

The Developing Concept of the Civilian Element in Warfare

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The following is the testimony of an officer from the First Lebanon War: “Encountering civilians in combat is not a new phenomenon; they are always around. Yet you have to know how to fight when civilians are present on the battleground. It is truly a tough dilemma.” Another example: An old man found himself trapped on the battleground as soldiers were running around him, firing their weapons and trying to carry out their mission.

In previous wars, we witnessed similar incidents where the civilian population was caught in the war arena. At the same time, when we look back at the most recent wars, and when we look ahead in anticipation of future conflicts, we can see the changes. First of all, we are increasingly engaged in fighting in densely populated areas like the Gaza Strip, where construction leaves little space between the houses, which is also experienced in Tel Aviv and other cities. As such, we have to fight in an environment in which the civilian population makes up the majority of those present. Furthermore, the enemy has shifted its fighting methods and now exploits the civilian population as human shields. This marks a change and poses a challenge. Today we must deal with the conflict between defeating the enemy in a densely populated area and allowing that population to pursue its normal daily life.

At the same time, a new player has entered the scene: the media. The media’s presence on the battlefield was not so prominent before, yet it now plays a major role. As has often been the case, it can take a tactical event and turn it into a strategic problem and a challenge by merely presenting it this way.

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How does the need to deal with the enemy's civilian population affect the military decision the commander wants to achieve? How does it affect the degree of legitimacy of the IDF and Israel to engage in warfare, and how does it impact on the operational time span, or the amount of time the army has to complete its mission? Sometimes the media's presence can even halt the operation.

This new situation presents many diverse challenges to the IDF. It must distinguish between the civilian population and the involved party, namely the enemy; it must deal with the civilian population's movements within the combat zone; and it must detect and identify civilian and humanitarian distress situations and find a solution for them. This solution may vary depending on the duration of the fighting: there is a huge difference between fighting that takes one day, or combat that stretches over a full week or month. The IDF must also coordinate the activities of international agencies; it must contain civilian events on the tactical level quickly, comprehensively, and cognitively; and it must refute rumors and fraudulent reports. Moreover, all of these missions are only some of the many challenges we face today.

A brief survey of the latest wars and military campaigns illustrates the dilemma between dealing with the civilian population and defeating the enemy, and the effect this dilemma has on the operation's legitimacy. In Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, we performed well on the operational level, but not as well when handling the civilian population. We failed to support it. Let me cite some examples from the tactical perspective: An ambulance was heading toward the hospital when it came across a tank on the outskirts of town. In order to establish what kind of ambulance it was, the IDF tank swerved its turret. The ambulance, noticing the gun, automatically turned back. Five minutes later, the radio and TV carried a report claiming the IDF was disrupting the evacuation of the wounded to the hospital. This kind of incident exemplifies the tactical significance of an event associated with the civilian population, and how it affects the legitimacy of the military operation. In another example: One of the infantry battalions decided to deploy its frontline command post inside a local bank. From the operational perspective, this was extremely important, but the media immediately reported the IDF was robbing banks. We can, therefore, see that these are manifestations of delegitimization – exhibited also in movies such as *Jenin, Jenin* and the tales about alleged massacres

and other deeds that never actually occurred. But how can you prove your contention that these were only fabrications or misinterpretations? Without people who can prove otherwise, whatever we say will remain irrelevant.

The quandary assumed a different dimension in the 2006 Second Lebanon War, because having special officers to handle the population was still not part of the campaign. Let us take Kafr Qana as an example: I believe when the army is engaged in combat and is ordered to halt its fire for 24 or 48 hours in order to enable wounded civilians to receive treatment and allow supply convoys to come in, it should do so at once, even if this exposes the soldiers to danger and puts our divisions and battalions at a disadvantage, because we did something that should not have been done and it is necessary to freeze the situation.

By Operation Cast Lead (December 2008-January 2009), the progress we had made in that respect was already clearly noticeable. The question of the legitimacy was presented impartially and fairly. The IDF was far more cognizant of the issue and knew how to deal with it. Yoav Galant, then GOC of the Southern Command, made sure that officers entrusted with the job of supporting the local population – a role that was assigned then for the first time – were sent in together with the combat troops. Not all our actions were executed optimally, and there were incidents showing lack of coordination on the ground, where uninvolved civilians were hurt. This was war and such things happen in war. Yet even then, there were cases in which we failed to deal with civilians properly during combat – as Richard Goldstone ultimately highlighted in the United Nations report (although subsequent testimonies and evidence proved a very large number of the cases he cited were not true). We were obviously unable to counter his contentions at the right time and in the right place.

Operation Cast Lead was, in a way, the straw that broke the General Staff Command's back. After that campaign, the understanding was we should adopt a different *modus operandi*. Then-Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi said the very discussion of the warfare affects the degree of its legitimacy; that it becomes part of the forces' mission; and on the tactical level, it should be handled on the battalion level and upwards. In Operation Pillar of Defense (November 2012), how the civilian population was handled featured prominently in the commanders' set of considerations on the strategic and the tactical level alike, even though there was no ground

invasion. This topic was part of the military thinking and the calculations in that campaign. The examples of IDF activity from that operation clearly demonstrate that other armies in the world would not necessarily take such precautions in the midst of fighting: More than 100 officers who were tasked with caring for humanitarian issues and worked on various levels. There were 43 cases of cooperation and operational coordination with the International Red Cross and the United Nations; during the campaign 54 new sensitive sites were identified and food supplies sent there, 18 of them civilian shelters (with a total of 10,000 people); 127 supply trucks entered the Gaza Strip; and 186 patients and their escorts were given exit permits to leave the Gaza Strip. These examples show that the IDF took pains to separate the solution to the population's needs from the mission of attacking the enemy.

Today we understand that apart from ethical values, which is an indisputably important factor, and from knowing how to carry out the mission properly, which always has primary importance, there are other factors to consider during fighting as well. All this has led us to a new kind of thinking involving making special efforts on the civilian humanitarian level during warfare even as the IDF engages in other efforts of combat, intelligence collection, and logistics.

The civilian humanitarian effort during battle has three components: the operational factor, namely, how to avoid injuring uninvolved parties or destroying what should not be destroyed; the humanitarian aspect, which involves assigning professional officers to handle the civilian population, i.e., to identify the distress and needs of the civilian population and provide solutions; and the cognitive/public diplomacy dimension. For example, if a picture taken of one of the enemy squads being attacked, which originally showed the launcher next to the bodies of the squad members, is eventually doctored by the media to show the same scene but without the launcher, the impression is these were civilian casualties. From this perspective, this is a battle over every detail in every event aimed at avoiding further reports like the Goldstone Report.

Today we know how to define and implement the operational, humanitarian, and cognitive elements, and we know what tools are available to us in this endeavor. We have created a combat doctrine employing professional terminology, as well as new concepts as "sensitive sites," or "sites that must be avoided," which include hospitals, facilities run

by international organizations and those organizations' headquarters, or population centers. In Operation Pillar of Defense, for example, we marked population centers and relayed to our forces information about sites they must avoid. Moreover, the concept of a "humanitarian axis," which is the road used by international organizations and the local population for humanitarian needs, was also newly created, as was the "humanitarian time slot," which is the period of time which we deliberately hold our fire to give the locals a hiatus to move around safely for humanitarian reasons.

Apart from the combat doctrine, we also trained and qualified an array of civilian population officers assigned to the tactical battalions. These officers, whether reservists or standing army personnel, undergo training in special courses, including classes on international law and on ways to cooperate with international organizations, dealing with the media's influence (including what needs to be documented and photographed), and the main subject: the civilian population in warfare. This covers the concerns of the civilian population during combat and the problems it faces, as well as the means to detect its distress and solve these problems during warfare.

Nowadays, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories is in charge of this issue in the Palestinian theater. Another new important element is the Center for Coordination with International Organizations and Public Relations, which engages in cooperation and joint work with international organizations such as the International Red Cross and the United Nations.

Thus, if another conflict breaks out, by now we have honed our professional know-how in dealing with the civilian population during warfare. We will do everything we can to draw a distinction between involved and uninvolved parties so as to be able to meet the challenge of handling the civilian population concurrently while carrying out our forces' mission. Our professionalism and our values are at stake, while the objective continues: to score victory and remember all the while that we are human beings.