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Limitations of Strategic Maneuver: The Israeli Case

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In this strategic analysis, Kobi Michael examines the difficulties that Israel's political echelon faces in complex strategic situations by exercising the paradoxical logic of strategy. Adding to that difficulty is the complex and turbulent environment in which Israel operates, where it faces a fundamental clash between military strategy and political logic.

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The state of Israel – since its independence in 1948 – continues to exist in a hostile environment. Such an environment has led Israel through years of strengthening military capabilities and consistently improving military might, thought and strategy. Political thought adjusted itself to military paradigms and the military establishment became the most appreciated and respected institute in Israel (Michael, 2007). There is doubt that the hegemony and supremacy of military thought narrowed the maneuver and flexibility spaces of the political echelon and it is reasonable to assume that the State of Israel missed some political and strategic opportunities that may have improved its geostrategic position. However, on the other hand, there is no doubt that the State of Israel has succeeded to flourish in its perilous neighborhood and has succeeded to tackle many strategic challenges in ways that continue to encourage its liberal and democratic characteristics and remain a part of the free world and one of the leading nations. If this is the reality, then what, precisely, are the problems? Is there a real strategic problem in a situation where military thought is the main emphasis? If it is a problem, how (and why) should it be dealt with? This article attempts to elaborate on these questions and to analyze the difficulties that the Israeli political echelon faces whenever it has to deal with complex strategic situations by exercising the paradoxical logic of strategy. The paradoxical logic of strategy and the difficulties to explain its logic to the public in order to gain public support and consensus that are required

for major strategic moves in a democratic society continue to represent serious obstacles.

Israel has succeeded to tackle many strategic challenges in ways that continue to encourage its liberal and democratic characteristics

Obstacles Created by Prioritizing Military Thought as Supreme

The complexity of the geopolitical environment and the characteristics of the prolonged confrontation with the Palestinians create a constant perception of security threats within Israeli leadership and serve to rank military thinking above political thinking. The unique characteristics of military thinking lead to a unique framing of the characteristics of threats, and this framing in turn shapes patterns of response and action. This framing of the threat's characteristics became a primary layer of the collective psychological foundation and fixes the conceptualization of the conflict as uncontrollable and ongoing (Michael, 2009). History demonstrates that under the circumstances in which Israel operates, Israeli leadership finds it difficult to update its strategic paradigm. The reason is that adjusting the paradigm requires disengagement from the military thinking that amplifies the sense of threat and leads to preference for military power as a means of solving political problems. The strategic paradigm is, in essence, security-based and military in nature, but this does not necessarily mean that the political sector has not willingly adopted it. Moreover, there were cases in which the military sector pointed out limitations of the paradigm, but the political sector continued to adhere to it nevertheless.

During Operation "Cast Lead" (January 2009), the Israeli pattern of action in the Gaza Strip was based on the logic of military thought and reflected the security discourse that prefers the use of force as a solution to political problems. The political discourse refrained almost completely from consideration of other political options, such as negotiations with Hamas, whether directly or indirectly.

The political sector chose to frame the complicated reality through the traditional military perception along the lines of

what may be termed "political militarism." A salient example of this phenomenon is the position of the military, headed by Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi and Minister of Defense Ehud Barak, who realized the limitations of military power after a few days of fighting during Operation "Cast Lead." They even advised the political sector to terminate the operation after approximately a week, but Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Foreign Minister Tzipi Livni pressed for continuation of military action, and indeed it continued for another month.

Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi and Minister of Defense Ehud Barak realized the limitations of military power after a few days of fighting during Operation "Cast Lead."

Israel exists within a complex reality because, among a multitude of other reasons, the awareness of threat and the sense of insecurity amplify awareness of the tension around security issues and create a reality of "neither peace nor war." In such circumstances, the complexity of strategy becomes a real challenge requiring particularly developed and sophisticated strategic skills. Such a complex mix of circumstances requires strategic acrobatics capable of creating tricky, paradoxical synergies out of opposites and contrasts, such as fighting Hamas and simultaneously providing the local population with daily requirements, including "luxury" items.

Given that in Israel "there is no conception of security that can serve as an organizing conceptual framework for politicians and soldiers, [and] Israeli governments have not developed the relevant know-how to address foreseeable crises and security matters," (Tamari, 2007: 30-31) the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is typically assessed in the context of a security policy that is not current, not adequately developed, and not totally relevant. Rather, it is, at times, detached from the broader contexts of national, regional, and international security and their methods of management. Israel tends not to trust the international community and carries in her ethos a bloody history. Therefore, Israel often makes mountains out of molehills and regards every threat as an existential danger. Thus, the burden of confronting threatening situations becomes heavier and more complicated.

Developing the skills to deal with strategic complexity under the structural and cognitive conditions described here requires significant enhancement of learning processes in a way that would enable the political echelon to develop a relevant, coherent, and effective national security perspective, in turn allowing the development of processes and formation of political and public legitimacy for complex, ground-breaking measures.

The Geopolitical Environment, Negative Influence, and Israeli Leaders

The complexity of Israel's strategic environment, which has been described as a "meeting of opposites" (Luttwak, 2002: 77), requires complex learning processes that would enable political leaders to cope with a dynamic reality in

an intelligent and critical way. "Learning" for our purposes is what Tetlock (1999) described as a change in the cognitive structure of the image of the individual in relation to the international environment…in the direction of greater complexity and willingness to be self-critical. The significance of this form of coping is the guarantee of relevance of the cognitive structures – the system of beliefs and perceptions that serves the purposes of interpretation and understanding of the same reality and of developing methods of coping with substantive challenges – by, among other means, reframing the perceived threats. The relationship between the cognitive structure and the content and beliefs, however, is fairly complicated and has the potential to overflow the value complexity barrier (Bar-Siman-Tov, 1996). Players prefer to assimilate new information into thought frameworks that already exist, which is likely to prevent a change in beliefs (Levy, J., 1994).

In many cases decision-makers aspire to avoid past failures, while the generals are fighting the previous war. Jack Levy (1994) has suggested that lessons from the past and their accompanying myths can affect policy more than standard perception. Rather than systematically learning from historical experience, it is possible to use history selectively and instrumentally by choosing examples that most support preexisting policy preferences. Israeli experience fuels the Israeli narrative and maintains the perception of threat and danger in a way that makes it difficult to change the strategic paradigm by accepting and processing new or alternative information.

Israeli experience fuels the Israeli narrative and maintains the perception of threat and danger in a way that makes it difficult to change the strategic paradigm

Decision-making processes – particularly those of governments subject to complex and conflict-riddled circumstances – reflect the manner by which various alternatives are examined through "cultural filters." Historical analogies, as well as precedents and metaphors, guide the process of selection among various alternatives, while "cultural filters" simplify reality but reduce the range of selection. These filters in fact determine what is considered obvious and what is subject to debate or reexamination. This process generates the array of scenarios to be developed by the government and affects the shape of patterns of operation and reaction (Levy, Y., 2009). In the case of Israel, the military filter almost always serves the political sector as well, and thus it influences the learning processes, design of alternatives, and policy choices, which in turn lead to a marked preference for use of military power to resolve political problems. The Second Lebanon War and Operation "Cast Lead" are clear examples of this process.

Israel's Complex Strategic Environment

The complex strategic environment in which Israel operates and the paradoxical principles on which this environment is based make it difficult to market and explain it, both to

coalition partners and to the general public. The complexity of the strategy and its underlying paradoxical logic require the creation of a balance based on *complementary opposition* – military strategy (force) balanced by a soft political-diplomatic strategy, and vice versa. For example, a severe military blow to Hamas could serve as the basis for talks and the adoption of a policy of negotiation with Hamas or supporting the local population. Conversely, it is possible to strike a blow to Hamas without damaging its ruling power ("home address") and principal assets because that would be the only way to deter it militarily in the future. That is, unless it has some standing and assets, Hamas cannot be deterred.

This process is based on paradoxical logic and on complementary opposition, making it very difficult to attract support among the Jewish public in Israel. That conclusion is reinforced by the findings of the Peace Index of February 2009, which indicate that a third of the Israeli public was disappointed by the outcome of Operation "Cast Lead" and less than a third was satisfied with the outcome. The more significant finding, however, was that 66% of the Jewish public think that the military operation should have continued until Hamas completely surrendered (Peace Index, Steinmetz Center, Tel Aviv University, February 2009). The December 2008 Peace Index showed that 90% of the Jewish public in Israel already believed that the operation should continue until Hamas surrendered.

The democratization of war makes it impossible for Israel's leaders not to consider public opinion and the power of the media, compelling them to act quickly, before the media can influence public opinion and planned actions. But it is precisely in these circumstances that the political echelon needs to have acquired complex learning processes requiring strategic skills and staff-work that do not exist in most of the Israeli ministries. In the absence of these tools, the resulting vacuum draws on military experience, knowledge, and thinking, and from that moment onwards, the military sector begins influencing decision-making processes and policymaking, primarily as a result of its structural and traditional advantages rather than its own free will. When the political sector is unable to internalize and operationalize complex-learning processes efficiently and relatively quickly, it then loses maneuverability and flexibility. In such circumstances it has difficulty setting new and relevant policy, and it is compelled to operate under the influence of public and media pressure and against a problematic reality of a gap of legitimacies on the part of the public — the gap between the legitimacy for using force vs. the absence of legitimacy for scarifying (Michael, 2008, Michael, 2007b; Michael, 2011).

The democratization of war makes it impossible for Israel's leaders not to consider public opinion and the power of the media,

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Even in cases where the national leadership has undergone a learning process that led to change of positions and priorities, these changes must pass the political and public legitimacy test because the leaders of democratic states – specifically the State of Israel – must earn political approval

(in the governmental and coalition contexts) as well as public approval for the implementation of policy, all the more so when novel, ground-breaking policy is involved (Bar-Siman-Tov, 1996). But sometimes the public cannot absorb paradoxical opposites and synergies of opposites and contradictions. These are key strategic elements of Israel's complex operational environment but are very hard to market and explain because, for these purposes, the public would also have to undergo a complex social learning process (Bar-Siman-Tov, 1996).

Despite the range of possible strategies, Israeli leaders have not always succeeded in establishing legitimacy for the policies they sought to implement, and the most salient cases actually turned out to be in the Palestinian context (Bar-Siman-Tov, 1996). This difficulty can be explained through the unique and complex characteristics of the operating environment in which, paradoxically, a sterile and prolonged political process is taking place against the background of a violent confrontation (with the Gaza Strip) and a continuing focused effort to eliminate terrorist threats (from the West Bank).

The lack of congruence between Israeli military powers and political powers creates a need for a unique leadership capable of developing a strategy for overcoming the obstacle described above, which is sometimes a stumbling block in the complex circumstances in which Israel must operate.

Israeli Leadership and the Incongruence Between Military and Political Power

The complex operating environment of the Israeli-Palestinian arena in which Israel is situated is characterized by sudden transitions from calmness to violent confrontation and sometimes also by a political process taking place in parallel to violent confrontation. Operating in such an environment requires a uniquely strategic leadership capable of influencing the public and leading it through complex and controversial processes. In democratic countries, however, leaders must act on the basis of political agreement and broad public consensus grounded in linear logic. The difficulty lies in resolving the contradiction between the accepted linear logic (common sense) and the paradoxical logic of the strategy. History has shown that only rarely have leaders been gifted with a strategic ability that applies to the reality of war as well as the reality of peace. Even rarer is the skill to deal with a complex, dynamic reality involving a sense of existential threat and "neither peace nor war."

Political leadership should also be intellectual leadership that is capable of combining military strategy with political understanding and formulating a grand strategy in the broadest, most inclusive, and most comprehensive sense of the term (Michael, 2007). The challenge becomes more difficult within the complex environment in which Israel operates, where reality embodies a fundamental clash between military strategy and political logic (balancing between "ways" and "means" in a turbulent environment towards the "ends"). Military strategy dictates striking, defeating, capturing territory, and achieving the best possible military outcome. Political logic requires achievement of the

best possible negotiating outcome. This is why almost all military personnel believe that almost all politicians are either too daring or too cowardly. The military leader will always try for the best possible outcome, even if this is less than total victory; the statesman will try to achieve his objectives through negotiations; the potential clash between them is understandable and insoluble (Luttwak, 2002:194).

Another contradiction between the strategies is reflected in the difference between the diplomacy of peace – the purpose of which is to minimize a threat – and deterrence by means of armed persuasion – the purpose of which is to prevent actualization of a threat. The very need to use armed persuasion undercuts the ability to persuade through the diplomacy of peace. The diplomacy of peace, however, could create a problematic reality for Israel, where she would have difficulty deterring her opponent through armed persuasion.

Israel exists in a reality of incongruence between notable military power and notable diplomatic power. Luttwak found that in cases of incongruence between these powers, the strategic range of operation decreases. In the Israeli case, though, it appears that the lack of decisive diplomatic superiority creates incongruence in relation to military power. Not only is there a strong need for strategy, but strong strategic leadership is also necessary.

The key to intelligent handling of the incongruence between these powers lies in a strategic leadership that will strike the right balance between the horizontal and vertical dimensions of strategy. Such leadership would define consistent and non-conflicting goals, set priorities, and coordinate the various sectors: military, diplomatic, social, and economic. This requires an acrobatic combination of paradoxes and contradictions because a tough military policy needs to be balanced with a soft foreign policy, and vice versa. But such acrobatics put the political sector – in Israel specifically and in democratic countries generally – in a very difficult position: decision makers might be (mistakenly) perceived as adopting incoherent and contradictory policies. Ironically, it is much easier for dictatorships to implement such policies because dictators do not have to explain their policies and do not need agreement (Luttwak, 2002: 326).

An excellent example of such acrobatic skill demonstrated in political leadership can be seen in the aftermath of the terrorist attack near Eilat (18 August 2011), which left eight dead. Despite public pressure to aggressively strike Hamas in Gaza, the political leadership chose to respond in a calm and considered way, which takes into account a variety

of considerations. They decided to act in a measured and balanced manner, so as not to lead to further escalation, to preserve deterrence, to contain Egyptian anger and, keeping the fragile agreement and security cooperation while building the infrastructure of international legitimacy for the next strike that might be needed. It was well expressed by Israeli MK Dan Meridor, as he explained the paradoxical reality imposed on Israel when Israel has to slap Hamas on the face in order to encourage and enable it to suppress and prevent terrorism emanating from the Gaza Strip. This example demonstrates the learning process of the political leadership and significant improvement in the ability to act strategically in the spirit of the paradoxical principle.

Despite public pressure, the political leadership decided to act in a measured and balanced manner, so as not to lead to further escalation

Summary and Conclusions

Characterizing and analyzing the complex environment in which Israel operates poses a significant barrier to implementation of strategic goals. This strategic barrier creates real difficulties vis-à-vis the learning processes necessary to bring about change. It also poses a series of obstacles that make it difficult for Israeli leadership to identify or create opportunities; to plan and take complex strategic steps; and to achieve meaningful political breakthroughs that serve the strategic needs.

Significant change of the characteristics of this complex operating environment can occur as a result of the redefinition of the space in a way that generates a sense of security within Israel that it is wanted and accepted in the region and grants its complete legitimacy as the state of the Jewish People. The political sector in Israel will be required to demonstrate clear strategic leadership; to develop learning processes that will lead to a knowledge base, and the strategic skills to reshape the contours of the security discourse; transform the "truth regime"; reduce the consciousness of threat; and enable the necessary social and political acquiescence. Under such circumstances there would be a reasonable likelihood of exchanging the existing security paradigm for a new paradigm, which in turn would lead to a new political reality. It seems that the way the Israeli government chose to act after the bloody event in Eilat demonstrates that such change is possible.

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