

The IDF: Implementing Lessons Learned from the Second Lebanon War

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The nature of IDF combat in the security zone in southern Lebanon imposed many restraints on the regular army's ground forces and their ability to operate in a way reflecting the IDF's traditional doctrine of combined ground warfare. The reasons for these limitations are beyond the scope of this article; suffice it to mention the anachronistic activity in the security zone and the trouble the IDF encountered in executing attacks on short notice and with rushed battle procedures.

The retreat from southern Lebanon and the war on Palestinian terrorism in 2000-2005 forced the IDF to make far reaching changes in its operational concept and in the forces' operational freedom on the ground. The IDF and the other security forces succeeded in defeating suicide terrorism through a process of learning and change fraught with operational failures and tenacious fighting.¹ The focus on fighting terrorism and the consequent changes in the army took a steep toll, manifested in a sharp decline of IDF preparedness to operate in a widespread confrontation that would involve the use of large formations and many corps, as required in combined arms warfare. The scope of resources allocated to maintain combined combat fitness dropped precipitously.² Commander training and unit exercises were all but suspended. Concomitantly, a fundamental conceptual gap developed: the model for fighting domestic terrorism was based mainly on policing geared at foiling attacks with help from the other security agencies. This approach did not

provide a sufficient knowledge base for widespread, combined fighting, for example, in Lebanon.

It therefore comes as no surprise that the 2006 campaign in Lebanon caught the IDF with a compromised ability to fight Hezbollah. Subsequent debriefings and investigations found more than a few flaws both in the IDF's force buildup and in its operation, requiring a profound process of reconstruction. In tandem, the IDF improved its understanding of the hallmarks of the threat posed by both Hezbollah to the country's north and Hamas and other organizations to the south.

The process of learning lessons from the Second Lebanon War continues. This essay deals with the central components of this process, including the IDF's model of command and control, maneuver and firepower, operations far behind enemy lines, and special operations.

Command and Control

In April 2006, then-Chief of Staff Dan Haloutz issued a binding document on the IDF's operations concept: this followed years in which IDF officers debated the optimal ways of confronting the nation's changing threats.³ In and of themselves these thought processes were a welcome development, but their contents and the confused way they were absorbed by the army had far reaching consequences, manifested in part by the lack of a common language in the Second Lebanon War. The report of the Winograd Commission, charged with investigating the war, stated that, "[The concept of operations] was insufficiently clear. There were fundamental gaps in the basic infrastructure and flaws in the IDF document's contents, language, and the extent of its assimilation in the IDF...Furthermore, the document did not include a translation or lexicon that would have rendered its instructions in more common language, and some of its principles were very general. At the same time, there were also [other] concepts and understandings... There was no real connection – at least with regard to the Lebanon sector – between the new doctrine of operations and its translation into binding operative terms in operational commands."⁴

Since the Second Lebanon War, several attempts were made to formulate a current operational concept for the IDF, but these did not evolve into a working document. Only in August 2015, a little over nine years after the war, was a new conceptual document issued – *The IDF Strategy*. The new paper defines several principles: the IDF's concept of force deployment, its

command and control model, and principles of force buildup. The principles described effectively regulate the IDF concept of operations and, as the document says, “serve as a guiding compass” for the use and buildup of force.⁵ The document’s simplicity and clarity, its assimilation in the army, and the fact that it was issued to the public reflect a desire to learn from past mistakes and confront the internal and external criticism of the 2006 document.

Before the Second Lebanon War, the IDF’s operations approach dealt with the division of authority within the general command, and the Chief of Staff’s approach to command and control on the use of force vis-à-vis the principal commands.⁶ It also defined the concept of “campaign” as what went beyond tactical fighting, based on the idea that the Operational Theory Research Institute (currently the Dado Center for Interdisciplinary Military Studies) introduced to the IDF.⁷ At the core of the concept was the “campaign arena” (the geographical commands) integrating all of the IDF’s fighting efforts against all the enemy’s efforts in the same arena. As a result, during the Second Lebanon War, tensions emerged between the commanders of the arenas of the “campaign,” on the one hand, and the command of the war arena (the General Command), on the other, as to who was the commander of the “campaign” in the northern arena. This tension remained in place for several years thereafter.⁸

As a lesson from this state of affairs, the chapter about command and control in *The IDF Strategy* states that “The Chief of the General Staff commands all the IDF’s campaigns and determines all efforts and missions assigned to the Principal Commands. He sets up the strategic and operational concepts to attain the missions of the Principal Commands and their interactions.”⁹ In fact, the document determines that there are no longer any IDF campaign commanders except the Chief of the General Staff, and the permanent command and control structure is retained at the general command. The importance of this statement should not be underestimated, as this aims at arresting a long period of confusion on the subject among the senior officers of the IDF.

Defining the military base state is a very important issue when it comes to command and control. One of the main problems in the Second Lebanon War was that there was no definition of war as a base state and there was continued reliance on processes associated with routine security conduct. A glaring example was the continued ritual of operations and sorties that

was (and remains) a hallmark of routine. The lesson of this failure has since been learned, and the IDF has defined three base states: routine, emergency, and war. It is the Chief of Staff's duty to declare at every given point in time the base state from which a series of concrete actions must be derived, such as the high command HQ shifting to "war time," and so on.

Maneuver and Firepower

One of the most important lessons to emerge from the debriefings after the Second Lebanon War relates to the IDF's preparedness and fitness to launch a combined arms battle of large scope. The 2006 war revealed difficulties, lack of professionalism, and a low level of effectiveness of unprecedented scope in armored forces and infantry multi-corps combinations and in the use of artillery fire. Furthermore, the combination between air and ground forces was flawed and marked by an inability to provide air cover close to the ground forces within relevant timeframes.

An example of the ineffectiveness of the use of the ground forces in the Second Lebanon War was the action by the Pillar of Fire division.¹⁰ The Winograd Commission devoted a short chapter to this division in its report: "The division was called up on August 4 and on the same day received an order from the command to seize control of the al-Hiyam area... Even after the plans had been approved... the division commander decided to postpone the execution of the order by 24 hours... because of the forces' unpreparedness... On Friday, August 11, the division prepared for a second attack... The forces were not ready for the fighting, the attack was postponed, and in the end was not carried out. This was the end of the fighting for the formation. Its missions were not fulfilled."¹¹ The last comment was particularly scathing given the fact that the ground forces had been on hold for an extended period before the decision was made to insert ground forces into Lebanon and because the model of preparing to enter the fighting and learning the lessons of other units failed to achieve its purpose.

The lessons of the Second Lebanon War thus compelled the IDF to repair the state of fitness of its ground forces and commanders. It did this by organizing ORBAT for combat, reestablishing two corps in the north, and investing in advanced weapon systems (including the Mark 4 Merkava tank, the Namer – an armored personnel carrier based on the Merkava tank chassis, fortification systems, and fire control). In the years after the war, the IDF paid particular attention to training and improving the fitness of ground forces,

including the reserve units. The conceptual “compass” focused on improving basic capabilities, representing the core of the IDF strength. Concurrently, the IDF stressed the building of ground forces’ accurate and independent fire capabilities and made particular efforts to improve coordination between aerial firepower and ground forces to provide close assistance. After years in which effort was diverted from building strength on the ground in favor of aerial firepower and intelligence capabilities (to generate targets), it seems that the IDF began to reverse the trend. The publication of *The IDF Strategy* is further evidence: the document attributes great importance to ground maneuvers as part of any comprehensive response. This is supposed to be based on “attack capabilities on several concurrent fronts by means of immediate ground maneuvers that must be rapid, deadly, durable and flexible, i.e., moveable between arenas and fronts.” Such capability should appear in tandem with “effective use of fire, powerful and high-quality, precise, multi-dimensional, in all arenas of war.”¹²

For most of the fighting in the Second Lebanon War, emphasis was placed on operational-level fire, based on the assumption that this alone could generate the desired effect.¹³ This approach, which went hand in hand with the conceptual developments in the IDF at the time, was manifested in the operational concept of 2006, which stated: “The change in the function of fire from an auxiliary component to the main component in attaining a decision...reduces the need...[for] extensive ground maneuvers far behind enemy lines...mass seizure of enemy territory...[and] the need to conquer large tracts of land. Identifying the aerial space (on the ground and from a standoff position)...while reducing the friction vis-à-vis the asymmetry of components developed by the enemy.”¹⁴

This aspect of operational-level fire was analyzed by the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee report on the lessons of the Second Lebanon War. The committee’s analysis explained the phenomenon whereby concepts such as the fire campaign and the “effects” approach gained currency as a byproduct of technological advances. The committee noted that the core of the approach developed by the IDF in those years was based on the conclusion that it was possible to achieve strategic aims using volleys of precision fire, making the need for multi-friction maneuvering into enemy territory redundant. According to the committee report, the Second Lebanon War proved that the approach was only theoretical and could not provide the desired outcome for the State of Israel in its conflict with Hezbollah.¹⁵ Yet

despite the committee's assertion, systemic power was effective in destroying Hezbollah's strategic ground-to-ground missile and rocket systems and its main stronghold in the Dahiya neighborhood of Beirut in the Second Lebanon War.

To a large extent, the IDF continued to rely on operational-level firepower as a dominant factor even after that war, including the three rounds of fighting in the Gaza Strip that have occurred since then, leaving the balance between operational-level fire and ground maneuvers as one of the army's most significant challenges. Moreover, the process of assimilating maneuvers is presumably only in its early stages, and much more effort will have to be made to bring it back to its vital place in the IDF toolbox. The lack of significant maneuvering in the last several campaigns stemmed from several other reasons, including: concern about having to control territories of adjacent states or entities far into the future; concern about a subsequent campaign to retain densely populated areas and the costs of having to deal with civilian resistance and terrorism; and a political echelon worried about an image of failure and another "flight" after the unilateral withdrawals from southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip. These reasons are of marginal importance in face of the assertion in *The IDF Strategy* that maneuvering is the core competency of the army and that it is necessary to place particular emphasis on the ability to put it into practice as soon as a war erupts, while continuing varied force buildup and prioritizing the IDF's strike divisions among all the army's components.¹⁶

Operations Deep behind Enemy Lines and Special Operations

Operating deep behind enemy lines and using special operations are also critical components in the toolbox of an operational commander.¹⁷ In the Second Lebanon War, the special ops took place primarily in the war arena and were local initiatives that developed into operations rather than the result of orderly planning ahead of time. Special operations in the Northern Command arena was of very low scope due to the lack of prior planning. Such preparation requires preparing units, drafting an existing bank of possible operations, training, creating operational models, and training commanders on the units' capabilities to carry out such operations that are high risk activities.

In this context, two major lessons were assimilated by the IDF: the establishment of a command center for operations deep behind enemy

lines, and the establishment of a commando brigade. As early as 2007, the Northern Command organized a command center for special ops and operations behind enemy lines. The command center has participated in all Northern Command and General Staff exercises held since then, and has been integrated into command-wide operational planning. The process of assimilating this lesson in the General Command took longer. Only four years later, in 2011, did then-Chief of the General Staff Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz decide to set up a Depth Command subordinate to the Chief of General Staff and operated by the General Command. The Depth Command was charged with developing the knowledge to carry out special ops and to develop significant maneuvering capabilities deep behind enemy lines. Since then, the Command has worked to develop operational capabilities for special ops, including operational plans, training and exercises, and the construction of a system of command and control and combat assistance for such operations. At the same time, the Depth Command is working to develop maneuver capabilities deep behind enemy lines (by ground incursion, aerial flanking, or naval flanking). The Command holds various exercises to develop command and control fitness for operations deep in enemy territory and the fitness of the different units allocated to it to carry out the mission.

The IDF Strategy provides further expression to the force buildup required for better assimilation of these lessons: “Build up the capability to parachute or fly infantry forces to raid enemy centers of gravity...the ability to conduct deep, extensive special operations shall be built up, [with] planning and exercising special operations in the war and the operational arenas, executing ‘operations of opportunity,’ buildup of a pre-prepared special operations ‘bank,’ [and] standardization of special measures means of warfare and doctrine (common language) among all Special Forces, to conduct special operations with large Orders of Battle.”¹⁸ The establishment of the Commando Brigade in 2015 was another component in the assimilation of the lessons of the Second Lebanon War.

Conclusion

The series of in-depth debriefings and investigations in the IDF after the Second Lebanon War, the Winograd Commission report on the war, and the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee report on the lessons of the war revealed many failures in the IDF’s performance in the 2006 war. Despite these failures, the IDF managed to inflict a heavy blow on

Hezbollah, which is perhaps the reason for the long period of calm on the Lebanese front since then.

Learning and assimilating the lessons of the war is a multi-year process, especially for an organization as large and bureaucratic as the IDF. Since the war, the IDF has undergone – and continues to undergo – a gradual process involving far reaching changes: a simplification of its command and control concept; a decision that command and control processes be unified in all IDF Command HQ;¹⁹ and the understanding that the Chief of General Staff is the only campaign commander in the army. The most important test will be the realization of these changes in practice.

Fighting in Judea and Samaria in 2000-2005 caused a slowdown in IDF ground forces buildup – forces meant to be deployed in a combined arms battle of scenarios involving widespread confrontations. The functioning of the ground forces in the Second Lebanon War was a direct result of their performance during the years of the second intifada. Today, the traditional maneuver is returning to its rightful place in a slow process and is again viewed as a central IDF tool alongside operational-level fire. The IDF has established command centers to deploy special ops and carry out missions deep in enemy territory, and has even founded a commando brigade. All of these can improve maneuvering action and the deployment of special ops in a war.

The debate about the necessity of the maneuver likewise touches on conceptual aspects linked to the growing difficulty to attain a decision in the classical sense of the word against non-state players. Current players are assimilated into their civilian surroundings and present a difficulty in identifying centers of gravity and weakness against which it is possible to act rapidly and effectively. Therefore, there is an urgent need to formulate an integrated response to attain a rapid decision against the enemy and eliminate its physical capabilities. It can be done by conquering land, destroying infrastructures and forces, and eliminating immediate threats, while shifting most of the fighting to enemy territory and using concurrent, multi-dimensional force that combines immediate, aggressive maneuvers with accurate systemic firepower.

The Second Lebanon War broke out despite the fact that neither side wanted it. In recent years, the IDF has developed the understanding that postponing the next round of fighting is one of the IDF's major objectives. The means the IDF uses to attain that goal is "the campaign between wars,"

whose objectives are enhancing the gains of the previous campaign, preserving and increasing deterrence, weakening the enemy and reducing its force construction, creating better starting conditions for the next war, improving the legitimacy for Israeli action, and denying the legitimacy for the enemy's action.

There is one major area in which no significant change has been made: the addiction to technology. This process has continued in the army for many years, especially in the decade since the Second Lebanon War. Israel's military industry provides technologies of the very highest level, but these alone cannot generate sufficient operational results. The key problem of the IDF in this context is not the lack of means or the lack of development of new means, but asking and answering the question of how to use existing means. The dependence on technology resulted in superficial processes of thought, strategy, and operational planning, and in damage to development of operational models and a doctrine of warfare. Officer training at the hand of the very best IDF commanding officers and the appointment of promising commanders to staff positions in the suitable army branches can go a long way toward rectifying this situation.

The publication of *The IDF Strategy* is an important step in the right direction. The document attests to the fact that a key lesson has been learned by the army, namely: the need for clear, simple basic documents that help create a common language for the IDF and its commanders on the one hand, and the public at large on the other, in which to discuss the ways of confronting the threats facing the State of Israel.

Notes

- 1 Gabi Siboni, "Defeating Suicide Terrorism in Judea and Samaria, 2002-2005," *Military and Strategic Affairs* 2, no. 2 (2010): 113-24, [http://www.inss.org.il/uploadimages/Import/\(FILE\)1298360394.pdf](http://www.inss.org.il/uploadimages/Import/(FILE)1298360394.pdf).
- 2 Combined arms combat is the ability to utilize all ground capabilities effectively and optimally in any given mission. This includes armored, infantry, engineering, fire (aerial and ground), intelligence, and logistic capabilities, as well as operations behind enemy lines and special ops.
- 3 Dov Tamari and Meir Khalifi, "The IDF's Model of Operations," *Maarachot* No. 423, February 2009.
- 4 *The Commission Investigating the Events of the 2006 Lebanon Campaign, the Winograd Commission, Final Report*, Vol. 1, p. 321.

- 5 *The IDF Strategy*, 2015. An English translation is available at <https://www.idfblog.com/2015/11/23/idf-strategy/>.
- 6 The main command centers for use of force in the IDF are all the command centers subordinate to the Chief of Staff. Today, the IDF has nine command centers: the command centers of the three geographical commands, and the home front, air force, navy, logistics, depth, and telecommunications command centers. Once the cyber corps is established, there will be a tenth command center.
- 7 Gabi Siboni, "The Military Campaign in Lebanon," in *The Second Lebanon War: Strategic Perspectives*, eds. Meir Elran and Shlomo Brom (Tel Aviv: Institute for National Security Studies, 2007), pp. 61-76.
- 8 This tension did not ease even after Operation Protective Edge and was, for example, manifested in the question of who was the commander in charge of Home Front Command activities in Beer Sheva during the operation.
- 9 *The IDF Strategy*.
- 10 Full disclosure: in the Second Lebanon War, the author of this essay served as the chief of staff of the Pillar of Fire division.
- 11 *The Commission Investigating the Events of the 2006 Lebanon Campaign, the Winograd Commission, Final Report*, Vol. 1, p. 320.
- 12 *The IDF Strategy*.
- 13 Especially stopping high trajectory fire on the country's civilian centers.
- 14 *The General Staff's Model for IDF Operations*, Eked, April 2006, first edition, p. 64 (the quotation is from *The Commission Investigating the Events of the 2006 Lebanon Campaign, the Winograd Commission, Final Report*, Vol. 1, pp. 272-73).
- 15 Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Report on Conclusions Drawn from the Second Lebanon War, December 2007.
- 16 *The IDF Strategy*.
- 17 Special ops are defined as missions carried out by a small force (compared to the other forces deployed in the campaign) designed to support the main action. By definition, a special operation is not designed to attain the main goal of the campaign in which it is used.
- 18 *The IDF Strategy*.
- 19 *The IDF Strategy*.