

# The Changing Nature of War: Six New Challenges

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Since World War II – and for Israel, since the Yom Kippur War – the nature of war has changed gradually but continuously, evolving from conventional total wars among states to low intensity military confrontations between states and organizations. This observation encompasses two dimensions: first, the number of low intensity wars is greater than the number of conventional total wars. Second, there are more wars between a state and organizations (terror organization, guerilla organization) than (symmetric) wars between states. This does not mean that the age of conventional wars is over, rather that the phenomenon of other kinds of confrontations has expanded significantly alongside regular wars.

States (led by either politicians or the military) generally fail to understand the significance of this change. Thus, even when the confrontation in question is different from a “regular” conventional war they continue to judge, appraise, and evaluate the situation in terms of criteria that are increasingly less relevant. The 2006 war in Lebanon and the war in Iraq proved this repeatedly. For example, around a year ago, the US president convened a press conference to explain that the security situation in Iraq was improving. In order to convey a sense of professionalism he appeared alongside General Casey, commander of the US forces in Iraq. Proof of the improvement offered by the president was the number of Iraqi battalions that were becoming operational – they were increasing in number, and the number would continue to grow. The president used a correct set of

terms for regular wars in which the side that has more divisions has a better chance of victory. In a conventional war the balance of power is mainly measured by quantitative evaluation. In Iraq, the quantitative aspect to the confrontation is not entirely unimportant, but it is secondary compared with other variables, which the president did not mention.

Similar assessments are made in Israel. Before the war in Lebanon I was a member of a team that examined the defense budget. Most of the members argued that the budget could be cut by about \$1 billion. The scientific explanation for this was offered by means of comparing Israel’s investment in the defense budget with its enemies’ investment. As Israel invests more, its investment is apparently superfluous, so cuts can be made and savings gleaned. The point is,

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though, that in an asymmetric war the cost of an explosives belt and preparation of a suicide bomber is insignificant compared with the sum that it takes to prevent an attack. Consequently, the quantitative terminology (comparing battalions or budgets) is almost entirely irrelevant.

The reality of a new kind of war generates six challenges, which are the focus of the essay below.

### **Challenge 1: Asymmetric Wars in a Populated Arena**

Asymmetric wars that take place in an arena with a civilian population require an analysis and adjustment of the principal variables. The first adjustment is connected to intelligence. While in a conventional war the commander asks the operations officer *where is the enemy*, in an asymmetric war the first question asked is, *who is the enemy*. The enemy in an asymmetric war does not wear a uniform and is part of a civilian population, and thus it is not always clear who he is. Moreover, the enemy can be “both” – an ordinary civilian during the day and a terrorist at night. Yet the more important dimension in terms of “who the enemy is” is specifically not the tactical dimension, rather the political dimension. For example, in recent years the definition of “who is the enemy” in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has changed many times according to the political situation. At certain times the Palestinian security forces were allies “fighting with us against terror”; other times they stood to the side; and at other times they were “the enemy” that Israel faced.

The definition of the enemy was no less important in the Second Lebanon War. Israel decided the enemy was Hizbollah and not Lebanon, and the world delighted in this distinction. It supported every attack on

Hizbollah targets and opposed any attack on other Lebanese targets. Yet it is difficult – if not impossible – to overcome a guerilla organization that enjoys the clear sponsorship of a state if it is impossible to attack the sponsoring state (Lebanon). Thus, Israel placed itself in a tough campaign with its hands tied behind its back, without even seriously examining the question of who is “the enemy.”

The second component of intelligence relates to what constitutes a relevant target. If in regular wars a large part of the relevant intelligence concerned physical targets (tanks, headquarters, and airports) and was the output of a longer process, in an asymmetric confrontation real time intelligence is measured in hours, minutes, and sometimes seconds, and the vast majority of targets are people. If, for example, it is known that the enemy is located in a particular building, this building will be a target. If the terrorists move somewhere else five minutes later the building is no longer relevant as a target. Thus, a high capacity for intelligence adjustment in real time is required.

The fact that low intensity wars take place within civilian populations is not just an intelligence issue, and it has far-reaching aspects – from rules of management to legal aspects. The latter is related, for example, to the Supreme Court discussion of whether targeted killings are permissible.<sup>1</sup>

### **Challenge 2: Civil-Military Relations**

In regular wars the dialogue is simple: the political leadership informs the army it has to win, and after a ceasefire is achieved, the political leadership starts to work. After the army conducts the fighting, the politicians address the results of the war. This is a simple set of concepts. It may be hard to achieve

a victory, but the definition of what represents a victory is simple, since the political definitions are generally quite clear and their translation into military objectives is simple. Military tasks and achievements are formulated in basic terms: stop the advance of a division, seize a mountain range, prevent the enemy from crossing a certain line, or destroy an airport.

The conventional war between states is relatively simple, as it involves a clearly defined area relating to the dimension of time (the time the war starts and the time it ends) and the dimension of space, and there is a clear framework in terms of the parties involved. The state framework serves as "an address" and overall, there is an authorized mechanism to suspend or halt the confrontation when the state opts to do so.

Definitions blur when the enemy is an organization rather than a state. Then the delineations of time and place are less clear, and the state's objectives are more amorphous in terms of what it wishes to achieve and what it is capable of achieving. In limited confrontations it is not easy to define political objectives and to translate them into military missions. A British general with experience in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, and the 1991 Gulf War once said on a visit to Israel that in today's reality, the attempt to define the strategic purpose or the army's missions is like trying to hold jelly in your hand. The more you try to grasp it the more it slips through your fingers. For this reason one should strive to maintain a different type of dialogue between the political and military leaderships, not just a hierarchical dialogue in which the politicians command and the army implements, but something qualitatively different.

I witnessed the difficulty in generating

the right kind of dialogue when Ehud Barak was prime minister. During Barak's term, at the start of the events of September-October 2000, every time a terrorist attack occurred that led to an escalation in the situation, the General Staff generals were summoned hurriedly to the office of the prime minister, who was also the minister of defense. The prime minister asked for the aerial photographs of the targets the army recommended attacking. His decision, as head of the political leadership, was to wage an aerial attack and the army's role in the discussion was to suggest targets. It took a while for one of us to say: "Mr. Prime Minister, maybe the principal issue here isn't which targets to attack. Maybe we should be asking whether attacking is the right thing to do. Maybe there are more effective measures we can take." There was a similar process with Sharon. It was actually Shimon Peres (who at the time was foreign minister) who said at one of the discussions that 80 percent of the important issues were neither just of a military nature nor just political, but involved both areas. He determined that there was no choice but to hold joint discussions, and with high frequency.

Three weeks after the start of the Second Lebanon War, Olmert said that the army did not present him with a ground operations plan in Lebanon, so he did not approve anything that was not presented to him. This claim reflects a basic misunderstanding regarding how the dialogue between the political and military leaderships should take place. In today's reality almost every political action has security implications; certainly every military action has political implications. Under such circumstances the prime minister cannot wait for the army to come to him and submit plans. In a situation such as the war in Lebanon the prime minister, chief of

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staff, and minister of defense should meet on a daily basis, in the most select forum, first to ascertain that all share the same view of the reality, and then to jointly make the right decisions.

### **Challenge 3: Organizational and Process Changes**

The defense organizations were formed to suit either of two situations: a situation of complete security calm or an all-out war. Today, the continuum between all-out war on the one hand and total peace on the other generates innumerable other situations that necessitate a different type of division of authority and coordination between the parties involved. The United States reached this conclusion after September 11, 2001 and after the war in Iraq. The question that arose is whether the division of areas between military intelligence, the CIA, and the FBI, which was appropriate at the end of World War II and at the start the Cold War, is also the correct structure to deal with terror today. The conclusion was that the intelligence facility needed to be reorganized. A civilian team was appointed to oversee and coordinate between the various intelligence sections. This team reports to the president, so that the CIA head is no longer the senior of the three organization heads and no longer reports directly to the president. In Israel too changes are underway – some successful and others less so.

The division of tasks between the IDF and the police can be cited as an example. Until 1973 the IDF had to fight against the Syrian and Egyptian armed forces, and the police were responsible for catching criminals. The division between the tasks was so clear that during a war that lasted two to three weeks, police officers left their regular duties and joined the military, since the only important

occupation during a war was to fight at the front. Today, when one examines the tasks of the police and the army, one finds an overlap of some 30 percent. This requires adjustments in some areas, such as allocating resources and personnel and granting authority. As one who served as IDF head of operations for ten years, I can attest to the army's conceptual difficulty in recognizing that on a national level, it was preferable that 13,000 police officers continue in their professional capacity and not join the army as reservists.

Another example of organizational complexity is the boundaries of responsibility between Military Intelligence, the Mossad, and the GSS. Officially the Mossad is responsible for preventing terror abroad and the GSS is in charge of terror inside Israel and the territories. Today this delineation is inadequate. Some of the major terror threats cross borders – a suicide terrorist can come from England or pass through Egypt to Gaza and from there to Israel. In this case, who is responsible?

A positive example of changes made in the defense system in view of the requirements of an asymmetric war concerns the challenge of suicide attacks, and this returns us to the issue of targeted killing. In order to act efficiently one needs not only to finalize intelligence within a matter of minutes but also “to close an operational cycle,” in other words, to connect the information of the GSS officer with the commander of the area division and the fighter pilot. The GSS and air force should be allowed to coordinate an operation in a matter of minutes or seconds, at a level of uncertainty and great complexity. The prime minister is the party responsible for formally connecting the two organizations. Nevertheless, the IDF and the GSS have created efficient working processes by

adjusting dividing lines, and this is the only way to achieve efficient operational results. Such changes are generally effected late, or are not carried out at all.

#### **Challenge 4: Technology**

Superficially, one can say that if one is waging a war against an enemy armed with explosives belts, knives, and Kalashnikov rifles, then advanced technologies are irrelevant because ultimately it comes down to hand to hand combat on the streets. This is obviously an error, as the state's clear advantage over an organization lies in the capabilities and resources at its disposal, particularly technological capabilities. Thus, technological adjustments are required to fighting against terrorist organizations, which involve not only technical ability (converting weapons currently used from use a to use b) but also the ability to change the psychological orientation of those developing the technology. For example, when a missile or bomb is manufactured for a war, the better it is, the greater its ability to kill and wreak destruction. When fighting in an arena with civilians, some of the weaponry becomes problematic. The weapons have to be made less lethal and then used effectively. If this expertise is not available one remains with advanced technology that is not compatible with the circumstances of asymmetric war.

A good example of matching new weaponry to new situations, particularly in the last six years, is the unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV). Initially UAVs were mainly designed for identifying clear military targets, such as tanks, artillery, and enemy headquarters. Due to technological advances in camera quality, flight duration, and altitude (UAVs are not visible or audible from the ground) one can employ them efficiently to combat

terror. The UAV is used today not only to track down people (during the day and at night) but also to identify a specific person. A better example of this is the technological solution that allows listening to the enemy's communications equipment, and specifically its adaptation for use in the West Bank. It would not be an exaggeration to say that a crucial part of the success in dealing with suicide terrorism is due to the development of suitable technological abilities.

#### **Challenge 5: Media**

One of the important means in any military confrontation, including regular wars, is public legitimacy, particularly international legitimacy. The impact of this factor on freedom of action and the ability to prolong and maximize the means at one's disposal is enormous. International legitimacy is influenced by the image of the reality more than by the reality itself, and the image of the reality is largely created by the media – especially television. The IDF understands that this is the situation, but it is difficult to translate this basic understanding into actual measures, primarily when it incurs a price that the IDF is not always willing to pay.

At the start of the events of October 2000 the Jewish settlement of Netzarim, in the middle of the Gaza Strip, was surrounded and under siege. For about one week air lifts by helicopter were the only way of providing the settlement and the IDF battalion there with supplies. Every night a CH 53 helicopter was sent with soldiers and equipment to the settlement. At the time the foreign media was extremely hostile towards Israel and focused almost exclusively on the Palestinian side of events. I was then head of operations. The IDF spokesperson called me and said there were three foreign reporters

who wanted to go to Netzarim to relate the Israeli side of the story. Clearly, the only way to do this was to fly them there by helicopter. I called Yair Naveh, then commander of the Gaza division, and asked him to take the reporters to Netzarim on a night trip. Naveh said to me: "Have you lost your mind? If I take them they will use the space otherwise available for a sniper, a MAG gunman, and a medic . . ."

The IDF's openness to the issue of the media has developed significantly since October 2000, but is still far from the desired level.

### **Challenge 6: Expectations vs. Reality**

In asymmetric war there is a large discrepancy between expectations among public opinion, politicians, and the media and the capability of the security forces to realize those expectations. The gap between expectations and realistic capabilities is reflected in four ways: the duration of the campaign, the number of casualties, the ability to avoid wounding innocent people, and the ability to achieve complete victory. Expectations are as such:

- **Duration of the campaign.** If the IDF beat four armies in six days in 1967, how long should it need to gain victory over a few thousand Hizbollah fighters? We are stronger than the enemy, and as such, it is reasonable that we should win in a short period of time.

- **The number of casualties.** Armed confrontations like the one in Lebanon are not generally wars of survival. They are sometimes viewed as "elective wars" and therefore the price one is willing to pay is determined accordingly. The IDF is both stronger than the enemy and has the benefit of far more advanced equipment. These advan-

tages generate the expectation that we will win without endangering our forces, based on the thinking that with such sophisticated weapons, we should engage the enemy from a distance and with caution.

- **Avoid wounding innocent people.** We are ready to support all-out war with Hamas or Hizbollah as long as the casualties on their side are fighters. When the television shows pictures of dead children, we tend to express reservations and protest, "we didn't support this kind of war."

- **Manner of victory.** We are ready to pay a price for war, and even for an elective war, on condition that we ultimately achieve a clear and total victory. A clear and total victory means formal surrender by the enemy and acceptance of our terms or, at least, inflicting such a severe blow on the enemy that it is clear to all, including the enemy, that it can no longer continue fighting.

These expectations are logical as long as "a regular situation assessment" is made, and as long as the balance of power is examined with the traditional measurements of states engaged in a conventional war. Some of today's wars, however, are different in terms of their character, and their special nature neutralizes part of Israel's advantages. Thus, it is impossible to attain the full desired result in any of the aforementioned dimensions.

Occasionally, a short term impression emerges that the desired result has been achieved (Iraq in April 2003 or Lebanon 1982). However, often this is the result of only one campaign and not of the entire war. After a while the enemy adjusts to the circumstances and embarks on a new campaign using tactics that neutralize the advantages of the modern army. If the military leadership or senior politicians ignore this and promise the public results that are unattainable, it will in-



crease the gap between the expectations and the results, and a serious crisis of trust will ensue when the full reality emerges.

### Strategic Adjustments

The ability to win a war in the twenty-first century depends on a leadership's ability to prepare for it correctly. The following are four anchoring guidelines:

- *Suitable deployment for the nature of the impending war.* There are three kinds of military confrontation: (1) conventional wars between states; (2) wars with states with which there is no shared border; (3) wars with terrorist or guerilla organizations. Each of these categories involves a different approach. The decision makers have to know what kind of war they will have to face and what its attributes are when a crisis develops or a war is initiated.

The use of aerial force to achieve the objectives (or most of them) is correct in a war with an enemy state with which there is no shared border. This is also the correct approach when engaging an enemy that bases most of its force on tanks and fixed facilities, and when the enemy – which is a state – is sensitive to damage inflicted on national infrastructures. That aerial force with the same technological abilities is less efficient when the enemy's strength is based on thousands of fighters with personal weapons (including rockets and anti-tank missiles), who are part of the civilian population and are not sensitive to national logic or damage to national infrastructures.

- *Creating versatility and flexibility in the defense forces.* Versatility in this context is a military ability that is suitable for a range of scenarios. The UAV is a good example. It is an efficient intelligence tool against distant countries, against a conventional army, and

in a war against terror. Flexibility is the ability to change processes, inter-organizational areas of authority, and organizational structures, together with a change in the environment and the threats. Such a need was identified twenty years ago with regard to protection of the home front. Nevertheless, the Israeli government displayed rigid thinking and did not take the necessary measures, as evidenced by the severe problems with the home front during the Second Lebanon War.

- *Use of military force while recognizing its limitations.* What has changed in recent years is not just the nature of the military confrontations but also the way the world views violent confrontations that cause fatalities. In order to succeed in a war one has to achieve legitimacy for the strategy (the act of embarking on a war) and the tactics (the way the war is conducted and the means used). The former, on its own, is not sufficient. The "good news" is that these limitations also restrict the enemy, even if it is an organization and not a state (and on condition that it has a strong connection with the state, for example, Hamas or Hizbollah). The restrictions that these two organizations were forced to accept in the last six years show how much the combination of military force with other means – political, economic, and public – is the correct mode.

- *Matching objectives to capabilities.* It is not right to conclude from the aforementioned that one cannot achieve significant objectives in confrontations with terror or guerilla organizations. Israel's achievements in its fight against suicide terrorists from Gaza and the West Bank are highly impressive, and it would not be wrong to define it as a victory. In March 2002, 135 people in Israel were killed in seventeen terror attacks. Since then Israel's losses in such attacks have been

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significantly reduced. The dramatic change is the result of four elements: (1) a successful military operation in April 2002, which set the right attainable objectives; (2) continued control of West Bank towns; (3) the construction of the security fence; (4) long term pressure on Hamas, which impelled the organization to suspend suicide missions.

Thus, coherence of the objective, the tasks, and a realistic level of expectations (i.e., significant lowering of the level of terror, but not total cessation) were and are a key to success.

### Note

1. The fact that a discussion of whether targeted killing is permissible or not attests in part to a misunderstanding of reality. The determining factor regarding whether or not an action taken against an enemy is labeled targeted killing is only the nature of the intelligence. For example: a military force is operating next to

the security fence in the Gaza Strip and terrorists open fire on it. If the Israeli force returns fire everyone would agree this is an act of self defense (and thus legitimate). Change just one element: assume that the force receives information about the whereabouts of the terrorists one minute in advance. Based on real time intelligence, Israeli forces open fire. Does this become targeted killing, since Israel opened fire? Probably not. Now assume that there is better intelligence and the information about the terrorists arrives while they are still in a vehicle en route to the ambush. This kind of good, real time intelligence allows one to send a gunship helicopter to attack the terrorists while they are on their way. Does the operation then become non-legitimate? If the enemy is considered a target that can legitimately be hit (and this is a question that should be asked in any event, and especially when its identity is known) then it is unreasonable to reject the targeted killing only because there was good intelligence, which reduced the risk and increased the chances of success.