

The IDF in the Second Intifada

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Introduction

The second intifada was an armed conflict short of war that began on September 29, 2000; it is not clear when it ended. The conflict erupted with a stormy beginning, reached its peak in April 2002, and since then has been in the process of waning, to the point that the security situation today is not significantly different from the ongoing security situation that existed in the years that preceded it.

The article below analyzes the way the IDF, in conjunction with other security forces, confronted this particular conflict. It divides the subject into two periods: up to Operation Defensive Shield (April 2002), and after Defensive Shield, with an emphasis on the period from 2002–2005. It addresses both the pure military aspects and the complexity that resulted from the need for the military echelon to hold an ongoing dialogue with the political echelon, a dialogue that was at times very tense. The article focuses on IDF actions in the Judea and Samaria area; the fighting in Gaza and against Gaza in the wake of the disengagement has a different logic, and merits a separate article. The article does not address the strategic question of whether it was possible to prevent the outbreak of the intifada, and once it erupted whether it was possible to end it earlier. The attempt to answer this important question requires a more in-depth discussion of the diplomatic dimension, which is outside the purview of this article.¹

The First Period: September 2000–April 2002

The specific timing and the way in which the riots began in late September 2000 surprised the IDF, even though Amos Gilad, head of

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Intelligence's research division at the time, recommended that Sharon not visit the Temple Mount on September 28 because of the prevailing tension. Indeed, the IDF prepared for 2000 being a "decisive year." There was an understanding that from the moment the five years stipulated by the Oslo process for reaching a permanent settlement ended in May 1999 without such an agreement, the outbreak of violence was only a matter of time.

Two developments sharpened the premonition. The first was the *Nakba* events on May 15, 2000, when a violent attack by a large mob, some of it armed, was launched on IDF positions near Ramallah. The IDF had a concrete warning about the incident and indeed, IDF forces were on high alert. The result was some twenty Palestinians killed. This incident shocked Arafat's close associates, but along with its deterrent effect it also aroused a strong desire for revenge. The second development was the failure of the July 2000 Camp David talks. Indeed, it was this failure that removed the last obstacle to an outbreak of violence.

The IDF, headed by Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz, prepared for a major clash in 2000. It drafted operational plans for a multitude of scenarios, equipped itself with many bulletproof vehicles, and held special training for its forces, including the reserves. The assumption was that there would be armed clashes, that is, that the other side would also

use weapons. On the basis of the lesson from May 2000 and the more painful lessons from the Western Wall tunnel events in September 1996, it was understood that the intention was to reach a casualty ratio that would demonstrate which side was stronger.

When the violence erupted, it became clear that it presented a more complex challenge than what was anticipated, and indeed, the army's preparedness was only partial. The difficulty was the combination of five factors. First, to Israel's surprise, the violence was considered justified in public opinion in many countries, and this

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is how it was covered in the international media. It was viewed as a "just struggle against the occupation." Second, Israeli responses were considered excessive use of military force against civilians; the IDF did

not see to it that it was equipped in advance with the required quantity and quality of non-lethal means required, and therefore, lacking an alternative, it was sometimes forced to use live fire. Third, there was a dilemma on the diplomatic level. Since desperate efforts were made to stop the violence (the Sharm el-Sheikh summit with President Clinton on October 4, 2000), the political echelon gave an order to exercise restraint. The vigorous action taken a few months prior, in May 2000, could not be repeated. Fourth, tactical problems arose with the Palestinians' use of children in areas of confrontation. Fifth, the scope of the riots and their occurrence throughout the Judea and Samaria region and the Gaza Strip area (as well as among Israeli Arabs) made it difficult to allocate trained and sufficiently equipped forces to all the sectors.

The IDF found itself on the defensive, both in the operational sense and in the need to explain itself and its conduct. A good example of this embarrassing situation is the siege of the settlement of Netzarim. For an entire week in October 2000, this Gaza Strip settlement and the adjacent military compound were entirely under siege, and it was possible to bring supplies to the settlement only by helicopter. Overall, the Palestinians' tactics made the situation very difficult for the IDF, with civil demonstrations joining "cold" violence: stone throwing and use of firearms during the demonstrations. In addition, there were attacks that were clearly terrorist attacks, involving fire from ambushes, car bombs, and a growing number of suicide attacks. Thus in the first year of the intifada, the IDF was largely on the defensive, in its war with the Palestinians, in its way of coping with the (primarily foreign) media, and in the need to deal with the slogan, "Let the IDF win."

Coping with the foreign media created challenges for which the IDF was not properly prepared. It was a longstanding norm that the IDF explains military events, and that civilian entities (mainly the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) explain the diplomatic aspect. This division was correct as long as there were no significant security incidents, and as long as the foreign media was mainly interested in political issues. When the riots broke out in September 2000, the media's attention

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was focused on the military events. Foreign journalists did not want to hear informed explanations from politicians or those charged with explaining Israel's political rationale; they wanted to speak to a military commander in the field and hear why his forces had done what they did. The army was not prepared for this, in terms of the required openness, the professional willingness of the officers in the field to be interviewed (certainly in English), or the sophistication required for mastery of the media. Moreover, in theory IDF commanders knew that the battle over public relations was important, but in the moment of truth, they tended to refuse requests (and sometimes, pleas) by the IDF spokesman to grant the interviews.

The first change resulted from an external event, the terrorist attack in the United States on September 11, 2001. Ironically, this event took place just when a "strategic" cabinet discussion on the Palestinian issue had ended. (After a year of tumultuous events, this was the first discussion in which the cabinet attempted to confront the relevant fundamental questions, such as how to try to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Until then, the cabinet's discussions had focused on ministers listening to intelligence reports and approving various tactical actions). The influence of September 11 on Israeli and Palestinian maneuverability was immediate. Suddenly, it became legitimate "to fight terror," and actions like targeted killings – which had earned across-the-board condemnation around the world – were accepted as a legitimate way of coping. Arafat, who until September 11 enjoyed wide international support for his "struggle against the occupation," suddenly received sharp messages to stop the terrorism, and not just from the United States. Over time a de facto partial ceasefire developed. Israel gradually reduced the actions it initiated, and at the same time, the number of attacks declined. The heads of the Palestinian security organizations, most noticeably Muhammad Dahlan and Jibril Rajoub, attempted to exploit this period in order to strengthen their standing among the Americans, their Israeli counterparts, and the Palestinian street.

In this period, the second American emissary, General Anthony Zinni, arrived and labored to broker a security arrangement between the two sides. The relative quiet reached by the sides in late 2001–early 2002 was short lived, as the terror genie released by Arafat one year earlier was too strong and too independent to be contained. The familiar terrorist

elements like Hamas and Islamic Jihad were joined by Fatah elements that became more and more dominant, until even Arafat's security organizations could not subdue them.

Israel also contributed to the escalation by continuing targeted killings, even taking the initiative and bringing the fighting to the refugee camps in Nablus and Jenin. Ra'id Carmi, a leading Fatah activist in Tulkarm, was assassinated in January 2002. Before his assassination, Israel unilaterally froze such actions for two months. In the case of Carmi, as a result of a General Security Service (GSS) assessment that he was headed for an imminent terrorist attack, a decision was made to eliminate him. To the Palestinians, Israel had violated the unwritten understandings that it would refrain from such actions, in exchange for an effort by their security organizations to lower the flames of the fire. In general, Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz pushed firmly to act against "armed Palestinians" wherever they were. The delicate distinction that was sometimes required between various people carrying weapons was not always maintained. Prime Minister Sharon too was not eager to renew security cooperation, as requested by the Americans and some Palestinians (e.g., Dahlan and Rajoub).

The influence of September 11 passed quickly. The pace of the terrorist attacks accelerated, reaching its peak in March 2002. In this month alone, 135 Israelis were killed in 17 terrorist attacks, most of them suicide attacks within the Green Line. The decisive event was the massacre at the Park Hotel in Netanya on Passover eve. More than 30 Israelis were killed in this attack, which was carried out by Hamas. It was clear that the situation could not continue as before.

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The Second Period: April 2002–2005

In the wake of the Passover attack, Defense Minister Fouad Ben Eliezer convened an urgent discussion that very evening. There was tremendous frustration. Since the attack was perpetrated by Hamas, Ben Eliezer opened the meeting by saying that the time had come strike to Hamas with

maximum intensity. Chief of Staff Mofaz and his deputy Moshe (Bogie) Ya'alon insisted that this was not the right approach. They claimed that it was impossible to wage a successful battle against terrorism without full control over the territory. The only way to change the situation, they believed, was to reoccupy all of the territory of the Palestinian Authority and thereby gain intelligence and operational control, which are so essential.

In the first stage, it would be necessary to seize control of the centers of terrorism in Gaza and the Judea and Samaria region, and later, to remain there and control the area. The chief of staff claimed that the minimum amount of time required for this kind of action was two months, one month to take control of the territory and at least one month to take advantage of this control in order to strike at the terror infrastructure. The defense minister was forced to agree, and thus Operation Defensive Shield was brought to the cabinet for approval.

The cabinet meeting about the response to the events of March and the decisions made during that meeting are a positive example of the correct way in which to discuss such issues. Four constructive aspects should be noted. First, it was a "relaxed" discussion that allowed the defense establishment to prepare an orderly plan and present it to the cabinet. Second, the decisions taken ultimately proved themselves correct. Third, the decisions were clear, and fourth, the cabinet understood that the decisions were liable to cause a dispute with the United States, and therefore it was agreed in advance who would talk to the Americans and where it would be possible to compromise.

From the moment the operation was approved, the security situation quickly changed. The occupation of most of the territory (which did not include the occupation of Gaza) occurred relatively easily and quickly, with the exception of the battle in the Jenin refugee camp, where the action was repeatedly postponed, and when it took place, resulted in the deaths of thirteen soldiers. It was demonstrated that sending in a large force with strong firepower and excellent armored fighting vehicle protection and personal protection, with the action accompanied by real time intelligence supplied by unmanned aerial vehicles and by a high level of eavesdropping ability (SIGINT), can ensure fast achievements at a relatively low price. Even more important was the ability to take advantage of the quick takeover of the territory to continue effective

control. The results were undoubtedly the most impressive success of the IDF and the GSS since April 2002.

Suffice it to compare the American experience in Iraq with Israel's experience in Judea and Samaria. The Americans also succeeded in taking all of Iraq by storm, including the threatening built-up areas in Baghdad and other cities, but they did not succeed in taking advantage of the first successful stage to continue effective control of the area. The IDF did succeed in this. Indeed, from April 2002 until now, the security situation has continued to improve, both in the Judea and Samaria region and within the Green Line. The number of Israelis killed (soldiers and civilians) decreased by hundreds of percentage points. The sense of security also increased greatly as the number of casualties dropped dramatically, and with it, the economic situation.

Three factors contributed to the dramatic improvement in the security situation. The first was the security fence. This barrier, whose construction was postponed again and again for political and budgetary reasons, proved to be an especially effective measure. It turned out that the barrier contributed not only to reducing the number of Israeli casualties, but also to reducing the number of Palestinian casualties. The explanation is simple: before the barrier was built, if there was a warning about a suicide bomber approaching the Green Line from Jenin, there was no way to prevent it except by an offensive action in Jenin, which would presumably cause casualties. Once the fence was built, it was possible to alternate between offensive actions and defensive actions, and to deploy forces on the line of the fence.

The second reason was the control over the territory: there is no substitute for it. This control creates strong synergy between security and operational effectiveness. For example, one day in 2005 intelligence was received to the effect that two suicide bombers whose identity was unknown had left Nablus on their way to Ramallah. In Ramallah, they were supposed to meet a guide who would brief them on how to infiltrate Jerusalem. Since their identities were not known, it was not possible to stop them on the way to Ramallah. Fortunately, the identity of the guide was known. Intelligence followed the guide, and it turned out that he had arranged the meeting with the terrorists in a bustling part of downtown Ramallah. This information, which was received less than an hour before the meeting, was enough, since it allowed an operational force to reach

the spot, arrest all three of them, and thereby prevent a serious terrorist attack.

The third reason is the cooperation with the Palestinian Authority security forces, which was at a low point immediately after Defensive Shield but has since continued to improve. Two factors accelerated the cooperation: intensive American activity by General Keith Dayton starting in 2006, and the decision by Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad to achieve security stability as a necessary condition for establishing a Palestinian state. Israel's suspicions during the Sharon–Mofaz era gave way to granting an opportunity for this cooperation, and indeed, the results have been impressive.

Political-Military Relations

Relations between the political and military echelons are complex, and do not involve only a hierarchical relationship in which one actor commands his subordinates. They also do not involve a simplistic relationship in which the political echelon determines the “what” and the military echelon determines the “how.”

Four examples are a good reflection of the complexity and the sensitivity of the relationship between the political echelon and the military echelon in Israel during the second uprising.

- a. *“Reprisals” at the beginning of the period.* In their brazenness or in their results, the terrorist attacks periodically led to an escalation. Every time an exceptional event occurred, the chief of staff and several generals were called in to see Prime Minister (and also Defense Minister) Barak. The prime minister would be in a somber mood, and generally wanted concrete proposals. He asked to see the aerial photos of the targets that the IDF recommended hitting in response. After several such frustrating meetings, the head of Military Intelligence, Amos Malka, dared to say: “Mr. Prime Minister, perhaps the main question is not which targets should be attacked, but whether to attack at all. Perhaps we should be taking other steps.” When Sharon replaced Barak as prime minister in March 2001, it took several such meetings until he agreed to hold a wider ranging discussion than an approval of targets for attack. Yet the decision, for example, to close the Orient House in the wake of an attack was more painful to the other side and caused less criticism of Israel.

- b. *The relationship with the American envoys.* Four American envoys came to the region in order to help stop the violence. The first envoy, George Mitchell, headed an international commission, and the others were the personal emissaries of the American president or secretary of state. Israel's political echelon feared that the envoys would interfere in political issues, and therefore they preferred that the IDF and the GSS represent the State of Israel. Since the envoys (rightly) also dealt with "quasi-political" aspects like "safe passage" or the rights of those holding VIP passes, nearly daily coordination was required between the prime minister and the professional echelon in the army. The high point was just before Passover in 2002. Zinni exerted pressure, and the army agreed to accept his plan for making security arrangements between the sides, at which point the prime minister's approval was required. At the end of a stormy discussion held in Sharon's office, the prime minister approved the plan. The Passover terrorist attack that followed naturally upset the agenda, but the acceptance of the Zinni plan greatly helped Israel in its dialogue with the Americans during Operation Defensive Shield, which began immediately after this serious event.
- c. *Approval of Operation Defensive Shield.* Operation Defensive Shield created the potential to cause the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, or at least the collapse of agreements resulting from the Oslo process. Sharon had no problem with this possibility, but Labor Party ministers were highly disturbed by this scenario. During the discussion, the army was required to explain repeatedly how it is (im)possible to have your cake and eat it too. Chief of Staff Mofaz insisted that it was impossible to avoid significant harm to Palestinian security officials as well. At the end of a difficult military-political discussion, the army's plan was approved as presented.
- d. *An international commission in the wake of the Jenin events.* Official Palestinian statements and declarations by UN officials about the "massacre" in the Jenin refugee camp led the UN secretary general to initiate establishment of an international commission on this issue. The Americans also supported it. Sharon attempted to prevent such a commission from coming to Israel, but was hard pressed to do so. In the discussion that took place in his office, the army suggested the following (political) condition: "We will propose a package deal

to the Americans. We will agree to lift the siege around the muqata' [Arafat's headquarters], and in exchange, the United States will oppose the establishment of the commission." And in fact, this is what happened.

These four examples and dozens of additional meetings between the army and the political echelon illustrate how impossible it was to dissociate the military from the political aspect. Even when early in the term of a new government the political echelon tends to declare that the army "will handle only its own affairs," the result over time proves that the political echelon, more than the army, also seeks the army's involvement on issues that are not purely military.

Conclusion

Four main lessons can be learned from the IDF's confrontation with the violence and its conduct during the second intifada. The first is the need for flexibility. The IDF planned well for the outbreak of the intifada in September 2000, but was not well enough prepared to confront its media and political aspects. In the realm of the purely military as well, it was required to make fast adjustments from a situation in which the main challenge was civil demonstrations, to a situation in which the chief threat was terrorism.

A no-less important point that required adjustments was the attitude to the Palestinian security forces. During part of the period they were Israel's allies; at other times they were "uninvolved actors"; and at yet other times they were the enemy. Adjusting activities on the ground, including open-fire orders, required the General Staff and the senior commanders in the Central Command and the Southern Command to constantly examine the (change in) the general picture, and not just to deal with ongoing activity. The chief of staff from 2002–2005, Moshe (Bogie) Ya'alon, was in the habit of holding a brainstorming session every two weeks. This meeting was sometimes criticized for being less formal than other military meetings, but in practice it greatly helped the chief of staff to identify changes in the state of affairs over the course of that period.

The second lesson underscores the importance of intelligence. From the moment that the threat of terrorism became the chief threat, it was understood that a necessary condition for confronting it effectively was

quality intelligence, and in fact, the intelligence was excellent (mainly, but not only, thanks to the GSS). It was based on an established infrastructure of human intelligence and on a real improvement in eavesdropping technologies (SIGINT) and visual intelligence (VISINT), especially from unmanned aerial vehicles. No less important was the recognition that low level cooperation was needed between all intelligence authorities. Very quickly, traditional barriers came down. Brigade commanders on the ground were exposed to sensitive GSS intelligence material, and the results were not long in coming.

Third is control of the territory. When weighing how to act against terrorism that is well entrenched in a built-up area, it must be decided if it is better to remain within the built-up area or to position oneself outside the area. The main factor that must be considered is the quality of the intelligence. If there is good intelligence, then there are many operational advantages to operating in the area. If the intelligence is not good, then the presence of forces in the built-up area only makes easy targets for the terrorist elements. It appears that in most cases, the IDF knew how to give the correct response to this issue (including a different method of operation in the Judea and Samaria region and in Gaza).

The fourth lesson concerns the relationship with the political echelon. In this type of fighting, every large military action has diplomatic significance, and every diplomatic action has a direct influence on the military's room to maneuver and its freedom of action. In this state of affairs, the political echelon and the high military echelon must conduct an open, ongoing dialogue. The dichotomous division whereby the political echelon determines the "what" and the military echelon determines the "how" is not correct. Furthermore, the chief of staff must understand politics (even if he should not engage in politics). When the chief of staff and the generals of the General Staff order an action, they must pay attention to the diplomatic significance as well. The assumption that the civilian system knows how to adjust the army's activity in real time is not correct.

Notes

- 1 This article includes "inside information" in my possession from the period when I served as head of the Operations Branch, head of the Planning Branch, and head of the National Security Council, which was a significant part of the period under discussion.