

Victims of Friendly Fire: The Winograd Commission vs. the Citizens of Israel

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From the perspective of a few months it appears that the public response to the Winograd Commission findings has been minimal. Nevertheless, the report lies in the public domain and one should not underestimate its impact on decision makers and on public opinion in Israel and the region.

In depth examination of both parts of the report – the partial version and the final report – raises a considerable number of questions with regard to its relevance to the security challenges facing the State of Israel. Moreover, the testimonies that were published and in particular the questions the commission put to the witnesses allow close examination of the commission's approach to the security reality that Israel confronts.

This article aims to examine two basic issues on which the commission took a strong stand: the results of the war,¹ and the decision making processes in Israel's defense establishment. The "commission of inquiry culture" that has developed in Israel over the years, with its negative impact on the security establishment, has come under fire.² It seems that the Winograd Commission has itself contributed to justification of this criticism. Two examples: first, the commission did not adequately assess the known implications of the change to Israel's security threat, and therefore its conclusion regarding the IDF's failure to achieve victory at the end of the war is problematic, if at all of any value.³ Second, the commission addressed and attached great importance to the decision making processes involved in launching the war and during the war. This article attempts to examine these two topics, and to suggest the problematic nature of the commission's opinions.

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Changes in the Nature of the Threat and the Security Concept

Since its creation, the State of Israel has been threatened by neighboring countries and different organizations using terror activities of varying dimensions, both inside and outside its borders. The principal threat that Israel had to face was the threat of invasion by an Arab country or a coalition of Arab countries that aimed to conquer territory.⁴ The IDF's buildup and the security solution that was devised allowed Israel to defend the country and move to an offensive mode, for example, during the Yom Kippur War. In practice, over the years Israel has been able to offer an effective solution to threats against it and to deter Arab countries from carrying out the threatened scenario. The security concept was based on three familiar pillars: deterrence, warning, and decision.

In addition to this approach, an ongoing security concept became rooted in the IDF regarding the use of force (that was generally based on territorial defense) for guarding the country's borders and other areas under IDF authority (for example, the West Bank). A popularly held idea was that every few years, when a military threat to the country becomes more heightened, the reserve forces are called up for a short period in order to quell the threat. Once the threat is removed, the country returns to the regular security routine and the reservists resume their normal lives. This scenario generated the expectation among citizens (and even among some of the leaders) that the Second Lebanon War would conform to a similar model. However, the war arrived and revealed a change in the essence of the threat.

This change is so fundamental that it demands an update in Israel's security concept. Once the enemies of the state understood,

following a gradual and ongoing process, the IDF's abilities in dealing with a classic threat, a new threat was devised, namely: amassing a massive high trajectory firepower capability against the front and rear while developing combat abilities based on guerilla tactics.⁵ These capabilities were developed both by countries such as Syria and by organizations like Hizbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip. The greatest danger of this threat does not lie in the physical damage that can be caused by Qassam rockets, which for the most part is limited. The greatest danger stems from the ongoing and sustained erosion of public faith in the country's ability to protect it. This is a highly serious threat that undercuts one of the most fundamental principles of the contract between a citizen and his country.

In addition, Israel is currently faced with one of the most significant security challenges it has had to address since its establishment – the Iranian threat. The Second Lebanon War clearly revealed Iran's role as a leader of the war against Israel. Iran's nuclear program is the strategic part of the struggle, and figures in addition to efforts to position Iranian operational strongholds along Israel's borders: Hizbollah in the north, Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and in the future, perhaps in the West Bank as well. These present a conventional threat whose long term ability to inflict damage augments the nuclear threat, for which the IDF still does not have an adequate solution. The Winograd Commission report should be read with these insights kept in mind.

So, Who Won the War?

A stark sentence in the report reflects the commission's misunderstanding of both how much the threat has changed and the nature

of the security challenge that now confronts Israel: "A quasi-military organization, with thousands of fighters, managed to withstand the strongest army in the Middle East⁶ for several weeks. This army enjoyed absolute aerial supremacy and marked advantages in terms of size and technology."⁷ While it is true that the IDF has developed impressive abilities to deal with the classic threat, these abilities do not provide an effective solution to the current threat. Moreover, the commission continues in the same vein when it addresses the question "who won the war," as if this was a sports match in which the judges (in this case, the commission) decide the winners. The report states: "At the end of thirty-four days of warfare, there was no resolution in favor of the IDF, even not by 'points.' Hizbollah fire on Israel's rear stopped only due to the ceasefire. Israel did not achieve a clear cut victory."⁸ It is hard to understand what parameters the commission used to reach such a clear cut and simplistic ruling on the results of the war, since there is no reference whatsoever in the report to these parameters. Nor is there or any attempt to analyze the criteria whereby "victory in the war" is achieved, unless the commission followed the lead of the Israeli media.

The commission's approach to the war, as if it were a game in which there are winners and losers, is problematic, to say the least. The commission does not at all address the complexity of the threat resulting from a low intensity conflict. Rather, it isolates a single manifestation (summer 2006) and removes it from the wider context of the overall struggle. However, Israel is in the throes of an ongoing war against resistance movements. This war did not end with the ceasefire in Lebanon, and in fact continues right now. If so, what is the significance of a sentence like:

"Israel did not win the war," when the war is still in progress, and its end is not even in sight? It is a mistake to compare the Second Lebanon War with classic conventional wars in which victory or defeat at the end of war can be measured and is significant. Indeed, herein lies another problematic ruling by the commission, that: "the political achievement of the war – resolution 1701 – was significant, but our examination did not indicate that it was achieved through appropriate analysis of effective means to attain the political objectives, and we found no essential, direct, prominent, and efficient causal connection between the military operation and the political achievement"⁹ – as if the resolution's stipulations were not part of the war's objectives and were not achieved as a result of the fighting.

Decision Making Processes and the Exit Strategy Trap

The Winograd Commission refers to a lapse in "understanding the critical nature of thinking on the objectives of the fighting and on the mechanisms of ending the war."¹⁰ The claim is seemingly a given, as who would oppose the idea of "look before you leap." Throughout the report the commission pushes the idea of maintaining built-in decision making processes. For example: "Orderly decision making processes should provide the decision makers, and those who assess their conduct, with the means for structuring and considering discretion that will help limit the dangers of uncontrolled reliance on emotion, unfounded intuition, impulsive reaction, or personal and political considerations that may spoil what is underway."¹¹

The commission seemingly says all the "right" things. However, these declarations are detached from the practical experience

of decision making. The commission does not differentiate between different processes: the first process relates to developing the database and common language of decision makers in an ongoing process prior to the event. The second process refers to the need to take decisions in real time, as per the security requirement, whereby the decisions are based on previously acquired insights. In many cases, security activity demands immediate action that is sometimes based on insights acquired over time (at times erroneously dubbed "gut feelings") rather than on analytical analysis of alternatives and sub-alternatives of various kinds. In addition, in most cases, once the analysis, decision making processes, and situation appraisals have been completed the action is no longer relevant and therefore is not pursued. The commission does not at all address the fact that the thinking process of each of the decision makers on this topic is more important to the decision and its quality. In most cases, the damage caused by discussion sequences and situation appraisal "rituals" incorporated in what is known as decision making processes is greater than their benefit when they take place in the heat of the moment.

The situation appraisal is a crucial rational tool and should be used in any situation. However, one must not err and assume that in depth and relevant situation appraisals can be conducted in large forums in which discussion is largely designed for protocol purposes only. In general, these generate a performance of a built-in process whereby the decision of the leader has largely already been formulated, based on his own understanding of the situation. The drive to neutralize the contribution and individual intuition of the decision makers, while generating processes that require an abundance of

resources and time, is liable to damage rather than enhance the quality of the decisions, especially when taking into consideration that the balances of security activity in Israel exist due to the very organizational structure of Israel's security services. The adherence to decision making processes reflects the intent to control a complex and volatile reality when the latter does not cooperate.

The commission felt that the decision makers in Israel should determine the strategy for ending the war in advance. It is true that in a sterile and programmed environment one can maintain processes for achieving this, although in most cases, such efforts are destined to dismal failure. One must find the delicate balance between the attempt to assess the development of a war ahead of time and the need to take action in real time. Even if, as the commission rules, no exit strategy was devised before the Second Lebanon War was started, it seems that in the summer of 2006 Israel had no other strategic choice than to embark on a war.

There is no doubt that had the declaration of war been contingent on prior devising of what is called an exit strategy, the war would not have happened. Past experience indicates that "endless discussions of situation appraisals" culminate in the hollow slogan of "Israel reserves the right to respond anywhere and at anytime it chooses." The achievements of the war that did take place can be assessed and will in the future be shown to be highly significant.

Conclusion

Although operative for more than one year, the Winograd Commission mistakenly identified the key issues at hand. One might have expected the commission's final report to deal with the complexity of the security situ-

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ation, and correct its misunderstanding of the security threat that now confronts Israel from Iran, in its conventional as well as non-conventional posture, directly and through proxies. The report ought to have been a platform for an in depth and relevant discussion of Israel's current fundamental problems and its necessary response to these problems. This was not the case, and herein lies a major missed opportunity. Despite the initial storm prior to and immediately after the release of the report,¹² the Israeli public is left with an anemic report that is in part irrelevant. The commission damaged its own image in its selection of areas of focus, and it was swayed by the simplistic approach led by the Israeli media. In addition, the commission reinforced the emphasis of the decision makers on the creation of decision making processes and mechanisms that require considerable resources while ignoring the complex and individual nature of these processes.

Notes

- 1 Notwithstanding p. 522 of the report, article 30: "After deliberating we decided not to include in our report a chapter that addresses an evaluation of the results of the war. It is not at all clear if this was part of the commission's mandate; moreover we believe that it is still too early to determine the results of the war." This declaration did not prevent the commission from taking a stand elsewhere in the report.
- 2 See, for example, Emmanuel Manor, "Enough with Our Commissions of Inquiry Culture," www.amedia.co.il, February 11, 2008; Amatzia Khen, "Until the Next Commission of Inquiry," www.nfc.co.il, January 5, 2008, and: Marcelo Rosenberg, "No to A Commission of Inquiry – Yes to A Commission of Culture," www.nrg.co.il, September 7, 2006.
- 3 For example: the concept "the military victory" used by the commission. See Winograd report, p. 34, article 9: "A prolonged war initiated by Israel ended without Israel gaining victory in military terms." The statement does not clarify the committee's criteria of "victory in military terms." This is just one example of many.
- 4 In the interest of a common vocabulary, the term "classic threat" will be used in this article to describe this threat.
- 5 For an analysis of the subject, see Gabriel Siboni, "High Trajectory Weapons and Guerilla Warfare: Adjusting Fundamental Security Concepts," *Strategic Assessment* 10, no. 4 (2008): 12-18.
- 6 The use of the expression "the strongest army in the Middle East" indicates just how outdated the commission's perceptions are with regard to Israel's current security environment.
- 7 Winograd report, p. 34, article 9.
- 8 Winograd report, p. 396, article 19.
- 9 Winograd report, p. 543, article 15.
- 10 Winograd report, p. 426, article 32.
- 11 Winograd report, p. 54, article 16.
- 12 A storm that was predominantly caused by the (unfounded) accusations that the decision makers had ulterior motives for embarking on the last campaign of the war.