



Palestinian protesters participate in a violent demonstration 1 June 2018 against Israel's eleven-year blockade of Gaza and its refusal to allow refugees to return to their villages inside the zone. From March to June 2018, estimates of approximately one hundred thousand protesters fired weapons and threw rocks at Israeli soldiers and sent balloon-transported firebombs and explosives into Israel, resulting in burnt forests and farmland, numerous Israeli injuries, and the death of at least one Israeli soldier. Israel's strong response to the protest over the period resulted in approximately two hundred Palestinian deaths (many were from organized militias) and several thousand injuries. Hamas leaders inside Gaza stoke domestic instability and resentment against Israel and use the resulting violence to recruit and organize militia groups to conduct asymmetric insurgent warfare against Israel. (Photo courtesy of the Israel Defense Forces)

The Reemergence of Gray-Zone Warfare in Modern Conflicts

Israel's Struggle against Hamas's Indirect Approach

Omer Dostri

Over the last decade, the use of gray-zone warfare—part of a coercive strategy—has increased. Various actors in the international system use this kind of warfare to achieve political, economic, and military advantages while minimizing risks and the reactions of their opponents. The means of gray-zone warfare are based on ambiguity and low signature that provide politicians and decision-makers with a strategic capacity of plausible deniability. These include surgical, restrained, and limited use of kinetic forces—mainly the use of special operations forces or irregular forces; cyber warfare by governments or nonstate actors; information warfare; and other nonviolent means of coercive diplomacy such as economic sanctions and the use of trade to impose an actor's will on its opponent (see figure, page 122).

In 2015, the U.S. Special Operations Command issued a white paper defining the “challenges” of gray-zone warfare as “competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality. They are characterized by ambiguity about the nature of the conflict, opacity of the parties involved, or uncertainty about the relevant policy and legal frameworks.”¹ Gray-zone threats are defined as “actions of a state or non-state actor that challenge or violate international customs, norms, and laws for the purpose of pursuing one or more broadly defined national security interests without provoking direct military response.”² An April 2017 panel discussion in Crystal City, Virginia, by the U.S. Department of Defense's Strategic Multilayer Assessment team—published later as a special document in June 2017—defined the gray zone as “conceptual space between peace and war, where activities are typically ambiguous or cloud attribution and exceed the threshold of ordinary competition, yet intentionally fall below the level of large-scale direct military conflict.”³

The study of gray-zone warfare intensified after Russia took control of the Crimean Peninsula in February 2014. Russian involvement in the Ukrainian civil war began with the apparent intent to provide internal and international legitimacy and legality for its actions in the international arena. Moscow clearly articulated its intention to rely more on an integrated strategy of using military and nonmilitary tools that took advantage of significantly vague legal concepts.

Among other things, Russia places great emphasis on psychological and political warfare, economic manipulations (e.g., disruption of access to the supply of natural

gas), cyber activity, and lawfare. Russia also manipulates public opinion at home and abroad by using information warfare and disseminating “fake news” as a means of creating confusion and skepticism.⁴

Gray-Zone Warfare as a Renewed Phenomenon

While some researchers see gray-zone warfare as a new phenomenon, others believe it has been used in the past. According to Antulio Echevarria, what is now known as the gray zone is actually a version of coercive strategies that have been reinforced by technological development.⁵ Michael Mazarr stresses that countries have used such approaches for centuries—in some ways, for thousands of years. However, Mazarr continues Echevarria's line and argues that there are at least three innovations in the gray-zone phenomenon. First, an increasing number of aggressive nations—mainly China, Russia, and Iran—are making extensive use of gray-zone strategies. Second, the cost of significant aggression has grown enormously, and the economic and social interdependence of the world has grown so much that countries with aggressive intent are looking for alternative ways to achieve their goals. Finally, while some tools of gray-zone warfare have been used since antiquity, others (e.g., cyber warfare, advanced forms of information warfare, and the processing and refinement of civilian tools for policy and strategic purposes) are relatively new phenomena.⁶

According to James Wirtz, revisionism, which he sees as characteristic of gray-zone warfare, occurred during the Cold War but was limited by the desire of the great powers to avoid changes in the status quo that could lead to nuclear conflict.⁷ Wirtz, in effect, states that the gray zone is indeed similar in its characteristics to the Cold War, but the scale and scope of the operations are more intense, aggressive, and varied.

In contrast, Joseph Votel et al. view the Cold War as a forty-five-year struggle for the gray zone during which the West coped with the spread of communism. To avoid confrontations of superpowers that might escalate into nuclear war, the Cold War was largely a proxy war where the United States and the Soviet Union supported various state and nonstate

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actors in small regional conflicts and intervened directly in countries around the world. Votel et al. argue that U.S. operations in Korea and Vietnam were under constraints that made a total victory by the United States or its allies almost impossible for fear of an American escalation with the Soviet Union.⁸

Philip Kapusta supports Wirtz's approach. For him, the relative certainty the world experienced during the Cold War was simpler than today's global environment.

Whereas during the Cold War, nation-states mainly faced other nation-states, state actors are now forced to deal with hybrid phenomena and nonstate and substate actors such as powerful and institution-alized terrorist organizations. The challenges of today are that

actors and nonstate actors do not respect the norms and rules of the international law. According to Kapusta, even when nation-states made a deliberate choice to engage in activities in the gray zone during the Cold War, their actions were still subject to the rules and norms that characterized international relations. Other differences that Kapusta finds between the Cold War and the geopolitical reality today are the growing number of potential gray-zone actors, the tools available to them, and the rapid changes in the world.⁹

Maren Leed also mentions the changes and developments in the various tools of warfare regarding the gray zone. He argues that the roots of gray-zone warfare may be found in technological advances, especially in information technology, which allows an unprecedented level of globalization.¹⁰ Miroslaw Banasik, who served in the Polish army, follows Leed and mentions in his study that the innovations of warfare in the gray zone include new technological means, development and dissemination of information, and the transfer of the spheres of state functioning and citizens' lives to the virtual world. These

innovations have made it difficult to discern and unequivocally distinguish where modern conflicts rest along the continuum of war or peace.¹¹

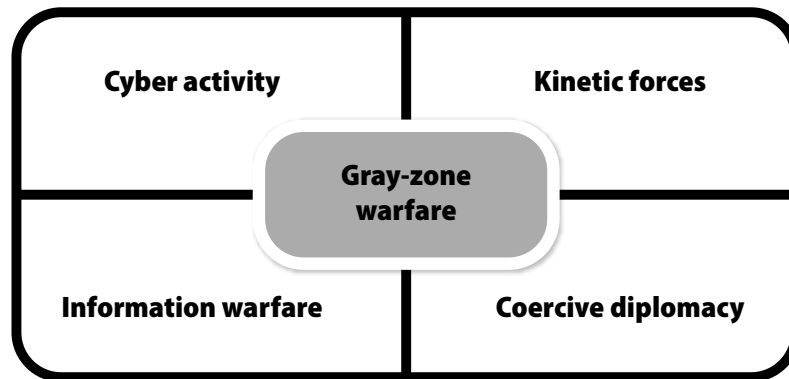
Isaiah Wilson and Scott Smitson mention in their study the territorial dimension in the arguments of the strategic historian Walter Russell Mead. The latter described the changes in the nature of geopolitical competition and defined the current and future global security environments in the context of geography. He believed

the current struggle between state actors on the world stage is over control of territory rather than ideology. However, he then claimed that territorial struggles are unique in their character to the various actors and focus on certain historical places.¹²

While some researchers agree that the gray zone is an existing or ad-

ditional phenomenon, other researchers point out that this is a phenomenon with new features expressed in modern tools and a means developed by the advancement of technology and the expansion of globalization. The strategies, tactics, and means of gray-zone warfare have been used in the past and by different actors. Hence, it is neither an innovative phenomenon nor an old one. Instead, gray-zone warfare is a description of trends in the geopolitical and strategic environment, and in fact is a renewed phenomenon applied by modern technologies and tools.

Gray-zone warfare is not limited to use by state actors only. Various nonstate actors who develop into substate actors (e.g., Hezbollah and Hamas) and hybrid actors (e.g., the Islamic State) also use this kind of warfare. The political transformation and changes that occur within various nonstate actors—in the form of de facto control of territories and populations—led to the development of political institutions and semi-institutional structures, and to the responsibility of substate actors over territory and population, through which the actors



(Figure by author)

Figure. Nonstate Actors' Involvement in the Gray Zone

derive their popular power and legitimacy. The fear of damaging the economic and political assets of substate actors has led to a reduction in the use of conventional forces and classic terrorist acts as well as an increased use of gray-zone warfare to continue achieving these substate actors' goals while avoiding a strong military response to their actions by state actors.

While many nonstate actors operate primarily in the military and economic sphere, Hezbollah has had some success in diplomatic and information warfare. Al-Qaida and the Islamic State have placed great emphasis on information warfare, and the Islamic State in particular exploited social networks on the internet to gain broader support for its organization. The decision of these actors to adopt the tactics of the gray zone makes the security challenge of actors who confronted them even more difficult to deal with.

Israel's Gray-Zone Warfare

Israel is one of the significant actors who use gray-zone warfare. In recent decades, Israel has been secretly working to prevent the acquisition, reinforcement, and military buildup of its regional rivals in the Middle East. Thus, in June 1981, Israel launched a military strike to destroy a nuclear reactor in Iraq, destroyed Syria's nuclear reactor in September 2007, and launched a series of covert cyber operations and targeted assassinations of Iranian scientists with the aim of delaying an Iranian military nuclear project. During the Syrian Civil War, which broke out in March 2011, Israel carried out hundreds of attacks and extensive covert military operations to prevent the transfer of strategic weapons from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon.¹³ Israel also attacked Iranian assets and forces in Syria to thwart Iran's entrenchment in the country.¹⁴

This unofficial policy, called the "Campaign between the Wars," has become a strategy for the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).¹⁵ This military strategy expresses the idea of unified strategic logic—the management of *campaigns* that are carried out in multiple domains (military, economic, law, information, and diplomacy). The modus operandi of the "Campaign between the Wars" is to be offensive and proactive without crossing the threshold of war and in an ambiguous manner.¹⁶ This ambiguity allows Israel to achieve its coercive strategy by reducing the capabilities of the enemy in the event of a future war while avoiding war now.¹⁷

Gray-Zone Warfare: A Case Study of the Conflict between Hamas and Israel in 2018-2019

Five years have gone by since the end of Operation Protective Edge—a military operation launched by Israel on 8 July 2014 in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip after nearly 250 rockets were fired at civilian-populated areas in southern Israel—of which three-and-a-half were relatively quiet, and Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis Hamas was maintained.¹⁸ However, since March 2018, there has been a significant escalation in aggressive activity on the Gaza Strip due to Hamas's decision to organize and lead mass violence demonstrations near Gaza's perimeter fence with Israel. According to the Palestinian Ministry of Health, by the end of a year, more than 260 Palestinian rioters were killed, with tens of thousands more injured during demonstrations.¹⁹ The escalation stemmed from the change in Hamas's strategy; Hamas is trying to recover from the difficult economic and political situation it has experienced in recent years, especially after Operation Protective Edge.

On the political level, Hamas is isolated. Even before Operation Protective Edge in 2013, Egypt had outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood—Hamas's mother movement—and declared war on it.²⁰ In addition, in June 2017, Qatar demanded that Hamas representatives leave the country in an attempt to avoid the Arab boycott imposed on it by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Libya, Yemen, and Egypt.²¹ On the economic level, neutralizing the tunnels on the Egyptian side of the border with the Gaza Strip caused severe damage to Hamas's economy that was based, inter alia, on the collection of taxes from smuggling through tunnels to Sinai.²² Likewise, the expulsion of Hamas representatives from Qatar limited Doha's ability to transfer funds to the organization. On the military level, the ability of Hamas to smuggle weapons from Sinai was damaged after the neutralization of its tunnels by the IDF and the Egyptian army. In addition, Operation Protective Edge led to severe losses in infrastructure and assets for Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Despite its difficult situation, Hamas understood that another military operation against Israel would not serve it well since the cost of war would exceed the benefits of the current situation, its assets and infrastructure most likely would be damaged, and its political and economic situation would not be improved. In this

reality, Hamas's policy has shifted from one based solely on the use of kinetic measures against Israel and its citizens (from the launching of high-trajectory weapons on the civilian population and the use of terrorist tunnels) to a policy designed to undermine and erode (by attrition) Israel's deterrence strategy using varied tactics that include vague terrorist actions, diplomacy, and propaganda. This policy can be characterized as gray-zone warfare carried out by a weak actor who wants to change the status quo on the one hand while avoiding a military confrontation on the other because of the gap in the balance of power between the two parties.

As part of its gray-zone fight, Hamas has indirectly organized and led, through the use of ostensibly civilian organizations, violent demonstrations near the Gaza perimeter fence. Similarly, it has established units that fly burning kites and incendiary balloons as well as ostensibly independent civilian elements whose purpose is to ignite fires in Israel to harm its economy and citizens.²³ In addition, the organization has refused to take responsibility in most cases in which it used kinetic force against Israel by launching rockets targeting Israeli settlements, hiding under a new overall apparatus established in the Gaza Strip—the Joint Operations Room—or arguing that rockets launched at Israel were fired by mistake.²⁴ The Joint Operations Room in Gaza is an organization formed in the summer of 2017 by Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Its aim is to coordinate militant operations and political goals between the terrorist functions in Gaza. It consists of thirteen militant factions, run by the “Al-Qassam Brigades” (Hamas's armed wing) and the “Saraya al-Quds Brigades” (Islamic Jihad's armed wing).²⁵

Hamas has also used diplomatic means in its gray-zone fight. In every limited military operation between March 2018 and March 2019, it used an Egyptian delegation to mediate a truce between Israel and itself to put pressure on Israel to end military actions at a time convenient to Hamas, despite Hamas's initiating these restricted escalations itself.²⁶ And in the information domain, Hamas has used psychological warfare by publishing well-edited images on social media of the Israeli air force's strike in Gaza to falsely and manipulatively claim that the attacks allegedly did not significantly harm the organization. Hamas also used the Israeli media as a tool for negotiations on a cease-fire with the Israeli government. By broadly broadcasting Hamas's recordings from the mass riots near the perimeter fence

and the fires inflicted by blowing incendiary balloons into Israeli territories, Israeli media is playing into Hamas's hands and putting pressure on public opinion and on Israeli decision-makers. In addition, during the past decade, Hamas has invested in establishing and upgrading its cyber capabilities, mainly in improving the intelligence gathering effort against the IDF and attempting to carry out a number of cyber activities aimed primarily at IDF soldiers.²⁷

The common denominator of Hamas's policy of attrition from March 2018 to March 2019 is ambiguity and uncharacteristic actions to erode Israeli deterrence and gradually change the status quo that was set after Operation Protective Edge. Thus, Hamas correctly estimated that the actions it carried out below the threshold of war would not lead Israel to decide on a broad military operation, while at the same time, the organization could achieve advantages. In contrast to Hamas's gray-zone warfare, Israel has responded with relative restraint, allowing Hamas to gradually erode its deterrence strategy. Although there have been nine rounds of limited operations in the Gaza Strip, which included hundreds of IDF attacks against Hamas's targets (such as the organization's strategic infrastructure and assets), the IDF's activity was not strong enough, and as a result, deterrence was not restored. Hamas continued its gray-zone warfare and even sprayed hundreds of rockets at Israeli communities during limited rounds of fighting as part of the Joint Operations Room in the Gaza Strip (working hand-in-hand with other local terrorist organizations).

Israel's Options Responses to Fighting Hamas's Gray-Zone Warfare

Israel has four options in dealing with the Hamas's gray-zone warfare: (1) preserve the status quo and maintain the strategy of the limited military operations, (2) intensify the quality and quantity of Hamas targets during limited military operations, (3) engage in large-scale military operations, or (4) occupy the Gaza Strip.

Preservation of the status quo and the strategy of the limited military operations. In this option, Israel will be able to continue its current policy vis-à-vis Hamas, with the aim to contain Hamas's gray-zone warfare as a viable and cheap option relative to the possibility of a broad military operation. The advantages of this option are the low-intensity fighting that the IDF could contend with, the relatively large periods between



Palestinian Hamas militants attend a military drill 25 March 2018 in preparation for any upcoming confrontation with Israeli forces in the southern Gaza Strip. (Photo by Ibraheem Abu Mustafa, Reuters)

one operation of fighting to the next, and the relatively short time of each round of combat.

The drawback to this option stems from the gradual erosion of Israel's deterrence strategy and the creeping change in the status quo. This, in turn, will allow Hamas to be more daring and harmful to Israel's citizens, especially residents of the southern communities surrounding the Gaza Strip, and to erode the national resilience of the Israeli people.

Intensify the quality and quantity of targets during limited military operations. This course of action is actually a counterreaction to Hamas's attempt to undermine Israel's deterrence strategy. In this option, Israel chooses to not only continue its current conduct vis-à-vis Hamas but also to increase military responses against the terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip. The advantage to this is that by intensifying responses and attacking more targets in numbers and quality (e.g., a greater and more rapid impact on terrorist tunnels and Hamas government buildings), there is a greater chance that Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis Hamas will become stronger, and Hamas may reduce or even halt its attempts to change the status quo. The disadvantage of this policy is that

more aggressive military operations may lead Hamas and other terrorist organizations into Gaza to drag Israel into a broad military confrontation or a number of large-scale military operations in a relatively short period of time.

Large-scale military operations. In this option, Israel will engage in broader military operations in the Gaza Strip, including the use of air, armor, artillery, and engineering forces in areas close to the perimeter fence. The advantage of a large-scale military operation is the significant restoration and strengthening of the Israeli deterrence and the return to the end point of Operation Protective Edge, which included an Egyptian-mediated truce agreement and years of military and civilian rehabilitation for Hamas. For its part, Israel will gain a two-to-three-year period of relative calm that could be used for economic and military development. The disadvantage of this course of action stems from the high cost of a large-scale military operation, the possible destruction

of civilian infrastructure in Israel, and the damage to tourism and the economy. In addition, it may be possible to achieve this kind of result in significantly less costly ways, whether through military means, diplomacy, or a combination of both. The most significant drawback comes from the endpoint of such a military operation, which is unlikely to be different from previous military operations in the last decade and will probably not improve the situation in the long term.

Occupying the Gaza Strip. In this option, Israel will decide to launch a large-scale military operation into the Gaza Strip with the goal of defeating Hamas and overthrowing its regime. The IDF will have to use air strikes to soften some areas in the Gaza Strip and then use infantry, armor, or special operations forces to maneuver deep into Gaza to break it up into various parts and to control the territories after Hamas and other various terrorist organizations are defeated. The advantage gained from an extensive military operation to conquer the Gaza Strip is the elimination of the main terrorist elements. Israel will be able to decide whether it wants to hold the territory and impose a military regime there or transfer it to the Palestinian Authority.

The disadvantage of this situation stems from the very high economical cost of such an operation and the loss of dozens of Israeli fighters. In addition, there may be a situation in which the IDF will be drawn into a low-intensity conflict that will last many years against remnants of Hamas and other terrorist organizations. This would entail high costs and the use of a large amount of resources for routine security purposes. Moreover, in the case of handing over the Gaza Strip to the Palestinian Authority, this does not necessarily mean that IDF will be able to maintain peace and security against the new terror elements that could emerge from the destruction.

Importance of National Security Policy to Confront the Threat of Gray-Zone Warfare

To decide the wisest course of action for Israel to contend with Hamas's gray-zone warfare, it is not enough to focus only on military aspects; Israel must also consider the variety of power variables within a framework based on security, diplomacy, and economic means.

Regarding security, Israel is interested in completing the underground barrier along the Gaza Strip border to significantly improve its ability to monitor,

identify, locate, and thwart terrorist tunnels from the Gaza Strip into its territory, as well as to store weapons inside the Gaza Strip to significantly improve the IDF's preparedness for a military operation in Gaza. In addition, Israel must now divert most of its civilian and security resources and means to counter the threats from the Iranian military's establishment in Syria and from Hezbollah's nuclear and ballistic missile programs' attempts to improve the accuracy of its missiles.

In the diplomacy sphere, Israel is cooperating behind the scenes with Sunni Arab countries, primarily Saudi Arabia, on a range of issues including the Iranian threat. This cooperation is likely to be adversely affected to the extent that Israel will be manipulatively portrayed by Hamas as having significantly harmed many potentially innocent Palestinians during a military operation in Gaza. In addition, Israel's "divide and conquer" de-facto strategy leaves the Palestinians split between the Gaza Strip and the Palestinian Authority territories in Judea and Samaria so that their overall strength is weakened. Thus, the occupation of the Gaza Strip and the transfer of powers to the chairman of the Palestinian Authority would undermine Israeli interests.

In the economic sphere, Israel is interested in a long peaceful period for as long as possible, which can contribute to the economic development of the country. Since Operation Protective Edge, Israeli communities around the Gaza Strip have experienced significant development, including an increase in population.

Conclusion

From March 2018 to March 2019, Hamas has been involved in gray-zone warfare against Israel. The purpose of this kind of warfare is to achieve political, economic, and security advantages by acting below the threshold of war with vague military, diplomatic, cybernetic, and information tools (thereby trying to prevent the rival from responding with force). The strategies, tactics, and means of gray-zone warfare have been used in the past during different periods by different actors. Accordingly, gray-zone warfare is neither an innovative or old phenomenon. Instead, gray-zone warfare is a description of trends in the geopolitical and strategic environments and a renewed phenomenon applied by modern technologies and tools.

Israel must balance the preservation of its deterrent strategy with the need to respond to the

challenge of Hamas's gray-zone warfare. However, this need for balance leads to a contradiction between the two interests, as an ill-advised and simplistic response to Hamas's gray-zone warfare could lead to a broad military operation, and thus to the failure of the Israeli deterrence strategy. On the other hand, the continued containment of Hamas's gray-zone warfare and the continuation of the Israeli military response is not sufficiently strong in its quality and quantity. It may lead to the continued erosion of

deterrence and creeping change in the status quo in favor of Hamas. Therefore, a coherent and complex national security policy is needed to find a balance between Israel's deterrence—in the attempt to not use disproportionate force that could lead to an undesirable escalation in contrast to the Israeli interest—and a competent strategy using forceful responses in terms of both quality and quantity against the targets of Hamas and the other terrorist organizations in the Gaza Strip, when necessary. ■

Notes

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