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Israel's Goals of War: Victory of Time over Space

Shmuel Harlap

In today's complex and fluid reality, what are Israel's war goals? An objective military victory along the lines of the Six Day War seems impossible. A subjective victory, by way of a "victory image," is a matter for PR and propaganda aimed at public opinion. A "victory image," being a Clausewitzian objective of a "political gain," is not a legitimate goal for a democracy defending itself. Furthermore, in an asymmetrical war involving a multitude of participants and threats, where Israel is attacked from all sides with thousands of rockets, vulnerable to strikes against strategic installations and civilian communities and a crippled economy, it is strategically wrong to try to prevail and be victorious militarily – a belief belonging to the era of conventional wars in "sterile" battlegrounds. In an asymmetrical war, on any front, Israel has two goals of war only: confining the war's duration and damage to a minimum; and deferring the next war by many years. Formulating the goals of war as such means redefining Israel's war goals as a victory of time over space. Preparation of the defensive and offensive response for the implementation of these goals is an urgent requirement that must be assumed immediately by the government of Israel.

Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831), a Prussian general and theoretician, is famous for declaring that "war is merely the continuation of policy by other means." This axiom relays three concepts. First, war is a means and not an end by itself. Second, war is just a continuation of policy; it is not a reversal of policy or a testament to its failure. Third, war is "another means"; it is not a last resort when all other options have been exhausted. According to Clausewitz, war as "another means" and a "continuation of policy" is no different from any other policy initiative. It is morally neutral. So long as it serves the goal of government, war is a legitimate tool.

In Clausewitz's time, before the rise of modern democracy and the nationalist ideology, wars were motivated by territory and statecraft, not by ideology. The ruler's interest was at the core of war: an attempt to annex territory for the aggrandizement of the emperor, king, or prince. These territorial wars were waged between regular armies, on "sterile" battlegrounds. They were wars of conquest, not defense.

Yet with the advent of modern democracy, which would give rise to weapons of mass destruction and the evolution of total war, war is no longer "a continuation of policy" and "another means." In Western democracies, war rests on two pillars: First, democracies fight defense wars against the belligerence of authoritarian regimes, not wars of conquest. No democracy has ever launched a war against another. Second, war is a last resort for self-defense against outside aggression; it is neither "another" means, nor a war of choice. Consequently, in a world where democratic and authoritarian values clash, the adoption of Clausewitz's thinking as a modern warfare doctrine is only applicable to authoritarian regimes. Democracies require their own military theoreticians.

In Israel, military strategy until and including the Yom Kippur War was predicated on war between regular armies and the "deterrence–warning–resolve" doctrine. However, since the 1980s the nature of warfare has changed, and Israel's wars have shifted to asymmetrical fighting against terrorist organizations. The "deterrence–warning–resolve" doctrine has in practice been abandoned, even if not in theory, in favor of two doctrines, proactive and passive.

The proactive doctrine, Clausewitzian in essence, argues that war aims to achieve a political goal, and is not waged just to ensure survival and security. The Big Pines military plan for Lebanon in 1982 aimed to bring about regime change and put the Maronite minority headed by Bashir Gemayel in charge of the country at the expense of various other communities and their militias. Regarding the Gaza Strip, the approach advocated by MK Avigdor Liberman argues for toppling Hamas rule and replacing it with a regime friendly to Israel. The passive doctrine, currently associated with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, argues for a continuation of the status quo and restoration of the status quo ante. Three operations against Hamas – Cast Lead (2008-9), Pillar of Defense (2012), and Protective Edge (2014) – ended with Hamas remaining in power and a return to the status quo of "tacit agreements" toward restoration of calm in the security realm.

The two approaches – proactive and passive – have failed. In Lebanon, the Israeli strategy suffered a total failure with Gemayel's murder and the Phalangist downfall. In Gaza, toppling Hamas with a military operation does not guarantee an Israel-friendly regime. In addition, the "understandings" between Israel and Hamas, which are attained intermittently with Egyptian mediation, are systematically violated whenever Hamas decides to change policy and confront Israel.

Today, with the rise of Iran and its proxies, Israel is challenged on all fronts: Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, the slowly reconstituted Syrian military, Shiite militias in Iraq, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza – and, above all, the patron, Iran. The complexity of the

threats begets three intertwined war scenarios: a third Lebanon war, a northern war with Hezbollah and Syria, and a comprehensive war with Iran and its proxies. It is thus incumbent upon the IDF to prepare on all fronts for different and varied scenarios – in addition to defending the home front.

Against the background of this complex and fluid reality, what are Israel's war goals? An objective military victory along the lines of the Six Day War seems impossible. A subjective victory, by way of a "victory image," is a matter for PR and propaganda aimed at public opinion. A "victory image," being a Clausewitzian objective of a "political gain," is not a legitimate goal for a democracy defending itself. Furthermore, in an asymmetrical war involving a multitude of participants and threats, where Israel is attacked from all sides with thousands of rockets, vulnerable to strikes against strategic installations and civilian communities and a crippled economy, it is strategically wrong to try to prevail and be victorious militarily – a belief belonging to the era of conventional wars in "sterile" battlegrounds.

In an asymmetrical war, on any front, Israel has two war goals only:

- a. Confining the war's duration and damages to a minimum; preventing attrition-in infliction by the enemy; restoring normal life in Israel within a few days, if not hours.
- b. Deferring the next war by many years. This is more a consequence than a result of war.

In order to achieve the two goals –reduce the duration and damage of war to a minimum, and defer the next war for many years – preparation is required in two realms: defense and offense.

In the realm of defense, Israel should develop, in addition to Iron Dome, David's Sling, and the Arrow system, a rocket-interception capability that is effective in greater numbers and much cheaper. A breakthrough in the development of innovative technology for laser-guided weaponry, which would allow for the destruction of thousands of rockets in real time and at the cheapest possible cost, holds the most promise. According to Maj. Gen. (res.) Isaac Ben-Israel (*Maariv*, December 6, 2018), real-time laser interceptions are possible, pitting the speed of light against the rocket's flight-time. The result is a victory of time over space, in defensive terms.

In the realm of offense, Israel should unleash unprecedented military force while ensuring minimal harm to uninvolved civilians. Such force would destroy military capabilities and civilian infrastructures used to support the fighting; reconstruction of these capabilities and infrastructures would last many years. Massive destruction of capabilities and infrastructures stands to generate a deep change in perception, similar to

what followed the destruction of the Dahiya quarter, Hezbollah's bastion in Beirut, during the Second Lebanon War (July-August 2006). Unleashing unprecedented military force would effect, physically and psychologically, a deferral of the next war by many years. It would mean a victory of time over space, in offensive terms.

The two war goals thus have something in common: time versus space. In terms of space, Israel's enemies have the absolute geographic and demographic advantage: the Iranian-Iraqi-Syrian-Lebanese geographic and demographic expanse towers over Israel's slight geography and demography. However, in chronological terms, Iran and its proxies have no inherent advantage over Israel: laser defenses, Iron Dome, David's Sling, and the Arrow systems shrink the enemy's advantage in the rocketry space; the damage and war cost that Israel is liable to inflict are greater than those its enemies are liable to inflict.

Formulating the goals of war as such means redefining Israel's war goals: victory of time over space. A victory of time is not a military triumph or a political achievement. Clausewitzian illusions about political goals being an aim of war should be archived, as should any quest for glorious military victories. A victory of time over space is a minimal objective for survival and the safeguarding of existence, security, and sovereignty in a hostile and violent environment. It is designed to buy Israel quiet and time, and nothing more. This alone is the role of the IDF as the Israel Defense Forces.

Implementing the two goals of war requires an operational doctrine for defense and offense. The defense realm requires that Israel be covered by many low cost laser interception systems in addition to Iron Dome, David's Sling, and the Arrow systems. The offense realm requires preparing a combined air-sea-land blitzkrieg, along with threats to target regime assets in each of the countries that allow Iranian proxies to fire missiles and rockets at Israel. Preparation of the defensive and offensive response for the implementation of Israel's war goals is an urgent requirement that must be assumed immediately by the government of Israel.

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