Dilemmas of Warfare in Densely Populated Civilian Areas

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This essay attempts to present operational perspectives on conducting warfare in densely populated areas. It also distinguishes between three types of combat within this general category, with the goal of shedding light on this complex type of warfare.

The first type relates to standoff warfare, a situation in which the enemy is located in one sphere and one's own forces are in another. In this case, one's forces do not control the enemy's sphere but direct massive firepower towards it. Examples of such situations are IDF activity in Lebanon over many years and current activity in the Gaza Strip. In situations of this sort it is imperative to take into account not only the capabilities and means of one's own forces, but also the civilian population residing in the area of conflict.

The second type of warfare in densely populated areas relates to warfare in urban areas. In such situations, the attacking force must maneuver, i.e., take control of urban areas containing not only enemy forces but also civilian populations. The most prominent example of such warfare in recent years is Operation Defensive Shield. Operation Cast Lead and the Second Lebanon War are other examples of situations in which IDF forces had to take control of densely populated urban areas. This type of situation is marked by intense friction in civilian surroundings. The IDF is experienced in both standoff fighting and urban combat, but operating with civilians is qualitatively different.

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The third type reflects a specific complex situation, where although one's forces have taken control of the area, they are forced to battle returning enemy cells. An example of this situation is Judea and Samaria since Operation Defensive Shield. The United States faces a similar situation in Afghanistan and Iraq, albeit both geographically and militarily more difficult than the situation that confronts Israel. Despite the Americans' range of capabilities and means, they have not managed to decrease the amount of hostile activity. In this type of situation, legally and morally the army becomes almost completely responsible for the civilians in the area, even if military rule has not been declared. In other words, the army needs completely different abilities and skills.

What follows are some examples of the various situations. In the context of the conquest of Tul Karm during Operation Defensive Shield, the IDF conducted a series of intensive actions within densely populated urban areas, operating massive force at the brigade and division levels. The possibility of the IDF operating effectively against terrorism within the population was limited because terrorist cells were almost completely integrated within the area. Any movement of the population was used to camouflage the movement of terrorist cells. Three or four attempts to overcome terrorism in Tul Karm failed because movement by tanks and armored personnel carriers very noisy. When the noise was heard, the terrorist cells would scatter to the suburbs and villages at the city's outskirts, and when IDF forces would reach key locations in the city, only old people and innocent civilians would be left. Once the forces were withdrawn, the terrorists would return to the city and a week later would again attack cities in the heart of Israel. The enemy was well organized in orderly terrorist cells that would sit back while the IDF was in control of the area and attack at a later time.

The IDF studied the failed attempts, drew the necessary conclusions, and then operated in a simple, effective manner. Some sort of relatively small distracting action would be carried out within the city, sending the terrorists fleeing into the refugee camps on Tul Karm's outskirts. At the same time, large IDF forces would surround the refugee camps. This created a situation in which the fight was contained in a very small area. The idea was to press the enemy into surrender, and it proved successful. Using this pattern, some 500 terrorists were surrounded and forced to surrender. The operational achievement was striking.

The experience in the Jenin refugee camp differed. The complexity of the situation and the conditions on the ground required the IDF to enter the camp again and again in order to clear it of hostile activity. Every IDF entry was meant to deal with only a certain part of the camp, so the terrorist cells would simply move and operate from a different location, not unlike the movement of a liquid inside a closed system: pressure on one side causes the liquid to move far from the pressure point. Only effective pressure on several points at once forces the liquid to the center. In such an operation of occupying an area the most important aspect is to fortify and protect the attacking force. In addition, the IDF applied the tactic of leveling the ground and using non-precision fire to cover the attacking forces.

At the time of all these actions, the houses were full of civilians. As such, the attacking force faced complex challenges, in its drive to minimize harm to the civilian population. Early assessments were that the number of non-combatant casualties would be high, but the results were less devastating and relatively few civilians were harmed. However, such data and assessments are of no importance to the commanding officer in place who has to decide whether or not to launch an attack in the heart of a civilian population and risk causing non-combatant casualties. The rule of thumb in fighting in densely populated civilian areas is a ratio of one civilian casualty to two terrorist casualties. The ratio rises significantly when the choice of tactic is use of ground troops. The moment ground troops go in, the complexity is even greater and the ratio between civilian and terrorist casualties is commensurately higher. The success of the mission of taking such an area depends on the attacking force's determination, i.e., clearing the area effectively, patiently, and consistently. The occupation of an area in the heart of the civilian population is an important achievement in this type of asymmetrical fighting.

As Operation Defensive Shield ended and areas were brought under control, the regular brigades were charged with identifying and destroying the terrorist infrastructures. The Golani Brigade was put in charge of the Jenin sector, a particularly active and complex area that sent many operatives to carry out acts of terrorism in the heart of Israel. Unlike other sectors, not only the city center but also the more rural area around the city served as a terrorism operations base. In addition, it appeared that the terrorist organizations prepared themselves for an IDF occupation and were ready well in advance. The Golani Brigade was supposed to carry out

two missions: one, to secure the area and prevent terrorists from leaving, and two, to destroy terrorist infrastructures. The second was successfully accomplished; in five and a half months of activity, the brigade managed to shatter the infrastructures almost completely. But the first and more complex mission was not fully achieved, and during this period the terrorist organizations still managed to send several terrorists into Israeli territory.

Another factor is the presence of Israeli settlements within the sector, a factor complicating the fighting even more. Many tend to compare this type of IDF activity to that of the American army. In Baghdad there was an area called the Green Zone. Civilians, including American contractors and foreign citizens working for international organizations, resided in this area. Defensive procedures were very rigid there in terms of procedures for opening fire on the one hand, and in terms of defending against an incursion on the other. The situation in Israel is different: in many cases, there is no distinction between civilian and military areas, e.g., a military force stationed in the city of Sderot takes heavy fire from the Gaza Strip. This fire does not distinguish between the military force and the residents' homes, schools, and the children attending them. I believe, therefore, that we must change the rules and the international laws of war. The international law for a regular army opening fire does not distinguish between defending military forces and defending civilians. From the perspective of international law, it is impossible to punish people who fire at civilians with disproportionate and inaccurate standoff fire. Every such action intended to defend the civilians under attack is prohibited. This approach creates an absurd situation when the enemy is a terrorist organization with the a priori intention of killing civilians. The tactic of Hamas, as predicted by the IDF, was opening fire at precisely 7:45 AM, when Israeli schoolchildren waited for their school buses. This situation is not similar to fire aimed at American soldiers stationed on bases in Iraq or even at civilian contractors who operate there to serve these soldiers.

At the start of the action in Jenin, the area was saturated with terrorist cells. High ranking terrorists wanted by Israel, trying to impersonate innocent civilians, were caught almost daily at one of the roadblocks in the sector. Terrorist cells were caught almost at random. But this pressure made the cells split into tougher, smaller, and more independent units, making it harder for the IDF to identify and apprehend them. Therefore, the IDF boosted its efforts, placing more roadblocks and leveling more extended

curfews. In such complex situations and lacking intelligence, there was no choice but to operate in ways that also harm civilians. These steps blocked traffic to schools, and made it hard for civilians to acquire basic foodstuffs and receive medical attention. Consequently, serious friction with the local population developed, and indeed, the damage to freedom of movement and the routine life of the civilians led to a boomerang effect: the civilian population supported the terrorist organizations even more strongly than before and opposition to the IDF grew. At the same time, the Jenin sector dispatched terrorists who carried out two attacks in which 32 Israelis were killed. A situation in which a military force is charged with preventing the dispatch of terrorists while operating within the civilian population is very complex. This asymmetry, with Israelis hostage to the terrorist organizations, complicates military operations.
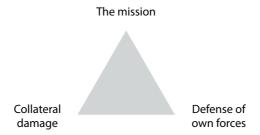
It was only long after Operation Defensive Shield ended that the correct conclusions were drawn about the most effective modus operandi for complex situations involving warfare in densely populated areas:

a. Gathering as much intelligence as possible.
b. Using infantry rather than armored personnel.
c. On the one hand, making life as easy as possible for the civilians, while on the other hand, fighting in a focused, uncompromising way against terrorist cells.

As for standoff fighting: The history of Israeli warfare on terrorism includes many commanding officers who felt this was the most effective way to fight within civilian populations. At present, the common understanding is that this is not the right method. Whatever the intensity of the fire applied, it will never be enough to render it unnecessary for the attacking force to use its infantry in the area and cleanse it. In addition, it is necessary to take the price the civilian population has to pay into account when operating heavy fire. Expelling the civilians is a tool not only to defend the population but also a means to motivate it to influence the regime. The methods of standoff fighting have failed over and over again. In asymmetrical warfare in densely populated areas there are no shortcuts.

Many speak of the tactic of deterrence in confrontations with terrorist organizations. However, one ought perhaps to relate to the situation as an equation with two players rather than as deterrence of the other side. In order to deter terrorist organizations from firing, the IDF first fought them in pinpoint fashion and created the rules for the fighting. When one of the

organizations would violate a rule, the IDF would take control over a civilian area and put the enemy's civilians into the same equation. However, this was at best a mixed blessing: taking control or any other extreme action would lead to terrorist organizations firing on Israeli citizens. As a result, Israelis became hostages of the situation. The IDF found itself caught in an impossible bind: on the one hand, an attempt to fight what proved to be an insufficiently effective tactical battle without full use of its military capabilities, and on the other hand, an attempt to minimize damage to the civilians on both sides. The only advantage of this situation is minimizing the harm to IDF soldiers because the activity is of relatively small scope. Nonetheless, the ineffectiveness made it hard to achieve the mission as a whole because it extended the duration of the fighting and therefore also added to the attrition of the force. It is therefore necessary to know when to change the rules of the game. One can clarify the complexity of the situation by means of the following figure:

The mission

Collateral damage

Defense of own forces

Completing the mission, defending the force, and minimizing damage to the civilian population are the three points of the triangle. Concentrating effort on one point comes at the expense of the other two. All along, one must remember that the IDF is charged with one clear task: defending the citizens of Israel. When a decision is made to embark on an operation in order to fulfill this task, it stems from the fact that life for Israelis in a particular area has become unbearable and that one cannot allow the situation to continue without taking some action.

However, the task of defending the citizens of the state implies damage to the enemy's civilian population. Any fire of any intensity immediately affects the civilians on the other side; the extent of the effect on the civilians is determined by the intensity of the fire. The bombing of an entire neighborhood in the Gaza Strip in response to a mortar bomb fired

at Sderot creates a different effect than that created by using precision weapons with limited collateral damage. To be sure, such weapons are not always available and cannot always be used, but in general the key is to use weapons with the least potential for damage in densely populated areas and minimize the effect on the civilians.

Another component is defending one's troops, which prompts a very serious dilemma: to what level of risk can one's forces be exposed in order to minimize damage to enemy civilians? No military force in general, and the IDF in particular, is interested in targeting civilians or ignores the ramifications of firing on civilians. Nonetheless, foregoing support fire as described above in the case in Jenin will lead to fire directed at one's forces from the buildings located in the area of the battlefield, which house both terrorist cells and innocent civilians. The decision on how to act in such situations is a real dilemma.

In Jenin, for example, there was initially no plan to take control of the refugee camp, but the circumstances on the ground – including the enemy's resolve to fight without regard for casualties to its own civilians – dictated the IDF's methods of operation. This operation of force of such large proportions had commensurate results. The triangle sketched above is the key for operating force in asymmetrical warfare within densely populated areas. In complex situations of this kind, it is possible to operate most effectively and optimally only by being exactly in the center. The political and decision making echelons must internalize that without understanding this triangle, the fighting will not succeed and the mission will fail.

In this sense Operation Cast Lead was unusual. Hamas was patently unprepared and unorganized; in terms of functioning like an organization, it was still in its infancy and was certainly not ready for the force brought to bear against it. One must consider that this was a one-time occurrence; next time, the enemy will be much better prepared.

There are three key issues, then, in asymmetrical fighting in densely populated areas. The first is to understand the challenges. If the IDF as well as Israel's decision makers understand the challenges, they will be able to prepare better for this type of warfare. As a conventional army, the IDF is still captive to the paradigm of conventional use of force. It is imperative to change this way of thinking and paradigm and understand the nature of warfare in densely populated areas and prepare for it. A different way of organizing the force – from preparing operational units to operating more

effective means of contact with the civilian population – will ensure better results in the future. Some of the positive results of Operation Cast Lead stemmed from the lessons learned through less successful efforts during Operation Defensive Shield.

The second key issue is to instill behavioral norms and rules of engagement. The IDF is used to operating in the format of army versus army, a much simpler and straightforward format. When the civilian factor enters the equation, the attacking force must be prepared not only operationally but also mentally. The level of friction with the civilians and the complexity and difficulties described above often result in uncontrolled use of fire by soldiers towards civilians. Restraining the force and handling these responses are critical to success.

The third key issue in asymmetric warfare is intelligence. Commanding officers and decision makers must understand that when they look through their binoculars, the true picture of the battle is not the tank battalion they're seeing at a distance, rather the huddle of civilian houses in the background. Therefore, it is their responsibility to prevent fire coming from those houses. The picture seen through the binoculars, in which there doesn't seem to be an enemy, must – using the means currently at our disposal – be turned into a picture in which the enemy is defined as clearly as possible.

The success of Operation Cast Lead lay precisely in this picture of the battle. At first glance, all that was seen was a civilian neighborhood, but in practice, every soldier who participated in the mission knew very well how the enemy was organized within it: which building had mortar bombs underneath it and which house had an attic full of ammunition. This is the capability that determined the outcome.