

The Challenges of Warfare Facing the IDF in Densely Populated Areas

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Current assessments are that fighting in densely populated areas will be one of the main types of combat the IDF will face in the foreseeable future. This essay will focus on three points: one, the change in threats facing the State of Israel; two, the main characteristics of the military response necessitated by the change in the threat; and three, some components of the necessary method of action in such confrontations.

The Yom Kippur War marked the beginning of a process of a steady gradual change in the nature of the threat to Israel. The enemy began to abandon its previous strategy, i.e., seeking the destruction of the state or conquering parts of it through military offensives, while it developed an approach that sought to exhaust the citizens and make their lives unbearable by firing high trajectory weapons at Israeli population centers from civilian enclaves. The experience of the last three conflicts – against the Palestinians in 2000-2005, the Second Lebanon War, and Operation Cast Lead – shows that there has been a fundamental transformation in the enemy's conduct: the enemy now penetrates a civilian environment, constructs its operational capabilities within it, and deploys its military positions there, replete with launch pads and weapons caches.

In late March 2011, the *Washington Post* published a map showing Hezbollah facilities located inside and next to civilian homes in 160 Lebanese villages. These facilities are military positions by any definition of international law. Not only does Hezbollah deploy military positions in civilian environments; it also plans on operating from within them. Its launch capabilities are expanding by every relevant parameter: destructive

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force, number of rockets and missiles, deployment along the front and into Lebanon's depth, and range and ability to cover Israel, as well as accuracy. A similar process is underway with regard to Hamas' growing strength in the Gaza Strip.

The purpose of intentionally operating out of civilian environments is to defend these launch capabilities against an IDF offensive, because Hizbollah has determined that given the IDF's desire to avoid harming non-involved civilians, the army is hard-pressed to operate there with the required effectiveness. Thus, the enemy's declared mode of conduct is to direct fire from within civilian environments, which serve as shields, towards civilian environments in Israel, which are seen as the country's Achilles' heel. In order to maintain its launch capabilities over time, the enemy engages in guerilla warfare, making it difficult for the IDF's maneuvering forces to reach these villages to stop the fire and destroy the military positions there. This change creates some difficult challenges. The IDF must deter the enemy from making use of its capabilities and, should the deterrence fail, stop the fire quickly while restoring its deterrence to the extent possible.

The second point deals with the main characteristics of the IDF's response to the challenge described above. Using Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion's declaration that Israel's ability to effect a fundamental political change in its geo-strategic situation in this region through the use of force is limited, one may set some basic objectives for the use of military force. In routine periods and as long as there is no significant violent conflict, the IDF must demonstrate deterrence over time and maintain it. The objective of deterrence is to undermine the enemy's motivation to use force beyond a bearable threshold and allow the constructive activity in which the state engages in its routine – economic development, infrastructures, education, aliyah absorption, and so on – to take place. However, if deterrence collapses, a widespread conflict, in which the citizens of the state are attacked by enemy fire, can be expected to erupt. In such a case, the IDF must attain two basic goals, first, the restoration of effective deterrence for years to come, which can usually be achieved by dealing the enemy a powerful blow that will compel it to engage in a long process of reconstruction, similar to what was achieved by the results of the Second Lebanon War and to a lesser extent as a result of Operation Cast Lead, which achieved a certain amount of deterrence and a significant

reduction in the scope of fire. The second basic goal underlying the IDF use of force is to reduce the damage the enemy is liable to inflict on the citizens and infrastructures. This can be attained by hitting the launch capabilities and their supporting facilities, by using both precision fire and ground maneuvers in the area from which the enemy fires (not for the purpose of a long term presence, rather to destroy the enemy's military infrastructures located there). At the same time, it is necessary to act to reduce the damage by improving defensive capabilities (passive and active) and rebuilding the home front. These two goals must be achieved while limiting the duration of the fighting to the extent possible.

Achievement of these goals requires operating inside densely populated civilian environments, which brings us to the third point of this essay: the method of action in order to minimize the number of casualties among non-involved civilians. It is more complex than that: it is very hard to distinguish non-involved civilians from combatants because often the combatants put down their weapons and are disguised as civilians. However, it is clear that the vast majority of the population is not involved in the fighting. In light of the experience of the Second Lebanon War, the IDF has developed an approach to handle the challenge. This approach consists of three stages. First, the army attacks targets located in the heart of the population representing a clear and present danger while adhering to the strict guidelines spelled out by international law about the proportionality of damage to civilians. This point must be comprehensible to the public in Israel and abroad: there will be targets whose capacity for inflicting damage is such that it is necessary to attack them, even if they are located within civilian enclaves, without prior warning and in real time. The *Washington Post* article listed military positions in the village of al-Hiyam in Lebanon. One may assume that some of the targets could be justifiably attacked by precision fire even if located among civilians. One may assume that civilians would be harmed during such an attack. In the second stage, the IDF acts to move the non-involved civilians out of harm's way for their own protection. Only after undertaking an evacuation of sufficient scope does the IDF move on to the third stage, which includes maneuvering in the area and launching extensive attacks.

Evacuating the civilians would significantly reduce the number of casualties from the non-involved population. Rapid evacuation is a difficult mission and does not occur in a vacuum. An organization such as Hizbollah

would likely try to prevent such a step because the population serves a critical role in defending its launch capabilities. In order to facilitate the evacuation process, some preliminary steps must be taken. Official state elements must announce that for all intents and purposes Israel is relating to the village and homes in which there are military facilities as military positions, and that these positions will be targeted and destroyed. Concurrently, Israel must work with the international community. It is necessary to condemn the mode of conduct that uses civilians as human shields. There is nothing new about this, but the international community and its institutions must take a clear stance on the matter. It is necessary to place the responsibility on the Lebanese government and the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip and to explain to them the cost of their strategy. In addition, the sovereign institutions in Lebanon and Gaza must help to prepare the populations for a process of evacuation. They must ensure that the evacuation is carried out in a way that allows for effective defense of the population. It is necessary to allow international elements in the area, such as the Red Cross, to plan their assistance in the evacuation process ahead of time and help the population evacuate for its own safety. Moreover, the IDF must provide the populations of these villages with reliable information in advance, e.g., by using an Arabic language website where civilians can obtain information about evacuation, safe passage, and a site providing instructions about the logistics. This will enable civilians to evacuate and manage their lives at this time in a reasonable fashion. All of this must be planned and organized ahead of time. Realizing the processes described herein will help reduce civilian casualties and also gain legitimacy – both internal and international – for an IDF operation, should such an operation be deemed necessary.