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Operational Solutions to Strategic Problems — Israel's Policy Towards Palestine

While Israel's assault on the Gaza Strip might yield a temporary sense of security at home, the root causes of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will remain intact. According to Andreas Krieg, that's because Tel Aviv continues to seek operational-level military solutions for its strategic-level political problems.

By Andreas Krieg for ISN

Once again, world headlines are being dominated by a spiral of aggression and retaliation in the Middle East. Self-made rockets are being indiscriminately fired by Hamas from Gaza into Israel, to which Israel responds with defensive and sometimes punitive air strikes. As Palestinian casualties mount and pictures of destruction continue to circulate, Israel becomes increasingly criticized for its actions. While some engage in anti-Semitic and anti-Zionist rhetoric, others construct a more informed critique about the ethics and legality of Israel's actions under the Laws of Armed Conflict. Israel usually responds by legitimizing its actions with first, its duty to protect its citizens and second, with the IDF's unsurpassed operational excellence in destroying targets in a congested urban environment proportionately and discriminately. While both justifications are generally plausible, they are missing the point. Both are founded on Israel's narrow security-centric operational approach to a much wider strategic problem that its leaders have failed to address in recent years.

The Strategic-Military Continuum

To understand why, it's worthwhile revisiting the concept of strategy. Ever since Antiquity the meaning of strategy has been dynamic and dependent on the context in which it was used. More often than not, strategy's meaning has been defined in a traditional military context referring to the achievement of military objectives on the battlefield through the most effective employment of means available under conditions of uncertainty. Yet, ever since Clausewitz's famous remarks about war being simply the continuation of politics by other means, the meaning of strategy has exceeded the narrow realm of war. Linking strategy to politics, military theorists have come to see war as not just a means in itself, but as a means to achieve political objectives. The arising subordination of the general to the political leadership brought with it a conceptual distinction between political strategy and military strategy. For Liddell Hart executing military strategy was "to coordinate and direct all the resources of the nation towards the attainment of the political object of the war - the goal defined by national policy". Accordingly, the political object of war is defined at the policy level by an overarching political strategy, which is preeminent over military strategy.

Today, political strategy is most commonly concerned with the deployment of all available national resources, including the military, to achieve strategic objectives as a matter of national security. When policymakers on the strategic level decide that the achievement of a particular objective requires the use of the military, the armed forces are called upon to develop a strategy, which through operational art achieves military operational objectives that ultimately serve the defined strategic objectives. What emerges is a distinction between the strategic and the operational level of war, whereby the latter provides guidance to the former. The strategic level is dominated by decisions revolving around political strategy. The operational level centres on trying to achieve military strategic goals through operational art, namely the ability to translate political strategic intent into tactical military manoeuvres.

The Lost Meaning of Strategy in Israel

Israel undoubtedly finds itself in a highly complex strategic context. The legacy of decades of constant armed confrontation has prompted successive Israeli governments to prioritize the maintenance of physical security. Consecutive campaigns by Arab states trying to annihilate the Jewish state have also ingrained a sense of 'security paranoia' into the collective national memory of the country. Consequently, the public legitimacy of Israel's political leaders has become primarily tied to their ability to provide and protect national security. Yet, with many Israeli leaders assuming political office after holding military positions, political decisions made with regards to national security have often been interpreted through a military lens. Under conditions of uncertainty and 'security paranoia', decisions about national security have rarely been taken with the same degree of long-term strategic vision as they have been in other Western countries. Decisions about national security were often taken reactively to a changing security situation on the ground rather than proactively or preventively.

The only major exception might have been Israel's commitment to the Madrid and Oslo negotiations in the early 1990s. After the First Intifada, political leaders in Israel saw an opportunity to engage in a political process of rapprochement with Palestinians that aimed at bringing about a sustainable security environment for both Palestinians and Israelis. Over the past two decades, however, this strategic vision has not been realized. Even worse, most of Israel's policies have conflicted with this strategic vision. Continued settlement building, the increased curtailment of freedom of movement and antiquated counterinsurgency measures have left many Palestinians alienated.

Today, political and military leaderships in Israel work within a vacuum of strategic ambiguity towards the Palestinian question. Torn between embracing the two-state solution as a strategic vision and nationalist demands to maintain control over the 'holy land' of Judea and Samaria (West Bank), political leaders have tended to engage in strategic inaction. The proclaimed strategic objective of maintaining Israel's security as a democratic Jewish state side by side with a Palestinian state has not been furthered by political strategic means. In absence of a strategic political roadmap prescribing the parameters for the establishment of a Palestinian state, senior Israeli politicians have tried to find alternative non-strategic means to maintain the country's national security.

Instead of targeting the ongoing occupation of the West Bank and blockade of Gaza as the strategic root cause for Palestinian public discontent and ultimately Israel's insecurity, Israel has relied on short-term operational approaches to providing its national security. When suicide attackers poured into Israel during the Second Intifada, Israel responded by building the security barrier. When Hamas started firing rockets from Gaza, Israel responded with the development of the Iron Dome. When three teenagers were kidnapped, Israel responded with an extensive operation in the West Bank that resembled colonial counterinsurgency operations employed by the British in Egypt, Kenya or Aden. And when rocket fire from Gaza becomes more intense, Israel responds with short-term military escalation. While all these means serve Israel's objective of restoring national security, they neither

constitute an end in themselves nor serve a well-defined political strategy. The strategic root cause of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict remains while Israel's military leadership is entrusted with the almost impossible task of employing operational art to cure the symptoms of political strategic failure.

Coercion and Deterrence...Not Hearts and Minds

However, without the willingness of political leaders to engage constructively with the Palestinians, the IDF's room for manoeuvre at the operational level is limited. The operational context in the West Bank and Gaza is an insurgency environment in which militant groups enlarge their social base by committing acts of aggression against Israel as the illegitimate occupation force. Hence, any operational approach to this insurgency by the IDF has to be population-centric, detaching militant groups from the social base. The armed wings of groups such as Hamas cannot be defeated militarily as long as these organizations can rely on social support. Without the Israeli political leadership's willingness to strategically commit to removing the political and socio-economic grievances of the Palestinian people, groups such as Hamas will be able to maintain a centre of gravity in the civilian population. This in turn means that military leaders in Israel have few options to conduct a population-centric approach to countering what is essentially an ongoing insurgency. Operational approaches to winning over the hearts and minds of Palestinians cannot be realized, forcing the IDF to rely on coercion and deterrence rather accommodation.

Without political engagement with Palestinians on the strategic level, the IDF sees itself confronted with the task of enforcing security in the occupied territories through checkpoints, raids and low-intensity military escalation. While these measures can achieve temporary security on the operational level, their long-term strategic impact promises to be disastrous for Israel's national security. These measures fuel public resentment among Palestinians and further alienate those moderate forces who have proven to be reliant partners for Israel in the past. As Israel's security policy is often dictated by military solutions on the operational level, the IDF has developed excellence in operational art in applying narrow Rules of Engagement in a highly congested and complex operational environment. However, the IDF's ability to achieve operational objectives effectively and within the confines of international law is often undermined by the strategic illegitimacy and ineffectiveness of Israel's political decisions.

The ongoing military operation in Gaza is a case in point: instead of relying on a preventive political strategy aimed at undermining Hamas' centre of gravity, namely its social base, the IDF is called in to militarily cure the symptoms of a failed political strategy. Regardless of how discriminate and proportionate the IDF manages to eliminate military targets, the complex operational environment of Gaza inevitably will lead to civilian casualties, particularly when Hamas does not shy away from using civilians as human shields. Without a political strategy to point the way, operational successes are only short-term in nature and come at the expense of further estranging a Palestinian population Israel ought to protect. As the strategic problem of Palestinian self-determination remains unaddressed, Israel's military solutions on the operational level undermine its national security in the long-term while burdening society with the rising costs of the absence of peace.

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