

Cognition: Combining Soft Power and Hard Power

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The cognitive effort is woven into all stages of military and political activity. At the outset of an action, it prepares the groundwork and creates the legitimacy for exerting hard or soft power. During the action, the cognitive effort enables the ongoing exertion of various powers, provides the logic of their integration, and establishes the foundations for the political resolution and the shaping of a stable improved military and political situation. At the end of the action, the cognitive effort emphasizes the achievement attained as a result of the powers utilized, and works to maintain it over time and prevent cognitive achievements by the adversary.

This article examines the hypothesis that cognition involves a conceptual framework that connects all efforts, “hard” and “soft,” aimed to achieve defined political and military objectives. The article first examines theoretical aspects of power and consciousness and cognitive effort as a central element in the approach of the political-military campaign (“translating” the achievements of the efforts exerted). Afterwards, the article presents two case studies in the Israeli context, and examines the hypothesis that cognition connects all of the efforts that aim to achieve political and military objectives. The article concludes by offering key insights and recommendations.

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Hard Power and Soft Power

The complex concept of “power” is of major centrality in the domain of international relations. Its complexity is expressed in being multi-dimensional and having a dynamic structure. For example, power can change its scope, the area in which it is exerted, its level of intensity, its cost (the price paid by the actor exerting the power, and the price paid by the actor upon whom power is exerted), and its means. Another dimension of power that is sometimes hidden is the dimension of intent. Cases in which one actor overtly influences another actor are easier to identify, whereas cases in which one actor influences another actor without overt or intentional activity or by means of covert activity are harder to identify.

The centrality of the concept “power” in international relations is evident in a large variety of approaches that define it and the way it is expressed. One general distinction indicates the difference between “behavioral power” – the ability to attain the results in the international arena sought by the actor exerting it – and “resource power” – the resources that the actor has that enable it to attain its desired results. Behavioral power is manifested in two principal means: “hard power” and “soft power.”

Hard power is applied when Actor A exerts coercive or conditional (deterrent) measures on Actor B, thus causing it to act in a way that is in the interest of Actor A, which Actor B would not have done without this coercion or condition. In contrast, soft power is expressed when Actor A succeeds in causing Actor B to act in accordance with Actor A’s wishes without exerting coercive or conditional measures to this end, but through persuasion or through norms and values.² It follows from this that hard power and soft power, while connected, are not the same, and sometimes complement one another.

An actor’s power is a tool for exerting efforts to promote its interests, in accordance with the strategic objective that directs both hard and soft efforts toward achieving political objectives. Therefore, the strategic objective is a compass for directing and synchronizing all efforts, including cognitive efforts. Cognitive efforts are integrated in soft power and hard power and

2 Joseph Nye, “Soft Power,” *Foreign Policy* 80 (1990): 153-71; Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004).

aim to influence the adversary's cognition by manipulating information and enhancing the effect of hard power.

Cognition as a Central Element in the Political-Military Campaign

The information revolution and the technological leaps of the past few years that have made information more accessible through many advanced platforms have led to the element of cognition assuming diverse layers. Cognition has also received greater weight in advancing the policy and objectives of various actors in the international system, both in conflict situations and in routine times.

Attaining a cognitive effect requires a series of actions aimed at shaping the approaches to the reality of different target populations, including the enemy, the domestic public (the internal arena), the enemy's domestic public, the regional environment, and the international community. The goal is to achieve the defined strategic objective. Cognition is always subjective and adapted to the culture and to the religious, political, and social views of the different populations, and to their expectations. Cognition is sometimes shaped over time, but there are cases in which a single picture can change the perception of reality. We suggest also seeing cognition as a conceptual framework that connects all efforts, hard and soft.

The shaping of cognition during a conflict between adversarial actors includes several stages: formulating the narrative of the conflict by describing the reality that prevailed before; the need and the legitimacy to change the situation or to maintain it, due to an assessment that the possible end states are inferior to the current situation; the reasons for defining the political-military objectives; and the principles for conducting the campaign such that it will influence the consciousness of the various target audiences in a way that serves the strategic objective.

The various measures and powers exerted need to match the "story" that the actor wishes to convey to the designated target audiences. This is so that the construction of cognition is effective and strengthens the legitimacy of exerting hard power, especially military power; so that the achievements of exerting hard or soft power are translated into political and international achievements; so that it is possible to shape an image of victory that illustrates the achievement of the political-military objectives, or offsets

the achievements of the adversary; and in order to establish an improved political-military reality over time.

Cognitive influence efforts create an ongoing process of providing meaning to events as part of the attempts to instill these meanings in target audiences. The primary and direct circle of cognition is the way adversarial sides who are involved in a conflict assess their achievements by examining the extent to which achievements in practice match declared objectives. At the same time, in secondary circles, cognitive efforts are directed toward external populations that are not directly involved but have the ability to influence the image of the achievement. The conclusion of an event in which one actor exerts power over another actor will be examined by each of the actors as it forms a sense of the achievement. This includes physical achievements (maintained territory, destruction, neutralized capabilities, and prevention) and cognitive achievements (recognition, formulated understandings, achievement of a settlement, adoption of international norms, and accepted rules of the game). This examination occurs by interpreting the situation as it is seen by the different populations and actors in local and international arenas. This interpretation has considerable implications for the level of legitimacy to continue to manage the incident or conclude it through deterrence, impose a situation, or reach a settlement. Hence cognitive failure can uproot physical achievements, while cognitive success can leverage them toward political achievements, but also compensate for the limitations of achievements on the battlefield or in the political campaign.

The central objectives of cognitive efforts include, therefore, leveraging the achievements of hard power, and as defined above, cognitive efforts are interwoven in all stages of military and political activity. At the beginning, they create the legitimacy for exerting hard or soft power. During the action, they enable the continuous exertion of various powers and provide the logic of their integration; the use of hard power thus places a cognitive emphasis on increasing the estimated cost of defeat for the adversary if it continues the conflict. At the end of the action, the cognitive effort emphasizes the achievement attained as a result of the use of the powers exerted, offsets the adversary's achievements, and works to maintain the achievement attained over time and to prevent later cognitive achievements by the adversary.

Israel, as a state actor that accepts international rules and standards, is also expected to cognitively emphasize humanitarian efforts, the importance

of international norms, compliance with international law, and integration of non-governmental organizations and civil society organizations in the processes of regulating and shaping the new reality.

Israel: Case Studies on Integrating Cognitive Efforts within Military Campaigns

In the current era, in which the international system has multiple actors of different kinds propelled by different logics, states are not necessarily the most influential actors in the arena. The international system is no longer solely examined in terms of the sizes of forces and the military capabilities at the disposal of states, or their economic, scientific, and cultural capabilities; this is a system in which cognition may be shaped by non-state actors (that can be directed by state actors), which do not act in accordance with the traditional and familiar rules of the game in the international arena. This reality, which is known as “asymmetric conflict,” creates a situation of an almost built-in lack of symmetry in the struggle on cognition, and poses a number of questions related to cognitive efforts as an element that connects between hard power and soft power.

From Israel’s standpoint, cognitive efforts aim to leverage achievements of the battlefield, translate them into political achievements, and create a stable security regime over time. There are a number of basic elements for managing a successful cognitive campaign:

- a. International and internal conviction regarding Israel’s legitimacy to operate in the designated arena.
- b. Clear achievements on the battlefield, portrayed through documentation and facts, along with strategic communication that clarifies the purpose of military activity and the expected cost to the other side of continued fighting.
- c. Imposition of Israel’s conditions for a ceasefire on the enemy, subsequently followed by imposition of the principles of the settlement.
- d. Complete coordination with the United States regarding the goals of the war and how to achieve them, while taking American interests into consideration.
- e. Upholding of the laws of war, including by minimizing collateral damage and harm to non-combatants.

- f. A social media campaign vis-à-vis designated target audiences in order to advance the Israeli narrative and shape the image of victory.
- g. Counter cognitive efforts of the other side, such as false and unsubstantiated information (fake news).

A central challenge is the ability to leverage a military achievement for a political achievement through cognitive efforts. We will illustrate this through two case studies that represent two different archetypes: one can be defined as an “ongoing” event, while the other is an event that has clear start and end points.

Along the Gaza Border since the Spring of 2018

The so-called Marches of Return encouraged thousands of Gaza residents to march toward the border fence in order to penetrate Israeli territory. These developed into violent conflicts between the IDF and Hamas and other terrorist groups, which included the dispatch of incendiary kites and balloons, and rockets and mortar shells launched into Israeli territory; in response, Israel carried out air strikes on Hamas targets.

The Israeli military achievement, which prevented the penetration of terrorists and rioters into its territory and enabled the interception of rockets and mortars and sharply reduced damage, was significantly offset in the cognitive dimension following public diplomacy and public relations achievements by Hamas in the international arena (with the assistance of foreign media networks critical and even hostile toward Israel) and in the internal Palestinian arena (by convincing the Gaza public of the justness of the cause and recruiting it for the ongoing campaign against the “blockade” of the Gaza Strip). The ongoing cognitive campaign has had a number of peaks, such as the split television screen broadcast on May 14, 2018, with the harsh scenes from the clashes on the border of the Gaza Strip on one side, and the ceremony inaugurating the American embassy in Jerusalem on the other side, as if it were a different universe.³ The ongoing conflict enabled seeing how both sides achieve cognitive successes: Hamas sought to revive the world’s interest in the Gaza problem, while Israel sought to

3 Nevo Brand, Pnina Shuker, and David Siman-Tov, “‘The March of Return’ – Operative Achievement and Strategic Failure: A Test Case for Cognitive Warfare,” *INSS Insight* No. 1063, May 30, 2018.

send a clear message to the Gaza population and to Hamas that crossing the fence is not possible.

At the same time, there were prominent cognitive gaps in that same conflict: Israel saw great importance in the knowledge that the majority of those killed were Hamas members, while the international mindset did not attribute great importance to this fact. The reason for this is the cognitive “proximity” between the Hamas movement and the residents of the Gaza Strip, who are seen as motivated by the hardship for which they blame Israel. The picture brimming with contrasts that was broadcast on television from Jerusalem and from the Gaza Strip undermined Israel’s operative achievement, having taken action in order to maintain its security and its sovereignty. The large number of casualties on the Palestinian side strengthened the image of Israel’s disproportionate use of force against civilians that demonstrated against it.

The picture described above illustrates a situation in which Israel did not properly prepare for the cognitive campaign in accordance with its basic components: it did not create the preliminary, accompanying, and subsequent account of the events in advance; did not sufficiently clarify Hamas’s objectives; relied on its sense of the justice and legitimacy of its actions in defending its sovereignty; and did not manage to assess the negative possible consequences of the asymmetric confrontation in Gaza, especially against the backdrop of the celebratory and disconnected pictures from Jerusalem. Israel responded somewhat late, with a meager stock of pictures, videos, and facts to support its version that it made cautious and restrained use of force in order to maintain its sovereignty.

The incongruence between Israel’s military activity and its cognitive activity led to ongoing instability in Israel’s Gaza border region, and increased Hamas’s motivation to continue to challenge Israel and exploit the momentum in order to improve its standing in the Palestinian arena and with respect to the international community. The negative consequences for Israel from the sequence of events on the border with Gaza were extensive: the Palestinian issue was restored to the center of the international stage; Hamas’s legitimacy and the “path of resistance” were revived in the eyes of the Gaza public; international decisions against Israel were facilitated; and full responsibility for events in the Gaza Strip was ascribed to Israel.

Another round of escalation occurred in November 2018, when Hamas and other organizations fired some 500 rockets into Israeli territory. This time, the Israeli response was expressed in extensive air strikes on Hamas targets in the Gaza Strip, while minimizing harm to civilians and acceding to Hamas's request for a ceasefire. Israel thereby made clear that from the cognitive perspective it does not have an effective response to the problem of the Gaza Strip, and the event ended with a "victory image" for Hamas – the resignation of Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman.

The Cognitive Failure of the Second Lebanon War (2006)

The Second Lebanon War ended with a highly negative feeling among the Israeli public, which felt that operationally it was a missed opportunity or even a loss to Hezbollah, despite a series of clear operational achievements by the IDF. The achievements included: destroying Hezbollah's strategic array of surface-to-surface missiles; destroying the organization's nerve center in the Dahiya quarter of Beirut; intercepting rocket and missiles launchers; and translating the military achievement into a political achievement in Security Council Resolution 1701, which led to a change in the overt reality in southern Lebanon, the transfer of responsibility there from Hezbollah to the Lebanese government and army, and the deployment of an expanded peacekeeping force (UNIFIL) in the theater.⁴

From the cognitive perspective, here too Israel did not manage a cohesive cognitive campaign according to the basic elements described above. Internally, Israel was perceived as having lost: it did not succeed in returning the soldiers who were taken captive by Hezbollah – an event that in part constituted the grounds for going to war; it did not decisively defeat a sub-state actor with inferior military capabilities and powers; extensive faults were discovered in the ground forces' preparedness for an emergency; and the campaign continued far longer than planned, without ending the launch of rockets from Lebanon toward Israeli population centers. The most prominent expression of the cognitive failure was the widespread

4 Zipi Israeli, "Did We Win or Lose?": Media Discourse in Israel about the Second Lebanon War, 2006-2016," in *The Quiet Decade: In the Aftermath of the Second Lebanon War, 2006-2016*, eds. Udi Dekel, Gabi Siboni, and Omer Einav, Memorandum No. 167 (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2017), pp. 71-82.

demand in Israel to establish a commission of inquiry to assess the war.⁵ In retrospect, impressive achievements following that war are evident, chief among them consolidating Israeli deterrence and establishing a stable border regime between Israel and Lebanon for the first time since the beginning of the 1970s.

Where does this gap come from? In this case too, the cognitive aspect was not managed properly: at the outset, the Israeli government presented overambitious war aims, considering the limitations that it imposed upon itself in the use of force, such as rejecting and delaying ground maneuvers and not damaging Lebanese infrastructure. The story of the war was woven only afterwards, such that there was no central idea directing cognitive efforts and spokespersons during the war; the military successes were downplayed and the failures emphasized, including on the part of the media and Israeli politicians. It is very difficult to achieve decisive victory in conflicts that are asymmetrical in capabilities and objectives; hence the results are not unequivocal, which led to an image of failure with respect to public expectations. Furthermore, the facts on the ground in Lebanon were discovered late, mainly for the Lebanese side, which while deterring it from another escalation against Israel for more than thirteen years (to date), did not change the negative image of the war among most of the Israeli public, even years later.

Israel did not manage to focus its cognitive efforts on its military achievements (eliminating Hezbollah's strategic array of surface-to-surface missiles; destroying the organization's operations center; destroying every launcher that launched medium range missiles, and more) and on providing its citizens with a sense of security in these achievements. Therefore, despite the strategic objective defined for the war – changing the security reality in southern Lebanon, distancing Hezbollah from the border, and severely harming the organization's strategic capabilities – a gap arose between the expectations of Israeli society and the results in practice.

Since it is difficult to judge the achievements of a war while it is raging, the prevailing sense among decision makers is often that fighting should continue in order to deepen military achievements and leverage them for

5 Udi Dekel, "The Second Lebanon War: The Limits of Strategic Thinking," in *The Quiet Decade: In the Aftermath of the Second Lebanon War, 2006-2016*, pp. 27-37.

political achievements. So it was during the Second Lebanon War: Hezbollah's condition was not properly assessed and the enormous damage done to the organization was not cognitively leveraged at the end of the first week of the war, when Israel could have ended the fighting, with Hezbollah surprised by the scope and intensity of the Israeli operation. Similarly, Operation Protective Edge against Hamas in the Gaza Strip in the summer of 2014, though it lasted 51 days, did not bring about a substantial change in the strategic situation.

Israel's delayed action and the lack of an effective cognitive campaign directed at increasing Hezbollah's and Hamas's concerns regarding Israel's unexpected leeway enabled these organizations to overcome the initial shock (which stemmed from the Israeli response that they did not expect) and adjust to the IDF's mode of action. This is supported by the words of Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, that had he known in advance that this would be Israel's response, he would not have approved the abduction of the Israeli soldiers. Hamas also admitted this regarding the damage to its strategic asset – the tunnels. Lacking a clear image of victory for Israel, Hezbollah's leader was able to declare victory despite having regretted abducting the soldiers, and the leaders of Hamas did likewise. In contrast, Israel immersed itself in internal criticism and commissions of inquiry into the failures. The sense of failure and/or success in past wars influences the motivation of the government, as well as the operative planning of the next war.

In conflicts such as those presented in the case studies described above – between a state and sub-state terrorist organizations, e.g., Hezbollah and Hamas – the asymmetry is a given dynamic. On the one hand, terrorist organizations are free of state responsibility, willing to hide among the civilian population and use it as a human shield, and direct their operations toward harming civilians on the other side. On the other hand, the state, in this case Israel, instilled in the Lebanese population, as well as the international community, the understanding that since Hezbollah turned the Lebanese villages and urban centers into launchpads for missiles and rockets, this made them military targets that would be hit hard in any war. Developing this understanding creates the legitimate foundation for Israel's use of hard power, if it becomes necessary. The message enters people's consciousness, serves Israel's deterrent image, and is included in Hezbollah's cost-benefit calculation when considering whether to escalate the situation. With respect

to the Gaza Strip, in contrast, Israel sends the message that there is no point in conquering it or even causing heavy damage there, which is interpreted by Hamas as providing it with flexibility and preventing the concern that its actions will bring about the toppling of its rule.

An asymmetric conflict is expressed not only in the way force is exerted, but also in the objectives of the war. For the sub-state enemy, its continued survival and the fact that it has not been defeated by a state and standing army is considered a victory (in the cases of Hezbollah and Hamas, this is also expressed in the continued launching of rockets at the Israeli civilian home front). In contrast, the IDF must create clear facts on the ground that cannot be manipulated by the enemy. The way to create these facts is to cause very heavy physical damage, potentially including ground maneuvers deep into enemy territory. Nonetheless, in order to stop the other side or convince it that continued fighting is not worthwhile, it is not sufficient to assess the balance of achievements and failures at the end of the war; cognitive manipulation must also be carried out on the organization's leaders and on the population that supports it to clarify the enormous extent of the damage that they can expect from continued fighting or from violating the ceasefire.

Conclusion

In the past, Israel was forced to take part in conventional wars, in which victory on the battlefield influenced their cognitive implications. This was the case during the War of Independence, the Six Day War, and the Yom Kippur War. As a result, in Israel there is a tendency to prefer the military option, which relies on the conception that the region in which we live only understands “the language of force” and is influenced more by the ability to cause damage to adversaries than by the use of tools of persuasion. This is a somewhat limited worldview. Today Israel needs a broader, more complex, and more sophisticated approach in which the cognitive aspect is of central importance in combining and synchronizing between the use of hard and soft power. If in the past cognitive efforts aimed mainly to enhance the effectiveness of the military act, today military force is exerted in part as a tool to create the desired cognitive effect.

The changing battlefield and the decline in the relevance and frequency of large scale military conflicts between standing armies, along with the increasing number of actors influencing the situation and the dynamic rules

of the game, have diminished the relative importance of military efforts and increased the importance of soft and semi-soft efforts accordingly, including cognitive efforts. Cognitive efforts are another dimension of the campaign to fulfill national security objectives, and aim to shape the perception of reality of different target audiences by combining subjective aspects with created facts on the ground.

The change in the nature of conflicts has led Israel to develop the conception of the “between wars campaign,” or the “ongoing campaign,” whose purpose is to maintain power and deter enemies while controlling the levels of escalation, in order to avoid crossing the intensity threshold to a state of war. The campaign between wars contains a toolbox that aims to strengthen and maintain Israeli deterrence over time, in a controlled and planned manner. This toolbox is made up of three levels that serve the objective: disrupting enemies’ military buildup efforts; demonstrating Israel’s growing capabilities through diverse, covert, and surprise operations; and developing the cognitive foundations among the adversary that deter it from the damage it can expect from escalating into war, along with mentally preparing the Israeli home front for behavior that will significantly reduce effective harm against it. In order to advance the aims of the campaign between wars and achieve effective influence on target audiences in the internal and external environments, the narrative (or stories) that we wish to instill in the target audiences need to match the actions directed toward shaping the reality. This is the purpose of the cognitive campaign.

Cognitive efforts towards the adversary’s population and leadership, as well as the international arena, aim to create a narrative and achieve influence, which in Israel’s case are translated into consolidating its standing in the local, regional, and international arenas, and removing possible barriers, limitations, sanctions, and damage to its legitimacy, especially when the use of power will be required in order to fulfill and/or defend interests. There are several examples from the current decade.

This article examines the hypothesis that cognition is a conceptual framework that connects hard and soft efforts that aim to achieve defined political and military objectives, through a number of examples. Additional measures that can cultivate cognitive efforts in order to achieve the objectives include:

- a. Utilizing direct access to the adversarial population, whether through public diplomacy and social media or by providing humanitarian aid up to the level of local communities. An example of this is the Operation Good Neighbor project that Israel conducted on the Golan Heights, which aimed to demonstrate to the Syrian population that Israel is not a threat to it, but rather contributes and provides assistance.
- b. Employing soft measures, such as economic leverage, water and energy arrangements, security and technological assistance, and initiatives for the private and civilian market in neighboring states. This can increase dependence on Israel and influence the cost-benefit calculations of regional actors in scenarios of military escalation.
- c. Multi-dimensional cooperation with actors that have interests that are close to or overlap with those of Israel. The most prominent shared interest of Israel and the pragmatic Sunni states today is the concern about Iran's increasing negative influence in the Middle East, along with the need to neutralize the threat of Islamist jihadist terrorism. This is also the basis for Israel's cooperation with Jordan and Egypt and even with the Palestinian Authority's security forces. Cognitive efforts aim to strengthen the recognition of shared interests, as well as demonstrate Israel's unique contribution to the advance of these interests among potential partners.
- d. Cyber warfare is also of great importance. While this is focused on neutralizing enemy capabilities, it also has a cognitive element – creating influence by assisting with cyber defense, as well as using it as a central platform to convey messages and illustrate the situation. A necessary condition for this is the use of new media, as well as traditional media, in order to achieve influence on social media discourse, both among the adversary's population and among the domestic public.
- e. Domestically, Israel must cultivate the cognition of its citizens as a democratic and liberal society, based on hard power and soft power. In this case, government transparency is important, as is informing the public of strategic objectives and political and military goals, in order to set expectations and reinforce national resilience. In this way, the public will feel that it is a partner in these objectives and goals.