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Benjamin S. Lambeth. "Israel's War in Gaza: A Paradigm of Effective Military Learning and Adaptation." *International Security* 37:2 (Fall 2012): 81-118

Jerome Slater. "Just War Moral Philosophy and the 2008-09 Israeli Campaign in Gaza." *International Security* 37:2 (Fall 2012): 44-80.

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Benjamin Lambeth and Jerome Slater share a common interest in the military meaning of Arab-Israeli confrontations of the last decade, but they come at the battles very differently. Whereas Lambeth is interested in analyzing the Israel Defense Forces' effectiveness and learning curve, Slater is focused upon the morality of Israel's actions, calling Operation Cast Lead (2008-09) a "moral catastrophe." (44) Even though the authors cover some of the same events, one would be hard-pressed to develop a common narrative because they hold very different perspectives on Arab-Israeli events and history.

Interestingly, since both authors published their articles in mid-2012, the Hamas-Israel fighting in November of last year came afterward and, as a byproduct, provided new information through which to consider their claims. It raises important questions for both authors. For Lambeth, the success he saw in 2008-09 looks less compelling in light of Israel's return to battle in 2012. For

¹ The author would like to thank Ehud Eiran for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

Slater, a long Israeli history of pummeling civilian infrastructure during military operations was more restrained in 2012 relative to 2008-09.

In the rest of this review, I compare the Lambeth and Slater versions of Arab-Israeli history and in particular consider competing explanations for damage to civilian infrastructure in Gaza; raise a question for each author that stems from a more recent event, the battle in November 2012; and conclude by looking at problems with how the authors think about Hamas, the Palestinian Islamist movement. Lambeth powerfully illuminates military learning while Slater productively unsettles us by bringing in the oft-neglected consideration of the morality of war.

In Slater's article, the history is the story, and it is a history of Israeli aggression against Arab people. Israel, according to Slater, has smashed Arab civilians for decades and Operation Cast Lead "must be understood in the context of Israel's...strategy, which from the outset has included deliberate attacks on civilians or their economy, institutions, and infrastructures." (45) If his interpretation of history is correct, his argument of the unjustness of Israel's war drive stands. If his interpretation is wrong, his argument falls.

Slater documents a long Israeli history of reliance on military force that was used against civilian targets. He opens his case with the "Iron Wall" doctrine of Zeev Jabotinsky, founding leader of Revisionist Zionism, an idea highlighted in more recent years by Avi Shlaim, an historian.² The Arabs would face "an iron wall of Jewish bayonets" (Jabotinsky's words) (45); blocked by this wall, the theory went, eventually the Arab side would give up and sue for peace. But prior to that peaceful solution, Israel would have to be resolute in projecting its strength. The key conclusion Slater draws is that, "attacks on Arab civilians resisting Jewish expansion in Palestine are a central component of the [Iron Wall] strategy." (45) Slater then describes examples of Israel attacking Arab civilians from the 1930s to the 2000s. (45-51)

For Lambeth, the history of the general Arab-Israeli past is less central; it is more embedded in the article, which suggests that it is not the central concern. He focuses on military innovation: Did Israel learn lessons from a military operation and then successfully apply those lessons the next time around? Empirically, what did the Israeli government and military learn after its 2006 fight with Hezbollah and how well did they apply those lessons in 2008-09 when it engaged with Hamas? He concludes that Israel was successful in adapting its behavior, which, in scholarly terms, supports earlier work by Stephen P. Rosen but undermines that of Dima Adamsky.³ (112; also 118)

Lambeth's views are clear: Hamas is a "radical Islamist" organization (82), and the Hamas-Israel confrontation was entirely the result of Hamas actions (93-4). Hamas ended the truce with Israel, and then Israel acted "against the increasingly intolerable cross-border rocket and other provocations by Hamas." (102, 106)

² Avi Shlaim, *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

³ Stephen P. Rosen *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Dima Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation: The Impact of Cultural Factors in the Revolution in Military Affairs in Russia, the U.S., and Israel* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010).

In short, Slater argues that Israel instigated the actions across the decades. Lambeth, looking only at recent events, makes the opposite argument: Hamas is to blame.

That these authors, whether directly or indirectly, take sides on recent Arab-Israeli history is not surprising. The warring parties themselves are quite focused on shaping the historical narrative, as we saw in 2012 with the twitter clash between Hamas's @alqassamBrigade and Israel's @IDFSpokesperson even as real fighting raged in Gaza and southern Israel.⁴ Lambeth quotes an Israeli spokesman who noted that "It's a war of the narrative. The one who controls the narrative is the one who wins." (106) This war of the narrative also included attention to social media; as an Israeli military spokeswoman explained, "the blogosphere and new media are another war zone and we have to be relevant there."⁵

I want to focus on one important aspect of the Lambeth-Slater difference: Has Israel targeted civilians? Or, is Hamas to blame for the death of Palestinian civilians and the extensive damage to Palestinian infrastructure, homes, and institutions? The authors disagree strongly on this point.

In Lambeth's telling, what was important was that Israel warned targets with leaflets and phone calls,⁶ used mostly precision-guided munitions, and sought to minimize damage. (99-100) In contrast, "Hamas and its allies, as a central element of their operating style, bent every effort to maximize the extent to which noncombatant civilians in the Gaza Strip would be exposed to IDF fire for its propaganda value." (100) Lambeth details the charge:

these included a Hezbollah-like opponent in Hamas that stored rockets and other weapons inside public facilities, mosques, hospitals, and private homes and apartments; that positioned and fired rockets in close proximity to schools and residential buildings; and that systematically exploited innocent civilians as human shields to inhibit IDF attacks against its military assets. (103)

Israel did not intend to hit civilian targets, but if it did, Hamas policy had made it necessary. By this reasoning, Palestinian civilians died and structures were destroyed because of Hamas.

Slater explicitly rejects this line of argumentation, arguing instead that it was Israel who consciously intended to hit civilian targets. Slater, for example, quotes Israeli General Gadi Eisenkot's comments about Lebanon just a few months before Cast Lead. In the aftermath of the 2006 fight with Hezbollah, Israel, "will wield disproportionate power against every village from which shots are fired on Israel, and cause immense damage and destruction. From our

⁴ For more on official Israeli use of social media, including by the IDF, see Rebecca L. Stein, "StateTube: Anthropological Reflections on Social Media and the Israeli State," *Anthropological Quarterly* 85:3 (2012), pp. 893–916. Thank you to Kevin Sobel-Read for bringing this work to my attention.

⁵ David Byers, "Gaza: Secondary War Being Fought on the Internet," *The Times* (London), December 31, 2008, as cited in "The 2008/09 Gaza Conflict-An Analysis," (RAF Waddington, UK: Air Warfare Centre, Air Warfare Group, 2009), p. 8.

⁶ The RAF report, "The 2008/09 Gaza Conflict-An Analysis," noted that Israel warned occupants. (pp. 3-4) It also reported that Hamas staged some photos of damage, but offered no additional citations.

perspective, these are military bases.”⁷

Of the sources I was able to compare, I found Slater’s to be more convincing on this point. The quality of evidence varies greatly according to the claim. That Israel, at a policy level, wanted to target civilian infrastructure in Gaza is pretty clear. Israel wanted the general population in Gaza, or Lebanon for that matter, to reject the non-state actor in its midst and deny it support. On January 13, 2009, then foreign minister Tzipi Livni said regarding Hamas: Israel “is a country that when you fire on its citizens it responds by going wild – and this is a good thing.”⁸ Going wild does not suggest sensitivity to civilian casualties.

This Israeli approach has sometimes been referred to as the ‘Dahiya doctrine,’ named for the Beirut neighborhood that suffered massive destruction in 2006 at the hands of the IDF; it had been a Hezbollah stronghold. Again, Gen. Eisenkot, then head of the IDF’s northern command offered an explanation of Israeli policy: “What happened in the Dahiya quarter of Beirut in 2006 will happen in every village from which Israel is fired on.... We will apply disproportionate force on it (village) and cause great damage and destruction there. From our standpoint, these are not civilian villages, they are military bases.”⁹ This was an approved plan, Eisenkot added. The Dahiya doctrine offers an acknowledgement that one Israeli aim (in 2006 at least) was the destruction of Palestinian civilian infrastructure, albeit infrastructure redefined as military bases.

In the actual fighting of 2008-09, the impact was devastating. (Slater, 67-71) More recently, the Israeli journalist Shlomi Eldar noted additional evidence: “During Operation Cast Lead I came into possession of material about very grim events relating to the idea that Israel was deliberately ‘going crazy.’ Testimonies, images and much more. So many people were killed there.”¹⁰ Eldar went on to dismiss the notion that the damage was caused by just a few “rotten apples.”¹¹

⁷ Slater, p. 66. He cites Amos Harel, “ANALYSIS / IDF plans to use disproportionate force in next war,” *Ha’aretz*, October 5, 2008, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/analysis-idf-plans-to-use-disproportionate-force-in-next-war-1.254954> . Harel’s article concerns Israeli policy toward Lebanon. Reflecting on 2006, Maj. Gen. (ret.) Giora Eiland noted that Israel would have to fight Hezbollah differently the next time if it wanted to win: “Such a war will lead to the elimination of the Lebanese military, the destruction of the national infrastructure, and intense suffering among the population. There will be no recurrence of the situation where Beirut residents (not including the Dahiya quarter) go to the beach and cafes while Haifa residents sit in bomb shelters. Serious damage to the Republic of Lebanon, the destruction of homes and infrastructure, and the suffering of hundreds of thousands of people are consequences that can influence Hizbollah’s behavior more than anything else.” See Giora Eiland, “The Third Lebanon War: Target Lebanon,” *Strategic Assessment*, 11:2, November 2008, pp. 9-17 at 16, [http://www.inss.org.il/upload/\(FILE\)1226472866.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/upload/(FILE)1226472866.pdf).

⁸ UN Fact-Finding Mission (Goldstone), paragraph 1206, p. 256. See also paragraphs 1203-1212.

⁹ “Israel warns Hizbullah war would invite destruction,” March 10, 2008, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0.7340.L-3604893.00.html> as cited in UN Fact-Finding Mission (Goldstone), paragraph 1195, p. 254.

¹⁰ Ayelett Shani, “Israeli News Broadcasters Don’t Cry,” *Ha’aretz*, January 19, 2013.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Furthermore, Israel did not publicly reevaluate that policy after 2008-09. In 2010, *Human Rights Watch* urged Israel to, “Review policy and tactical decisions made during Operation Cast Lead that may have led to unnecessary destruction of civilian property, with public findings and recommendations for minimizing such destruction in any future engagements.”¹² In 2011, a UN report, known as the Davis committee report, assessed the implementation of the Goldstone report, and found that “there is no indication that Israel has opened investigations into the actions of those who designed, planned, ordered and oversaw Operation Cast Lead.”¹³ In January 2012, B’Tselem, the leading Israeli human rights organization, criticized Israel’s choice not to investigate “the policy that guided the forces during the offensive,” “the choice of targets for bombing,” and “the means taken to protect the civilian population.”¹⁴ That said, Israel may have reevaluated its policies privately, especially given the apparent lower level of destructiveness in its November 2012 military operations. After Operation Pillar of Defense (2012), Israel’s military chief of staff, Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz, said, “If we could draw the appropriate conclusions without having the heavy cloud of an international or local commission of inquiry hovering over us, that’s good enough.”¹⁵

In addition, the evidence is limited that Israel destroyed civilian infrastructure only as a result of or in response to Hamas tactics. For example, a *Human Rights Watch* report on the matter persuasively undermines that Israeli meme by describing twelve examples of destruction in Gaza where no fighting was going on, but where the IDF nonetheless destroyed civilian infrastructure. The claims that Hamas used human shields or booby-trapped large areas are thus far unproven; though plausible, it is not clear these tactics were widespread. The evidence the IDF amassed is relatively weak. For example, some evidence does not concern the 2008-09 battle, and other evidence revolves around a single informant or single newspaper article.¹⁶ Hamas militants were operating in civilian areas and firing rockets from these areas.¹⁷ As to whether they were doing so with the intentional hope that Israel would be deterred from attacking due to the presence of Palestinian civilians had not been conclusively proven. Not much convincing evidence has been produced to systematically support that claim.¹⁸

¹² Human Rights Watch, “I Lost Everything,” May 13, 2010.

¹³ Slater, p. 73; or “Report of the Committee of independent experts in international humanitarian and human rights law established pursuant to Council resolution 13/9,” http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/docs/16session/A.HRC.16.24_AUV.pdf, paragraph 47.

¹⁴ B’Tselem, “Three years since Operation Cast Lead: Israeli military utterly failed to investigate itself,” January 18, 2012.

¹⁵ Yoav Limor, “For a quiet soldier, a war fought increasingly in the shadows,” January 25, 2013, http://www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter_article.php?id=7168.

¹⁶ State of Israel, “The Operation in Gaza, 27 December 2008 – 18 January 2009,” July 29, 2009. See also Avi Mor *et al.*, “Casualties in Operation Cast Lead: A Closer Look,” The Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, 2009.

¹⁷ Human Rights Watch, “Rockets from Gaza,” August 6, 2009, <http://www.hrw.org/node/84867/section/1>.

¹⁸ That Palestinian militants wanted to hit Israeli civilians with rockets is clear, and they did cause a few casualties, psychological damage, and some physical damage.

From a legal and moral perspective, there certainly remains a tension in trying to evaluate Hamas activity during the fighting. Compare these two lines from the Goldstone Report:

“Fighting within civilian areas is not, by itself, sufficient for a finding that a party is using the civilian population living in the area of the fighting as a human shield.”

“The Mission wishes to emphasize that the launching of attacks from or in the vicinity of civilian buildings and protected areas are serious violations of the obligation on the armed groups to take constant care to protect civilians from the inherent dangers created by military operations.”¹⁹

The first quotation seems to favor Hamas while the second quotation paints a much more critical standard. In tactical terms, Hamas militants have four choices in densely-populated Gaza: avoiding operating in civilian areas altogether; operating in civilian areas but making every effort to minimize the impact on civilians; operating in civilian areas with indifference toward civilians; or operating in civilian areas and using civilians as a tool, e.g. human shields. The first is a recipe for total defeat. The last is Israel’s largely unsubstantiated claim; *Human Rights Watch* found no examples of this.²⁰ But the second one, which puts Hamas in a better light and is consistent with international law, is not well-substantiated either.

To be clear, thus far it appears that Hamas was operating in civilian areas with indifference toward civilians.

At the same time, there is a fundamental tension in the Israeli outlook. Sometimes Israel argues that destroying civilian infrastructure is the only way to deter or suppress non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah. There is no way to square the Dahiya doctrine with other occasions when Israeli officials went to great lengths to deny any illegal attacks on Gaza civilians, claim strict Israeli adherence to international rules of war, and pin the blame for such incidents solely on Hamas.

Although the Lambeth and Slater narratives are sharply contradictory, the different emphasis seems to suggest that both authors could be correct. Plausibly, the IDF could be effective in terms of Lambeth’s standards and immoral in terms of Slater’s metric. Any combination of (in)effectiveness and (im)morality is plausible. To carry the idea a step further, Israel’s very military effectiveness could heighten its immorality in Slater’s interpretation.

Both scholars wrote before the November 2012 clash between Israel and Hamas, and that clash challenges important parts of their stories. For Lambeth’s article, the fighting in 2012 raises questions about defining success. For Slater’s article, the Israeli military operation (called Pillar of Defense) was less destructive. The question is whether Israel intentionally avoided targeting civilian infrastructure in Gaza.

According to Lambeth, the Israel fight with Hezbollah in 2006 was a failure because of the IDF’s “irresolute performance.” (96) In contrast, the IDF’s fighting with Hamas in 2008-09 was a “successful experience.” (84-85) Yet Hamas and other Palestinian militants in Gaza were

¹⁹ UN Fact-Finding Mission (Goldstone), paragraph 493, p. 123 and paragraph 497, p. 124.

²⁰ HRW, “Rockets from Gaza.”

emboldened after 2008-09, with sporadic rocket fire continuing to hit Israel's southern area. Almost four years later, Israel launched another major military operation. That seems problematic for coding the 2008-09 operation a success given that, "an avowed longer-term goal [in 2008-09] was to produce a more enduring end to further rocket and other attacks against Israel emanating from the Gaza Strip." (97)

Hezbollah has grown stronger politically in Lebanon since 2006, but has kept quiet in terms of launching missiles or rockets at Israel.²¹ If that is the result of the IDF's irresolute performance, one may need to redefine the concept of military success. Hezbollah may have turned to other methods for challenging Israel, such as drone flights into Israeli territory or the attack on Israelis in Burgas, Bulgaria in 2012.

Meanwhile, Slater's article describes a long Israeli history of attacks on civilian populations and civilian infrastructure. In that sense, the battle in November 2012 seems like an anomaly. Compared with 2008-09, the IDF fought a shorter war, refrained from a ground invasion, and killed noticeably fewer Palestinians. In 2008-09, approximately 1166-1444 Palestinians were killed. In 2012, the number dropped to 160-168.²² Early reports also suggest much less damage to the civilian infrastructure.²³ Even accounting for the fact that the second military operation was shorter, the difference is significant.

One wonders how Slater would account for this difference? Was it luck? Or did Israel make a decision to scale back the deadliness of its attacks in 2012 and if so, why? Was Israel hoping to minimize casualties and thereby avoid the huge international outcry that followed the 2008-09 military operation? The Gantz quotation above is suggestive. No outcry would also likely mean no international commission to investigate war crimes along the lines of the Goldstone report.

In thinking about Hamas, Lambeth's article presents a unified Gaza, attributing Palestinian action in Gaza solely to Hamas: "relentless rocket fire by Hamas" (83), "Hamas's rocket launch squad" or "Hamas combatants fired." (102) Yet we know that other armed groups also operate in Gaza, such as Islamic Jihad and Popular Resistance Committees, and sometimes that the real issue is contestation in Gaza between those groups. By attributing everything to Hamas, Lambeth's article creates a false sense of control when the reality is more conditional with Hamas maneuvering between multiple parties both inside (rival Palestinian groups) and out (Israel). To understand that Hamas pays a price if it allows rocket fire by others, shoots rockets itself, or clamps down necessitates an understanding of the multi-player relationship.

Yet on a key issue, I disagree with Slater's view of Hamas as well. I think he may be correct that Hamas was open to a political pathway or accommodation of some sort. The Israeli government could and should have tested Hamas on this possibility. At the same time, I do not see evidence that Hamas was locked into peacefully accepting Israel. The evidence is tentative, preliminary,

²¹ That said, the Syrian civil war could have a very negative impact on Hezbollah's political future.

²² Carl Bialik, "Accurate Death Toll a Casualty in Gaza," *Wall Street Journal* (*wsj.com*), November 24, 2012; "Casualties of the Gaza War," Wikipedia (In my opinion, this article is a reliable one. It contains links to several major casualty counts).

²³ That leads back to a question for Lambeth. If the damage to civilian infrastructure in Gaza was due to Hamas' behavior, did Hamas become more observant of international norms from 2009 to 2012, more accepting of human rights strictures? I have not seen evidence to that effect.

confused, and contradictory, and I wish that Slater's article had acknowledged that uncertainty more clearly. Had there been a real opportunity, Hamas might or might not have changed its position.

The non-unitary nature of Palestinian actors in Gaza is also relevant here. In terms of Slater's work, it means that Israel's view of Gaza is cloudier than he allows for. Seeing the possibility of an opening with Hamas required Israel to not only cut through Hamas's own confused rhetoric and conflicting opinions,²⁴ but also to distinguish between rockets fired by Hamas and those fired by other armed groups. In an already conflictual environment, that does not seem especially possible or likely.

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²⁴ *Light at the End of their Tunnels? Hamas & the Arab Uprisings*, Crisis Group Middle East Report no. 129, 14 August 2012, p. 15 (and more).