



Woe to the winner

military-Earth thinking notebook

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Histoire & stratégie

In "OfWar", Clausewitz described war as the confrontation of two trinities, each of which associates a government, a people and an army. In his mind, this translated into a gigantic duel between two armed forces until one of them was crushed. Deprived of their centre of gravity, the State and the people then had only to submit to the victor on the battlefield. This pattern was undermined when states no longer faced other states, but "organizations" whose centre of gravity was no longer their generally small armies, but the support of the population, transforming the "duel" into an "operation among the people".

In the case of the opposition between Israel and Hamas, this asymmetry is further accentuated by the peculiarities of the two adversaries. David who became Goliath, Israel combines a power that is weak because it is unstable, a very powerful army and an increasingly radical population [1]. 1) Faced with him, Hamas has a "power" that is determined to the point of fanaticism, a militia that is materially very weak and a population that is even more radicalized than that of Israel. In the absence of a will capable of imposing a long-term political solution, Israel is trapped by this army to which it owes its survival and which can only offer it short-term security solutions. Arnold Toynbee, speaking of Sparta, called this the "curse of the strong man".

The Spartan Syndrome

In its military strategy, Israel has traditionally reasoned in terms of three types of threats: internal (Palestinian movements), close (neighbouring Arab states) and distant (nuclear Iraq or Iran), trying to reconcile the reThe military responses were combined into a single doctrine, a combination of the "iron wall", described by Zeev Jabotinsky in the 1920s, and the "revolution in military affairs". Through the combination of nuclear deterrence, the security fence, the squaring of the Palestinian population and a strong capacity for remote conventional strikes, Tsahal thought it had found the answer to all threats. In reality, this

'great unified theory' creates new actors: peripheral 'proto-States' such as Hezbollah in southern Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, born and living more or less from the confrontation with Israel.

The current Israeli power is incapable of winning peace, Hamas is incapable of winning the war against Israel, but both can hope to win "to" wage war for domestic political purposes. On 4 November 2008[3], the Israeli government proposed confrontation with a raid killing six Palestinians and Hamas agreed by not renewing the truce. We thus find ourselves in a form of war that is closer to the game of go than to the game of chess, because both opponents know that it will end not with checkmate, but with a tacit mutual agreement [4] followed by an accounting of "victory points".

As in reality, these "points" are largely subjective. This time, the Olmert government was careful not to announce, as in 2006, a list of very ambitious objectives whose non-attainment had largely contributed to the idea of defeat. It was only a question of "restoring a normal life to the inhabitants of southern Israel" and "inflicting a severe blow on Hamas", war goals sufficiently vague to hope for at least a small victory (the cessation of rocket fire). Implicitly, it was clear that this operation was also intended to restore the deterrent capacity of the IDF and its internal confidence.

The non-battle

In line with the American "shock and awe" doctrine, Operation Cast Lead began with a massive 40 to 50 F-16 I raid striking very precisely (thanks to drones, with the help of Fatah and the human networks of Shabak) the "infrastructure" of Hamas. The following waves, with the help of artillery and assault helicopters, then set about destroying the hundreds of tunnels on the southern border, rocket launching sites and preparing the penetration axes for the land offensive. Much more effective than in 2006, this campaign claimed between 400 and 500 victims in one week, a result that nevertheless remains insufficient, confirming that remote fire alone is powerless to achieve decisive results in the face of organisations embedded in a dense urban fabric. The rocket fire did not cease and Hamas was not beheaded, despite the deaths of Nizar Rayyan and Azkariah al-Jamal. The military potential of Hamas (an estimated 7,000 to 20,000 militiamen) is not seriously depleted.

Contrary to 2006, the campaign of remote strikes is thus prolonged by a real ground operation whose immediate objectives are to control the rocket launching zones, to participate in the destruction of the tunnels, to prevent any coordinated manoeuvre by Hamas and to inflict as many casualties as possible on it. More symbolically, it is also a matter of "planting the flag at the enemy's house". However, this ground offensive (or air-land offensive, as the air and ground means are integrated) has no right to fail. Thanks to the use of armoured-mechanised columns moving in a bubble of fire support, the five Israeli brigades began by partitioning off then try to wear it out by a series of mini armoured raids in slightly open terrain or, more rarely, by the use of special forces in more densely urbanised areas. In this, the modes of action employed are very similar to those of the Americans in Iraq, with the exception of the humanitarian aspects.

Faced with these "iron columns", a militia can only play on the preparation of the ground, the use of long-range weapons and stealth. The preparation of the ground (obstacles, explosive devices) was hampered by a lack of means and skills, and the few obstacles put in place were, for the most part, destroyed during the remote fire phase. Unlike Hezbollah, Hamas apparently does not have modern anti-tank missiles, making it difficult for it to strike Israeli units other than with mortars or snipers. Since any direct attack is

doomed to massacre, the only way for Hamas is to remain entrenched in areas inaccessible to armoured columns and wait for the Israelis to engage in an urban clean-up operation.

Taking Fallujah at the end of 2004 required the deployment of four brigades (two to partition and two to conquer) for a month and a half, and cost the lives of 73 Americans. In 2002, the capture of Jenin had required two weeks of fighting and 23 deaths for the brigade engaged. However, Gaza City and the outlying camps represent about four times Fallujah and twelve times Jenin in terms of surface area and population. The price to be paid to seize them was too high for the Olmert government. The battle of Gaza thus remained symbolic, the two adversaries not really meeting.

Targeting the population

In this context, it is ultimately the populations surrounding these two armies that avoid each other who are the most affected. This was already the case during the July 2006 war, when Israeli civilians complained of being subjected to daily rocket fire from Hezbollah, while the Olmert government refused to commit troops to southern Lebanon. At the same time, IDF strikes killed many more Lebanese civilians than Hezbollah militiamen, who were well protected in their underground shelters.

Worse still, it now seems that the population has become the primary objective of military operations in order to "pressure" an adversary that, on both sides, cannot be defeated militarily. With the arrival of ultra-precise munitions, it was thought that human progress had been made since the strategic bombings of the Second World War. We are now witnessing a step backwards, since the damage appears to be less and less "collateral" and more and more "central" [5].

This is obvious on the side of Palestinian organizations that confront Israel and who consider that they have no other recourse than to strike the civilian population through the "... kamikazes" or by projectiles, insufficiently precise to be really dangerous (it takes more than 400 to kill a single civilian), but which maintain a permanent climate of insecurity. But this is now also the case on the part of Israel, which has not only transformed the Gaza Strip into an immense prison camp, but which is using its force in such a way that, more than weakening Hamas, it is the punishment of the Palestinian population that seems to be sought [6]. Of course, as always in such cases, the adversary is stigmatized as both coward and terrorist, while the suffering of its own population is largely instrumentalized.

In good faith and with a certain schizophrenia, Tsahal can present itself as the most ethical army in the world since it warns by phone, leaflets or SMS [7] before killing. 7) If we believe the figures commonly evoked, the "kill ratio" between Israelisoldiers and Palestinian civilians is about 1 to 50, of which 20 to 30 children, which does not suggest either an extreme willingness to control force[8] or, it is true, a fierce willingness on the part of Hamas to preserve the population. But how can one expect anything else from an organization that introduced suicide bombing to the Sunni world?

The letter and the spirit of the major international treaties signed since 1868 aimed at protecting the population as much as possible from the ravages of war are obviously flouted, with, moreover, this aggravating circumstance for Israel that the population of Gaza, still officially occupied territory, remains under its responsibility. Legally, Operation Cast Lead is an internal security operation, an area in which, even more than in a state of war, the response must be proportional and controlled. From the outset of the operation, the names of the unit commanders were not disclosed for fear of prosecution for war

crimes. Far from the heroic wars of the Sharon, Tal or Adan, Cast Lead is anonymous.

Without hearts, controlling minds

If, in this regression, Hamas is held back by the technical inadequacy of its machines, Israel still has to arbitrate with its own morality, but above all with that of international public opinion, first and foremost American. In fact, Israel knows that each of its major asymmetrical operations (Grapes of Wrath in 1996, Rampart in 2002, Summer Rain and Change of Direction in 2006) always triggers a process of protest that ends up putting a stop to it. To delay this deadline and for the first time on this scale, the military operation was accompanied by a real campaign of perceptions.

The first circle concerned was that of Israeli public opinion. To do this, the government took care to place itself in a position of self-defence, putting forward the threat of rockets and the non-renewal of the truce by Hamas, then preceding the offensive with an ultimatum, thus obtaining the support of more than 80% of the population. But the media are no longer the only sources of information. The new information technologies, first and foremost mobile phones, also offer the possibility of establishing a direct link between the army and the nation, and thus of bringing the morale of the "front" and the "rear" together more quickly than before. This had been one of the reasons for the failure in 2006, as soldiers did not hesitate to communicate to their families their criticisms of the way in which operations were conducted. This time, in addition to reducing the reasons for dissatisfaction through precise planning, a complete seal was established between the battle zone and the interior of the country[9], in exchange for a permanent effort to explain things to the soldiers.

The second battle of perceptions took place outside the Middle East. Prolonging an intense diplomatic preparation with foreign governments and diplomats, the Israelis organized the blockade of images (without images, suffering remains an abstraction), and appealed to pressure groups and sympathetic intellectuals to organize demonstrations of support and hammer a number of messages (Israel shows restraint, the idea of proportionality between the threat and the response has no place[10], etc.)... Since communication via the Internet cannot be compartmentalized, an "army" of reservists and supporters has been called in to "occupy" the key points (the first pages on Google, for example) and to flood sites and blogs with comments. It has thus become very difficult to find information favourable to Hamas. Finally, on the ground, Tsahal tried to avoid, without succeeding, the "Qana" [11], that is to say massacres that were sufficiently important to appear in the international media and to arouse strong emotion [12].

What is victory?

On 17 and 18 January 2009, the two camps "passed their turn" by declaring, one after the other, a unilateral ceasefire. Then begins the battle of the balance sheet. In 2006, Hezbollah was the first to occupy this ground, hammering home the theme of "divine victory". This time, it is rather the Israelis who saturate the space with messages of victory. But the objective "points" are few and far between. The rocket fire has stopped, but despite the destruction, the threat is still there. The losses inflicted on Hamas, claimed by Israel (700 combatants killed), are unverifiable; but even so, when there are about 200.000 unemployed people of military age in Gaza, one can imagine that Hamas's human potential will be quickly replenished and its killed leaders quickly replaced. Private Guilad Shalit, still a prisoner of Hamas, is carefully forgotten. For its part, Hamas cannot boast of having inflicted significant blows on the enemy (seven deaths, no prisoners, no

destruction of machines) but, like any organisation committed to the war, it is not a terrorist organisation.e in a very asymmetrical combat, it can simply claim the fact of having resisted, and thus gain prestige among the Palestinian population. All in all, Israel can claim a small victory, but at the price of an increase in the number of its enemies and the erosion of its image.

In 745 BC, at the beginning of the reign of Teglathphalasar III, Assyria was the greatest military power in the Middle East. A century and a half later, after mercilessly crushing its enemies in every battle, Assyria no longer existed.

1] The most traditionalist Jewish population will account for half of the population in twenty years' time.

2] In 2002, a study concluded that 50% of Palestinians between the ages of 6 and 11 did not dream of being a doctor or engineer but of being blown up among Israelis.

3] US Presidential Election Day in order to go unnoticed.

4] The game of go ends when both players pass their turn successively.

[5] With this aggravating circumstance it is much less guilty to kill from a distance.

[6] With for example the destruction of economic infrastructures.

[7] Which replace the old sirens that warned of the arrival of the bombers.

[8] "We are very violent. We do not hesitate to use all means to avoid deaths in our ranks", Lieutenant-Colonel Amir, quoted by Michel Bôle-Richard, in Le Monde, January 9, 2009.

9] By simply confiscating mobile phones and strict orders not to talk to journalists, all of which are strictly controlled by the military police and accompanied by threats of prison sentences.

10] Among others, André Glucksman, in Le Monde, 5 January.

11] Named after the southern Lebanese city that was bombed in 1996 (106 dead) and again in 2006 (28 dead).

12] A "Qana" took place on January 5 when a school run by the UN was hit, killing 39 people.

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