Israel's Cognitive War

by Brig. Gen. (Ret.) Shlomo Brom

Wars among states are becoming a rare phenomenon all over the world in general and in the Middle East in particular. In the case of Israel, the common engagement in violent conflicts is no longer with other states, but rather with non-state or hybrid actors[1] in an asymmetrical war. The objective of such military encounters is not to achieve a classical military victory that will cause the surrender of the enemy or encourage the enemy to adopt a peaceful settlement that will annul the causes of the conflict. On one hand, the non-state adversaries, who are weaker militarily, do not intend to achieve a classical military victory. Instead, they pursue their political goals through terror and guerilla warfare that target civilians with the purpose of using the people directly or indirectly to influence Israel's policy makers.

On the other hand, Israel's non-state adversaries, who are ideologically motivated and in many cases guided by radical Islamic ideologies, will not surrender, and when they are defeated in direct military encounters, they melt away and find refuge in the supportive population. This allows them to shift to more clandestine terror activities and organize as a potent military force. Therefore, the purpose of the Israeli military campaign—in addition to minimizing damage to its civilian population and armed forces and curbing their adversaries' capabilities to cause future damage—is to influence the non-state actors' perceptions and policies in a way that will make them limit their violent actions against Israel and eventually consider more peaceful ways to achieve their political goals. In the last two decades, Israel was actually quite successful in achieving these objectives. There were substantial periods of practical cease fire between Israel and its bitterest non-state enemies, and there are indications that some of them are considering less violent ways of engaging Israel.

[1] A hybrid actor is a non-state actor that has some attributes of a state, e.g., state-like military capabilities and control over territories.

MES Notes

This issue of *Insights* carries an abrigded version of guest lectures Brig. Gen. (Ret) Shlomo Brom presented on information operations and the information environment for the faculty, students, and staff at the Marine Corps University in January 2018.

Information about MES events and publications is available on the MES website at: www.usmcu.edu/mes, or you can contact Adam Seitz at (703) 432-5260 or adam.seitz@usmcu.edu.

Also in this Issue

MES at MCU Disclaimer

Both sides in these conflicts are interested in shaping the perceptions not only of their adversaries but also of those in their domestic and regional environments and beyond, acknowledging that these perceptions will affect the attitudes of the different societies, policy makers, and political groups in these environments. At the end of an encounter, the general perception of which side was victorious and which was defeated is sometimes more important than the actual military results of the campaign.

Modern military thought recognizes that the objective of military operations is not only to inflict direct material damage on the other party but also to shape the adversary's thinking in a way that will serve one's campaign goals. Complementing the kinetic effects with information operations is also not new; this strategy has been used since Biblical times. What has changed in recent decades is the scope and means of such operations, first because of the evolution of the classical traditional media from print to radio and then to television, and then because of the information revolution that has allowed individuals to serve also as media channels by using YouTube, chats, and other social media tools to communicate to a global audience.

Consequently, Israel is developing a theory, doctrine, and practice of cognitive war, a form of warfare that combines kinetic operations aimed at influencing the other side's thinking with information dominance and information operations aimed at achieving realistic limited objectives in an asymmetric, limited conflict. The most important soft power elements in cognitive warfare are economic steps aimed at decreasing the pressure for use of violence and diminishing the supportive constituency of the adversary.

Israel's engagement with the Gaza Strip can serve as a good example of Israel's engagement in cognitive war. The Gaza Strip is ruled and tightly controlled by the Hamas Movement, which is a classical hybrid actor. It is a violent political movement using terror and guerilla warfare in the fight against Israel, but it also serves as the government of the Gaza Strip. It operates against the Israeli population from Gaza population centers, enjoying their coverage for disguise and protection.

The Israeli campaign against Hamas in the Gaza Strip has four target audiences: Hamas, the Palestinian public in the Gaza Strip, the Israeli public, and the regional and international community. Israel uses threats of retaliation to deter Hamas from attacking. The message to Hamas is that, if it attacks

Israel, it will fail in causing any real damage and will pay a very high price. On the other hand, if Hamas stops its attacks, Israel would accept Hamas' de-facto rule of the Gaza Strip and help provide necessary services to the population by allowing flow of goods, electricity supply, and water as well as medical assistance, enabling normal life for Gazan citizens. That message is communicated using information operations, to include public statements made by senior political and security personalities and messages delivered by third parties. These statements are reinforced by kinetic means such as missile and rocket defense, destruction of tunnels that Hamas has built to penetrate Israel, and retaliation for every attack coming from Gaza.

Influencing public opinion in the Gaza Strip is considered an indirect way of shaping policy makers' decisions. In this case, Israel is influencing public opinion by directly accessing the Palestinian inhabitants of Gaza through telephone calls (based on an accurate list of all phone numbers in the Strip), internet chats, and social networks to deliver a clear and consistent message: Hamas is making your life miserable when it allows attacks on Israel, and Israel is willing to make your life better if the attacks stop.

These kinds of cognitive operations are also needed to prevent the adversary's cognitive war against Israel from being successful, and, therefore, it is also necessary to address the Israeli public. The message to the Israelis is that the state and the armed forces are doing all they can and are going to extremes to ensure Israelis' security and prevent interference in their lives; however, it is impossible to guarantee 100% security. That message is delivered through kinetic operations (e.g., successful interceptions of rockets by rocket defense systems, destruction of offensive tunnels around Israel's border, and punishing retaliatory attacks) and through statements made by political and military leaders, government spokesmen, and the media.

The last target audience is the regional and international community. Here the message is that Hamas is not serving the interests of the Palestinians. Instead, it is using innocent Palestinians to protect terrorists who attack innocent Israelis, threatening life and property of both Palestinians and Israelis. Israel cannot allow terrorist attacks against its citizens and is reacting accordingly, doing the utmost to distinguish between the terrorists and the innocent civilians and to minimize collateral damage. Once again this message is delivered through actual actions in the material realm and through verbal messages that are released via diplomatic channels, public statements, the media, and social networks.

There are two major keys for the successful delivery of Israel's message. First of all, the messages to the different audiences should be consistent. In the current open and transparent world, delivering a message to one audience while delivering a contradictory message to another is a grave mistake that will backfire. Second, there is a need for synchronization between actions in the material world and operations in the information world, namely synchronization between what Israel says and does. When these two principles are followed, there is a good chance of success in shaping perceptions and affecting decisions of foes and friends.

MES Hosts Visiting Israeli Scholar

Middle East Studies (MES) hosted retired Israel Defense Forces Brigadier General Shlomo Brom, currently a senior research associate at the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv, from 16 through 19 January 2018. Brig. Gen. Brom's visit was sponsored by the Israel Institute. During his four days at the Marine Corps University (MCU), Brig. Gen. Brom addressed five different educational forums at MCU. He co-taught the Marine Corps War College's course, "Israel Security and the Balance of Power in the Middle East Class," with Dr. Amin Tarzi and guest lectured for Dr. Tarzi's Command and Staff (CSC) elective, "The State of Israel in Context, 1948-2018," and the CSC elective, "Modern Political Warfare: Cyber and Information Operations," speaking on Information Operations in the Lebanon War. He also led a roundtable discussion with MCU's Commanding General and invited guests on "The 2006 Lebanon War–Information Operations/Information Environment in a War with a Hybrid Adversary" and presented the lecture, "Israel—Retaining an Island of Stability in Stormy Water" as part of the MES Academic Year 2018 Lecture Series, "Navigating Geopolitical Competition and Internal Wars in the Middle East and North Africa."

As the United States and its allies continue to advance their strategic interests and develop partnerships to effectively confront the multifaceted challenges posed by revisionist powers (e.g., Russia), rogue regimes (e.g., Iran), and non-state actors, it is imperative for policymakers, military planners, and practitioners to understand the challenges our allies face when confronting these adversaries. Given the Marine Corps' mission set and ongoing deployments to the region, it makes sense for Marine Corps University to lead this research agenda and to provide opportunities that enhance professional military education (PME), both in and beyond the classroom. Hosting a visiting professor from Israel with strong practical information operations experience in Israel's complex security environment provided such an opportunity to inject further innovation in, and further enhance, the overall PME programs at MCU.

Brigadier General (ret.) Shlomo Brom, a senior research associate at the Institute for National Security Studies, joined the Jaffee Center in 1998 after a long career in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF). His most senior post in the IDF was director of the Strategic Planning Division in the Planning Branch of the General Staff. Brig. Gen. (ret.) Brom participated in peace negotiations with the Palestinians, Jordan, and Syria, and in Middle Eastern regional security talks during the 1990s. He continued to be involved in Track 2 dialogues on these subjects after his retirement from the IDF. In 2000 he was named deputy to the National Security Advisor, returning to JCSS at the end of his post. In 2005-2006, Brig. Gen. (ret.) Brom was a member of the Meridor committee established by the Minister of Defense to reexamine the security strategy and doctrine of the State of Israel. His primary areas of research are Israeli-Palestinian relations and national security doctrine. Brig. Gen. (ret.) Brom authored *Israel and South Lebanon: In the Absence of a Peace Treaty with Syria*, and edited *The Middle East Military Balance 1999-2000* and *The Middle East Military Balance 2001-2002*. He is the editor of In the Aftermath of Operation Pillar of Defense: The Gaza Strip, November 2012, co-editor (with Meir Elran) of *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Perspectives* and (with Anat Kurz) the *Strategic Survey for Israel* series.

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