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## **The New United States Policy against the Islamic State:**

### **Ramifications for Asymmetric Warfare**

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In late May 2017, US Defense Secretary Gen. James Mattis announced a change in United States strategy in the war against the Islamic State, amounting to a transition from attrition to a concerted policy of annihilation. Mattis announced that the US intention is to prevent foreigners fighting in Islamic State ranks from surviving the battle and returning home or acting elsewhere, such as in North Africa, Europe, the Americas, and Asia. Mattis added that civilian casualties in the war against terrorism is “a fact of life,” but made it clear that US forces would continue to make great efforts to prevent civilian casualties, while taking the army’s needs into consideration. However, it is already clear that since President Trump took office there has been an increase in civilian casualties in US attacks in Iraq and Syria against the Islamic State.

On June 5, 2017, the international coalition led by the United States began its attack on al-Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic State in Syria. According to UN estimates, 88 civilians were killed in the airstrikes. Some 30 of the dead were women, children, and teens. The incident follows reports of two other coalition airstrikes in May in which civilians who had fled Raqqa were reportedly killed – 20 and 31, respectively. While it is impossible to say that this constitutes a significant change compared to the results of previous policies on opening fire and preventing collateral damage, the nature of the strikes and the number of casualties can be understood as the result of a more permissive rules of engagement and airstrike policy than that issued in Obama’s administration, which took a more stringent attitude on preventing collateral damage, going so far as ostensibly striving for “zero civilian casualties.”

Complete avoidance of collateral damage in asymmetric warfare, when a sub-state organization operates in an urban environment and while intentionally embedded in the civilian population uses human shields as it fights other combatants, does not, generally

speaking, allow military forces to attain their goals. Moreover, when there are severe restrictions on the level of collateral damage, commanders on the ground and pilots generally add another safety margin to avoid harming civilians and those not involved in the fighting. Consequently, the operational effectiveness of the attacks declines, a phenomenon that draws criticism in the United States and elsewhere, the claim being that even international law does not set such stringent standards and limits on the use of force.

During President Obama's term in office, the United States apparently chose to fight against the Islamic State with one arm tied behind its back, resulting in impaired operational effectiveness. In practice, this is one of the features of the "paradox of power," reflecting the difficulty of nations with substantive military force to confront terrorist and guerilla organizations with inferior power because of the limits they assume on the use of force, in part out of principles of morality and international law. The United States also avoided the use of ground troops other than in limited special forces operations in order to reduce or avoid altogether battle losses to its forces. This is yet another symptom of the same paradox, reflecting a concern about domestic criticism. It reduces the ability to maximize the use of military force and thus attain predetermined goals and objectives. Another concern limiting the scope of attacks on civilian environments and economic infrastructures in Iraq and Syria was consideration for future reconstruction needs.

The cautious, conservative rules of engagement of the United States and the international coalition forces was radically different from the policy of the pro-Assad coalition, which did not hesitate to target civilians intentionally or use chemical weapons, including the Russian intervention in the fighting alongside the Assad regime. From the outset Russia's policy on the use of force has been permissive, almost limitless, and there are many reports of Russian airstrikes having harmed civilians, damaged civilian infrastructures and hospitals, and demolished urban areas without considering the possibility of mass civilian casualties.

The first signs of the Trump administration's willingness to use more force in general were the strikes on the Shayrat airbase, from where the Syrian planes took off to attack civilians with chemical weapons; more extensive use of US ground troops in the battle zones in northern Syria; and the use of a GBU-43/B bomb (weighing more than 10 tons) on Islamic State targets in Afghanistan. Although the United States claims that only military targets were hit in these strikes, they represent a clear policy change.

One explanation for the decision to use more force in the fight against the Islamic State, albeit with the understanding that innocent civilians would also be harmed, is that the Trump administration wants to show it is not following in the footsteps of the preceding administration, and that it intends to take more decisive action with fewer limitations against terrorists around the world. Another reason is that the previous policy indirectly

caused a greater number of casualties by prolonging the campaign and was ineffective in denying or neutralizing the organization's ability to carry out attacks. In any case, the change expresses a desire to target as many Islamic State combatants as possible to prevent the return of radical jihadists to their countries of origin and their infiltration of liberated or other regions in the Middle East.

### **Ramifications for Israel**

Are Mattis's declaration and the recent US strikes, as well Russia's permissive policy on the use of airstrikes in Syria, which cause mass civilian casualties and extensive harm to civilian infrastructures, evidence of a change in international standards in the fight against terrorist organizations and sub-state actors? A related question is: do the rules of engagement that apply to powers such as the United States and Russia also apply to other states confronting terrorism, such as Israel?

As part of its preparations for a future round of asymmetric fighting, Israel is deliberating whether in the next war against Hezbollah in Lebanon, it should deliver harsh blows in the first stage of fighting in the villages and urban areas where Hezbollah infrastructures are hidden, especially missile and rocket launchers aimed at Israel. The goal of such activity would be to neutralize the organization's ability to damage Israel's civilian and strategic home front; for its part, Israel might claim that even according to the proportionality principle, the security need to defend Israel's home front outweighs possible collateral damage to Lebanese civilians living near Hezbollah's military locations. A similar dilemma regards a possible round of fighting with Hamas. To what extent does Israel's policy of preventing collateral damage while fighting against Hamas in the Gaza Strip harm the IDF's operational effectiveness, prolong the duration of the campaign, and thereby cause more collateral damage and expose the Israeli home front, especially the populated areas near the Gaza Strip, to recurring damage from Hamas and the other terrorist organizations operating out of Gaza?

Should Israel, in a future confrontation, opt to impose fewer limits on itself (while still adhering to international law), it may well be that given the current state of the international arena, it will be exposed to less criticism and fewer sanctions from the United States (unlike during Operation Protective Edge, when the administration delayed the shipment of Hellfire missiles Israel needed to continue the fighting because of harm to civilians caused by Israeli strikes). Indeed, when the United States began to launch targeted killing operations from the air in the context of the war on terrorism, its criticism and that of other Western nations against Israel for doing the same declined. On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that others within the international community would accept a more permissive Israeli policy on the use of force. Moreover, aside from taking into

account international responses, it behooves Israel to act on the basis of the fundamental values of Israeli society, which at its core are democratic and liberal, demanding the utmost possible reduction in harm to innocents.

The Trump administration, too, is under constant scrutiny and is limited by various elements built into American democracy, such as the media, the judicial system, and the political relevance of civilians influenced by these democratic institutions and public opinion; it is also influenced by international public opinion. A more permissive policy than in the past, whether by the United States or Israel, must thus still recognize the limits on the use of force in asymmetric conflicts and continue to seek appropriate solutions for optimal operational effectiveness against terrorist organizations and sub-state entities, while reducing harms to civilians not involved in fighting.