Principles of Warfare in the Densely Populated Areas of Arab Non-State Entities

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In Israeli research there are two types of discourse regarding how to assess and judge warfare in densely populated areas: the normative discourse and the operative discourse. Conspicuously absent is the interactive discourse with the non-state enemy, i.e., the willingness to look at oneself through the eyes of the enemy in the course of the fighting. This discourse exists among non-state organizations such as Hizbollah and Hamas.

The normative discourse examines actions in war using parameters based on absolute moral values. The action and outcome are examined on the basis of norms, and therefore, "think before you act." The operative discourse bases its assessment and judgment of actions of war on professional parameters and comparisons with similar events of war in Western militaries. Events are judged on the basis of outcome rather than norms, so that the beginning is subject to the end, or according to T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, "in my beginning is my end."

In Israel, the two types of discourse, the normative and operative, limit the value of feedback and trial and error mechanisms that allow for learning in real time about the enemy's multifaceted conduct and responses.

On the side of the non-state Arab entity, where the interactive discourse is prevalent, the normative and operative discourses are intertwined. The end, i.e., the test of results, and the beginning, i.e., the test of norms and intentions, are part of a dynamic process of learning in which the end is a longing for the beginning. Going beyond traditional Israeli myopia, it behooves us to say something about the discourse on the Arab side,

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and refer to the poet Mahmoud Darwish (though one should beware of making sweeping generalizations): "I walk without rendezvous, vacant / of my tomorrow's promises. I remember that I forgot, / and I forget as I remember...I forget the things I have said / and remember what I haven't said yet."[1]

This essay discusses three articles dealing with Operation Defensive Shield and Operation Cast Lead that reflect the normative and operative discourses common in Israel. It will also discuss statements made by Hizbollah and Hamas leaders that reflect the interactive discourse.

The essay by Yagil Henkin, "Kosovo, Somalia, Jenin: A Comparative Analysis,"[2] deals with the events of Operation Defensive Shield in order to form a clear idea of what took place. It surveys the portrayal of the operation in the media and tries to clarify whether the accusations against Israel, whereby the IDF perpetrated war crimes, are in fact valid. To this end, the author states: "It is impossible to assess what happened in Jenin without a clear understanding [from the army's point of view] of what is involved in urban warfare."[3] According to Henkin, in order to understand what occurred in Jenin, it is necessary to judge matters in their military context and examine the cost-benefit ratio between the steps that were taken and the cost that was paid, while learning from the experience of other armed forces that operated under similar circumstances.[4] Given that Henkin is trying to get "a clear understanding" about the actual events, there is no interactive discourse with the changing reality by means of a process of trial and error. The comparative method Henkin uses is inconsistent with the interactive approach.

Asa Kasher, in his essay "Operation Cast Lead and the Ethics of Just War,"[5] attributes particular significance to examination of the value-based aspects of a military operation that he defines as a clearly political act. Particular military components with value-based aspects are "decisions, commands, and actions [that] should be closely examined in order to determine whether they appropriately manifested the moral principles of the State of Israel, the ethics of the IDF and the General Security Service, and the laws to which Israel is subject."[6] Kasher, unlike Henkin, derives the principle that defines the action from the fundamental intention. Laws explicitly clarify what is right and what is wrong, what is permitted and what is forbidden. Therefore, processes of trial and error are not part of what is taken into consideration for a military action. Feedback is also

nonexistent here because of the clear precedence of abstract rules over concrete situations.

There is an obvious difference between Henkin's approach and Kasher's. Assessing warfare in an urban zone, says Henkin, requires a professional discussion about military moves as well as a comparison with similar military moves by other Western forces. For Kasher, the context is legal and philosophic. An enlightened nation is measured by its adherence to the rules and laws incumbent upon it. Kasher does not engage in comparisons unless it is a comparison between the ideal and reality. According to his approach, success lies in creating as much congruence as possible between the two.

Despite the difference between Henkin's and Kasher's approaches, the two have a common denominator: neither discourse is based on Israel's interactions with the nation's non-state enemies in the context of warfare in densely populated areas. In both cases, interaction with the enemy is absent from the discussion about military action in an urban setting.

From Kasher and Henkin's point of view, the enemy is an object. It serves as a mirror in which Israel can view itself according to moral and professional yardsticks while engaging in a comparison with other Western nations. According to Henkin, the mirror used by Israel reflects an IDF that knows how to attain the goals with which it was charged while maintaining the professional rules that obligate the army to protect civilians. According to Kasher, the mirror used by Israel reflects an IDF that upholds both binding moral principles and self-imposed ethical limitations.

Even when Israeli commanders manage to go beyond seeing the enemy as an object, they find it hard to create significant interaction with the enemy. In his essay, "Walking through Walls," Eyal Weizman[7] claims that during Operation Defensive Shield, the commanders in the sector, especially the paratroopers' brigade commander at the time, Col. Aviv Kokhavi, sought to apply military methods based on rational deconstruction of the urban space in order to surprise the enemy. These methods of warfare stressed the reshaping of the space. The ability to reshape the space became the commanders' major objective on the ground. However, even this reshaping, as Weizman explains, was undertaken without any sensitivity to the interactive dimension. The assumption of the commanders on the ground was that they were dealing with a micro-technical calibrating of the military toolbox available to the IDF.[8] They ignored the fact that in

addition to a view of the expanse, they should also have considered the enemy as a dynamic entity with a clear functioning presence in the combat sphere, a player demanding interactive consideration at the strategic level. In other words, even in a situation of a comprehensive radical analysis, Israel remained – in its own view – the only entity in existence in the sphere and in planning the campaign.

In my mind, the geocentric approach, as reflected in the discussion about warfare in densely populated areas, represents a significant gap between Israel and its enemies, in particular its non-state enemies.

How do non-state organizations such as Hizbollah and Hamas relate to fighting in densely populated spheres? In a speech made in July 2006, Hassan Nasrallah stated:

> Our policy is not to cling to one particular point or another in a particular town, and so on. Our fighting doesn't have a geographical dimension, because we are not an organized army and do not fight like an organized army; we fight a guerilla war. Therefore, from our point of view, it is better to let them advance and enter the cities and villages because that way we can fight them directly and cause them damage and loss of life. That is our goal in a ground confrontation.[9]

In Hizbollah's view, close contact with the Israeli enemy allows its presence in the arena without committing it to holding any particular target or line.

Although his goal is to kill as many Israelis as possible, the number of Israeli dead is not a yardstick of victory from Nasrallah's perspective. An interview he gave to al-Jazeera reflects a common motif in Hizbollah's policy:

> A victory for us means that the resistance remains, that its spirit is not broken, that Lebanon is not vanquished and maintains it honor...As long as missiles are launched from Lebanon and hurt the Zionists, as long as there is even one soldier firing his gun... it means that resistance still exists... The fact that we've lasted this long – that's victory. We're talking about Israel! I've always said that one can't underestimate Israel. We're not fighting the militia, party, organization, or army of a weak or poor nation. We're fighting against an army that beat several Arab armies combined in a single blow...The fact that we're still standing is a victory, the fact that we've

> taken a blow is a victory, and the fact that we've continued the struggle is a victory.[10]

In this segment too, there is a clear stress on feedback: what Israel does defines what Hizbollah does, and vice versa. Nothing exists only in and of itself. Even the respect he grants Israel is evidence of Hizbollah's determination in service of its definition of self. The success of the resistance is thus measured by its standing up to a particular enemy in a particular context. The ability to interpret stamina as victory is a direct outcome of the aggressor's obvious characteristics. Nasrallah made it clear that a part of what he thinks of Hizbollah's success lies in the organization's ability to see itself through the eyes of the aggressor, i.e., Israel.

In an interview with al-Jazeera about Hizbollah's rocket fire, he said:

> The first time we trained our weapons on Israeli settlements was on the day the former General Secretary Abbas Musawwi was killed [February 1992]. The first blow we landed on them [that year] was very painful because it came as surprise to the Israelis. For our part, after we launched the Katyushas on the settlements, we realized that the enemy stopped its attack on us, and from that day onward we understood the lesson that lay at the heart of that incident.[11]

Nasrallah's statement indicates the importance he attributes to trial and error. Hizbollah fired for one reason – to respond. It was surprised by the restraint shown by Israel and changed its conduct on the basis of the evolving reality.

Hizbollah can therefore be said to be a learning organization. Its basic assumptions are: every action on its part will elicit an Israeli response; the response will not necessarily be predictable or proportionate; and it is important to study the response and derive modes of action from it.

This interaction with the enemy is of primary importance in the organization's self-definition as it confronts the enemy. The situation in which there is no choice but to see oneself through the enemy's eyes leads to a learning of lessons and also to the shaping of systems and the agenda. The enemy is not "objective," in the sense of being unchanging. On the contrary: the enemy is dynamic, capable of change. If I want to confront him, I cannot be less dynamic or capable of change than he.

Interaction – the state in which one is willing to see oneself through the enemy's eyes – is therefore a sign of strength in Hizbollah's view. From

Israel's point of view it is a sign of weakness. Nonetheless, in warfare in densely populated cities – both from afar and within the urban zone itself – this interaction clearly comes to the fore. In such warfare, boundaries are crossed and distinctions blurred. Three feet conquered by your forces can quickly be retaken by the enemy. Innocent civilians can turn out to be combatants. A secure axis is liable to turn into a death trap. The gaps of context I have discussed so far demonstrate the extent to which such intensive interaction is problematic from Israel's perspective and the extent to which it affords opportunities to non-state entities such as Hizbollah.

Hamas is another non-state entity that wages war on Israel in densely populated areas. An examination of statements by Hamas leaders shows that Hamas too defines success via a deep understanding of its enemy, an understanding that comes from interaction. Hamas spokesman Abu Obeideh, in an interview with *al-Hayat*, said:

> We studied the methods of the Israeli army as it comes across fighters and we laid a relevant defensive infrastructure. We prepared for this war. We in [the] al-Qassam [Brigades] studied for a long time... because the enemy is planning to strike at Gaza...From the first moment of the war, we started changing our tactics and scenarios.[12]

Mohammed Def, one of the founders of the military arm, stated in an interview with al-Jazeera:

> Does the resistance have to attain a crushing victory by means of a knock-out or simply make the occupier pay a heavy price by attaining local victories, in stages?...It's part of the strategy that has made Benjamin Netanyahu understand, over and over again, that Israel's War of Independence has been going on since 1948 and is still not over.[13]

In Hamas' view, military skills are not measured by professional yardsticks, à la Henkin. They are also not an expression of absolute principles, as Kasher would have them. They are acquired and learned through facing a concrete enemy, and by constantly changing and regrouping anew.

The ability to exploit the IDF's weakness on the basis of a deep understanding of its capabilities and routines lies at the very heart of Hamas' strategy. However, this recognition is not absolute. Mohammed Def said that Hamas did not embark on operations whose chances of

success are 5-10 percent; it strove to be in the 70-80 percent range. The possibility of failure despite the interaction was always taken into account.

Another feature discernable in statements by Hamas leaders is the organization's communal rather than the state-like nature. Hamas' vitality does not emerge from the formal activities of a state's apparatus and institutions, or from abiding by predefined rules. In this context, Mahmoud al-Zahar noted: "Palestinian unity is what will help us attain the goal...We will continue [to act] patiently and persistently – this is the weapon we must present to the enemy."[14] On another occasion, Ismail Haniyeh pointed out: "It is true that our people have no planes, tanks, submarines, nuclear missiles or phosphorous bombs, but we have will, intention, belief, and determination characterized by perseverance, unity, and the ability to be patient and remain firm."[15] It seems that in order to understand interaction as a strength, it is necessary to be self-confident and to know who you are. The Palestinians know who they are. Israel is still on a journey that has yet to end.

Hamas does not seek to depend on comparative professional standards, as does Henkin, or the existence of laws, as does Kasher. Hamas derives its strength from the community's strengths – solidarity, functional flexibility, and ideological horizons. This vitality is expressed not only in military actions but also in the organization's highly developed social philosophy. This philosophy, which Israelis understand to be a means of recruitment for terrorist activity, stands as a communal mechanism of the highest order. Research that has been published gives evidence of the independence of Hamas' social wing and its civic commitment to the members of the community. The recent book by Sarah Roy on civil society in the Gaza Strip[16] reveals a strong, cohesive community that views ambitions of statehood as a legitimate goal but not as a starting point.

In its struggle against states, Israel has less difficulty. Israel's tendency to create contexts that derive from "big ideas" such as professionalism, morality, sovereignty, and so on is appropriate for confrontations with nations that view such standards as desirable.

In the regional reality, in which confrontations with nations are waning, especially in the reality in which the nations themselves are changing in unrecognizable ways, it behooves us to consider the modes of operation of non-state entities and the reality of situations such as warfare in densely populated spheres. The interaction that lies at the heart of a successful

battle can and must also lie at the heart of successful contacts to end hostile activities and even to peaceful ways of resolving longstanding conflicts.

Israel needs a fundamental revolution, one that will cause the decision makers to understand that Israel is not the stable entity around which the entire region revolves. On this, Buddhist teachers would say: "Anyone who doesn't see the world as it is will never be able to contend with it."

Notes

1 Mahmoud Darwish, "Tuesday and the Weather Is Clear," http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/lib/tmp/cmsfiles/File/review/Darwish.pdf.
2 Yagil Henkin, "Urban Warfare and the Lessons of Jenin," *Azure* 15 (summer 2003).
3 Ibid., p. 36.
4 Ibid., p. 40.
5 Asa Kasher, "Operation Cast Lead and the Ethics of Just War," *Azure* 37 (summer 2009).
6 Ibid., p. 45.
7 Eyal Weizman, "Walking through Walls," *Mita'am* 15 (September 2008).
8 Ibid., pp. 79, 83.
9 *Al-Manar*, July 16, 2006.
10 Hassan Nasrallah in an interview with al-Jazeera, July 21, 2006.
11 Hassan Nasrallah in an interview with al-Jazeera, May 27, 2003.
12 Hassan Nasrallah in an interview with al-Jazeera, December 17, 2007.
13 Muhammad Def in an interview with al-Jazeera, July 2006.
14 Al-Jazeera, January 5, 2009.
15 Palestine-info, January 5, 2009.
16 Sarah Roy, *Hamas and Civil Society in Gaza: Engaging the Islamist Social Sector* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).