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A New Age of Violence:

The Political Use of Force in the Context of Gaza and Lebanon

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CARL von Clausewitz tells us that war is nothing more than the continuation of state policy through other means. In other words, war is what states engage in when they cannot achieve their goals in any other fashion; force finds its utility in compelling our opponents to accede to our will. For weeks now, Israel has sought to end attacks upon its citizens and territory by engaging in a devastating air operation, and a limited incursion into South Lebanon. In this latest outbreak of violence of the never ending war, each side clearly sees the use of force as having some utility. Yet, as the conflict drags on longer and longer, the sense of alarm in the region and elsewhere grows as does speculation as to whether this is something far more dangerous than the usual tit for tat raid we are accustomed to.

Using the logic of Clausewitz, what goals does each side seek in this conflict? For Israel, they are obvious; security of its citizens and the survival of the state. For the foes of Israel, the goals are more complex ranging from the simple end to violence to the desire to drive the Jews into the sea. The involvement of regional players such as Iran and Syria play to larger regional questions, the establishment of Iran as a regional great power is obviously an important goal driving its involvement in the conflict.

Israel's Use of Force: "Sherman's March"

Are any of these goals achievable through the use of force? Examining Israel, its clear military superiority over any of its foes stands out clearly. Israel possesses conventional advantages over any of its opponents, whether in terms of air, sea, or land power. With its fleet of UAVs and spy satellites, Israel enjoys advantages in surveillance over its adversaries. Finally, its inventory of nuclear weapons is Israel's "ultima ratio" in this area.

The imbalance of military power has so far allowed Israel to operate uncontested against Hizbollah and Hamas. In the past, Israel has sought to bring about peace through its “land for peace” strategy, unilaterally disengaging from South Lebanon, Gaza, and parts of the West Bank. But recent events seem to demonstrate the futility of this approach. Israel has also sought to use escalation strategies, gradually ratcheting up the level of pain. Precise targeting of Hamas and Hizbollah leadership gave way to more indiscriminate artillery strikes on areas launching rockets. In turn, widespread air raids on “infrastructure” seem to echo “Sherman’s March” on Atlanta Georgia during the American civil war. Sherman sought to impress upon the South the cost of supporting secession through a burnt grass campaign. The destruction of so much accomplished in Lebanon in the past 15 years strongly suggests that the Israelis are pursuing a similar strategy to that of Sherman, demonstrating the cost of permitting Hamas and Hizbollah the freedom of movement they have enjoyed in these areas. Still, can these strategies ultimately lead to the elimination of these organisations’ ability to operate in Gaza and Lebanon?

Hamas and Hizbollah: “Fourth Generation Warfare”

Hamas and Hizbollah are pursuing distinct strategies in their strikes on Israel using irregular forces and weapons of mass disruption, rather than confront Israel’s conventional advantages. Fourth generation forces are described as focusing on asymmetric attacks, taking advantage of extensive local social networks to organize operations and move about rapidly and discreetly. A further distinctive feature of their modus operandi is the focus on media and information operations. The use of spokespersons to denounce “collateral damage” (even while inflicting it themselves), the use of hostages, both willing and unwilling, and the direct targeting of civilians all speak to a strategy aimed at the popular morale under pinning their opponent’s war effort, as well as engineering an external groundswell of opinion against continued operations. But as with the Israeli example above, one must ask what the end state is. Unguided rocket attacks, kidnapping soldiers, and suicide bombs in market places are hardly techniques that will ultimately throw the Israelis into the sea.

The End of the Post-Cold War Era

As much as the violence is fruitless, there realistically does not seem to be any alternative to it either. The fundamental goals of each are mutually exclusive. Two possible developments seem to be underway.

The first is the erosion of the liberal order that has underwritten international order since the end of the Second World War. The growing rational control of international issues by the forces of “governance” has extended even unto war

itself in the form of the law of armed conflict which has turned modern operational planning into as much an affair for lawyers as any modern activity. However, if there ever was an event which tells us that the “Post Cold War” era is over, it is this. The hesitation of Western states to confront Israel is revealing. Throughout the 1990s, there was much speculation on what would succeed the Cold War order. There was speculation that a “New World Order” would emerge, an order of democratic states laying the foundation for an age of peace, an “End to History” as Francis Fukuyama put it. The calls for “peace dividends” have ceased, and the frustration of concerned groups to shame nations into action in Darfur show the shallowness of the commitment to “human security”. While European states may yet condemn Israel for its actions, their hesitation seems to indicate their recognition of the intractability of the present situation.

The second potential, equally disturbing, is that Hamas and Hizbollah may recognize that their actions possess relatively little utility – for the present. The time scale each works with may be far longer than we realise. The time scale of Israel’s opponents reaches back thousands of years to the end of the 13th century when the last Crusaders were ejected from Syria by Ottoman forces. For fighters working within this long term time frame, the lack of success is not a matter of concern; just as it took nearly 200 years to prevail over the Crusaders, Islamic forces will again prevail against this modern “Crusader state”.

This mindset is very difficult to combat through warfare, as it is not susceptible to rational persuasion by force of argument or by force itself. These fighters operate in certain faith in the sanctity of their mission. Those contemplating their own sacrifice in this struggle can find meaning in their contribution to a great cause and their salvation in the hereafter.

The larger meaning of this present struggle is decidedly pessimistic. The clash of civilizations, of which Samuel Huntington has warned, is not upon us yet – Israel and the US remain too strong for such an eventuality. However, the failure of the 1990s peace process indicates that the gloves are off and are not likely to be put back on again.

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