



RETHINKING CONTEMPORARY WARFARE

*A Sociological View
of the Al-Aqsa Intifada*

**EYAL BEN-ARI, ZEEV LERER,
UZI BEN-SHALOM, ARIEL VAINER**

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Rethinking Contemporary Warfare

SUNY series in Israeli Studies

Russell Stone, editor

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A Sociological View
of the Al-Aqsa Intifada

Eyal Ben-Ari
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P R E S S

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Introduction

In this volume we examine the combat experience of Israel's ground forces in the Al-Aqsa Intifada that erupted in September 2000. We contend that the case of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in this conflict allows us to explore debates about how the armed forces of industrial democracies wage contemporary war. Our book, however, is not another addition to scholarly works focusing on the broad social and organizational features of these militaries or on the special character of "new wars" (Kaldor 2001). Rather, our analysis is placed at the level of combat, the localized conflict between two or more armed actors. In other words, we explore the constantly changing circumstances of warfare for the actual units and soldiers engaged in current conflicts.

A short description of how our research project commenced may clarify the issues we have set out to study. At the beginning of July 2000 we began a project centered on the Israeli army's combat companies, primarily infantry and armor. The company level in many armed forces is considered the lowest level that is large enough to be powerful but small enough to be intimate (Baum 2005). Our aim was to analyze such issues as the formal and informal social structures of the units, leadership patterns, or relations between experienced soldiers and "newcomers." Concretely, we thought that an interesting entryway into these issues would be those regular but hitherto unstudied transitions between periods of operational deployment and training. Our reasoning was that in these transitions—kinds of "mini-organizational crises"—the underlying social and organizational dynamics of the units would be most evident. This was a period when Israel had withdrawn from southern Lebanon and when, we assumed, the main operational assignments of the IDF would continue to be policing the territories and implementing the Oslo and subsequent accords. Indeed, many of the troops and commanders we interviewed were worried that they would have no more serious work, since the intense deployment in

southern Lebanon was over. In all, we expected a relatively calm period of research.

Three months after we began the project, the Al-Aqsa Intifada erupted, marking the IDF's critical transition into a state of prolonged conflict. We consequently found ourselves in the rather "advantageous" position of being able both to chart this intense transition and to accompany the development of the conflict. We quickly decided to continue our research by observing the front-line units within the renewed clashes and the often chaotic situations they experienced. From the social scientific perspective, the Al-Aqsa Intifada provided us a rare opportunity to witness the way military forces are suddenly mobilized and have to shift quickly from routine activities into sudden, often very violent, action. While the move into combat is, of course, crucial for any armed force, it is rather rare to find it documented and analyzed. Moreover, it is often during such transformations that many of the assumptions that troops have about military work are suddenly exposed.

Yet many of the phenomena we encountered during this initial period and in the subsequent five years of our project did not fit our and other scholars' propositions about combat. As we gathered data—interviewed soldiers and officers, observed camps and deployments, or held numerous conversations with commanders—we found ourselves rethinking many of our assumptions and seeking new ways to understand the characteristics and dynamics of contemporary combat. When we tried to make sense of our data, seven sets of issues—paralleling the major parts of this volume—emerged. Each set is related to social scientific discussions about contemporary conflicts and the military.

The first set centers on difficulties many troops had in defining what has come to be called the Al-Aqsa Intifada. When interviewing one company commander about three months into the conflict, he said "I don't know what to call this." We sensed that this kind of difficulty underlay our need to conceptualize the combination of armed revolt, civilian protest, and violent demonstrations that characterized the uprising. Calling the Al-Aqsa Intifada part of the "new wars" or the combat taking place within it as "low-intensity conflict" was akin to offering labels but not conceptualizing what was happening. What was needed, we felt, was a framework that could encompass the variety of violent practices used by the IDF and armed Palestinians, the ebb and flow of aggression, and the feedback between the actions of both sides.

The second set involves a peculiar organizational phenomenon: the constant breakup of cohesive units and the assembly of their constituent elements into temporary, ad-hoc frameworks that provided the

IDF with flexibility and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances. In our interviews and conversations with commanders and soldiers, we often heard comments that did fit our presuppositions. These fractures and construction of new frameworks were invariably phrased in negative terms and seen as temporary states on the way back to the reconstruction of cohesive units. Yet we began to understand that the new structures that were set up—which we came to call “instant units”—were actually becoming the norm for military activity in the Al-Aqsa Intifada. Here again we found ourselves looking for a suitable analytical framework for explaining their organizational emergence.

The third array of issues concerns the constant local-level innovations made by IDF units in order to adapt to their changing circumstances. We understood that, in miniature form, these innovations were related to the creation of military knowledge or expertise. But we had problems in finding the right kind of theory that could help us tap into the processual, negotiated reality of military units in which soldiers often pushed the limitations placed on them in novel ways. Similarly, the violent clashes involving troops seemed to be organized, but this organization did not imply order, control, internal consistency, homogeneity, or continuity between fighting units. Necessitated here were theoretical interpretations that could account for the creation of local solutions to continuously changing military problems.

The fourth set of issues involves the ubiquitous checkpoints staffed by IDF troops. These sites, through which thousands and sometimes tens of thousands of people move every day, touched upon the ever-present but little theorized interactions between soldiers and civilians. Moreover, they are related to the pervasive presence of human rights groups, humanitarian movements, and representatives of the media in and around locations where military forces operate. As a basis for making sense of these diverse contacts, we found ourselves seeking a way to conceptualize the complex tensions, relations, and images of checkpoints as military sites. Concretely, we needed to analyze the ways in which the IDF controls the movement of Palestinians through them and the complex relations it has instituted with external entities.

The fifth group of issues entails combat in citified, urban environments characterized by intense friction between armed forces and insurgents, and the multifaceted relations with civilian noncombatants. With Israel's incursion into the main West Bank cities about a year and a half into the conflict, we found ourselves trying to grapple with the sociological meaning of urban combat rather than the more general state of urban war, because it is at this level that warfare actually takes place. In other words, we had to go beyond claims that military activities today take place in urban contexts to ask about how this very

context influences combat. We therefore came to distinguish between warfare *in* cities and city warfare—between studying units waging combat in cities without much concern for the urban context and investigating how the physical and social structures of cities impact and challenge military behavior.

The penultimate and sixth cluster comprises relations between gender, advanced military technology, and organizational status. The erection of the separation barrier in the West Bank and the activities of forces along it have been accompanied by significant integration of women into light infantry units or into roles using advanced technologies. These changes, we thought, could create an alternative social and organizational order within the military, either because operating technological means would signal the emergence of new types of soldiering or the proximity of women to combat would allow them to partake of the prestige of warriors. In effect, we found that we needed to explain how and why these forces reproduced the existing social hierarchies of conventional militaries.

The last and seventh set entails an intriguing combination of violent practices and restraining elements characterizing the Israeli armed forces. We found a strong emphasis on precision warfare, new rules of engagement, and use of heavy weaponry (tanks and helicopters, for example) alongside a host of limiting factors, such as the activities of the media and human rights movements, the propagation of an IDF code of ethics, and judicial involvement in tactical decisions. Here we sought to account for the puzzling development of restraining elements alongside new forms of organized violence. While the problem at the center of any armed military action is that of “savage restraint” (Ron 2000), a blend of violence and control, our challenge was to chart the ways this tension played itself out within the specific conditions of the conflict.

“Future Warfare”?

At the beginning of our analysis, we turned to the literature on “future warfare,” searching for adequate conceptualizations of what we witnessed and heard. The emphasis in much of this kind of scholarly and (especially) journalistic work has been on “safe, clean wars” (Smith 2000) that are technologically based, precise, distanced, and imagined as near-bloodless (Spiller 2000, 2) (examples are Dunnigan 1993; Friedman and Friedman 1997; Meilinger 2001). Gates (1998) caricatures this perspective on wars as “high tech affairs, dominated by lasers, robot weapons, computerized decision-making, neutron bombs, energy

beams, and fighting space stations.” We found that many commentators are actually skeptical of the high-tech scenarios that dominated academic, journalistic, and professional debates at the end of the 1990s. Spiller (2000, 4) notes, for instance, that such missions as the intervention carried out in East Timor defied the “easy, technological solutions that are so blithely promoted in some quarters today.” Crock (2000) quotes the director of strategic studies at a Washington, D.C., think tank who says in regard to the Al-Aqsa Intifada: “What is being waged now is a low-tech war in populated areas, where the combatants are hidden among civilians—and are often civilians themselves. It’s a strategy that undermines advanced weaponry.” And, as Van Riper and Scales (1997) point out, what if the recipient does, embarrassingly, ignore the distant attack with firepower, forcing the attacker to choose between escalation and impotence?

There is enormous difference between enduring distant attack, which however unpleasant must eventually end, and enduring the physical presence of a conquering army with all of its political and sociological implications.

Thus for all of the polemics—especially rife after the Gulf War of the early 1990s—some scholars have argued that contemporary conflicts actually comprise “messy” local wars in which ground forces continue to be of prime importance (Beckett 2001; Dandeker 1994, 1998b). Thus Burk (1998, 8) observes that “unconventional” struggles have actually been the predominant kind of conflict over the past fifty years, and Beckett (2001, 217) notes that, despite the advent of alleged means to wage “virtual” wars, the world is marked, if anything, by the proliferation of insurgencies. In fact, there is a growing consensus among scholars that in the “future” battlefield many of the classic features of warfare on the ground—leadership, group cohesion, the ability to withstand stress—will continue to be essential (Bolger 2000; Van Riper and Scales 1997). Indeed, the current American imbroglio in Iraq is but another attestation to the continued importance of ground forces.

It is this level—the actual warfare waged by ground forces—that constitutes the focus of our volume. To be sure, excellent journalistic portrayals of military forces in contemporary conflicts have been published over the past few years. As of yet, however, there have been almost no sustained social scientific studies exploring the actual experience of troops within one of the new “messy” conflicts (one exception is Winslow 1997). As Simons (1999) observes, while many scholarly works are being published about the causes and effects of contemporary conflicts, almost nothing is written about their mechanics. Against

this background, we turned to other kinds of scholarly literature seemingly relevant to our analysis: studies of irregular warfare, older and recent studies about the human side of warfare, and debates about the alleged emergence of “postmodern” militaries. We reasoned that these scholarly approaches could provide us with a set of analytical tools or frameworks with which to make sense of our data. Each body of literature, however, while suggestive in many respects, also proved rather limited for our purposes.

“Regular” Warfare, “Regular” Questions?

There is a rather voluminous professional military literature about armed conflicts waged by the ground forces of the industrial democracies. Yet despite the existence of these writings, it is only very recently that military establishments around the world have set out to develop a comprehensive doctrine for combating irregulars (Gates 1998). Dunlap’s (1997, 27) observations in regard to the United States are probably true of all of the industrial democracies:

Many in uniform will insist that they are not laboring under this myth. But when one examines the literature coming out of the U.S. defense establishment, it too often suggests that the United States foresees an adversary who thinks more or less as we do and organizes his forces and employs weapons accordingly. We seem to be preparing for an opponent who will fight us essentially symmetrically, much like Iraq tried to do [during the early 1990s].

In a similar vein, Cohen (1994) observes that low-intensity challenges to security have been accorded low priority on Israel’s military agenda, and Beckett (2001, 234) notes that the IDF has not in the past regarded internal security as representing a significant role as major conventional threats to its borders. Given the Al-Aqsa Intifada and the participation of many militaries in Afghanistan and Iraq, things are slowly changing. But in this respect, much recent work, to put this point by the Israeli example, is still either rooted within studies of military doctrine (Ya’ari and Assa 2005) or is journalistic (Harel and Isascharoff 2005). To reiterate, very little sustained and systematic social scientific research combining empirical data with theoretical formulations has been carried out about so-called irregular warfare. One reason for the dearth of such scholarly work derives, we think, from the kind of imagery of war and combat that many scholars still retain.

What is the model that shapes the social scientific idea of war? In short, it is an image of a conventional interstate conflict between soldiers, fought in accordance with the codified laws of war (Munkler 2005, 12). Indeed, from our perspective, notice how the terms used by various commentators originate in an assumption that the diversity of contemporary conflicts is based on their similarity to, or difference from, conventional wars. Spiller (2000, 1), for instance, talks about “war and lesser forms of conflict,” and Smith (2000, 65) speaks of “lesser operations” (presumably contrasted with “greater operations”). Fastbend (1997) mentions “war and military operations other than war,” while Gates (1988) talks of “military operations short of war.” Eliot Cohen (1987) talks about “small wars” as opposed (we would assume) to “big wars,” while Stuart Cohen (1994) uses the term “sub-conventional,” and Hehir (1996) talks about “unconventional” in opposition to “conventional” wars. Or, take the idea of “spectrum of conflict,” based on the idea of its intensity (high, medium, or low), from which the term LIC (low-intensity conflict) is derived (Fastbend 1997; Gates 1998). In fact, the very term “irregular” warfare implies a normal, “regular” war—and assumptions about “regulars” and “irregulars” as fighting adversaries—offering a benchmark against which all other conflicts may be measured.

But the problem runs deeper than this kind of assumption. In the majority of recent social scientific works on combat—in sociology, psychology, social-psychology, social history, and political science—the focus continues to be on what may be termed “conventional” or “regular” war. Take the latest crop of excellent books about combat: Joanna Bourke’s (1999) *An Intimate History of Killing*, Dave Grossman’s (1995) *On Killing*, McManners’s (1994) *The Scars of War*, or, the book edited by Evans and Ryan (2000), on *The Human Face of Warfare: Killing, Fear and Chaos in Battle*. All of these volumes focus on, and assume the continued importance of, the stipulated conventional war. Similarly, a number of recent ethnographies about combat or preparation for combat that have been written about Israel (Ben-Ari 1998) and other industrial democracies (Hawkins 2001; Simons 1997; Winslow 1997) take a similar tack. Whether concentrating on the organization and interpersonal dynamics of combat units or the experiences of individuals serving in them, such analyses tend to examine how such qualities are related to “conventional” combat, the armed struggle of (usually) two opposing forces belonging to regular armies of organized states. In this sense, we argue that corresponding to the relative (albeit changing) disregard of “irregular warfare” by military professionals has been an almost total absence of social scientific studies about the organizational and sociological aspects of such conflicts.

It is as though social scientists have accepted the military's priorities in defining what is "worthy" of study. Many social scientists, in other words, have willy-nilly accepted the very worldview of the military organizations they study.

Long ago, Morris Janowitz (1971b) argued that the militaries of the industrial democracies have been moving toward a constabulary role, toward policing in various forms. This transformation—or, more correctly, an addition of new roles to conventional ones—has led to debates about the tensions between the ethos of warriors and the needs and practicalities of policemen. This dichotomy, however, does not quite get at the complexity of situations that involve peace enforcement (as opposed to peacekeeping) and in which armed forces are called upon to do more than policing. Conflicts in such places as Somalia, Sierra Leone, or large areas of former Yugoslavia are dispersed, blurred, and unpredictably fluid. They are dispersed in place and time in accordance with the principles of guerrilla warfare (Munkler 2005, 12). They are blurred because, as Battistelli, Ammendola, and Galantino (1999) state, many new arenas are characterized by unclear definitions of friend and foe, the existence of many enemies, and the saturation of the "battlefield" with a variety of innocents, unknowns, or neutrals. Arguably, while conventional wars tend to relatively clearly differentiate between the geographical and social positions of military forces and civilians, the new wars tend to confuse such categories. This confusion is related to the "vanishing front," because in present-day conflicts it has often become unclear where front and rear are, who the warriors on the "battlefield" are, and who the supporters are at "home" (Shamir and Ben-Ari 1999a, 1999b). Finally, many contemporary conflicts are fluid, in that within one arena different kinds of struggles may often combine or transform into each other, for example, peaceful demonstrations, violent protests, terror attacks, small-scale fighting, or open combat. In such conflicts fighting is not restricted to relatively isolated sectors but may flare up anywhere and anytime. Moreover, "the new wars have neither an identifiable beginning nor a clearly definable end" (Munkler 2005, 13).

Against this background we were led to questions that centered on just how the dispersal, blurredness, and fluidity of current wars are related to the actions of combat units and their internal social and organizational dynamics. In an effort to answer these questions we turned to the theories and concepts developed in the social sciences in regard to combat in conventional wars. Again, we thought that we could infer from the findings and contentions of this rich scholarly literature answers to the puzzles we had encountered in the Al-Aqsa Intifada.

Seeking Answers: Conventional Military Sociology

In a wide-ranging article covering the core issues of military sociology, Siebold (2001) focuses on a variety of issues placed at the macro-sociological level, such as military professionalism (Janowitz 1971b), the similarity between the civilian and military professions (Wood 1988), or civilian control of the armed forces (Feaver and Gelpi 2005). Much more relevant for our case are what he calls the core issues related to the military institution and its fighting potential. He is worth quoting at length:

[T]he primary orientation of the military as an institution and as a set of organizations is to take the raw “materials” such as recruits, weapons, systems and doctrine and work with them to produce capable combat units (land, sea, and aerospace) ready to engage the enemy on the battlefield (or carry out alternate military missions). For example, the development of leaders and small unit cohesion and performance would be clearly within the scope of that orientation at the individual and small group levels of analysis. . . . Thus the center of military sociology in this area could be a theory that addresses how that orientation to produce combat units dominates the institution and organizations of the military. Military sociology must ask how that orientation permeates the visions used for planning . . . formal and informal values, structures, and processes. (Siebold 2001, 150)

Siebold’s characterization of the sociology of the military as it developed over the past five or so decades is quite apt. To put it simply but not incorrectly, much of this sociological literature attempted to deal with the shortcomings of psychological and social-psychological research on attitudes and motivation because it failed to describe the underlying social system of military establishments (Janowitz 1971a, 16). Instead of the single concept of morale, sociologists (and, later, social psychologists) sought to build a theory of organizational and professional behavior that focused on such concepts as authority, communications, hierarchy, sanctions, status, social role, and socialization (Andreski 1956). At the time, this line of analysis, moreover, paralleled the study of other institutions, such as the factory, mental hospital, or school, as social systems. Take the following passage from a classic essay by Janowitz and Little (1974, 103):

[T]actical leaders must regulate the relations of their unit with higher authority. The commander is required by his

men to defend them against arbitrary and unwarranted intrusion from above. Yet the officer in the tactical unit is also the final representative of coercive higher authority. For him to overidentify with his men would impair the system of authority.

This kind of analysis could easily have been used in regard to any institution or organization studied by social scientists during that period.

Perhaps the most developed set of concepts at the micro-level of combat units centers on cohesion and primary groups as collective responses to external threats (Shils and Janowitz 1948; Little 1964). Investigators have called attention time and again to the fact that the most “significant persons for the combat soldier are the men who fight by his side and share with him the ordeal of trying to survive” (George 1971, 294). Following Janowitz’s lead, many analyses developed the idea of how even the smallest unit contains an “iron framework” of social control whether it be at the level of “buddies,” squads, or platoons (George 1971, 296–8). Moskos (1975) took this line of research one step farther to show that primary group ties in the military do not necessarily rely on deep identifications and solidarity with group members but may be the outcome of instrumental and self-serving efforts to minimize personal risk.

While we develop these ideas in chapter 3, at this point suffice it to say that most research carried during the past five or so decades focused almost exclusively on professionally homogeneous, hierarchical groups: that is, on organic military units. No less importantly, underlying many analyses was a model or an ideal of the infantry (and to a much lesser extent, the armored corps) as the epitome of military organization. The assumption at the base of much of this literature seemed to be that the social structures and dynamics of combat units could help the military overcome what Clausewitz termed friction: things that look like they are easy become extremely difficult in warfare because of the magnitude and complexity of armies in conflict. At the individual level, friction entails “mortal danger, privation, physical exertion, fatigue, the uncertainty of vitally required information, random chance, and environmental drags like mud, fog, and the enemy’s destruction of supplies” (Shay 2001, 4). It was for this reason that the psychological approach complementing the sociological literature was developed to illuminate the level of the individual soldier in combat. This approach centered on ideas of stressors and anti-stressors and the ways in which personal resources could be “freed” for soldierly activities. While many of these models tended to be dichotomist—more or less cohesion, greater or lesser stress, leading to better or worse cop-

ing—some such studies, as Shalit's (1988) significant but overlooked book, present a dynamic, integrated psychological model of combat based on feedback loops of appraisal, reaction, and motivation.

These individual psychological processes were then encased within social frames entailing group cohesion, status, or leadership. Yet in all these studies, the link is basically between a set of psychological and sociological variables, on the one hand, and military effectiveness, on the other (one example is Tziner and Vardi 1982). Along these lines, Lehrer and Amram (2001) contend that the psychology and sociology of combat comprise bodies of knowledge preoccupied with (and created against the background of) the basic difficulty of controlling military units in situations of extreme face-to-face conflict. Concerns with morale, cohesion, or leadership thus represent attempts to find factors allowing greater control and predictability in the battlefield. Our wider argument is that this extended family of sociological and psychological models has been generally tested and elaborated in rather specific circumstances: hierarchical, unified, and homogeneous infantry units engaged in (or preparing for) conventional combat. Only rarely have these models been systematically applied to other military sites, roles, and activities.

Let us go back to Shalit (1988), since his candor allows us to see the problems of applying conventional models to a conflict bearing some similarity to the Al-Aqsa Intifada. At the end of his book, Shalit tries to make sense of IDF soldiers' behavior in Lebanon during the 1980s after the initial period of intense combat had died down. In a section aptly entitled "New Concepts" he states (Shalit 1988, 180–82):

The new IDF norms were called "Levantinization." Values became more fluid and adaptable; reactions towards previously unacceptable behavior became less harsh and more forgiving. Soldiers who were in an NCO course were given the task of covering another platoon on patrol. Instead, they engaged in looting. . . . There were cases where soldiers who had been ordered to search houses wantonly destroyed property, just for revenge. The officer in charge described how, on a previous day's search, they had not thoroughly investigated a house because a woman was crying loudly, until an expert assured them that this meant there were arms hidden—and indeed, a big ammunition dump was discovered. "All the time, I thought about this woman," said a soldier. "She was like my mother; how could I behave like this towards her—and then I say the expert was right." Another soldier who was there said that after that they found

a radio control for exploding mines hidden in a bed, they started shooting at all the furniture in the house.

In explaining these developments, Shalit (1988, 183) suggests that military failure to cope with unexpected forms of battle was related to the problematic situation in Lebanon:

1. The purpose of the war was not clear to many. The nature of the enemy and rules of war were very diffuse.
2. Moral issues prevented many from identifying with the war; and conflict with home-front perceptions further reduced the potential for commitment.
3. Loss of trust in the military skills and abilities to handle the new situation, loss of status of leaders, and the inability to protest all lead to decreased feelings of adequacy and control.

Given these conclusions, it appears that fundamental to Shalit's analysis is an ideal war that is consensual, clear in its goals, pits unmistakably defined enemies one against another, and utilizes military skills and abilities of the conventional kind. Yet it is precisely the difference between this ideal view of combat and the reality of the IDF's actions in Lebanon that needed conceptualizing. In his attempt to do so Shalit (1988, 184) reverts to generalities:

Any training must assure the adequacy of the perceptual process. Since the actual war scenario can only be predicted in a very diffuse way, training must be focused on the ability to perceive—how to structure, evaluate, and have confidence in one's ability to cope. . . . There is no point in preparing for the stressful emotions before one has structured the possible scenarios. There is no point in teaching skills and tactics before one has dealt with the emotional problems in their application.

These kinds of statements seem to beg rather than answer questions related to the social and organizational dynamics of contemporary conflicts.

While social scientific studies of combat have not been developed to explain these new circumstances, they do contain a number of important theoretical insights. According to Janowitz (1971a, 15), since