

Chapter 3

The IDF: Addressing the Failures of the Second Lebanon War

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The Winograd Report, and even more importantly, the investigations conducted by the IDF itself, underscored three principal failures in the IDF's performance during the Second Lebanon War: poor performance by the combat units, particularly on land; weakness of the high command and poor command and control processes; and problematic command norms, including a dissociation from traditional values. However, despite the criticism, insufficient attention was given to the causes of these lapses.

The poor level of combat was mainly the result of a decision to downscale the military's level of readiness. In March 2003, a multi-year plan was devised whereby the required minimum annual IDF budget was NIS 36.5 billion. In practice, the budget came to approximately NIS 34 billion. In order to compensate for the discrepancy the military preferred to cut back primarily in the area of readiness (including exercises). This was not only because it was not possible – in the midst of a difficult struggle against terror – to scale back current security operations, but also because since the end of the Iraq War in April 2003, no war was expected to erupt between Israel and its neighbors in the near future. The decision to go to war in the summer of 2006 therefore produced a strange situation. On

the one hand, the IDF made a conscious decision to run a risk in terms of readiness, and on the other hand, it “surprised itself” when it embarked on a war that Israel initiated.

Poor military thinking was demonstrated on several levels:

1. In the period leading up to the war, several changes were made that damaged the military’s ability to function at a maximum level, without the decision makers having fully analyzed their implications.
2. Noticeably absent were clear professional language, uniform procedures, and standards that were translated into professionally issued commands. Instead, too much importance was attached to the “operational concept.”
3. The command and control processes were adversely affected by the chief of staff’s preference for bypassing the war room.
4. Open-minded thought, necessary to reduce the risk of sticking to preconceived ideas and relying on unquestioned assumptions, was far too rare.

The war also revealed a weakening of values and norms traditionally instilled in IDF commanders: sticking to the mission, taking responsibility, and leading by example. The normative lapses behind the troubling phenomena that came to light probably stem from the way the officers were trained to operate rather than from any flaws in their personality or basic value-systems. More precisely, there were problems with the way the commands were issued, which did not provide the coherent distinctions between “objective,” “mission,” and “method” needed to motivate soldiers or instill in them the sense that “the fate of the war is on our shoulders.” Furthermore, there was a sense that the highest priority was to protect soldiers rather than civilians (exemplified by the fact that stopping the Katyusha rocket fire was not defined as the primary goal). Commanders also relied too much on technology (“the plasma culture”), which created the impression that it was possible to wage a tactical land battle without actually being in the field. Finally, there was an overall decline in the relative importance attributed to security, hence, in the need to invest

in and contribute to it; that message was implicitly conveyed in the government's decision in the year before the war to stop calling up reservists for operational duty and to shorten the length of compulsory military service for men.

More than eighteen months after the war, it can be said that the IDF and the government have done and continue to do much to correct the faults that came to light during the war.

Readiness

In the area of readiness, several corrective measures were implemented. First, the government approved a special budget of NIS 1.8 billion for immediate procurement of personal equipment that was clearly lacking during the war, especially for reservists. Second, exercises for regular army soldiers and reservists were stepped up, and standards were set that had not been in effect since 2000. Third, extensive efforts were made to document methodically the exercises and generate a picture of individual fitness at the brigade level. Fourth, there was large-scale procurement of unit equipment, i.e., platforms (armored personnel carriers) and munitions, which is expected to provide a far better response capability than was available prior to the war.

This program for enhancing readiness was made possible principally through budgets that were expanded from two sources. The first was a gradual increase over ten years in annual aid from the United States, from \$2.4 billion to \$3 billion. The second was the government's decision to adopt the Brodet Commission's report, which recommended a gradual increase of the defense budget, in contrast with the pre-war trend of reducing defense outlays (on the other hand, the army was also required to demonstrate improved efficiency, i.e., cutting expenditures without harming operational capabilities).

Enhancing readiness has two costs. The first is financial: more expenditures toward readiness come at the expense of other areas. Most of the cost results from the need to recruit more reserve units for operational duty in order to allow regular army units to invest

more time in exercises. The second cost is the drive to reduce the overall defense burden. The decisions designed to reduce the onus both on the regular army soldiers (by shortening military service) and on reservists (by doing away with “operational duties”) will clearly not be implemented in the foreseeable future.

Overall, the combat forces, particularly the ground forces, are better prepared than they were in the summer of 2006. Further improvements are expected in the coming years.

Thinking, Planning, and Command and Control Processes

This area is more difficult to examine, as it is more qualitative than quantitative. Nevertheless, even prior to the Winograd Report, the IDF understood that there were serious shortcomings in this area. Not surprisingly, therefore, considerable investment in this area is evident, in more advanced training, the revision of doctrines (including “operational concepts”), and a complete overhaul of the operational programs and war exercises of the high command. Will all this necessarily lead to improved functioning of the General Staff and the command headquarters and divisional commands?

Investment in other areas will lead to better outputs. One example is a proper rebalancing of the division of responsibility and authority between the chief of staff, ground forces, air force, and area commands. The changes introduced by the current chief of staff, particularly the return to the previous balance, can maximize the capabilities and relative advantages of these branches. Furthermore, much will be gained from the stringent application of operating procedures, especially regarding the modus operandi of the General Staff. Decades of operational experience and command exercises have spawned crucial organizational know how and a situation in which professionals are capable of operating the IDF efficiently. Adherence to correct methodology, logic, and straightforward thinking does not necessarily prevent mistakes, but it does significantly reduce two negative phenomena that were prominent in the Second Lebanon

War: the lack of coordination among commands and contradictory or unclear commands; and the failure to discuss important issues in a timely fashion, if at all.

In other areas, there is a less solid basis to predict improved performance. With respect to readiness, the message that emerged from the IDF in the wake of the war, particularly from the commanders of yesteryear, was that if the IDF can reacquire its traditional ground maneuver capabilities, Israel will win the next war. However, nostalgia and a return to “the good old ways” are not necessarily the best preparation for future wars. For example, war with Syria remains a possibility. In past wars (e.g., 1973), the ability to take Syrian territory in Syria was what eventually led to victory. Another war with Syria could be very different. Instead of a symmetrical war, Israel may find itself in a “parallel war”: Israel will overcome the Syrian army while the Syrians overcome the Israeli home front, since Israel does not possess an adequate solution to the threat of rockets and missiles. Victory over Syria in the next war requires different thinking and different priorities for different political and military operations. It is unclear just how much the army has adapted itself to a different reality. Military activity at the most senior levels is a complex intellectual challenge that necessitates a connection between a theoretical and abstract system of concepts and “the reality base.” It demands correct identification of changes, even when they occur imperceptibly. It is still too early to know to what extent the military leaders are actually doing this.

A second uncertainty concerns the thorough reassessment of basic assumptions. True, the IDF has undertaken systematic and noteworthy improvements to correct the deficiencies that were manifested during the last war. However, it is possible that some of the reasons for the army’s mediocre performance relate to outmoded decisions or institutions and habits deeply rooted in basic assumptions that seemingly required no reexamination. One example is the structure of the General Staff, particularly in wartime. In most of the world’s militaries, there is a clear distinction between staff elements and

operational units. However in the IDF, most of the generals of the General Staff also serve as staff officers and as operational unit commanders. Thus, for example, the head of the logistics branch fills three functions simultaneously: he is a staff officer (the General Staff logistics officer), the logistical command officer, and the ground logistics divisional officer – and this example is only one of many. This state of affairs generates two problems. The first is that, as in the example cited, one element “issues orders to itself.” The second problem is that the critical desideratum of a staff officer – that he work solely for his commander on the basis of the overall interest – cannot be realized. Moreover, if this phenomenon does not exist in other armies, then there might be some reason to question its existence in the IDF. This is not a theoretical issue. The IDF General Staff has not performed brilliantly in any war since 1967. It is likely that in addition to the improvement in professionalism, the structure should be thoroughly examined.

The third dimension of questionable change concerns the culture of debate. One of the problems in the Second Lebanon War was the exaggerated adherence of senior officers to the chief of staff's decisions. There is no question that the final word rests with the chief of staff, and once decisions have been made, all must demonstrate complete commitment to their implementation. However, it is the senior officers' job to argue with the chief of staff when they feel he is wrong, and this should be done assertively on the basis of professional truth as they see it. It is not clear if the silence of the senior officers in the last war was a one-time phenomenon or is a persistent attribute of the IDF.

Norms and Values

The senior command is clearly concerned over certain normative shortcomings that came to light in the war, and there is a genuine intent to improve this area. The current chief of staff now communicates the message that the IDF is in one of two conditions: either preparing for a war or fighting to win a war. This is a different message than the more

administrative approach conveyed by his predecessor. On the other hand, it is hard to discern if and to what extent change has actually taken place. The main question remains: to what degree should the army be ready and is it ready to pay the price of preparing the field officer to take more initiative and responsibility. For example, is it correct or even possible to allow lower-grade officers to plan and lead current security operations with less control from above only in order to prepare them better for a conventional war? There are no easy answers to such questions, and it is hard to say that a change can be seen. Yet one can venture that if there is significant improvement in formulating orders and defining “objectives” and “missions” more clearly, they will be more easily implemented and there will also be a clear improvement in the soldiers’ determination to stick to the mission in order to attain the objective.

In conclusion, the IDF has related seriously to the flaws and shortcomings revealed in the Second Lebanon War and it has shown a real determination to correct them. In all matters relating to the short term, much work has undoubtedly already been done. However, it is harder to be equally definitive with regard to the fundamental causes of the problems that came to light.