

Chapter 4

Low-Intensity Warfare

Human history bears witness to a continual stream of military clashes, with war serving as one of the grand strategies of nations. In the words of military theorist Basil Liddell Hart: "for the role of grand strategy is to co-ordinate and direct all the resources of a nation towards the attainment of the political object of the war—the goal defined by national policy. Grand strategy should both calculate and develop the economic resources and man-power of nations in order to sustain the fighting services."¹ War is not an end in itself, but rather a means of implementing a grand strategy. This helps to explain the famous statement by the Prussian military theorist Carl von Clausewitz: "War is the continuation of politics by other means."

"The sign of true strategy is that it defines its intent and sticks to it, without fear, while adapting the means to the end, and also the end to the means,"² Liddell Hart emphasizes. The Chinese military thinker Sun Tzu stated in *The Art of War* (probably the first treatise on military doctrine, written in the fifth century BCE): "War is a matter of vital importance to the state; the province of life or death, the road to survival or ruin. It is mandatory that it be thoroughly studied."³ Therefore, Sun Tzu continues, it is essential to "appraise" war in light of five fundamental factors: moral influence, weather, terrain, command, and doctrine. "There is no general who has not heard of these five matters," he asserts. "Those who master them win; those who do not are defeated."⁴ Some 2,500 years have passed since Sun Tzu wrote these words, and the key points of his military doctrine are still cited in current military theories.

War is not a one-dimensional and fixed concept. Over the course of history, diverse forms of warfare gradually developed in keeping with the times and technology. Clausewitz compared war to a chameleon

that changes its colors and saw it as a phenomenon that is based more on continuity and conservatism than on change and revolution. For Clausewitz, war was like a chain of mutations whose nature or direction could not be foreseen.



World War II is considered the last major war, but warfare is still a part of our world. Wars have evolved in new and varied ways, but they still entail violent confrontations over political-military objectives. Many scholars concur that conventional wars between states have become a rare phenomenon since the end of the Cold War—that is, since the 1990s. International conflict can run the gamut from conventional war to peaceful competition. “Most of the conflicts have occurred under the level of traditional conventional warfare (sometimes defined as ‘high-intensity conflict’), but over the level of peaceful competition that routinely exists between states. These conflicts [at a middle level] are sometimes defined as ‘low-intensity conflicts.’”⁵

Low-intensity violence has many definitions, including some that emerged from the Israeli experience: “A conflict with a political aim, which is decided through a change of consciousness in the society, by attrition. The political calculation is the dominant calculation in the conflict, and the military-operational calculation is secondary to it; its main results are related to consciousness and the physical outcome is secondary; it is a protracted conflict, and its moves are planned accordingly; it is focused on the struggle over consciousness; conflict management relies on the ability to control the intensity of friction; and the nonsovereign entity, which is inferior in combat strength, is usually the one that chooses the path of limited conflict.”⁶ The U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff adopted another definition: “Low-intensity conflict is a limited politico-military struggle to achieve political, social, economic or psychological objectives. It is often protracted and ranges from diplomatic, economic and psychosocial pressures through terrorism and insurgency. Low-intensity conflict is generally confined to a geographic area and is often characterized by constraints on the weaponry, tactics and level of violence.”⁷

Based on these and other definitions, we can describe the characteristics of low-intensity warfare:

1. The use of subtle tactics and political expertise because the conflict should not be decided only by firepower.

2. There is no distinction between the battlefield and the home front, and clashes between armies on the front lines rarely occur.
3. The principal objective of both sides is to influence the views and loyalties of the civilian population. This can be achieved by dampening support for the rival through persuasion or coercion.
4. Conflict management is conducted ad hoc, not according to advanced planning.
5. Political calculations carry significant weight in these conflicts, sometimes more than military calculations.

When all-out war, or even limited war, is conducted between states, there is symmetry. Limited conflicts, on the other hand, are asymmetric—at least one of the participants is not necessarily a state. In this asymmetry, one side has advantages over its rivals in terms of its capabilities and power. In a limited conflict (or low-intensity warfare), the strong side must exploit its advantages to diminish the rival’s ability to fight, while the weak side will try to eliminate its rival’s advantages by reducing the friction between them. The weak and militarily inferior side will also mobilize diverse means of communication (especially via the Internet) to neutralize the asymmetry, win the advantage, and magnify its achievements.



Guerrilla actions and terrorism are two modes of low-intensity warfare aimed against a state. In this type of conflict, the goal is to achieve political gains by wearing down the rival through attrition and shaping consciousness.

Yehoshafat Harkavi, a former IDF general, defined *guerilla* action as “an ancient form of warfare that preceded regular combat, because in ancient times fighting was primarily between irregular forces. Guerilla [warfare] became a distinct method of combat only when regular combat emerged. It is characterized by small-scale fighting in a territory controlled by the enemy.”⁸ Guerrilla combat served as a defensive tactic in the past, but in the 20th century it became a method of attack aimed at grabbing power. Guerrilla activity combines political and military means for achieving its objectives.

Boaz Ganor defined *terrorism* as “a form of violent struggle in which violence is deliberately used against civilians in order to achieve political goals (nationalistic, socio-economic, ideological, religious, etc.).”⁹

Guerrilla warfare and terrorism have much in common, and both employ propaganda and communication in their fight to shape consciousness. However, the goals of a guerrilla struggle are material, political, and more clearly defined: Guerrilla warfare is aimed against a state and its symbols, not against its civilians; it seeks to destroy equipment and supplies; it relies on broad popular support; and it is more selective than terrorism. Its principle objective is to advance a particular ideology.



In an asymmetric conflict, the inferior side chooses to balance power by influencing public opinion and building consciousness to amplify its actions and accord it legitimacy, recognition, and support. In these ways, it will seek to drive the target public in the desired political direction.¹⁰ The information and technology revolution, the emergence of multinational corporations, and the participation of new players (such as international organizations and NGOs) in the international system created a comfortable infrastructure for the battle for consciousness.

As the centrality of this battle grew and spread across the global arena, it unintentionally helped international terrorism to proliferate. The turning point in the international arena was September 11, 2001. The United States had failed to understand the extremism and Islamization in the Arab-Muslim world and had not identified the growth of anti-Western and anti-American movements. After 9/11, it recognized the need to return to public diplomacy and to add new dimensions to it.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the United States was involved in low-intensity warfare in Iraq and in Afghanistan. On both fronts, it fought against international terrorism that had struck against it and other Western nations. Gradually, the United States succeeded in reducing the scope of Al-Qaeda's activity and especially its involvement in international terrorism. However, as often occurs in this type of warfare, a new organization inherited Al-Qaeda's position: Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). At the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, ISIS occupied large parts of Syria and Iraq. It developed a semi-state structure, bolstered by thousands of volunteers from around the world. Within a few years, it also succeeded in creating an infrastructure of international terrorism. An anti-ISIS coalition arose,

led by the United States, with France, Britain, and other states. They were later joined by Russia, though primarily with the aim of protecting Bashar Assad's regime in Syria. While ISIS lost some of its territorial gains, it recorded impressive “achievements” in international terrorism, successfully mounting attacks in the United States, Britain, France, and Germany. Scholars expect that most of the wars in the 21st century will occur in developing states and in nations that lack a solid political structure and government and that are divided ethnically and religiously. Therefore, the wars of the United States and its allies will be against nations or terrorist movements that champion extreme ideologies and opposing cultural values, and against societies plagued by poverty and lacking stable government institutions. **The principal effort will be the battle for consciousness.**

There are various terms used in the world to describe the battle for consciousness. In Britain, it is called the “fight for hearts and minds.” The U.S. military uses the expressions “psychological warfare,” “perception management,” “influence management,” and “information operation.” The IDF speaks about *consciousness*: “The strategy of limited conflict is to win a decision of consciousness in the society with the help of military means. The battle is for the society's consciousness and for national resilience. Decision is achieved through maneuvering to raise doubts and generate a sense of persistent uncertainty.”¹¹

Consciousness is not a natural and inherent concept but rather a structured process, continually shaped by interested parties and by those who wield wealth and power. According to this view, there are two states of consciousness—a situational consciousness and a basic consciousness, and there are six tools used in the battle for consciousness:¹²

1. *Physical actions* including destruction, aerial bombardment, attacks against people and property, aimed at affecting consciousness.
2. *Acts of deception* aimed at tendentiously injecting false information to influence the rival's perceptions, to mislead and surprise it, and to lead it to make erroneous assessments.
3. *Cybernetic activity* of two types: 1. actions aimed at harming the rival's computerized systems and information—command and control, communications, computers, and electronics; 2. actions aimed at protecting one's own systems and information.

4. *Humanitarian activity* aimed at strengthening the positive connection between military forces and civilian authorities in areas where military forces are deployed.
5. *Propaganda activity via the media*, aimed at winning support for policies and national goals—both at home and in the rival's public opinion and system.
6. *Psychological warfare*—use of nonviolent means of persuasion, such as distributing leaflets, communicating messages via the media, and spreading misleading messages and rumors. There are three types of psychological warfare: *white*—activity whose source is known, *gray*—activity whose source is unknown, and *black*—responsibility for this activity is cast upon someone else.



Military experts and historians, including Clausewitz, have distinguished between a strategy of decision versus a strategy of attrition. In their view, wars are supposed to end in decision and victory, which pave the way for diplomacy and political activity. Political activity can also appear at the start of the process, and then war and the use of force signify the failure of this activity. However, Clausewitz and his generation dealt primarily with all-out conflict between regular armies, while today limited conflict is more common. This requires new definitions for the terms “decision” and “victory.” The criterion that comes closest to decision in a limited conflict is victory in the battle for consciousness.

Terrorist and guerrilla organizations have adopted the strategy of attrition, concluding that it would enable them to win a decision in the battle for consciousness. Attrition is conventionally viewed as a weapon of the weak side, compensating for its technological and numerical inferiority. But the state can also seek to wear down and even defeat its rival through attrition. This requires a resilient society, capable of finding the emotional and physical strength to cope with a protracted war, despite its price.

However, the battlefield today is not clearly defined; the means of warfare have become diverse and new participants have joined the fight. The arena of limited conflict has blurred the terms “decision” and “victory,” and a new perception of these terms is also required. “A situation may develop in which both sides declare themselves victors, but this enables, to some extent, manipulation of the victory.”¹³ We

can determine the victory by changing the definition of the war's aims. This strong subjective dimension and the ability to manipulate are what differentiate between victory and decision. “There is a basic difficulty in precisely defining victory in a ‘limited conflict’ or in a guerrilla war waged by an organization, religious or political, from a neighboring state,” Zeev Schiff writes regarding the Second Lebanon War.¹⁴



Low-intensity violence and the new public diplomacy come together on the battlefield of consciousness. Old and new tools have been deployed in the new battle for consciousness, including the new media and networks, the Internet, international broadcasting, and two-directional communication. Since the campaign is directed at public opinion in the enemy state, I see a fascinating similarity between the strategy of terrorism/guerrilla warfare and a state's public diplomacy. Both seek to win over public opinion in the target state and to effect change in that state. The low-intensity conflicts do not end in decision and in victory. At best, both sides declare victory and these declarations have an impact on public opinion. However, in reality, there is no “victory” in protracted low-intensity conflicts. International experience indicates that crises wane, only to erupt again in new circumstances.