Journal of Strategic Studies

Mowing the Grass: Israel's Strategy for Protracted Intractable Conflict

Efraim Inbar[a] & Eitan Shamir[a]

[a] Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan
University, Israel
Published online: 10 Oct 2013.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

'Mowing the Grass': Israel's Strategy for Protracted Intractable Conflict

EFRAIM INBAR AND EITAN SHAMIR

Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Bar-Ilan University, Israel

ABSTRACT 'Mowing the Grass', Israel's strategy in the twenty-first century against hostile non-state groups, reflects the assumption that Israel finds itself in a protracted intractable conflict. The use of force in such a conflict is not intended to attain impossible political goals, but a strategy of attrition designed primarily to debilitate the enemy capabilities. Only after showing much restraint in its military responses does Israel act forcefully to destroy the capabilities of its foes, hoping that occasional large-scale operations also have a temporary deterrent effect in order to create periods of quiet along its borders. The Israeli approach is substantively different from the current Western strategic thinking on dealing with non-state military challenges.

KEY WORDS: Asymmetrical War, Counterinsurgency, Deterrence, Israel Defense Forces, Military Strategy, Terrorism, Use of Force

A baobab is something you will never, never be able to get rid of if you attend to it too late. It spreads over the entire planet…It is a question of discipline…You must see to it that you pull up regularly all the baobabs, at the very first moment when they can be distinguished from the rosebushes which they resemble so closely in their earliest youth. It is very tedious work.

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince*

Israel has a rich experience in the use of military force.[1] Notably, the last conventional large-scale encounter – involving armored divisions and air duels – took place in 1982 in Lebanon against the Syrian Army. Since then, Israel has used force primarily against non-state

---

[1]For a typology of Israel's wars see Stuart A. Cohen and Efraim Inbar, 'A Taxonomy of Israel's Use of Military Force', *Comparative Strategy* 10/10 (April 1991).

armed organizations in small wars.[2] This reflects the changes in the Arab-Israeli conflict, as the inter-state dimension of the conflict lost much of its intensity, turning the arena mainly into non-state entities.[3] Israel's strategic approach toward terrorists and irregular forces, a challenge to the Zionist enterprise from the very beginning, has evolved in accordance with transient political and operational challenges.[4]

Israel's use of force against non-state actors in the twenty-first century has attracted academic attention and has been subject to much criticism. This literature maintains that Israel's tactical successes have no corresponding political or strategic 'strategic dividends'.[5] Ignoring opportunities by not engaging the political side of the conflict

---

[2]For the notion of small wars, see Col. C.E. Calwell, *Small Wars: Their Principles & Practice*, 3rd edition (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press 1996).

[3]For the state and non-state dimensions of the conflict, see Shmuel Sandler, 'The Protracted Arab-Israeli Conflict, A Temporal Spatial Analysis', *The Jerusalem Journal of International Relations* 10/4 (1988), 54–78. Increased combat against non-state entities is characteristic of other states since the end of the Cold War. See data in 'Global Conflict Trends', Center for Systemic Peace, Severn, MD, posted online at <http://www.systemicpeace.org/conflict.htm>. For a review of the recent literature on this phenomenon, see Azar Gat, 'Is War Declining – and Why?' *Journal of Peace Research* 50/2 (2012), 149–57.

[4]There is vast literature on Israel's wars against guerrillas and terrorists since 1948. See inter alia Benny Morris, *Israel's Border Wars, 1949–1956: Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation, and the Countdown to the Suez War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993); Zeev Drory, *Israel's Reprisal Policy, 1953–1956* (London: Frank Cass 2004); Avi Kober, 'From Blitzkrieg to Attrition: Israel's Attrition Strategy and Staying Power', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 16/2 (2005), 216–40; Jonathan Shimshoni, *Israel and Conventional Deterrence: Border Warfare from 1953 to 1970* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1988); Efraim Inbar, 'Israel's Small War: The Military Response to the Intifada', *Armed Forces & Society* 18/1 (1991), 29–50; Zeev Schiff and Ehud Yaari, *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising – Israel's Third Front* (Tel Aviv: Schocken 1990); Sergio Catignani, *Israeli Counter-Insurgency and the Intifadas: Dilemmas of a Conventional Army* (New York: Routledge 2008).

[5]Sergio Catignani, 'The Strategic Impasse in Low-Intensity Conflicts: The Gap between Israeli Counter-Insurgency Strategy and Tactics during the Al-Aqsa Intifada', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28/1 (2005), 70; Dag Henriksen, 'Deterrence by Default? Israel's Military Strategy in the 2006 War against Hizballah', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35/1 (Feb. 2012), 95–120; Raphaelle L. Camilleri, 'Examining the Paradox of Israel's Unrealized Power: The Conceptual and Structural Sources of Israel's "Strategic Deficit"', Paper presented at the International Study Association 53rd Meeting, San Diego, CA, 2 April 2012.

is repeatedly mentioned as major flaw.[6] In a similar vein, Israel has been criticized for not placing a greater emphasis on a 'hearts and minds' strategy or on diplomatic measures.[7] Another prevalent criticism is that Israel's use of force is not successful in producing deterrence, or that it is 'doomed to fail' because non-state entities are not deterrable.[8] In addition, it is often asserted that Israel fails to attain its goals. For example, an analysis of Operation 'Cast-Lead' in Gaza (2008–09) concludes that it achieved nothing but a 'shaky ceasefire'.[9] Accounts of the 2006 war postulate a failure in fostering domestic anger on Hizballah to weaken its position in Lebanon.[10] In the absence of a perceived logic or utility in Israel's 2006 Lebanon War, some analysts even asserted that Israel was primarily motivated by revenge, seeking 'emotional satisfaction at the suffering of another'.[11]

This article argues that the much of this literature misunderstands Israel's rationale for using military force, and has failed to realize the changes that took place in Israel's threat assessment and strategic thinking. Israel's approach in the twenty-first century is often termed 'Mowing the Grass',[12] a new term in Israel's strategic parlance that

---

[6]Catignani, 'The Strategic Impasse in Low-Intensity Conflicts', 72. See also Zeev Maoz, 'Evaluating Israel's Strategy of Low-Intensity Warfare, 1949–2006', *Security Studies* 16/3 (July 2007); Daniel Byman, 'Curious Victory: Explaining Israel's Suppression of the Second Intifada', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24/5 (2012), 837–9.

[7]Niccolò Petrelli, 'Deterring Insurgents: Culture, Adaptation and the Evolution of Israeli Counterinsurgency, 1987–2005', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36/5 (Oct. 2013), 744; see also Maoz, 'Evaluating Israel's Strategy of Low-Intensity Warfare, 1949–2006'.

[8]Maoz, 'Evaluating Israel's Strategy of Low-Intensity Warfare, 1949–2006', 346; Emanuel Adler, 'Dammed if you do, Dammed if you don't: Performative Power and the Strategy of Conventional and Nuclear Diffusing', *Security Studies* 19/2 (April–June 2010), 210.

[9]Sergio Catignani, 'Variation on a Theme: Israel's Operation Cast Lead and the Gaza Strip Missile Conundrum', *RUSI Journal* 154/4 (2009), 66–73.

[10] Evan Braden Montgomery and Stacie L. Pettyjohn, 'Democratization, Instability, and War: Israel's 2006 Conflicts with Hamas and Hezbollah', *Security Studies* 19/3 (Aug. 2010), 554; Patrick Porter, *Military Orientalism* (New York: Columbia UP 2009), 186.

[11]Oded Lowenheim and Gadi Heimann, 'Revenge in International Politics', *Security Studies* 17/4 (Dec. 2008), 710.

[12]IDF officers often use the phrase 'mowing the grass', usually in a tactical sense. A recent example is a briefing for academics by senior officers in the Central Command, 20 Feb. 2013. See also <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4340652,00.html> and the IDF website: 'Did We Beat Palestinian Terror?', <http://www.idf.il/1613-15468-he/Dover.aspx>. The use of this term, nonexistent in any IDF doctrinal document, is typical of the organizational culture in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), which allows the use of informal operational and doctrinal concepts. On the IDF's informal culture, see Dima Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel* (Stanford UP 2010), 111; Eitan Shamir, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the US, British, and Israeli Armies* (Stanford UP 2011), 83.

reflects the assumption that Israel finds itself in protracted intractable conflict with extremely hostile non-state entities, which is qualitatively different from an inter-state conflict. The use of force is therefore not intended to attain impossible political goals, but rather to debilitate the capabilities of the enemy to harm Israel. Realizing the difficulties in affecting the behavior of radical ideological non-state actors, Israel's use of force can achieve only temporary deterrence. Therefore, Israel has adopted a patient military strategy of attrition designed primarily to destroy the enemy capabilities. Only after absorbing a series of attacks and showing much restraint in its offensive actions does Israel act forcefully to destroy the capabilities of its foes, hoping that occasional large-scale operations will also have a temporary deterrent effect in order to create periods of quiet along its borders. Significantly, the 'Mowing the Grass' approach is substantively different from the current Western strategic thinking on dealing with non-state military challenges.

This article begins with a presentation of Israel's dominant strategic perspective during the twenty-first century – a protracted intractable conflict. Subsequently, it analyzes the military dimension of Israel combating terror and guerrilla warfare against ever more sophisticated organizations. Finally, the 2002, 2006, 2008-09 and 2012 rounds of large-scale violence serve as case studies, demonstrating Israel's new 'Mowing the Grass' approach in the twenty-first century.

The Strategic Dimension of 'Mowing the Grass'

In the past, Israel's national security doctrine was shaped by its stark geostrategic position and demographics – a small nation surrounded by many implacable enemies. Aware of this predicament, David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister, devised Israel's security doctrine based on two basic assumptions:

(1) Arab hostility towards the State of Israel is likely to continue for decades;
(2) Israel suffers from chronic inferiority in both territory and demographics.

The basic asymmetry in resources, combined with Arab hostility, led him to conclude that Israel is not able to dictate a peace treaty to its neighbors – not even by the use of overwhelming force. Ben-Gurion recognized that Israel's military superiority could not transcend deeply-rooted enmity, accepting the fact that Israel's use of force

had inherent limitations.[13] Yet, military force could be useful to create enough deterrence to erode the states' motivation of its foes and to extend the time between the rounds of violence. Therefore, only a long and violent struggle, punctuated by decisive battlefield victories, could eventually lead Arab states to accept the notion of Israel's permanence.[14]

Indeed, almost 100 years of conflict and repeated military defeats, as well as changes in the threat perception of the Arab leaders, brought about a transformation in their views toward Israel. Egypt signed a peace treaty with Israel in 1979,[15] as did Jordan in 1994, while most of the Arab world subscribes to the 2002 Arab League Peace Initiative. Today, the so-called 'Arab Spring' that has seriously challenged the Arab state and negatively affected its military capabilities, further weakened the statist dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

Israel's strategic landscape during the 1990s and 2000s had witnessed a gradual shift from threats originating in the conventional military might of states to challenges from armed non-state organizations.[16] (Iran, who is neither Arab nor a neighbor of Israel, poses a potential nuclear challenge of a different magnitude, and is an exception that requires a separate treatment.) The upheavals in the Arab world since 2010 are conducive to the proliferation of such non-state organizations as Arab states lose control over their territories and national arsenals. Moreover, the ascendance of political Islam in the Arab world buttresses the ideological opposition to Israel of such non-state groups.

In contrast to the Arab states, organizations such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad or Hizballah cling to a radical Islamist ideology denying Israel's right to exist. They adhere to a doctrine of resistance – *Muqawama* – that assures its adherents that the long, historic, currently difficult struggle against Israel will eventually end in victory, despite temporary setbacks. The strategic goal is to demonstrate continuous violent resistance and keep the historic struggle against the Zionist entity alive at a time when the Arab states seem to have given up on the goal of

---

[13]David Ben-Gurion, *Uniqueness and Singularity: Discussions on Israel's Security* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Maarachot 1971), 207, 369.

[14]For the evolution of Israel's strategic thinking and culture, see Avner Yaniv, *Politics and Strategy in Israel* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Hapoalim 1994); Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 110–19.

[15]The Egyptian decision was due to several factors including the desire to adopt a a pro-American foreign policy orientation and the fact that the 1973 war allowed it to regain its dignity.

[16]Efraim Inbar, 'Israel's Strategic Environment in the 1990s', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 25/1 (March 2002), 37–8; Hemda Ben-Yehuda and Shmuel Sandler, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict Transformed: Fifty Years of Interstate and Ethnic Crises* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press 2002), 167–79.

destroying the Jewish state. Moreover, they believe that time is on their side as Israel will eventually disappear as a result of the protracted struggle.[17]

Under such circumstances, Israel's perspective on the statist dimension of the Arab-Israeli conflict was projected on the new reality. The non-state organizations are implacable enemies, who want to destroy the Jewish state and there is very little Israel can do on the political front to mitigate this risk. While there is a distant hope that these extremist organizations will evolve along the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) trajectory that shifted from armed struggle to the political arena allowing for political engagement, Israel's superior military power is incapable of coercing a change in their basic attitudes in the short term. The breakout of a Palestinian terror campaign in September 2000 put an end to Israeli illusions about having a Palestinian peace partner, while the 'Arab Spring' that underscored the ascendance of Islamist movements with a radical anti-Israeli (and anti-Western) ideology painted the regional picture with great hostility.[18]

Israel realizes that it cannot affect the motivation of the non-state actors – such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Hizballah – to fight the Jewish State in the short run, and that producing deterrence against them is problematic. Yet, its use of force could reduce the military capabilities of the non-state actors in order to lower the damage caused to Israel. It just 'mows the grass' of the enemy capabilities, with no ambition to solve the conflict. It also attempts to achieve some deterrence to extend the time between the rounds of violence. Periods of tranquility are important for Israel because its mere existence is a success over its radical non-state enemies and sends them a constant reminder that their destructive goals are not within reach. The longer the absence of violence along its borders, the lower the price Israel pays for being engaged in such a protracted conflict. Ironically, 'Mowing the Grass' mirrors the patient Arab *Muqawamah* strategy.

---

[17]On Islamist resistance, see Ehud Yaari, 'The *Muqawama* Doctrine', The Washington Institute, 13 Nov. 2006, <www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-muqawama-doctrine>; Michael Milstein, 'The Challenge of al-Muqawama (Resistance) to Israel', *Strategic Assessment* 12/4 (Feb. 2010). Their behavior is reminiscent of the role assumed by Palestinian terrorist groups after the defeat of the Arab states in 1967. See Yehoshafat Harkabi, *Arab Strategies and Israel's Response* (New York: The Free Press 1977), 63–77; Barry Rubin, *Revolution until Victory. The Politics and History of the PLO* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP Press 1994), 22–3.

[18]For Israeli large consensus that conflict resolution is not around the corner, see The Peace Index, <http://en.idi.org.il/tools-and-data/guttman-center-for-surveys/the-peace-index/>; and Yehuda Ben-Meir and Olena Bagno-Moldavsky, *The Voice of the People: Israeli Public Opinion on National Security, 2012*, Memorandum 126 (Tel Aviv: INSS, March 2013).

Israel's approach to its present foes differs significantly from the approaches taught in Western military academies, which offer two basic schools of thought on coping with non-state armed groups, often referred to as insurgencies.[19] The first approach – *enemy centric* – suggests that a counterinsurgency (COIN) campaign is fundamentally not different from conventional war, where the main effort is on neutralizing the armed units by locating and engaging them. ('A war is war is a war', as one American officer wrote.[20]) If fought correctly it is possible to vanquish the enemy force. The second approach – *population centric* – focuses on gaining the support of the civilian population ('winning hearts and minds') in order to deprive the insurgents of their main source of support. Yet, the evidence for the success of the 'hearts and minds' approach in the many arenas of the world is questionable.[21] The debates over the best approach for attaining success by the US-led coalition in Iraq and NATO in Afghanistan were carried mostly within the context of these two approaches. For example, the joint US Army and Marines *FM 3-24 Counterinsurgency* has advocated a *population centric* approach,[22] while the way US forces operated in Vietnam exemplifies the alternative *enemy centric* approach.[23]

In the twenty-first century, Israel is not aiming for victory or for ending the conflict; it realizes that radical ideologies cannot be defeated on the battlefield. In contrast to other Western powers, Israel has also refrained from winning the hearts and minds of the Arab insurgents. The ethno-national, cultural and religious gaps between Jews and Arab are simply too large to allow for a strategy aiming for ending the conflict by persuading the opponents that peaceful coexistence is preferable. Despite the quest for regional acceptance, Israel understands that it will be impossible to bridge the hostility and suspicions of Arabs towards Jews. This attitude was reinforced by the failure of the Oslo Peace Process with the Palestinians that became apparent with the outbreak of the hostilities in 2000.

---

[19]See Colin Kahl, 'COIN of the Realm', *Foreign Affairs* 86/6 (Nov./Dec. 2007), 472–4; John Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Univ. of Chicago Press 2002), 27–8; Mark Moyer, *A Question of Command, COIN from Civil War to Iraq* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP 2009), 2–4.

[20]Harry G. Summers, 'A War is War is a War', in Loren B. Thompson (ed.), *Low Intensity Conflict: The Pattern of Warfare in the Modern World* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books 1989).

[21]See Robert Egnell, 'Winning "Hearts and Minds"? A Critical Analysis of Counter-Insurgency Operations in Afghanistan', *Civil Wars* 12/3 (2010), 282–303.

[22]Department of the Army, FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 *Counterinsurgency* (Washington DC 2006), 51.

[23]Nagl, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*, 27–8.

Israel shied away from adopting a population centric approach when it ruled over Arabs in the West Bank (Judea and Samaria), Gaza and southern Lebanon. It basically viewed its military presence as temporary until a political settlement was available.[24] Moreover, Israel, with very few exceptions, did not entertain the illusion that it could generate sympathy from the Arab occupied population. This did not prevent it from developing a stick and carrot system for minimizing violent opposition and for fostering pragmatic cooperation with the local leadership. For example, following the 1967 War Moshe Dayan promoted the 'Open Bridges' policy with Jordan and a degree of economic integration policy with Israel.[25]

Following its experiences in Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza, fully aware of the limits of a population centric approach, Israel even pursued a policy of disengagement from territories inhabited by hostile populations. The Oslo peace process with the Palestinians was fueled by the desire to part from territories populated by Arabs. Israel withdrew unilaterally from southern Lebanon in May 2000; built a security barrier in the West Bank in 2002, signaling disengagement from the main Palestinian population centers and marking a potential future border; and evacuated its civil and military presence from Gaza in August 2005. Yet, in the areas that are regarded by Israel as critical for its security – such as the West Bank – Israel maintains some military presence, but avoids the burden associated with a civilian administration. This approach maintains a separation between Israel proper and the hostile population beyond its border.

The Military Dimension of 'Mowing the Grass'

The objective in Israel's past conventional wars was usually battlefield decision, meaning the destruction of the opponent's capacity effectively tocontinue fighting. It clearly preferred *blitzkriegs*. This preference conformed to what the German military historian Hans Delbrück (1848–1929) termed a *strategy of annihilation*, in contrast to a *strategy*

---

[24]Israel has refrained from annexing the West Bank and the political power of the 'Greater Israel' ideology has greatly diminished. Every poll shows that over two thirds of the Israelis are ready for partition. Moreover, the establishment of the Palestinian Authority in 1994 is a de facto partition, albeit a messy one.

[25]Moshe Dayan, Israel's defense minister at that time, allowed free *movement of goods* and people between the West Bank and Jordan, despite the fact that formally a state of war existed between Israel and Jordan. See Eitan Shamir, 'From Retaliation to Open Bridges: Moshe Dayan's Evolving Approach toward the Population in Counter Insurgency', *Civil Wars* 14/1 (2012), 63–79.

of attrition.[26] Yet, despite its predilection for short and decisive wars, Israel also waged wars of attrition.[27] This latter strategy is designed to wear down the enemy through constant, relentless pressure. It stresses the cumulative effect to be obtained during the course of a prolonged sequence of intermittent military actions, none of which of itself need be regarded as decisive in the attainment of the political objectives. Therefore, it was not out of character to adapt itself to the new enemies in the twenty-first century and to opt for a patient strategy of attrition.[28] Mowing the Grass can be characterized as an anti-*Muqawama* strategy, which contains traditional elements of Israel's military modus operandi, such as retaliatory raids and preemptive strikes.

While Israel hoped that in the long run organizations such as Hamas or Hizballah could transform into less belligerent entities or wither away, it did not entertain any hope that in the short run they could become partners for a political dialogue, due to Israeli military actions. Therefore, the military activity against such organizations is taking place within a strategy of attrition and has only limited goals.[29]

The non-state militias' desire is to inflict pain on Israel and test its resolve. Harming Israel and denying it a decisive victory is all they want for the time being on the tactical level.[30] They hide among civilians and use a combination of methods, including terror, suicide bombings and guerrilla tactics. Moreover, they launch rockets at Israel's population centers.[31] The challenge from the non-state organizations is greatly amplified by the support they receive from states, such as Iran. This primarily means better training and access to advanced weaponry.

Israel does not respond automatically to acts of aggression against it. The timing and scope of its reaction is subject to the nature of the provocation, the damage and casualties experienced, and political

---

[26]Hans Delbrück, *A History of the Art of War*, Vol. 4 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press 1985), 293–315.

[27]Avi Kober, *Israel's Wars of Attrition: Attrition Challenges to Democratic States* (New York: Routledge 2009).

[28]For the need of a long term strategy of attrition, see Col. Shay Shabtay, 'The War after the Next War: The Era of Protracted Conflicts', *Maarachot*, No. 440 (Dec. 2011), 4–9.

[29]Maj. Gen. Dan Harel, Lecture presented at 'The Limitation of the Use of Military Force: Strategic, Moral and Legal Considerations,' Joint Conference of the IDC and National Security College, Herzliya, 23 Jan. 2013.

[30]On the development of military doctrine of these organizations, see Itai Brun, 'While You're Busy Making Other Plans – The "Other" RMA', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33/4 (2010), 535–65.

[31]Uzi Rubin, *From Nuisance to Strategic Threat: The Missile Attacks from the Gaza Strip on Southern Israel* (Hebrew), Studies in Middle East Security No. 87 (Ramat-Gan: Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Feb. 2011).

considerations, such as the international atmosphere and domestic circumstances. Fear of casualties has been also a factor.[32]

This leads to a preference for short responses primarily from the air where Israel has overwhelming superiority and escalation dominance.[33] Israel's air force, in cooperation with the intelligence agencies, has over the years perfected its methods for hunting rocket launchers and targeted killing.[34] Israel was successful in decreasing the limited collateral damage of such pinpoint attacks, lowering international criticism. Targeted killing is an important element of the military dimension, as replacing skilled personnel in terrorist organizations is not easy and takes time. Key personnel – such as bomb makers, trainers, document forgers, recruiters and leaders – are both scarce in number and require many months if not years to perfect their skills.[35] Generally, the more sophisticated and technological the non-state organization becomes, the more time it needs to restore lost capabilities.

Another element in the 'Mowing the Grass' approach is preventive actions, such as the interdiction of supply of advanced weaponry to Hizballah and Hamas, usually not formally acknowledged by Israel.[36] Covert operations against overseas intelligence and financial networks are part of this routine as well. Apprehending terrorist operatives by preventive arrests for disrupting attacks or collecting intelligence is also part of the repertoire, primarily in the West Bank.

Only after a series of aggressions not prevented by Israel's sporadic retaliatory use of limited force does the IDF commence larger-scale operations that might include a ground invasion. Israel's large-scale operations (analyzed below) were conducted with limited political objectives. Despite the high price the IDF tries to inflict upon the enemy, it does not expect to see either a new moderate leadership emerge or a qualitative reduction in the basic motivation to fight

---

[32]Efraim Inbar, 'How Israel Bungled the Second Lebanon War,' *Middle East Quarterly* 19/3 (Summer 2007), 61; Udi Lebel, 'Militarism versus Security? The Double-Bind of Israel's Culture of Bereavement and Hierarchy of Sensitivity to Loss', *Mediterranean Politics* 16/3 (Oct. 2011), 365–84.

[33]For the term 'escalation dominance', see Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (Baltimore: Penguin Books 1968), 290.

[34]Steven R. David, *Fatal Choices: Israel's Policy of Targeted Killing*, Mideast Security and Policy Studies, No. 51 (Ramat-Gan: Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Sept. 2002).

[35]Byman, 'Curious Victory: Explaining Israel's Suppression of the Second Intifada', 838.

[36]For example Israel attacked from the air in Sudan weapon convoys to Hamas in Feb. 2009 and Oct. 2012; in Syria in Jan. 2013 and May 2013 weapons on their way to Hizballah.

Israel. Therefore, as only temporary deterrence is achieved, another round of violence is anticipated in the future.

The main objective of the large-scale military operation is to cripple severely the military capabilities of the non-state organization.[37] The elimination of weapons accumulated over time, such as rockets, and of qualified personnel gives Israel some respite. As noted lengthy truces are important strategically. Moreover, Israel uses this time to learn from its past mistakes and to hone its own military skills. For example, it needed time to develop and deploy the Iron Dome system against short-range rockets, denying its enemies some of their offensive capabilities. This strengthened deterrence by denial.[38] So did the security barrier in the West Bank.

Yet, large-scale operations do not prevent subsequent rearmament and build-up, which necessitates the continuation of 'Mowing the Grass'. There is also reluctance to put boots on the ground. A ground invasion might increase Israeli casualties; it entails friction with a hostile civilian population and causes civilian casualties; and it extends the duration of the operation, which might attract international criticism. Therefore, Israel reserves the use of ground invasion only in response to grave provocations or in cases where only ground troops can achieve the desired result. At the same time, the threat of a ground invasion is held for increasing the credibility of deterrence.

Indeed, 'Mowing the Grass' is also intended to have a deterrent effect.[39] Deterrence aims to persuade 'a potential enemy that he should in his own interest avoid certain courses of activity'.[40] While 'Mowing the Grass' operations are primarily designed to inflict damage on valuable assets and capabilities, a corollary effect is lowering the motivation of the enemy to harm Israel.[41] Past evidence shows that Arab actions decrease in response to Israeli actions.[42] In Israel's thinking, the concept

---

[37]Interviews with senior IDF officers.

[38]See Glenn H. Snyder, 'Deterrence and Defense', in Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz (eds), *The Use of Force* (New York: Lanham 1983), 133–4.

[39]Col. Eran Ortal 'Is the IDF Capable of a Conceptual Breakthrough?' *Maarachot*, No. 447 (Feb. 2013), 22–8.

[40]Thomas C. Schelling, *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 1960) 9.

[41]Hillel Frisch, 'Motivation or Capabilities? Israeli Counterterrorism against Palestinian Suicide Bombings and Violence', *Journal of Strategic* Studies 29/5 (Oct. 2006), 843–69.

[42]See inter alia, Alex Mintz and Bruce Russett, 'The Dual Economy and Arab-Israeli Use of Force: A Transnational System?' in Steve Chan and Alex Mintz (eds), *Defence, Welfare, and Growth* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul 1992), 179–96; Christopher Sprecher and Karl DeRouen, Jr, 'Israeli Military Actions and Internalization-Externalization Processes', *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46/2 (April 2002), 244–59.

of deterrence is not understood as *absolute deterrence*, but rather as *cumulative deterrence*.[43] Cumulative deterrence aims to postpone each round of violence as much as possible, but as long as fundamental political realities persist, deterrence might fail at one point or another.[44] Destruction and denial of capabilities serves to strengthendeterrence.[45] Using force is much like fighting crime; it is not a sign of deterrence failure but necessary for the maintenance of a minimum level of deterrence.[46] The history of wars is, according to Colin Gray, 'a history of deterrence failure, but the use of force, both by the state and by its adversaries, may not be a sign of failure; it may be a precondition for success'.[47]

However, the validity of deterrence in asymmetrical wars is questionable as a result of the complexity of structural conditions it presents. This calculus changes, however, when non-state actors take over territory and act as de facto governments. Hizballah and Hamas, after taking control of Lebanon in 2005 and Gaza in 2007 respectively, are facing new dilemmas, and seem more likely to be deterred by Israel's use of force. The Israeli dilemma in the face of growing capabilities suggests that there might be a need for stronger retaliatory measures, as some Israeli strategists suggest.[48] So far, Israel refrained from adopting what is called the 'Dahya concept,' which advocates the threat and/or use of disproportionate force in order to enhance deterrence.[49]

In sum, 'Mowing the Grass' has limited political objectives, while attempting to target the enemies' military capabilities and freedom of action. It forces the opponents to make the investment in time and treasure for defense and to rebuild lost capabilities. It also acts with deterrence in mind, demonstrating the price involved in continuous conflict.

---

[43]Israel Tal, *National Security: The Few Against the Many* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Dvir 1996), 61–88.

[44]Doron Almog, 'Cumulative Deterrence and the War on Terrorism,' *Parameters* 34/4 (Winter 2004–05), 8.

[45]Robert Pape, *Bombing to Win: Airpower and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1996).

[46]Thomas Rid, 'Deterrence beyond the State: The Israeli Experience', *Contemporary Security Policy* 33/1 (2012), 126–9.

[47]Colin Gray, 'Deterrence and the Nature of Strategy', in Max G. Manwarning (ed.), *Deterrence in the 21st Century* (London: Routledge 2001), 19.

[48]Giora Eiland, 'The Third Lebanon War: Target Lebanon', *Strategic Assessment* 11/2 (Nov. 2008), 9–17; Ron Tira, 'Breaking the Amoeba's Bones', *Strategic Assessment* 9/3 (Nov. 2006).

[49]For the debate, see Jean-Loup Saman, 'The Dahya Concept and Israeli Military Posture vis-à-vis Hezbollah Since 2006', *Comparative Strategy* 32 (2013), 146–59.

The Twenty-First Century Experience of the IDF

This section analyzes the large scale military operations of Israel in the twenty-first century: 'Defensive Shield' campaign in the West Bank in 2002, the Second Lebanon War in 2006, Operation 'Cast Lead' in Gaza in 2008–09, and 'Pillar of Defense' in Gaza in 2012. All were conducted in the 'Mowing the Grass' mode. The differences reflect Israel's learning curve and changing political circumstances. Moreover, the IDF internalized the failures of Operations 'Accountability' (July 1993) and 'Grapes of Wrath' (April 1996) in Southern Lebanon that did not focus on eliminating the military capabilities of Hizballah, and that hoped that the heavy use of fire would create deterrence. The following sections examine the context, the objectives, the operational performance and the results of these operations. Despite the differences among them, they all share a similar logic, the disruption and dislocation of capabilities leading to a weakening of the rival organization and to a period of recuperation. The West Bank is somewhat of an exception because Israel was able to regain control over the entire area and to prevent re-armament until the Palestinian leadership made the decision to embark on a non-violent struggle.

Operation 'Defensive Shield'

Operation 'Defensive Shield' (29 March–21 April 2002) was launched following a long Palestinian campaign of terror against civilians within Israel, particularly suicide attacks that started at the end of September 2000. By the start of 2002, 244 Israelis were killed and hundreds more injured in nearly 7,000 terrorist attacks.[50] Israel's military response was initially very restrained because it regarded the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a peace partner, and because of the Pavlovian instinct of the international community to call for restraint. Moreover, it took time to move from a cooperative mode to a confrontational one with the Palestinians. Rebuilding its intelligence assets also took time.

The trigger for Operation 'Defensive Shield' was the terrorist attack on the Park Hotel on 27 March 2002 that killed 30 Israelis and wounded an additional 140. The Palestinian terror campaign elicited much sympathy for Israel, granting international and domestic legitimacy for a strong military riposte. Moreover, military action was seen as a necessity following a peace process that offered the Palestinians

---

[50]Israeli Security Agency (Shin Bet), *Palestinian Terrorism in 2007 – Statistics and Trends*. 'Terrorist attacks' include the following: throwing of Molotov cocktails, stabbing, running over by car, torching, hurling grenades, abduction, anti-tank fire, stone throwing, mortar fire, rocket fire, suicide attack, blowing up of cars laden with explosives, infiltration, laying of explosive charge, and assault.

tremendous concessions to no avail. The IDF invaded almost all the major cities in the West Bank that had been under the control of the PA since the Oslo Accords. It used many regular formations and a limited number of reservists.

The political objective of 'Defensive Shield' was 'to create a different security reality for Israel'.[51] The IDF aimed at gaining security control of the West Bank without the necessity to administer the population.[52] Lieutenant General (res.) Moshe (Bogi) Ya'alon, then the IDF Deputy Chief of Staff said: 'The military rationale for the operation was to regain the security responsibility in the West Bank…in order to stop the terror attacks.'[53] Israel had no plans to change the PA or its leadership in any way. More and more Israelis recognized that they were locked in a protracted intractable conflict with the Palestinians whose goals are incompatible with Israel's.[54]

The military goal, in the framework of 'Mowing the Grass,' was to dismantle the terror infrastructure through systematic destruction of weapons caches, bomb-making laboratories, headquarters, training camps and the capturing and killing of militants. During the operation, the IDF killed almost 500 terrorists and arrested 7,000, of whom 1,500 remained in detention. The intelligence gathered was useful in disrupting additional Palestinian terrorism. Operationally, the IDF engaged in big encirclements led by infantry and supported by tanks, engineers, special forces and attack helicopters.

'Defensive Shield' marked the beginning of the end of the Palestinian terrorist campaign. Suicide bombings continued for a while, but the number of successful attacks fell dramatically by 2004.[55] The Israeli offensive combined with defensive measures,

---

[51]Gal Hirsh, 'From "Solid Lid" to "Other Way": Campaign Development in Central Command 2000–2003', in Haggai Golan and Shaul Shay (eds), *Low Intensity Conflict* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Maarachot 2004), 246. Hirsh, the Operations Officer (G3) of Central Command at that time, named the operation 'Defensive Shield', evoking the need to create a shield between the terrorists and population. See Gal Hirsh, *War Story – Love Story* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot 2009),174.

[52]Ibid. See also Sergio Catignani, 'The Security Imperative in Counterterror Operations: The Israeli Fight against Suicidal Terror', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 17/1–2 (2005), 256.

[53]Moshe Ya'alon, *The Longer Shorter Way* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot 2008), 137.

[54]Palestinian terrorism during the second Intifada was a turning point in Israel's public opinion on the Palestinian issue.

[55]Frisch, 'Motivation or Capabilities?', 849, 852; Byman, 'Curious Victory', 830.

such as the security barrier, proved very effective in eliminating the suicide bombing threat.[56]

Because of the proximity of the West Bank to Israel's heartland, the Jerusalem–Tel Aviv–Haifa triangle, Israel could not disengage totally from this territory, which turned into a base of terror under the PA rule. Therefore, following the operation the IDF retained military control over large parts of this area. This presence allowed the IDF to continue to fight effectively against the emerging terrorist threats to this very day. It continues 'Mowing the Grass' primarily by preventive arrests. Unfortunately, the motivation of parts of the Palestinian society to attack Israel is still very strong.

Operation 'Defensive Shield' demonstrated that terrorists and insurgents can be overpowered by conventional armies, contrary to what many pundits were preaching.[57] Significantly, the level of Palestinian terror was only gradually diminished by additional Israeli military measures. This was an important lesson for the IDF. Similarly important was the realization that 'Mowing the Grass' was needed to keep the terrorist challenge at a bearable level.

The Second Lebanon War

Hizballah provocations since May 2000 (the date of Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon) included several crossings into Israel's territory to abduct Israeli soldiers. Moreover, Hizballah established a burgeoning missile arsenal capable of covering most of Israel. The 2006 Lebanon War (12 July–14 August 2006) was a reaction to a rocket barrage against Israeli military and civilian targets used as a diversion for a successful abduction of two Israeli soldiers and the killing of three others. The Hizballah attack came just 19 days after Palestinian militants staged a similar cross-border raid from Gaza,

---

[56]Frisch, 'Motivation or Capabilities?,' 860–864.

[57]For example, Maj. Gen. Amram Mitzna (res.), GOC Central Command at the outbreak of the first Intifada, said on a few occasions that it was impossible to arrive at a military decision in a confrontation with 'terrorist organizations'; see quotes in Zaki Shalom and Yoaz Hendel, 'The Unique Features of the Second Intifada', *Military and Strategic Affairs* 3/1 (May 2011), 22–3 and note 5. Former head of the Israel Security Agency Ami Ayalon (1996–2000), argued that 'War against terrorism is…not a fleeting battle that ends in either victory or defeat.' Quoted in Catignani, 'The Security Imperative in Counterterror Operations', 257. Col. Yehuda Vagman quotes a similar opinion expressed by Likud Party Member of the Knesset Yuval Steinitz in 'The Trap of Low Intensity Conflict', Ariel Center for Policy Research, White Paper No. 149 (2003), 11. For the debate within the military over the issue; see response to Vagman in Col. Shmuel (Semo) Nir, 'There is No Trap', *Maarachot*, No. 387 (Jan. 2003), 68–70.

during which the soldier Gilad Shalit was kidnapped, signaling to many in Israel a serious deterrence failure.

The enunciated strategic goals of the Israeli military operations were not very modest. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert mentioned driving Hizballah out of southern Lebanon, the deployment of the Lebanese army in that area, restoring deterrence and the return of the kidnapped soldiers. The military concurred,[58] and it suggested exerting strong pressure on the Lebanese government by extensively damaging Lebanese infrastructure from the air to force the government to deal with Hizballah. Elements in the IDF also argued that the heavy damage might decrease the domestic legitimacy of Hizballah and its freedom of action to provoke Israel.[59]

For a variety of reasons, including US support for the Fouad Siniora government in Lebanon, Israel decided to limit its attacks to Hizballah targets, effectively adopting a modest goal. Moreover, Israel realized that Hizballah was a well-rooted organization in Lebanese society whose character and political clout cannot be easily affected.

The IDF was ordered to 'destroy Hizballah's long-range rocket launchers and to damage the organization's launch capability, attack its soldiers, commands, and infrastructure, strike its symbols and assets, and destroy Hizballah infrastructures next to the Israeli border in order to establish a special security zone'.[60] Colonel Gur Laish, head of the Campaign Planning Department in the Israel Air Force (IAF), summarized the Israeli strategy in 2006 as 'a heavy assault against Hizballah – its military assets, the center of the government and its deployment in Beirut, and its communal infrastructure in south Lebanon'.[61] Brigadier General Gal Hirsh, who commanded the division that carried out the brunt of the fighting in 2006, understood the objectives of the war in a similar way, 'the aim of the maneuver into Lebanon is not to eliminate [rocket] launches but to directly hit Hizballah, to make it pay a high price and to shake its foundations'.[62] In contrast to the criticism voiced, Israel's strategy was neither

---

[58]Itai Brun, 'The Second Lebanon War, 2006', in John Andreas Olsen (ed.), *A History of Air Warfare* (Washington DC: Potomac Books 2010), 302-3. See also Dani Haloutz, *Straightforward* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot 2010), 364–5. The IDF often defines the concrete objectives of the war as a result of ambiguous civilian directives. See Kobi Michael, 'The Israel Defense Forces as an Epistemic Authority: An Intellectual Challenge in the Reality of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 30/3 (May 2007), 421-46.

[59]Brun, 'The Second Lebanon War', 305.

[60]Ibid.

[61]Gur Laish, 'The Second Lebanon War – A Strategic Reappraisal', *Infinity Journal* 4 (Fall 2011), 23.

[62]Hirsh, *War Story – Love Story*, 240.

attempting to target civilian infrastructure, nor planning to pressure the population to rise against Hizballah.

The 2006 war began with a massive and successful air attack on the long-range missiles of Hizballah. Some in the defense establishment thought that no additional action was necessary. Subsequent limited ground incursions near the borer indeed appeared ineffective. Moreover, the failure to halt the firing of short- and mid-range rockets into Israel, the hesitations to commit troops for a large-scale ground offensive and the indecisive way the war ended all contributed to the widespread perception that Israel was militarily ill-prepared and botched the war.[63]

According to a UN report, 1,191 Lebanese civilians were killed and 4,405 were wounded in the war. About 900,000 Lebanese fled their homes and nearly 30,000 residential units were destroyed or extensively damaged.[64] Israel evaluated 700 Hizballah fighters to be killed and over 1,000 wounded – a high price for a militia consisting of 3,000–4,000 professionally-trained fighters, many of them highly-skilled and trained by Iran. In addition, the symbol of Hizballah's rule in Lebanon, its headquarters in Beirut, was severely damaged. Israel destroyed most Hizballah positions on its border, including several fortified underground facilities, and a large part of its rocket arsenal. The Shi'ite villages where Hizballah built strongholds similarly endured severe damage. Hizballah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah went into hiding for two years following the war, fearing an Israeli attempt on his life. He admitted that he would not have ordered the abduction of Israeli soldiers had he known its price.[65]

Israel paid a moderate price for the 2006 Lebanon War. The economic damage was bearable and the stock market remained bullish. Its casualties were 144 killed (121 of them soldiers) killed and about 2,000 wounded (660 of them soldiers). Yet its vulnerability to missile attacks became clear. To some extent, the war also amplified the international misperception of Israeli excessive use of force. UN Resolution 1701 seemed at the time the right exit strategy, but did not drastically

---

[63]See Avi Kober, 'The Israel Defense Forces in the Second Lebanon War: Why the Poor Performance?', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31/1 (Feb. 2008), 4–6; Inbar, 'How Israel Bungled the Second Lebanon War'; Benjamin S. Lambeth, 'Israel's War in Gaza: A Paradigm of Effective Military Learning and Adaptation', *International Security* 37/2 (Fall 2012), 85–91.

[64]United Nations Environment Program Lebanon Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment, <http://postconflict.unep.ch/publications.php?prog=lebanon>.

[65]'Hizballah chief revisits raid,' *Washington Post*, 28 Aug. 2006.

change the state of affairs in southern Lebanon that continued to be under Hizballah control. Despite its success in 'Mowing the Grass' in Lebanon, the IDF obviously needed to rethink its military doctrine and organization.[66]

Since the war ended, Hizballah has been rebuilding its military strength, acquiring many more missiles capable of hitting every point in Israel. However, the 2006 Israeli response appears to have strengthened Israeli deterrence against Hizballah. In addition, Israeli covert operations against the terror group, as well as the increasing Hizballah involvement in Syria, have kept Israel's border with Lebanon mostly quiet until today.

Operation 'Cast Lead'

The decision to launch Operation 'Cast Lead' (27 December 2008–21 January 2009) was made following a long period of escalation in rockets and mortars fired towards Israel's civilian communities from Gaza.[67] Overall, since Israel's unilateral disengagement from Gaza in August 2005, over 6,000 rockets and mortars were fired by Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist organizations against towns and communities in southern Israel. During 2008 alone – prior to the operation – there were more than 400 rocket attacks. The daily lives of over one million Israelis within range of Hamas rockets were affected.

On the whole, Operation 'Cast Lead' followed a similar pattern to that of the war in Lebanon in 2006; only this time the Israeli operation was better planned and executed.[68] The IDF prepared three operational plans with incremental ambitions for the government consideration. The political leadership opted for the minimalist option that called only for a large raid aimed at damaging the military wing of Hamas enough to deter it from further firing into Israel.[69] Brigadier General Zvi Fogel, then a senior officer at the Southern Command headquarters, later said that the objective was to 'to cripple Hamas military capabilities as much as possible'.[70] Notably, neither toppling the Hamas rule in

---

[66]Lambeth, 'Israel's War in Gaza: A Paradigm of Effective Military Learning and Adaptation', 85–91.

[67]Rubin, 'From Nuisance to Strategic Threat', 20.

[68]For an evaluation, see Lambeth, 'Israel's War in Gaza: A Paradigm of Effective Military Learning and Adaptation', 96–118; and David E. Johnson, *Hard Fighting: Israel in Lebanon and Gaza* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND 2011), 111–12.

[69]Maj. Gen. Yoav Galant, at the time the Chief of Southern Command, Lecture at the IDF Staff & Command College, 15 April 2009.

[70]See Shai Fogelman, *Haaretz*, 24 Oct. 2010.

Gaza nor the re-conquest of the entire Gaza Strip was an objective of the mission.

In contrast to the reactive 2006 response, in 2008 Israel caught Hamas off guard. The operation commenced with a short but a powerful airstrike. Capitalizing on accurate intelligence, 88 strike aircraft hit 100 preplanned targets in 220 seconds.[71] One of the first targets was a Hamas officers' graduation ceremony. While the officers marched on the parade ground, five missiles struck. According to some IDF officers it was an Israeli version of the US doctrine of 'Shock and Awe'.[72] A conservative estimate suggests that 225 Hamas militants were killed and 750 injured in that incident alone. In addition, the IAF attacked Hamas government offices, weapons depots and factories and other critical infrastructure in Gaza. About 100 warplanes and helicopters dropped over 100 bombs within the first hour of the operation.[73] The shock was immense and there were indications that Hamas was practically paralyzed. This situation led some IDF officers to believe that this was an opportunity to topple Hamas.[74] Yet the government resisted the temptation to expand the operation to this end.

Unlike the 2006 Lebanon War, Operation 'Cast Lead' planned for a ground campaign and reserve mobilization. The ground phase started a week after the air strikes, when the IAF exhausted the list of valuable targets. A key difference between the operations in Lebanon and Gaza was the growing realizations for the need of a ground maneuver. Conquering territory is not a goal in itself, but it allows a reduction in enemy fire and the destruction of its operational infrastructure.[75] The operation ended with an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire.

Casualty figures are contested. A 2009 UN report placed the overall number of Palestinians killed between 1,387 and 1,417. Israel provided a figure of 1,166, noting that 709 had been identified as Hamas terror operatives. The Palestinian Centre for Human Rights counted 1,417 dead, consisting of 926 civilians, 255 police officers, and 236 fighters.[76] On the Israeli side, there were ten soldiers killed, four of which were caused by friendly fire, and 207 wounded. In addition, three Israeli civilians were killed and seven were severely injured.

An additional cost was the damage to Israel's reputation. Like Hizballah, Hamas fighters hid among civilians, using them as shields.

---

[71]Quoted in Johnson, 'Hard Fighting', 113.
[72]Shai Fogelman, 'Made in Israel', *Haaretz*, 24 Dec. 2011.
[73]Catignani, 'Variation on a Theme', 68.
[74]Interview with IAF Lt. Col. R, who took part in the planning of the operation, Tel Aviv, 25 Dec. 2010.
[75]Gabriel Siboni, 'War and Victory' (Hebrew), *Military and Strategy* 1/3 (Dec. 2009).
[76]Johnson, *Hard Fighting*, 120.

Despite the many Israeli precautions to prevent collateral damage, civilian casualties resulted in many tragic television stories. Israel faced ever-increasing international criticism that culminated with the 'Goldstone Report', which accused Israel of war crimes and severe human rights violations.[77] These unintended consequences raised the question whether in the future Israel would be able to initiate a similar operation given the constraints posed by the international community.

Overall, the operation achieved for a while its objective of bringing tranquility to the border with Gaza. Several rockets were occasionally launched mostly by the more extreme terrorist organizations, such as Islamic Jihad. For a few years the number of rockets dropped to a minimum (from hundreds per month to isolated cases), which allowed maintaining normal life in Israel's south. However, 'Mowing the Grass' was once again a necessity, as deterrence eroded over time.

Operation 'Pillar of Defense'

In 2010 there were 365 rocket and mortar incidents from Gaza, while the respective figures for 2011 and 2012 were 680 and 800.[78] Operation 'Pillar of Defense' (14–21 November 2012) was an immediate response to over 100 rockets fired toward Israel within 24 hours, as well as to an attack on an Israeli patrol and IED explosion on the Israeli side of the border. Unlike previous incidents, Hamas also fired rockets.

As in Operation 'Cast Lead' the government decided on a minimalist approach.[79] No statements about toppling Hamas or about attaining a decisive victory were issued. Instead, Defense Minister Ehud Barak presented the following objectives: strengthen Israel's deterrence, severely impair Hamas and other terror organizations,

---

[77]United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, <www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/specialsession/9/FactFindingMission.htm>. For a refutation of these findings, see Dore Gold, 'The Dangerous Bias of the United Nations Goldstone Report', *US News*, 24 March 2010, <http://www.usnews.com/opinion/articles/2010/03/24/the-dangerous-bias-of-the-united-nations-goldstone-report>. Goldstone himself retracted the findings of his report on 2 April 2011, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/reconsidering-the-goldstone-report-on-israel-and-war-crimes/2011/04/01/AFg111JC_story.html>.

[78]Benjamin S. Lambeth, 'Second Lebanon War – a Reassessment', *Military and Strategy* 4/3 (Dec. 2012), note 47.

[79]Giora Eiland, 'Operation Pillar of Defense, Strategic Perspectives', in Shlomo Brom (ed.), *In the Aftermath of Operation Pillar of Defense: The Gaza Strip, November 2012* (Tel Aviv: INSS 2012), Memorandum 124, 12.

specifically crippling its rocket capabilities, and minimizing attacks on Israel's home front.[80]

Similarly to the Second Lebanon War in 2006 and Operation 'Cast Lead' in 2008–09, the major achievements were gained in the first hours of the operation due to the effect of accurate, surprise airstrikes. The IDF initially eliminated Ahmed al-Jabari, the Hamas supreme military commander, and many junior Hamas terrorists were eliminated as well. Additional Hamas targets were attacked, such as underground rocket launchers and ammunition warehouses stocking Iranian-made, long-range Fajr-5 missiles. The idea was to simultaneously decapitate the leadership of the Hamas military wing and destroy its strategic assets. In the next few days the IDF continued its stand-off fire campaign against military targets. However, the impact of the strikes dissipated as the targets became less valuable, while the Palestinians continued to fire rockets and mortar shells into Israel. In contrast, the IDF took measures unprecedented in the history of warfare to minimize civilian casualties. Almost 100 per cent of attacks used precision-guided munitions, in comparison to 63 per cent in the Second Lebanon War and 81 per cent in Operation 'Cast Lead'.[81] Moreover, the IDF spread leaflets, made telephone calls, aborted airstrikes and engaged in roof knocking by small munitions to warn about impending airstrikes. Indeed, the numbers of civilian casualties was less than a third of the 200 total Palestinian fatalities.

Just as impressive were the defensive measures. The Iron Dome batteries intercepted 422 rockets that were fired into urban areas, an 88 per cent success rate. The 58 rockets that did fall in these areas killed only three civilians, reflecting the disciplined behavior of the civilian population that followed the instructions issued by the authorities. The success of the defensive measures reduced the pressure for a ground offensive.

In parallel to the air campaign, the IDF made preparations, including the mobilization of tens of thousands of reservists for a ground invasion that did not materialize.[82] These preparations were also meant to increase the psychological pressure on Hamas. Yet it was obvious that Israel was reluctant to put boots on the ground.

---

[80]Zvi Zinger, The Political Echelon is hoping for a quick ending but preparing for a ground operation',< http://megafon-news.co.il/asys/archives/98500>.

[81]Amir Rapaport, '100% Precision Munitions from the Air', *Israel Defense* 11 (Nov.-Dec. 2012),

[82]According to IDF, it mobilized between 60,000 to 70,000 reservists – a greater number than in Cast Lead and similar to the figure in the last stage of the 2006 Lebanon War. Or Heler, 'The Reserve in Pillar of Defense,' *Israel Defense*, 19 Jan. 2013.

Israel refrained from escalating with a ground offensive, and the operation in Gaza again ended with an Egyptian-negotiated truce. The details of the cease fire agreement with Hamas were not made public. Though Israel made a few minor concessions to Hamas, its important achievement was the Hamas commitment to maintain and enforce the cease fire. It was the first major military operation Israel launched following the 'Goldstone Report' and the events of the 'Arab Spring' that led to the Muslim Brotherhood takeover in Egypt. These factors, as well as reluctance to commit boots on the ground because of potential casualties, constrained Israel's reaction. Importantly, Jerusalem was successful in maintaining international support for its operation in Gaza.

The absence of a ground operation posed, however, two problems for Israel. First, Hamas' claim of victory – by insisting that Israel was deterred from conducting a ground offensive – encourages Hamas and other terror groups to continue to provoke Israel. Second, without a ground offensive that regains operational control over all or parts of Gaza, parts of the terrorist infrastructure remained intact.

Conclusion

This article dwelled on Israel's twenty-first century military experience against radical non-state actors whose radical ideology is not subject to change in the near future. The critics of Israel's use of force share a common Western cultural bias that aspires for solutions to end military conflict. The idea that the Arab-Israeli conflict is a *prolonged intractable conflict* that evolved over 100 years and might continue for a long while is simply intolerable to many Westerners. There is a marked reluctance to accept the evaluation shared by the dominant Israeli decisionmakers and a large majority of the Israelis that the Arab-Israeli conflict is not going to be solved in the near future. Similarly difficult to accept is that there is no decisive military solution to meet the challenges posed by the radical non-state organizations. Consequently, the success of a military strategy should be measured against achieving the policy goals set by the political echelon, not by the analysts. Moreover, part of the critics are averse to the use of military force, a widespread aversion in the West.

In contrast to current Western thinking and practices, long-term occupation and a population-centric strategy is not an option for Israel. Therefore, Israel settles for modest goals, attempting to destroy the capabilities of the enemy to terrorize a large number of Israelis and harm Israeli strategic targets.

Therefore an Israeli response to terrorist attacks from non-state actors is only a question of time. Though the initial response is

low-key, to prevent escalation, the cumulative effect of the terrorist activity inevitably brings about an Israeli escalation, one that is intended to inflict a high price on the enemy and destroy at least a part of its offensive capabilities and restore deterrence. A larger-scale operation including a ground invasion is not an enticing option, however. Indeed, Israel showed much patience and endurance before commencing large-scale operations, as was reviewed here. Nevertheless, the empirical data clearly indicates that Israel's use of force achieves temporary quiet, which this article argued is Israel's main goal.

Over time, Israel has improved its military performance. The IDF has also used more precise fire and has taken more precautions to prevent the loss of innocent lives. This suits the moral code of the IDF, but also enhances legitimacy at home and abroad. It is not clear whether Israeli military actions affect the learning curves in Gaza or Lebanon. In any case, the immediate effect is some tranquility, which is possibly due also to the fact that Hizballah and Hamas have assumed government responsibilities.

'Mowing the Grass' is a realistic strategy that could serve a model for other armies. Yet, if the non-state actors are to acquire statist characteristics and/or more powerful capabilities, 'Mowing the Grass' might become an outdated military strategy.

Acknowledgements

Note on contributors

Efraim Inbar is Professor of Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University and Director of the Begin-Sadat (BESA) Center for Strategic Studies.

Eitan Shamir is Lecturer in Political Studies at Bar-Ilan University and Senior Researcher at the BESA Center.

Bibliography

Adamsky, Dima, *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors on the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the US, and Israel* (Stanford UP 2010).
Adler, Emanuel, 'Dammed if you do, Dammed if you don't: Performative Power and the Strategy of Conventional and Nuclear Diffusing', *Security Studies* 19/2 (April–June 2010).
Almog, Doron, 'Cumulative Deterrence and the War on Terrorism', *Parameters* 34/4 (Winter 2004–05).

Ben-Gurion, David, *Uniqueness and Singularity: Discussions on Israel's Security* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Maarachot 1971).

Ben-Meir, Yehuda and Olena Bagno-Moldavsky, *The Voice of the People: Israeli Public Opinion on National Security, 2012*, Memorandum 126 (Tel Aviv: INSS March 2013).

Ben-Yehuda, Hemda and Shmuel Sandler, *The Arab-Israeli Conflict Transformed: Fifty Years of Interstate and Ethnic Crises* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press 2002).

Brun, Itai, 'The Second Lebanon War, 2006', in John Andreas Olsen (ed.), *A History of Air Warfare* (Washington DC: Potomac Books 2010).

Brun, Itai, 'While You're Busy Making Other Plans – The "Other" RMA', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 33/4 (2010).

Byman, Daniel, 'Curious Victory: Explaining Israel's Suppression of the Second Intifada', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 24/5 (2012).

Calwell, C.E., *Small Wars: Their Principles & Practice*, 3rd edition (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press 1996).

Camilleri, Raphaelle L., 'Examining the Paradox of Israel's Unrealized Power: The Conceptual and Structural Sources of Israel's "Strategic Deficit"', Paper presented at the International Study Association 53rd Meeting, San Diego, CA, 2 April 2012.

Catignani, Sergio, 'The Strategic Impasse in Low-Intensity Conflicts: The Gap between Israeli Counter-Insurgency Strategy and Tactics during the Al-Aqsa Intifada', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 28/1 (2005).

Catignani, Sergio, 'The Security Imperative in Counterterror Operations: The Israeli Fight against Suicidal Terror', *Terrorism and Political Violence* 17/1–2 (2005).

Catignani, Sergio, *Israeli Counter-Insurgency and the Intifadas: Dilemmas of a Conventional Army*, (New York: Routledge 2008).

Catignani, Sergio, 'Variation on a Theme: Israel's Operation Cast Lead and the Gaza Strip Missile Conundrum', *RUSI Journal* 154/4 (2009), 66–73.

Cohen, Stuart A. and Efraim Inbar, 'A Taxonomy of Israel's Use of Military Force', *Comparative Strategy* 10/10 (Apil 1991).

David, Steven R., *Fatal Choices: Israel's Policy of Targeted Killing*, Mideast Security and Policy Studies, No. 51 (Ramat-Gan: Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Sept. 2002).

Delbrück, Hans, *A History of the Art of War*, Vol. 4 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press 1985).

Department of the US Army, FM 3-24/MCWP 3-33.5 *Counterinsurgency* (Washington DC 2006).

Drory, Zeev, *Israel's Reprisal Policy, 1953–1956* (London: Frank Cass 2004).

Egnell, Robert, 'Winning "Hearts and Minds"? A Critical Analysis of Counter-Insurgency Operations in Afghanistan', *Civil Wars* 12/3 (2010), 282–303.

Eiland, Giora, 'The Third Lebanon War: Target Lebanon', *Strategic Assessment* 11/2 (Nov. 2008).

Eiland, Giora, 'Operation Pillar of Defense, Strategic Perspectives', in Shlomo Brom (ed.), *In the Aftermath of Operation Pillar of Defense: The Gaza Strip, November* 2012 (Tel Aviv: INSS 2012), Memorandum 12.

Fogelman, Shai, *Haaretz*, 24 Oct. 2010.

Fogelman, Shai, 'Made in Israel', *Haaretz*, 24 Dec. 2011.

Frisch, Hillel, 'Motivation or Capabilities? Israeli Counterterrorism against Palestinian Suicide Bombings and Violence', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29/5 (2006), 843–69.

Gat, Azar, 'Is War Declining – and Why?' *Journal of Peace Research* 50/2 (2012), 149–57.

Gold, Dore, 'The Dangerous Bias of the United Nations Goldstone Report,' *US News*, 24 Mar. 2010.

Gray, Colin, 'Deterrence and the Nature of Strategy', in Max G. Manwaring (ed.), *Deterrence in the 21st Century* (London: Routledge 2001).

Haloutz, Dani, *Straightforward* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot 2010).

Harkabi, Yehoshafat, *Arab Strategies and Israel's Response* (New York: The Free Press 1977).

Heler, Or, 'The Reserve in Pillar of Defense', *Israel Defense*, 19 Jan. 2013.

Henriksen, Dag, 'Deterrence by Default? Israel's Military Strategy in the 2006 War against Hizballah', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 35/1 (Feb. 2012), 95–120.

Hirsh, Gal, 'From "Solid Lid" to "Other Way": Campaign Development in Central Command 2000-2003', in Haggai Golan and Shaul Shay (eds), *Low Intensity Conflict* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Maarachot 2004).

Hirsh, Gal, *War Story – Love Story* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot 2009).

'Hizballah chief revisits raid' *Washington Post*, 28 Aug. 2006.

Inbar, Efraim, 'Israel's Small War: The Military Response to the Intifada', *Armed Forces & Society* 18/1 (1991).

Inbar, Efraim, 'Israel's Strategic Environment in the 1990s', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 25/1 (March 2002).

Inbar, Efraim, 'How Israel Bungled the Second Lebanon War', *Middle East Quarterly*, 19/3 (Summer 2007).

Johnson, David E., *Hard Fighting: Israel in Lebanon and Gaza* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND 2011).

Kahl, Colin, 'COIN of the Realm', *Foreign Affairs* 86/6 (Nov./Dec. 2007).

Kahn, Herman, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (Baltimore: Penguin Books 1968).

Kober, Avi, 'From Blitzkrieg to Attrition: Israel's Attrition Strategy and Staying Power', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 16/2 (2005).

Kober, Avi, 'The Israel Defense Forces in the Second Lebanon War: Why the Poor Performance?' *Journal of Strategic Studies* 31/1 (Feb. 2008).

Kober, Avi, *Israel's Wars of Attrition: Attrition Challenges to Democratic States* (New York: Routledge 2009).

Laish, Gur, 'The Second Lebanon War – A Strategic Reappraisal', *Infinity Journal* 4 (Fall 2011).

Lambeth, Benjamin S., 'Israel's War in Gaza: A Paradigm of Effective Military Learning and Adaptation', *International Security* 37/2 (Fall 2012), 85–118.

Lambeth, Benjamin S., 'Second Lebanon War – a Reassessment', *Military and Strategy* 4/3 (Dec. 2012).

Lebel, Udi, 'Militarism versus Security? The Double-Bind of Israel's Culture of Bereavement and Hierarchy of Sensitivity to Loss', *Mediterranean Politics* 16/3 (Oct. 2011).

Lowenheim, Oded, and Gadi Heimann, 'Revenge in International Politics', *Security Studies* 17/4 (Dec. 2008).

Maoz, Zeev, 'Evaluating Israel's Strategy of Low-Intensity Warfare, 1949–2006', *Security Studies* 16/3 (July 2007).

Michael, Kobi, 'The Israel Defense Forces as an Epistemic Authority: An Intellectual Challenge in the Reality of the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 30/3 (May 2007).

Milstein, Michael, 'The Challenge of al-Muqawama (Resistance) to Israel', *Strategic Assessment* 12/4 (Feb. 2010).

Mintz, Alex and Bruce Russett, 'The Dual Economy and Arab-Israeli Use of Force: A Transnational System?' in Steve Chan and Alex Mintz (eds), *Defence, Welfare, and Growth* (London: Routledge Kegan Paul 1992), 179—96.

Montgomery, Evan Braden and Stacie L. Pettyjohn, 'Democratization, Instability, and War: Israel's 2006 Conflicts with Hamas and Hezbollah', *Security Studies* 19/3 (Aug. 2010).

Morris, Benny, *Israel's Border Wars, 1949–1956: Arab Infiltration, Israeli Retaliation, and the Countdown to the Suez War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1993).

Moyer, Mark, *A Question of Command, COIN from Civil War to Iraq* (New Haven, CT: Yale UP 2009).

Nagl, John, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife: Counterinsurgency Lessons from Malaya and Vietnam* (Univ. of Chicago Press 2002).

Nir, Shmuel, 'There is No Trap', *Maarachot* No. 387 (Jan. 2003).

Ortal, Eran, 'Is the IDF Capable of a Conceptual Breakthrough?', *Maarachot* No. 447 (Feb. 2013), 22–28.

Pape, Robert, *Bombing to Win: Airpower and Coercion in War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1996).

Petrelli, Niccolò, 'Deterring Insurgents: Culture, Adaptation and the Evolution of Israeli Counterinsurgency, 1987–2005', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 36/5 (Oct. 2013), 724–49.

Porter, Patrick, *Military Orientalism* (New York: Columbia UP 2009).

Rapaport, Amir, '100% Precision Munitions from the Air', *Israel Defense* 11 (Nov.–Dec. 2012).

Rid, Thomas, 'Deterrence beyond the State: The Israeli Experience', *Contemporary Security Policy* 33/1 (2012).

Rubin, Barry, *Revolution until Victory: The Politics and History of the PLO* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 1994).

Rubin, Uzi, *From Nuisance to Strategic Threat: The Missile Attacks from the Gaza Strip on Southern Israel* (Hebrew), Studies in Middle East Security No. 87 (Ramat-Gan: Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, Feb. 2011).

Saman, Jean-Loup, 'The Dahya Concept and Israeli Military Posture vis-à-vis Hezbollah Since 2006', *Comparative Strategy* 32 (2013).

Sandler, Shmuel, 'The Protracted Arab-Israeli Conflict, A Temporal Spatial Analysis', *The Jerusalem Journal of International Relations* 10/4 (1988).

Schelling, Thomas C., *The Strategy of Conflict* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP 1960).

Schiff, Zeev and Ehud Yaari, *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising–Israel's Third Front* (Tel Aviv: Schocken 1990).

Shabtay, Shay, 'The War after the Next War. The Era of Protracted Conflicts', *Maarachot*, No. 440 (Dec. 2011).

Shalom, Zaki and Yoaz Hendel, 'The Unique Features of the Second Intifada', *Military and Strategic Affairs* 3/1 (May 2011).

Shamir, Eitan, *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the US, British, and Israeli Armies* (Stanford UP 2011).

Shamir, Eitan, 'From Retaliation to Open Bridges: Moshe Dayan's Evolving Approach toward the Population in Counter Insurgency', *Civil Wars* 14/1 (2012).

Shimshoni, Jonathan, *Israel and Conventional Deterrence: Border Warfare from 1953 to 1970* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP 1988).

Siboni, Gabriel, 'War and Victory' (Hebrew), *Military and Strategy* 1/3 (Dec. 2009).

Snyder, Glenn H., 'Deterrence and Defense', in Robert J. Art and Kenneth N. Waltz (eds), *The Use of Force* (New York: Lanham 1983).

Sprecher, Christopher and Karl DeRouen Jr, 'Israeli Military Actions and Internalization-Externalization Processes,' *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 46/2 (April 2002), 244–59.

Summers, Harry G., 'A War is War is a War', in Loren B. Thompson (ed.), *Low Intensity Conflict: The Pattern of Warfare in the Modern World* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books 1989).

Tal, Israel, *National Security: The Few Against the Many* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Dvir 1996).

Tira, Ron, 'Breaking the Amoeba's Bones,' *Strategic Assessment* 9/3 (Nov. 2006).

United Nations Environment Program Lebanon Post-Conflict Environmental Assessment, Jan. 2007.

United Nations Fact Finding Mission on the Gaza Conflict, Sept. 2009.

Vagman, Yehuda, 'The Trap of Low Intensity Conflict', Ariel Center for Policy Research, White Paper No. 149 (2003).

Ya'alon, Moshe, *The Longer Shorter Way* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot 2008).

Yaari, Ehud, 'The *Muqawama* Doctrine', The Washington Institute, 13 Nov. 2006.

Yaniv, Avner, *Politics and Strategy in Israel* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Hapoalim 1994).

Zinger, Zvi, 'The Political Echelon is hoping for a quick ending but preparing for a ground operation' (Hebrew), *Megafon*, 14 Nov. 2012, <http://megafon-news.co.il/asys/archives/98500>.