
Confused Warfare

Haim Assa and Yedidya Ya'ari

**Diffused Warfare: War in the
Twenty-First Century**

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Reviewed by Yagil Henkin

According to the old cliché, generals are always preparing to fight the last war. But since World War II, as conventional conflicts have increasingly given way to unconventional ones, military scholars and war planners have become intensely focused

on the future. Most agree that wars will no longer be waged between national armies; instead, at least one side will be a non-state actor, such as a terrorist or guerilla organization. Some even claim that today, all the classical foundations of warfare have become obsolete.

Haim Assa, former strategic adviser to Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and head of the National Security Council of the Prime Minister's Office, and Maj.-Gen. (Res.) Yedidya Ya'ari, former commander of the Israeli navy, were part of a committee that sought to devise new strategies

to fight unconventional wars. Their conclusions form the basis of their new book, *Diffused Warfare: War in the Twenty-First Century*. Assa and Ya'ari have emerged with a detailed plan for remodeling Israel's army, and their ideas will undoubtedly reverberate throughout the Israel Defense Forces (IDF).

The book begins with the assertion that future conflicts will be staged between civilizations and without boundaries. The concept of the "front" will become a thing of the past, as will the directing and maneuvering of large armies. States will have to rely instead on a strategy of "diffused warfare," and make use of what the authors call "dynamic molecules": Task-force-oriented teams of small, highly competent ground forces capable of intelligence-gathering, reconnaissance, and direct-action missions, and who can also direct airstrikes, naval fire, artillery, and cruise missiles, and pilot unmanned drones. These teams will function seamlessly with other "molecular units," all of which are directed toward a common goal by means of a higher command framework. As the authors explain, this framework "creates one logic that leads to a specified effect."

These molecules are expected to operate against enemy targets simultaneously, with no need to capture or occupy territory. The enemy is to

be struck at every point—whether at the front or the rear areas—immobilized, and destroyed. Furthermore, advanced communications and intelligence operations will create a "network" of information-gathering and -sharing to help reduce uncertainty in wartime, avoid the unnecessary concentration of forces and the financial cost of ground battle, and conserve an army's strength and resources. In encountering terrorist and guerilla enemies, the authors explain, diffused warfare "simply produces counter-asymmetry as a response to the asymmetry presented by the enemy." In this way, the idea of molecular units can be seen as an extension of the tactic known as infiltration, by which forces quietly bypass the strongest enemy defenses in order to attack important targets behind the front lines. Large armies tend to forget the importance of this means of waging war, despite its distinct advantage—the element of surprise. Fortunately, this advantage is not lost on Assa and Ya'ari, who propose the building of an army whose fundamental skill lies in its ability to outmaneuver and outwit the enemy on its own turf.

The essence of diffused warfare, the authors conclude, is for combat units to be powerful, fast, and fluid, while satisfying two major requirements: The reduction of collateral damage and the reduction of costs. While

Assa and Ya'ari do not say so explicitly, meeting these goals requires that the IDF turn into a downsized, professional army, one based on career service rather than conscription. No doubt, were Assa's and Ya'ari's proposals implemented, they would result in a smaller yet far more technologically savvy army—and one dramatically different from the IDF of today.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom within the IDF, Assa and Ya'ari believe that it *is* possible to militarily defeat irregular enemies. For this reason, *Diffused Warfare* offers a valuable discussion of the IDF's strategies for combating Palestinian terror. For example, the chapter that addresses the "strategic immobilization of a guerilla/terror organization" explains why targeted killings are such a successful tactic: Since a terrorist organization's main asset is people, not equipment or bases, taking out its leaders effectively shuts it down. This tactic also exploits another of the terrorist's major advantages—the ability to disappear into a population—to create a debilitating sense of fear and paranoia among its members.

The book's strength lies in its ability to update existing military concepts. The authors admit, for instance, that "the manner by which we use special forces today is indeed similar to the molecular concept of decentralized

warfare." So, too, are significant parts of diffused warfare in fact adaptations of operational concepts known as the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), developed by American military analysts and based on Soviet ideas from the 1970s and 1980s that presumed a radical change in warfare, primarily through the development of smart weaponry. Indeed, as radical as many of Assa's and Ya'ari's suggestions may first seem, there is much in them that is not new.

But if the book borrows ideas from the RMA school of thought, it also suffers from that school's shortcomings. To be sure, there is something aesthetically appealing about "pure" high-tech warfare, quick and clean, a small unit for every situation, the streamlining of ungainly chains of command. Yet, like most visions of a technology-based future, *Diffused Warfare* steps on a series of landmines. The most serious is its tendency to downplay war's human element. Assa and Ya'ari are supremely confident that intelligence, information channels, and sophisticated command-and-control systems are enough to clear the fog of war; so, too, do they insist that technology alone can neutralize the enemy on the battlefield. In this vein, they begin to project a mix of management theory and mathematical calculus onto the battlefield. But in the end, it is still humans who

do the actual fighting, and even the best information is worthless if the individual soldier errs in applying it.

Indeed, while technology has proven its ability to replace humans in a number of key ways, it can never replace courage or judgment under fire. No technology can guarantee the near-perfect clarity in battle that the authors predict, or that good decisions or execution will result from it. Thus, although Assa and Ya'ari propose a model in which every commander, by means of an "interpretation' system... of the battle scene... can descend to the individual image of the specific situation of every molecule (and see that it is successfully integrated into the greater picture)," the proposal alone reveals the extent to which human judgment ("interpretation") matters in the height of battle, and in particular the burden that falls on the commander's shoulders. And while the authors admit the possibility of "assessment errors" on the operational or tactical level, they consistently downplay them, pointing instead to the dynamic molecules' ability to adapt to different situations.

Moreover, *Diffused Warfare* appears to take as its starting assumption the drastic inferiority of the enemy. Assa and Ya'ari assert that the "new" army's supremacy in the areas of information and technology "will overwhelm the

mass of the enemy's forces and prevent them from organizing... and create a state of battle confusion." But surely there is something self-indulgent about asserting that the IDF, or any modern military for that matter, will consistently enjoy such a degree of superiority. As is always the case in war, enemies quickly adapt, and advances in technology are followed by countermeasures: The flow of information among forces, for instance, can be disrupted by attacking critical information junctures or control centers, or even by conveying disinformation. Indeed, soon after the invasion of Iraq, the Iraqi army attempted to employ GPS scramblers against American satellite-guided ordnance, and all of the U.S. technological superiority did not prevent an American force from accidentally running into an undetected Iraqi division and winning not by means of better information, but by the superiority of its conventional tactics.

Finally, *Diffused Warfare* suffers from an oversimplified approach to war, focusing on operational objectives to the near exclusion of strategic goals. For instance, the authors' belief that the adoption of a decentralized strategy could prevent an American quagmire in Iraq would be true only if the objective in Iraq were no more than the destruction of the Iraqi army. True, the elimination of enemy

targets could have eased the ascendance of an acceptable Iraqi government or secured the oil fields, even without a traditional American military presence on the ground. Nonetheless, even if Saddam Hussein's forces were completely destroyed, how exactly would this help the Americans to achieve the democratization of Iraq? How can political control be asserted and new institutions nurtured without boots on the ground?

D*iffused Warfare* ends with a chapter addressing the idea of military disengagement as a solution to the problem of occupying enemy territory. The book was released before last year's disengagement from the Gaza Strip, which the authors very much saw as a test of their theory: "The first practical test of the new theory is already upon us. The test of disengagement will be in the ability to retain perpetual and unconditional deterrence; in other words, to unequivocally ensure that our capability

to control and influence the region remains uncontestable, whether we retain physical presence or not." It would appear that the post-disengagement reality—hundreds of Qasam rockets launched into Israel from the evacuated territory, and Gaza fast becoming a haven for Palestinian and al-Qaida terrorists—demonstrates that technology is, in the final analysis, no substitute for strategy; contingencies play their part no less than capability. Perhaps we will one day reach the point in which we can replace our armored personnel carriers with guided missiles, and our tanks with radios. But we are not there yet.

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