Shock without awe

Zionism and its horror

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On 27 June 1976, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, in conjunction with their German allies from the Red Army Faction, orchestrated a daring operation that seized, in mid-flight, an Airbus A300 en route from Tel Aviv to Paris. They redirected the plane towards Libya and then guided it to its final stage in Uganda, finding sanctuary at Entebbe Airport. A mere week later, the commandos of the Israeli elite unit Sayeret Matkal undertook a still more daring extraction operation. It involved a radar-evading flight spanning over 2000 miles, camouflage, swift and decisive action, pre-prepared escape routes and minimal casualties.[1] The meticulously executed manoeuvre culminated in a resounding triumph for the Israeli special forces.

Entebbe does not stand alone as an isolated instance within the archive of Israel's special military operations. It figures instead as an exemplary case of a more general strategy, a use of force that fully succeeded in evoking a mix of awe and terror.[2] Such operations simultaneously elicit horror at the spectacle of violence together with admiration for their meticulous execution and, ultimately, also for their instrumental success. The aesthetics of such military operations play a crucial role in evoking these powerful emotions. The symbolic substance they help to convey – heroics in the face of adversity, overcoming resistance, eventual triumph – have played a foundational role in the formation of Israeli identity around military power and its exercise. They have also helped turn its aesthetic effects into mythological narratives, narratives that have been well used to attract new settlers, entrench and reinforce the support from imperial centres, and solidify its primary social base. These operations also induce a sense of awe and terror among the Arab and Palestinian masses and contribute to the con-ception of an Israeli military that is undefeatable. This conception is reinforced with every new battle, operation and war.

These 'splendid' spectacles, mediated through the apparatus of military operations and large-scale battles, appear also as retrospective evidence of the 'righteousness' of Israel's settler-colonial project. Such retrospective legitimation finds support not only in the notion that 'might is right' but also in the aesthetic effects that Israeli military power can evoke – both within its own society, against its enemies, and in the impression it leaves on distant observers, both friend and enemy alike. Here, the technology and operational dimensions of military power transcend mere instrumentality or tactical outcomes. The capacity to reach, strike, generate or extract targets, to enact violence with precision and rapidity, to win wars spectacularly, operates not only as a demonstration of power but as a performative act of demobilisation, fracturing Palestinian and Arab resistance and eroding their will to resist. It has also built a cult of victory that sees in perpetual war not only the means to fend off enemies or deter them but a recurrent testing of Israeli power and its ability to overcome all forms of resistance, confirmed through endless streams of battles, special operations and large-scale wars.[3]

Military aesthetics

The nexus between aesthetics and war is a domain fraught with profound philosophical contention,[4] not least in responses to the rise of fascism in the early twentieth century. Walter Benjamin traces the phenomenon of German fascism to a distinct effacement of the inherent cruelty and stark reality of war, elevating it instead to

a glorified pursuit that ultimately finds its purpose within itself, in a celebration of 'war for war's sake'.[5] Such erasure of war's cruelty, its bloody and bone-breaking reality, is necessary for the propagation of war as an honourable national pursuit. For Benjamin, such pursuit not only remains blind to the abject horrors of war, and not only serves to perpetuate property relations within fascist regimes; it fundamentally ignores the pivotal role of technology in mediating the raw experiences of war and ideological claims to heroism. For Benjamin, the glorification of war within many German intellectual circles belies the loss of heroics that new technologies and mechanical weapons systems effaced.[6] It also redirects the struggle from internal civil conflicts (conflicts regarding social and economic emancipation) towards an external enemy, while ignoring the growing reliance on technology in its celebration of heroics invested in machinery and munitions. This diversion permits the true fight for social and political emancipation to be squandered on a false battlefield.[7]

What emerges as most significant in Benjamin's analysis is the way intellectual circles, even those directly scarred by war, grappled with the experience of their encounter with combat. He unveils a disturbing aestheticisation within German intellectual discourse about the First World War, whereby the sting of defeat was not only disregarded but subtly transmuted into a catalyst for future wars. It is within this nexus between interpretations of defeat and glorification of war that the seeds for renewed war were sown, a sombre testament to the perilous interplay between reification of war and the relentless drive towards another encounter with vast devastation. The aestheticisation of war in works by Ernst Jünger and others, its mystification, emerges as a peculiar response from a nation marked by defeat that now internalises this defeat as part of its very essence. Yet, this glorification is not merely a retrospective veneer or mystification, as Benjamin contends; it also springs directly from the raw experience of war itself. This is an element that Benjamin overlooks. Within the chaos and the abyss of war, there lurks an element of the sublime.[8]

In his book *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* (1959), J. Glenn Gray evokes a feeling of the sublime in war that possesses an 'ecstatic character', where ecstasy is understood in its original Greek meaning as 'a state of being outside the self.'[9] Even amidst the mundane curi-

osities of battle there is a momentary suppression of the ego, a slight dissolution of the self's barriers. However, this pales in comparison to the more rarefied states of awe that soldiers sometimes experience. These moments of ecstasy bring a deep satisfaction, stemming from the consciousness of 'a power outside us with which we can merge in the relation of parts to whole.'[10] As Gray emphasises, in this state the soldier's feelings of triumph or depression are suspended, replaced by a pervasive sense of wonder.[11] This wonder satisfies because it reassures the individual of their place within the larger world, mitigating the isolation and insufficiency of the ego. What especially intrigues Gray is the way it also enables the idea of brotherhood to attain its highest articulation. Unlike Jünger and his cohort, Gray was not a war enthusiast. As Hannah Arendt writes in her foreword to the book, quoting Gray himself, his reflection 'makes opposition to war forceful', and it does so 'by not just warning us, but making us understand "why there is in many today as great a fear of a sterile and unexciting peace as of a great war".'[12]

Recognising the ecstatic feeling and sublime moments prompted by war does not necessarily negate its horrors. For Gray, it also highlights certain aspects of war that make it an alluring object. This acknowledgment addresses the allure that war holds for soldiers, commanders and those who identify with the war effort, who view and perceive its effects as spectators. This pull towards war finds parallels in various liberal, democratic, settler-colonial and other political formations. In Israel, the pull is central to the formation of 'Israeli-ness', to the constitution of Israeli identity and its perpetuation as a state, society and economy made and remade by war. In other words, at the heart of my discussion here lies the notion of 'Israeli-ness', a construct forged through the phenomenological and aesthetic resonances of its military praxis.

The choreographed movements of soldiers and armoured vehicles, the interwoven technology, the valour displayed by its forces, the capacity to inscribe its power through its aesthetic effects and performance, the assassinations of Palestinian leaders and activists, the covert operations by undercover units in the labyrinthine spaces of refugee camps and dense urban area, all the grand military engagements against Arab armies, culminating in spectacular victories, function not just as displays of

dominance, they also open a narrative space in which the state's very identity might be reinscribed. These triumphs, alongside the systematic exclusionary measures and regular recourse to lethal force that structure everyday life for Palestinians, underscore the aesthetic nature of Israeli military operations and its perpetual yearning for spectacular victories. It is an intricate interweaving of force and finesse. In this performance, the Israeli military not only seeks to overcome resistance, but also to inspire awe and wonder, and to reinforce a unified sense of self-identity that spans whirlwind encounters in operations, battles and wars.

The allure of war for Israel, and more precisely for Israeli-ness, lies in the ability to elicit a moment of exaltation, of ecstasy – what Amos Oz called, commenting on the 1967 war, 'the orgy of victory.'[13] What is at issue are moments when a nation facing a perceived and overhyped abyss is instead lifted by the power to surprise, kill and win.[14] This pursuit of a military sublime, and consequently victory, is central to Israel's historical constitution and to its continual aspiration for war – an elusive and perpetual search for total victory marked by creative, innovative and daring military operations. Here, the destructiveness of war is paradoxically coupled with a drive for an artistic, almost divine, form of realisation, where the horrors of war are transmuted into a narrative of sublime self-assertion.

Since the beginning of Israel's onslaught on Gaza, however, Israel has lost its once-potent ability to deliver 'awe-inspiring' operations. Gone is the capacity to land a decisive, silencing blow upon its enemies, rendering them mute and incapable of further resistance. Instead, Israel has pivoted to a different regime of the sublime – one marked by an obscene enjoyment of death and destruction pure and simple. This shift involves a brazenly unapologetic, shameless transgression of established norms, laws and the codes of war. The spectacle of power is now mediated through advanced AI and representational media, operationalised primarily through an utterly dominant air force.

The recent failure to 'awe' is certainly not total, since Israel retains the ability to induce forms of pure affective negativity, such as fear, disgust, anger and feelings of hopelessness and insignificance in the presence of an overwhelming display of firepower. But it now fails to inspire enjoyment in its own operational design, its cre-

ative use of military power, its intelligence and precision and rapid dominance. It is a form of militarism that simply unleashes force without constraints, or that only acknowledges such constraints by announcing that it intends to transgress them – as in the case of Shifa Hospital, or the destruction of universities, or the targeting of sanctuaries, and the near destruction of Gaza as a whole.

This obscene enjoyment now centres on Israel's ability to transgress all apparent limits, to both declare *and* desecrate sanctuaries, and to violate the law of sanctuary itself. No longer does the regime seek to inspire awe; instead, it simply shocks without the accompanying reverence, indulging in a grotesque display of unrestrained brutality. The public consumption of these massacres marks a troubling turning point, as the aesthetics of military operations feed into a dark pleasure, stripping away the former veneer of heroics and replacing it with a brutal, unvarnished lust for domination. This is a military performance that relishes in the act of transgression itself, a spectacle that sows pure fear and horror, at the expense of its historic cultivation of disciplined and awe-inspiring militarism.

Sublime domination

A decade before Operation Entebbe, back in October 1967, the dynamics of Middle Eastern geopolitics were indelibly altered. The Israeli military, employing a combination of airpower, strategic surprise and audacious rapid manoeuvring, succeeded in decimating the Arab armies within six days. This swift and decisive war, known as the Six-Day War, became etched in the collective memory of Israelis as a miraculous event – an almost divine vindication of their historical claims over Palestine. As Tom Segev points out in his book *1967*, the triumph in the war reversed an ambient mood of hopelessness, a pervading feeling of doom among Israelis that had preceded it. It was declared as evidence of the 'hand of god' by Israel's newspaper *Yediot Ahronoth*.[15]

The air campaign decimated the Egyptian air force, gaining air superiority that would prove to be the key to Israel's tactical and operational advantage. On the ground, the Israeli forces executed a blitzkrieg across the Sinai Peninsula that left the Egyptian army in disarray.[16] In the north, the formidable Syrian tanks posed
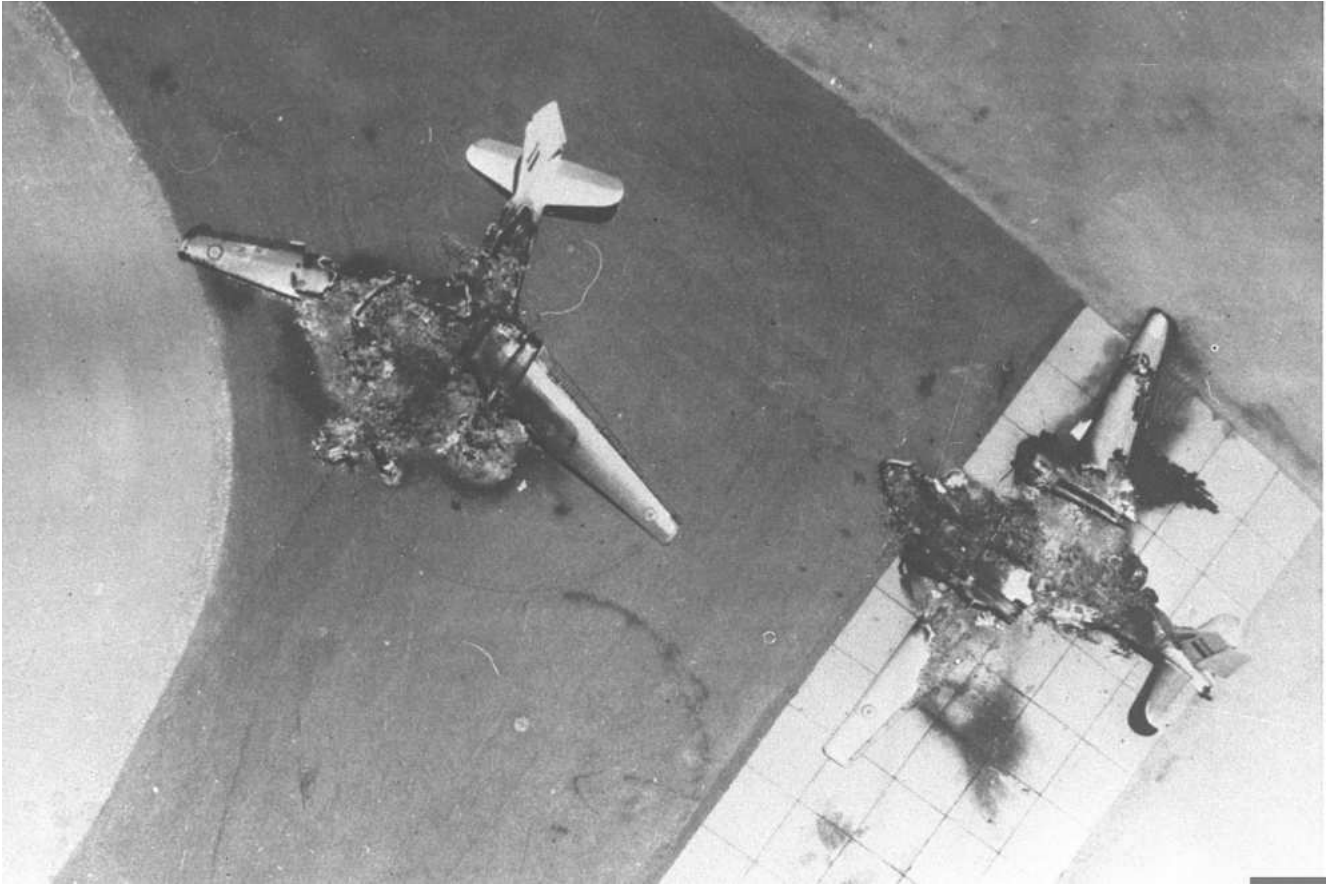
Israeli attack on Egyptian air force base, June 1967; source: Wikimedia Commons

a significant threat from the high grounds of the Golan Heights. Yet here too, the Israeli forces managed to fend off the Syrian incursions, securing a buffer zone in a place that had long been a source of hostility, a buffer zone in which Israel could then build settlements and later officially annex as part of its territory.[17] And in the east, the rapid takeover of the West Bank underscored the agility and the sheer momentum with which Israel operated by weaponising surprise and superior firepower. The territorial gains made during those six days were staggering, expanding the settler colony's borders and reshaping the regional map in ways that continue to have far-reaching implications.

As Palestinian accounts of the 1967 war confirm, when tanks came rolling from the east into Nablus, Palestinians went to greet them, believing they must be Jordanian and Iraqi tanks – only to discover that they were Israeli tanks that had manoeuvred behind Jordanian lines.[18] The rapidity, surprise and impact of this victory on cultural representations and understandings of collective identity, both for Israelis and Palestinians, cannot

be underestimated. Although the Nakba saw harrowing massacres combined with fierce Palestinian resistance and an extensive ethnic cleansing campaign, the Naksa can be seen as more of a Nakba than the Nakba itself, precisely on account of the sublime character of the victory. The only difference that rendered it more tolerable for Palestinians was the emergence of a new revolutionary project embodied by the *fida'i* – a figure of self-sacrifice that emerged to take centre stage in the fight against Zionist colonisation at the very moment the Arab armies themselves faltered.[19] But also, the collective lessons of the Nakba played a crucial role in limiting the mass expulsion of Palestinians from their homeland, as many insisted on staying put, in exactly the same way that hundreds of thousands of people have also refused to leave North Gaza in this current phase of the war.

For many Israelis, the 1967 war transcended mere military triumph. It was perceived as a providential event, one that made war and victory synonymous, encouraging a widespread intoxication with power. Unlike other mythologisations that have been woven into Israeli identity,

such as Tel-Hai, the fall of Masada, or even the Warsaw Ghetto uprising, this was not an ethical or moral victory (a celebration of the power of rebellion even if miscarried, or an exploration of the heroism of tragic heroes, along with their ethical implications) – it was instead a purely military victory, a sublime moment that left Israelis in awe of their own technological and military prowess, the ingenuity of their military design and their sheer operational supremacy.[20] It was an Event that retroactively affirmed the right to the land, mediated through the spectacle of victory and its breathtaking speed. It also included within its very invocation of the miraculous and providential that sublime element which remained in essence unrepresentable, excessive and uncapturable.[21]

These narratives of national survival and the possibility of their mythologisation born from sublime victories attempt to depict the undepictable. They strive to articulate the experience of standing outside oneself, and to celebrate an agential sublimity produced by Israel's military prowess and its effects. Lyotard, in his exploration of the Kantian sublime, elucidates how this overwhelming emotion, which he describes as 'strong and equivocal', encompasses both pleasure and pain.[22] This emotion disrupts the basic reality and physical materiality of what was known before the encounter, and is triggered by an experience of the immensity of nature, or by a grand concept, or by a striking scene or image. In such moments, when the imagination is unable to fully grasp what lays before it, a feeling of bewilderment or wonder arises, a suspension of the ability to understand and comprehend. This failure to grasp the vastness of the object was central to the Romantic rendition of the sublime, for instance in the work of Edmund Burke.[23]

Kant expanded the reach of the sublime, however, when he situated it not only in what lies outside the subject, but also in the inward movement of the mind performed by the subject in relation to the supersensible.[24] And what changes if the encounter with the supersensible is itself the product of an agent? What if it retains the character of an unexpected encounter, one that fulfils the ecstatic suspension of the ego, yet retains an agential source?

Israel's militarism embodies a paradoxical suspension, whereby the imagination's capacity to apprehend is simultaneously arrested and inscribed as an artefact of its own creative force and agency. This militarism entwines the roles of artist and spectator, where the artist both creates yet stands in awe of his own creation. Mythologisation emerges as a secondary effect of this encounter with the supersensible, through which textual, artistic and other expressive forms are deployed to extricate events from their historical specificity.[25] This in turn enables a national identity to oscillate between a propensity for war and an underlying dread of peace or political engagement with its adversaries. This in turn reinforces a permanent quest for victory, where victory is not only 'sufficient' or pragmatic, but also an affirmation of a creative agency at play.[26]

Early Zionists, epitomised by Ze'ev Jabotinsky's articulation of the 'Iron Wall' (1923), construed war as an exigency borne from Palestinian resistance and their refusal to relinquish their land. This militaristic mode of thinking has since evolved into an active operational strategy vis-à-vis the Palestinians. It finds expression in quotidian colonial terror, in advanced technologies of surveillance and assault, and now in a genocidal war in Gaza. The Iron Wall has historically anchored itself in deterrence and territorial expansion, underscoring the fundamental conflict between Israeli territorial claims and Palestinian indigeneity. It is a wall that in principle seeks to engrave the Arab and Palestinian consciousness with the permanence of Israel's existence, an indelible fact resistant to negation. However, it is also more than simply a wall facing the Palestinians or Arabs. The Iron Wall is not solely a defensive structure; it transcends the simplistic function of a barrier and divider. It embodies the potential to surpass its own present pinnacle, to rise above its current state.[27]

The logic of this wall also helps to secure the otherwise circular argument defended in Jabotinsky's treatise on the 'ethics of the Iron Wall.' Here Jabotinsky boldly asserts that 'if Zionism is just, then justice must be realised without taking into consideration anyone's consent or lack of consent.'[28] The aestheticisation of military operations, the meticulous choreography of power, and the ongoing reification of the Iron Wall all serve to reinforce a form of ethical reassurance or solace that is deeply entwined with Zionist ideology, and grounded in Israelis' capacity to emerge victorious, and to silence or punish those who do not consent. This solace is derived from the ability to impose a self-referential and self-sustaining

justice, perpetuating a vision of sovereignty that is unchallenged by the realities and voices of those on the other side of the wall.

Yet the wall, like any wall, has two sides. Military power not only sears the consciousness of Palestinians and the larger Arab world but also serves to both constitute Israeli-ness and resolve the ethical contradictions and implications inherent in Zionism, i.e. fundamentally and dramatically to re-orient the consciousness of Israelis. As Talal Asad points out in his recent reflections on the genocide in Gaza, the new Jew or the new 'Hebrew' that Israel constituted was attractive to the diasporic Jew not only on account of their 'eternal victim status', or on account of the history of antisemitism in Europe, as a Jewish solidarity that arose out of the experience of the Holocaust and was channelled through a yearning for the national home embodied in Israel. The new state was attractive precisely for the *power* that it was capable of mustering, the sublime nature of its military and the spectacular nature of its victories. As Asad makes clear, 'Israel's many political, cultural and technological achievements merely reinforce its transnational standing, and contribute to the desire of Jews to identify strongly with Israel.'[29]

Conversely, when Walid Daqqa endeavoured to delineate the methodologies that transformed the practices of Israeli torture during the Second Intifada, he sought to encapsulate the intersection of shock and what he termed the 'searing of consciousness' of Palestinians.[30] For Daqqa, the incursions into Palestinian cities, camps and villages transcended the mere material and direct objective of arresting or killing resistance fighters. These operations, driven by the formidable force of airpower, armoured vehicles and D9 bulldozers, unfolded as a form of 'extreme horror' intended to shock the Palestinians. The goal was to deliver the sort of overwhelming shock that might render Palestinians malleable, soft and impressionable. Disenchanted with their capacity to resist, Palestinians could then be expected to give up, and to initiate a process of healing in accordance with terms, discourses and politics defined broadly by the Israeli colonial apparatus.

Daqqa challenged a more widespread interpretation among many Palestinian analysts at that historical juncture (Second Intifada), who tended to assume that Israel had gone mad. In Daqqa's view, this presumed madness did not signify a loss of reason but rather represented a calculated deployment, aimed not only at dismantling the resistance but also at eroding its spiritual foundations – the virtues and political conceptions underpinning resistance. The primary battleground for Daqqa was the Palestinian faculty of representation and perception of the world, the way they try to make the world intelligible. He saw that Israel's (perfectly rational) objective was to shock the Palestinians and render them docile by attacking the inward movement of the subject. The 'shattering experience' of facing the shock of unconstrained military force would enable Israel to saturate the Palestinians with its own interpretation and expressions of its victory. This 'searing of consciousness' sought to induce a state of acquiescence among Palestinians, leading to a gradual self-effacement.[31]

Warring perceptions

'There is no war … without representation', Paul Virilio asserted in his exploration of cinematic techniques in warfare. He emphasised that 'no sophisticated weaponry exists without psychological mystification.'[32] For Virilio, weapons, and by extension military operations and tactics, are not merely tools of destruction but also instruments of perception. He showed how these objects of war are also 'stimulants that affect the human sensory and neurological systems, influencing reactions and even the perceptual processes involved in the identification and differentiation of objects.'[33]

In particular, from the initial use of missiles in World War Two to the catastrophic flash of Hiroshima, Virilio illustrates a paradigm shift where the 'theatre weapon' supplants the traditional 'theatre of operations.'[34] This shift marks a significant change in the history of warfare, emphasising the evolution of perceptual fields over tangible territorial or political gains. Virilio's concept of the theatre weapon underscores how warfare has increasingly relied on the manipulation and control of perception. The term itself reveals the essence of modern combat: an ongoing use of military power not merely for physical territory or economic resources but for the dominance of immaterial perceptual realms. The manipulation of perceptions becomes a strategic objective in and of itself.

The Shock and Awe doctrine of the 1990s stands as a

testament to the aesthetic and perceptual designs of military strategy and its attempt to dominate on the lever of perceptions. This doctrine emerged in the twilight of the Cold War, aspiring to display a sanitised, swift, economical and formidable use of superior firepower in newly one-sided or asymmetrical imperial conflicts.[35] It was intended to overcome the bloody and failed history of engagements like Vietnam, where the combination of an indomitable Vietnamese will to resist coupled with high American casualties and a large and growing anti-war movement in the United States forced the empire to withdraw and cut its losses. The impact of Vietnam on the ways the United States would reconceptualise its war machine was and remains tremendous.[36] The new priorities would be avoidance of long intractable battles, clear definition of strategic objectives, rapidness and speed, and the tendency to rely more emphatically on airpower and other forms of remote firepower.

These new doctrines also took their cue from a long history of military manoeuvres, surprise attacks and other ways of using overwhelming force to secure victory. The rapid fall of France under the surprise of the German Blitzkrieg, the dropping of nuclear weapons on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, or even the Tet offensive launched by the North Vietnamese army would all serve as examples of operations where the use of devastating weapons or rapid operations ultimately eroded the enemy's will to fight. Shock and Awe would be thought of as a solution to the various challenges facing further deployment of Western militaries, for instance as a way of warding off domestic opposition while serving and preserving the economic interests that depended on the persistence of war.[37]

The doctrine explicitly sought to recreate through military power a sublime experience and spectacle.[38] The nexus between aesthetic effects and war has become central, investing the aesthetic dimension with practical and even ethical consequences. These shifts were also intimately tied to media and control of information, or management of this flow. The shock and awe would presumably take place on the battlefield, but its effects could be amplified by introducing cinematic techniques whereby images and narratives of wars were curated and reframed, and reinforced through media representations. The concept of a mediated sublime involves creating an awe-inspiring perception of power by simultaneously downplaying the horrors of war and emphasising sanitised, grandiose images of might and grandeur. This strategy aims to efface the atrocities while magnifying the war's evocative and majestic aspects.

Intrinsic to both effects-based operations and shock and awe campaigns was the appearance of a suitably sanitised, ordered, precise and rapid war. The new military logic reflects Kant's rendition of the sublime in war, which he also insisted must be ordered and fall within rules and norms.[39] This notion itself harbours a profound contradiction, for the sublime, in its essence, lies outside form. Lyotard elucidates this paradox in his discussion of the sublime, asserting that the sublime indeed involves a sacrifice of the aesthetic. This aporia between the sublime being contingent on an ordered war and the sublime as a sacrifice of the aesthetic is central to contemporary discourse on technology, aesthetics and war. It gestures towards another dimension of sublimity in war: the potential for destruction must encompass elements beyond the mere capacity to kill, maim or reduce cities to rubble. This applies particularly when this capacity for destruction is associated with a military machine that engages in expressly 'calculative' thinking – a mode of thought that estranges the human from the battlefield and, to evoke Heideggerian terms, renders the battlefield as *Enframing (Gestell)* and as 'standing reserve' or *Bestand*.[40]

In one sense, the doctrine of Shock and Awe promised the impossible. It was characterised by a profound mismatch between its conceptual foundation and the grim reality of war, a discrepancy that was apparent in the actual operation and representation of American and British forces in the First Gulf War. Here, war was transfigured into a media spectacle, where the curating and editing of war's brutal consequences on its victims were obfuscated and removed from the public's gaze. Within this curated media spectacle, American and British forces would indeed follow 'the rules of war', but the vast destruction on the ground, and the thousands of Iraqis killed and injured, would remain firmly out of view. The wide-scale bombings were broadcast without the visceral imagery of the suffering bodies, sanitising the horrors of war for the global audience and ensuring that no significant resistance would arise. The theatre of weapons is a theatre that insists on showcasing the grandeur of explosions while suppressing the actual experience of those suffering the consequences of its fire. The mys-

tification of airpower, the capacity to fight wars from a distance, the reliance on cinematic media techniques, and so on, led Jean Baudrillard famously to propose that the First Gulf War 'never took place': it was less a war than an attempt by the American empire to perpetuate its logic of deterrence through the use of shock and awe, targeted not so much at the Iraqi regime as at the spectators watching the unfolding images play out on TV.[41] This simulacrum of war, or 'non-war' as Baudrillard calls it, would reassure those identifying with the empire, and shelter them in the safety of military supremacy – but it was also a war that weaponised images to create a *spectacle* of awe, representing the Iraqis killed as little more than extras hovering on the edges of the show.

Such artifice, however, becomes increasingly untenable in an era of ubiquitous cell phones and the consequently immediate, unfiltered dissemination of raw images following each bombing or attack. This problem is particularly evident in the context of Israel's current assault on Gaza. The unmediated display of devastation now confronts the spectator with the inescapable reality of human suffering.

In response to this grim reality and the failure to conduct military operations that can evoke awe in a way that is both sufficiently overwhelming *and* sufficiently sanitised, the ongoing war in Gaza has instead taken a shape that openly affirms the devastation it is causing. It binds two logics together, a logic of deterrence premised on the capacity to evoke horror and celebrate its effects, and a logic of punishment adapted from the familiar image of the Iron Wall. These logics are applied through various devices, including the appropriation of representational media, the *Matrix*-like capabilities embedded in command-and-control centres in Israel, the deliberate maintenance of distance from the battlefield, and the utilisation of AI both to generate endless lists of targets and to direct drones and fighter jets towards them.[42] Each of these simulacra highlight the fact that Israel's familiar sense of itself as defined by a heroic engagement with sacrifice and as exemplified through daring, bold and creative operations, now belongs mainly to the past. In the phantasmagoric realms of warfare, these simulated codifications perform a disavowal, recasting the sublime not as an encounter with self-loss (whether agonising or ecstatic) but as a manifestation of imaginary omnipotence – an omnipotence that fully embraces the

notion that war is indeed hell, and affirms it repeatedly.

The current spectacle of war in Gaza, therefore, elicits either an obscene enjoyment in the spectacle of asymmetric punishment or silent complicity in its occurrence and unfolding among Israeli society writ large. October 7th marked a pivotal moment when the symbolic and imaginary fabric underlying a core tenet of Israeli identity – the sublime object of its ideology embodied in the Iron Wall and its own invincibility – was shattered. Israel's 'operational art', to borrow a term from military studies, is now being reframed away from a sacrificial and heroic sublime into a regime of sublime horror that lacks any sort of grandeur or magnificence. Virilio's observation rings true: the theatre of weapons unleashed on Gaza combines with the generative capacity of AI to articulate a coldly mechanical code of targeting centred on wide-scale bombardment and the mass killing of Palestinians. Israel no longer seeks to curate its war, rather it has chosen to overflow the senses with endless streams of visceral imagery, confirming its readiness and capacity to engage in an obscene and shameless genocide.

Israel's operational artlessness

After October 7th, Israel embarked on strategies of annihilation in Gaza, viewing them as essential responses to breaches in both its physical and ideological fortifications, and to the erosion of its existential certainty.[43] This turn towards mere obliteration of the enemy starkly contradicted Israel's carefully cultivated image of 'military excellence.' In the 1990s, amidst apprehensions about peace and confronting unconventional challenges from groups like Hezbollah, Hamas and Islamic Jihad, the Israeli military elevated the quality and tone of its intellectual inquiry, delving deeply into the operational complexities of warfare, appropriating elements from systems theory and post-structural theories of space. Among the prominent figures to emerge as a pivotal intellectual synthesiser and innovator in operational theory was Shimon Naveh, founder and former director of Israel's Operational Theory Research Institute (OTRI), which was itself part of its National Defence College.[44]

The definition of political objectives remains primary; operational inquiry then focuses on the method by which these objectives can be achieved, the 'how' of warfare. The intricate selection of ends and means en-

compasses institutional actors, geopolitical conditions, political factions and internal strife, socio-economic limitations or catalysts, and crucially, the availability of weapons and technology. The fundamental role of operational art is to enable an analytical inventory of these various components so as to provide solutions that overcome the various challenges faced by commanders. To this end, Naveh and his colleagues at OTRI sought to rejuvenate aspects of Soviet operational theory, in particular its emphasis on conducting analysis that examines parts in relation to the whole.[45] The fervour surrounding the operational dimension coincided both with Israel's newly vehement refusal of the political compromises that would be required to end its protracted occupation, and with the emergence of irregular, asymmetric adversaries that began steadily to undermine its capacity for definitive victories.[46]

The fixation on 'military excellence' in Israeli military discourse reveals a broader sentiment permeating the armed forces – a sense of diminishing prowess. This sentiment arises from a complex interplay of factors: a lowering of existential anxiety following peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan, the tumultuous Oslo peace process juxtaposed with the brutal crackdowns during the First Intifada (when the Israeli military infamously 'broke the bones' of Palestinian protesters and employed deadly violence against unarmed protestors), and the rise of adept guerrilla forces in Lebanon and Palestine.[47] The Israeli military, grappling with the need to reclaim its self-fashioned mantle of excellence, embarked on a quest for new operational modes, solutions and technologies. Naveh and his cohort emerged as an influential current within the Israeli army, advocating for innovative approaches to warfare and operations. Eyal Weizman, in his book *Hollow Land*, shows how Naveh's vision for OTRI offered a framework for 'operational architects' within the Israeli military.[48] However, the initial enthusiasm that surrounded OTRI proved to be overblown, and for a time Naveh and his followers were blamed for the Israeli military's setbacks in Lebanon in 2006.[49]

Seeking to grasp, appropriate, synthesise and develop new modes of operation that would set benchmarks for other armies and secure military objectives in any conflict, Israel now found itself thoroughly ensnared in the operational dimension of warfare – a space wedged between political ambitions and tactical man-oeuvres. This commitment to operational 'engagement' also reflected a broader malaise within Israel, and reflected a retreat away from diplomacy, negotiations and the delineation of clear political goals (beyond the perpetuation of a status quo based on expanding illegal settlements and quelling Palestinian resistance). The military assumed primary responsibility for maintaining order and advocated purely military solutions that obscured the necessity for political engagement. The operational dimension was therefore taken to be a silver bullet, the means through which Israel could avoid any compromises, while solidifying its permanent hold on historic Palestine.

Under the pressure of fierce resistance, Israel was confronted by the need to make unilateral withdrawals from Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2006. At the same time, it sought to hobble Palestinian resistance in the West Bank and ensure the rise of a collaborative regime, institutionalised in the Palestinian National Authority.[50] It would now concentrate on colonising the West Bank, besieging Gaza and keeping Lebanon at arm's length through a policy of deterrence. Meanwhile OTRI and the soldiers and commanders influenced by them were busy exploring the reinterpretations of space proposed by their operational architects, exemplified by new capacities for 'walking through walls', and new forms of systems analysis and dialectical cognition.[51]

By contrast, other currents within the Israeli military would insist on simplicity, and doubling-down on Israeli strength, its sheer firepower. Following its war in Lebanon in 2006, Israel introduced the infamous Dahiya Doctrine. This doctrine targeted civilians and civilian infrastructure as crucial nodes in any war effort. The new campaigns did not seek to target the resistance-fighters specifically so much as the society from which their resistance arose. The doctrine sanctioned recourse to calibrated massacres and to levels of destruction that can be quickly relaxed and intensified, depending on the evolving balance of deterrence. A sufficiently punishing and deadly campaign against civilians would compel resistance forces to give up or surrender, thereby ending conflicts without having to address the underlying political grievances.

Within the Israeli military, a debate raged for some years, especially after the 2006 Lebanon war, between these two contrasting yet equally lethal ideologies: the

simplistic yet deadly approach embodied by the Dahiya doctrine, and the complex lexicon of operational art that was led by those close to OTRI. The former was rooted in older doctrines of airpower that had emerged in Europe in the early twentieth century, as a means of by-passing the obstacles posed by trench warfare. Airpower and longer-distance firepower strategies aimed to exploit their new spatial dimensions, allowing forces to fly above and across battlefields, and to target civilian spaces deep within enemy territory. Warfare was no longer conceived merely as a clash between military forces but as a totalising conflict enveloping the entire socio-economic fabric of the warring nations.[52] Clustered around OTRI, the second and more future-oriented current within Israel's military employed systems theory, post-structural theory and architectural theory to rethink military operations. Naveh would soon emphasise the importance and relevance of both systems theory and dialectical thinking in conceiving operational art, and its acceptance of continuous change.[53]

The debate between these two currents was, in many ways, also aesthetic – a clash between strategies of sheer horror and brutality on the one hand, embodied in the pursuit of annihilation through conception of calibrated and intensifying destruction, and on the other, approaches that aimed to integrate elements of warfare capable of inducing operational shock and awe, thereby restoring Israel's reputation for military excellence. The intellectual dimensions of the debate began to fade as Israel turned its focus to developing new technologies such as AI targeting and missile defence systems, along with innovative networked systems concepts aimed at optimising their military efficacy, especially in ground manoeuvres – for instance, the Israeli military's concept of 'Land Ahead.'[54] Aviv Kochavi, a promising young commander during the Second Intifada and a key proponent of Naveh's 'operational architects', rose to become Israel's chief of staff by 2019 (through to 2023). In addition to cultivating a charismatic presence and some impressive rhetorical skills, Kochavi has long emphasised the need to foreground change and evolution within Israel's armed forces. He has prioritised the pursuit of decisive victories and highlighted the pivotal roles of intelligence, technological innovation and systemic investigations. The language of OTRI, systems theory and post-structuralism had returned to Israeli military discourse, albeit in a somewhat simplified form.

In the years following the 2006 Lebanon War Israel revelled in its means of annihilation, which it perceived as the only winning strategies to have emerged from its conflict with Hezbollah. This approach maintained a constant deterrent capacity, generally sufficient to keep Hezbollah at bay. In Gaza, a similar stance led to repeated military engagements, operations that Israel came to dub 'mowing the grass.' The goal was to maintain a purely military equilibrium, indefinitely. Punitive firepower campaigns and small operations targeting tunnels ensured that Palestinian resistance could neither challenge the status quo nor push the conflict from military terrain (where Israel remained strong) back onto political terrain (where Israel could still be challenged). In this context, Israel doubled down on various defensive technologies, surrounding itself with new layers of protection – security walls and fences, sensors, radars and missile defence systems such as the Iron Dome. In his role as chief of *Aman* (Israel's Military Intelligence), Kochavi played a crucial role in enhancing cyber capabilities, representational media, intelligence gathering and militarised AI.[55] Politically, this military stance was not aimed at disrupting the status quo but rather at maintaining Israel's ability to colonise the West Bank at minimal cost, without having to face significant political engagement or resistance.

However, once Kochavi assumed command of Israel's military in 2019, he began to argue that Israel should no longer be content with merely maintaining this equilibrium. It was time to go back on the offensive. This again required developing a lethal army that is both innovative and awe-inspiring, while also centralising the role of the commander in directing the components of a highly technological and integrated force.

Kochavi draws a compelling parallel between the role of a military commander and the work of an artist, illustrating how both require a blend of creativity and critical reflection. In his observations, Kochavi highlights how an artist experiences a peak moment of identification with their creation upon its completion, only to later engage in a process of self-criticism and distancing. This reflective process, which prompts the artist to revisit and critically evaluate their past work, encourages continuous learning and improvement. Similarly, Kochavi suggests that military commanders should embrace this artistic mindset,

recognising that their strategic decisions and operational plans are not static but subject to ongoing critique and adaptation. Just as artists question their past creations, commanders must constantly reassess their actions and the changing dynamics within their organisations. Of the ideal commander, Kochavi writes: 'any person who creates is familiar with the tendencies of artists who reach the peak of their identification with their work at the moment of its completion ... Then comes the process of "distancing" from the work ... Years later, the artist may find themselves critically asking, "I created that?" This is a good quality that promotes learning.'[56] In other words, the ideal commander is one who is aware of the system they lead, and who is able to devise the most effective operations from out of the various components of the systems available.

In 2021, Israel sought to confound Palestinian resistance in Gaza through its so-called 'Metro Operation.' The strategy was deceptively straightforward: leak intentions of a ground invasion of Gaza to the foreign press, thereby compelling Palestinian fighters to seek refuge in an already compromised tunnel network, which Israel then planned to obliterate with its airpower. This operation exemplified the convergence of Israel's advanced technological capabilities – geo-location, surveillance, sensory technologies, 'matrix capability', intelligence and airpower – and the precision required for subterranean targeting.[57] The operation maintained a safe distance from the battlefield and did not risk the lives of Israeli soldiers. It was built on past intelligence of Palestinian fighter movements, who could be expected to take refuge in tunnels. By turning the tunnel network into a death trap, the goal was to allow Israel to shake the foundations of Palestinian defensive strategies. Instead of the tunnels serving as a refuge, they would become graveyards. Nonetheless, after the smoke cleared, Israel was obliged to admit that few 'combatants' had been killed in its operation.

For figures such as Kochavi and much of the Israeli high command, the notion of operational art is inscribed within a technical framework but it also requires the infusion of creative imagination.[58] This creative imagination becomes the locus for the emergence of new ideas and representations, central to the conception of a military force that operates not merely as an efficient machine but as an entity capable of spectacular, deceptive,

creative and exalting operations.[59] The military force operates here as both machine and more-than-machine, or as Kochavi emphasises, echoing Naveh, a 'system'. The essence of victory is neither fully technical nor wholly imaginative but oscillates between these two poles, continuously redefined by the exigencies of warfare and the imperatives of innovation. It transforms the battlefield into a space of poetic engagement, in which the lines between reality and representation blur, and where the performative enactment of power becomes the ultimate testament to military prowess.

However, this artistic and adaptive vision is today starkly belied by Israel's actual practice in the current phase of its war in Gaza. The military *machine* has now wholly overshadowed the commander-*artist*, thereby limiting any role for operational art. The conflict has highlighted a reliance on sheer destructive power over strategic ingenuity and creativity. Although it remains in constant flux, the military system now functions in ways more akin to Heidegger's concept of 'standing reserve', and it figures mainly as a mere stockpile of resources and capacities on standby for instrumental use, lacking intrinsic purpose and no longer able to induce an experience of the sublime or enable true creativity. In Gaza, the army's alignment with advanced technology and 'calculative thinking' has led to an operational mode in which humans have to adjust to machines rather than vice-versa. Rather than draw on a dynamic interplay of imagination and machinery, military operations are becoming more and more mechanical, a mere exercise of force.

The bombardment of sanctuaries in Rafah, the destruction of universities, mosques and churches, even the breach of diplomatic norms through attacks on embassies – all these acts of wanton destruction epitomise the chaotic nature of the strategy currently being pursued by the Israeli military. It reflects a new dominance of calculative thinking, guided by algorithmic and instrumental rationality. This approach strips away an essential legitimising mechanism in the eyes of observers and supporters, it eliminates that 'aesthetic' impact of military operations that was so essential to the older aspiration to military excellence. Instead of fostering a creative, innovative and awe-inspiring militarism, it just invokes sheer horror.

Rather than daring heroism, Israel now resorts to the

banality and imbecility of pushing a button and unleashing force. The Dahiya doctrine first triumphed inside Israel in 2006, but its further consolidation in 2023-24 exposes the truth of the Israeli military for all to see. To the world and to itself, Israel now appears as it has always appeared to us Palestinians: as a regime of pure terror.

Shock without awe

In one of the rare moments of the current campaign that sought to reaffirm a clear sense of Israeli-ness, on 8 June 2024, Israeli special forces launched a daring mission within the dense confines of the Nuseirat refugee camp to rescue four Israeli captives. This operation, which the Israeli media hailed as a resounding success, was swiftly compared to the Entebbe raid or 'Operation Thunderbolt' of 1976, igniting a wave of national exaltation and widespread celebration among the many Israelis desperate for some sign that might confirm their nation's ongoing militarist ingenuity and creativity. The Israeli minister of defence called it 'one of the most extraordinary operations' that he has witnessed in more than 50 years.[60] To extricate their forces and the captives, however, Israel had to carpet-bomb the camp itself, resulting in the killing of more than 270 Palestinian civilians.[61] One of the commandos involved in the operation was also killed. Despite the hype, the actual mechanics of the operation confirmed that Israel now has only one strategy for victory in Gaza: a recurrent and daily recourse to massacres.[62]

Israeli-ness is now being redefined, and this is happening in ways that tacitly acknowledge Palestinian perspectives. For us, who have endured and continue to endure the horrors of Zionism and its systematic policies of exclusion, murder, ethnic cleansing, humiliation, revulsion and various forms of erasure, Zionism has always been a form of horror, an ongoing nightmare or Nakba. An emphatically *horrifying* conception of Israeli-ness is now also being redefined for both Israelis and their supporters. This new or emerging regime of the sublime, unfolding through extensive firepower and the removal of battle from war, conducted via heavily armoured machinery and aimed at rendering Gaza mute, represents a continuation of Israel's longstanding policy of ethnic cleansing – but it now does away with attempts to operationalise aesthetics in ways that might inspire wonder

or exaltation. It consequently fails to inspire narratives of heroism and creativity. Israel is now confined to the anti-heroics of pure elimination and genocide. This shift is already having a dramatic impact on Israel's ability to elicit political legitimation and support for its colonial enterprise.

It is important to reiterate that, although its reliance on pure horror has recently become more emphatic, Israel's self-cultivated image of military excellence has always coexisted with its recourse to massacres, ethnic cleansing and other forms of brute force. Israel's creation was enabled by the material effect of such massacres, more than by a performative display of awe-inspiring operations. However much the symbolic cultivation of Israeli-ness might centre itself on the sublime assertion of power, in reality the massacres and systematic ethnic cleansing were the primary means of its creation. The long history of the bloody killing of Palestinians predates the Nakba, it intensified during the Nakba, and it has continued all through the subsequent confrontation with Israeli settler colonialism. This history is punctuated by the Kufr Qasem Massacre, the Qibya massacre, the infamous Sabra and Shatila massacre in Lebanon and numerous other atrocities.[63] Though these episodes are or should be well-known, and played an essential role in the assertion of Israeli dominance and control, within Israel itself they were also kept largely hidden from public scrutiny.

By contrast, the current and overt display of Israeli military horror in Gaza serves as a deterrent not only to Gaza but also to Lebanon and the broader region. Israeli propaganda on social media juxtaposes images of 'Beirut Before' with suggestions of a 'Beirut After', evoking the spectre of a devastated city in the event of a large-scale war. This Shock *without* Awe paradigm continues to serve Israel, as it flirts with dangerous fascist ideologies and takes a festive and unapologetic pleasure in its power to punish, kill, maim and destroy.

Today, Israel's hope is not that the world will soon forget this current phase of the conflict. Nor does Israel seek to encourage the world to recognise itself in its carefully cultivated image as a lone liberal democracy holding back a sea of Arab and Muslim barbarians. Instead, it now hopes that the world will soon catch up with its stark monstrosity, and cement its collusion in all the horrors that 'total victory' might require.

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Notes

1. Saleh Abdel Jawad argues in his review of Bassem Sharif's book on Wadie Haddad, the Arab Nationalist leader assassinated by Mossad in 1978, that Israeli successes in extraction operations were largely due to the hijackers' orders not to harm passengers and their ethical commitments, which enabled Israel to stage these spectacular triumphs without risking much resistance from the hijackers themselves. See Saleh Abdeljawad, 'Abu Sharif on Wadie Haddad: Towards a Critical Review of External Operations', *Al-Akhbar*, 2014, https://www.al-akhbar.com/Opinion/2648.

2. A large corpus of mainstream books, alongside many dramatised takes on Israeli militarism, such as *Fauda* on Netflix, attest to this self-cultivated image of an embattled liberal state facing monstrous enemies. See for instance: Michael Bar-Zohar and Nissim Mishal, *Mossad: The Greatest Missions of the Israeli Secret Service* (New York: Ecco, 2012); Ronen Bergman, *Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations* (New York: Random House, 2018); Yaakov Katz and Amir Bohbot, *The Weapon Wizards: How Israel Became a High-Tech Military Superpower* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2017); Yossi Melman and Dan Raviv, *Spies Against Armageddon: Inside Israel's Secret Wars* (New York: Levant Books, 2012).

3. For an overview of the cultural and intellectual responses to this defeat in the Arab World, see Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 48–115.

4. Cf. Jens Bjering et al., eds., *War and Aesthetics: Art, Technology, and the Futures of Warfare* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024).

5. Walter Benjamin, 'Theories of German Fascism: On the Collection of Essays *War and Warrior*, Edited by Ernst Jünger', *New German Critique* 17 (1979), 122.

6. Benjamin points out how the technologies and materials of warfare, particularly gas warfare, make the desire for war an empty gesture. This is because it eliminates the 'outdated symbols of heroism' that Jünger and others celebrate (Benjamin, 'Theories of German Fascism', 121).

7. Benjamin, 'Theories of German Fascism', 127–8.

8. Barbee-Sue Rodman, 'War and Aesthetic Sensibility: An Essay in Cultural History', *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 51:3 (1968), 308.

9. J. Glenn Gray, *The Warriors: Reflections on Men in Battle* [1959] (Lincoln: Bison Books, 1970), 36.

10. Gray, *The Warriors*, 36.

11. Gray, *The Warriors*, 36.

12. Gray, *The Warriors*, xii.

13. Quoted in Joshua Leifer, 'What Amos Oz Couldn't See', *Dissent Magazine* (Spring 2019), https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/what-amos-oz-couldnt-see/.

14. Tom Segev, *1967: Israel, the War, and the Year that Transformed the Middle East*, trans. Jessica Cohen (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2007), 247.

15. Segev, *1967*, 15.

16. Segev, *1967*, 676.

17. Amnesty International, 'Israel/OPT: 10 Things You Need to Know About Annexation', 2 July 2020, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2020/07/israelopt-10-things-you-need-to-know-about-annexation/.

18. Mu'in al-Taher and Tabgh wa-Zaytoun, 'Hikayat wa-Suwar min Zaman Muqawim [Tobacco and Olives: Stories and Pictures from a Time of Resistance]' (Doha: Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, 2017), 19.

19. Rosemary Sayigh, *Palestinians: From Peasants to Revolutionaries* (London: Zed Books, 1979).

20. Dalia Gavrieli-Nuri, 'Saying "War", Thinking "Victory" – The Mythmaking Surrounding Israel's 1967 Victory', *Israel Studies* 15:1 (2010), 96.

21. For a discussion on war, the excessive and the relationship to the sublime, see Vivienne Jabri, 'Shock and Awe: Power and the Resistance of Art', *Millennium* 34:3 (2006), 821–4.

22. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 77.

23. Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* [1757] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

24. For Kant this confrontation with the suprasensible produces pain, it instigates a process within the faculty of mind. See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. H. Bernard (New York: MacMillan, 1951), 84.

25. Roland Barthes writes about how myths transform history into nature, and thereby extract events from their historical context. See in particular Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972), 142–5.

26. For more on Israeli militarism and the fear of peace, see Uri Ben-Eliezer, *War over Peace: One Hundred Years of Israel's Militaristic Nationalism*, trans. Shaul Vardi (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019).

27. For a detailed exploration of Nietzsche and Zionism and the influence of Nietzsche on early Zionist thinking, centring notions such as self-overcoming, mastery, longing for an authentic self and sublime missions, see Jacob

Golomb, *Nietzsche and Zion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997).

28. Ze'ev Jabotinsky, 'The Ethics of the Iron Wall', *Razsviet*, 11 November 1923, https://en.jabotinsky.org/archive/search-archive/item/?itemId=114767.

29. Talal Asad, 'Reflections on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict', *Humanity Journal*, 21 March 2024, https://humanityjournal.org/blog/reflections-on-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict/.

30. Walid Daqqa, 'Sihr al-Wa'i aw I'adat Ta'rif al-Ta'dhib [Searing Consciousness or Redefining Torture]' (Beirut: Centre for Studies and Arab Scientific Publishers, with Al-Jazeera, 2010), 27–33.

31. Daqqa, 'Sihr al-Wa'i aw I'adat Ta'rif al-Ta'dhib.'

32. Paul Virilio, *War and Cinema: The Logistics of Perception*, trans. Patrick Camiller (London: Verso, 1989), 10.

33. Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 13.

34. Virilio, *War and Cinema*, 13.

35. Harlan K. Ullman and James P. Wade, *Shock and Awe: Achieving Rapid Dominance* (Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1996), http://www.dodccrp.org/files/Ullman_Shock.pdf.

36. See for instance Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma: Imaginaries of War and Citizenship in Post-9/11 America* (London: Verso, 2022).

37. For a critical take on Shock and Awe and its relationship to the Vietnam War, see H. R. McMaster, 'This Familiar Battleground', *World Affairs*, 9 October 2009, https://www.hoover.org/research/familiar-battleground.

38. Ullman and Wade, *Shock and Awe*.

39. Lucian Staiano-Daniels, 'Taste and the Claims of War: The Kantian Sublime and the Function of War in Public Aesthetic Judgement', *History of European Ideas* 49:5 (2022), 824.

40. Martin Heidegger, 'The Question Concerning Technology', in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 3–35. For Heidegger, the essence of technology is not technological; rather, it lies in technology as a mode of revelation which he calls 'enframing' [*Gestell*]. Enframing 'is the gathering together that belongs to that setting-upon which sets upon man and puts him in position to reveal the real, in the mode of ordering, as standing-reserve' (24). By enhancing the military and its perceptive capacities through the employment of a wide range of complex tools – sensors, radars, satellites, algorithmic deductions, artificial intelligence, cyber capabilities, representational media, aerial surveillance, among others – both those operating the military system and those targeted by it are reduced to mere data points in a web of calculations. They now come to be seen as resources to be either used or annihilated. Enframing also conceals what it reveals in the context of modern technology. As Heidegger puts it, enframing 'does not simply endanger man in his relationship to himself and to everything that is.' In addition, the enframed resources or inventory of tools at man's disposal 'no longer even let their own fundamental characteristic appear, namely, this revealing as such' (27). Instead of disclosing the truth of being, modern technology distorts it. This has deep implications for the impact of technology in warfare, and for the ways the battlefield comes to be ordered, including human and non-human actants and targets.

41. Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, trans. Paul Patton (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

42. A series of articles were published by the Israeli magazine *+972* that discuss the generative targeting power of AI and its use in the war in Gaza. See in particular Yuval Abraham, '"A Mass Assassination Factory": Inside Israel's Calculated Bombing of Gaza', *+972 Magazine*, 30 November 2023, https://www.972mag.com/mass-assassination-factory-israel-calculated-bombing-gaza/; Yuval Abraham, '"Lavender": The AI Machine Directing Israel's Bombing Spree in Gaza', *+972 Magazine*, 3 April 2024, https://www.972mag.com/lavender-ai-israeli-army-gaza/.

43. Although Israeli society speaks of an existential anxiety, this generally remains a productive confession of vulnerability in the face of possible demise. This form of public acknowledgement of precarity hides a deeper sense of security that is paradoxically produced by speaking of vulnerabilities. A large literature exists on existential anxiety of Israeli society – see for instance Gad Yair, 'Israeli Existential Anxiety: Cultural Trauma and the Constitution of National Character', *Social Identities* 20:4–5 (2014), 346–62; Gilad Hirschberger, Tom Pyszczynski and Tsachi Ein-Dor, 'An Ever-Dying People: The Existential Underpinnings of Israelis' Perceptions of War and Conflict', *Les Cahiers Internationaux de Psychologie Sociale* 87:3 (2010), 443–57.

44. The DADO Centre for Interdisciplinary Military Studies was established in 2007 as a reconfiguration of the older Operational Theory Research Institute (OTRI), which was directed by Shimon Naveh. This change occurred as a result of the 2006 Lebanon War, during which Israel's military faced significant criticism for its failures in ground manoeuvres in South Lebanon. The Winograd Commission, set up to investigate these failures, placed some of the responsibility on the language and operative concepts developed by OTRI and the work of Naveh and his team. DADO thus emerged as an updated version of the Institute, one intended to retain what was valuable in OTRI's work while learning from its excesses and mis-

takes.

45. Naveh's 1997 book, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory*, is replete with various examples of systems analysis and historical experiences of operational art, including the Napoleonic Wars, Blitzkrieg and the 1967 war, among others. He provides analyses of these operations by approaching them through systems analysis, emphasising the capacity to integrate various components into a single operation that successfully achieves its military objectives. The book also includes analyses of how these operations can induce a systems shock in the enemy forces.

46. When Aviv Kochavi came to lead Israel's military in 2019, he redrew its conceptual apparatus around the pursuit of decisive victory. See Yaakov Lappin, 'The IDF's Momentum Plan Aims to Create a New Type of War Machine', *BESA Center Perspectives Paper*, no. 1, 497, 22 March 2020, https://besacenter.org/idf-momentum-plan/.

47. Sergio Catignani, *Israeli Counter-Insurgency and the Intifadas: Dilemmas of a Conventional Army* (London: Routledge, 2008).

48. Eyal Weizman, *Hollow Land: Israel's Architecture of Occupation* (London: Verso Books, 2012), 187–219.

49. Łukasz Przybyło, 'Systemic Operational Design – a Study in Failed Concept', *Security and Defence Quarterly* 42:2 (2023), 35–54.

50. For a critical reading on the Palestinian Authority in the wake of the Second Intifada, see Dana El Kurd, *Polarized and Demobilized: Legacies of Authoritarianism in Palestine* (London: Hurst Publishers, 2019).

51. See in particular Eyal Weizman, 'Walking through Walls: Soldiers as Architects in the Israeli–Palestinian Conflict', *Radical Philosophy* 136 (March 2006), https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/walking-through-walls.

52. For an early discussion of airpower and its efficacy and possibilities, see Giulio Douhet, *The Command of the Air*, trans. Dino Ferrari (New York; Coward-McMann, 1942).

53. Shimon Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997).

54. Colonel Eran Ortal, 'We're Confused, Too: A Historical Perspective for Discussion of "Land Ahead"', *Military Review* (March-April 2019), https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/English-Edition-Archives/Mar-Apr-2019/82-Confused/.

55. Aviv Kochavi and Eran Ortal, 'Ma'asei Aman: Permanent Change in a Changing Reality', DADO Center, 2 July 2014, https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/dado-center/vol-2-change-and-transformation/ma-asei-aman/.

56. Major General Aviv Kochavi, 'To Be a Military Leader: Major General Kochavi', Dado Center, Israel Defense Forces (22 June 2022), https://www.idf.il/en/mini-sites/dado-center/research/to-be-a-military-leader-major-general-kochavi/.

57. David M. Halbfinger, 'A Press Corps Deceived, and the Gaza Invasion That Wasn't', *New York Times*, 14 May 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/14/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-disinformation.html.

58. Kochavi, 'To Be a Military Leader.'

59. The metaphoric reference to matrix capability is meant to highlight the representational media available for Israeli commanders. The matrix is designed to integrate vast amounts of intelligence, imagery and other information, displaying this consolidated data on one or multiple screens for commanders and operational leaders. This integration allows for real-time situational awareness and informed decision-making, and is presumed to enhance operational effectiveness on the battlefield. See Ron Leshem, 'IDF Possesses Matrix-like Capabilities, Ex-Israeli Army Chief Says', *Ynetnews*, 30 June 2023, https://www.ynetnews.com/magazine/article/ry0uzlhu3.

60. Al Jazeera staff, 'Nuseirat: Anatomy of Israel's Massacre in Gaza', *Al Jazeera*, 11 June 2024, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/6/11/nuseirat-anatomy-of-israels-massacre-in-gaza.

61. Al Jazeera staff, 'Nuseirat.'

62. Shrouq Aila, 'Nuseirat Massacre: Inside Israel's Failed Hostage Rescue in Gaza', *The Intercept*, 10 June 2024, https://theintercept.com/2024/06/10/nuseirat-massacre-israel-hostage-rescue-gaza/.

63. Much is made of Israeli protests against the 1982 Sabra Shatila Massacres. A confluence of factors encouraged these protests to emerge in Israel at the time, including concerns that Israel might get bogged down in an unnecessary war in Lebanon, More fundamentally, the massacres drew particular condemnation because they were committed by allies of the Israeli military, the Phalange, rather than by the military itself.