

## **The Double-Edged Sword of the Fog of War**

### **The Fog of War as a Weapon**

A territory plunged into war lives in an atmosphere of general uncertainty. A metaphorical fog covers everything beneath it, both for belligerents and any third parties struggling to monitor or contain the conflict. Combatants at various levels possess radically different information, chains of command and authority are easily disrupted, and the conduct of subordinates oftentimes contravenes the plans and interests of their commanders. But this confusion in itself also tends to be further weaponized. While a warring side tries to “penetrate the fog” over the battlefield, it also seeks to blind the enemy and gain the upper hand in media framing of the situation. When information is obscured, the battle for the most convincing narrative begins. But how useful is this harnessing of uncertainty? The key question is: to what extent does the Fog of War represent an effective instrument of warfare? Analysing the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of the recent flare-up of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, I will argue that employing the fog of war in combat leads, at most, to temporary gains, as its objectives break down in the interactions between those levels.

### **Levels of Information Warfare**

Before we delve into our case study, I would like to situate the instrumentalization of the fog of war within the idea of information warfare. Information warfare (IW) can be broadly defined as a struggle to maintain information and communication advantage (Lewis, 1997). On the whole, two categories of IW can be identified. There is the option to proceed reactively and take the information space as given, collecting information about enemy movements and destroying the opponent’s ability to do the same. But it is also possible to alter or “create” information itself through propaganda and disinformation. In the reactive approach, a managed fog of war is a goal in itself, serving to conceal and blind; in the proactive approach, it serves as protection and a foundation for other information operations.

While IW is a qualitative category, levels of warfare differ in scope. We can divide each military conflict into its strategic-political, operational, and tactical facets (Rogers, 2006). At the strategic-political level, broad objectives—and campaigns to achieve them—are discussed and designed. Domestic and international support is maintained, favourable

narratives are constructed, and the enemy is vilified. This is the core of the proactive IW under the fog of war. At the operational level, armed forces are coordinated to materialise the key steps in the overall strategy. Here, on the contrary, the fog of war in itself is part of the desired outcome: Information about the enemy's movements is gathered, while the opponent's own intelligence capacity is destroyed so that the hostile troops are demoralised due to the lack of effective command (Tuner, 2003). At the tactical level (the sphere of direct combat), friendly units must be kept under the radar and provided with up-to-date information. But crucially, their behavior also needs to align with the framing of the high command if it is to remain credible. This interaction between the proactive approach at the strategic level, the reactive at the operational level, and the passive at the tactical level tends to be the cause of the failure of the militarization of the fog of war.

### **Hamas Attack on Israel**

Having laid the theoretical foundations, we may move our attention to two cases of bloodshed in the recently rekindled Israeli-Hamas war. The casus belli of the current escalation was a Hamas incursion into Israeli kibbutzim (a non-competitive worker community) in the area near the border with Gaza. A carefully planned operation overwhelmed the border defences and more than 1000 civilians were killed, often with considerable brutality (CBS News, 2023). The Israeli government even claimed cases of infants being decapitated (Gavin, 2023). At the strategic level, the violent reality of the atrocities enabled Israel to mobilise the sympathy of the public abroad. The narrative of an unprovoked and bestial attack on a civilian population was, of course, present in the domestic media as well, reinforced by the shock and grief over the loss of loved ones. It is therefore no surprise that, at the tactical level, Israeli soldiers clashing with Hamas see their enemies as little more than animals without any sense of remorse (Pacchiani, 2023). While the strategy to capitalise on Hamasniks' inhumanity rendered some short-time gains, it also gave Israeli soldiers the incentive to effectively treat them as subhumans, undermining the picture of Israel as an innocent victim. Furthermore, as the Israeli authorities have proved unable to substantiate their claims of beheadings (Speri, 2023), it seems that even on the political level, they have overestimated the "freedom with the truth" that the fog of war gives them.

### **Al-Ahli Arab Hospital Explosion**

Before proceeding with a full-scale invasion of Gaza, Israel spent several weeks after the October 7 attack shelling positions of Hamas. Its main goal was to disrupt the group's

organisational structure and its ability to mount a coordinated defence. But the intended chaos meant that even the Israeli command had limited information about the ongoing operation. This proved crucial at the moment of the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital explosion that left several hundred dead (Cordesman 2023, Biesecker 2023). Hamas was quick to blame an Israeli airstrike, which was picked up by several international news outlets. Israel, though denying responsibility, was only able to challenge the claim several hours later with inconsistent evidence. By that time, it had lost the initiative (Cordesman 2023). Later analyses have leaned towards a Palestinian missile failure (Biesecker 2023), which indicates that Israel lacked accurate information about the events precisely when it needed it the most. Even if Israel was indeed responsible for the blast, it points to the completely misplaced priorities of the operational command, which lacked either a prepared cover story to deflect the blame (in the case of a deliberate attack) or established crisis mechanisms (in the case of a misfire). Regardless of whether the operational forces lost some of their intelligence capacities in the attempt to paralyse the enemy, or the importance of the public image was not properly communicated to them, the result was identical: the grand narrative of a rightful and necessary defensive campaign was damaged.

### **The Fog Parted**

In the case of both the original Hamas attack and the hospital explosion, we have seen how the incoherence of the goals of information warfare, and perhaps even the lack of understanding of its relevance, have led to the undermining of the attempts to make systematic use of the fog of war. Information has persistently remained just beyond the control of the Israelis. While strategies such as those adapted so far may be able to secure momentary benefits, it is only a matter of time before their potential is erased by hardly predictable self-sabotage.

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