National security has defined the Israeli experience for nearly seven decades. Yet, in the face of threats ranging from low-level terrorism to existential nuclear dangers, Israel has never adopted a formal national-security strategy. Founding prime minister David Ben-Gurion was the only sitting leader to develop one, and though it was never formally enshrined, the ‘Ben-Gurion doctrine’ remains Israel’s closest equivalent to a national-security strategy to this day. The defence components of that doctrine were based on three fundamental pillars, commonly known as the ‘three Ds’: deterrence of possible threats; detection, meaning early warning of impending attacks in the event that deterrence failed; and decision, meaning decisive military defeat of the enemy. In recent years, a fourth pillar has been added – defence – though it remains controversial, and the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) have yet to fully adapt to its implications.

In recent years, changes in Israel’s strategic environment, and in the nature of the military threats it faces, have made securing the strategic pillars increasingly challenging. Deterring non-state actors is much harder than deterring states, as repeated rounds of violence with Hizbullah and Hamas have shown. Detection of terrorist acts – and especially of rocket attacks, as Israel has learned painfully in recent rounds – is particularly difficult, requiring a near-immediate response. Defence against these threats
presents unique operational and technological difficulties, and the rocket
shield that Israel deployed so effectively against Hamas during fighting in
summer 2014 is unlikely to be anywhere near as effective against Hizbullah’s
mammoth (and increasingly precise) rocket arsenal. But it is the remaining
strategic pillar – decision – which has proven hardest of all, and may even
have become unachievable in the contemporary environment.

In search of decision
The concept of military decision refers to the ability to prevent the enemy
from carrying on the fight, by destroying its military capabilities or by
undermining its psychological will to continue. Historically, the need for
clear decision reflected the presumption that deterrence would fail every
few years and that war would break out. Israel’s concept of military decision
was thus designed to help restore failed deterrence and prolong the lulls
between wars. It explicitly sought to end each round with a clear victory,
because nothing else would provide for the cumulative deterrent effect
Israel sought – that is, to convince the Arabs that their efforts to destroy
Israel were futile, and ultimately to lead them into accepting the need to end
the conflict. The two had an interactive effect; decision would restore deter-
rence, and deterrence would limit the need for decision. As the mechanism
for resolving hostilities once they had actually broken out, military decision
was the most crucial of Israel’s four strategic pillars.¹

Israel has never in practice been able to achieve total victory of the kind
reached, for example, by the allied powers in the Second World War. The
asymmetries between Israel and the Arab countries in territory, population,
overall economic resources, diplomatic support and more were so funda-
mental that such a degree of decision was never feasible. In contrast to
countries such as the United States, Israel never sought total victory as the
objective of its military strategy.²

Instead, in Israel’s case, military decision has generally meant the ability
to end the fighting on enemy territory, following significant destruction of
enemy forces and under favourable strategic circumstances. Nevertheless,
Israel achieved this inarguably only in its first three conventional wars (in
1948, 1956 and 1967); and arguably managed it during the war in Lebanon
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in 1982, and the second intifada. Israel was only partially successful – or unable to achieve military decision – in the 1969–71 War of Attrition, the 1973 Yom Kippur War, the 2006 war in Lebanon and repeated smaller-scale operations against Hizbullah and Hamas.\(^3\) The difficult reality is that Israel’s last unequivocal military victory came in 1967, some five decades ago.

Even in the three ostensibly decisive wars, Israel only succeeded in destroying a comparatively small percentage of enemy capabilities, sufficient to cause disarray, incoherence and a short-term loss of will to continue fighting, but not enough to deliver a knockout blow, or to turn the military achievements into concrete diplomatic ones. After a dramatic victory in 1967, Israel was soon involved again in low-level hostilities on the Syrian and Jordanian borders; just two years later in low- to medium-intensity hostilities with Egypt (the War of Attrition); and in high-intensity hostilities with Egypt two years thereafter, in the Yom Kippur War. Moreover, the Arab armies were rapidly resupplied and grew greatly in size and quality after each of the wars.\(^4\)

The first intifada, and the second even more so, had a fundamental impact on Israeli thinking, further reinforced by the subsequent rounds with Hizbullah and Hamas. Strategic military decision was found to be irrelevant to confrontations of this nature. Instead, the IDF would seek tactical decision; in other words, to gain the upper hand in every specific confrontation, but not overall decision in one major campaign. In effect, Israel was returning to the principles that had guided its approach to ‘current security’ (low-intensity state-based or terrorist attacks) during the 1950s.\(^5\) Even hawks such as then-prime minister Ariel Sharon and IDF chief of staff Moshe Ya’alon came to the conclusion that the intifada could only be overcome through a gradual, cumulative and long-term process of physical and economic exhaustion, rather than blitzkrieg,\(^6\) and that victory would be ‘won by points, not by a knockout blow’.\(^7\) In the meantime, Israel would seek to reduce the threat to a level the public could live with, and which would allow it to retain its diplomatic freedom of manoeuvre.\(^8\)

The apparent debacle of the 2006 Lebanon war pushed the IDF to give considerable further thought to the concept, and to the means of achieving decision in an era of asymmetric threats. Based on its experience in the
three rounds with Hamas in Gaza in 2008, 2012 and 2014, it does not appear to have succeeded, and Hizbullah is a much more potent adversary – yet the desire to achieve rapid military decision has nevertheless remained fundamental to Israeli strategic thinking. In the face of primarily asymmetric threats, however, the concept is becoming less applicable, and fundamentally less useful. Israel will find it increasingly difficult to achieve military decision; what follows here is an attempt to identify the reasons why.

**Indefatigable opponents**

In most conflicts in history, the militarily successful side has been able to dictate the terms of peace. This has not been true in the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Arab states long refused not only to acknowledge defeat or accept any of Israel’s conditions for peace, but even to recognise Israel as a negotiating partner, denying its very right to exist. Some Arab states have since changed their approach, but this fundamental refusal still holds true of others, as well as of Hizbullah and Hamas. When the enemy flatly refuses to accept defeat, negotiate or even recognise the other side, achieving military decision becomes uniquely difficult, regardless of the outcome on the battlefield.

Israel continues to face highly radical actors, some theocratic and genocidal in nature. Their objectives are not limited to specific demands whose fulfilment would lead to resolution of the conflict – instead, they seek Israel’s destruction. Consequently, they have proven willing to suffer particularly harsh consequences and to perpetuate the conflict over the long term rather than reach an accommodation. It is very hard to achieve military decision over adversaries for whom every confrontation is merely part of a battle to the end. If this has been true of radical state actors, such as Syria and Iran, it is particularly true of non-state actors such as Hizbullah and Hamas.

In conventional warfare, moreover, victory is relatively clearly conceived of as the physical defeat of the enemy’s armed forces, in terms of destruction of military formations and equipment, and its will to fight. In asymmetric counter-terrorism and counter-guerrilla wars, by contrast, the very concept of military decision is unclear. These enemies’ irregular military capabilities are limited in scope and concentration, difficult to find and deeply embedded
in civilian populations. They do not present clear targets, and are very difficult to destroy.\textsuperscript{10} Israel nevertheless dealt severe blows to Hizbullah in the 2006 war and various operations before then, and to Hamas in the three major operations since 2008. But, unlike state actors, defeating non-state actors militarily, or severely degrading their capabilities, does not have a fundamental impact on their objectives, willingness to continue fighting, or standing in their respective societies. Hizbullah and Hamas are not just terrorist organisations, but mass political, ideological and socio-economic movements. One cannot destroy the ideas they represent, or eliminate the need for the services they provide. The difficulties Israel has encountered in dealing with them have been shared by all conventional armies dealing with asymmetric guerrilla confrontations.

**Indecisive wars**

Israel’s conventional wars against the Arab countries were viewed both by the leadership and the public as existential wars of no choice, leading to a broad national consensus regarding the need to win at virtually all costs. This is not the case of the threats posed by non-state actors, which can be significant, even severe, but certainly not existential. It is not that Israel cannot achieve military decision against non-state actors – it can – but the costs of an effective response have been perceived by both government and public as exceeding the magnitude of the threat, painful as that calculation may be. In the operations against Hizbullah in 2006 and Hamas in 2008, 2012 and 2014, Israel could have achieved decisive outcomes had it conquered most or all of Lebanon and Gaza respectively. The number of Israeli casualties, damage to property and disruption of daily life caused by Hizbullah and Hamas during the periods leading up to the operations were sufficient to provoke significant Israeli responses, with overwhelming public support.

A number of considerations, however, militated against an attempt to achieve military decision and truly ‘solve’ the problem. Achieving military decision would have entailed comparatively large-scale Israeli casualties, something the various governments in office at the time clearly did not believe the threats warranted. Moreover, Lebanese and Palestinian civilian casualties would have been far higher than they were even in the lower-
level operations that took place, and would have resulted in an even greater, possibly unacceptable, blow to Israel’s international standing.

Changing international norms are making military action generally – let alone achieving military decision – particularly difficult, especially in urban areas in which the likelihood of civilian casualties is high. Even a country under attack and acting in pursuit of its legitimate right of self-defence, as Israel was perceived to be by parts of the international community in Lebanon in 2006 and Gaza in 2008, 2012 and 2014, is expected to show restraint and to minimise civilian casualties, even if this means conducting less effective warfare and incurring greater losses to its own civilian population and military personnel. As civilian casualties mount, international differentiation between the side responsible for the onset of hostilities and the responding side blurs, and the victim often comes to be seen as the aggressor, especially when there is also a fundamental asymmetry in the sides’ overall military capabilities.\(^{11}\)

All countries are subject to these changing norms, but none more so today than Israel, whose difficulties in achieving military decision are compounded by the deterioration in its international standing of recent decades, primarily as a result of the Palestinian issue. In the absence of international legitimation, even when Israel has clearly been the victim of provocation it has found it increasingly difficult to take the escalatory measures needed to achieve military decision, and in some cases even to respond at all.\(^{12}\) International opinion turns hostile rapidly, and when Israel is perceived, rightly or (usually) wrongly, to have used disproportionate force, it quickly loses whatever international legitimacy it enjoyed at the outbreak of hostilities.

In most cases, Israel has chosen to take action despite international opprobrium, but its freedom of manoeuvre has been circumscribed considerably, in some cases even by the United States. In 2008, for example, concern over the response of the incoming Obama administration led Israel to restrict the scope of the Gaza operation and end it rapidly. The tempered American support Israel received in the 2012 and 2014 operations in Gaza...
was also a constraint on its freedom of action. Pressures from the rest of the international community, meanwhile, were far heavier.

Crucially, even if Israel had pursued clear military decision, it would probably not have been able to achieve more than a short-term amelioration of the threats it faced. Iran replenished Hizbullah and Hamas’s rocket arsenals in relatively short order following all of the operations, at least until 2014, and will presumably seek to do so in the future. Moreover, the consequences of achieving full military decision might have been even worse from Israel’s perspective than the pre-existing situation, at least in Gaza. Israel probably could have toppled Hamas in the operations in 2008, 2012 and 2014, but refrained from doing so out of concern that the end result would be something like Somalia, a completely lawless area from which various terrorist organisations would vie to fire more rockets at Israel; or that an even more heinous organisation would take over, such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad or al-Qaeda.

Had an effective and long-term response to the threats from Hamas and Hizbullah been deemed feasible, Israel might have been willing to pay the price. In the absence of such a calculation, Israel concluded that the costs were simply too high. The differential costs of conventional and asymmetric conflicts are such that in the former there is usually no choice but to seek military decision, whereas in the latter the threat often does not justify the price of pursuing a decisive conclusion.

**Uncooperative targets**

Ideologically driven non-state actors, such as Hizbullah and Hamas, are less susceptible than states to international pressure to cease firing. In fact, the ability to prolong the fighting for as long as possible is a fundamental part of their strategy, and a sign of victory to be trumpeted before domestic and international audiences during the post-conflict public-relations battle. On top of this, the efficacy of the UN Security Council as a force for peace – always limited when it comes to the Middle East – has been further undermined by the divisions in recent years among its permanent members. During the Cold War, a shared interest in preventing the escalation and prolongation of local conflicts enabled the two superpowers, at
times, to work together. With the recent deterioration in both US–Russian relations and America’s stature in the Middle East, the ability of either the Security Council, or the US independently, to intervene to end conflicts has diminished. In the conflicts in Lebanon in 2006 and in Gaza in 2008, 2012 and 2014, the US had virtually no influence over Hizbullah or Hamas, terrorist organisations with which it had no direct channels of communication. In 2012 and 2014, Egypt thus served as the primary mediator, even though it lacked the clout to truly influence either side and despite the fact that its relations with Israel in the former case, and Hamas in the latter, were very poor. Both times, Israel ultimately sought to end the fighting unilaterally, for lack of a better conflict-resolution mechanism, but in 2014 Hamas repeatedly rejected ceasefire proposals, leading to a prolongation of the fighting.

With large and hostile populations on virtually all fronts today, moreover, Israel’s two primary means of achieving military decision in the past—the conquest of territory and ground manoeuvre—have become both more difficult and less desirable, often something to be avoided if at all possible. Not only does Israel not seek to acquire additional territory, but it has become very reluctant to take even temporary territorial control, as evinced by its behaviour in Lebanon in 2006 and the operations in Gaza since then. Indeed, for political, demographic and military reasons, Israel has withdrawn from some territories under its control (Sinai, southern Lebanon and Gaza), and has found maintaining control of others to be difficult and costly (West Bank). Without ground manoeuvre to conquer territory, even temporarily, it is very difficult to achieve military decision. Firepower alone has not proven to be sufficient.

Ground manoeuvre may be effective against short-range rockets near the border, but it is of limited utility against rockets with ranges that can be deployed tens or even hundreds of kilometres away. To effectively deal with rocket threats at these distances through ground manoeuvre would require massive and prolonged occupations of a magnitude that Israel clearly does not wish to conduct. The apparent end of the era of conventional military-to-military conflicts in the Middle East and the rise of asymmetric warfare have thus further undermined Israel’s ability to destroy enemy forces, especially when deeply embedded in civilian populations.
In these circumstances, the levels of attrition required in order to achieve military decision are unclear. During the Yom Kippur War, for example, Israel neared military decision – but did not quite achieve it – after reaching an attrition rate of some 40% of enemy armour, while the US achieved military decision in the first Gulf War with an attrition rate of about 50% (the precise figures are the subject of debate). Even so, in both cases it was the threat to continue advancing, destroy the respective militaries and occupy the respective capitals that was the truly decisive factor, not the levels of attrition. In terms of a war without ground manoeuvre, such as those Israel has waged in recent decades and is likely to face in the future, at least one informed scholar speaks of the need to achieve an attrition rate of 70, 80 or even 90%, a feat no combatant has ever managed to achieve.

In contemporary asymmetric warfare, whether for political or operational reasons, the stronger side can bring only a small portion of its capabilities to bear. During the 2006 war against Hizbullah, and the operations against Hamas since then, geographic constraints meant the IDF was able to deploy only a relatively small part of its ground forces – and had this not been the case, the international reaction to a large-scale invasion would have been severe. Even the Israeli Air Force (IAF), which bore the brunt of the fighting, had a hard time manifesting its superiority. The issue of air superiority was negligible, and the IAF was severely constrained by Hizbullah and Hamas’s practice of embedding their forces among the civilian population. The US, a global superpower with incomparable military might, encountered similar problems in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Israel succeeded in achieving military decision in the past when ground manoeuvre enabled it to conquer territory, especially when the overall force–space ratio was favourable. Destruction of Arab air capabilities often proved sufficient to approach decision, but not to fully achieve it, and actual decision was only reached on the ground. In 1973, the problem of a saturated battlefield arose for the first time, as the fighting was conducted by far larger militaries and in narrow areas on both the Egyptian and Syrian fronts, creating great force–space density and constraining Israel’s ability to
conduct manoeuvre. In the operations in Lebanon from 1982 through 2006, and against Hamas in 2008, 2012 and 2014, the force–space ratio again manifested itself, resulting in a dense battlefield and limiting Israel’s ability to manoeuvre, achieve breakthrough and bring its superiority to bear. In addition, Israel has been largely unable to achieve escalation dominance over Hizbullah and Hamas – escalation of the conflict to a level where the adversary can no longer, or no longer wishes to, continue the fighting. Indeed, in all of the confrontations to date, Hizbullah and Hamas have shown a determination and ability to fire the last shot, as a matter of strategic doctrine, even when Israel had conducted lengthy and painful campaigns designed to suppress rocket fire, and it was Israel that was forced to exercise the restraint necessary to bring about a ceasefire. In prolonged asymmetric conflicts in which Israel’s home front is exposed to continuous rocket fire and international pressure to end the conflict grows, it is simply not worth the cost. Israel prefers to get the fighting over with, at the expense of its deterrence posture.

More fundamentally, in past wars Israel had the ability to threaten the stability and even the existence of Arab regimes. The Yom Kippur War, for example, ended with IDF forces within striking distance of both Cairo and Damascus, and during the 1982 invasion of Lebanon, Israel conquered Beirut. Given Israel’s air superiority, both the Arab civilian and military rears were vulnerable. Today, a balance of terror has evolved both with non-state actors, such as Hizbullah and Hamas, and state actors such as Syria (at least prior to the civil war). Given the vast rocket and missile arsenals at play, the wars have become ones of mutual deterrence – or mutual punishment – against the civilian home fronts and military rears, and both sides now have the ability to cause grave damage to the other even after absorbing a severe first strike. Moreover, long-range and precise missiles, with large warheads, may soon provide these actors with the ability to significantly disrupt both Israel’s offensive operations and the mobilisation of its reserve forces. In these circumstances, achieving military decision will be even harder.

Finally, the missile programmes and chemical, biological or potential nuclear-weapons capabilities of countries in the region that are distant from
Israel – such as Iran today, or Libya and Iraq in the past – pose great difficulties. Military decision vis-à-vis such capabilities at these distances is simply unrealistic for a country like Israel, whose strategic reach is limited. Israel must focus on deterrence, either by punishment (attacking high-value targets), or by denial (attacking critical military nodes). At the nuclear level, the very concept of military decision is largely meaningless for a country Israel’s size – and arguably for all others, too.

The ongoing inability of a military as large and technologically advanced as the IDF to decisively defeat organisations as comparatively small as Hizbullah and Hamas is troublesome, and requires that it conduct a fundamental reassessment not just of its concept of military decision, but of its overall strategic approach. The asymmetric threats Israel faces are likely to grow even more severe in the future. The highly problematic conclusion is that Israel must be more selective in resorting to military force. It should do so primarily when the prospects of actually achieving military decision are significant, not just as a standard, unspecified means of maintaining deterrence. In other cases, it must adopt a more defensive approach. (This is without addressing the obvious need for diplomatic progress with the Palestinians, as at least a partial solution to Israel’s military challenges.)

A call for a more restrained and defensive approach in the face of severe threats and provocations is extremely difficult, both because it may undermine Israel’s deterrence (the first of the four strategic pillars), and because it means ignoring public demands for a strong response. The electoral ramifications for decision-makers are a major and understandable concern. Hizbullah and Hamas have, moreover, at times taken measures that were specifically designed to leave Israel with little choice but to respond, regardless of its leaders’ preferences.

If there is a possibility, however, that exercising greater restraint could undermine deterrence, there is no doubt that repeated failures to achieve military decision have already done so – and this weakening of the two strategic pillars weakens Israel’s entire strategic posture, including its
international standing. Indeed, Israel often loses thrice: its international standing is severely damaged by military responses, which often do not produce a long-term change for the better, and the damage to Israel’s deterrence encourages its non-state adversaries to renew hostilities at a relatively early date. This is exactly what they seek; indeed, it is at the heart of their strategies. Acting this way plays into their hands.

In these circumstances, far greater emphasis on the new strategic pillar of defence – including, but not limited to, investments in anti-rocket systems such as Iron Dome – becomes more important than ever. It is true, as critics charge, that one does not win wars and solve problems by means of defence, and thus that investments in offence are more important. But it is a question of balance. Until such a time as Israel succeeds in developing an effective offensive response to Hizbullah and Hamas rockets, and other asymmetric threats, it must learn to live with them to a greater degree than it has in the past – and place greater emphasis on conflict management, rather than seeking to resolve it through military action.

Unlike during its early decades, Israel’s existence is no longer in question – a fact admittedly subject to a possible Iranian nuclear capability. As a country whose basic security against non-nuclear threats is now essentially ensured, Israel should develop a greater ability to live with the pain inflicted by Hizbullah, Hamas and others like them. This is a difficult recommendation when people are under rocket fire, and will clearly depend on the specific circumstances; Hizbullah’s more than 100,000 rockets pose a truly massive threat. In some cases, Israel will have to respond, at times even more forcefully than it has to date, but in others restraint and defence may ultimately prove more effective. That Israel’s options are thus constrained may be unjust, but defence may prove the better option – at least until means of achieving military decision are ensured.

Notes

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