

The First Circle of Military Challenges Facing Israel: Multiple Arenas and Diverse Enemies

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The upheaval that began in the Arab world in late 2010, which brought down the central government in several states and upset the regional order, is still potent. Six years later, the IDF faces a number of geographic arenas representing different challenges: the borders arena – with countries with which Israel has peace treaties (Egypt and Jordan); the Gaza Strip; Judea and Samaria; and Lebanon and the Golan Heights. Joining these fronts are the Iranian threat, the cyber challenge, and the threat of a conventional conflict against Arab armies in the area (albeit an unlikely reference scenario).

The IDF's deployment on the borders with Egypt and Jordan relies on inter-state cooperation, and military and intelligence coordination. Despite the presence of non-state actors in Sinai (including Wilayat Sinai, an organization affiliated with the Islamic State), the underlying logic of Israeli activity on these borders is state logic. In the conflict arenas in the Gaza Strip, southern Lebanon, and the Golan Heights, on the other hand, Israel faces armed non-state actors that wage terrorism and guerilla warfare, while assimilated and concealed among the civilian population, which it uses as a human shield. These patterns of action remain dominant even when those actors are to some extent formally established, when they control territory, and when they are responsible for providing services to the population under their control (Hamas and Hezbollah, for example). The Judea and Samaria conflict arena is different, due to the existence of the Palestinian Authority

(PA), a semi-state entity that functions poorly. At the same time, Israel and the PA security agencies cooperate in the struggle against the terrorist infrastructure of individual terrorists and cells linked to Hamas, which also operates against the PA and builds on the prevalent frustration among the local population. The military activity in this area comprises typical police missions requiring, in addition to counter-terrorism measures, acting vis-à-vis the civilian population in a manner designed to prevent violence and mass rioting.

The variety in type and modus operandi among the enemies in the respective arenas requires adaptation of the military response, different deployment, and individual buildup of the relevant forces. At the same time, the effort to use military units for diverse and fundamentally different missions, as shown by the lessons of the conflicts in which the IDF has been involved in recent years, indicates that this approach leads to a decline in the professional level of the forces, mental confusion in the transition from one arena to another, and high costs resulting in operations by untrained and irrelevant forces and lack of efficiency in organization and resources.

This article explores the military challenges in the various arenas of the first circle. The difficulties in the use of force by the IDF in the respective arenas are cited as a basis for proposing possible directions for action that provide a response to most of the challenges. The primary goal is to build and train special and specialized forces, while maintaining the existing overall military capability, and thereby provide a response to the challenges facing the IDF on the various fronts at this time.

The Arenas and Challenges Facing the IDF

Judea and Samaria

The most prominent characteristic in the Judea and Samaria arena is the existence of the PA, which has state institutions and security agencies, and which bears direct and complete responsibility for part of the Palestinian population (in Area A) and civilian and policing responsibility in another part of the territory (Area B); Areas A and B are home to some 95 percent of the Palestinian population in Judea and Samaria. Israel bears complete responsibility for Area C, which includes a Jewish population numbering 400,000 people living in hundreds of settlements, most of which are located

west of the security fence, with some areas, including more isolated settlements, located east of the security fence. The IDF, assisted by the Israel Security Agency (ISA), is present in the territory, and operates cooperation and coordination mechanisms with the Palestinian security agencies. IDF and ISA activity in Area A also constitutes an essential security envelope for the PA, because the latter is hard pressed to cope on its own with Hamas's efforts at subversion.

The situation in the area is shaped by a number of principal elements: the continued occupation under a military government (particularly in Area C) functioning in a prolonged political stalemate, with no significant indication that negotiations might be renewed any time soon; an Israeli presence and control in a large portion of the territory, which includes relatively intense activity in PA-controlled Area A; division and alienation in Palestinian society; a difficult economic situation, marked by a high unemployment rate among the population, especially well-educated young people; and a feeling of anguish in the young generation, which sees no better future for itself. The loss of confidence in the PA and its leadership, combined with despair at the strategic ineffectiveness of Hamas's violent resistance and the absence of hope for the future among the young generation have resulted in the violence that began in October 2015, as reflected in the lone wolf terrorism of knife stabbing and car-ramming; the outbreak itself was likely triggered by the intentions attributed to Israel regarding the Temple Mount and the accompanying incitement, and heightened by the glorification of the perpetrators and the demonization of Israel. In addition, there was a rise in terrorist attacks involving shooting, stone throwing, and Molotov cocktails, plus rioting in areas of friction with the IDF and Jewish civilians. It is likely that in the background of this wave of terrorism in Judea and Samaria, beyond the incitement of the Palestinian establishment and social media discourse, was the general mood in the region and the rise of the Islamic State and the Salafi jihadist ideology it represents.

Treaty Borders: Egypt and Jordan

The Israel-Egypt and Israel-Jordan borders are Israel's longest land borders. They are sparsely populated areas and relatively remote from large population centers. At the same time, these borders differ from each other in their

topographic and demographic characteristics. Many parts of the border area with Egypt are unpopulated, while other parts are inhabited by a Bedouin population that does not accept the rule of the central government; the Egyptian government has difficulty exercising control in these areas. The border area with Jordan is sparsely inhabited by a rural Bedouin population. The city of Aqaba, located at the southernmost point on the border, is developing rapidly municipally and in tourism, and a tourist infrastructure on the shores of the Dead Sea is also developing. These assets, coupled with Amman's proximity to the border and Jordan's commitment to the peace treaty with Israel, have motivated Jordan to invest heavily in the deployment and activity of its security forces, resulting in effective security control along the border.

The most significant challenge on the Egyptian border is the presence and activity of the Islamic State-affiliated Wilayat Sinai terrorist organization. Although this organization is fully engaged in its war of survival with the Egyptian security forces, it also has an interest in carrying out terrorist attacks in Israeli territory as an expression of its identification with Hamas, and in an effort to embarrass the Egyptian regime. In addition to this threat, the IDF must deal with attempts to cross the border illegally, mainly by drug smugglers, labor migrants, and refugees. The challenge on the Jordanian border, on the other hand, is less difficult, because the threat is not as great, and the Jordanian army responsible for security on the Jordanian side is relatively effective. Israel enjoys a high level of military and intelligence cooperation with both Egypt and Jordan, and the three states share a mutual understanding of the importance of preserving tranquility on the border.

Lebanon

Since the Second Lebanon War, UN Security Council Resolution 1701 notwithstanding, Hezbollah has taken advantage of its political and military power in Lebanon to continue developing its military capabilities without interference from the Lebanese government. Hezbollah has become no less than an army, boasting a range of firepower and maneuvering capabilities and special forces. Iran's connection with Hezbollah is Tehran's means of influencing Lebanese politics. Iran, the main supplier of Hezbollah's military capabilities, provides the organization with financing, weapons, and strategic support that will enable it to confront Israel effectively. Hezbollah

ignores the authority of the Lebanese army, and since the organization joined the Lebanese government, the Lebanese army has gradually enhanced its cooperation with the organization.

Hezbollah bases its military operational approach on several aspects. One is the construction of a military infrastructure in a civilian environment, with the understanding that this environment will protect it, because Israel will have difficulty in operating against it; indeed, Hezbollah's bases are deployed in hundreds of villages in southern Lebanon.¹ Another element involves the use of advanced weapons generally employed by regular armies, but in combination with guerilla tactics. The organization has many firepower capabilities, some with long range improved accuracy and great destructive capability. In addition, Hezbollah is equipped with sophisticated anti-tank weapons, dozens of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), advanced anti-ship missiles, and aerial defense systems that challenge the supremacy enjoyed by the Israeli air force in recent decades. The threat on the Lebanese front is also significant, given that there are dozens of Israeli communities along the border. A surprise attack by Hezbollah aimed at taking control of a community or military outpost is not an unimaginable scenario. Hezbollah's force buildup, together with the operational experience it has accumulated in the fighting in Syria, the geographic features of the area, and the proximity to the border of Israeli communities, make this potential threat very grave.

The Golan Heights

The situation on the Golan Heights is different because of the civil war underway and the large number of actors operating in the area. Many rebel organizations operate in this region, which is home to weakened remnants of Assad's army and a sparse population, alternatively cooperating and fighting with each other. What they all have in common is the struggle against the Assad regime and the desire to overthrow it. On other matters relating to Syria's future, however, they do not necessarily agree. In contrast to the cases of Hezbollah and Hamas, which usually act as the sole ruler of well-defined territories, there is no single ruling group on the Golan Heights. In this sense, Israel has no clear address, as it does in the Gaza Strip and southern Lebanon, and must therefore deal with a number of players having different agendas.

The Gaza Strip

The security challenge in the Gaza Strip results from a number of factors. Hamas controls the Gaza Strip, consolidating its status as a semi-state with a (relatively) strong military infrastructure and the ability to attack many areas in Israeli territory with its firepower. Hamas is not the sole armed group in the area; it is joined by Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Salafi jihadist organizations, which have adopted the ideology of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. All of these organizations use terrorism and guerilla warfare. Like Hezbollah, they are assimilated among the civilian population, and use it as a human shield. The border with the Gaza Strip runs next to Israeli rural and agricultural communities and the town of Sderot, so any friction in the area of the Gaza Strip border fence affects the nearby communities and their daily life, enabling Hamas to create pressure on the Israeli civilian population. One of the main methods Hamas has adopted (also following Israel's success in using active defense systems to counter rockets launched from the Gaza Strip) is digging tunnels across the border that make it possible to bypass the obstacle at the border and bring forces to the Israeli side. The proximity of the Israeli communities to the border makes this threat particularly serious. It has a severe psychological effect on the Israeli population and causes protests, backed by a political lobby, thereby keeping the issue alive in Israeli security discourse and exerting pressure on the political and military echelons in Israel.

The humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip is complicated and difficult, and the ability to improve the situation there depends on the following factors: (a) relations between Hamas and the PA, and between Hamas and Egypt (as part of the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas is regarded by the Egyptian regime as a dangerous and subversive enemy that aggravates instability in Sinai, due to Hamas's cooperation with jihad groups in the area such as Wilayat Sinai); (b) Hamas's willingness to limit its efforts to rearm, which come at the expense of efforts at reconstruction in the Gaza Strip; and (c) Israel's policy and the willingness in the Arab world and the international community to take more substantial responsibility for improving the situation. The humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip, a ticking bomb, has caused flare-ups and escalation, leading to major IDF operations in the area (the most

recent one being Operation Protective Edge in 2014). Without a material change in the Gaza Strip, further escalation can be anticipated in the future.

The strategic partnership between Israel and Egypt requires Israel to take Egyptian interests into account in this context, and to maintain a high level of coordination with Egypt on all matters pertaining to the Gaza Strip. Given the Egyptian hostility to Hamas and the tension between Egypt and Turkey, Israel will have to show great sensitivity in the context of the measures it initiates to speed up reconstruction in the Gaza Strip (particularly in view of Turkey's expectation of substantial involvement in this process), which will tend to consolidate the Hamas rule in the area.

The Israeli Response

Israel must deal with the variety of threats in times of routine, while maintaining its readiness and fitness for escalation, and even for full-scale war. Non-state actors are operating in three arenas facing Israel – Lebanon, Syria, and the Gaza Strip. Despite the special characteristics of each, there are a number of prominent features common to all. These groups have taken control of territories and populations in all three arenas – they have become the actual rulers of those territories, and are responsible for the people living there. Over the years, therefore, these groups have had to undergo a process of institutionalization involving the use of state institutions and the provision of state services to the civilian population. Their military wings have undergone a similar process, and have become what amounts to armed forces of a semi-state. The cases of Hezbollah in south Lebanon and Hamas in the Gaza Strip are the clearest examples of this pattern.

The IDF's challenges in the first circle can thus be divided among three areas: the Judea and Samaria arena, in which the main focus is on counter-terrorism and police missions; treaty border arenas – the Israeli-Egyptian border and the Israeli-Jordanian border: despite the difference in threats, these theaters are more similar than different; and borders with sub-stage organizations in states with which Israel does not have a treaty: the Israeli-Syrian border, the Israeli-Lebanese border, and the Israeli-Gaza Strip border, in which the threats are also similar. This categorization demands the adaptation of operations according to the respective characteristics of the arenas, and enables the IDF to devise three kinds of relevant responses, which can make

regular security work and defense of the borders at routine times more effective, while improving readiness and fitness for war.

The IDF governs in Judea and Samaria through the military government established in the area following the Six Day War. Since then, the IDF has based its response to the variety of threats in this area on regular army units and reserves, which perform police and regular security missions in cooperation with the ISA. The area is under the command of an area division, divided into fixed area brigades, to which combat forces are assigned as needed. In the event of escalation, the army reinforces the area with additional troops.

The complexity and sensitivity typical of the Judea and Samaria arena require a great deal of familiarity and understanding of the area and the population living there. The extent of the friction between the IDF and the Palestinian population in a situation of terrorism by individuals, ongoing efforts by Hamas to rebuild its terrorist infrastructure and launch terrorist attacks, and the PA's functional problems are liable to turn incautious, irresponsible, or unprofessional handling into a significant strategic blunder. The likelihood of mistakes is relatively high when there is extensive turnover of the military forces in the area, and when these forces lack extensive knowledge of the territory and the expertise needed for military missions of a police nature.

In view of the operational need, the Kfir Brigade was founded as a designated specialized brigade. Even so, however, most of the forces deployed in the area are regular army battalions (infantry, armored forces, combat engineers, field intelligence, and others) and Border Police. Before assigned to the area, the battalions hold a short training session designed to train them for police missions, make arrests, and guard Jewish settlements. This model is questionable for many reasons. The first is the fatigue among soldiers and commanders as a result of ongoing friction with the Palestinian population (and in some cases, also with the Jewish population in Judea and Samaria). The second is the inherent lack of professionalism among the forces performing police missions according to this model. A few days of training are not adequate preparation, while the operating experience acquired during the months spent performing these tasks is not utilized. The establishment of the Kfir Brigade is designed to compensate for some of these limitations. Due to the IDF ethos, however, the commanders of this brigade have acted over the years to expand its capabilities to those of an

ordinary infantry brigade with extra training. This phenomenon (which is not confined to the Kfir Brigade),² has a negative impact on the goals for which the brigade was founded.

The solution to this challenge can be a greater use of specialized forces through the establishment of a military deployment based on the Border Police, which includes soldiers in their regular compulsory military service and permanent army soldiers. The latter are experienced and trained in dealing with the civilian population, and have specialized army units and special forces at their side. Increasing the size of the Border Police will require more recruits from conscripts at the expense of the IDF.³

The treaty borders pose a substantially different challenge, which also does not require the use of standard military forces. The Caracal battalion is already operating in this area as a specialized force.⁴ The nature of the threat (terrorist penetration and smuggling of drugs, arms, and merchandise) makes it possible to use a relatively limited number of forces as centrally controlled interception teams. For this purpose, the intelligence gathering system on the Egyptian border has been significantly upgraded. Widespread Jordanian counter-terrorism operations are conducted on the border with Jordan. The sharing of intelligence with the Jordanians can help reduce the extent of the necessary efforts on the Israeli side of the border. Separate control centers can be set up for each arena, but the establishment of a single central operations room to conduct operations jointly in both arenas should be considered,⁵ due to the extent and character of the area, the characteristics of the threat, and the approach to the operational response, which facilitates rapid reinforcement of forces between the borders, as needed. Due to the fact that in many cases interception forces encounter hostile activity involving smuggling rings working in tandem with Israeli civilians, it is also necessary to include police forces with the appropriate authority in the control and operations center.⁶

The characteristics of the Israeli-Syrian, Israeli-Lebanese, and Israeli-Gaza Strip borders require the maintenance of the IDF forces' fitness and readiness for immediate escalation, while dealing with a range of threats requiring a large scale military response to major asymmetric threats on all three of these fronts. In the event of escalation and deterioration into a large scale violent conflict, the IDF will have to deal with armed and trained

militias operating like guerilla forces that sometimes possess the military capabilities and weapons of a state, operating in densely populated areas, while assimilating and concealing themselves within that population as an asymmetric response to a balance of power unfavorable to them, thereby turning the IDF's power into a weakness, due to self-imposed restraints. One of the most prominent challenges on these fronts will be high trajectory fire, which requires dealing with the threat of rockets and missiles launched from areas populated by civilians toward population centers and military infrastructures in Israeli territory. These theaters will continue to require deployment of a regular military force capable of maneuvers, firepower, and intensive fighting in areas densely populated by civilians and underground.

Conclusion

The unique features of each of the five arenas in which the IDF operates, and the major differences between them, require rethinking the IDF's current response patterns. In the context of the Gideon IDF multi-year plan, and in view of the realization of the importance and contribution of special units to the war against non-state actors and its new characteristics, a depth corps has been established, a commando brigade has been founded, and it was decided to turn the special forces division into a regular division. Furthermore, the buildup of the threat on the borders requires up-to-date thinking about the types and characteristics of the forces and responses needed to ensure military relevance and effectiveness in the respective arenas.

The Judea and Samaria arena requires specialization in police missions, maintenance of public order, and counter-terrorism activity. Consolidation of operations by specialist forces, the Border Police, and special forces is likely to improve the effectiveness of operations in the area. On the treaty borders, preference is to be given to small interception forces in a central command and control model (similar to air force operations) over operations in military frameworks of battalions, companies, platoons, and squads. Small interception forces will be substantially more effective against the threat in both Judea and Samaria and on the treaty borders, and can be reinforced in escalation scenarios. On borders where there are asymmetric conflicts, despite the differences between arenas, the IDF can continue operating in the existing format, in which regular military forces are responsible for

defending the borders, with the IDF ready for escalation scenarios and a rapid transition from defense to attack.

Adjustments of the response in Judea and Samaria and on the treaty borders can aid the IDF in improving the quality and effectiveness of regular security, while at the same time making it possible to release resources for improvement of the readiness and fitness of the other forces in the event of full scale war.

Notes

- 1 Isabel Kershner, "Israel Says Hezbollah Positions Put Lebanese at Risk," *New York Times*, May 12, 2015.
- 2 A similar phenomenon can be seen in the Caracal mixed battalion stationed on Israel's peace borders. Here too, continual pressure exists to deepen the brigade's capability to operate in war scenarios.
- 3 Using the Border Police also has disadvantages, mainly concerning the volume of missions that a Border Police company is capable of carrying out, as opposed to an IDF combat company, due to the character and conditions of service in the Border Police. The increased operational effectiveness of the force, however, can be expected to make up for this.
- 4 There is also continual pressure by commanders in this battalion to extend its capabilities and training for the purpose of being included as a combat battalion in a full-scale war.
- 5 In the Jordanian theater – at least up to the southern Dead Sea.
- 6 Units of haredi (ultra-Orthodox) yeshiva students can be deployed along the borders as a response and interception force in order to better utilize the potential of haredi recruits, and to enable them to observe their religious rules and customs, engage in religious studies, and become part of the military deployment in a variety of essential combat support and logistics roles.