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Institutional analysis and irregular warfare: Israel Defense Forces during the 33-Day War of 2006

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The new attention paid to ‘small wars’ does not seem to translate into a better adaptation of conventional armed forces to this type of conflicts. As illustrated by the IDF’s inability to get a decisive edge against the Hezbollah during the 33-Day War, Israel is no exception to such difficulty to adapt. A number of analysts have concluded that, victim of its long experience gained through the Intifadas, Israel ‘over-adapted’ to irregular warfare. Applying a sociological framework inspired by the seminal work of Richard Scott, this study suggests that this view is, at best, arguable. Going beyond the classical military explanations by uncovering key sociopolitical forces that have shaped the Israeli defense institutions, this study proposes that the combination of a post-heroic society and unbalanced civil–military relations have led the Israeli military institution to opt for a conventional posture articulated around technocentric tenets, which are ultimately disregarding the true nature of the asymmetrical challenge presented by the Hezbollah.

Keywords: Israel; IDF; institutional analysis; irregular warfare; 33-Day War

Introduction

The post-Cold War era has been characterized by a greater saliency of unconventional conflicts that either pit two or more non-state actors against one another, or lead to the confrontation of a state actor with a non-state actor. This greater attention paid to ‘small wars’ has been further aroused since the events of September 11, 2001, as Western states became more aware of various threats posed by ideological/religiously driven political and terrorist organizations. The latest examples of such conflicts are the American-led counterinsurgency (COIN) operations in Iraq and NATO’s COIN war against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

This greater appreciation for the challenges that this type of conflicts presents, however, does not seem to translate into easier military adaptation of conventional armed forces to handle irregular warfare. Some may argue that armed forces of Western countries like the United States or Canada are not used to this type of conflict, and hence military adaptation was therefore uneasy. This may be a correct assessment, but beyond the issue of military experience, there

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are reasons to think that other forces are at play in hindering military adaptation, forces linked to deep institutional dynamics.

This study aims to illustrate that the role of deep institutional dynamics should not be underestimated when it comes to military adaptation. For the purpose of this illustration, this study uses the case of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and its military adaptation to unconventional warfare before and during the 2006 war in Lebanon against the Hezbollah. The selection of this case is based in part on the fact that the IDF cannot be described as a conventional military force lacking experience with unconventional warfare. Yet, it too had significant challenges to adapt itself to fight well-known unconventional enemies.

To look into the IDF’s military adaptation through the lenses of institutional theory, a sociological framework inspired by the seminal work of Richard Scott is applied. Institutional theory poses that any substantive organizational change in a given institutional milieu only occurs when pressures from either the external or internal environment are strong enough to seriously endanger the social legitimacy of the institution. In other words, institutions only enact substantive change when they do not have any other choice. According to institutional theory, change remains dependent on assessments and perceptions of institutional leaders about the weight of various institutional forces implicated in any foreseen change. These forces can be described analytically based on three generic threads, or pillars, each of which is theoretically capable of encouraging or discouraging change and adaptation.

These three types of institutional forces, or pillars, are the normative (values, norms, both formally and informally conceived), cognitive (ideas, worldviews, shared patterns of thoughts), and regulative (rules, regulations, policies, both formal and informal). These three pillars will be analyzed separately to disentangle the institutional forces that shaped the IDF’s doctrinal/organizational posture. Subsequently, attention will be paid to how the pillars interact with one another and dynamically shape the IDF’s attempts to respond to various challenges posed by irregular warfare. The aim of this article is to demonstrate that the complex nature and processes of a modern military response to irregular warfare is heavily dependent on institutional forces. Hence, major decisions influencing military transformation cannot be fully grasped if one is analyzing the situation only within the confines of the rational decision-making model. In fact, any institutional transformation, be it military or otherwise, is made of ‘compromises’ that appear irrational on the surface, but that are in fact geared towards preserving the foundation of the institution’s legitimacy, which in the case of modern military is its conventional nature as a neutral instrument of the modern state.

Theoretical framework
By the end of the 1960s, and after decades of neglect, institutions and institutional analysis were rediscovered. Through the lens of sociology, institutions are
Institutions, although extremely varied and complex, may be defined as a relatively enduring collection of rules and organized practices, embedded in structures of meaning and resources that are relatively invariant in the face of turnover of individuals and relatively resilient to the idiosyncratic preferences and expectations of individuals and changing external circumstances.

Furthermore, by participating in the maintenance of social order institutions create inequities that have to be justified and perceived as legitimate. In a Westphalian state, the armed forces (with police forces) retain the monopoly over the use of legitimate violence. This monopoly over such extraordinary powers has to be seen as legitimate, one way or another, to ensure that social order is not disturbed. In a democratic environment, given that there is more room for dissension, maintaining legitimacy is usually a more difficult task. Hence, institutions, despite their resiliency, always face challenges from their environment about the inequity they create. In other words, for a group of people to have the monopoly over legitimate means of violence (i.e. the armed forces), it must be seen as ‘deserving’ such ‘privilege’ if it wants to keep the monopoly without facing major challenges from its parent society. The military, as an institution, also has to ensure that its own internal integrity is maintained, as institutions also create inequities internally (such as the rank structure and access to decision-making). Military leaders have to be seen as legitimate in the eyes of their troops too. Oftentimes, however, an institution is facing pressure from its external environment requiring reinforcing external legitimacy, but responding to such external threats may lead to upsetting the internal balance of the institution. The issues surrounding the acceptance of gays and lesbians in the United States military is a classic example of such institutional tensions between external and internal legitimacy.

In light of institutional theory, one would think that the inability of a military force to defeat an enemy would constitute a very substantive pressure for change coming from the external environment. Yet, when it comes to irregular enemies the pressures appear to be weaker. It is certainly true that ‘small wars’ are by definition conflicts that do not endanger the survival of the state, and therefore losing can be an option, although not a preferred one. But one cannot ignore that the internal integrity of the institution has to be preserved too, so ‘losing’ may become a way of ‘protecting’ the institution. In plain language, this means maintaining the internal legitimacy of the institution by ensuring that members of the armed forces remain trained and equipped for ‘real soldiering’ (i.e. conventional warfare). Members of the armed forces, who have the monopoly on the use of legitimate violence, do not want to be seen or to see themselves as armed bandits, but only as ‘true’ combatants.

To explore these issues in further depth, it is proposed to use Richard Scott’s model to distinguish between regulative, normative, and cultural-cognitive pillars, underwriting institutional dynamics. The normative pillar relates to ‘the normative rules’ capacity to introduce a prescriptive, evaluative, and obligatory dimension into social life’.3 These include values and norms, where the latter
specify how things should be done in terms of ‘good and evil’, and thus define legitimate means to pursue valued ends, as well as deep senses of collective identity. In the case of identity, this translates as being on the ‘good’ side of things, however it may be defined in a given society. These institutional values and norms are in relation with the ones found in the parent society, but they do not necessarily fully reflect them. In a democratic environment, a significant difference between the norms and the values of an institution compared to those of its parent society is likely to create significant tensions that sooner or later will have to be resolved.

The cultural-cognitive pillar, also referred to as the cognitive pillar, refers to the shared conceptions that constitute the nature of social reality and the frames through which meaning is derived. Emphasis is put on the important role of ideas that can help or hinder institutional adaptability. These ideas can mobilize a large group of individuals to act as their carriers and on their inherent appropriateness to respond to the identified source of problems. It is often build upon beliefs about what works, what is effective and efficient, what has been ‘proven’, etc. Hence, key institutional decisions are also justified on such beliefs. If these beliefs are dissonant with those found in the parent society, then again tensions are likely to rise.

Lastly, the regulative pillar is thought of as potentially working to constrain or empower social behavior. As such, ‘force, sanctions, and expedience are central ingredients’. In this study, the regulative pillar refers mainly to the important role played by the political sphere, more particularly, the civilian/political leadership, to which a democratic system’s military establishment should be subservient. It is often built upon accepted notions, in a given institution, of what is authorized or not. However, as students of civil–military relations are aware, the military institution can have a significant influence on determining the content of accepted rules.

Background of the conflict
The IDF has been operating in Lebanon against irregular enemies for quite some time. As early as 1982, the ongoing Lebanese Civil War and the continued presence of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon gave way to a large and robust invasion of Lebanon by Israel, with the sole aim of uprooting the PLO from Lebanese territory once and for all. The invasion proved to be costly in lives, with over 49,000 civilians, and 5300 fighters killed on the Lebanese/non-Israeli side, while fewer than 600 on the Israeli side. As a result of the invasion, the 1982–1985 occupation of southern Lebanon, and the establishment of the southern Lebanese Security zone, with the PLO driven out of Lebanon, there emerged the Hezbollah as a resistance organization, tasked initially with resisting the Israeli occupation of southern Lebanon.

Thus was born an entity that was to preoccupy Israel immensely for decades to come. The 1982 invasion and its aftermath also led, for the first time in Israeli history, mainly because of its horrific implications, to some Israeli citizens’
refusal to serve in the IDF. From early 1985 until May 2000, when Israel evacuated all its forces from the security zone, the Hezbollah was engaged in a war of attrition, one that Israel proved unwilling to fight indefinitely. Although in the period between 1985 and 2000, there were many ups and downs in terms of attacks and counterattacks involving both parties — especially the 1993 Israeli Operation Accountability and the 1996 Operation Grapes of Wrath, lasting 7 and 16 days, respectively — no serious attempt was made by Israel to extend its occupation deeper into Lebanese territory.

The tensions continued even after the Israeli withdrawal, with the Lebanese side claiming both the return of Lebanese prisoners held in Israel, and the Israeli withdrawal from occupied Shebaa Farms, a relatively small parcel of land situated in the occupied Golan Heights, which Israel claims is Syrian territory, but which Syria and Lebanon claim is Lebanese territory. Given the constant high tensions between Hezbollah and Israel, the latter had refused to give in to Hezbollah’s demands for the release of all Lebanese prisoners held by Israel.

Aware of Israel’s increased sensitivity toward recovering all Israeli casualties held by its opponents (dead or alive) and the lengths that it would go to in order to achieve this (freeing a disproportionately number of Arab prisoners in exchange for small numbers of captured Israeli soldiers and citizens), the Hezbollah leadership was determined and vocal about its plans to capture further Israeli soldiers, and as such, to force Israel’s hands in releasing the remaining Arab/Hezbollah prisoners. On 7 October 2000, for example, five months after the Israeli pull-out of southern Lebanon, the Hezbollah kidnapped three members of the Israeli military, and ended with another round of prisoner exchange four years later. Motivated by this logic, on 12 July 2006, the Hezbollah crossed the Israeli–Lebanon border and launched a daring raid on an Israeli patrol. In the clash that ensued, three Israeli soldiers were captured and eight were killed. This provocation acted as the spark embroiling the two sides, Israel and the Hezbollah, in a bloody war that would later become known as the 33-Day War, or the Second Lebanon war (SLW).

Resulting in nearly 1500 fatalities on both sides, the conflict itself could be described in two distinct segments. The first one was led by the Israeli Air Force (IAF), which launched a wide air strike campaign destined to destroy the physical infrastructures of the Hezbollah in Beirut and southern Lebanon as well as the communications infrastructures, roads, and bridges linking southern and northern Lebanon to physically isolate the Hezbollah. Although the air campaign caused significant physical damage in Lebanon, it did not prevent the Hezbollah from continuing its activities. The second segment was essentially led by the army through a mechanized advance in southern Lebanon to destroy the Hezbollah on the ground and their rocket launching systems, which were used against civilian areas in Israel. The ground campaign was also problematic as the Hezbollah surprised the Israeli by putting forward aggressive tank-hunting teams to stop the mechanized advance, and established well-designed fortifications around their strongholds. Neither the IAF nor the army achieved their objectives. Given very strong international pressure on Israel to stop, and fearing a costly protracted
conflict, the Israeli government decided to put an end to the operations after 33 days. The war ended with a weaker Israeli deterrence and a stronger Hezbollah prestige in the region.

**Institutional analysis**

After the end of the SLW, many in Israel were questioning the judgment of the IDF military leadership and of their politicians. How could this have happened? Strangely enough, a common critique in Israel was that its military became ‘too irregular’ because it was preparing unconsciously to re-fight the Second Intifada, and lost its way when it came time to fight an enemy using more conventional tactics like tank-hunting teams and fortifications. In essence, these critiques implied that the IDF ‘over adapted’. In light of institutional analysis, however, this common view is arguable.

**The normative pillar**

When the IDF launched its operations against the Hezbollah in 2006, it was hoping for a quick victory over irregular militias. This expectation is very much that of a conventional military launching an attack against a weaker enemy. In fact, a number of parallels can be made with Operation Desert Storm where a significant airstrike campaign was launched to destroy infrastructures, followed by a quick mechanized ground campaign to sweep away whatever was left of a weaker military, all this relying on technological superiority. This operational approach was selected by the conventional forces of the United States during Desert Storm because they knew it had to be quick to minimize blue force (friendly) casualties and not spoil popular support for the campaign. The IDF, in many ways, was facing similar pressures from its social environment.

**The emergence of the post-heroic society**

As Stuart Cohen points out: ‘Shifts in domestic environments can help to explain revisions of previous national military concepts and conduct.’ The Israeli model of a ‘nation-in-arms’ has gradually given place to the post-heroic society; that is, the state’s aversion toward battle plans that can end up inflicting a high number of casualties among its troops. Indeed, ever since the 1982–1985 First Lebanon War, the ‘nation-in-arms’ or ‘garrison society’ model of Israeli society began to undergo substantial changes, with a fear of casualties. Accordingly, by the mid 1990s and beyond, the IDF was faced, for the first time since the establishment of the state of Israel, with difficulty in recruiting for its combat units.

Among important sociological changes taking place in Israeli society has been the new tendency among the Ashkenazi middle-class Israelis, who have historically acted as the backbone of the IDF and Israeli society’s most affluent group, to gradually turn away from military service. The change reflects a sociocultural
process that shifts ‘from a “subjected militarism” that perceived military service as an unconditioned, mandatory national duty to a “contractual militarism,” according to which military service is stipulated by the fulfillment of the individual’s ambitions and interests, although it remained a formal obligation’. In other words, this may be viewed as a shift from a paradigm of unconditional allegiance to the nation to one of partial commitment conditioned on the pursuit of individual interests.

The Ashkenazi population that used to fulfill the roles of ‘gold sacrificers’ and ‘body sacrificers’ has gradually retreated to the position of gold sacrificers alone, important in filling the state’s coffers, while hitherto marginalized Israeli populations have flocked to fill the personnel gap created by the exit of Ashkenazi from the IDF. As such, Israeli society has been divided between those who contribute in material terms and those who contribute literally with their lives. This cleavage has then caused the shift from republican control over the IDF (social control through the nation-in-arms model), to market control over the IDF (the private sphere responsible for funding the state), whereby the IDF’s leaders are engaged in a constant public relations campaign, through the media, for support and legitimacy. Thus, it is important to note that socioeconomic and cultural changes within the wider society directly impacted the IDF’s social makeup and the relative importance of the military establishment in the country’s security/defense paradigm. The IDF was in the context of a society increasingly sensitive to casualties. Interestingly, the same type of sociopolitical pressures affects, quite similarly, defense institutions in most Western democracies.

Assumptions, beliefs and the impact of fighting two Intifadas

In parallel with those social changes, another aspect that a normative analysis helps to highlight is the simultaneous evolution of the thinking about the ‘true’ nature of war within the military institution. It is a common saying in Israel that ‘IDF officers have never been “intellectual soldiers”… Instead they have been “practical soldiers”, basing their professional performance on experience, intuition, flexibility, imagination, initiative, and audacity.’ For instance, promotion in the IDF has always been based on battlefield experience and proven ability, sidestepping intellectualism and conceptual innovation, producing an organizational culture in which major strategic-level adaptation and transformation have been quite rare. As such, IDF officers have at best shunned ‘big ideas’ in warfare, while at worst, the IDF has been plagued by its conservative nature in terms of doctrinal, organizational, and strategic adaptation.

Yet, the Israeli military had to adapt itself to changes in modes of warfare taking place at the close of the twentieth century with the arrival and later consolidation of the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA). If the Israeli military does not define itself as pro-intellectual, it is very much pro-engineering. The IDF’s overreliance on technocentrism entrenched a number of assumptions and beliefs in Israel about the nature of warfare. Thus, over the past decade, Israeli military thought has been inspired by such RMA-driven notions as ‘information
dominance’, ‘dominant maneuver’, ‘precision strike’, and ‘focused logistics’, all the hallmarks of a conventional military force. But these technological changes cannot be fully understood separately from the emergence of a post-heroic society in Israel. Furthermore, coupled with military budget cuts where these technologies were perceived as a way of ‘doing more with less’, a major transition towards a greater emphasis on technocentric warfare was put in motion. In other words, it led to emphasis on a ‘leaner’ but ‘meaner’ force through technological superiority that is less likely to suffer substantive casualties, and thus can offset pressures from the post-heroic social environment. Such military technological adaptation is also very much an adaption to social change that has little to do with the nature of the enemy.

The nature of the enemy had a role to play, but not the one that it is usually perceived. A conventional military tends to assess the strength of its enemy in conventional terms. It is a very common and serious mistake when a conventional military force engages in an irregular conflict. The American example in Iraq in 2003, still resting on the laurels of the First Gulf War, speaks volumes about this common error. The approach to the 2006 conflict by the IDF was very much based on a conventional assessment, as it may also be explained by the fact that the Israeli military, since the First Intifada of 1987, looked at ‘mostly empty-handed Palestinian men, women, and children as if they were in fact a serious military threat’. The Hezbollah, on the surface, looked similar to the Palestinian fighters, namely, a light infantry militia. This dysfunctional focus on making conventional assessments has been probably reinforced by a growing sense in the IDF of not being a ‘true’ fighting force, dealing with children throwing rocks. This is what Martin van Creveld termed the ‘betrayal of faith’, a significant decline in the credibility, prestige, morale, and legitimacy of the IDF ever since 1982. The Israeli public lost their faith in the IDF, accusing the military authorities of negligence or cover up, with the Israeli media’s headlines filled with negative assessments of the IDF in its policing role. In other words, a pernicious perception in the IDF of not engaging enough in ‘real soldiering’ activities reinforced the notion that the enemy was not therefore not a ‘real military foe’.

Based on the above, Israel and the IDF entered the 33-Day War with certain distinct normative characteristics that were to weigh heavily upon the latter’s motivations for an effective adaptation to low intensity conflict situations and irregular warfare. The deep sense of military identity of the IDF was under pressure for quite some time, and a greater reliance on implicit assumptions typical of a conventional military, namely making a conventional assessment of a non-conventional enemy, was a normal reaction in 2006 for an institution like the IDF, to reassure itself of its ‘true’ military nature. The post-2006 criticism that the IDF was not conventional enough, although the 2006 War was approached in ways not dissimilar to the First Gulf War, was also predictable from an institutional theory perspective. The institution, after its failure, was under even more pressure from its domestic environment and retreated further towards the legitimacy that confers a conventional outlook to the armed forces of a Westphalian state.
The cognitive-cultural pillar

A careful analysis of cognitive factors helps highlight additional reasons that led the Israeli defense establishment to adopt a response to irregular warfare that does not depart fundamentally from a conventional approach. In this respect, the 1990s constitute a turning point for the transformation of Israel’s military doctrine. The post-Cold War era, the First Gulf War, coinciding with the establishment of RMA, Arab–Israeli–Palestinian détente, and the peace process, were all important factors in producing a major change in Israel’s strategic thinking, sometimes defined as a new Israeli strategic paradigm.18 If in the past the Israeli defense establishment thought along ‘expansionist’ lines, by the late 1990s and especially early 2000s, the focus was rather placed on strategic ‘contraction’, i.e., the unilateral withdrawal from the Security Zone in southern Lebanon (2000), Gaza (2005), and the installation of security fences to keep Israel secure from foreign threats.19 Israeli military commanders’ transformation of the IDF doctrine is fundamentally based on the realization that Israel’s future wars no longer require the IDF’s immense conventional posture, but rather a ‘lean and mean’ conventional posture.

Threat perceptions, adaptation, and again technocentrism

Affected by a ‘lean and mean’ mentality, the political/military leaders’ inattention to the possibility of troop intensive land warfare had the effect of inadequately preparing the IDF for such eventualities, and thus underlining how threat perceptions and assumptions built into military doctrine and strategy may adversely affect the military establishment’s readiness. For instance, the Israeli defense establishment decided not to install the state-of-the-art Trophy antimissile system on most of its tanks, had faulty antimissile equipment on its navy ships, and declined to purchase bunker buster bombs for the IAF.20 Again the IDF’s adaptation to ‘lean and mean’ warfare proved indeed limited and ‘over-determined’ by the type of warfare it had grown accustomed to in the Occupied Territories. Although this appears on the surface as being an adaptation towards fighting irregular and asymmetrical wars, it was more a shift of conventional focus from mass kinetic force towards precision kinetic force.

In terms of military thinking, especially so far as institutional adaptation is concerned, some analysts believe that Israel as a ‘young’ state, and the IDF as a ‘young’ organization, enjoyed a relative advantage in terms of adaptability when compared with older nations,21 having less of an institutional ‘drag’ or isomorphic pressure, which would otherwise have prevented change. Yet, already by the 1973 War, it was noticed that the IDF was constrained by its small geographical size and its overreliance on ‘Offensive Maneuver Warfare’.22 However, the latter cornerstone of Israeli military thinking gave way, as early as the 1990s, to the realization that the wars of the future implied more than mere mobility. As such, an overtly technocentric military doctrine has dominated Israeli military thinking to an unprecedented extent. This meant that focus was set on
achieving battlefield success via a combination of accurate, stand-off fire and limited operations on the ground; the need to affect the enemy’s consciousness; the central role played by airpower; and the diminishing role of large-scale and deep ground manoeuvres’. This focus is reinforced by a strong belief among military planners as well as commanders that airpower alone can achieve the results.  

Based on the above, it is therefore not surprising that military leaders, like Major General (res.) Amiran Levin, identified ‘over-reliance on precision technology as one of the major reasons for the IDF’s malfunctioning in the [2006] war’. In the ‘new’ warfare that became paramount to the new Israeli strategic and doctrinal military thinking, simultaneous confrontations take place throughout the battle space, and along a multitude of pressure points, with the armed forces consisting of light, yet highly specialized modular forces, which together make up the entirety of the battle space. Yet, in the SLW, these methods proved wanting in the face of continued Hezbollah rocket attacks on northern Israel, averaging 128 rockets a day, 25% of which hit built-up areas. The Hezbollah was actually able to play on two weaknesses of the IDF. First, at the tactical level, the Israeli technocentric force was more able to deal with a dispersed asymmetric threat, and so the Hezbollah concentrated its capabilities in classical strongholds. But at the strategic level, the IDF approached the conflict from a conventional perspective, and it is in this context that the Hezbollah’s rocket attack campaign was directly aimed at the political realm, an asymmetric approach par excellence. Ultimately, it became apparent that a RMA/technocentric approach to warfare cannot effectively deal with sophisticated irregular warfare as combat capabilities remain tightly attached to kinetic delivery rather than ensuring effective political effects.  

Such a situation can be linked back to an institutional ‘compromise’ that emerged within the IDF, equating high technology with asymmetric warfare. Up until the outbreak of the SLW, Israeli military intellectuals and analysts were quite content with the IDF’s state of affairs, based on Finkel’s evaluation of the IDF’s adaptability in dealing with the low intensity combat situation of the Second Intifada. Finkel noted that ‘this conflict once again demonstrated the power of the Israeli commanders’ adaptability and ingenuity and, in this armed conflict, organizational changeability as well.’ The differences in Israel’s handling of the two Intifadas (1987 and 2000) may be understood as an indication of why Israel’s military intellectuals were so confident of their degree of adaptation to irregular warfare. While, during the First Intifada, the IDF response was a conventional army’s coming to grips with a Palestinian ‘insurgency’, the Second Intifada relied on an altogether different strategy and doctrine: true to its new technocentric character, after it was realized that Israeli special units and commandos alone were not able to put down the uprising, came in the use of advanced air power and targeted assassinations (leadership decapitation). The solution was technological, but again, essentially kinetic.  

Despite claims underlining IDF’s ‘successes’ in dealing with the Palestinian resistance, one can argue that Israel’s response to low intensity conflict threats (at least outside of the Occupied Territories) generally has not changed
fundamentally over the last decade and remains heavily conventional. According to Rodman, since the trend in Israeli military and defense doctrine has been to move away from ‘land for peace’, the occupation and control of land has lost much of its significance. Rather, Israel’s response to low intensity conflict situations will continue to focus on disproportionate kinetic retaliation, and ‘on the destruction of Arab military forces and, perhaps, on the destruction of the economic and political infrastructures of Arab states’. This logic is reflected in the so-called Dahiya Doctrine.

The emergence of the Dahiya Doctrine

In the aftermath of the 2006 war, the criticism against the supposed asymmetric ‘posture’ of the IDF led to a backlash against sophisticated approaches such as systemic operational design (SOD), which were espoused but not necessarily put in practice. Such rejection of sophisticated approaches to irregular warfare, however, brought others to reiterate the need of achieving political effects in much less sophisticated terms. For instance, as a response to IDF’s failure to adapt to irregular warfare and win the SLW, the IDF Northern Command Chief Gadi Eisenkot noted:

We shall destroy Lebanon and won’t be deterred by the protests of the world. We shall pulverize the 160 Shiite villages that have turned into Shiite army bases… This strategy is not a threat uttered by an impassioned officer, but rather, an approved plan.

The ‘logic’ behind this perspective, which was latter dubbed the Dahiya Doctrine, – where military goals are also conceived in political terms – is simple: the military must first, following technocentric approaches, devastate the enemy society’s weak and soft points, including economic interests, centers of civilian powers, and state infrastructure, and only then concentrate on the enemy combatants’ actions and diffuse the military threat. This illustrates that there is a cognitive point of tension within the IDF, as it is recognized by some that conventional kinetic approaches are not sufficient for the IDF to be successful in the future.

It is at this time difficult to determine in which direction the IDF will go in cognitive terms. Operation Cast Lead in 2008–2009 was construed as being conducted in a spirit much closer to the Dahiya Doctrine, and this operation was deemed much more successful than the SLW, although, as discussed later, the operation’s successes were actually limited. There is therefore potential that this way of ‘doing business’ be institutionalized cognitively because it was construed as being effective. But this could prove to be a very serious challenge. The violent and apocalyptic overtone of the deterrence found in the Dahiya Doctrine, however, may not be aligned with the deep normative assumptions of ‘true soldiering’. Ultimately, it will survive or not based on the formal sanctioning of such an approach by the Israeli political authorities. In light of the poor handling by the IDF of the obvious political trap laid by the activists of the Gaza flotilla in
May 2010, it is unclear how much support the IDF will have to conduct asymmetric campaigns truly based on achieving political effects.

**The regulative pillar**

Generally, the defense institution is transformed when political actors believe that it is no longer capable of fulfilling the functions for which it was established in the first place. Conversely, leaders of the institution tend to protect the institution’s ways through slight adjustments that they try to present as being sufficient. The analysis of regulative factors helps explain why, in the Israeli case, an acute disconnection of civil–military relations gave rise to the second scenario. In democratic societies, legal authorities are key actors when dealing with questions of military institutions and organizations. Theoretically, the military establishment is deemed to be subservient to the civil/political leadership. Yet, in Israel this dynamic is rather particular, and institutional forces play in ways that are not following Huntington’s famous ‘normal’ theory of civil–military relations.

**Civil–military relations**

In Israel, like elsewhere in the Western world, the transformations experienced in post-Cold War warfare in favor of low intensity conflicts or intrastate wars (instead of inter-state wars) have hampered the civilian/political sphere’s capacity to control the military sphere. Overall, the political community has neither the know-how nor the knowledge to deal with low intensity conflicts, nor a permanent, professional staff at the government level to master the complexities involved, resulting in poor directives emanating from the political sphere. Indeed, oftentimes the political/civilian leadership deferred to the military sphere, letting the latter decide, because of its ‘developed knowledge’.

For more than a decade, this trend has increased in Israel because of four key factors. The first factor has to do with the political establishment crisis, characterized by the increasing weakness of elected officials to develop a clear view of what is to be achieved. Second, there are particular weaknesses in the structural mechanisms for civilian control over the military, as identified by Peri. Third, the ‘nation-in-arms’ model of Israeli society has historically blurred the military/civilian boundaries, given that many senior Israeli politicians are also former IDF senior officers. Fourth, the ongoing and essentially permanent nature of the conflict with the Arabs (and Palestinians) provides the Israeli military with an open-ended mandate. The combination of these factors has had the effect of increasing the military’s involvement in the political process and decision-making, both on the conduct of the war and in diplomatic negotiations, and blurring the ‘needed clear line between politics and military’.

Irregular warfare situations generally cause frictions between the civil and military echelons that are more acute, because they require political involvement at a more granular level, a responsibility that politicians prefer to avoid and that
the military considers as being micro-management.38 The complexities involved in irregular warfare have also divided the military establishment into those seeking to untangle the IDF from the political establishment and those wanting the military to play a significantly more important role in the conduct of war and decision-making in general, at the risk of crossing the ‘threshold of legitimate activity in a democracy’.39 As such, in 2004, the IDF began to raise political issues such as war aims and the meaning of victory, to identify threats, choose the doctrine and strategy that would best neutralize them. However, what happened during the 33-Day War proved that although the military might hold the upper hand vis-à-vis its civilian counterparts in terms of knowledge and information regarding conventional warfare, it may nevertheless be ill-equipped in general to fight irregular warfare because of the need for ‘granular’ political involvement. This shortcoming is one of the main reasons that prompted the establishment of the Winograd Commission.

The Winograd Commission

Put in place in 2006 to investigate and draw lessons from the Israel–Hezbollah War, the Winograd Commission is worthy of note in that it sheds light on the extent to which the 33-Day War was digested and integrated in military regulations. The Commission’s Partial Report recommended that, with an eye on strengthening the civilian/political sphere, and as a counterweight to the IDF, the foreign minister now takes part in all meetings between the prime minister and the minister of defense, while his ministry has access to most restricted intelligence reports.40 The adoption of such a comprehensive management principle suggests that Israeli leaders have come to understand the increasingly regional and international scope of modern battle space. More generally, this suggests that they acknowledge, at least partially, the highly political nature of today’s irregular warfare.

The Winograd Commission’s recommendations point to the fact that certain deficiencies in the IDF’s capacity to fight irregular wars may be easily rectified by sound political/military decisions, such as increased funding for the IDF, procurement of better weapons systems, or more training for the reserve; yet deficiencies in strategic thinking may be harder to remedy. More specifically on political leadership and decision-making, ‘it is a matter of changing the organizational culture, which doesn’t happen overnight.’41 As Major General (res.) Uzi Dayan stated, ‘What Israel needs now is leadership with an agenda.’42 Several voices raised to argue that an effective strategy, following the classical Clausewitzian maxim, must effectively reconcile politics and military action, ensuring that the use of force and the tactics involved will bring about the desired effects so that a political goal is achieved.43 Ironically, the political leadership, under Prime Minister Olmert and Minister of Defense Peretz, has rejected the suggestion put forth by Chief of Staff Halutz and Israel’s director of military intelligence that, just five days into the war, they wanted to stop the operations, having realized that they could not achieve the government’s declared political
goals. Although in this case the political leadership reaffirmed its authority over the military, it was done in absence of clear political goals.

After the SLW, Israel’s political and military leaderships were scrutinized, but the response of ‘giving back’ to the military a ‘true’ military posture was predictable from an institutional analysis perspective. Under the leadership of a new chief of staff a five-year improvement plan for the IDF was undertaken to boost the conventional war-fighting capacity of its forces for both the regular and reserved forces, thus addressing the IDF’s ‘classic warfare’ needs. According to Israeli military commanders, the post-2006 changes in the IDF are nothing short of revolutionary, but they added that the real efficacy of the changes could not be assessed until the end of the next war. However, given the nature of civil–military relations in Israel, the institutional ‘reflex’ of a conventional military to focus even more on what provides the greatest amount of both external and internal legitimacy (i.e. getting ready of conventional warfare – real soldiering) appears unstoppable. In fact, this is likely to further complicate the development of a true asymmetric approach at the strategic level to deal with its enemies, and encourage these enemies to focus even more on undermining the state of Israel through asymmetric strategic warfare.

**Integrated analysis**

Despite the IDF’s long experience with various irregular conflicts, how can we make sense of the immense adjustment difficulties it faced during the 33-Day War? To answer this question, it is necessary to go beyond classical explanations limited to logistical, doctrinal, and geopolitical factors by shedding light on the interaction of institutional forces that are, in general, neglected in the analysis of military affairs. This is what institutional analysis provides by taking into account a much more complex transformational dynamic, especially concerning the interweaving of cultural, cognitive, normative, and regulative constraints. Undoubtedly, the combined weight of these constraints conditioned the choices of Israeli political and military leaders, and in large measure influenced the turn of events.

Firstly, this approach points out that Israeli society at large and the IDF as an organization have both undergone tremendous transformations in the past two decades that have had significant effects on both the IDF and its potential for adaptation. Foremost among these changes has been the transformation of Israeli society from a ‘nation-in-arms’ to a ‘post-heroic’ model increasingly sensitive to casualties. As a result of the widespread failures associated with the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, the overwhelming societal consensus with regard to the IDF was eventually undermined. More liberal, individualistic-oriented values emerged.

Secondly, the effects of such social changes on the IDF are inextricably linked to the technocentric approached espoused by the Israeli military. ‘High tech’ warfare is oftentimes perceived as ‘touch less’ warfare where casualties are minimized and a greater distance between the troops and the actual violence of war is established. Hence, it is no surprise that RMA/technocentrism had a deep
impact on the IDF’s doctrinal and organizational dimensions. After the First Gulf War, no modern military establishment could afford not to take notice of the vast military superiority offered by the information/technological revolution in military affairs. Material constraints coupled with the consolidation of the post-heroic, postmodern value systems reinforced the institutional forces, pushing the IDF to undergo a transformation leading to the establishment and consolidation of a ‘small but smart’ IDF. Thirdly, the unique nature of civil–military relations in Israel further compounded such institutional forces. Lastly, the environment did not provide enough pressures on the IDF to force any institutional adaptation as the handling of the Second Intifada was deemed successful and as such prevented the IDF from training effectively for the next war.47

The 33-Day War and beyond

The December 2008–January 2009 IDF Operation Cast Lead (OCL) in Gaza is an invaluable instrument for assessing the evolution of the IDF but also, more specifically, for determining whether the institutional forces that have underpinned the Israeli response to the asymmetric challenge in Lebanon continued to influence the approach adopted in the Palestinian territory.

At first glance, the way the Israelis dealt with the Gaza war of 2008–2009 can give the impression that they were determined to build on the experience gained during the Lebanese crisis. That is what Ariel Siegelman suggests when he claims that: ‘The debacle of Lebanon set the stage for the success of Gaza.’48 Clearly, the OCL was better prepared and structured than the operation led in south Lebanon two years before. The IDF’s entry into Gaza was mandated, unlike the 33-Day War, with clearer goals, including significantly reducing Hamas’s capabilities and its ability to inflict damage on Israel. Whereas in Lebanon, Israel had actually to destroy strongholds to succeed, in Gaza: ‘We were to keep them at arm’s length, not attempt to engage them in combat, and use anything within our means to destroy them.’49 The IDF’s goal thus consisted of strengthening Israel’s deterrence posture vis-à-vis its enemies,50 and not necessarily destroying them physically, while avoiding if possible any casualties on their side. Politically, the goals set for OCL may be considered much more ‘asymmetric’ and modest when compared to the 2006 War, showing that the lessons of the Winograd Committee about the performance of decision-makers during the 2006 SLW were fully internalized.51

Another element suggesting that the Israelis have built on the Lebanese experience is the greater importance given to functions other than war in the preparation of the OCL operation. For instance, Israeli strategists have acquired the certainty that non-kinetic media such as a whole-of-government approach to public diplomacy were lacking,52 while Hezbollah, during the SLW,53 made an effective use of public diplomacy to compensate for ‘military/material weaknesses’ and score points at the grand-strategic level.54 As a result, Olmert established the Directorate of National Information in the prime minister’s office in July 2007. Its task, although deficient in terms of directive powers, was to
coordinate public diplomacy initiatives and activities across all government ministries.\textsuperscript{55} For OCL, the Directorate managed restoring the population’s confidence in their government and the IDF; blocking leaks that had hampered the war effort during the 33-Day War; and providing the IDF with the time-frame needed to ‘finish the job’ before international pressure could mount to an unbearable level.\textsuperscript{56} These strategic communications initiatives have produced some results,\textsuperscript{57} and their integration into Israeli arsenal may suggest a certain degree institutional adaptation. But, as a more detailed examination of the conduct of OCL reveals, this adaptation has in fact been limited.

**Disentangling practice from rhetoric**

The analysis of the Gaza operation reveals not only that the Israelis have not learned all the lessons of the 33-Day War but also that the functioning of their security institution has continued to be shaped by the same kind of cognitive and normative reasoning as that which prevailed in Lebanon. Despite IDF’s declared intentions and, more specifically, despite its objective to strengthen its conventional war-fighting capabilities after the 2006 Lebanon failure, what took place during OCL was yet another instance of overreliance on technocentric warfare.\textsuperscript{58} For example, despite the unquestionable military superiority of the IDF over Hamas during OCL, the Israeli reserve forces were practically absent until the closing days of the conflict; thus, the backbone of the IDF did not get the chance to prove itself.\textsuperscript{59} The entire Israeli strategy was based on the belief that the sheer intensity of the military operation would cause Hamas to crumble and propel the people of Gaza to lose hope in Hamas and support the Fatah under the leadership of Mahmoud Abbas.\textsuperscript{60} In many ways, this was the Israeli version of the conventional and naïve ‘shock and awe’ campaign in Iraq, another variation on the theme of a ‘touch less’ approach to warfare. To a large extent, the IDF’s technocentric obstinacy can be explained by the permanence of normative and cognitive mechanisms that were already at play during the 33-Day War.

A similar observation prevails at the political level where civil–military relations continued to be affected by the same ‘regulative reflexes’ as those observed during the SLW. As in the previous crisis, political leadership was unable to orchestrate the conduct of operations effectively. The only real consensus in the Israeli political as well as military leaderships was that Israel had to fight in ways that would restore Israeli deterrence and show the Hezbollah, Iran, and Syria that it was too dangerous to challenge Israel by limited or asymmetric attacks.\textsuperscript{61} But besides this general agreement, there was a lack of compromise among Israeli policymakers. Intense disagreements continued between Israel’s top three political leaders – Prime Minister Olmert, Minister of Defense Barak, and Minister of Foreign Affairs Livni – with regard to the length of the war and the military/political objectives that had to be achieved.\textsuperscript{62} While Barak and, later, Livni thought that Israel should stop the assault while being unquestionably ahead and had managed much of what could possibly be done
militarily – acknowledging that the air force had already taken out all its prewar targets just a few days into the war – Olmert insisted on continuing the fight and further weakening Hamas.63

The lack of consensus on the conduct of operations is also observed with respect to an exit strategy. In his analysis of OCL, Anthony H. Cordesman is categorical:

Israel’s leaders do not seem to have learned key lessons from the fighting in Lebanon. They attempted to improvise conflict termination and went to war with half formed and conflicting strategic and grand strategic objectives.64

Already observed in the case of the 33-Day War, the lack of dialogue between policy and military leaders gives the impression of an operation performed inconsistently. There was no overarching message dominating the Israeli public’s and military’s mind but various, contradictory, messages that dominated the headlines. Once again, the Israeli government and military were leading the counterinsurgency operations in a purely tactical manner, capitalizing on their technological and military superiority, but ignoring the highly political nature of the irregular challenge posed by the enemy. It is a common element that is found in the Israeli approach adopted in 2006 and 2008, but also during the Second Intifada. In this respect, Andrew Exum observes that the IDF has always adopted a counterterrorism approach rather than a counterinsurgency approach, the main difference between the two being that while in the former, there is a near absence of a political dimension, in the second, political elements are just as important as military ones.65

As such, Israel’s Achilles heel in its various irregular wars appears to have been its tendency to ignore the political root causes of such organizations as Hamas and Hezbollah.66 The apparent success of the IDF during the OCL owes more to the weak capacity of the Hamas to play the political card rather than to an effective military transformation. Whether Israel is up against an insurgency in Gaza or an irregular enemy in Lebanon, today’s wars require a much broader scope of ways and means, including political and diplomatic dimensions. As one can see, once the institutional forces involved in military change are identified and disentangled, a very different picture emerges where there is little room left for complacency.67

Conclusion

This study aimed at understanding and explaining the IDF’s doctrinal and organizational adaptation to irregular warfare, especially with regard to the SLW. A message that seeps out may have to do with the ultimate futility of military might as the sole instrument of providing Israel with the security it still longs for. Despite the great changes that have taken place at the level of Israeli society, such as the consolidation of individualism and liberalism, and the strengthening of a post-heroic society, Israel remains among the greatest conventional military powers in the world. However, the greatest issue of concern, from an Israeli perspective, is the inability of both the political and military leadership to move beyond kinetic solutions, hallmark of the conventional way of war.
In the meantime, the political fragmentation in Israel has significantly widened, with 12 to 14 factions present in the Knesset, and elections and government turnovers taking place, on average, every 18 months, making effective planning for the future impossible. The IDF, as a military institution whose legitimacy is very much tied to a conventional outlook, benefits from such political instability. The external pressures for change from the Israeli political realm on the IDF are relatively weak, and the pressures from its irregular enemies are also sufficiently limited for seriously hindering and postponing any substantive change. The integrity of the military institution was preserved in the short term through the technocentric approach, a ‘compromise’ to deal with the social pressures exerted on the institution. The lack of success in fighting the Hezbollah in 2006 was not enough to enact significant institutional adaptation, and thus the technocentric compromise remained essentially untouched. From an institutional perspective, this is to be expected, as preserving the legitimacy of the IDF within the Israeli society is better served by not adapting, even if it creates significant problems for the IDF’s military efficacy. Such an apparently illogical approach, from the point of view of the rational decision-making model, makes sense in light of institutional analysis.

The IDF remains a conventional military organization in many respects, and like other modern militaries, it will only implement substantive transformation when it will have no other options available. The risk for Israel is that it may not be in a position to react fast enough if such pressure emerges from the geopolitical environment. The unknown outcome of the recent regime changes in countries like Egypt, Tunisia, as well as Yemen and Libya may force Israel to adopt a true grand strategy.

At a more generic level, adaptation to irregular warfare by conventional military forces remains a significant challenge. This type of warfare, given its deeply political nature, undermines the fundamental legitimacy of the military institution built on the notion of being the apolitical instrument of the state. In this light, the Israeli experience is very instructive, but also worrisome if ‘small wars’ are to become the dominant form of warfare in the twenty-first century; the impetus for effective adaptation may be finally perceived when it will be too late.

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