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Is the IDF Ready for War?

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Toward the end of his tenure as IDF ombudsman, Maj. Gen. (res.) Yitzhak Brick charged that the ground forces were not ready for war. Countering this claim, an IDF-appointed committee contended that the ground forces were ready and prepared for war, but highlighted a host of significant lapses that require correction, and recommended a sizeable budget increase to strengthen the ground forces. Apparently, therefore, Brick's criticism prompted a constructive review process that was in the public interest. Questions about military readiness touch not only on the technical capacities of various units, but also on different combat scenarios and the military capabilities that they require. One of these - cited also by Brick - is the ability to carry out ground maneuvers deep within enemy territory, which, according IDF strategy, is necessary to defeat the enemy. As such, ground maneuver capabilities deserve a high prioritization, including in the next multi-year plan that the defense establishment is preparing.

The public debate about the readiness of the ground forces for war intensified following the report issued in September 2018 by Maj. Gen. (res.) Yitzhak Brick before concluding his term as IDF ombudsman in January 2019. This classified report followed the ombudsman's report issued in mid-2018. Brick argued that the ground forces were not ready for war, and in a radio interview on January 11, 2019, strongly criticized the IDF organizational culture. He warned that airpower, intelligence, and cyber capabilities would not suffice to stop missile fire against the home front in the next war, and that ground maneuver deep within enemy territory, perhaps on several fronts simultaneously, would be necessary. Brick made clear that within the framework of his job, rather than only looking into soldiers' complaints, he had personally investigated the root causes, drawing on his rich combat experience in the ground forces.

In the wake of this criticism, then-Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Gadi Eisenkot appointed a committee to investigate the readiness of the ground forces for war (henceforth "the committee"), headed by IDF Comptroller Brig. Gen. Ilan Harari. In summarizing the committee's findings, Harari said that the ground forces had been significantly improved in recent years, and stated: "We declare the ground forces ready and prepared for war." However, the committee also pointed out significant lapses in certain aspects of the readiness of these forces. Findings included: lags in integrating the Command and

Control System in reservist regiments; shortfalls in logistical transport, namely a major shortage of trucks for conveying ordnance and other supplies and the transportation of armored fighting vehicles; slow procurement of advanced tanks and APCs; a need to increase weapons stockpiles in certain areas; shortfalls in appointing personnel to available posts in combat support roles, both in the regular military and the reserves; lags in reserves mobilization; training environments that in some cases do not simulate combat scenarios; and insufficient dialogue between commanders and the junior officer corps. Maj. Gen. (res.) Avi Mizrahi, who headed the steering committee of Harari's committee, argued that the successes of Iron Dome had given rise to a mistaken perception among decision makers that wars could be won without ground maneuvers; Mizrahi contended that no war in Lebanon could be won without ground maneuver. Given the shortfalls uncovered by the review, and the need for further buildup, the committee recommended a large budgetary supplement for bolstering the ground forces (some \$2 billion annually over five years), in addition to the budget in the Gideon Plan.

Brick's criticism was also discussed in the Knesset Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee's Sub-Committee for Readiness and Maintaining National Security, headed by MK Omer Bar-Lev. In December 2018, the Bar-Lev committee rejected Brick's argument that the IDF was not ready for war, with the counter-argument that the problems cited were familiar and were appropriately addressed by the Chief of Staff, guided by a reasonable order of priorities. It issued its own report on IDF readiness, drawing on its reviews over recent years. Among its findings were that six division commanders who were interviewed gave their units a score of 8 out of maximum of 10 points for readiness, while eight reserve regiment commanders gave a score of 9. As part of its recommendations, the Bar-Lev committee placed a top priority on raising salaries of senior non-commissioned officers, and suggested that the deputy Chief of Staff be made responsible for ensuring that the shortfalls found by the various committees be followed up and rectified. The panel further demanded that operational plans - specifically, the timetables for combat mobilization - are coordinated with estimates that implementation could well occur while under massive fire targeting traffic routes, induction centers, and emergency supply depots.

The Differences between the Various Reports

It appears that the primary dispute between Maj. Gen. (res.) Brick, the Harari committee, and the defense establishment is not over Brick's findings per se, but rather, over their interpretations and emphases. Specifically:

- a. Interpretation of criteria for ground force readiness varies. Brick focused on what in his professional assessment was a gap between the real and the ideal, while the committee found that the military was ready for war in accordance with the graduated professional criteria defined by the Chief of Staff under the multi-year

- Gideon Plan. In other words, some of the shortfalls, which stemmed from a reasonable decision over priorities within the reality of the IDF's budgetary constraints, were viewed by Brick as grave flaws in the readiness of the ground forces.
- b. Contrary to Brick, the committee and the military highlighted the steady reduction in lapses under the multi-year Gideon Plan, including, subject to budgetary constraints, more extensive force training and equipment with additional advanced main battle tanks, heavy APCs, and the Trophy active defense system for armored vehicles. Similarly, major changes were made to the organizational structure of the ground forces – led by the unification of the Ground Forces Branch, which is responsible for the buildup and training of ground forces, and the Technology and Logistics Division, which is responsible for the arming and logistics of the ground forces. This unification promises to increase the integration and streamlining of the ground forces.
 - c. Varying assessments regarding the scale of the problematic phenomena and their effect on the IDF's overall readiness for war, stemming in part from differing methods of information-gathering.

Although the bottom line of the Harari committee was entirely different from Brick's regarding the readiness of the ground forces for war, the committee also found significant flaws, some of which were cited by Brick. These include shortfalls in the integration of Command and Control System, shortfalls in the filling of combat-support roles in the career military and reserves, and shortfalls in the logistical apparatus. Similarly, Brick's contention that the new career military model decreases motivation to serve in the career military also warrants long term monitoring (the model significantly increases the likelihood of officers having their commissions terminated before they are eligible for transition pensions). Some lapses do not require supplementary resources to be corrected, for example dialogue between commanders and junior officers, and some can be addressed using relatively limited resources, such as the allocation of additional training days for the reservist contingent in the Command and Control System apparatus. Such flaws are unrelated to the policy of graduated combat readiness.

Brick's contentions sparked a beneficial review process. And indeed, while the soldiers' complaint box was not intended as an index of military readiness, it can serve an important role as one of the information sources available to military commanders in their self-evaluations.

Ground Maneuver to Defeat the Enemy

At the heart of the discussion of ground force readiness is the issue of ground maneuver as a requirement for defeating the enemy, as pointed out by Brick, Mizrahi and other

senior officers. At issue is the ability to use high power ground maneuvers to break through or outflank enemy lines and remove threats such as missile launches from deep within enemy territory. In practice, it appears that Israel's operational method over the past two decades has been to avoid resorting to deep ground maneuvers as much as possible. Such maneuvers are liable to incur heavy casualties (both as a general rule, and especially if the maneuvering forces are not of a high operational readiness) and commit forces for a protracted period deep within enemy territory in order to consolidate war gains. By the same token, there is no guarantee that such maneuvers will deliver the expected achievements over an extended period. Years of such considerations and budgetary constraints, which affected on the combat-effectiveness of the reserve units, have marginalized the army's maneuvering capability and circumscribed the government's options for using it. A perceived deterioration in IDF maneuver capability is also liable to detract from its deterrence potency. For example, on February 16, 2019, Hezbollah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah that Israel's generals apparently "believe in our ability to penetrate the Galilee and not in the ability of their army to penetrate south Lebanon."

Maneuver is a required core capability for implementing IDF strategy (as laid out in the April 2018 "IDF Strategy" document) and appears to be a precondition for IDF readiness for a major war. That said, maneuver capability is not explicitly mentioned among the top priorities listed in the 2030 Defense Doctrine presented to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in August 2018, even though he has championed significantly increasing the defense budget. The IDF indeed retains a capacity for ground maneuver, but the question is whether there is sufficient power and readiness available to implement the IDF strategy and the objectives that might be defined by the government. This matter should be debated and decided in the government and military echelons. It also appears that in the future a ground maneuver would be best avoided where the objectives can be achieved through other means, but the preservation and cultivation of decisive maneuver capability ensure a strategic asset that might be required to stop missile fire or achieve Israel's terms for ending a war. It is thus advisable to place a high priority on strengthening the ground maneuvering capability in the next multi-year plan, which the defense establishment is currently preparing.

The next Israeli government will begin its term when decisions are required regarding the IDF's buildup vectors for the coming years. In this framework, a decision will be required on the resources to be dedicated to ground maneuver capability relative to other buildup priorities, for example, bolstering the multi-layer defense systems against missiles and rockets, preserving and developing a long range airpower branch, and retaining supremacy in intelligence, the cyber realm, and special operations.