

The Rise of the Feral Adversary

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Articles & Testimony

As "feral" actors find answers to Western military might, Israel and other countries may be facing another turn in military history.

The recent war in Gaza was a glimpse of one type of conflict that Israel -- and likely other Western countries -- can expect to fight in the Middle East. This form is the outcome of three major trends: glocalization, when local power is amplified by global connectedness; littoralization, the rapid urbanization in coastal zones; and feralization, the gradual replacement of state-order by local violent armed actors. These trends set the conditions for the emergence of a new type of enemy -- the feral adversary. Avoiding conventional warfare altogether, this enemy has found an effective formula to force its Western opponents into a kind of war that defies orthodox definitions and categories -- one where war and peace merge, diffusing into every domain of human activity.

First, I will illustrate the trends that brought about this new adversary, then I will describe its way of war, using examples from the Israeli experience. Surely, much about feral adversaries is not new, and this will not be the only form of war Western states and militaries can expect. Nevertheless, the feral adversary will represent a significant and increasingly predominant challenge in the region and perhaps other regions of the world.

Glocalization

Roland Robertson helped to popularize the term "glocalization." In short, he argued that the more technologies allow people to integrate and "go global," the more they use technology to fragment and "go local;" and as global actors infiltrate local environments, local actors gain global outreach.

Glocal groups are fundamentally altering Israel's strategic operating environment. Threats are now increasingly disaggregated and nested within large licit global networks of actors and markets. Malign actors throughout the Middle East are using globalized networks to disseminate ideologies, weapons, drugs, revenues, and technical expertise.

Unlike past encircled insurgents, glocalization helped Hamas to increase the porousness of its geographical

isolation, and thus continue developing its project of building a self-sustained fortress of resistance. During the last decade, for example, the Gazan economy was based on both the import of goods via its crossing with Israel, and on illicit trade through tunnel networks connecting Gaza to Egypt. The Hamas economy was financially bolstered by Qatar, Turkey, and until recently, Iran through the international financial system, and by cash infusions hand-carried in suitcases.

Militarily, Hamas depended on dual-use raw materials from Israel, and on weapons from Iran and war zones in the region, delivered by land and sea. They gained military know-how using information technologies and by sending militants to train outside.

Littoralization

The second trend is David Kilcullen's "Littoralization," which describes the rapid urbanization of coastal areas. A littoral zone is the part of body of water that is close to the shore -- from a few yards to dozens of miles. Currently, 80 percent of the world's population lives within sixty miles of the sea. Massive migration mostly to coastal metropolises -- together with climate change -- make these populations increasingly prone to political restlessness: vastly altering the setting, context, and forms of warfare. In fact, wars continue to force us into the city.

Israel, a littoral state, will continue to face the challenge of protecting its coastal urban clusters, and its onshore and offshore strategic assets, as demonstrated in the last Gaza war. Forced to operate in hostile littorals in its immediate and distant environment, illicit urban networks, like those that stretch from the port of Bandar Abbas to Port Sudan and throughout the Mediterranean, pose a first-order challenge to Israel's national security. Keeping abreast of developments in these littorals is an ever growing challenge to Israel's intelligence agencies.

In the last war, Hamas skillfully took advantage of its urban territory for offensive and defensive purposes. Some 4,000 rockets were launched from its cities (about 600 of them from UN facilities) targeting population centers in Israel. Hamas also targeted the Ashdod seaport and Ben Gurion Airport -- symbols of Israel's connectivity -- to create equivalence with its own demands for a seaport and airport to connect Gaza to the outer world.

Feralization

An article by Richard Norton captures the third trend, "feralization," in which cities or entire regions go "feral." In biology, a feral animal is a domesticated animal which has become wild. Feral plants are ones that have been transplanted from their natural habitats and grow rampant in other regions. The social sciences have borrowed concepts from biology to better understand social behavior. Norton's article, "Feral Cities," describes the urban realities within failed states. "Feralization" is a provocative term, and should not be taken too literally to dehumanize our enemies and the populations from which they spring. Nevertheless, the term helps to explain the ecology of a growing security phenomenon, in the context of the broader decline of the Westphalian state. Indeed, the Israeli security landscape is a clear manifestation of it.

If society is considered akin to an ecosystem, feralization is the process in which the social and political order degrades and is replaced by an alternative, local and feral (Mafia style) order. Societies can never sustain a vacuum, and when the national order fades out, the feral order fades in -- since the population always prefers it to social chaos.

Within some parts of the Middle East, chronic feralization is endemic for various reasons including: water and food insecurity, lack of state institutions and governability, ailing and mismanaged economies, sectarianism, and radicalization.

The Feral Adversary

Feral environments produce feral adversaries; yet, naturally, not all feral adversaries look the same. Their characteristics are shaped by geostrategic conditions, social and cultural traditions, and local political contexts.

All the preconditions of feralization can be found in today's Lebanon, where Israel faces Hezbollah. In Gaza, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad dominate, and the Sinai is a base for several terrorist groups. Of course, Syria and Iraq have proven breeding grounds for groups such as the Islamic State, Jabhat al-Nusra, and others.

In the future, Israel is likely to engage in conflicts against feral adversaries in underdeveloped littoral zones. Such conflicts will be amplified by competition over narratives and the distribution of resources. Western militaries will be drawn into these zones either as part of conflict management, humanitarian operations, or out of a need to operate militarily in these complex urban environments. They will inevitably fight "wars amongst the people" -- composed of friendly, hostile, and neutral elements -- and will be constrained by the ever growing global media exposure.

Feral enemies don't seek a short-term, decisive victory; they look at the horizon and compete over the long haul for power and control over resources and narratives.

"Domesticated" actors play by certain codes of behavior in war and international relations: codes that evolved over the past two centuries. Feral actors, meanwhile, do not view them as valid. Instead, they abuse these codes, turning them into a weapon to be used against their Western adherents. They challenge Western values, while forcing their enemies to employ means that increase the ferality of the environment, the very condition in which they flourish.

Mao Zedong said that the guerrilla must "move among the people as a fish swims in the sea," meant to infer that the fish had to depend on the sea for its survival. Today, relations between insurgents and the population in which they operate have reversed. With the ever-increasing simplicity of illicit trade and financial transaction, insurgent groups have become the sea; the people are now the fish. Feral enemies have foreign allies and access to markets and resources. They feed the population. By the same token, such actors can leverage their wealth as a weapon against the local population. Formerly the population was the host, and the insurgent his guest; today the insurgent is captor, and the population his hostage. Hamas, the captor of Gaza, waged its last war in order to regain access to resources -- all so that it could in turn maintain its tenuous authority over its hostage population.

Objectives and Tactics

Feral adversaries have ambitious political objectives when they go to war. They merge a strong commitment and political will, with efficient war machines that assertively promote these goals. When they collide with those of the Western "domesticated" nemesis, they remain resolute.

Furthermore, feral opponents seek to remain in a state of protracted friction. Constant contact with the Other is necessary both for self-definition and learning. Hamas "lost contact" with Israel after Operation Pillar of Defense (2012), and therefore lost its prestige as the leading organization resisting Israel. Hamas had to regain this prestige for political legitimacy and material support; this was a main reason why it waged war in 2014, and did not accept any ceasefire for fifty days.

Feral adversaries do not want a large-scale war. Unlike the Israel Defense Forces and other Western militaries that mold their doctrines and tactics around existing military technologies, feral adversaries form theirs around a clear political vision, and transform their limited means into effective weapons. Israel's enemies developed doctrines and capabilities that have allowed them to prevent decisive military defeat and cause significant casualties; they manage to offset Israel's overwhelming military superiority and avoid direct military engagement. Instead, they create competitive advantages, exploiting local conditions and Israel's self-imposed restrictions, to hide and disperse, and then attack Israel's vulnerabilities. In particular, these adversaries aim at a core Israeli vulnerability -- the home

front. Gradually, their tactics achieve their intended psychological and physical impact. Hamas also intentionally forces major collateral damage on its own population, and then uses this to fuel legal and media campaigns to undermining Israel's legitimacy.

When feral adversaries fight, clear-cut categories are blurred. With the general decline in the prevalence of conventional wars, along with the increase in unconventional wars, one can say that war and peace are blending; but Western countries tend to abandon the space between them. When Hezbollah sells drugs and launders money, one can describe a blending between terrorism and organized crime. When Westerners go to Syria to fight jihad with ISIS, where are the boundaries between law enforcement and acts of war? When Israel fights Hamas, yet all the while sends tons of goods, medications, gas, and oil to Gaza, it engages simultaneously in war and humanitarian relief. When Hamas uses civilians as human shields, knowing that it can "outsource" anti-Israel campaigns to international institutions, then violent and nonviolent means have mixed. When you cannot tell whether the report on TV was made by an independent journalist or a feral adversary's public relations branch, then news and narratives are blending. And when feral enemies use advanced weapons systems, traditionally the preserve of state actors, one can say that states and non-state actors, the conventional and the unconventional, are blending.

The adversaries faced by Israel are on the path to improving their own precision capabilities, which will give them greater lethality and spatial military influence. Proliferation of advanced standoff weapons systems will erode the traditional tactical edge that was maintained by the state-based military training system.

The march of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant -- and Israel's recent round of conflict in Gaza -- provides a glimpse of a possible future. In such a future, feral opponents will not merely "win by not losing." They will, in fact, gain the ability to defeat Western militaries in battle. It is conceivable that such adversaries might achieve political victory by augmenting their advanced military and non-military capabilities. They will cause a mixture of both real and perceived operational losses to their enemies to gain political power and material resources.

Conclusion

War is a chameleon: As soon as we think we grasp its nature, it changes its colors. War constantly eludes human control. It has seeped from the battlefield into other spheres of life. Today it encompasses almost every aspect of human activity -- physical, social, psychological, and technological.

We now face another turn in military history, in which feral actors have found the answer to Western military might. State-based militaries and defense establishments are slow creatures: they learn slowly and transform slower still, if at all. Despite Western technological advantages, we might very well find ourselves two steps behind our enemies.

In this long-term competition, it is not enough to degrade their economic and military sources of power. It will also be necessary to holistically shape the entire ecosystem in order to uproot feral enemies and prevent future reincarnations. Victory will require full-range competition in the military, economic, social, and political domains. A process of "de-feralization" requires rebuilding civil society and the institutions of governance to replace the feral order.

Relying on innovative and creative technologies is insufficient for this endeavor. What we really need is innovative and creative strategic thinking. We need to rethink our strategic ends, operational ways, means, and organizational approaches -- and reinvent the way we combine military and nonmilitary instruments to achieve this.

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