcision! With worldviews such as these, which are totally out of touch with the region in which we live, these legal minds try to teach the IDF how to fight and, yes, also how to win. Jurist Prof. Daphne Golan of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem suggests: "Why not talk with our neighbors about reconciliation? Why not listen to their dream of returning to their homes in Jaffa, Ramla, and Lod?"[3] This is also the suggestion of sociologist Prof. Yehuda Shenhav and geographer Prof. Oren Yiftahel. All of them are asking the IDF not to harm non-involved civilians who protect or help pitiless murderers. Some would suggest not taking any shortcuts, e.g.,

the approach advocated by Prof. David Anokh of the Hebrew University, which speaks of "the willingness to absorb losses as a moral imperative."

In late 2011, my grandson enlisted in a combat unit in the IDF. It would be unpardonable for him to be sacrificed on the altar of fuzzy, cynical Western morality; if at all, he must only be sacrificed in defense of the Jewish, Zionist, democratic State of Israel. One must not propose to anyone to sacrifice one's children on the altar of cynical morality.

Conclusion

This essay does not deal with a theoretical problem far removed from reality. It may well be that within a short period of time, the IDF will have to stop a heavy attack on Tel Aviv by missiles fired from dozens of batteries located in the heart of Beirut, the heart of many Lebanese villages, Gaza, and even Damascus, with every missile battery surrounded by hundreds of human shields.

The dilemma IDF officers will have to face is whether to harm the human shields while neutralizing the barrage or to continue to absorb missiles, destruction, and the loss of Jewish lives, in line with the worldview that says we have to absorb losses as a moral imperative. You, the readers, will have to decide. I've already made my choice.

Another dilemma is likely to arise very soon. Above Hizbollah's command center in Beirut and above Hamas' command center in Gaza there are hospitals treating many patients. From these command centers a brutal war is being waged against Israel. Should the hospital and command center be destroyed in order to cut the war short, or should we talk about multiculturalism, morality, "isolating terrorists," and other empty phrases while at the same time sacrificing several hundred Jewish fighters and civilians? The right thing to do seems perfectly clear to me.

It may be that due to political or military considerations it will make sense to capture the entire Gaza Strip or southern Lebanon, perhaps southern Syria, as the only way to stop missiles fired at Israel. The IDF would have to do it quickly and with massive power in order to limit the days of fighting, thereby reducing the suffering to both sides. Paying any attention to the "cartel" − in Israel or abroad − will only extend the war and suffering; its advice must be ignored because it is both irresponsible and immoral. My point was strengthened by Yuval Bazak in his essay, "Responding to the Need for International Legitimacy: Strengthening the

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IDF's Striking Force,"[4] and by Gabi Siboni in his article "Fighting Among Civilians."[5]

I conclude with an excerpt from my essay, "Between Jurists, Demography and the Existence of Israel":[6]

> I propose changing the public discourse that was begun by various jurists in Israel, who have concluded that any targeted killing is a war crime, and have also included the destruction of home and the construction of the separation fence − our fence of life − in the same category, and state the very opposite: jurists preventing the elimination of a terrorist or preventing the reduction of a war's duration cannot be said to have no blood on their hands. Such jurists are complicit in acts of terrorism, and their actions are liable to be considered war crimes.

In the new urban war that confronts us we cannot lose. We cannot agree to absorb heavy losses. It must be won and everything must be done to limit the war's duration. These are the only objectives that commanders and soldiers must bear in mind. We cannot be confused about this, despite the fact that in recent years many have tried to sow precisely such confusion.

Notes

1 Mordechai Kremenitzer, "Terrorism and Democracy, and the Case of Israel," *Hamishpat*, 2008, pp. 2-12.
2 Menachem Mautner, *Law and Culture in Israel at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century* (Am Oved, Sapir Academic College and the Rubin Publishing House of Tel Aviv University, 2008).
3 Daphne Golan, *Haaretz*, May 6, 2008.
4 Yuval Bazak, "Responding to the Need for International Legitimacy: Strengthening the IDF Strike Force," *Military and Strategic Affairs* 3, no. 2 (2011): 3-17, http://www.inss.org.il/upload/(FILE)1326272957.pdf.
5 Gabi Siboni, "Fighting Among Civilians," *Yisrael Hayom*, December 6, 2011.
6 Arnon Soffer, "Between Jurists, Demography and the Existence of Israel," *National Security* No. 7, 2009.