



COMMENTARY

Center for Strategic and International Studies ■ Washington D.C.

Qana and the Lessons for Modern War

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July 31, 2006

Qana is more than a horrifying human tragedy; it is a brutal lesson in the changing nature of modern war. It is also a lesson that applies just as much to Iraq, Afghanistan, and the war on terrorism as it does to the fighting in Lebanon. The lesson is simple: Limited wars must be fought in ways that give avoiding collateral damage and civilian casualties at least as much priority as destroying the enemy.

Wars based on “shock and awe” may still apply when the enemy consists of conventional military forces that can be attacked without a major risk of serious civilian casualties, although any form of “shock and awe” whose execution leads to “anger and alienation” must be avoided just as much in such struggles as asymmetric wars. Most modern combat, however, will not be directed against such enemies.

It also will not be existential in ways where the need for sheer survival excuses collateral damage and civilian casualties. They will be wars against enemies that use terrorism, insurgency, and asymmetric tactics and fight at the political and ideological level. Winning will require victory at that political and ideological level, and in the tactics of shaping the psychological, perceptual, and media dimensions of the conflict.

Defeating the enemy will not be more important than winning the support, or at least tolerance, of the population. Local, regional, and global perceptions of the conflict will be as important in sustaining a war, and in terminating conflict on favorable and lasting terms, as the number of enemies captured and killed.

Israel has so far failed to understand this in Lebanon as the U.S. to some extent failed to understand it in Kosovo, Afghanistan, and Iraq. This is all too natural in wartime, and Israel – unlike the U.S. with the exception of the attacks on 9/11 – is under direct attack. “Understandable,” however, is not “excusable” in modern war. Carelessly seeking immediate tactical advantage at the cost of major strategic risks and penalties is stupid and dangerous. Creating more enemies than you kill is self defeating; making it politically and ideologically impossible to end a war and so is spreading new levels of anger and hatred to other countries and/or factions.

The U.S. has long seen the consequences of careless treatment of civilians even in allied countries in peacetime. The actions of a few bad Marines in Okinawa have had major long-term strategic effects. More recently, expediency in treating detainees in the war on terrorism, Abu Ghraib, and the murder of innocent Iraqis has had a serious impact on the war in Iraq. The Serbs used collateral damage and civilian casualties as their primary weapon against the U.S. and NATO in Kosovo. Every real and reported air strike against civilians in Afghanistan has come at a serious price in terms of Afghan support.

This does not mean that civilian casualties and collateral damage can be avoided in war. The military tools simply do not exist to create a level of situational awareness, command and control, reliable precision, and battle damage assessment to avoid constant mistakes. No level of discipline or training will turn every soldier into a political warrior, or make soldiers risking their lives take even more risks to save potential civilians.

Modern war is going to be war fought by both state and non-state actors that seek to compensate for U.S., Israeli, and other countries' conventional military superiority by using populations and civil facilities as a shield, and constantly finding and exploiting new ways to use civilian casualties and collateral damage as ideological, political, psychological, and media weapons. It is also a duel that favors the enemy actor. It is easier and cheaper to disperse, shelter, hide,

and collocate, and then exaggerate and lie if civilian casualties and collateral damage occur.

The officer or official who responds by accusing such enemies of being cowards or endangering their own people is simply stupid, incompetent, and obsolete. Quite aside from the fact that the U.S. and UK found no problem in using the same tactics against Nazi Germany, and democratic resistance fighters have used them in many wars, such talk is based on the fundamental strategic and tactical fallacy that wars have rules based on the past. Enemies always seek to fight on advantageous terms and modern enemies will seek to fight below our level of conventional military advantage at the tactical level and above it at the ideological level.

It is equally stupid, incompetent, and obsolete to simply call such enemies “terrorists” and talk about “democracy.” This may work within the confines of Israel or the Beltway, but wars are being fought for the minds and perceptions of very different people with very different values. Ethnic identity; perceiving such tactics as authorized by God or as the only workable route to liberation and “freedom fighting;” putting faith and culture first are military realities that no amount of prattle about universal Western values is going to defeat.

It may simply be too late for Israel to react in this war. It entered it based on deeply flawed grand strategic and tactical principles, and seems to have fought the ideological and political dimension on the basis of the perceptions of Israelis and Americans. The IAF and IDF have so far been clumsy in both air and artillery operations, and sought tactical advantage at serious risk of excessive civilian casualties and collateral damage. Military cultures do not change in mid-operation and the incredibly clumsy IDF and Israeli government response to Qana is a case in point. Israel will, however, *have* to learn in the future if it does not want to take a largely passive region and turn it into an active enemy.

The question for the U.S. is will it learn in time to win in Iraq and Afghanistan, and seek the new military reality it faces in shaping its force transformation. One critical case will be the battle of Baghdad, where any major American mistake could alienate large numbers of Sunnis - or more seriously – turn a large number of Shi'ites against the U.S. Baghdad is a political struggle for stability and security; not a counterinsurgency campaign. Similarly, Afghanistan could be lost in political terms in several ways: putting the anti-drug campaign before internal economic stability; continuing to let the Taliban win the political struggle for Pashtun support; and more attacks that hit civilians.

More broadly, however, the Bush Administration and U.S. military need to drastically reshape their priorities and methods to deal with suspected terrorists and detainees. The political dimension, particularly outside the U.S., is critical. Avoiding large-scale detainment centers that train and indoctrinate more enemies, avoiding alienating Arabs and Muslims, and seeing every action, as part of a political and perceptual war is critical. U.S. tactics need to give accurate, local intelligence on the risk of civilian casualties and collateral damage – and local ideological, religious, factional, and political sensitivities – the same priority as finding and targeting the enemy.

Aid, payments, use of local allies, and every other possible measure to win popular support, deny it to the enemy, and ameliorate the inevitable cases where civilian casualties and collateral damage occur need to be a basic part of operations. UAVs, other sensors, red-blue trackers, and all of the other new “toys,” are fine; but not if they are not linked to HUMINT, a new level of analysis of local sensitivities, and new tactical goals.

At a broader level, the American military and would-be defense transition experts also need to understand the message for the “Revolution in Military Affairs,” Netcentric warfare, and “effects based operations.” All of these concepts have tended to downplay the ideological and political dimensions of war, and the dangers of civilian casualties and collateral damage. They call for impossible levels of near real-time intelligence and situational awareness even in narrow tactical terms in dealing with the enemy.

Until recently, they have given far too limited priority to the ability to know the political sensitivities of the operations they are meant to conduct and civilian casualties and collateral damage, and even today the efforts to modernize and adapt them are generally crude, and confuse setting broad goals with the practical ability to implement them.

The truth is that American HUMINT, targeting capability, and battle damage assessment capabilities so far are grossly inadequate for the task; there is no overarching capability to manage ideological and political warfare; military discipline and training are inadequate; and the U.S. seems virtually unable to use public diplomacy as a credible weapon of war. It is still fighting a battle to preach to the converted half a decade after 9/11.

Qana should be a warning to both the U.S. and Israel; fighting the last war is almost always a good way to lose the next. Ignoring the true political and ideological nature of modern asymmetric warfare, and the critical impact of civilian casualties and collateral damage, is certain to have a price tag neither country should ever have to pay.

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