

War and Victory

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Introduction

Before embarking on Operation Cast Lead, the IDF and the defense establishment held many discussions about the need for military action in the Gaza Strip and the strategic objective of such an action in the event it would in fact occur. These discussions were held in light of the sharply worded recommendations of the Winograd Commission, which wrote the following in its report:¹

We were surprised to discover a significant weakness in terms of the in-depth thinking and multi-dimensional, deep, sophisticated strategic planning required in complex arenas and in conditions of rapid change and uncertainty. The planning and prosecution of a war or the use of military force in some other informed manner must also include attention to such principles of strategic thinking.

Attention to how to end a war or to an exit strategy is not a sign of weakness but rather a critical component of planning. True, things do not always develop as planned, but a plan based on information and reasonable scenarios must be present.

In a war, an army must strive for victory. If it is known ahead of time that there is no preparedness or possibility of arriving at such a victory, it is proper to avoid going to war in the first place, or even to avoid any move liable to deteriorate into war.

As noted, we found none of the above in the military's thinking in the Second Lebanon War, not even in the material the military presented to the political echelon. (As noted, the fact that the political echelon did not demand such materials represents a severe failure on its part.)

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The desire to implement the Winograd Commission's recommendations – even if this was not explicitly stated by the decision makers – dragged out the discussions and the strategic situation assessments, even though at the end of 2008 it was already clear to everyone that in light of the scope of rocket and mortar fire from the Gaza Strip a military operation was inevitable. However, notwithstanding the extent and intensity of the strategic thinking processes and situation assessments by the IDF and the political echelon before the operation, Operation Cast Lead was launched without a clear strategic framework or without an exit strategy formula. The following statement by Major General (ret.) Giora Eiland expresses that gap well:

When [Operation Cast Lead] began and when the first strike by the air force was carried out – a strike that was very successful in and of itself – it was still unclear what it was we wanted to achieve. The definition given by the political echelon was a definition along the lines of “creating better security conditions.” This is a vague formulation, which may be rephrased more simply as “we want things to be better.” This is not a definition of goals that lends itself to translation into concrete military terms. It was only three days after the beginning of Operation Cast Lead that a real discussion began at the political echelon and between the political echelon and the senior military echelon about what we wanted to achieve.²

This essay contends that against the threat that has developed in recent years, Israel's war objectives are fixed goals attainable by means of fixed principles of action. The essay thus argues the irrelevance of the terms “victory” or “decision” in the State of Israel's strategic discourse, and then shows why the Winograd Commission recommendation is not only unclear and impossible to implement but is also a recommendation whose potential for damage far exceeds any possible benefit.

The Military Goals of War

The change in the nature of the threat faced by the State of Israel has been discussed extensively.³ Today the threat of high trajectory fire, based on the use of conventional weapons (missiles, rockets, mortar bombs) in massive quantities, tops the list of threats Israel confronts. It joins the classical, conventional threat that was based on the use of large military systems engaging in battles of ground maneuvers. Both may be called

conventional threats, and both may be contrasted with threats of an essentially different nature: the non-conventional threat and the threat of terrorism (inside Israel and abroad). This essay focuses on the objectives of a war against conventional threats.⁴

Israel's geo-strategic situation has not changed since the establishment of the state. Israel cannot end the conflict with its neighbors by force. Therefore it operates on the basis of strategic defensive principles, which can be summed up as the attempt to preserve and fortify Israel's national existence. Almost all of Israel's wars⁵ occurred within the context of this strategic philosophy. Ben-Gurion clarified Israel's unique situation in this context when addressing IDF officers:⁶

There is a deep-seated difference...between our situation in the conflict and that of the Arabs who are a party to it. The Arabs attacked us; we won; they plot the next round. Let us assume that the next round takes place in the year X and we win again. They will then plot the third round. We have no option of a final resolution between the sides as long as the Arabs reject it...We do not have the option of ending the conflict, but they do, whereupon the conflict will be eliminated.

Clausewitz's formative historic claim about the supremacy of political objectives of war over military objectives⁷ still holds true. However, in light of Israel's unique situation as described by Ben-Gurion, the political goal of operating military force by the State of Israel is a fixed defensive one, focusing on preserving the national existence of the state. From here one may derive the objectives of the application of military force by the state: the goal of the Israeli military is to foil Arab enemy plots to damage Israel's existence and sovereignty.

Based on the understanding that after every round of confrontation another one will follow, it is worth examining the achievement required of the IDF in these rounds of confrontation. Should it be impossible to create a lasting political achievement as the direct objective of the fighting, the supreme requirement of the military must be to extend the period of time between the rounds of confrontation and, to the extent possible, minimize the duration and damage of every such round. The intervals of calm can be achieved through deterring the enemy from acting against Israel. Thus, one may determine two fundamental types of action that allow the IDF to meet this requirement:

1. *A severe blow and significant damage to the enemy:* The IDF must use the two major components of its capabilities, firepower and ground maneuver, in order to damage both the enemy's military capabilities and its political or organizational infrastructure. The purpose is to impress the severity of the blow on the enemy for as long as possible so that it postpones its next operation against Israel for years and, additionally, will be bogged down in an extended, resource-intensive process of reconstruction. An enemy seeking to avoid severe blows operates purposefully and cynically within civilian population centers in order to attain two goals: first, limit Israel's ability to operate freely, and second, allow the enemy to present Israel as an entity attacking civilians.⁸ In order to prevent harm from befalling bystanders, the IDF acts to evacuate civilians from the war zones and separate civilians from soldiers. Further refinement of this approach will make it possible to deepen the impact of the blow against the enemy while at the same time minimizing harm to uninvolved civilian populations.
2. *Activity to reduce the duration and damage of any given round of confrontation:* The IDF must act to minimize the damage caused to Israel as a result of fighting. This goal may be attained through a number of steps:⁹
 - a. *Isolating the confrontation arena:* The IDF must isolate the arena of fighting away from the other arenas of confrontation, both by means of stationing battle-ready forces in these arenas and by means of using force in the proper doses – based on necessity – in order to deter the enemy from opening additional fighting fronts.¹⁰
 - b. *Reducing the scope of fire directed against Israel:* The army is required to take action to reduce the scope of fire directed against Israel both by means of precision fire at the sources and resources of the fire (weapons caches, command and control installations, launchers, and so on) and by means of ground maneuvers towards the sites that can directly affect the reduction of the scope of the fire.
 - c. *Reducing the damage:* The army must employ defensive means to reduce the damage caused to the fabric of civilian life in the round of confrontation.

- d. Reducing the duration of the fighting: The IDF must act to ensure a blow of such scope and intensity that the enemy will understand that continuing to fight belies its own best interests. On the other hand, the fighting must cease only after a critical blow has been rendered against the enemy, as defined above.

These are fixed types of action, adjusted to the relatively fixed threat, and do not require reexamination before every confrontation. The IDF has to construct its force and operate it in times of crisis in order to conform to these principles. Experience from the recent past, the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead, demonstrates that even a partial implementation of these principles allows the attainment of lasting strategic results. The combination of defensive principles of action and the transition to offense (moving the fight onto enemy soil) complete the picture of the principles of response.

Israel's geo-strategic situation requires it to take maximum advantage of the periods of calm between the rounds of confrontation to gain three primary objectives. The first lies in the field of security:¹¹ constructing the military force and the political conditions (e.g., constructing international legitimacy) in advance of the next confrontation. The second objective is developing the country in various fields such as immigration, the economy, education, social issues, and more. The third objective is the attempt by the political echelon to identify ways of arriving at a political settlement with the enemy. The efforts by the political echelon to provide the army with a context for its activity are critical. Despite the constancy of the objectives of Israel's wars, the political echelon must provide the constraints of force operation alongside a description of how it intends to leverage the military action into political achievement.¹² In many cases and as a result of not understanding the principles described above, the political echelon creates fuzzy political directives so that it will be possible to create the appearance of a "victory" in the public eye.

Victory and Decision

On the basis of these principles of operation guiding the IDF, it is important to clarify the terms "victory" and "decision" in Israel's strategic discourse. It is hard to understand what the Winograd Commission intended when it determined that "in a war, an army must strive for victory. If it is known ahead of time that there is no preparedness or possibility of arriving at

such a victory, it is proper to avoid going to war in the first place.”¹³ What did the Winograd Commission have in mind when it used the phrase “such a victory”? It seems that this statement relates more to the field of tactical concepts than to the field of strategic ideas.

Clausewitz viewed victory as limited to the tactical level in battle. He claimed that “in strategy, there is no such thing as victory.”¹⁴ In his book, Yehoshafat Harkaby writes that “the strategic-political success of a war is measured by yardsticks that lie outside the purview of the military.”¹⁵ A tactical unit can determine with certainty that the enemy facing it has been defeated and that the unit has won the battle if the enemy is no longer relevant in the given encounter. This holds true in one of three situations: the physical destruction of the enemy; the enemy’s collapse as a fighting entity and its flight from the battlefield; and its surrender to our forces. These criteria are not relevant at the level of strategic discourse because in practice it is physically impossible to destroy the adversarial entity that Israel faces. Alternately, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which the white flag is raised over the presidential palace in Syria. As Harkaby says,

The verdict over “victory” in a battle is therefore autonomous, self-referential. It is an immediate judgment at the end of the battle. By contrast, the verdict over the war is not autonomous: it is dependent on outcomes that are not immediate, rather delayed.¹⁶

It is possible that the members of the Winograd Commission fell victim to popular opinion and its notion of how to calibrate the results of the war, to the popular and prevalent index guiding the public’s concept of victory. Indeed, for years the public was trained to use the concept of victory even when it was completely irrelevant. The transformation of the threat resulted in a situation in which after the Second Lebanon War, the public found it difficult to determine the “winner” at the end of that particular round of fighting. The difficulty was intensified when on the one hand Israel experienced media frenzy and hysterics, while on the other side of the hill the celebrations of “the divine victory” grew more lively. While relating to public opinion both inside Israel and abroad is important and carries significant weight, it must not stand in the way of reaching a lasting strategic achievement in the form of deterring the enemy from attacking Israel for many years to come.

One cannot underestimate the importance of this aspect. Before embarking on Operation Cast Lead, the army and the political echelon, still under the influence of the Winograd report, dealt extensively with the issue. There were innumerable discussions in an attempt to understand what would constitute a “victory and decision” in the south, despite the fact that the intensity of fire at the Israeli settlements in the vicinity of the Gaza Strip, which inflicted severe harm on the fabric of civilian life there, demanded quick action to end the fire and deter the enemy from pursuing the same path in the future, regardless of the desperately desired appearance of “victory.”

The achievement that the IDF must provide the State of Israel on the one hand, and the concept of “victory” on the other, are entirely unrelated. The IDF is required to postpone the next confrontation as much as is possible. That is the supreme goal. The index for examining this achievement is clear: the achievement is measured by the intensity of the blow dealt to the enemy and by the number of years of calm between rounds of confrontation. The environment in which we live does not always make it possible to see the outcome clearly at the end of the war; one must not be swayed by enemy bravado. In the future, it would be highly advisable to leave the concepts of victory and decision to the dimension of concepts dealing with tactical fighting rather than misusing them in the context of Israel's strategic discourse.

Going to War

The purpose of applying military force is to gain political objectives. In Israel's unique situation, the long term political objectives are constant – i.e., preserving and fortifying the national existence of the state. The principles of applying force as described above were derived from them. A more in-depth discussion requires examination of the scenarios requiring the State of Israel to go to war or engage in high intensity violence. Israel has no choice but to go to war given one of the three following situations:

1. Stopping enemy violence: The enemy, both on the northern and southern borders, is equipping itself with high trajectory weapons, intended to harm civilian and military targets within the State of Israel. As long as the enemy is careful not to use these weapons and the fabric of civilian life is not harmed, the purpose of applying force on Israel's part would be to preserve deterrence and to damage, as

much as possible, the processes of the enemy constructing its force. However, once the threat is realized, the State of Israel must act quickly in order to end it and create renewed deterrence. In such a scenario, Israel is *reacting* to a threat that has been realized in practice.

2. Foiling a concrete threat: There are times when a threat develops whose existence and potential are viewed by Israel as highly dangerous. In the process of risk management with regard to such a threat, and after non-aggressive tools of foiling (e.g., economic, political) have been exhausted, the application of force remains the last alternative. In such a case force will be applied in order to create a preventive blow whose supreme goal is to foil the potential of the threat. In this scenario, Israel *initiates* its use of force against the *potential* of the enemy's threat.
3. Strategic retaliation as a reaction to an enemy action: There are times when the potential of the threat is realized and action to stop it is irrelevant, e.g., a one time attack on Israel by long range missiles or a significant terrorist attack.¹⁷ In such an event, the State of Israel must apply force whose purpose is to inflict a strategic retaliatory blow on selected enemy targets. In this scenario, too, Israel *is reacting* to a real threat posed by the enemy.

All of these scenarios have the following in common: they are defensive strategies based on the understanding that the use of force by Israel does not serve long term political goals other than removing the threat from the agenda and giving the country some years of calm that would allow the political echelon to do what it is supposed to do so that the Arabs will accept the existence of the State of Israel in the region. In all three scenarios, the principles of application of force on the part of the IDF remain constant. The variable components touch primarily on the nature of the agreement that comes after the military action. As Ben-Gurion said, what is at stake is not a political peace settlement, rather a local arrangement intended to create the conditions for a ceasefire. While the concrete political context affects the nature of the application of force, this influence is limited because the setting of the action remains unchanged.

Holding innumerable discussions before embarking on the operation in the Gaza Strip while hundreds of rockets were fired at the State of Israel was meaningless and made virtually no contribution to the overall

effectiveness of the operation. The statement made by Ehud Barak is particularly enlightening in this context:

Another discussion, another meeting, another assessment will not solve the problems we are facing...Would another staff discussion of the war have changed anything? In the end there are leaders and there is leadership.¹⁸

Therefore, it behooves us to reread the Winograd Commission's recommendation, "If it is known ahead of time that there is no willingness or possibility of arriving at such a victory, it is proper to avoid going to war in the first place," and to conclude that this statement contains no insight applicable to the geo-strategic reality of the State of Israel.

Conclusion

As far as one can see, it is unlikely that the Six Day War and its confluence of conditions will ever recur. A new conceptual framework is required to coordinate expectations among the IDF and the political and the civilian echelons. Such a framework must be based on relevant strategic discourse in which the supreme objective of the Israeli military is to attain consistent, unchanging achievements. The strategic discourse in Israel must rid itself of concepts such as quick and absolute victory and decision, or at least redefine them in the context of the present threat. The use made of these concepts by the Winograd Commission not only fails to serve any useful purpose but also damages the possibility of conducting relevant strategic discourse.

In addition, Israel's decision makers must adopt decision making processes that rely less on discussions of situation assessments in real time (just before the threat is realized) and more on the routine study of reality between wars. At the end of the day, situation assessments in real time tap precious resources of time, are ineffective, and have little effect on the characteristics of the application of force. These must be derived from the fixed principles of action. By contrast, discussions focusing on the study of reality are imperative in order to create and expand a common language and understanding of the security challenges and the analysis of events and reactions. Israel must take care not to chain itself to the recommendations of the Winograd Commission, which mandate the advance identification and definition of "victory" and the formulation of an exit strategy before the war has begun. The characteristics of Israel's

strategic environment prove that these processes are liable to paralyze the military and the defense establishment.

Notes

- 1 The Winograd Commission Report, Chapter 12, "Recommendations for the Military," p. 416, par 7. The emphasis in the third paragraph is the author's.
- 2 Giora Eiland, "The Second Lebanon War: Lessons on the Strategic Level," *Military and Strategic Affairs* 1, no. 2 (2009): 13.
- 3 Zaki Shalom, "Is the IDF Prepared to Face a Regular War against Arab Nations?" *Military and Strategic Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2009); Gabriel Siboni, "High Trajectory Weapons and Guerilla Warfare: Adjusting Fundamental Security Concepts," *Strategic Assessment* 10, no. 4 (2008): 12-18.
- 4 An analysis of the objectives of a nuclear war involving the State of Israel lies outside the scope of this essay. The purpose of the war against terrorism is based on ongoing action (ongoing security in Israel and abroad) to foil attempts to form organizations and plan attacks. In order to focus the discussion, this type of activity is also not analyzed in this essay.
- 5 Operation Peace for the Galilee is an exception. It attempted to implement a grand offensive strategy motivated by the desire to change Lebanon's political situation from the ground up. However, this is an exception and not indicative of the overall strategy.
- 6 David Ben-Gurion, "Distinction and Destiny: An Address to IDF Officers, July 5, 1955," Ministry of Defense Publications, September 1971, p. 207.
- 7 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Penguin Classics, 1982), pp. 109, 401-10.
- 8 The Arabs and their supporters around the world have labored to delegitimize Israel's military operations during the Second Lebanon War and Operation Cast Lead, because they identify the high degree of effectiveness of this response. In this context one may also refer to the Goldstone report published in September 2009.
- 9 The IDF's activity with regard to the civilian front comes under the rubric of the need to reduce the damage by means of preserving the civilian fabric of life and defending critical civilian and military infrastructures through both active and passive means of defense.
- 10 This of course is in addition to the messages of calm or the threats to be transmitted by the political echelon to the appropriate elements.
- 11 Ben-Gurion already determined that Israel's primary consideration must be security: "I count security first, because if we fail to exist, there will be nothing." Ben-Gurion, "Distinction and Destiny," p. 209.
- 12 The desire to define a long range political objective for every military action is laudable. However, it is necessary to remember that in Israel's geo-strategic environment it is not always possible to act on that desire. At times, the entire purpose of applying force is to manage the violence on the battlefield

and to provide the required years of calm. In these cases, the function of the political echelon is to characterize what it wants the situation to look like at the end of the fighting, e.g., the stationing of multinational forces, the introduction of some other kind of force, capturing and running the arena until such an element is identified, and so on. It should be remembered that these are secondary questions when compared to the central objective, which is the removal of the threat and the construction of deterrence for years to come.

- 13 See note 1.
- 14 Quoted in: Yehoshafat Harkaby, *War and Strategy* (Tel Aviv: Ma'arachot, 1990), p. 593.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Or an attack on Israel with non-conventional weapons. Even though this topic lies outside the scope of this essay, the example appears here to demonstrate the concept of strategic retaliation.
- 18 Ehud Barak in the cabinet meeting of September 13, 2009, during a discussion of the law on the National Security Staff.