The War in Afghanistan – Lessons for Israel

Shlomo Brom

The war in Afghanistan is essentially over, though some remnants of the Taliban and Al-Qa'ida remain, and 'mopping up' actions may continue for some time. While the US has yet to capture Al-Qa'ida leader Osama Bin Laden and Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar, it seems likely that the search for them – barring their capture in the near future in the framework of the sweeping searches presently being conducted in Afghanistan – will be conducted primarily by intelligence and police methods, rather than through military operations. This article deals with the preliminary operational and strategic lessons that Israel can draw from the Afghanistan campaign. It should be emphasized that the present article does *not* discuss the comprehensive subject of the War on Terror; rather, it focuses on lessons that can be derived from the operational aspects of the US campaign in Afghanistan.

Strategic Lessons

The American decision to go to war in Afghanistan was not motivated only by the desire to punish those responsible for the attacks of September 11. American leaders also understood that the most effective way to fight terrorism of this sort was by preventing third-party states from sponsoring and/or sheltering terrorist groups. The destruction of the Taliban regime, then, was meant as a deterrent message to other states considering harboring groups like Al-Qa'ida: what we did to them, we can do to you as well.

In the wake of the September 11 attacks, much has been written about international terrorist groups capable of operating in 'virtual' space, i.e. without state sponsorship. This refers to terrorist groups which could potentially exploit modern Western society by melting into and hiding within it, exploiting the resources afforded by the information revolution to establish a system of independent cells capable of coordinated action. There may well be some substance to this concern: some organizations have successfully operated without state sponsorship, such as the Aum Shinrikyo cult, which carried out the Sarin-gas attack in the Tokyo subway system in 1995.

Even so, Al-Qa'ida is not this type of group. Bin Laden has historically taken pains to assure himself a sponsoring state (Afghanistan, the Sudan), whose territory can serve as a staging ground and safe refuge. Ensuring such a refuge vastly expands the ability of terrorist groups to operate, and enhances their effectiveness. Possessing a territorial base eases the process of drafting new members and establishing suitably-equipped camps to train them; of developing weapons and routes for smuggling and caching them; of developing communications channels; of planning and overseeing terrorist operations; and of providing sanctuary when pursued. Moreover, taking actions against a state that supplies such refuge serves as a warning against other states that may be pondering similar policies.

Taking Israel's particular circumstances into account, these facts have relevance to its ongoing struggle against terrorism. How can observations regarding the US campaign in Afghanistan be put to work when considering terrorist organizations arrayed against Israel, such as Hamas and the Hizballah?

Admittedly, Hamas is considerably different from Bin Laden's organization, its strong standing among the Palestinian people notwithstanding. Hamas was active against Israel even without the specific support of a state or state-like entity (the organization, it should be recalled, was active prior to 1993, when Israel

still occupied the whole of the West Bank and Gaza). Even so, its effectiveness has increased significantly since finding sanctuary under Palestinian Authority (PA) rule. The fact that some Hamas leaders have been able to operate freely in other Arab states since the organization's establishment has also been a contributing factor. Hizballah is another example of an organization whose high operational capability is maintained by virtue of state sponsorship; in this case, from Syria and Iran.

The conclusion to be drawn from this is that striving to eliminate state sponsorship of terrorist organizations should be a central aspect of Israel's anti-terrorism efforts. Such an effort would need to rely on both political and military means. Israel is not a superpower, nor is it in a position to invade unfriendly states and forcibly eject their ruling regimes – its unsuccessful effort to do so in Lebanon in 1982 provides a case in point. However, judicious use of political and military incentives and pressure can influence states that offer sanctuary for terrorist organizations. In this fashion, by using coordinated political and military activity *vis-à-vis* Syria and in response to Hizballah attacks, it has been possible to achieve a degree of restraint since the IDF's withdrawal from southern Lebanon. The same holds true for actions taken by Israel against the PA. Israel could not have replaced the leadership of the PA even had it wished to do so – there were simply no alternative groups within Palestinian society that could have taken up the mantle of leadership in cooperation with Israel. However, Israel has proved able to influence the PA's behavior by means of a combination of military and political pressures and incentives.

Prior to putting its forces into play against Afghanistan, the US built a coalition for its war against global terrorism. While in practice, the US conducted the war with virtually no assistance from the allies it had called to its side (with the notable exception of limited British involvement), there was great importance in the assistance provided by Afghani opposition forces and the states bordering Afghanistan. Cooperation with opposition forces enabled the US to achieve its goals with only a small US military presence on the ground – the majority of the US campaign was fought from the air. Cooperation with neighboring countries, such as the Central Asian republics, Pakistan, and Russia was necessary for establishing contact with Afghani opposition elements, and for gathering intelligence within the country.

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Israel's situation is such that it is not usually able to engage the assistance of opposition forces within enemy countries, though it has done so in the past in Lebanon, Iraq, and the Sudan. However, the use of states adjacent to the target state demonstrates for Israel the importance of seeking allies which share borders with its enemies, particularly when the state in question is some way distant from Israel itself. These considerations are relevant to Israel's relations with Turkey. Cooperation with a state bordering on Iraq could greatly ease the difficulty of a possible military confrontation there, even if its allies were not to actively participate in the fighting, just as Uzbekistan and Pakistan did not take active part in fighting the Taliban regime.

Operational Lessons

The pessimistic forecast that preceded the US campaign in Afghanistan – that the US was about to sink into the mire of a war which would be difficult to win – was discredited. This assessment was based on previous failed attempts by armies throughout history to conquer Afghanistan, the most recent being that of the Soviet Union, which had been forced to withdraw from the country in defeat. However, the US succeeded in causing the complete collapse of Taliban and Al-Qa'ida forces over a short period of time, and with almost no loss of American life. It could, of course, be argued that the war may yet continue for a long time, in the form of rear-guard guerilla actions conducted by

the remnants of the Taliban. Even so, the minimal US military presence in Afghanistan provides few targets for this kind of warfare, and it is likely that even these forces will be removed at the first opportunity.

Since similar forecasts also proved mistaken prior to the Persian Gulf War of 1991 and in the Kosovo campaign in 1999, the time has come to recognize that a genuine change has taken place in operational planning and execution. This change is what has enabled the US to achieve absolute dominance over its opponents in each of these conflicts, and this has, in turn, made it difficult for analysts to formulate net assessments regarding the expected outcomes of military confrontations. In the US, this change has been dubbed the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA), and it includes dramatic technological developments alongside organizational and doctrinal adaptations which maximize the potential of these developments. This revolution includes several key elements, parts of which overlap and complement each other:

- *Standoff capability* – the ability to target enemy forces from great distances with pinpoint accuracy, with a high degree of invulnerability for the launching platform – from air, sea, or land.
- *Information dominance* – the ability to know the exact location of enemy forces and those of one's own in real time, and to deny such information to one's enemy.
- *Dominance in outer space* – the ability to use space-borne platforms to collect and disseminate real-time information, and to enable forces in the field to communicate across great distances.
- *Strategic reach* – the ability to mass essential forces (rapid-response units, special operations units, carrier battle groups, etc.) and firepower in distant parts of the globe for the purpose of defending strategic interests.

All of these elements came into play in the Afghan campaign, and to greater degrees than in the past. It is worth noting that in the 1991 Persian Gulf War, the percentage of air-launched ordnance (bombs, missiles, and the like) with "smart" capabilities was less than 10% of total ordnance dropped – in other words, 90% were traditional "dumb" bombs. In the Afghanistan War, the ratios were reversed: smart bombs were used in 90% of the sorties. Long-range precision-guided cruise missiles were also used, launched from both naval vessels and aircraft, primarily during the first phase of the war, during which time the Afghani air-defense system was attacked, in order to achieve freedom of operation in the air. For the first time, use was made of attack UAVs (Unmanned Aerial Vehicles): pilotless aircraft armed with air-to-ground smart munitions. Effective use of these technologies demands an organizational and operational doctrine that facilitates the acquisition of targets – most of which are mobile – almost in real time, an effective system of distributing these targets among the forces at the disposal of the attacker, close control over attacking forces, and an effective mechanism for providing Battle Damage Assessment (BDA) – feedback mechanisms which can confirm that targets that have been singled out for attack are indeed destroyed or disabled.

The US displayed an impressive capability in terms of achieving information dominance. Such a capability requires the ability to gather data by means of a variety of cutting-edge sensor technologies and computerized information systems. The US successfully obtained information about both moving and fixed targets located thousands of kilometers from its bases. This information was gathered both from outer space and from airborne platforms, including unmanned ones. To this was added further intelligence from allies (primarily Russia and Pakistan, both of which had experience in Afghanistan), and from the opposition elements within Afghanistan. The enemy was denied the ability to acquire similar intelligence by accurate hits on its command and control centers, which also were the most significant nodes in the rudimentary information distribution system at that served the Afghani regime. The US was also very effective in limiting coverage by the mass media. In this sense, the very distance separating Afghanistan from US bases was actually a helpful factor.

In wars involving long-range

operations – which have come to characterize present-day warfare – control of outer space is essential for intelligence purposes, for control over one's own forces, and for accurate weather forecasting. The US capability in outer space enabled it to obtain high-quality intelligence within Afghanistan and to control and deploy its forces across great distances.

Strategic reach in this new type of war does not necessarily mean the capability to move massive ground forces over great distances, as was the case during the Cold War era, or during the era of Great Power confrontation. US capabilities in this area, which are dependent primarily on the capacity of its air- and sea-borne transport fleets, have remained relatively constant over recent decades, and indeed advanced technology plays little role here. Instead, high-tech solutions find expression in other ways: in the ability to direct precise bombing from strategic distances and in the ability to rapidly deliver Special Forces units and other small, mobile ground units – capable of bringing an extremely large volume of firepower to bear – across such distances.

In Afghanistan, the US was able to deliver accurate fire without proximate ground bases by deploying fighter planes from aircraft carriers, launching long-range cruise missiles from naval vessels and aircraft, and dispatching bombers located at bases thousands of kilometers from Afghanistan. In addition, it was able to airlift Special Forces and Marine Corps units into the country. The use of these forces recalls the vision of Andy Marshall, Director of Net Assessment at the Pentagon. Regarding the use of ground forces in future conflicts, Marshall developed the concept of the "swarm" [as of bees]: that is, that in wars managed thousands of kilometers away from permanent bases, there is no sense in using large, heavy ground forces. Instead, Marshall envisioned the use of small, mobile squads capable of reaching the enemy from any direction, efficiently "stinging" the enemy by calling in other forces and deploying vast firepower. These forces would then disengage, and return to attack from another direction. The accomplishments of these forces are judged in terms of their ability to wear down the enemy rather than in capturing and holding specific territorial assets. The Special Forces and Marine Corps units deployed in Afghanistan enjoyed great mobility, along with vast firepower, provided both by the precision weaponry they carried, and by virtue of their ability to call in highly accurate air strikes.

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Following the Persian Gulf War there was a tendency in Israel to turn a blind eye to the lessons of the war the US conducted against Iraq (though the question of Israel's vulnerability to missile attack was a notable exception to this). The reason for this was that some advanced the claim that Israel's operational environment was considerably different from that of the US. Not being a superpower, Israel could not enjoy the luxury of conducting a war which involved first wearing down the enemy with bombing and engaging in ground battle only once enemy forces had been significantly eroded.

By contrast, Arab military commanders did study the lessons of this war. They concluded that Israel was the only state in the Middle East with the requisite basis for adopting RMA-related means and doctrines, and that it was in the process of doing so. Israel had good capabilities with regard to long-range precision armaments. Its surveillance and communications assets, including satellites, could potentially be used to achieve information dominance. Finally, it enjoyed good strategic reach (within the limited confines of the Middle East), capable of reaching Iraq and possibly even Iran. In the wake of these realizations, a perception developed among the Arab countries that Israel had succeeded in tipping the balance of conventional forces in its favor, and that the gap between them and Israel was only growing

larger. This perception has had political and strategic implications, and it is expected that these will only grow in the wake of the war in Afghanistan.

This raises a question: is there substance to the aforementioned perception regarding Israel's growing conventional superiority? Indeed, there are significant differences between Israel and the world's sole superpower: the US has greater resources and greater political freedom of action. It operates against adversaries located far from its territorial heartland, and it has no potential enemies along its borders.

Even so, the various components of the RMA accord Israel many advantages, even within the country's particular circumstances. The geographical proximity to its enemies is a disadvantage in terms of Israel's vulnerability, but it also serves as an advantage from the standpoint of Israel's attack capability, thereby compensating, to some degree, for its disadvantage in resources when compared to the US. The proximity to targets makes it easier to acquire information in real time and makes it possible to bring greater amounts of fire to bear within an operational area in a given period of time.

According to information from the US Department of Defense, an average of 80 to 100 attack sorties were flown in Afghanistan per day. The Israel Air Force could conduct a far larger number of sorties on an average day of fighting against its likely enemies. Moreover, Israel's likely rivals are stronger and better-equipped than the Taliban. While this may seem like a disadvantage, this is not necessarily the case: stronger and more developed traditional military forces offer many more attractive targets for campaigns derived from RMA-related doctrines.

The technological revolution in precision-guided weapons and sensors has also reduced the limitations on nighttime fighting:

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precise bombing sorties can now be carried out at night, with a degree of accuracy approaching that of daytime. As a result, it is possible to increase the number of rounds of attack per day of battle – the number of attack sorties is now more limited by the difficulty of finding targets than by the ability to mount attacks.

Another advantage of Israel's proximity to its enemies is that it is not limited to launching precision weapons from air- and seaborne platforms, as was the US in Afghanistan. The IDF can also employ land-based platforms with the same degree of effectiveness and accuracy. Given that even Israel's most distant potential enemies (Iran, Iraq, Libya) are still relatively close by, Israel simply does not need a strategic transport capability along the lines of that possessed by the US.

The capabilities that Israel has developed also endow it with certain advantages in space-based warfare and with regard to information dominance, when compared to its potential rivals in the Arab world. Given its conditions, space-based capabilities are significant primarily in the context of potential conflicts with Israel's more distant rivals – Iran, Iraq, and so forth. Information dominance gives the IDF the capability to effectively wield precision-guided fire.

Conclusion

Israel's last large-scale conventional conflict was in 1982, and its warfighting experience in campaigns (outside of low-intensity conflicts) is rapidly becoming obsolete. Accordingly, Israel must take pains to study the strategic and military lessons learned by other nations, even if the conditions and the characteristics of the forces and the combatants in our region are different. With that, care must be taken to ensure that such lessons – whether at the strategic, operational, or tactical level – are adjusted to suit Israel's particular circumstances.