

Israel’s Asymmetric Wars (The Sciences Po Series in International Relations and Political Economy)

By S. Cohen

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This book is devoted to Israel's asymmetric wars, those conducted against irregular armed groups that have attacked it. It seeks to understand the Israeli strategy in the fight against terrorists acting under the guise of civilians or using the population as human shields. The army has implemented a loosely devised, if not simplistic, doctrine of "disproportionate response" since Israel's founding. The results have been mediocre, nearly always leading to the death of innocent Arab civilians and exacerbating anti-Israeli sentiment. Each time it has led to an escalation that is difficult to control and thrown the entire country into an increasingly inextricable situation. Practically every time it has made Israel, the aggressed party, look like the aggressor. What explains such perseverance? This research is based on vast documentation collected in Israel as well as on more than 60 in-depth interviews with officers and simple soldiers, senior counterterrorism officials, politicians, journalists and NGOs.

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Editorial Review

Review

"An important and critical analysis of Israel s asymmetrical warfare against the Palestinians since its inception in 1948. The author rejects claims that Israel has used state terror or intentionally targeted civilians as did other states, such as Russia or France, when conducting counterinsurgencies. Rather, he critiques the IDF for ignoring the basic rules of asymmetrical warfare: namely, to use minimum force, dissociate civilians from combatants, and seek to change hearts and minds. This is an important book for anyone interested in asymmetrical conflicts. It provides both a thoughtful examination of Israeli strategy and a balanced analysis of the causes for its failure." - Yoram Peri, Abraham S. and Jack Kay Professor in Israel Studies, Director of the Gildenhorn Institute for Israel Studies, University of Maryland

"Long regarded as the only true manifestation of political pluralism in the Middle East, Israel has long taken pride in an army that has secured the state amid a wider Arab animus for over six decades. But while its reputation as the region s most formidable military machine has been forged in over six conventional wars, it has been the involvement in low intensity conflict that has shaped the combat experience of the Israel Defence Force (IDF) over the last twenty five years. From combating PLO guerrillas in the late 1960s to Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in 2008/09, the IDF has probably has as much experience of asymmetric warfare as any other army in the democratic world. Yet unlike the experience of the United States military in Iraq and Afghanistan, it has singularly failed to develop over time a coherent counter-insurgency doctrine or indeed principles for conducting war among the people . Indeed, Israeli military operations have been defined by their kinetic intensity which, all too often, has relied on an application of firepower that is more suited to the conventional battlefield in its intensity and destructive power.

In this fascinating new book, Samy Cohen explores in forensic detail why the IDF has time and again proven so resistant to encompassing a more proportionate use of force to secure the borders of the state against non-state and sub-state actors. He questions the extent to which the doctrine of Havlagah (restraint) really has determined the IDF approach to asymmetric warfare, it having been so conditioned by a narrow interpretation of deterrence that it merely reinforces, rather than breaks recurring cycles of violence to the wider detriment of Israel s national security. In exploring these issues Cohen examines how asymmetric conflict should be understood and approached by both policy makers and practitioners in an era where, as he notes, insurgency too often demonstrates the powerlessness of power . As such, this book will be essential reading not only for students of military theory and counter insurgency, but equally, for anyone who cares about Israel and its wider place in the contemporary Middle East." - Clive Jones, School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds, UK

About the Author
SAMY COHEN is Senior Research Fellow at CERI (Centre for International Studies and Research) Sciences Po, Paris, France.

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