

# The Struggle for Situation Awareness in the IDF

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“Situation awareness” is the perception and understanding of the elements in a particular environment that allow us to interpret the reality we are in. Thus, it is perhaps the most influential and fundamental element affecting our actions, both for good and for bad.<sup>1</sup> Situation awareness and efforts to influence it are a cornerstone of military thought and achievement, and bringing the other side to a state of cognitive defeat, and not necessarily through physical exhaustion, is the basic objective of military actions. Indeed, any defeat is always two-pronged, and occurs not only on the physical level. This is the reason that the IDF and the State of Israel, which do not enjoy the luxury of unlimited time and physical force, cannot allow a situation where a decisive outcome, no matter in which type of warfare, is based on the attrition of the enemy over time. Since its inception, the IDF has sought a quick decisive outcome using deep maneuvering: the goal is to break the enemy’s fighting spirit and command ability, to the point of the total collapse of the other side. *Battle Doctrine*, a study of the rules of ground forces use published in 1963, states that the individual fighter is the only fundamental element that can be toppled without physical destruction.<sup>2</sup>

This essay claims that the situation awareness of IDF commanders before and during the Second Lebanon War was far too skewed for the commanders to diagnose the operational problems they were facing in that war, and it was also the element that prevented them from solving these problems. The result of the faulty situation awareness was that the war was a failed recourse to rules of engagement against *irregular forces*, which are the norm in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, in an arena that demanded the application of force based on rules of engagement against *regular forces*.

## Sisyphean Fighting

A common misconception among some IDF senior commanders has led them to call the IDF’s fight against terrorists and guerillas “Sisyphean fighting.” According to the Greek myth, Sisyphus was condemned by the gods

to roll a heavy rock up a mountain; once he approached the top, the rock would invariably roll back down to the foot of the mountain, and he was forced to begin the task anew. This effort in futility was repeated endlessly.<sup>3</sup> While the IDF’s struggle against terrorism is

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sometimes dismissed as a Sisyphean effort, in contrast to the story of Sisyphus's ongoing failure, the reality is that the IDF's fight against terrorism is in fact a success story. Perhaps the only connection between the success in fighting terrorism and Sisyphus' punishment is the time the IDF needs to achieve the goal and the necessity to maintain it with ongoing fighting, which is certainly not beyond reach. The dramatic improvement in security since Operation Defensive Shield is the best evidence. It behooves the commanders to consider the error of the parallel they draw between their own success and a myth, which otherwise invites a

self-fulfilling prophecy of failure.

In contrast to the success in fighting terrorism, an examination of the use of ground forces during the Second Lebanon War demonstrates that it was Sisyphean to the nth degree. For thirty-four days, the IDF rolled its conglomeration of errors up the mountain whence it came tumbling back down; it seemed that no one learned anything from one day of fighting to the next. An attempt to dig down to the root of the problem using eyewitness accounts and debriefings collected after the war indicates a prominent gap between the situation awareness necessary for proper functioning in the fighting milieu of the summer of 2006, and that which was perceived on the eve of the war and during it. The discrepancy between the situation awareness among the commanders and that which was required of them in order to succeed is precisely what formed the basis for the repeated erroneous actions, which rendered the fighting irrelevant and the achievements

Sisyphean, in the way described by the myth of three thousand years ago.

On one of the first days of the Second Lebanon War, the GOC of the Northern Command was seen on television telling one of the commanders that the fighting in the Bint Jbail zone was Sisyphean. The GOC's commentary points at the precise difference between the situation awareness that existed among the commanders and that which was necessary in order to achieve the goal of the fighting, if there was such a goal. The application of a mistaken concept, which came to represent the character of the fighting against irregular forces in an arena that demanded a model of dealing with a regular army, pointed to the erroneous set of concepts by which the GOC – and many like him – operated, and also strengthened the tendency of commanders to fight in a manner that was fundamentally flawed. Instead of offensive fighting, using massive forces engaged in deep and continuous maneuvering aided by firepower until a decisive outcome was reached, which was required by the organized defensive systems that Hizbollah had put in place, the IDF let itself be dragged into the only model of fighting it knew – fighting against irregular forces.<sup>4</sup> Because this was the case, the forces fought using methods familiar from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, i.e., primarily raids for the purpose of detaining enemy personnel, carried out by small forces, covered by intelligence and command and control systems, detailed down to the level of the individual soldier. Duplicating Judea and Samaria methods of fighting in Lebanon caused the attacking forces, which in many cases were moving towards their targets head-on in broad daylight, to come into contact with fortified defense systems that were ranged on killing grounds on axes

of advance.<sup>5</sup> Predictably, the result could not have been other than a sequence of failures that turned into a series of rescue and withdrawal battles, some of them heroic.<sup>6</sup>

### **“Going into the field to find out what is going on”: The 1973 Version**

It is possible to affect perception by propaganda and psychological warfare, but it is *decisive actions that change and even turn reality on its head*. The function of fundamental systemic situations and familiar forms of battle is, first of all, to allow the commander to analyze the operational reality correctly, and second and more important, to outline the reasoning required for the moves that can bring about changes in that reality, until the enemy's defeat. The more forceful the change in reality is to the detriment of the enemy, so will the enemy's desire to continue to fight decrease. This, for example, is the reason that the emergence of an attacking force at the less protected rear, which operates from behind a deployment's vanguard, makes such an inestimable negative impact on the fighting spirit of the defenders, as compared with the actions of the same forces against the heavily-defended front.<sup>7</sup>

The importance and effect of situation awareness changes for success in war is clear in an historical perspective. A prominent favorable example was the period leading up to the Six Day War in 1967. The three weeks before the outbreak of hostilities allowed the fighters, particularly the reservists, to acclimate themselves to the transition they had to make from a civilian situation to the fundamentally different one of a fighter. One of the factors that significantly helped create situation awareness that was suited to the demands of the war that ensued was the intensive training that the relatively long waiting

period allowed the IDF to carry out before the start of the war.

Whoever seeks an explanation for the phenomenon of some of the commanders glued to the plasma screens in the Second Lebanon War, which, like other phenomena of the war received highly populist treatment in the media, will benefit from studying the experience, both good and bad, of the Yom Kippur War.<sup>8</sup>

On the positive side, one may look at the great success of the navy in 1973, which includes the importance of adjusting the situation awareness of the commanders and



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the fighters to the right military reality as a condition for success in battle. On the eve of the war, the commanders of the navy did not accept Military Intelligence's assessment of "a lower than low probability" of war. After a series of arguments the navy's request to prepare for hostilities was approved, and thereafter it was able to prepare well for battle, both in terms of situation awareness and in practice.<sup>9</sup> These preparations, together with bravery and ruses in deploying the forces, brought the navy to brilliant achievements on par with anything the world has seen when, in the first series of missile boat battles in history fought between the Israeli navy and the navies of Syria and Egypt, the Israeli navy dealt the enemy a decisive blow without incurring any casualties of its own.

On the negative side, one may see that in contrast with the unusual approval granted the navy, and because of the mindset of "they wouldn't dare" that prevailed among the various decision makers, the air force was not allowed the preemptive strike that time and again it demanded it be allowed to make; even calling up the infantry reserves was postponed until five hours before firing commenced. The very surprise of war erupting on two fronts simultaneously and the tremendous power of the attack did not grant the defending forces the conditions necessary to change their situation awareness from "routine security measures" and an isolated "day of battle" to one of comprehensive war. Under the vast and paralyzing pressures of the events it was only normal for them to latch onto the familiar and to what seemed safe: the conception of how to use forces under routine security conditions.

This also resulted in waiting too long in leaving the headquarters where the day-to-day activities were being directed before the

war. The Agranat Commission report formulated this point as follows: "Even after the war broke out, the unit commanders on the line continued to control their forces from the operations rooms as if they were in a state of routine security measures/day of battle, and hours [in the north] and days [in the south] passed before they changed the manner of their command and went into the field to learn of the events from up close."<sup>10</sup> Col. Granit testified before the Commission that when he arrived at the fire-pummeled Suez Canal battle zone and saw the casualties, he encountered a situation in which "all the staff people were sitting in the operations room; everything was like it was during the War of Attrition." Maj. Gen. Ariel Sharon also told the Commission, "I said to [GOC Southern Command Shmuel Gonen] that in my opinion he did not have a clear picture of what was going on in the field. I suggested that he instruct all the commanders to leave the operations rooms immediately, and go into the zone with the frontal command group to find out what was actually happening."

The long time lapse since the Yom Kippur War and the comparison with the situation awareness shortcomings during the war in 2006 suggest that despite the negative light in which the Agranat Commission viewed the phenomenon, in 1973 a very rapid process of adjustment took place in the command structure. The result was a reversal in the war's direction after only twenty-four hours on the Golan Heights and after some additional time in the Sinai.<sup>11</sup> The difference between the Yom Kippur War and the Second Lebanon War regarding situation awareness is that in 2006 no such transition ever took place, and therefore that war was waged to the end as a series of routine security measures and not as a war designed to rout the

enemy, with all accompanying ramifications and repercussions.

## Two Distinct Cultures of Warfare

The key question becomes what was the source of the extended rigid cognitive state of the Second Lebanon War, which lacked the flexibility and learning capacity of 1973. Apparently, the situation awareness and the concepts that derived from it during the War of Attrition, a war fought between the IDF and the regular armies of Egypt and Syria, were not vastly different from those of the comprehensive war that followed. Despite the differences, both were fought in a situation of warfare between regular forces. By contrast, the IDF forces that fought in the Second Lebanon War were required to bridge the huge gap between their situation awareness and its accompanying set of military concepts to which they became accustomed in fighting against irregular forces, and the essentially different awareness and military concepts required of them in fighting against regular systems in Lebanon.

Fighting against irregular forces is characterized by use of very small and highly decentralized forces with strict limitations on opening fire, so as to refrain if possible from harming the uninvolved, and above all, by the justified drive to prevent casualties among one's own forces even at the expense of failure to carry out the mission. In addition, because of the low number of events and the existence of sophisticated command and control systems, in this type of fighting the commanders' control of the forces is complete and detailed, down to the level of the individual soldier, and every movement of the forces is directed and monitored at headquarters via the screens.

By contrast, the type of warfare required

against massive maneuvering or defending forces in fighting against regular forces demands totally different force deployment modes. The situation changes suddenly and dramatically, the forces are large compared to those used in the other type of fighting, and the limitations on opening fire are relatively few. However, above all, in warfare of this type *the necessity to fulfill the mission under all circumstances and at any cost* is the mindset that must govern the commanders and is what obligates them, as opposed to fighting against irregular forces, to leave their command centers frequently and to place themselves at the head of their forces. The subject of command and control too becomes greatly uncertain as a result of the frequent and violent encounters with the enemy: there is suddenly a surfeit of data to the point of the control systems crashing. This situation further confirms the precept that it is the commanders' obligation to leave their command centers, to place themselves at the head of the forces, and to lead them to victory despite the complexities created by uncertainty and losses.<sup>12</sup>

Thus it would seem that there are two distinct cultures of warfare, and as in any transition between cultures, here too the transition from one to the other is problematic and complex, and above all, requires an awareness that such a transition is necessary to begin with. Cultures differ in their languages, customs, norms of behavior, symbols, and particularly value systems, and it is difficult if not impossible to bridge all of these without instruction, preparation, and practice. The Second Lebanon War proved that a quick transition to a culture of "the mission above all" is almost impossible for those who have been trained to operate only within the context of the culture of "zero casualties to our

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forces” that characterizes, and justifiably so, the logic of fighting against irregular forces and the post-heroic culture, some of which managed to penetrate even the IDF.

For the commanders of the Second Lebanon War, the gap between the two cultures was so great that they were not even able to identify it, and certainly not the operational ramifications. Those looking for an answer as to why the commanders remained so close to their plasma screens will not find it in the simplistic explanation according to which the IDF just abandoned some of its old systems and methods, but rather in the fact that the Second Lebanon War lacked the crucial condition for success in fighting in that arena, namely an unequivocal transition from one culture of warfare to another. This argument is bolstered by the problematic though opposite transition in the period before Operation Defensive Shield, when the IDF was required to go from a culture of “the mission above all” to one of “the lives of soldiers are more important than the mission,” and the various characteristics that differ fundamentally when fighting against irregular forces.<sup>13</sup>

The difficulty in making the transition from one culture of warfare to another makes the transition impossible if those responsible are not equipped with adequate professional military knowledge, and especially if they have not received actual and frequent training in the type of warfare to which they must adapt. The military culture crisis in the IDF that, luckily for Israel was exposed in 2006 against a relatively weak enemy, before the damage became irreversible, indicates that in the period before the war, the range of fighting situations that was formulated in the minds of IDF commanders narrowed down to one single possibility – that of a war fought against irregular forces. The con-

ception of “the end of the major wars” that ruled the IDF during the first years of the new millennium did not remain an abstraction: it caused a drastic reduction in training in general, and a total halt to the kind of training that was necessary to prepare for the fighting against Hizbollah in 2006 in particular.<sup>14</sup> Together with the dismantling of some of the maneuvering units, these actions created a message that denied and canceled out the traditional, formulated world of military contents and turned it into an obsolete, irrelevant situation.<sup>15</sup> In practice, as a result of the IDF erasing the possibility of regular warfare, irregular fighting, in every way and ramification, became the only response to every operational problem, and this is also how it became firmly fixed in the commanders’ consciousness.<sup>16</sup> They were entirely unprepared for any reality foreign to what dominated their awareness. Thus when the same commanders were forced to deal with the battlefield reality that prevailed during the Second Lebanon War, they were left without the ability to give it the proper response.

## **Conclusion**

Apparently before the battle against the mind of the enemy begins, it is necessary to struggle for a change in the mind of our own forces. The process of transition and adjustment to a different culture of warfare is not self-evident. It is necessary to consider this process, as well as the tools commanders must be given in order to make sure the process proceeds as quickly as possible.

The three essential conditions for a successful transition process are: first, developing the awareness in commanders regarding operational questions that derive from the differences between the two cultures; second, appropriate training in both cultures;

and third, insistence on enough time to make the transition happen, to the extent that this is possible. These three conditions must be stressed before any future engagement, and certainly when the IDF is the instigator, as in the Second Lebanon War.

In contrast to cultural transitions in other realms of life in which failures are tolerable and do not come at the expense of people's lives and national traumas, the military is unforgiving towards those who delay adjusting from one culture to the other. It is of course impossible to overcome entirely the problems involved in moving from one culture to another, but anticipating them, exploring them, and coping with their practical ramifications are the way to reduce the adjustment time and the cost of the transition, a transition that the commanders and fighters of the Second Lebanon War failed to make.

## Notes

- 1 Situation awareness is defined as the term that indicates awareness of the self and one's surroundings. It relates to the connections of every person with his/her external environment as well as within him/herself. Situation awareness is thus a function of individual character and tendencies, as everyone reacts in his/her own manner to external stimuli from the environment and to internal stimuli such as thoughts, feelings, and physical sensations. Personal consciousness plays a significant role in creating a person's situation awareness, and therefore it necessarily differs among people. When we try to solve a problem, we choose a coping strategy that is unique to us because our personal interpretation, which defines our situation awareness, determines that decision.
- 2 IDF General Staff, General Library, *Battle Doctrine*, vol. 1, p. 3.
- 3 According to Greek mythology, Sisyphus was the son of Aeolus, the god of the winds and the founder of Corinth. Sisyphus was crafty and evil, and used to mislead travelers on the

roads and murder them. Zeus, the father of the gods, punished him, decreeing that he would have to roll a heavy rock up the mountain. Every time he reached the top, the rock would roll down to the bottom, and Sisyphus was forced to roll it up again. It was backbreaking, pointless labor. Thus, "Sisyphean work" has come to mean difficult, backbreaking work that never ends, without any point or objective.

- 4 See Amir Kulick, "The Next War with Hizbollah," *Strategic Assessment* 10, no. 3 (2007): 41-50. Kulick explains that in southern Lebanon "an underground system of tunnels and bunkers and relatively limited infantry and anti-tank systems" were established. The term "system" encompasses the entire difference between fighting against irregular forces, which lack systems, and fighting against regular forces, which depend on organized defensive systems. Affixing the "guerilla" label to Hizbollah systems, i.e., their reliance on camouflage in the field, demonstrates the effectiveness of these systems and not that they in fact exemplify "guerilla."
- 5 It is possible to see evidence of the IDF operating unprofessionally in many cases, including in Hizbollah films shot during the fighting.
- 6 See the list of citations for bravery awarded after the war. Without detracting in any way from the actions for which the citations were awarded, most of them were given for rescue missions and not for perseverance in fulfilling the mission to its completion. Because meaningless utterances were taken as commands that must be fulfilled, forces became entangled in meaningless moves against the enemy, without any true operational value. It is no wonder that all that was left to do was to extricate casualties, something that in 2006 became the primary "form of battle" in the fighting.
- 7 That is, fundamentally, the essence of the meaning of "stratagem," a crucial principle of war so lacking during the Second Lebanon War.

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- 8 The general situation awareness of IDF commanders in general, together with the lack of preparedness for the war in particular, are the factors that explain why, as firing broke out in the Golan, the commander of Brigade 188 instructed his troops to perform the only command he had at his disposal for a situation in which there was no comprehensive war – “capital.” However, “capital” was meant to be a command for a limited day of engagements, in which a few local incidents, orchestrated to the last detail, take place. It was not intended to serve as a response to the chaotic situation that the four Syrian divisions that attacked the Golan created in the form of an artillery war, which some senior commanders also referred to at the beginning as only “a day of battle.” As a result of their faulty situation awareness, many commanders in the Golan and the Sinai were trapped in an extreme cognitive dissonance. One of its obvious and prominent expressions was the stubborn clinging to the procedures of operating routine security measures, which was completely incongruent with reality.
- 9 A primary reason for the operational independence of the navy was the fact that its preparations for war did not require calling up supplementary reserves, an act requiring cabinet approval.
- 10 This and the quotations that follow appear in the Agranat Commission Report, p. 1270.
- 11 The rapid reversal was especially apparent on the Golan Heights. In the Sinai, replacing the GOC was necessary for the commands to begin to operate in an acceptable manner. The comparison between what happened to the IDF in this regard and what happened to foreign armed forces in the same respect was very much in favor of the IDF until the Second Lebanon War. See, for example, the fatal freeze on methods of warfare employed by the militaries of both sides in World War I, the British army in the western desert until Montgomery in World War II, and other examples.
- 12 The question of the location of commander in battle is not unequivocal, except for the general principle whereby he must be in a place where he can optimally influence the battle. Personnel positions and processes of correct use of the command center allow the commander to go out to the forces any time it becomes necessary. In such a situation, the chief of staff and the one directing the combat from the central headquarters desk will run the command center.
- 13 Partly as a result of various policy limitations but primarily as a result of gaps in perceiving military reality, the IDF needed a year and seven months to make the transition to an attack initiative against terrorism, the first expression of which was Operation Defensive Shield.
- 14 A number of reserve units trained for a scenario of fighting in Lebanon. However, even if this trained array of forces was fully activated in Lebanon, it was not large enough to have controlled the entire southern sector from which the rockets were being fired. (About the sector, see Kulick, “The Next War with Hizbollah.”) In other words, in order to fulfill the mission of securing the entire north, the IDF would have needed far more forces than it had trained for that purpose.
- 15 “Being relevant” was an important concept in the IDF before the Second Lebanon War. Like other expressions that spread throughout the army before the war, it too seems to have originated with Special Ops. People used the expression to mark themselves as belonging to the mainstream of the IDF that was canceling out all classical military concepts that had become “irrelevant.” With a particular inflection, the expression became a derogatory term used against anyone who did not fall in line with that stream. A book that uses primary sources and indicates what was considered relevant and appropriate in the IDF before the Second Lebanon War and what was not is Ofer Shelah, *The Israeli Army: A Radical Proposal* (Kinneret Zmora-Bitan, 2003).
- 16 Based on media reports, in the fall/winter of 2006–7, regular army divisions of the IDF undertook their first full-division exercises in six years. There is no better evidence than this state of affairs regarding the true conception of those who were shaping the character of the IDF in the six years leading up to the Second Lebanon War.