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**Deterrence against Non-State Actors:**

**Thoughts following Operation Protective Edge**

**Yair Naveh**

Recent years have witnessed the accelerated weakening of state actors in the Middle East. In turn, regular state armies are less able to grapple with an ensuing trend, namely, the strengthening of non-state actors and their heightened regional influence. Semi-state actors such as Hamas and Hizbollah pose an immediate concrete threat to Israel; Islamic State (ISIS) can also be categorized as a semi-state entity. In contrast, there are organizations such as Jabhat al-Nusra and Palestinian Islamic Jihad that have no connection to any geographic locale and feel no responsibility for the civilians under their control. Organizations of this type are jihadist outfits operating seemingly unhindered, and they rely on the support of the population in which they operate less than semi-state entities. At present, there are not only semi-state entities along Israel's borders, but also Salafist jihadist terrorist organizations along the entire border in the Sinai Peninsula and the Golan Heights. States, which bear responsibility for what happens in their territory and for the population under their rule, are relatively vulnerable, particularly when it comes to national infrastructures. In contrast, the deterrence of Salafist jihadist groups is a much more complex and difficult challenge.

### **The Concept of Deterrence**

Deterrence against non-state – and especially jihadist – actors, lacks any academic or doctrine-based foundation. The IDF, like other Western armies, is forced to adapt the concept of deterrence, formulated for nuclear arms situations and refashioned for use for conventional weapons in the context of states and national and military coalitions, to the context of non-state actors. Israel's founding fathers developed the state's security concept, in which deterrence played a major role. David Ben-Gurion stressed that Israel was incapable of achieving a strategic decision against all the Arab nations, and that it was therefore necessary that every military confrontation end with a clear outcome on the battlefield in order to postpone as much as possible the next round of fighting, ensure years of peace and calm, and allow the country to gain strength and prosperity.

Israel's basic deterrence depends on two components: proven IDF capabilities and the leadership's resolve to use force whenever necessary to create deterrence or undermine the enemy's intentions to act against it. The IDF's capabilities are a combination of military force, technology, and high quality manpower. The resolve of the leadership to use force when required and sometimes to maintain deterrence is necessary to complete and demonstrate the extent of the military capabilities. Over the years, Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis the hostile Arab sphere was constructed with layers of force buildup and force application. The process generated a certain understanding among the region's states that it was impossible to defeat Israel on the battlefield.

Israel's deterrence consists of two levels: one, the strategic, with emphasis on deterrence against an initiated war against Israel because of the high cost in physical, economic, and social damage the enemy will have to pay for an attack; and two, the operational, intended to limit the impact of military and terrorist acts if the enemy decides to attack. In effect, the goal is convey that an attack that crosses the red line is tantamount to an attempt to change the rules of the game and will prompt Israel to respond with destructive force. There is an interplay of these two levels. For example, two decades ago the combined deterrence prompted Syria to stop building its offensive force designed to maneuver and seize control of the Golan Heights and transition instead to surface-to-surface rockets and missiles threatening the Israeli civilian rear in an attempt to deter Israel from initiating military actions against Syria. Hizbollah, with Iranian and Syrian help, did the same in its force buildup. As a result, mutual deterrence or a balance of deterrence developed. The situation is relatively stable because both sides, in tallying their cost-benefit analysis, choose to avoid the use of force. The key to deterrence is the enemy's understanding that the cost of losing in a military confrontation – as a result of severe damage to its capabilities, strategic assets, and economic and civilian infrastructures – is higher than any potential for gain in the confrontation. The start of a conflict by an enemy means that one's strategic deterrence is gone, whether the conflict is initiated because of some long term goals the enemy feels justify the expected damage or as the result of erosion of Israel's resolve to respond and risk escalation. In this context, the time factor is critical: strategic deterrence must be effective for several years. Still, effective operational deterrence is supposed to limit the enemy's use of force, as the enemy should have to worry about paying the full price for its actions should Israel choose to respond with the full use of its power.

### **The Challenges of Deterring Non-state Actors**

To deter semi-state and non-state actors, especially jihadist organizations, it is necessary to understand their core assets and weaknesses, and from there estimate the potential cost of their losses from a confrontation and see if the concept of deterrence is applicable. Terrorist organizations at all levels rely on several key assets that enable their existence

and survivability: (a) leadership and ranks of senior commanders; (b) the sum total of military and terror capabilities; (c) economic capabilities, system of financial assistance, supply channels, and weapons provisions; and (d) the web of alliances with other organizations and states providing legitimacy and support in the form of arms and financing. For semi-state organizations, public support and legitimacy are also important, along with the orderly functioning of critical civilian infrastructures.

If strategic deterrence is lost and a conflict with a non-state actor erupts, it is necessary to undermine its drive to continue fighting by damaging its assets, and especially threatening the organization's very existence. Usually, as long as the conflict centers on damaging only the organization's military assets, the enemy will not stop fighting unless it becomes clear that it stands to lose all of its military and strategic capabilities. Therefore, to restore deterrence for the long term it is necessary to take multidimensional action entailing severe damage to the organization's capabilities and economic assets and resources, as well as a direct threat to the organization's existence through targeted assassinations of commanders and leaders. But this alone is not enough: it is also necessary to attack the organization's civilian centers of support. During Operation Protective Edge, it was necessary to damage Hamas's strategic capabilities (the rockets and the offensive tunnels), its operatives, the infrastructures serving the organization, and its senior commanders (by targeted assassinations) before Hamas would accept a ceasefire and be deterred from continuing the fighting. But this cumulative achievement was not enough to motivate Hamas to agree to a ceasefire, because Israel chose not to threaten the organization's future or act to undermine its rule of the Gaza Strip. Only after causing damage to the assets of Gaza's social elite, which provides legitimacy to Hamas' rule, by bombing the city's residential high rises, did Hamas's profit-loss calculus change.

Hamas' plight, already serious before Operation Protective Edge, grew more acute as a consequence of the confrontation. If Hamas would like to change this situation by escalating the conflict with Israel, reasoning that Israel does not want to topple Hamas' rule (as was the case during Operation Protective Edge), Israel's strategic deterrence against it will remain limited. In other words, in the absence of any real threat to the organization's actual existence, Hamas will again initiate conflicts with Israel and do so as long as it estimates that a confrontation will help it further entrench its rule there and that its ability to absorb blows allows it to pay the cost of Israel's counteraction.

### **Handling this Dilemma**

This analysis provides several insights that may help formulate a policy of deterrence against Israel's potential enemies. Regarding Hamas, it seems that Israel must strive for military decision against the organization in the next round by causing very severe

damage to its capabilities and operatives, including the military commanders, being prepared to topple the Hamas government, and concurrently preparing alternate governing options. Only such a policy can sideline Hamas and create strategic deterrence against it. As for Hizbollah, the experience of the Second Lebanon War and observations of the rounds of fighting in Gaza show that the organization has the ability to estimate the scope of damage it may expect and that its leadership understands the impact of that damage. Hizbollah has chosen to respond to attacks on its senior operatives as well as the Iranian general in the Golan Heights in order to restore deterrence vis-à-vis Israel, which – in its opinion – has eroded in the seven years since the Second Lebanon War, though in a proportional manner. Should Hizbollah nonetheless decide to initiate a large scale military conflict with Israel, this would indicate that it is prepared to sustain massive damage to its assets in order to promote success in different arenas or to appease Iran. In such a situation, only a threat to Hizbollah's existence, its governing infrastructures, and its symbols of power and rule will reduce its drive to continue to fight.

In conclusion, deterrence against non-state entities, especially Salafist terrorist organizations, differs from deterrence of states or even semi-state actors. Deterrence of non-state actors that lack obligations toward the local civilians in the sphere of their activities is possible only if the deterring nation shows its willingness to use its power to damage its enemies' core strengths, especially the leaders, military commanders, strategic assets, and sources of social support.

