CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

In Focus

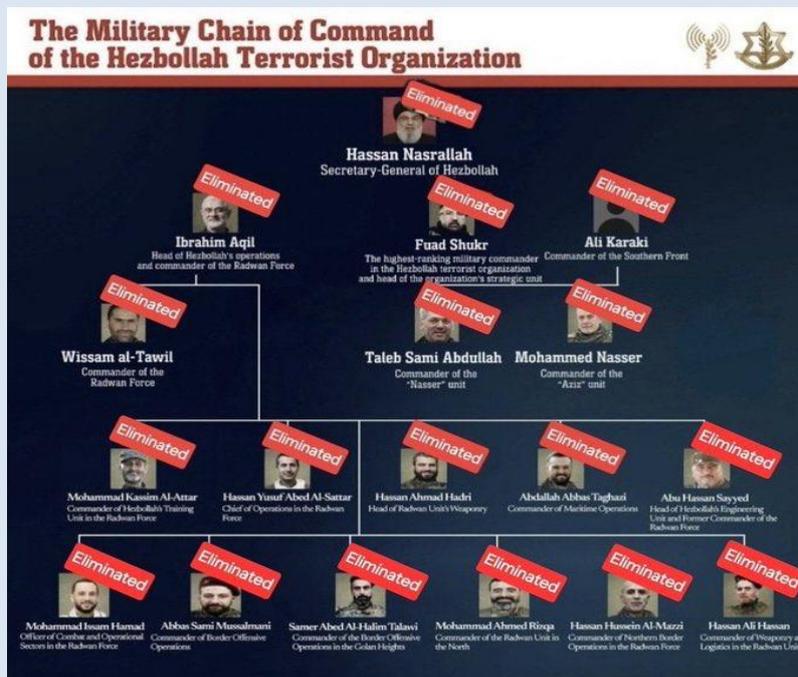New Delhi

EVOLVING DYNAMICS IN WEST ASIA : STRATEGIC INSIGHTS FOR INDIA AND ISRAEL

Colonel Amit Bedi
Senior Fellow, Centre for Air Power Studies

Source: @Israel on X (twitter) dated 1:37 PM on 28 Sep 2024

Keywords: Gaza Conflict, Hamas, Hezbollah, Ben-Gurion Defence Doctrine, Power Equation of National Security, Abraham Accords, India Israel relations, Global Terrorism

Introduction

India and Israel share similar challenges, although they are different in context. Both are surrounded by hostile adversaries, and affected by terrorism which is one of the prime threats that the world faces today. In a perfect world, addressing terrorism requires global consensus, and the issue of terrorism can only be solved if all nations agree that a terrorist in one country is considered a terrorist by all countries. However, the world today is plunged into chaos and uncertainty, and every nation prioritises its own national interest when dealing with any situation, particularly when forming its national security strategy and doctrine. Notwithstanding the above, there are many areas where all countries can collaborate, share knowledge, and take appropriate actions.

Current Situation

Over the last year, the security landscape of the world, and more specifically the areas around Israel, has drastically changed. Post the 07 October 2023, Israel has been fighting its longest war since independence. In recent months, many people have begun to question why Israel has taken its current positions regarding Gaza, Hezbollah, or Iran. However, much of it can be related to the threat environment and the perceived existential threat it faces. In past, Israel has been widely recognised for its swift and intense wars which has ensured both quick resolution and continued deterrence. On closer scrutiny, these operations were largely conventional in nature and the situation has changed significantly, with warfare also shifting from conventional towards asymmetric conflict in recent years.

The terrorists of today are much more sophisticated, equipped with advanced weaponry and technology that sometimes surpasses that of regular armies. Neutralising these threats not only requires sustained effort but also a new doctrine and tactics that encompasses hybrid warfare. Moreover, terrorists do not adhere to international laws, unlike nation-states, which restrict the actions of conventional armies against them. There is also a requirement to address the mentality of terrorists who do not adhere to any known norms accepted by humanity.[1]

The threat today has shifted from primarily Arab countries in the pre-1990 era to non-state actors which are mainly backed by Iran, and act as its proxies. The last significant doctrine in Israel is considered to be the Ben-Gurion Defence Doctrine of 1953 and the last full scale military operation took place in 1982 during the first Lebanon war. Ben-Gurion's defence doctrine embodied three principles, or pillars: deterrence, early warning, and offensive power, which are also being adhered to today.[2]

Despite the changing nature of hybrid threats Israel's existing strategies and doctrines are seen to be in line with conventional threats and can also be considered somewhat outdated to fully address the complexities of this new form of warfare. Several aspects related to security planning have also changed due to the induction of new technology or complexities, including, missiles attacks, drones, the Iron Dome system, enhanced surveillance means, tunnel warfare, and dealing with the well-armed Hezbollah on the northern borders. This situation requires a shift in understanding and necessary preparations to counter emerging threats.

Countenance with Ground Reality

Some of Israel's current actions could be described as what it calls a 'war between wars.' referring to the targeted covert operations done by the IDF and Mossad by preventing its enemies, from developing capabilities that will directly affect Israel's balance of deterrence. It is carried out through detecting and selectively destroying emerging threats. [3] However, the 07 October incidents represent one of the most significant failures of Israeli intelligence and military operations and are being heavily commented upon, but within the broader flow of events, it may be seen as a black swan event.

Previously Israel aimed to locate terrorists, make the war as short as possible, and remove them from the equation. This approach granted Israel 15 years of relative growth, allowing it to develop economically. However, the situation changed with the Arab Spring, the spread of Iran's influence, and the rise of radical Islam in the resulting void.[4] More so over the years, Israel has reduced strength and invested in a technologically advanced army, but actual conflicts require boots on the ground. This is one reason why, despite being aware of the facts, Israel was unable to prevent Iran from building an army against it in Syria.

Israel is also seen moving away from the two-state solution this is despite the fact that it has tried to give a certain degree of autonomy to Palestinians and does not want to interfere in their daily lives. One may argue that the ground reality reflects NO potent Palestinian leader with a vision or capability to realise peace. Any party that stands up is ultimately defeated by terrorist groups, meaning that Palestinians are being controlled by extremists. A prime example is how Hamas managed to render the Fatah movement non-viable in Gaza. Israel fears the same outcome in the West Bank if it completely removes its forces giving Hamas a free run.[5]

The second and bigger issue is that apart from Israel no other country/ or group is willing to resolve the issue of terrorism from the region. The pragmatic solution is for Israel to work with its neighbours to stop the spread of radical Islam, paving the way for both communities to coexist. Presently six countries in the region seek economic and security cooperation in the region and the way forward is to create a security framework, layered with economic collaboration. However, this can only begin once the terrorists are defeated, semblance of peace returns, and the global community recognises that any actions taken will lead to a positive outcome. Due to the above, the idea of not implementing a two-state solution has gained traction in the past few months.
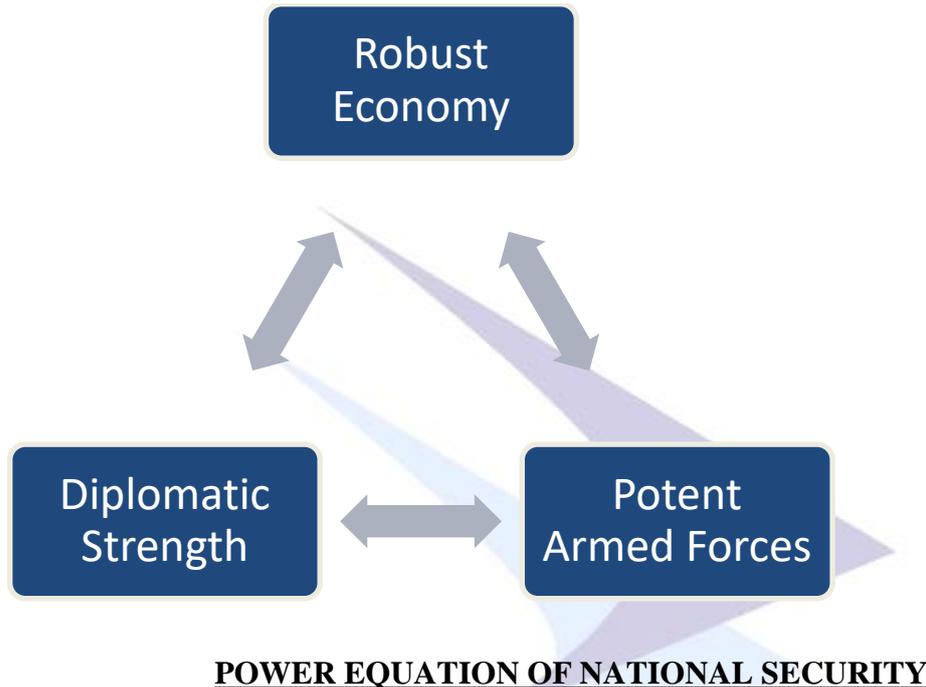
Strategies, Doctrines and Power Equation

Israel has fought legendary conventional wars, like the Six-Day War and the Yom Kippur War. These wars also gave rise to iconic figures like Moshe Dayan and Ariel Sharon and their brilliant military strategies and tactics have been widely studied by military professionals worldwide. Apart from conventional operations involving large arrays of forces facing each other, Israel also specialises in covert ops and the use of advanced technologies. Israel has managed to maintain control of the situation for approximately a quarter of a century through these means.

When we discuss strategies to counter threats there are three different levels to consider: At the top, we have the Grand Strategy, followed by the National Security Strategy, and then the Military Doctrine. Most current military doctrines the world over deals with conventional or asymmetric threats separately. However, what the world is now confronting is a fusion of both and accordingly the need for a fresh thought process for the same.

Military doctrine must account for the changes occurring in the region. A nation's grand strategy should provide the tools to achieve the targets laid out for its military strategy. GDP and technology are a vital part of the same for example; During the Yom Kippur War about 50 years ago, Israel spent approximately 40% of its GDP on national security. Today, those figures have reduced to about 5%. Experts argue that, to achieve success in the current context, this budget needs to be increased to a minimum 7-8%, though this would have some economic consequences for the country.

The power equation of national security in the world today resembles the sides of a triangle: in order to have national security, you need large and potent armed forces. For a large army, you need a strong economy. When you have both a robust economy and a large army, you automatically gain diplomatic strength.

POWER EQUATION OF NATIONAL SECURITY

In today's multipolar world, diplomatic power is essential. Israel has made significant progress in recent years through agreements like the Abraham Accords between Israel and four other countries UAE, Morocco, Bahrain and Sudan in 2020.[6] For quid pro quo gains. As part of the agreement, The United States recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara,[7] it also removed Sudan from its list of state sponsors of terrorism and gave them a US$1.2 billion loan. In turn these countries have agreed to recognise the legitimacy of Israel's sovereignty and have established full diplomatic ties with Israel. These actions had a corresponding negative impact on support for Hamas and Hezbollah who do not recognize Israel as a state and continue to advocate all forms of resistance against the country.

On any given day, Israel would prefer to have more stable relationships with its Arab neighbours. However, before that can happen, the security situation in Gaza and the Northern borders must be resolved. This requires a regional approach, including Arab countries affected by terrorism as no single state can manage events like the multiple missile launches by Iran on Israel on its own.

Actionable Insights for India

In the past, India has inducted various Israeli equipment and imbibed few operational concepts while modifying them to suit our local requirements. The Anti-Infiltration Obstacle System or AIOS is one of them for which experts and practitioner made several visits to Israel to understand the dynamics of Israel's fence system and its applicability. India even established a similar system at a significant cost of approximately ₹2000 Crores in the state of Jammu and Kashmir in 2004-2005 with large recurring costs subsequently.[8] The goal was to reduce the number of terrorists from about 4000-4500 to fewer than 1000, with approximately 225 terrorists in Kashmir today; the target seems to have been largely met.[9]

There are several lessons; the Indian armed forces can gain from the current situation in Israel. What is visible on the TV screens is just a glimpse of well-planned coordinated and executed military operation, where unprecedented success has been achieved on the ground. One key lesson is the coordinated use of ground, air, and naval forces. The ground commander in Gaza, has boots on the ground, intelligence and strike capabilities in the air, and is capable of acting at the right place and time to neutralise terrorist threats, one target at a time. The second is the use of tunnels and underground warfare with more than 360 km of tunnel network beneath Gaza. These tunnel infrastructure, include command and control centres, weapons storage, and areas for other operations. They have allowed Hamas operatives to strike from civilians houses and then escape into the tunnels. It might be a major issue in case some aspects of it are adopted by terror groups operating in India. Secondly is the strategy to counter the same in terms of detection and neutralisation of the same.

The third issue is collateral damage in terms of human life, during the operations against ISIS the approximate civilian causality figure of 8:1 as opposed to casualties in Gaza, where statistics point to a figure of 1.8:1. Despite the lesser number of casualties, the way it has been projected in media, the global outrage has been tremendous, virtually weaning away a great amount of sympathy and support for Israel. This is an aspect which is required to be considered when you are carrying out last scale operations against terrorist organisation.

Another significant achievement is the protection of tanks. In the Ukraine war, tanks have become easy targets for FPV (first-person view) drones, leading to significant losses. However, Israel has managed to reduce vehicle casualties in Gaza through the use of advanced active and passive defensive measures. It has also been able to fine-tune the Iron Dome system for air defence, especially against drones. The next is cyber defence strategies for monitoring, detection and guiding operations apart from the protection of civilian infrastructure are also major achievements, especially as Israel is one of the most cyber-attacked countries in the world. Several of these aspects which are applicable to our armed forces should be studied and if required included in our war fighting tactics/ strategies.

At a higher level, India should develop a comprehensive national plan that includes all elements of statecraft and having reliable strategic allies who will stand by you in difficult times. Secondly, future conflicts will likely be a mix of conventional and non-conventional warfare, making the era of short, swift wars a thing of the past. The third challenge is balancing technology with military knowledge. Today, there is an increasing inclination towards technology which in turn centralises command and control at hubs. As seen during the 07 October attack these hubs were targeted resulting in temporary paralysis.

Actionable Insights for Israel from the Indian Example

India has learned valuable lessons in both conventional warfare and anti-terrorist operations from Israel. Over time, warfare has evolved into hybrid conflicts, and the Indian Army has adapted accordingly. Our Armed

Forces have been engaged in hybrid warfare since the 1960s, particularly in regions such as Northeast India, Punjab, Sri Lanka, and Jammu and Kashmir, and have fared well in comparison to other armies facing similar challenges. Keeping the Indian experience in mind certain questions on the current situation in Gaza remain. Why was Gaza, a relatively small area surrounded by a fence on one side and the sea on the other, able to achieve a strategic surprise on 07 October? How was Hamas able to build such an extensive network of tunnels beneath Gaza? How did Israel allow them to become armed with heavy rockets and missiles? What is the end state and what would define victory in the present crisis? These questions need to be addressed to improve the counter-hybrid conflict strategy.

Secondly, one of the most difficult aspects of hybrid conflict is to understand that you can never completely eliminate the last terrorist, as new ones keep emerging. The numbers can only be reduced to a certain level. Media also plays a critical role in shaping the perception of what constitutes victory or failure in counter-hybrid conflicts. The support for Israel is taking a sine curve by depiction of success in pin point strikes on terrorist leadership vis-a-vis suffering and death of more than 42,227 people, including nearly 16,765 children and more than 98,464 people injured.[10]

The Israeli state is aware that in hybrid conflicts, there are no set peace solutions available for many situations. Solutions often emerge during the conflict, as you absorb the situation and invent new strategies. In the current conflict, two main objectives need to be achieved: stability and the restoration of deterrence.

Thirdly, India undertook certain action to deal with proxies in Kashmir by targeting their networks, including financial, media, and ideological channels. By neutralising these networks, India realised that the strength of the proxies diminished drastically, and they were unable to recover quickly. However, all such actions were not kinetic in nature; the political environment in such areas also needs to be managed. Through concentrated efforts, India has made most separatist politicians, irrelevant in the Kashmir Valley today. India also uses a balanced approach of hard and soft power, which has resulted in much-needed success. In contrast, Israel's tactics are seen as more oriented towards hard power rather than a mix of hard and soft power. This difference is visible when you compare the treatment of Palestinians inside Israel with the treatment of Kashmiri people within Kashmir by the Indian state. The key is knowing when to be hard and when to be soft.

After the killing of Burhan Wani in 2017, India specifically focused on dismantling these networks, especially the financial ones, most notably in the Kashmir Valley, something that had not been done before.[11] On the other hand, Israel has not been as successful in neutralising the financial networks of Hamas, which continues to receive large amounts of money and weapons as was evident from its attacks.

It's not that Israel has not tried to use soft power, but the balance of power in West Asia is completely different compared to South Asia. The size of Israel is much smaller than its neighbouring countries, many of which are failed states that have been completely taken over by terrorist organisations. The spread of radical Islam in these neighbouring countries makes it more challenging for Israel to deal with such issues.

India has been using its moral ascendancy over its adversaries, demonstrating that it is far ahead of them. This extends to the civilian population of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir, where, indirectly, India is able to convey that people living in India are happier, more prosperous, and have a brighter future than those in Pakistan.[12] The mute question remains whether a similar approach be applied in Gaza and the West Bank, where Palestinians could be shown that a future with Israel would be far better than any other governance or rule?

On the flip side, Israel feels that the idea is not new—it follows the doctrine of "Ben-Gurion" where the thought process was that bringing economic prosperity to Palestinians can help resolve conflicts. However, various divisions, such as between Shia and Sunni, radicals and moderates, and the competing interests of nationalist states, have diminished the appeal of such approaches in entire West Asia. In fact, in October 2023, Israel was negotiating with Hamas to grant more work visas to Palestinians for working within Israel when it was deceived by Hamas, which was covertly preparing for attack.

Lastly, failure of Israel's ability to apply enough international pressure on Iran to stop the supply of weapons and war fighting technologies to Hamas and Hezbollah. If these groups are acquiring such weapons, it won't be long before other terrorist groups, especially those operating in Asia and near Indian borders, do the same.

Way ahead

The events of the past year have significantly heightened tensions, which were further escalated by Iran's missile attack on Israeli targets on 01 October 2024, involving approximately 200 Fattah-1 and Kheibar Shekan ballistic missiles. On the other side, the targeted elimination of Hassan Nasrallah and top leadership of Hezbollah, along with the initiation of ground operations by the IDF against Hezbollah in Southern Lebanon, as well as the killing of Yahya Sinwar, the leader of Hamas in Gaza, may represent critical turning points in the conflict. Once the situation stabilises, actions currently perceived as reactive may be more clearly understood and can be analysed in greater depth.

In the end, two key actions are needed in the current situation. First, there must be a clear perception that Israel is no longer under threat from Hamas and Hezbollah. Second, the establishment of civilian governance in Gaza is essential, as most of Gaza is currently controlled by Hamas or other organisations heavily influenced by them. It is necessary to alleviate the fear of Hamas among the people of Gaza and the West Bank. After the conflict, Israel will also need to seek partnerships from its Sunni Muslim neighbours to address the issue of radical Islam in this region. Additionally, greater emphasis should be placed on the education of children, ensuring the next generation is better equipped to foster peace and prosperity in developing nations.

India would also be closely watching the events in the Middle East, as they have a direct bearing on its counter-terrorism strategies and security cooperation with Israel. The evolving dynamics in the region, particularly the countering of threats, will have a definite influence on India's approach to combating terrorism within its borders.

NOTES:

[1] "The National Security Strategy of the United States of America," April 29, 2003, https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nssall.html .

[2] Jacob Nagel and Jonathan Schanzer, "From Ben-Gurion to Netanyahu: The Evolution of Israel's National Security Strategy," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, 2024, accessed October 1, 2024.

[3] Lappin, Yaakov. "'The War Between Wars': Israel vs Iran in Syria." Fathom, n.d. https://fathomjournal.org/the-war-between-wars-israel-vs-iran-in-syria/ .

[4] Aarabi, Kasra. "The Fundamentals of Iran's Islamic Revolution," February 11, 2019. https://institute.global/insights/geopolitics-and-security/fundamentals-irans-islamic-revolution .

[5] Beshay. "Israelis have grown more skeptical of a two-state solution." Pew Research Center, July 23, 2024. https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/09/26/israelis-have-grown-more-skeptical-of-a-two-state-solution/ .

[6] United States Department of State. "The Abraham Accords - United States Department of State," January 13, 2021. https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/ .

[7] Rabat, U.S. Embassy. "Proclamation on Recognizing The Sovereignty Of The Kingdom Of Morocco Over The Western Sahara - U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Morocco." U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Morocco, December 10, 2020. https://ma.usembassy.gov/proclamation-on-recognizing-the-sovereignty-of-the-kingdom-of-morocco-over-the-western-sahara/ .

[8] Institute of Security Studies. "The LoC Fence is bad Strategy." Observer Research Foundation, December 27, 2004.

[9] Hindustantimes.com. "Kashmir's disturbing new reality | the young militants of Kashmir," n.d. https://www.hindustantimes.com/static/the-young-militants-of-kashmir/ .

[10] AJLabs. "Israel-Gaza War in Maps and Charts: Live Tracker." Al Jazeera, October 13, 2024. https://www.aljazeera.com/news/longform/2023/10/9/israel-hamas-war-in-maps-and-charts-live-tracker .

[11] Singh, Chander Parkash. "ENFORCEMENT OF ANTI-TERRORISM LAWS IN JAMMU AND KASHMIR: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS." PhD dissertation, Lovely Professional University, 2021. http://dspace.lpu.in:8080/jspui/bitstream/123456789/4809/1/AD%20544.pdf .

[12] Pti. "No Need to Capture PoK by Force; Its People Will Themselves Want to Join India, Rajnath Singh Feels." The Hindu, May 5, 2024. https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/no-need-to-capture-pok-by-force-its-people-will-themselves-want-to-join-india-rajnath-feels/article68141794.ece .