
10 Is It Possible to Deter Armed Groups?

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The notion of “strategic deterrence” as one of the key pillars of a nation’s military strategy has been weakened as concepts of warfare have shifted from traditional or regular to what the American administration calls “irregular” warfare. Traditional warfare between nation-states had a predictable chilling effect that sometimes prevented war or, at least, limited the way force was used. Each side’s perception about how the adversary would react to a specific strategy, or the intent to attack certain targets, had a restraining effect on the way wars were fought.

The threat of mutual destruction, for example, had a profound impact on the way America and the Soviet Union treated their military capabilities during the later part of the cold war. In the end, the Soviets feared they could not maintain their counterstrike capability due to the “Star Wars” program, which changed the entire strategic perception of the cold war and contributed significantly to its termination with what everybody perceived as a decisive victory, without the use of any weapons.¹

The logic of deterrence is based on the idea that if a state wishes to affect its adversary’s strategy it has, first of all, to balance the cost and benefit for the adoption of a certain strategy, such as developing a nuclear weapon or deploying strategic missiles. Then it has to analyze the way the adversary develops its assessment about what the deterring state is going to do in various circumstances. Using this knowledge, the deterring state has to convince potential enemies that it has the capability and the determination to exact a price enemies are not willing to pay.

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SHAPING THE ARGUMENT

The emergence of armed groups was to some extent an outcome of the problems some states and organizations had in facing the growing strategic deterrence that liberal democracies like the United States and Israel managed to develop. The tactic used by armed groups, and especially terror organizations, is to change the way traditional wars are fought and, in doing so, change the deterrence equation. Under the new paradigm, terror groups can deter democratic states and societies committed to the values of liberalism from adopting certain policies and at the same time deprive democracies of the ability to deter armed groups and their state sponsors. This idea is based on the assumption that certain sets of liberal values may be used against democracies in the context of deterrence. In other words, liberal democracies honor the value of *life* higher than any other intrinsic concept. This means that almost nothing is worth risking your life for and that the manner in which force is used should minimize casualties. The value of life is the fundamental element in the relationship between the state and its citizens. A state protects the lives of its citizens and, in turn, citizens grant power of authority to the state to govern and levy taxes.

This was always the case, but nowadays a new expectation has been added. It's not only the protection of the lives of the citizens that should be considered before using force but the protection of the lives of the soldiers too. Protecting the life of the soldier was of course always an important issue, because it was needed for preserving the force and achieving the desired victory. But today it stems not only from military considerations but from existential philosophical origins too. Moreover, since the sanctity of life is a general value, it applies to the population that supports the enemy as well. That is why democracies hesitate to take steps that would endanger the lives of citizens of states who support armed groups. This makes it possible for armed groups to practice a sort of *de facto* strategic deterrence vis-à-vis liberal democracies in many cases.

The bombing of the Marines' barracks in Beirut in 1982 and the attack against the U.S. military compound in Riyadh had dramatic impacts on the American presence in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, for example. In many cases the wars against armed groups have turned into a count of the number of the dead soldiers the liberal democracies had, and of the so-called innocent civilians on the other hand, and both have become a burden that liberal democratic societies could not sustain, though in the past, they could have in a traditional war.

This problem is exacerbated since democracies tend to adopt a wider meaning to the value of life as well as the quality of life. It's not only about existence; it's about welfare. It's about enabling people to pursue their happiness. Anything that interferes with that, namely, anything that contradicts what Western democracies term as human rights, is unacceptable, regardless of if it refers to the citizens of these democracies or to anybody else. When there is a contradiction between the security needs and the commitment to human rights, it's not clear which the superior value is. This is a perceived weakness of liberal democratic societies from the viewpoint of armed groups. There are others too.

The next one is the commitment to the idea of accountability and the guilt complex that is attached to it. Democratic regimes are going to be held accountable for any breach of the "safety and security" arrangement between the state and its citizens and for any

harm done to the well-being of civilians. The perception is that the government is at fault when harm befalls its population. This notion has of course a paralyzing effect on democratic leaders who try to avoid the blame and guilt that will follow any military move against terror groups if it puts the lives of civilians on both sides or of their own soldiers in danger. Moreover the democratic leaders are bound to be blamed for being unable to achieve a decisive victory in their war against terror groups, since they and their constituency were never prepared for this kind of war and were led to believe that it is an asymmetric war in which they are supposed to have the upper hand quite easily.

Another characteristic of liberal democracies that plays into the hands of armed groups is the role of the media. The media, not the government, has assumed the leading role of shaping public opinion, the political agenda, and the way people differentiate between right and wrong. The Western mainstream media, for a variety of reasons that will not be elaborated here, amplifies the problems mentioned above. It considers sowing distrust toward the regime as its main mission and is ready to serve as a loudspeaker of terror groups' propaganda—too often without employing basic criticism to judge its accuracy.

Finally there is the issue of sovereignty, which is another perceived weakness of democracies. Western democracies are committed to the concept of sovereignty as the basic idea according to which control and the responsibility for the use of force and the rule of law in the world is shared. Therefore they always look for the sovereign entity, usually a state, to exercise its sovereignty over what happens in the territory it controls. This serves as an impediment and deterrence to the use of force in areas that are supposed to be under the dominion of another entity even in the cases where this logic is clearly baseless or worse—dangerous. This is also a contentious point that undermines United Nations unity to act against some of the world's worst atrocities. The matter of "sovereignty rights" at the UN is sometimes used to halt well-intentioned democracies from intervening into the matters of despotic and dictatorial regimes. The irony is inescapable.

On the other hand, armed groups and terror organizations are committed to an exactly opposite set of values, and therefore are able to claim that they cannot be deterred. First of all they adopt a totally different approach to the value of life. Life is just a tool to gain more important values (a revolution in the situation of their communities or entrance to paradise). The readiness to sacrifice and to suffer replaces the sanctity of life and the commitment to provide public welfare (hence Hamas's willingness to let Gaza citizens suffer). The pursuit of cultural/religious respect, and of their version of justice (often revenge), is their alternative to life's sacredness and pursuit of happiness. They have managed to build a theory that justifies the use of force against civilians and that puts the entire responsibility for all their problems and suffering on the shoulders of the West. Relying on this worldview, armed groups and terror organizations manage to avoid any accountability or responsibility. They then leverage the commitment of the democracies to the notion of sovereignty in order to find refuge in nongoverned areas and to develop more areas of this kind. They have absolute control of their media and a good capability to manipulate the Western mainstream media. Thanks to that advantage,

armed groups and terror organizations are able to shape the political agenda and the political vocabulary within their constituencies and elsewhere.

THE CONSEQUENCES

So far, this chapter may seem to suggest that armed groups and terror organizations are without vulnerabilities. Since those who search for martyrdom cannot be threatened by death, since those who fight a mighty demon cannot fear being blamed for failure, since those who are not sovereign entities are not afraid of losing the control over a certain piece of land or being held accountable, they therefore have created, from their point of view, a win-win situation. Suffering means success and failure proves the authenticity of their interpretation of the world order and why it should be changed. At the same time success in escaping total annihilation or in causing suffering to the enemy without abiding by norms of warfare are of course steps toward the inevitable victory.

How then can the terror groups be deterred and deprived of the ability to deter the democracies they fight? In some respects, discussion of strategic deterrence may seem inapplicable to armed groups. After all, the context of strategic deterrence emerged from wars between states, not from conflict with nonstate actors. But as a matter of fact, the notion of deterrence is relevant to armed groups as well, though the elements with which armed groups can be deterred are different from those used against states. Just like in the case of developing an ability to deter states, one has to look first at those things that terror organizations most fear losing. Surprisingly, these are all well known to the liberal democracies.

VULNERABILITIES

The most precious asset terror organizations have is their credibility in the eyes of their own constituencies and the support they expect to get based on that credibility. They have to prove again and again that they behave like they preach. They must glorify their readiness to sacrifice and proclaim their own achievements against a seemingly hollow and cumbersome enemy. At the same time terror organizations have to make sure that their supporters don't lose hope that this sort of war will get them closer to the set of goals the terror groups set forth, the most immediate of which is to humiliate the enemy. The terrorists' greatest fear is that supporters of the movements begin to question the groups' own commitments to the causes, or have second thoughts about the goals and the feasibility of the terrorists' aims.

The second-most-valuable asset they fear losing is their ability to use ungoverned territories, or areas that are governed by state supporters, as a way to enjoy plausible deniability. If an armed group or terrorist organization brings trouble for its own constituency, it may lose the geographic freedom it benefits from. For example, the cases of groups like Hezbollah and Hamas, which in fact control certain areas and are supposed to be answerable, are very telling of how important nonaccountability is. Hezbollah prefers to point at the Lebanese government as the power responsible, and Hamas, which came to power recently in the Gaza Strip, still maintains the policy of deniability regarding attacks from that area toward Israel.² Hamas blames the Palestinian Authority and the rest of the world for any difficulty it encounters. One may argue that the cases of these

terrorist organizations are a bit different from those of other armed groups, but actually, they all fear being held accountable and try to avoid responsibility as part of their survival strategy.

Next on the list of importance for armed groups are the lives of the activists and their freedoms of action. Contrary to their philosophical approach to the value of life, and unlike the people on the end of the terror chain who are really ready and sometimes even eager to kill themselves upon killing the enemy (even if the enemy is helpless civilians), the terror organizations' activists and leaders value their own lives highly. They try very hard to protect themselves, and when they feel that the danger is real, they spend much more time in attempts to save themselves than in contemplating martyrdom. This is especially true for the supreme leadership. Therefore, leaders of armed groups are not unlike leaders of liberal democracies; neither really wants to die.

Another very important asset to a terror organization is the support of the patron, who is usually a state. The groups have to make sure that their patrons continue to look at them more as assets than as liabilities. If they do not deliver the political and operational goods; or if the patrons begin to have doubts about their loyalties and common sense; or if the political, military, and financial burdens the groups constitute for the patrons grow too much, the armed groups might risk losing their vital state support. It's a bit strange, but since the terror group's supporters may be affected by the way other nations regard the group, it is very important from the supporters' point of view to be acceptable by the international community.

Finally, the terror groups have to make sure that their sources of arms supply, new recruits, and financial resources remain safe and sound. The fear of steps taken against them by the international community is relevant in this respect too. The terror group Hezbollah has voiced several regrets following its precipitous actions that led to hostilities with Israel in the summer of 2006. Speaking of having killed three Israeli soldiers and kidnapping two others, Hassan Nasrallah, the secretary general of Hezbollah, said, "We did not think, even one percent, that the capture would lead to a war at this time and of this magnitude. You ask me, if I had known on July 11 . . . that the operation would lead to such a war, would I do it? I say no, absolutely not."³ Moreover, Hezbollah's actions placed the group in a precarious position with its patrons and certainly the international community.

Therefore, there are vulnerabilities that armed groups and terror organizations have. The challenge is to hold these vulnerabilities at risk. Threaten armed groups where it hurts. Find what they care about, and go after it.

CHALLENGES OF DETERRENCE

On the surface it seems that liberal democracies have done their homework, studied the vulnerabilities of armed groups, and developed strategies for fighting them. In general, democratic nations are trying to fight a war of ideas in the media, threaten the lives of the key group leaders, take action against states that support terror groups, and intimidate those who give arms and money to the terror groups. Yet a deeper analysis will discover that the problem is not with understanding what should be done but with building a posture of deterrence: having the political courage to act and ensuring armed groups and

terror organizations believe it—specifically, understanding the way terror groups make their decisions and convincing them that liberal democracies are able and determined to charge them with a heavy price if they continue to try to carry out terror attacks. The reasons why this is not done properly are a combination of many problems that liberal democracies have in changing their way of learning about the situation they are entangled in and about the threat and the enemy they face.

First of all, it's pretty difficult to turn away from the paradigm of regular warfare and fully comprehend the characteristics of the new paradigm—that of irregular warfare. One of the key errors is to focus on the physical components of irregular warfare, neglecting the more abstract parts of it—in other words, thinking that if this is war, then the armed forces should be the main element fighting it. Using brute force without developing a strategy that is relevant to specifics of the new war is counterproductive since it serves as proof for the terror groups' claims that liberal democracies are ruthless and hideous and, at the same time, unable to beat them. The lessons of recent wars against terror groups have shown that the armed groups are indeed worried about the possibility that liberal democracies would try to use their military might in order to try to root them out of ungoverned areas. But at the same time they exemplified how poor the results can be if the democracies don't prepare well, especially mentally, for the long war that follows the major regular warfare stage. In this way the ability to deter the terror groups is significantly eroded.

But an even greater challenge to deterrence is the lack of coherence between what the democracies say while they fight the war of ideas and what they do. It's extremely hard to shake the credibility of the terror groups if your own credibility is questionable. If you say that you are going to take harsh measures against terror groups and their supporters, and immediately thereafter adopt a relatively soft attitude toward them, avoid calling them by name, and behave as if subconsciously you have empathy or even sympathy to their way of action, then your efforts to deter these groups are doomed. If the way liberal democracies behave sends the message that they are hesitant to pay a price in order to win the war—be it in casualties or in showing readiness to reexamine their commitment to the idea of sovereignty, in order to cope with the threats emanating from ungoverned areas—there is no chance that they will convince terror groups that they should worry about the reaction to their activities. In other words, by inconsistent words and actions, liberal democracies undermine their own credibility and, at the same time, their own ability to deter armed groups.

To some extent it is also an intelligence problem. The intelligence services of the liberal democracies find it hard to understand the decision-making processes of the terror groups because their rationales are based on a different logic. The armed groups attribute much more importance to the issue of respect than to happiness, they recognize no standard of international morality when it comes to using force, and they can easily believe the conspiracy theories they themselves invented for the consumption of their constituencies. They think in a deductive way—namely, they have an assumption about the nature of the liberal democracies and their mind-set allows them to accept only those impressions that fit with this perception. This means that any gesture the democracies make is either a part of the conspiracy or a manifestation of their weakness or both.

It is also a problem of culture. The transparency of the liberal democracies and their open debates expose the disagreements within their societies regarding the proper way to cope with the threats posed by the terror groups. This in turn undermines the credibility of their threats and serves as a proof for the ineffectiveness of any deterrence capability. Moreover the liberal culture of accountability, guilt, and speaking the truth makes it extremely difficult for these societies to participate as a real competitor in the battle waged in the media. At the same time, liberal democracies often evidence a feeling of superiority over other societies, making it very difficult for them to actually reach the minds of the people in these other cultures and have an impact on the way the terrorists and their supporters think. The main reason liberal democracies, and especially the United States, are subject to such world hatred is that they are perceived as arrogant. If this could be changed, it would significantly threaten the ability of terror groups to mobilize the masses.

In order to be able to deter the terrorists and eventually win the war against them, liberal democracies have to find ways to overcome these inherent challenges without compromising their values. The fundamental difficulty for liberal democracies is that real life is very complicated for those who don't believe in absolute values. Yet liberal democracies have to decide what is worth putting their soldiers' lives at jeopardy for. The most effective way for liberal democracies to overcome this tension is to openly show how proud they are of their system of government, demonstrate through actions that they live by their beliefs, showcase a standard of living and quality of life that come from democratic ideals—without demeaning those who have other principles.

NOTES

1. "The Strategic Defense Initiative (commonly referred to as Star Wars) was a proposal by U.S. President Ronald Reagan on March 23, 1983 to use ground-based and space-based systems to protect the United States from attack by strategic nuclear ballistic missiles. The initiative focused on strategic defense rather than the prior strategic offense doctrine of mutual assured destruction (MAD)." "Strategic Defense Initiative," Wikipedia, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strategic_Defense_Initiative.
2. According to the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 428 missiles and 590 mortar bombs were fired at Israeli cities between mid-June 2007, when Hamas took over the Gaza Strip, and the end of that year. See "The Hamas Terror War against Israel," Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism-%2BObstacle%2Bto%2BPeace/Palestinian%2Bterror%2Bsince%2B2000/Missile%2Bfire%2Bfrom%2BGaza%2Bon%2BIsraeli%2Bcivilian%2Btargets%2BAug%2B2007.htm.
3. Herb Keinon, "Nasrallah: I Would Not Have Kidnapped Troops Had I Known the Outcome," *Jerusalem Post*, 28 August 2006, available at www.jpost.com/servlet/Satellite?cid=1154525950456&pagename=JPost%2FJPArticle%2FShowFull.