

A Distorted Self-Image: On the IDF and its Responsibility for Civilians

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The official mission of the IDF is “to defend the existence, territorial integrity and sovereignty of the state of Israel. To protect the inhabitants of Israel and to combat all forms of terrorism which threaten the daily life.”¹ The essay below contends that the Second Lebanon War was another milestone in the deconstruction process of the IDF’s self-image. More precisely, the IDF has come to see itself as less and less obligated to fulfill its mission. The essay also argues that the IDF was hard-pressed to protect the state’s citizens during the summer of 2006, due to four primary causes: extensive IDF involvement in diplomatic negotiations; the infiltration of post-modern and post-heroic concepts into the IDF; casting the protection of soldiers as the highest value, in place of the value of mission fulfillment; and the neglect of ground maneuvers as a tool for military victory.

In the early 1990s, in part in response to the end of the Cold War, ideas arose in Europe about “the end of history”² and the “end of wars.” These ideas also influenced the thinking of leaders, senior academics, and military personnel in Israel. However, the gap between these concepts and the mid-1990s security reality of an Israel beset with terrorist attacks created the cognitive dissonance that is the product of tension between reality and desire. The response to that tension was to ignore it, as Yitzhak Rabin did, for instance, when he defined the impossible situation in which declarations of peace and a “new Middle East” were supposed to mesh with terrorist attacks in the “war for peace.”³

Though not always at their own initia-

tive, senior IDF officers embraced these ideological trends, as well as the ideas created in their wake. In his forthcoming book *Military Fights Peace – Military and Peacemaking*, Kobi Michael writes that in contrast to the norm, whereby diplomatic negotiations are headed by representatives of the diplomatic echelon who are assisted by professionals, including security and military experts, the negotiations process toward the first Oslo agreement was initially led by the military echelon, where then-Deputy Chief of General Staff, General Amnon Lipkin Shahak, was appointed by Prime Minister Rabin to head the Israeli delegation. The civilian diplomacy was conducted by an officer in uniform in active service, and was, to a certain extent, “di-

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plomacy in uniform.”⁴ Michael also quotes Carmi Gillon, at that time head of the General Security Services, who said: “With all due respect to the diplomatic work done by Uri Savir and Yoel Zinger from our side and Abu Ala on the Palestinian side, who together produced the framework for an agreement, the contents were supplied by members of the military and the GSS.”

When the deputy chief of staff heads a delegation to diplomatic negotiations, he will naturally use the General Staff for the staff work related to this task. Thus, senior General Staff personnel found themselves increasingly occupied by the processes and work of a diplomatic staff in place of their traditional jobs – preparing the force for combat. This was one of the central reasons that the IDF very quickly fell into line with the ideas prevalent among the political echelon. From here, the path was short to the publication by the General Staff’s training directorate of a booklet called “The Limited Confrontation,” which deals with combating terrorism. The booklet explains to the IDF that “the diplomatic consideration in a limited confrontation is the dominant consideration, while the military-operational consideration is secondary.”⁵ This was the first time that a professional IDF handbook instructed that the responsibility for combat and battle success is not the IDF’s exclusive interest.

“Looking Smart”

The Operational Theory Research Institute reinforced the lack of clarity created within the IDF in relation to its role. The aim of the Institute, which was founded in 1993 within the framework of the military colleges, was to serve as a research unit that would study and teach the principles of systemic thought to IDF officers.⁶ From the state comptroller’s

report for 2006, however, as well as from the way the forces were operated during Operation Defensive Shield and Operation Change of Direction (the Second Lebanon War), it became clear that little was learned in the Institute in relation to professional military systems that would allow commanders to plan and operate military systems that defeat the enemy quickly and decisively.⁷

However, though it failed to formulate any active combat doctrine, the Institute succeeded in imparting – all too well – that language in general, and accepted military language in particular, limits the creative thought of combat planners. With the blessing of the chiefs of staff,⁸ the commanders learned a new language that generated new processes in the IDF that were seemingly progressive but in reality created practical and intellectual anarchy. Such an orientation was well described by John Ellis in his book *Against Deconstruction*, which deals with the language of post-modern philosophers. Ellis argues that what was achieved was not a more intelligent logic, but the image of intelligence and complexity; any task undertaken made use of rhetorical means in order to create the illusion of intelligent analysis at a time when there was no such analysis.⁹

The first casualty of the new language was the main principle in war: adhering to the mission. As formulated, the mission became meaningless and devoid of actual operational content, which made it impossible to plan, undertake, and complete. The second and no less important casualty was the situation assessment process, which became impossible to carry out due to the commanders’ unfounded intellectual basis. These processes created a situation that caused confusion among the officers and left them without solutions to the problems that were created

from that confusion. For the troops in the field, the result was disastrous. Rather than trying to dispel as best as possible the vagueness inherent in the battlefield, the new military language compounded the obscurity.

Thus the IDF reached a situation whereby it was both heavily involved in diplomatic processes that diverted it from its fundamental task and was at an entire loss as to the terminology connected with military force operation – and the concepts behind them. An additional area in which the IDF lost its clarity of thought was the ranking of the military mission on its list of priorities.

From “Mission as Central” to “Soldier as Central”

In one of the discussions on the feasibility of ground maneuvers during the Second Lebanon War, Chief of Staff Dan Halutz said that a move of this sort could cause “fatalities among soldiers in Lebanon,” and that “the people in Israel do not want to go into Lebanon.”¹⁰ The Chief of Staff expressed a feeling reflective of the post-modern ideas that permeated the IDF and in any case also allowed the penetration of post-heroic ideas into its midst.¹¹ Consequently, the traditional and declared combat values of the IDF underwent a deep and uncontrolled transformation, primarily vis-à-vis the basic value of adhering to the mission. Yet without realizing this basic value in contact with the enemy, and without ignoring the price demanded for this purpose, no victories in any type of combat can be achieved.¹²

The primacy of adhering to the mission was overtaken by other values, led by the protection of the lives of the soldiers over all else. These attitudes complemented the enticing idea of decision by standoff fire as an alternative to maneuver. The result was

a complete neglect of the ground forces and its maneuvering units, which were deemed an item whose time was up. Thus, the four divisions that were mobilized in the summer of 2006 – and this only after heavy pressure on the chief of staff – were untrained for the combat that was demanded of them, joined the combat after a two week delay, and in the end barely saw any combat. Similarly, the phenomenon, unprecedented in the IDF, in which regular battalions went out for “refreshers” during the war and before the IDF had met its main task in its only theater of combat, was also the direct extension of the outlook that the life and comfort of the soldier are at the center of the military industry, rather than what is actually the main task – the protection of civilians.¹³ It would not be an exaggeration to conclude that this belief is what created the situation whereby during the Second Lebanon War it seemed that the soldier’s family became of secondary importance to the soldier who was meant to protect it.

Not surprisingly, the next conceptual link, the need for a rapid victory – long a cornerstone of Israel’s security concept – was likewise eroded by the innovative ideas that had infiltrated the IDF.

From the “Image of Victory” to the “Staging of Victory”

A decisive victory is a situation in which the defeated side loses its will to fight or is not able to realize this will. It is important to distinguish between the decisive military victory required of IDF officers over the military or quasi-military expression of a certain ideology, and the demand, which is not always realizable, to defeat the ideology itself that underlies any terrorist organization or military opposing the IDF.

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Testimony by the chief of staff to the Winograd Commission regarding the purpose of the war that he himself conducted shows clearly the confusion that reigned in the IDF in this regard. Halutz told the commission: "The entire purpose of the operation was to create an entirely different reality for...the Israeli home front."¹⁴ Earlier, however, he testified: "I personally believe that the words 'decisive victory' and 'defeat' against a guerrilla or terrorist organization are not relevant....It is impossible to defeat an ideology. It is impossible to defeat a terrorist organization that has woven terror into its flag ...This is our experience and the experience of others."¹⁵

When a military commander automatically makes the mistaken assumption that he is unable to physically defeat the expressions of ideology – because it is impossible for him to vanquish the ideology itself – he has contributed significantly to the IDF's not fulfilling its sole mission: the protection of the citizens. Halutz was not the first to claim thus. At a conference in January 2001, General Moshe Ya'alon described his concept of victory in the war on terrorism: "This struggle will be decided through attrition. We refer to this today as 'tiring.' Each one of the sides is trying to tire the other....We are not talking about a military victory."¹⁶ At the same conference, then-Chief of Staff Shaul Mofaz, later the minister of defense, said: "In a situation of limited confrontation in the context of all-out war, I think that the term 'decision' is no longer relevant."¹⁷

In early 2004, the head of the Strategic Planning Branch, Brig. Gen. Eival Giladi, said:

When I began this job, IDF plans included the concept "to defeat the Palestinians." I asked myself what was

this gibberish, what kind of nonsense was this? Whom exactly are we defeating? What does it mean to defeat? What is the meaning of this? We tried to create alternatives to defeat. At first, I talked about "the image of victory," that is, victory for the sake of appearance. Afterward, this became staging the victory.¹⁸

The Redesign

Ofer Shelah's book *The Israeli Army: A Radical Proposal* (2003) is the clearest evidence of the operational concepts that developed in the IDF in the wake of the processes described above. For the purpose of the book, Shelah interviewed Amnon Lipkin Shahak, Uzi Dayan, Moshe Arens, and Haim Ramon, as well as other senior figures. The discussions he held with Dov Tamari and Shimon Naveh, the heads of the Operational Theory Research Institute, "opened [for him] a new world of looking at and understanding military affairs," and "as the fate of the IDF would have it, they are bequeathing this world to a new generation of officers today."¹⁹

Shelah claims that then-Chief of Staff Ehud Barak was the one who in the early 1990s began to design the concept whereby "the emphasis will be on fire and not on maneuver, on neutralizing the enemy and not on decisively defeating it via conquest of territory."²⁰ The commanders of the army, senior academics, and those who set the tone in the media were captivated by the idea that the post-modern warfare era had arrived, in which, according to Shelah, "war takes place and is decided not by physical destruction on the battlefield, but by the collapse of systems and by the change in the people's mindset." Proponents of this doctrine ignored the fact that in the very first days of the IDF and

due to the general balance of power that was always to the IDF's detriment, the IDF taught its commanders that decisive victory is a cognitive situation in which the enemy loses its will to fight. However, and in contrast to the contemporary opinion makers in the IDF, they also understood, based on an acute sense of the nature of warfare and the nature of mankind, that the essential condition for the creation of such a situation – both on the tactical and the operational levels – is the performance of rapid and deep ground maneuvers that will bring about the collapse of the enemy.²¹ Ignoring both basic IDF doctrine and the IDF's own positive experience in the operational arena created the situation that in place of learning, for instance, about the maneuvers that brought about the cognitive collapse and physical defeat of the Arab armies in Israel's wars, the trend in the IDF became internalizing "the lessons of the US military in Iraq." The IDF ignored the fact that the lessons learned from the wars in Iraq and Kosovo are not necessarily relevant to Israel, since these were wars by a superpower that was not subject to time, financial, or international diplomacy constraints, and most important, whose civilians' routine lives were not at all disrupted while the military was pounding the enemy from the air over the course of many weeks.

Shelah writes: "The practical meaning of the revolution in military affairs... is that the era of conventional symmetric warfare is essentially over. No longer will similarly armed militaries confront each other and engage in battles of maneuvering and attrition.... Under these conditions there is no need for the IDF's huge armored forces."²² Without critique or investment of additional thought, the writer presents the basic assumptions regarding the IDF's force structure as he gleaned it from

those he interviewed:

The true threats facing the IDF are different today: low intensity warfare against the Palestinians....the Hizbollah missile threat that could cause tremendous damage to the home front...despite its not being a threat to the territorial borders...the possibility of regular army actions for a localized purpose, along the lines of the kidnapped soldiers.

Those interviewed believed that in light of these threats, "a large, uniformed people's army acting in armored units does not provide a solution to any of them," and that "in any scenario, the most important elements of such a confrontation are the lack of significance of territorial conquest and the lack of ability of any side to achieve decisive victory."²³

Three years before the Second Lebanon War, which demonstrated to the Israeli public that the IDF had neglected ground maneuvers as a method for defeating the enemy, Shelah wrote:

The concept of "moving the war to the enemy's territory" has gone bankrupt. The Northern Command, with regular forces and aerial support and advanced weaponry is supposed to deal with a [ground] threat of this sort rapidly and efficiently. The proper way to deal with Hizbollah passes through Washington, or through a campaign in which the proper force is regular and not large. The threat to Syria...will in any case be made by aerial forces....

No longer is it the firepower and obsessive striving to conquer territory, but the analysis of the enemy as a system, understanding of its weak points, and sporadic attacks of fire are what will silence it."²⁴

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Fundamental principles must not be allowed to unravel and assume the likes of transient, fashionable ideas borrowed from realms and disciplines that share no common ground with the IDF.

The attitudes and beliefs described obviously had a significant effect on what actually occurred in the IDF. Between 1990 and 2005, a revolution took place in the organization in everything connected with equipment, training for force operations, and most important, the IDF's foremost values. However, this revolution ignored the ramifications of the changes on the lives of Israel's citizens, which are the IDF's only *raison d'être*. Moreover, other than a few individuals whose voices were not heard, no one dealing with state security in the media or in academia paid attention to this revolution or to its consequences for Israeli security.²⁵

In the months before 2006, the IDF deleted from its set of plausible scenarios the possibility that any war would be decided by maneuvering armor assisted by infantry, artillery, and engineering. This in turn spurred the processes that led to the closure of some of the reserve units, the reduced ground forces training to the point of its complete cessation, and discussions about shortening compulsory service in the IDF. There even began a process of presenting the "reservists law" for approval in the Knesset. This law was, in practice, a bill to deplete the reserves. The claims regarding "a lack of resources" that the commanders used to explain the end of ground forces training do not stand the test of reality. An editorial in *Haaretz* stated: "Completely contrary to the claims of the military, the Brodet Commission determined that the results of the Second Lebanon War did not derive from a lack of resources. The army did not lack resources at any stage. It lacked efficient management of resources and an understanding that management is a major factor in military power."²⁶ When the maneuvering ground forces are declared by the IDF as anachronistic, they are also as-

signed a commensurate budget level. That same low priority is given to the expectations of those forces, and that was also – not surprisingly – the outcome of many ground forces operations during the war.

The Drive for Zero Casualties will Yield Zero Achievements

Edward Luttwak writes that when political institutions and leaders and societies are prepared to suffer casualties in combat, they are also able to fight out of insignificant reasons. Yet when they are not prepared for this, they create various and sundry claims in order to explain the reasons why the combat about to take place is not worth the expected sacrifice.²⁷ The Second Lebanon War manifested once again the simple historical lesson: if you strive for zero casualties, you will score zero achievements.

Another issue that was proven critical during the terrorism war of 2000-2005 and 2006 is that decision makers in the government and the military must properly assess the point at which anti-Israel terrorism turns from what has been called a "limited confrontation," which requires a response by a relatively small part of the force, into activity that requires a full scale war against terrorist bases. Israel's reactions to the terrorist attacks that began in 2000 and to the rocketry terrorism in 2006 show that faulty assessment brought it to the operation of a military force in a manner and extent that did not match the threat. The decision makers ignored the fact that above a certain level, civilian damages of terrorism, in terms of morale and economics, exceed the damage of a regular war between armed forces.²⁸

In considering when a limited confrontation shifts to all-out war against terrorism of various types and intensities, the words of

Yigal Allon, one of Israel's military giants, come to mind:

The lesser war that produces trifling results is a function of an actual state of war, and it must be defined from a political standpoint and from the standpoint of the right to fight it with appropriate tools, including the use of full power, if there remains no other option to quash it. Moreover, if it is not restrained in time and with sufficient assertion, we must be concerned that in addition to the intensive suffering caused to the population that is within the range of attack, Israel's moderation will be interpreted as military or diplomatic weakness and will encourage the enemy to strengthen its actions, which could snowball into an all-out war.²⁹

Those who viewed the various forms of terrorism as a non-existential threat were mistaken, and it was wrong to derive far-reaching conclusions regarding the IDF's values and appropriate preparations for war. For the IDF to once again realize its goals, the military must undergo a multi-faceted recovery process. First, beyond the professional opinions required of it, the IDF must disconnect itself from any involvement in diplomatic negotiations, and it must certainly be banned from repeating the mistake of leading those negotiations. Second, the IDF must review seriously the concept of the "people's army," its practical ramifications, and how much this term allows the IDF to adopt for itself civilian ideologies that impair the essence of a fighting organization. The term "people's army" was originally intended to describe a situation in which the population is temporarily mobilized in war time, and for this purpose, it adopts – also temporarily

– its military values. It is not intended to describe the situation prevalent today whereby the military enlists in the civilian population and then internalizes, albeit incidentally, its civilian thought processes. Third and most important, the IDF must return to its traditional combat values, high demands, discipline, structure, and organization that derive from the authentic and comprehensive set of threats facing the State of Israel.

The processes described in this essay demonstrate that another situation in which fundamental IDF principles unravel and assume the likes of transient, fashionable ideas borrowed from realms and disciplines that share no common ground with the IDF must not be allowed.

Notes

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- 1 IDF website: <http://dover.idf.il/IDF/English/about/doctrine/default.htm>.
- 2 An expression of these ideas appears in Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Penguin, 1992).
- 3 Speech by Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin to the US Congress, July 26, 1994.
- 4 Arie M. Cacowicz, "Rashomon in Jerusalem: Mapping the Israeli Negotiations' Positions on the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process, 1993-2001," *International Studies Perspectives* 6 (2005): 252-73; quoted by Kobi Michael, *Military Fights Peace – Military and Peacemaking: The Influence of the IDF Over the Transition Process from Peace to War – The Israeli Case* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Press, 2007, forthcoming).
- 5 "The Limited Confrontation," IDF Doctrine and Training Unit, p. 64.
- 6 According to the state comptroller's review, in December 1993 the deputy chief of staff approved the proposal of the Doctrine Training Unit to establish a research group whose first goal was to "draft a combat doctrine for the

systemic level, research this doctrine, develop it, and implement it in the IDF," State Comptroller's Report 57A, 2006, p. 61.

- 7 Ibid. The comptroller found that from the day the Institute was established in 1993 to the day of the review's completion in 2005, the Institute did not issue a single publication in the field of systemic doctrine (p. 61). The head of the Institute explained the lack of publications that "systemic knowledge is undergoing constant change," and that "the language in the operative field changes with great frequency, which creates didactic difficulty in instruction, implementation, and writing," p. 62.
- 8 See Ofer Shelah and Yoav Limor, *Captives of Lebanon* (Tel Aviv: Yediot Ahronot, 2007), p. 197.
- 9 John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).
- 10 Winograd Commission interim report, p. 98.
- 11 Edward Luttwak coined the term "post-heroic war" in order to reflect the shift from a type of war where a soldier requires heroism to win at combat, to a war among whose main goals is the prevention of losses, and in which heavy losses are essentially not acceptable. Edward N. Luttwak, "Toward Post-Heroic Warfare," *Foreign Affairs* 74, no. 3 (1995).
- 12 The principle and value of "adhering to the mission" should not be understood as permitting commanders to use their force in an unintelligent manner as took place in the 2006 war. In order for the task to be completed with a low number of casualties, additional war principles, which are essential conditions for success, support this higher value, including the concentration of effort, stratagems, security, constancy, continuity, and so on.
- 13 See Lt. Col. Yariv Elbaz and Maj. Eyal Asraf, "The Development of Anti-Terror Combat in the Golani Brigade," *Insight into Events* 4, p. 19. "There is evidence of actual damage caused to the process of training IDF troops....We must find the balance...between the version in which 'we place the soldier at the center' and the version in which 'the mission is central.'"
- 14 Winograd Commission interim report, p. 62.
- 15 Winograd Commission interim report, p. 52.
- 16 "Between 'Decision' and 'Victory'" – lecture at the conference by the Center for National Security Studies and the National Security College, January 28, 2001, published by the University of Haifa, The Center for National Security Studies.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 *Maariv*, January 2, 2004.
- 19 Ofer Shelah, *The Israeli Army: A Radical Proposal* (Kinneret Zmora-Bitan, 2003), Acknowledgments.
- 20 Shelah, *The Israeli Army*, p. 37.
- 21 Israel, Military, General Staff, General Collection, *Battle Doctrine* (1964), vol. 1: "Attack, Advance, and Pursuit, Descent, and Ambush"; see introductory chapter.
- 22 Shelah, *The Israeli Army*, pp. 40-41.
- 23 Shelah, *The Israeli Army*, pp. 58, 59.
- 24 Shelah, *The Israeli Army*, p. 60, 129.
- 25 The only warning calls in the military periodical *Ma'arachot*, which is distributed to all IDF officers, were those of General Yaakov Amir and myself, the last of which was published in December 2005, just seven months before the Second Lebanon War. (Additional publications by the author appeared in *Nativ*, *Military Technology*, *Makor Rishon*, and in an article in *Limited Confrontation* [Ma'arachot, 2004]. The military researcher Yagil Henkin also warned about the issue.)
- 26 *Haaretz*, June 1, 2007.
- 27 Edward N. Luttwak, *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).
- 28 The cost to the Israeli economy of the years of terrorism that began in September 2000 was higher than what was caused it by the Yom Kippur War. In the first two years of terrorism, the Israeli economy lost 45 billion shekels, or about 10 percent of its GDP. In place of annual GDP growth of 4 percent, Israel had a negative growth rate of -1 percent. The unemployment rate also rose steadily. In Israel's economic history there was no example of a significant decline in GDP due to any war. See the study of Dr. Michel Stravichensky of the Bank of Israel's Research Department, published in advance of the Caesaria Conference in 2002.
- 29 Yigal Allon, *A Curtain of Sand*, (HaKibbutz HaMeuhad, 1959), p. 18.