

"Anti-War": Has the IDF Really Lost Its Ability to Win Wars?

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In an article published in the previous issue of *Strategic Assessment*, Ofer Shelah offered an analysis of the second Lebanon War. Shelah's commentary leads him to the conclusion that the terrorism of the 2000-2004 intifada and the last war in Lebanon were "two post-modern wars" and as such, the recognized rules of past wars do not apply to them. Thus, Shelah claims, Israel's leaders erred in trying to apply conceptual and behavioral rules to the war in Lebanon that did not match the "anti-war" reality that emerged there, and in so doing, they brought the failures on themselves.

Shelah determines that in contrast to Clausewitz's argument, in the case of anti-war, "force is no longer a continuation of policy through other means." Clausewitz's exit from the stage of military history was sealed when Shelah said that "the ability to achieve political gain through a military operation has almost completely dissipated." Shelah's article fails, however, in that his contentions rest largely on what he calls "historical facts" that seemingly corroborate his arguments in several areas but fall short of the actual historical facts.

Deterrence

Shelah writes that deterrence is "one of the known obsessions of the IDF and the Israeli public." He adds that "decisive victory, preferably in every battle, generates an image of

strength and deterrence. This mentality has not changed despite the historical facts showing otherwise for some time: the Six Day War, which ended in a crushing victory, did not deter the Egyptians from embarking on the War of Attrition just two years later, and the Yom Kippur War three years after that."

Deterrence, however, is not designed to effect an ideological change in the opposing party, rather to deter that party from acting violently to realize its ideology. A review of the wars initiated by the Arabs before and after the Six Day War indicates that if until 1967 the enemies of the Jewish state had aimed to destroy the country by storming it, the 1967 war put an end to that idea. The decisive victory in 1967 generated an unprecedented deterrent to a direct military operation by the Arab armies. Thus, albeit with the basic ideology remaining unchanged, the Arabs moved to a different military approach based on all-out war that was designed to achieve a limited military objective. Increasing deterrence led Sadat to forsake the idea of annihilating Israel and military occupation of the Sinai Peninsula. He decided on a limited assault that was designed only to shake up the Middle East and generate a political process that would restore the Sinai Peninsula to Egyptian hands. The Israeli deterrent created a change in Arab public opinion and the Arab objectives of the following wars against Israel.

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Shelah's conclusion – based on historical inaccuracies – that the IDF was unable to implement classic principles of war in the last war leads to the fallacy that such principles are erroneous in terms of military logic.

Disregard of the Leadership?

Shelah's discussion of the period before the Yom Kippur War reveals another distortion of historical facts. He claims that before the war, the Israeli leadership knew that Sadat's military objective was no longer to annihilate Israel by a military campaign, but it chose to disregard this. In this context Shelah condemns all the decision makers through the generations when he states that "it is characteristic of Israel that intelligence said one thing and the leadership ignored it."

Yet here too Shelah slipped with regard to the dry facts. All researchers of the Yom Kippur War, including the recent book by Aryeh Shalev – who in 1973 was head of Military Intelligence's research division – agree that the roots of the intelligence failure in that war stem specifically from not knowing of the change that had occurred among the Egyptian leadership regarding the war's objectives. Shalev writes: "The intelligence branch, prior to the Yom Kippur War, provided all the information about the preparations made by the enemy armies. It did not interpret their preparations correctly, not because its approach remained unchanged, but because its adversaries' approach had changed and the intelligence branch did not obtain information about the change...from a policy of all-out war to a war with limited objectives designed to shake up the political situation."¹

Terror and Defeating Terror

Cognizant of their military disadvantage, another channel that the Arabs began using with increasing intensity was terror, which was designed to chip away over time at Israeli national resilience. In the context of deterrence one can say that the transition to terror is the most prominent sign of the success

of Israeli military deterrence, which peaked following the 1967 war. In the seventies, the IDF succeeded in eradicating Palestinian terror anywhere it emerged. The Jordanian army achieved a similar success in 1970, when it crushed the terror that threatened the kingdom of Jordan; the French army likewise wiped out Algerian terror.

The problem of the IDF's war on terror from 2000, in the intifada that Shelah calls "a post-modern war," is rooted in the fact that at that time, distorted ideas – such as "there is no decisive military victory" – began to infiltrate, and these misconceptions diluted an idea that should be embraced in all types of war, namely, the idea of decisive victory. It is no wonder that an army led by people with watered-down ideas did not overcome its enemies. However, the IDF field officers upheld opposing ideas and thereby restored the idea of decisive victory to its rightful place, including in the realm of terrorism.

Beating Artillery Terror

Shelah claims that "a rocket cannot bring a country to its knees, certainly not a country with economic and organizational strength." The Katyusha rocket fire on the north was a terror attack in every sense, which was designed to convince the civilians that there was nowhere safe for them, and only accepting the terms of those behind the terror would buy them peace and quiet. Shelah forgot, or chose to ignore, the serious results of the terror attack on Israel – enormous damage, more than any previous war, to Israel's economy and national morale. One can reasonably assume that had the IDF not overcome the terror in Judea and Samaria, Israel would have found itself in a situation in which its very existence was under threat, a threat it had never faced in previous wars.

Enough time has elapsed and adequate data has emerged for the unfounded argument of terror “not being an existential threat” to disappear from public debate in Israel. However, Shelah continues to adhere to it in support of his “anti-war” idea.

Hizbollah’s anchor was its rocket weaponry. When the IDF destroyed the long and medium range rockets with an aerial campaign that left the short range rockets intact – these could only be destroyed by a ground operation – it also did not succeed in breaking Hizbollah’s backbone. Instead of drawing the conclusion from this with regard to the importance of a ground operation, which was so lacking in the war, Shelah paints Hizbollah as invincible, and this leads to the conclusion that there is no point in endangering soldiers in trying to defeat it.

Shelah then argues, once again in contrast with the facts, that “the ground forces incursion had absolutely no effect on the progress of the war, a result that the IDF knew from the outset.” Simple examination of the events of the war indicates that the IDF, which in the last decade has been poisoned with “advanced” anti-military and anti-professional ideas, actually made every effort not to utilize the forces that were designed and trained over the years to paralyze short range rockets. Moreover, the facts show that wherever the land forces succeeded in penetrating deep into the launching areas, they completely closed down the launch capabilities.

Conclusion

Shelah’s article contends that by definition, in a post-modern war military strength is not manifested to the extent that it is able to

change the outcome of a battle or influence the result of a campaign. This leads the author to conclude that “in the second Lebanon War, the party that had weaponry and used it lost, and the side that desisted from war gained.” In fact, however, the conclusion that should be drawn from the war in Lebanon is that training must be undertaken before the next war, and that what is planned should be carried out with the utmost efficiency. “Post-modernism” is a convenient and tempting state of mind, but a war should be conducted based on classic principles of war. Shelah’s conclusion – based on historical inaccuracies – that the IDF was unable to implement them in the last war leads to the fallacy that such principles are erroneous in terms of military logic.

Efficient warfare based on correct construction and efficient utilization of the military force will completely contradict Shelah’s determination that “the ability to achieve political gain through a military operation has almost completely dissipated.” I believe that this claim is no more than support for the military professional bankruptcy revealed last summer together with the question mark placed over Israel’s ability to survive existential threats.

If, according to Shelah, decisive victory is not achievable, deterrence does not exist, and military strength is superfluous, on what will Israel’s security be based in the face of an existential threat?

Note

1. Aryeh Shalev, *Success and Failure in Advance Warning: Israeli Intelligence Assessments before the Yom Kippur War* (Tel Aviv: Ma’arachot and the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies), p. 238.