

# Is the IDF Prepared to Face a Regular War against the Arab States?

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Since its establishment, Israel's security policymakers believed the IDF must be prepared to face every possible threat scenario presented by the Arab states, including a war involving all Arab countries.<sup>1</sup>

This principle guided Israel's position on various security issues. The IDF's performance in the Sinai Campaign, the Six Day War, and to a large extent the Yom Kippur War seems to have proved the validity of the principle. In each of these cases, the Israeli army emerged with the upper hand, and there was little doubt that Israel was the victor. However, this was not the case in recent military confrontations: in Lebanon (July-August 2006), and in the Gaza Strip (December 2008-January 2009). Following those conflicts, Israel's ability to meet all threat scenarios successfully has been questioned. This paper will examine the reasons for this shift in perception, with the war in the Gaza Strip as the test case. It will also present lessons learned from the events of the Second Lebanon War.

Both the war in the Gaza Strip (Operation Cast Lead) and to a large extent the war in Lebanon started with optimal conditions from Israel's perspective. The Gaza operation began after years of Israeli restraint towards ongoing barrages of missiles, rockets, and mortar bombs aimed at Israel's southern towns. This restraint, whatever its reasons, was harshly criticized by many Israelis, especially southerners whose towns were targeted and those on the right of the political spectrum.

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Once Operation Cast Lead began, however, it became clear that this policy of restraint greatly contributed to creating a broad consensus of support among Israeli society for the war. Wide segments of the Israeli public, including those who consistently expressed reservations against “militant” Israeli policies, were aware that as far as Gaza was concerned, Israeli governments were not eager for battle and had done everything in their power to avoid the confrontation. Consequently, internal criticism of Israel’s military moves in Gaza was muted. Those who did criticize Israel for its escalation did so in a fairly low key and conciliatory way.<sup>2</sup>

The restraint shown by Israel (akin to “the waiting period” that preceded the Six Day War) created a supportive atmosphere for Israel’s military moves in the international arena as well. This basic support would probably have existed without regard for the policy of restraint because many countries viewed radical Islam, as represented by Hamas, as a threat not only for Israel but also for themselves. Nonetheless, one may assume that the policy of restraint greatly intensified the fairly forgiving and supportive attitude shown by many countries towards Israel’s massive military undertaking in the Gaza Strip. The international community’s support in essence reflected its willingness to give Israel a period of free rein of attack in order to achieve a clear decision over Hamas.

Most European countries were clear about placing the responsibility for the situation on Hamas...Many countries such as Italy, Germany, and the Czech Republic showed understanding for Israel and described Israel’s actions as self-defense. These countries generally used strong language against Hamas and demanded that it stop the rocket attacks unconditionally... After the ground operation took place, countries of this group remained supportive of Israel and focused on the need to work for a durable ceasefire that would reflect Israeli concerns.<sup>3</sup>

The timing of the operation was also convenient for Israel, in at least two respects. First, the end of the calendar year marks a near-freeze of activity in international diplomacy, making it difficult to formulate a political end to the hostilities, i.e., Israel enjoyed freedom of military action, and there was no significant diplomatic effort to bring it to an end. Second, the interim period between the end of the Bush administration and the incoming Obama administration lent Israel a great deal of

freedom, regardless of the fact that the Bush administration supported Israel from the beginning of the operation.<sup>4</sup>

The operation started with a tactical surprise for Hamas. Hamas assessed that Israel would avoid a comprehensive confrontation just before the Israeli elections, and thus the decision to embark on an extensive operation took Hamas by complete surprise. The campaign began with a massive aerial assault that severely injured dozens of Hamas police personnel and damaged its infrastructure. The first stage of the confrontation displayed Hamas' state of shock to Israel's offense. Hamas was also taken by surprise by the ground campaign and eventually by the ceasefire.<sup>5</sup>

In the course of the war, Israel enjoyed total superiority in terms of forces at its disposal, available firepower, and technology. Above all, Israel had and still has unquestioned and unthreatened aerial superiority. The air force succeeded in causing severe blows to Hamas, while Hamas was incapable of neutralizing that activity. Yet notwithstanding these favorable conditions, today it is clear that Israel did not succeed in winning a clear decision on the ground, such that would, in Chief of Staff Ashkenazi's terms, preclude any question of who won the war.<sup>6</sup> The question is indeed being asked, though with much less hesitation than after the Second Lebanon War.

To be sure, Israel scored many great achievements in the war, including:

- a. Severe damage to Hamas' infrastructure and personnel: Israel's disproportionate response brought about extensive destruction in the Gaza Strip. According to a report made by the Minister of Internal Security Avi Dichter, the campaign caused 2,000 Hamas casualties, including dead and injured.
- b. Israel strengthened its deterrence with regard to Hamas. Israel managed to create a credible threat that it was prepared to use tremendous firepower even against populated areas, mosques, schools, universities, UN institutions, and other locations where Hamas fighters were hiding. All of these had previously been considered off limits to Israel's response. These results will presumably deter Hamas from continuing to fire missiles at southern settlements in such scope and intensity that would in their estimation force Israel to take action in Gaza as it did in Operation Cast Lead.<sup>7</sup>

- c. Israel seems to have partially succeeded (at least according to Prime Minister Ehud Olmert) in ensuring a more effective mechanism to control arms smuggling into the Gaza Strip, a mechanism in which Egypt, the United States, and the European Union all play a part.<sup>8</sup>

At the same time, one cannot minimize Hamas' achievements. At the end of a three week confrontation with a state (Israel) defined as "a regional military superpower," with opening conditions optimal from the Israeli point of view, Hamas remained on its feet. It does not hesitate to send an almost daily drizzle of rockets, mortars, and so on aimed at Israel's southern settlements. To date, almost a year after the war, most have fallen in open spaces and caused no significant damage. On the political level, Hamas draws encouragement from the statements of officials and leaders, mainly in Europe, calling on the international community to demonstrate more flexibility in all that regards recognition of, and negotiations with, the organization. Such calls empower Hamas' legitimacy in the international arena and are another component of Hamas' achievements after the campaign.<sup>9</sup>

This overall balance of the battle in the Gaza Strip, coming after the Second Lebanon War, should lead Israel's leaders to undertake a thorough examination of the validity of its longstanding security doctrine. In particular it should examine its ability to withstand threats far worse than the ones it has faced recently. While carrying out such an examination, several background points should be kept in mind:

- a. The battles in Lebanon and Gaza clearly indicate that the threats terrorist organizations pose towards Israel are not just part of Israel's ongoing, daily security concerns; they are true strategic threats. It is impractical to classify these as low profile threats, because they often develop into all-out wars.
- b. The battles in Lebanon and Gaza exposed the vulnerability of the Israeli home front. During the war in the north, hundreds of thousands of citizens temporarily abandoned the region. Similar phenomena, though to a much lesser extent, occurred in the south during Operation Cast Lead. The economies and social systems of both sectors were badly hit and have yet to be fully rebuilt.
- c. Both battles required the IDF to use massive force from the air, the armored corps, and the infantry. There were significant mobilizations of the reserves, although the IDF did not employ all

its capabilities. In many ways the two battles were conducted as full-scale wars rather than as low intensity conflicts, as it is customary to call confrontations between states and terrorist organizations.

- d. In neither battle did the IDF manage to reach a real decision against a militarily inferior enemy. It may be assumed that in the next confrontation residents of the center of the country will also suffer casualties and the IDF will again find it difficult to ensure victory, even in limited terms.

This is a fairly worrisome picture from the Israeli perspective. In addition to the dangers posed by terrorist organizations, Israel has to prepare for far worse future threats, such as a confrontation with Arab nations similar to the nature of the Six Day War and the Yom Kippur War. In both cases, Israel simultaneously faced two to three Arab states. Currently, the odds of such a scenario are low, given that Israel has fairly stable peace agreements with both Egypt and Jordan. The only apparent threat is Syria, who would almost certainly avoid solely facing Israel in a confrontation. Nonetheless, history demonstrates that the Middle East is filled with surprises and unexpected scenarios. Therefore, the State of Israel must consider the risk of a multi-Arab military confrontation, while simultaneously fighting the terrorist organizations that help them. In such an event, the Israeli army would face regular armies of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, aided by armored troops, infantry, and air forces of huge dimensions. Above all, these states would have a significant capability of neutralizing Israel's air superiority by two basic means: a) creating a balance of terror, i.e., launching long range missiles at Israeli cities in the center of the country as retaliation for air force activity; and b) operating advanced systems of aerial defense to damage the air force's aircraft. In other words, Israel's primary strategic arm will not be able to operate as freely as in past confrontations.

An even worse possibility is a preemptive war against Israel launched by Arab states and terrorist organizations, beginning with massive missile fire and artillery barrages aimed at Israeli cities, population centers, military bases, industrial complexes, and so on. Reports indicate that Hizbollah already has tens of thousands of such missiles that threaten large areas of Israel. Syria has an even larger stockpile. Israel must consider the possibility that such fire would take the country by complete surprise. Until now, it has been customary in Israel to assume

that the intelligence services would provide adequate warning of such a preemptive strike. There is no longer certainty that this is the case. Such a massive attack is liable to cause paralysis, if only partial, of the preparations for a counterstrike.

In conclusion, Israel may face an extremely dangerous security situation in the future. On the basis of its current security preparedness, it is doubtful if Israel has an appropriate response to those future threats. A more significant question mark hovers over whether Israel would emerge from such a confrontation with the upper hand. All these possible future threats should lead Israeli leaders to seriously reexamine its security doctrine.

### Notes

- 1 In an interview with the press, Yitzhak Navon, Ben-Gurion's personal secretary, said the following: "Ben-Gurion always told the senior command echelon that two major principles must guide the IDF: the ability to be victorious against all the Arab armies should they attack Israel all at once, and second, never to let the IDF fight against any European army." Interview with Yitzhak Navon, *Maariv*, December 7, 1973.
- 2 The policy of restraint and forbearance was expressed in declarations made by national leaders during the war. See "Olmert: It is Liable to Take Time; Patience is Needed," *Ynet*, December 27, 2008.
- 3 Tamas Berzi, "European Reactions to Israel's Gaza Operation," Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, Articles on Europe & Israel, Volume 8, no. 20, January 29, 2009.
- 4 For the "convenient" timing of the operation, see Rowan Scarborough: "Timing of Israeli Invasion Limited Obama's Options," *Washington Times*, January 19, 2009.
- 5 For Hamas' surprises in the battle, see statements by Head of Intelligence Amos Yadlin, Chief of Staff Gabi Ashkenazi, and the Head of the General Security Services, in Roni Sofer, "Intelligence: Hamas to Try to Balance the Picture Using Attacks," *Ynet*, January 18, 2009. "As early as the cabinet meeting on January 11, the Head of Intelligence made it clear that Hamas leaders had not anticipated an aerial strike, did not anticipate a ground maneuver, and did not anticipate the cold shoulder from the Arab world." Channel 2 News, January 11, 2009, <http://news.reshet.tv/News/Politics/StatePolicy/Article,11392.aspx>.
- 6 Yuval Azoulay, "Ashkenazi: In Every Future Confrontation It Should Be Clear Who Won," *Walla News*, September 27, 2007.
- 7 "Avi Dichter: Some 2,000 Hamas personnel were killed or injured in Operation Cast Lead," as cited by *Reuter.net*, January 22, 2009. In this context, Prime Minister Olmert said explicitly: "Today, Israel's deterrence

is higher than ever, not just in the last decade but well beyond...This is deterrence against all the components of the axis of evil, and whoever needs to know knows...The war in Lebanon created deterrence not just with regard to Hizbollah but also with regard to Syria." Ben Caspit, "Now Go Cope," *Maariv*, January 23, 2009. For the new rules of the game against Hamas, also see Ron Ben Yishai, "Shock Treatment," *Maariv*, January 23, 2009.

8 Caspit, "Now Go Cope."

9 For the achievements of Hamas, see Yoni Ben Menahem, "Israel attained only partial achievements in the course of Operation Cast Lead. Accepting the Egyptian ceasefire initiative is liable to erode Israel's achievements and Hamas will again grow strong within a matter of months," [http://www.arabexpert.co.il/2009/01/blog-post\\_08.html](http://www.arabexpert.co.il/2009/01/blog-post_08.html).