The Cognitive War as an Element of National Security: Based on Personal Experience

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I remember the story of the Battle of Kela on the Golan Heights during the Six Day War since my youth. At the decisive moment of the battle, only two functioning tanks remained for conquering the target, commanded by the company commander, Lt. Nati Horowitz (later Brig. Gen. Nati Golan). These two tanks brought about the retreat of a considerably larger Syrian force. The story of the battle was seared in my memory as proof that quantitative advantage and physical superiority are not sufficient – what is necessary, and perhaps even more important, is cognitive superiority.

I have learned from experience that cognitive superiority among forces stems from the morale of the fighters; the fighting spirit; the confidence in commanders, their strength, and their ability; and belief in the justness of the cause. All of these are "soft" elements that are not visible and not calculated with the number of troops or weapons. I have also learned that the importance of cognitive superiority goes beyond the boundaries of the battlefield and applies to the home front as well, as there is enormous importance in the cognitive state of civilians, especially, but not only, when the nation is at war. In the case of civilians too, "soft" elements, such as the population's morale; confidence in the leadership and defense and rescue forces; social solidarity; and belief in the justness of the cause are of the utmost significance before, during, and after the campaign. That is, the cognitive aspect is important both during times of peace and during times of war.

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It is important to distinguish between several populations in the cognitive campaign:

a. Our forces: It is necessary to distinguish between the political and the military leadership, the fighting forces, and the civilians (families and acquaintances of soldiers, civilians in the areas under attack, and the general public).

b. The enemy: It is necessary to distinguish between the political and military leadership of the enemy, its fighters, and its civilians.

c. The regional and international system, comprising the leaderships of friendly and hostile states, the public in these states, and international institutions.

d. Intermediary bodies that influence public opinion in each of the environments: the media, social networks, and so on.

The many groups and their respective interests have always been a challenge, which is intensified due to the difficulty of separating between the different target audiences. The information age has created new capabilities of division into distinct target audiences and targeted broadcasting of messages to them. At the same time, the messages transmitted to one sector are also received by other target audiences, and each population is able, free, and even expected to interpret the events on the ground, as well as the messages that accompany them, in a way that suits and promotes their perspective and their interests.

Aside from belonging to one group or another, there are several additional factors that influence people's consciousness among each side and their understanding of the campaign forms, including its objectives and achievements. Among them (not necessarily in order of importance):

a. The kinetic-combat activity of both sides and its results.

b. Public diplomacy, propaganda, psychological warfare, and branding by both sides toward the various target audiences, for the purpose of strengthening the spirit of the target audience of one's own forces and undermining the spirit and legitimacy of the other side, both vis-à-vis the other side and in the eyes of the international community.

c. Events in the international arena: the general zeitgeist, along with specific responses by official figures and civilian/private figures in the international community.

Beyond these three factors, which stand out in times of emergency, there are many additional elements that influence a state's national resilience in routine times, and as a result, serve to shape consciousness indirectly. These factors influence both the way the state perceives itself, its capabilities, and the challenges it faces, and the way it is perceived by its adversaries and the entire international community. These factors include the state of the economy, education, quality of life, innovation, and more. Despite the great importance of these variables, the scope of this article allows a focus on the cognitive efforts surrounding the campaign itself, and not the complementary and indirect factors.

The cognitive arena is important in any struggle between states, all the more so in the State of Israel's struggle against terrorist and guerilla organizations, some of which are hybrid (i.e., terrorist organizations with semi-state functions – political, social, and others), such as Hezbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in the Gaza Strip. In this case, the challenge of the cognitive war intensifies and becomes more complex. There are several reasons for this:

a. Acting in accordance with the law: The State of Israel acts in accordance with the law and is subject to both Israeli law and international law, while hybrid terrorist organizations do not see themselves as subject to laws. They make prominent use of intentional attacks against Israeli civilians, while hiding and taking offensive action from within their civilian population centers, which they use as human shields, in violation of international law and norms.

b. Double standard: The State of Israel is challenged in the international arena by figures who ignore its enemies' frequent violations of international law and norms in a way that leaves it alone in the campaign. Those who refrain from assigning sovereign state responsibility, for example to Hamas for the situation in the Gaza Strip, or to Lebanon for Iran and Hezbollah's activity from its territory, fall for intentional cognitive manipulations and tend to believe that these lawbreaking terrorist organizations are the "victim" and Israel is the "victimizer." That is, these same terrorists are presented as "innocent" civilians under "occupation" or "blockade," while Israel is presented as carrying out war crimes regardless of the need to defend itself. Israel's enemies exploit this situation to influence the consciousness of the Israeli public and undermine its belief in the justness of its cause. They understand that when a campaign takes place during a

political argument over its justness, the challenge increases tenfold. This is part of the attrition strategy of Israel's enemies, after understanding that this is the only way they may cause it real damage, in light of their inferiority on the military-kinetic battlefield.

c. The centrality of the home front: Most of the burden in the campaigns that the State of Israel has had to wage falls on the home front, that is, on civilians. Therefore, what is put to the test in these kinds of campaigns is the stamina of society, more than military force. Hence the importance of cognitive superiority, which is expressed in the Israeli public's determination and stamina in light of its belief in the justness of its cause, and in the enemy recognizing these qualities in the Israeli public. The antithesis of this is the way Hezbollah and Hamas treat their civilian home front as human shields.

The Conflict with the Palestinians in the Cognitive Context

In the campaign against Israel that began after the Oslo Accords, Israel suffered over 1,000 deaths in a long series of attacks that were seared into the Israeli consciousness, including suicide attacks. This campaign took place during an internal political debate surrounding the causes and future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, as well as Israel's control of Judea, Samaria, and the Gaza Strip.

The Palestinian side presented "the occupation" as the cause of the conflict. It also refrained from stating explicitly that the problem is the "1967 occupation" and never committed to an arrangement whereby an Israeli concession of all of the territories conquered in the Six Day War would constitute "an end to the conflict and end of all claims." Nevertheless, this idea of an end to the conflict upon withdrawal from the 1967 territories took root among many in Israel and worldwide; this false narrative also gained a foothold within Israeli politics and in the international arena, and gave the Palestinians an advantage. They absolved themselves of responsibility and created the impression that the end of the conflict depends on Israel's good will. In presenting "the occupation" as the cause of the conflict, the Palestinian side attained a significant cognitive achievement, which reversed the asymmetry that had characterized the Arab-Israeli conflict from its outset, in which little Israel was analogous to David fighting against Goliath, embodied in a superior coalition of Arab states. The moment "the occupation" was

presented as the cause of the conflict, the Palestinian cognitive effort focused on placing the responsibility for it on Israel alone, while consolidating the image of the Palestinian David and the Israeli Goliath.

From my appointment as Director of Military Intelligence in 1995, at the peak of the implementation of the Oslo Accords, until the end of my term as Chief of Staff in 2005, I saw the Palestinian achievement in the cognitive campaign as a cognitive-leadership challenge for the Israeli political leadership, both internally and externally. It is clear that this reality also made the situation difficult for the tactical echelons. The awareness of this role reversal led me to make operational decisions while seriously considering their cognitive implications. I made efforts to avoid situations that would allow the Palestinian side to exploit them as propaganda, such as pictures of an Israeli tank against a Palestinian youth throwing a stone, or prolonged air strikes (in general, night time strikes were preferred over daytime strikes, and in any case the duration of strikes was kept short).

The many means of photography and communication accessible in the battlefield pose a huge challenge for an army and state that insist on integrity. In operational activity in a civilian environment, every person with a cell phone is a photographer, and photographs can easily be edited in a biased manner. This has placed great importance on the presence of photographers among IDF forces, so that Israel will have visual proof of what actually occurred on the ground. The time it takes for an army and state committed to the authenticity of their reports to verify the facts provides an advantage to terrorists and enables them, their agents, and their supporters to spread their story, which they can photograph, edit, and immediately distribute on the internet and in the international media. By the time the IDF Spokesperson investigates or verifies the facts and then publicizes its credible version, no one is paying attention anymore. The most prominent examples of fabrications and libels produced by the Palestinians that gained momentum before Israel managed to publicize its findings from reliable investigations are the Muhammad al-Dura incident (at the outset of the wave of Palestinian terrorism in 2000) and the so-called Jenin massacre in 2002.

Recognizing Israel's disadvantage in this area led me to work to shorten the duration of inquiries and investigations in order to enable the publication of the Israeli version as quickly as possible. In many cases, Israel has succeeded in shortening the duration of the response after clarifying the matter, while

not compromising on authenticity. Nonetheless, those who do not hesitate to lie will always have the advantage of time.

Along with the obvious adherence to acting within the framework of laws and norms, we took additional steps to address the challenge:

a. Raising the awareness of commanders and soldiers regarding the importance of how their activities appear, and the need to avoid photos taken by the other side, or by members of the media, in a way that could harm Israeli interests. In addition, we introduced the documentation of activity that is important to highlight and publicize.

b. Changing the activity of the IDF Spokesperson's Unit (headed at the time by Brig. Gen. Ruth Yaron) to a unit that operates 24 hours a day, with a war room that receives all of the relevant media information and provides a response as fast as possible in different languages.

c. Training operational documenters from the IDF Spokesperson's Unit who accompany the forces in their activities.

d. Training combat soldiers as documenters.

e. Attaching journalists to forces.

f. Creating reliable and available databases and data centers (in part, both within the IDF Spokesperson's Unit and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) for those interested in receiving the Israeli version, including volunteers fighting the legitimacy war and struggling against boycott and delegitimization movements (BDS, for example) on social media.

g. Distributing information to governmental bodies, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Diplomacy (if it exists), and the Ministry of Strategic Affairs.

h. Establishing the Center for Cognitive Operations during my time as Chief of Staff, as another way to address the challenge of the cognitive war.

These changes, which were mainly within the IDF, contributed to the State of Israel's improved handling of the cognitive war. I observed this during Operation Cast Lead in the Gaza Strip in 2014 as Minister of Defense: despite the length of the operation, Israel enjoyed both civilian resilience and international sanction to continue its activities, thanks to the understanding and recognition of the operational need for them. However, these processes alone are not sufficient. An integrated effort is required for addressing all of the challenges in the cognitive campaign in the framework of a national public diplomacy and cognition directorate, as will be explained below.

Cognition as an Ongoing Campaign

The cognitive preparation of the fighting force and of civilians does not begin the day the escalation starts. Cognition is formed, influenced, and shaped all the time, and the cognitive state at the time of the outbreak of a campaign is the direct result of the routine that preceded it. The cognitive campaign is never-ending and takes place before, during, and after the campaign on the ground.

Before and during the campaign, there is importance in leadership statements that highlight the justness of the cause and convince both civilians and fighters. Such statements strengthen the belief, fortitude, and resilience of civilians and soldiers in advance of the campaign.

At the outset of the wave of Palestinian terrorism in 2000, when I served as Deputy Chief of Staff, I found myself speaking to the general public, and not just to soldiers, and explaining the essence of the campaign and the challenge Israel was facing. In fact, this is the role of the political leadership and not of army commanders. But in this case, it was politically difficult to admit that a terrorist offensive had been launched against Israel by the chairman of the Palestinian Authority, Yasir Arafat. This created a problem that I saw great importance in clarifying. I decided to prepare the public for the length of the campaign and to make it clear that we must not surrender to terrorism, and that the campaign against it, which will take a long time (even years), is no less important than the War of Independence. I said then, and I still believe, that it is essential that this campaign end in such a way that the Palestinians understand and internalize that terrorism will never be worthwhile for them (the term that I used for this purpose was "seared consciousness"). I expected that these statements would come from the political leadership, but political difficulties prevented this and even led to an argument regarding the nature of the campaign and the right way to respond to the terrorist offensive: to stand strong or to give in.

The cognitive war is also important at the end of the campaign and in its aftermath. Henry Kissinger wrote that in an asymmetric campaign between an army and a guerrilla organization, "The guerrilla wins if it does not lose. The conventional army loses if it does not win."[2] That is, the very survival

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2   Henry A. Kissinger, "The Viet Nam Negotiations," *Foreign Affairs* 47, no. 2 (January 1969): 214.

of a guerrilla organization is portrayed as its victory and as a loss for the army that opposed it.

Indeed, it is difficult to explain how at the end of an operation like Protective Edge, Hamas survived a campaign against the IDF that lasted 51 days, while claiming that the IDF won. It is easier to present a victory such as that of the Six Day War, in which it is possible to demonstrate territorial gains and show the flag flying above the Western Wall, at the peak of Mount Hermon, or on the banks of the Suez Canal, or to show pictures of destroyed enemy airfields and the convoys of its destroyed tanks. Do pictures of thousands of destroyed buildings in the Gaza Strip after Operation Protective Edge serve as a victory image?

These two kinds of campaigns raise the question of the essence of "victory" and "defeat." Victory or defeat in a campaign derive from the achievement of the objectives defined for it. My argument is that the defeat of Hamas in Operation Protective Edge was more significant in terms of the period of calm that was achieved than the situation following the brilliant military victory over the Arab armies in the Six Day War. Defeating the enemy means bringing about a situation where it stops wanting to fight against you and accepts a ceasefire according to our conditions. In Protective Edge, Hamas accepted (on the 51st day of the campaign) a ceasefire without any condition and without any achievement on its part, and more importantly – it was deterred. This was reflected in that Hamas did not fire as much as a single bullet into Israeli territory until May 2018 (until the escalation surrounding the Nakba events), and even then, it acted with restraint, due to concern that it would be forced to pay a heavy price for any escalation on its part. Even when southern Israel suffered from the "kite terrorism" in the summer of 2018, the moment the threat to renew the campaign became tangible, it was evident that Hamas acted quickly to restrain events on the ground.

In contrast with Protective Edge, Egypt renewed its fire only three weeks after the end of the Six Day War, and Syria did so three weeks thereafter, in a manner that dragged the State of Israel into the War of Attrition. This does not change the fact that from the cognitive perspective, the victory in the Six Day War was seen as a clear victory, while the achievement of defeating Hamas in Operation Protective Edge was described critically and disparagingly. This illustrates how critical it is that the leadership engage not only in achieving victory on the physical battlefield, but also in the

cognitive battlefield, especially surrounding the results of the campaign, both internally and externally.

After a campaign, the cognitive struggle in the internal arena begins and ends with the expectations that the leadership created regarding the objectives and results of the campaign before beginning the campaign, both among the domestic public and among the enemy. If the feeling that is created among civilians (and also soldiers) is that the objective is the physical elimination of the enemy and complete conquest of the territory (in this case, the elimination of Hamas and the conquest of the Gaza Strip), though at the outset this is not the objective, a gap in expectations is created that generates disappointment, frustration, and even a sense of defeat. Setting expectations and meeting them is a challenge in itself, let alone when politicians exploit the opportunity to foster false expectations, out of an interest in creating a cognitive basis for attacking the current leadership.

It is also important to explain the achievement externally, namely, to those observing the campaign and its results. Hamas understood that it was defeated in Operation Protective Edge, and hence it requested the ceasefire, ceding its initial demands. Despite this, it was important that Israel make clear to those who were not involved in the campaign – civilians in Gaza, other adversaries in the area, such as Hezbollah and Iran, and the world at large – who won and who lost, and at what cost. The cognitive war at the end of the campaign is of great importance, externally for strengthening deterrence and internally for strengthening the confidence and resilience of civilians and soldiers.

The joint appearances of the Prime Minister, Minister of Defense, and Chief of Staff in briefings during Operation Protective Edge and at its conclusion were made out of a recognition of the importance of displaying the cohesion of the political and military leadership, both externally to enemies, and internally to the Israeli public. This recognition became particularly clear against the backdrop of the internal bickering and mutual accusations among the politicians, especially members of the security cabinet.

Creating a Public Diplomacy and Cognition Directorate
Despite the increasing recognition in the State of Israel of the importance of the cognitive campaign, the steps taken so far display a lack of consistency and systematic activity, and range from improvisation stemming from

necessity to ad hoc planning in individual cases. So far, the State of Israel has not built or instituted a national directorate for the cognitive war, as would be appropriate and expected given its experience. In a reality where the decisive importance of the issue is proven time and time again, there should be a national public diplomacy and cognition directorate within the Prime Minister's Office that would operate under the direction of the Prime Minister and coordinate all public diplomacy and cognitive war efforts. The purpose of this directorate is not to create a single message or to impose censorship, but to direct Israel's public diplomacy efforts by clarifying the policy and ensuring consistency and harmony among various efforts. It is recommended that the head of the public diplomacy and consciousness directorate be named as an advisor to the Prime Minister. This would ensure that cognitive considerations are taken into account from the outset in shaping policy.

As part of its role, the directorate would provide direction and define the areas of responsibility and the authorities of the bodies in charge of conveying messages, and ensure that they reflect a clear and organized policy (which should be formulated in advance). In this framework, the authority and the resources for leading the cognitive campaign in the international arena should be returned to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, preventing division and duplication of efforts, resources, and responsibility in other government ministries, such as the Ministry of Public Diplomacy and the Ministry of Strategic Affairs.

The directorate that would be established in the Prime Minister's Office should lead policies approved by the Prime Minister, translate them into messages, and coordinate the efforts among all relevant government bodies and defense forces, such as the IDF Spokesperson and the intelligence community. In this way, the cognitive war, like any other war, would be carried out in a coherent manner based on the policy dictated and approved by the political leadership, and include every public servant and soldier. Institutionalizing the governmental effort would also enable individual volunteers or organizations in Israel and abroad to receive reliable information and messages and to contribute in their way to the national cognitive effort.