The First Cognitive War

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Israel's strategic environment has witnessed dramatic changes in the array of threats. The nuclear agreement between the world powers and Iran took the immediate Iranian nuclear threat off the table and postponed it for several years. The threat of conventional war declined significantly once peace treaties were signed with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994), and following the destruction of the Iraqi army in the two Gulf wars (1991 and 2003). It has since been reduced further now that the Syrian army no longer poses a risk, due to its involvement in the civil war and the tremendous losses it has sustained there. The sub-conventional threat, especially from Hezbollah, has not lessened; in fact, it may become more severe in the not-too-distant future because of the resources that Iran has invested to beef up the organization. Nonetheless, Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian civil war should at least delay its decision to embark on another major operation against Israel.

The current security threats to Israel are rooted in three sources:[1] a) states, e.g., Iran; b) sub-state organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas, which control defined territories and/or operate in areas where failing states lack a firm grasp, such as Syria and Lebanon, and even states that are not failing but have difficulties imposing control on certain parts, such as Egypt in the Sinai Peninsula; and c) global jihadist groups without defined territories, such as al-Qaeda organizations, and organizations with expansionist visions, such as the Islamic State operating in Iraq, Syria, the Sinai Peninsula, Libya, and many other states. In addition, efforts persist in establishing terrorist cells in the West Bank, and these join the phenomenon of individual terrorism, typical of the terrorism Israel has tackled since October 2015. In other

words, Israel faces a wide range of non-state elements possessing different motives and capabilities.

Most of the elements Israel confronts have a range of kinetic fire capabilities allowing them to attack targets on Israeli soil from afar, some of which are significant and extensive. The extreme example is Hezbollah, which threatens Israel with high trajectory fire, including long range fire capabilities endowed with great destructive power and ever-improving accuracy. In addition, the organization has other fighting capabilities that were enhanced over its years of fighting in the Syrian civil war. Speaking about the experience the organization has accrued in Syria, Hezbollah's special ops commander stated that "in certain ways, Syria is the dress rehearsal for war with Israel."[2] For its part, Hamas continues to grow in the Gaza Strip, although because of Egypt's revamped stance on smuggling, the organization has been severely curtailed and is experiencing greater difficulties. The other non-state organizations have less advanced kinetic capabilities, forcing them to concentrate on terrorist attacks in their immediate vicinity.

By definition, terrorism is designed to attain psychological ends by means of force. Kinetic action on the physical level always has a cognitive effect on a range of target groups (that of the attacker, that of the attacked, decision makers, various groups in neighboring countries, and so on), and in many cases the main goal of the action is precisely to attain that cognitive effect rather than to cause any particular physical damage. An important trend of recent years is the developing ability to affect mass consciousness by means of actions in the realm of cyberspace (at times in conjunction with actions in the realm of the physical world).[3] Indeed, the development of technology and the information revolution often allow for attaining significant outcomes without any kinetic action at all or in conjunction with some physical action, making it possible to influence different target groups immediately and with less effort needed to attain similar results by relying on efforts on the kinetic level alone.

The IDF Strategy states: "The enemy has changed its use-of-force characteristics posing new challenges to the IDF: a decrease in the threat from regular state militaries and an increase in that of sub-state organizations, either irregular or semi-regular…This means, a decrease in the threat of invading Israel's territory, while maintaining the threat of limited penetration

for terrorist activity or for…[cognitive] achievements"[4] It seems that the enemy's current social media and other psychological efforts are growing more sophisticated and include a large presence and much activity on the internet. Action on the web is not the sole province of non-state organizations; many others are active there, including hostile nations, terrorist organizations, and NGOs, all with different objectives and agendas.

Cognitive Warfare

Beginning in the fall of 2015, Israel faced a wave of terrorist attacks perpetrated by individuals operating alone in the domestic arena; concurrently, there is a worldwide campaign at work seeking to attain a range of objectives, including the undermining of Israel's legitimacy and its judicial system, promotion of an academic and economic boycott, and attacks on Israel at the diplomatic level within the international community. The terrorism of individuals is fueled by incitement to carry out spontaneous attacks, requiring no organizational infrastructure or organized logistics. Common to these attacks is the extensive use of social media to foment and promote action against Israel, both within Israel and abroad.

The information revolution underway over the last few decades has created a new reality, allowing for an unmediated flow of information. Along with its many positive aspects, the phenomenon includes some highly problematic components. For example, it allows the influence of large groups by means of cognitive manipulation, encouragement of potential terrorism, high levels of incitement, and the attainment of measurable outcomes affecting decision makers and public opinion – at far lower costs than in the past, when it was necessary to create effects and impact by non-virtual action in the physical realm. Thus, in an ongoing process, the effectiveness of classical force components in the cognitive battle is steadily on the wane. Militaries find it difficult to face phenomena associated with the cognitive battle, as the relevance of resource-intensive, kinetic means of warfare lessens.

Many societies face this phenomenon; in this sense, Israel is not alone.[5] The direct broadcast of mass media through social and other digital media allows for the transmission of messages targeting different audiences in a way that tries – and often succeeds – in influencing their behavior, opinions, and the perception of their own interests. Action on the internet significantly

affects the classical media, such as TV, radio, and print journalism, thus generating more intense reverberations of the original message. The global wave of terrorism is in part a result of the messages transmitted over the internet; in addition, elements behind terrorism use the internet to amplify the impact of the events, thereby gaining two objectives vis-à-vis two major groups: an effect on other potential attackers, and a concurrent and magnified effect on the levels of fear among civilian populations.

Beyond the challenge of terrorism affected by messages in social media and other internet platforms, Israel also has to deal with target groups investing extensive efforts into damaging its image and policies. Different audiences in the international community are subjected to internet-based efforts aimed at altering their consciousness in order to promote a boycott of Israel and oppose its policies and actions. These efforts have a direct impact on decision makers as well as on a range of relevant groups – be they NGOs, politicians, or others. One of the goals is to undercut the legitimacy of Israel's court system to affect relevant decisions in international institutions. Although these efforts operate independently and in a decentralized fashion, they fuel one another in a perpetual echo chamber.

Operation Protective Edge demonstrated the true dimensions of the phenomenon. The enemy's successes in the war cannot be measured only from kinetic outcomes; from the enemy's perspective, the operation had – and still has – significant achievements on the consciousness level, and Hamas's adoption of the "victim doctrine"[6] serves to maximize those successes. The legal campaign confronting Israel (before, during, and after the operation) by many elements in the international community reduces the IDF's freedom of action in future confrontations in general and in the use of certain weapons in particular. For the enemy, these are all important long term accomplishments, of no lesser importance than physical damage and physical casualties. Another cognitive effort is aimed at affecting the Israeli public and weakening its fortitude. Hamas, for example, makes focused efforts aimed solely at generating cognitive-related victories while also incorporating physical means, e.g., by firing rockets at Ben Gurion International Airport during Operation Protective Edge. Even though the rockets hit nothing, the idea was to generate a cognitive victory against the Israeli public and vis-à-vis foreign airlines.

This type of warfare makes extensive use of information infrastructures to reach a wide variety of important target groups. In a cognitive war against enemies and rivals spread all over the globe, the main effort is aimed at success using modern communications technologies. Israel's security greatly depends on the IDF and the other security agencies, but it seems that the potency of the cognitive warfare threat has yet to be fully appreciated. While Israel formulated a proactive approach that succeeded in tackling suicide terrorism, the wave of lone wolf terrorists besetting Israel since the fall of 2015 challenges that approach and requires the formulation of updated methodologies. Moreover, it is far from being the only and perhaps even the most dangerous of the threats, as the effort to constrain the IDF's freedom of action is a very severe and troubling threat.

How to Confront the Challenge

The IDF's main operation of force takes place in physical space, and its force buildup is also informed by the traditional dimensions of space. Thus, the IDF equips itself with maneuvering capabilities, armored vehicles, airplanes, means of precision fire, and so on. Every IDF action will have a cognitive effect on different groups, but the classical objective of the use of military force has always been to attain real, physical achievements, while the cognitive effect was mostly an inevitable consequence or byproduct, e.g., the destruction of the Egyptian and Jordanian air forces in the Six Day War. It is true that the IDF undertook some kinetic actions whose rationale was mainly psychological, such as the supersonic booms above Assad's palace in Damascus, sending him the message that he ought to rein in terrorism coming from the Golan Heights. Alongside these, the IDF operates some softer efforts, such as defensive and offensive cyber actions, designed to support the primary action, which remains kinetic. Although there is an inherent difficulty in assessing achievements in the realm of consciousness, the effectiveness of kinetic means against the threat inherent in a consciousness war is generally low. This is like a knight of the Middle Ages suiting up in his armor before going to war, who is brought to knees by fire ants crawling under his chainmail.

Kinetic force construction and capabilities remain a protective shield against a range of threats Israel still faces. But the IDF and the State of Israel must

balance their investments in kinetic force buildup with the development of a current method of action, supported by the range of cognitive capabilities on the web and other mediating elements, so that it is possible to fight this war effectively. The IDF cannot be the only element conducting this war. The war has broad national aspects, and therefore its prosecution requires radical reorganization at the national level. Some of the challenges Israel faces are relevant to other nations too: the fight against terrorism and lone wolf attackers, motivated primarily by incitement and cognitive efforts invested by jihadist organizations, or the effort to undermine the legitimacy of any use of force, which is liable to damage the freedom of action of other Western states.

In this war, the confrontation requires several components, first of all full recognition that we are, in fact, already in the midst of a mixed, multi-dimensional battle at the national level and that this requires the formulation of a comprehensive approach. Such an approach would have to combine all force operators in the state, as well as legal, economic, and diplomatic efforts. The IDF would obviously play a central role, and to do so requires development of an updated method of operation, which requires action in several ways, including: the development of intelligence guidance capabilities by means of relevant essential elements of information, and intelligence gathering and analysis capabilities to generate an ongoing, up-to-date, relevant situational assessment. The army must also develop methods to evaluate success at the cognitive front, in order to try to link action to results. Intelligence analysis and a concrete situational assessment would allow Israel to undertake a cognitive assessment, with this being an inherent part of the overall situation assessment, both at the national level and at the level of the IDF. Therefore, it is necessary to develop the ability to undertake an integrated situational assessment that would involve all the relevant elements at the national level (the IDF, the various security agencies, the Foreign Ministry, the Justice Ministry, the state's public diplomacy organizations, and others). It is likewise necessary to develop the ability to act on the consciousness of a range of different target groups. The approach must make provisions for reactive (defensive) actions to existing threats, the ability to foil threats in the making, and also proactive (offensive) actions to attain goals with reference to a range of relevant target groups, including the potential lone

wolf terrorists, the enemy's leadership, commanding officers and fighters, and elements in the international community (decision makers, public opinion leaders, and NGOs).

To realize the ability to make such a situational assessment at the national level and to monitor actions and their results, it behooves decision makers to set up a National Cognitive Situation Room where all the relevant parties would be partnered. Such a situation room would have to formulate an ongoing situational assessment based on intelligence, research insights, and a continual evaluation in order to synchronize all actions of the different organizations fighting the battle. The civilian sector is developing a discipline focused on action in the realm of consciousness, mostly toward marketing, advertising, and media campaigns. It is necessary to train and develop manpower at the national level that can operate effectively in the cognitive war in a similar way. The IDF will have to be involved, even though traditionally, the army's fighting ethos was geared at the kinetic sphere. True understanding of the potency of the threat requires an adjustment in the development and training of commanding officers and manpower to fill newly defined jobs. The importance of technology as a critical component in operating in the realm of consciousness must not be underestimated. Realizing the method of action requires significant investments in technology, but these investments are negligible compared to the sums going toward kinetic force construction. It is therefore necessary to find the right balance.

Israel is not alone in this war. Even though there are differences between the challenges it faces and those confronting other nations, a platform for cooperation with states confronting similar threats must be established. Extensive intelligence cooperation with many nations is already in place. In addition, it is necessary to expand cooperation in developing joint capabilities and constructing broad coalitions involved in common actions. Cooperation is likewise needed in dealing with the giants of technology. Israel has already started a legislative process to handle incitement in general, and on the internet in particular. Attempts have been made with hi-tech companies to remove problematic contents from the web.[7] This effort requires international cooperation to promote a dialogue with the large technology firms, as well as regulation and legislation, which may help reduce incitement on the basis of international law.[8] This would reduce the freedom of action of potential

terrorists and terrorist elements on the internet and their use of information technology.

Conclusion

A decade after the Second Lebanon War, the public discourse has once again turned its attention to Israel's preparedness for the Third Lebanon War and what that war would look like. Indeed, the threat from Hezbollah in the northern sector is serious, and the IDF must prepare for it in every way. But concurrent with this threat, Israel is at this very moment in the midst of a cognitive war that uses internet infrastructures to attack Israel and its citizens with terrorism. Most of the action is aimed at people's psyches, whether it is to persuade the international community to act against Israel or to incite individuals to commit lone acts of terrorism. At the same time, the country's enemies use the web for a host of ends, including promoting the BDS movement, harming Israel's legal system, and damaging Israel's legitimacy in using force, in part so as to significantly reduce the army's freedom of action and the legitimacy of the State of Israel.

Israel must appreciate the potency of this war, and take action in a way that would allow it operate effectively against enemies and hostile entities. Some of these challenges are shared by other states, and it is therefore imperative to identify areas of cooperation with them. The first cognitive war is not in the future. It is underway here and now. It would be best were the country's decision makers to internalize this insight as soon as possible so that appropriate action can be taken.

Notes

1   *The IDF Strategy*, August 2015, English translation, November 2015, https://www.idfblog.com/blog/2015/11/23/idf-strategy/.
2   Jamie Dettmer, "Hezbollah Develops New Skills in Syria, Posing Challenges for Israel," *Voice of America*, April 27, 2016.
3   Hans-Luidger Daniel, Yair Sharan, Christian Repp, and Niv Ahituv, *Terrorism and the Internet* (IOS Press BV, 2010).
4   *The IDF Strategy*.
5   *An Analysis of Terrorist Attacks Inspired by ISIL in the West*, The Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, August 9, 2016.

6   Gabi Siboni, "Operations Cast Lead, Pillar of Defense, and Protective Edge: A Comparative Review," in *The Lessons of Operation Protective Edge*, eds. Anat Kurz and Shlomo Brom (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2014), pp. 27-36, http://goo.gl/pU8i4k.

7   Tova Tzimuki, "Terrorism Online: Facebook Law en Route to the Government," *Ynet*, July 5, 2016, http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4824249,00.html.

8   Wibke Kristin Timmermann, "Incitement in International Criminal Law," *International Review of the Red Cross* 88, no. 864 (December 2006).