

Liminal Warfare in the Israel-Palestinians War Case Study: Post-October 7, 2023 Attacks

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ABSTRACT

The Israel-Palestinians conflict has experienced a new escalation after the October 7, 2023 attacks, which reflects the dynamics of liminal war – a war strategy that falls between conventional and unconventional. This study analyzes how liminal warfare takes place in such conflicts, including its actors, strategies, and impacts on regional and international stability. With a qualitative case study method, this study examines official reports, expert analysis, and data from international organizations. The results show that this war is characterized by guerrilla tactics, precision strikes, as well as information warfare that affects global perception. These findings enrich our understanding of modern warfare and security strategies in conflict zones.

INTRODUCTION

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one of the most complex and protracted conflicts in the world, with dynamics that continue to evolve as military and geopolitical strategies change. On October 7, 2023, during the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah, Palestinian militants launched a surprise attack on Israel. The assault involved armed militants breaching security barriers and a large-scale barrage of rockets fired from the Gaza Strip. This attack occurred exactly one day after the 50th anniversary of the Yom Kippur War, when Egyptian and Syrian forces launched an offensive against Israel in an attempt to reclaim territory captured by Israel in 1967. According to Ely Karmon, Hamas's strategic objectives in this attack were to disrupt the normalization process between Saudi Arabia and Israel and to weaken the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority in the West Bank (Karmon, 2023).

The October 7, 2023, attack by the Hamas group against Israel marked a new escalation in this conflict, triggering a massive military response from Israel to the Gaza territory. This escalation not only has an impact on the security situation in the region, but also changes the pattern of the ongoing war, leading to the phenomenon of *liminal war*—a form of war that falls between conventional and non-conventional wars, involving a combination of direct military operations, asymmetric warfare, and information warfare.

This study aims to analyze how the concept of *liminal war* is manifested in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict after the October 7, 2023 attacks. The main focus of the study includes the identification of the strategies used by both sides, the role of state and non-state actors, and the impact of this war on regional and global stability. Using a qualitative approach and case studies, this study examines various data sources, including official reports, expert analysis, and publications from international organizations. The results of this study are expected to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of modern warfare and counterinsurgency strategies in evolving conflicts.

The 7 October 2023 attack by Hamas on Israel marked a watershed moment in modern warfare. It was not just a military operation but a masterclass in liminal warfare—a form of conflict that operates below the threshold of conventional war, exploiting ambiguity and surprise to achieve strategic objectives. This article explores the 7 October attack as a case study in liminal warfare, examining its planning, execution, and implications for future conflicts. By analyzing the attack, we aim to understand how non-state actors like Hamas are redefining the rules of engagement and challenging traditional military paradigms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Kilcullen (2019). “liminal warfare involves the integration of political, economic, legal, military, intelligence and cyber into a single seamless mix of maneuver activity focused on the shaping of operations with the adversary before an operation is launched.” The concept of liminal war refers to warfare that operates in legal, political, and military ambiguity, where state and non-state actors exploit loopholes in the traditional rules of war to achieve their strategic objectives. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, this war involves the use of

advanced military technology, cyber-based attacks, media propaganda, and guerrilla battles that take place in densely populated urban areas. The liminal war also creates new challenges in international diplomacy, given the increasing pressure from the global community on Israel and Palestine to achieve a more sustainable resolution of the conflict.

The implications of liminal war on non-conventional warfare are significant, especially in the structure of resistance and the operational strategies used. According to Hasler (2017), this concept of war shifts the traditional paradigm in the resistance movement from a hierarchical structure to a multifunctional network of cells that are able to adapt quickly in various operational conditions. The concept of netwar put forward by Arquilla and Ronfeldt (1996) reinforces this idea, showing how resistance networks can align themselves and support operations in a variety of areas, from information to kinetic combat. In liminal warfare, the line between open and hidden activities becomes increasingly blurred, creating a maneuverable space between the thresholds of detection, attribution, and response from adversaries.

The concept of liminal warfare introduced by David Kilcullen offers a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics of modern conflicts that occur in the threshold space between overt and covert activities. Liminal warfare is defined as a strategy that takes advantage of a zone of ambiguity to avoid triggering a full-scale military response from the adversary. In this zone, the actions taken operate below certain thresholds, such as detection, attribution, and response, each of which depends on the adversary's surveillance capabilities and political decisions.



Figure 1. Liminal Warfare Pyramid

The liminal zone itself consists of three main layers. The first layer is the detection threshold, where the existence of the operation is still hidden and undetected by the enemy. The second layer is the attribution threshold, where

the operation has been detected, but the identity of the sponsor has not yet been confirmed. The final layer is the response threshold, where the adversary has sufficient evidence to respond, either through military action or diplomatic decisions, with domestic or international legitimacy. These three thresholds create space for state and non-state actors to exploit the gap between detection and response to achieve their strategic objectives.

The liminal warfare framework also includes several important phases, namely the formation phase, the implementation of rapid military operations, diplomatic maneuvers, and the strategy of escalation to de-escalation. In the formative phase, the battlefield is prepared through information warfare, political manipulation, and social influence before physical conflict begins. When military operations are carried out, they are usually high in intensity but short in duration to reach the goal before the enemy can respond effectively. Once the goal is achieved, diplomatic maneuvers are carried out to legitimize the action and reduce international pressure. This strategy often ends with an escalation-to-de-escalation approach, where the actors involved seek to lock in gains while avoiding potential retaliation.

The theoretical framework of the liminal warfare campaign sequence describes the temporal dynamics and spectrum of activities carried out by state and non-state actors in liminal warfare. In this framework, there is a dynamic relationship between signatures, time, and detection thresholds by the enemy, all of which are integrated into the concept of liminal zones.



Figure 2. Liminal Warfare Campaign Sequence

The liminal zone refers to a strategic space where activities can run below the enemy's detection level or be ambiguous in their identity or intentions. Liminal warfare campaigns are designed to make optimal use of these zones, which is demonstrated through the stages of escalation and de-escalation of activities based on operational objectives.

In the early stages, the operation began as clandestine activity, where the signs produced were so low that they were barely detected by the enemy. In this context, the sponsor or actor behind the activity remains unknown. Over time, the activity moves to the covert operation stage, where the operation begins to be detected, but the identity of the actor cannot be fully confirmed. Activity continues to increase until it reaches a phase of ambiguity, in which the resulting signs are clear enough to indicate the presence of an operation but still have not yet reached the level of a full response by the enemy.

At its peak, the campaign enters the mission window, which is a critical period where the operation becomes highly visible (overt) and achieves the planned strategic objectives. However, this is done with speed and efficiency designed to complete the mission before the enemy has enough time or resources to provide an effective response. Once the goal is achieved, activity gradually declines, reverting back to ambiguous zones or even clandestine operations, making it difficult for the enemy to evaluate or retaliate against such actions.

The framework also highlights the importance of the enemy detection threshold as a critical limit that determines the effectiveness of a liminal strategy. By keeping operations below this threshold for a considerable period of time, the actors involved can optimize their maneuvering space without having to face an escalation of direct conflicts. At the same time, the framework focuses on the enemy's decision-making timing, which is often a weak point in the face of attacks that occur within the liminal zone.

As a theoretical framework, liminal warfare campaign sequences offer analytical tools that are essential for understanding how modern actors, both state and non-state, use a combination of clandestine activities, covert operations, and ambiguous actions to achieve strategic objectives without triggering a full-scale military response. This model provides insight into how temporal dynamics and operational intensity can be leveraged to manage risk, exploit ambiguity, and achieve strategic advantage in modern conflicts.

METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative method with a case study approach to explore the application of the liminal warfare concept in the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023. The case study approach was chosen because it is able to capture the complexity and dynamics of real events in the context of conflict, as explained by Yin (2009) that case studies are an effective method for investigating contemporary phenomena in real-life contexts.

In this study, data was collected through secondary sources, including international media reports (such as BBC, The Times of Israel, The Washington Post, and Al Jazeera), policy documents as well as official statements from relevant institutions (e.g. IDF), and relevant scholarly publications. The data analysis techniques used included document and content analysis, with the application of data triangulation to increase the validity of the findings. As stated by Patton (2002), the use of data triangulation is essential to ensure the reliability of qualitative research results.

The theoretical framework of this research is based on the liminal warfare campaign sequence concept proposed by Kilcullen (2020) and Boyd's (1995) OODA Loop model. Kilcullen explains that liminal warfare is a strategy that exploits the zone of ambiguity - the space between the threshold of detection and full response - to achieve strategic objectives without directly triggering open conflict. Meanwhile, the OODA Loop model emphasizes the importance of speed in the process of observation, orientation, decision-making, and action, which is key in exploiting the enemy's reaction time gap.

The analysis was conducted using thematic and narrative methods to identify and interpret the stages of operations carried out by Hamas, starting from pre-threshold shaping, crossing detection threshold, rapid seizure, to sub-threshold repositioning. This approach allows researchers to systematically map how each stage is carried out and responded to by the opponent, thus building an in-depth understanding of the liminal warfare strategy in the context of the attack. In line with Creswell (2013), this analytical approach helps explain the cause-and-effect relationships and processes underlying conflict dynamics.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Liminal Warfare Pyramid

The Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, against Israel analyzed using the concept of *liminal warfare* introduced by David Kilcullen. In this attack, Hamas utilized strategic ambiguity to operate between the thresholds of detection, attribution, and response, creating space to act without triggering a full-scale military response from Israel. As Kilcullen explains, "*liminal warfare is defined as a strategy that exploits the zone of ambiguity to avoid triggering a full-scale military response from the adversary.*"

Initially, the rocket barrage launched by Hamas served as a diversion, while Hamas fighters infiltrated Israeli territory using methods that were difficult to detect. The use of vehicles such as motorcycles, paragliders, and even a bulldozer to breach the security barrier illustrates Hamas's attempt to stay below the detection threshold, keeping their operation hidden until the primary objectives were achieved. For example, one video circulating showed "*a bulldozer tearing down part of the security fence*" (The Times of Israel, 2023), indicating an effort to manipulate the space below the detection threshold.

Once Hamas's forces infiltrated, Israel began attempting to identify the source of the attack. At this point, Hamas remained at the attribution threshold, where the attack was detected, but the identity of the perpetrators and their objectives were not immediately clear. As reported by The Washington Post, "*videos and images spreading across social media depicted the tactics used by militants, clarifying that this was an operation organized by Hamas*" (The Washington Post, 2023).

Eventually, the attack crossed the response threshold. Israel was forced to respond with military force after Hamas forces breached Israeli borders and caused significant damage, both in terms of casualties and infrastructure. Israel then launched airstrikes on Gaza and continued fighting Hamas infiltrators who had entered multiple locations in Israel. As reported by Al Jazeera, "*the IDF was*

still fighting with hundreds of Hamas infiltrators overnight in 22 locations near the Gaza Strip, a clear sign of the scale of this escalation" (Al Jazeera, 2023).

This Hamas attack demonstrates the use of phases in *liminal warfare*, starting with preparation and diversion through rocket fire, followed by rapid military operations to achieve objectives, and ultimately, with Israel's inevitable military response. Hamas's strategic objectives, including weakening the Palestinian Authority and disrupting normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, align with the broader goals Hamas sought to achieve through this attack. As Ely Karmon explains, "*Hamas's strategic objectives in this attack were to disrupt the normalization process between Saudi Arabia and Israel and to weaken the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority in the West Bank*" (Karmon, 2023). This attack serves as a clear example of how *liminal warfare* can be applied in modern conflict, using the space between detection and response to achieve strategic goals.

Liminal Warfare Campaign Sequences

In international security studies, the concept of liminal warfare highlights how actors – both state and non-state – can exploit enemy detection and reaction thresholds to achieve strategic objectives without triggering a full military response. This concept refers to operations carried out in the gray area between peace and open conflict, where activity is not fully defined as a conventional act of war. For example, the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023 against Israel can be analyzed through the theoretical framework of the Liminal Warfare Campaign Sequence which outlines the stages of the operation starting from preparation below the detection threshold to the attempt to return below the threshold after reaching the objective.

In its early stages, Hamas undertook what is referred to as "pre-threshold shaping," which involves capacity-building and covert operational preparation, which involves intelligence infiltration, disinformation campaigns, and the placement of seemingly non-military assets. The move allows Hamas to prepare for its operation without attracting the attention of Israel's intelligence and surveillance systems tasked with detecting suspicious activity. Thus, in this phase, Hamas's activities are still below the threshold of detection, so it does not immediately invite a military reaction from the Israeli side.

As the operation began, Hamas then entered the "crossing detection threshold" phase. On the morning of October 7, the attack began with the launch of thousands of rockets into Israeli territory, which also served as a distraction. This tactic forces Israeli air defense systems, such as the Iron Dome, to focus on the rocket threat, thus distracting from the ground infiltration that is being carried out. Behind the rocket attack, Hamas forces carried out infiltration using various methods of transportation, including motorcycles, paragliders, and even bulldozers seen in video footage while breaking through the security fence. At this stage, although activity has begun to be detected, the attribution process – that is, the attempt to attribute the attack to a specific actor – is still ongoing, so the identity and ultimate purpose of the operation have not been fully revealed by the Israeli side.

In the context of liminal warfare theory, the next phase is "rapid seizure". By taking advantage of the time gap between the initial detection and the completion of the attribution process, Hamas moved quickly to achieve its strategic goals. The coordinated infiltration tactics at several border points have made Israel's response even more urgent. Within hours, Hamas forces had managed to spread across several locations on Israeli territory, causing damage to infrastructure and casualties, forcing Israel to finally enter the "response threshold" phase. Here, due to the escalation that has occurred, Israel no longer has no choice but to launch a larger military response, such as intensive air strikes on the Gaza territory and the deployment of ground forces to suppress the infiltration.

The final stage in the framework of liminal warfare is "sub-threshold repositioning," in which after achieving operational objectives—for example, destabilizing regional stability, disrupting the normalization process between Israel and Saudi Arabia, and weakening the position of the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority—liminal actors will seek to lower the profile of their actions back to a level that does not trigger further escalation. This step is taken so that the conflict does not develop into a full-scale conventional war that can harm both sides.

This theoretical framework is supported by various theoretical foundations, such as hybrid warfare theory and gray zone tactics, which emphasize that a combination of unconventional methods (e.g., cyber and propaganda) with limited military tactics can avoid a full response from the adversary. In addition, the Observe, Orient, Decide, Act (OODA Loop) model proposed by John Boyd underlines the importance of speed in decision-making, so that the ability of liminal actors to "trim" the reaction time of the enemy is the key to the success of their operations. Escalation and threshold theory also highlights that by operating below certain thresholds, actors can minimize the risk of a large-scale response, while the concept of asymmetric warfare explains how relatively weaker parties conventionally can leverage non-military advantages to avoid frontal clashes.

Thus, the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023 is a concrete example of the application of liminal warfare. Hamas managed to exploit the time gap between the detection, attribution, and response phases to launch a swift and coordinated operation, forcing Israel to provide a full response when the scale of the attack had grown. Through the use of the enemy's relatively slow detection threshold and reaction time, Hamas not only achieves its tactical objectives, but also disrupts regional political stability and suppresses the ongoing normalization process between Israel and Arab countries. The implementation of this liminal warfare strategy emphasizes the importance of improving early detection systems, intelligence coordination, and response speed in an effort to prevent the use of similar time gaps by other actors in modern conflicts.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, exemplifies the principles of *liminal warfare*, where ambiguity and strategic deception are used to operate within the gray zone between detection, attribution, and response. By leveraging tactics such

as diversionary rocket fire, rapid infiltration, and the exploitation of Israel's security gaps, Hamas effectively prolonged the time needed for Israel to detect, attribute, and respond to the attack. The phased approach—preparation through information warfare, swift military action, diplomatic maneuvering, and escalation-to-de-escalation—allowed Hamas to achieve significant operational success before Israel could fully mobilize its counteroffensive. The attack also highlights the growing complexity of modern conflicts, where non-state actors can manipulate thresholds to challenge state security forces.

In light of these findings, states facing similar asymmetric threats must enhance their ability to detect and disrupt *liminal warfare* strategies before they escalate. Intelligence-sharing, real-time surveillance, and predictive threat modeling should be improved to counter adversaries operating within the detection and attribution thresholds. Additionally, governments should invest in *whole-of-government* approaches that integrate military, political, and technological responses to mitigate the effectiveness of such attacks. Strengthening civil-military cooperation and reinforcing deterrence strategies—both conventional and unconventional—are crucial to reducing vulnerabilities in national security. Finally, diplomacy should not be overlooked; preventing the escalation of *liminal warfare* into full-scale conflict requires proactive international engagement and conflict resolution mechanisms.

An analysis of the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023 using the theoretical framework of the liminal warfare campaign sequence reveals that the operation is a clear example of the strategy of operations in the gray area between peace and open conflict. Hamas managed to take advantage of the time gap between the threshold of detection, attribution, and response to launch complex and coordinated attacks. Starting with pre-threshold shaping, followed by detection triggers through rocket attacks as diversion, and continuing to the rapid seizure phase through ground infiltration utilizing various modes of transport, this operation delayed the full response from Israel. The end result, although an Israeli military response must ultimately be made, shows that Hamas has achieved several strategic goals, including disrupting Israel's normalization process with Arab countries and weakening the Palestinian Authority's political position. The findings highlight weaknesses in early detection and response coordination systems that non-state actors can leverage with liminal warfare strategies.

FURTHER STUDY

This research has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the case study approach used relied primarily on secondary data, such as media reports and official documents, so there could be biases or limitations in the validity of the available data. In addition, limited access to primary data, such as interviews with military practitioners or security analysts, limits the depth of analysis regarding the internal dynamics and strategic considerations taken by the actors involved.

Another limitation to note is the contextual nature of the liminal warfare phenomenon. This study focused on the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023 as a specific case, so generalization of the findings to other conflict contexts should be

done with caution. Future research should examine similar attacks or strategies across different regions and conflicts to identify common patterns as well as significant differences.

For future research, it is recommended that a multi-method approach be used to provide a more comprehensive picture. Combining qualitative and quantitative data - for example through surveys or statistical analysis of conflict data - can help reduce bias and increase the generalizability of findings. In addition, the inclusion of in-depth interviews with field actors, military practitioners and policy makers would be valuable to gain a more in-depth and contextualized perspective on liminal warfare strategies.

Furthermore, future research could explore the long-term impact of implementing liminal warfare strategies on regional conflict dynamics and national defense policy. A comparative approach between cases of liminal warfare attacks and conventional conflicts could also provide a broader understanding of the effectiveness and strategic implications of this approach. Thus, further research is expected to overcome the existing limitations, as well as make a more significant contribution to the development of military strategy literature and practice in the era of modern conflict.

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