



Can the IDF Afford a Small Army?

by Prof. Avi Kober

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The IDF unveiled a new plan, promising a smaller yet smarter army. However, the IDF must take into consideration that a smaller military comes with a price, as even the low-intensity conflicts for which the IDF is preparing require a large number of troops to enable the army to succeed.

The IDF's new multi-year plan is based on several assumptions. The first is that the nature of the challenges the IDF will face in the foreseeable future will be low-intensity conflicts. The second is that a window of opportunity has opened, with no large-scale wars in sight, allowing the army to reform its structure and operational conception. The third is that the army can make the budgetary cuts by reducing its order of battle. The "new" casualty-averting IDF will rely heavily on airpower, firepower, intelligence, and cyber warfare, and will supposedly be smaller but smarter.

This paper deals with just one aspect of the reform – the smaller size of the military. Two military rules must be taken into consideration while advancing in the "small but smart" direction. The first is the troop-density paradox, which postulates that low-intensity challenges actually require *more* troops than high-intensity ones. The second is the force-to-space ratio, which relates to the number of troops required to effectively carry out missions within a given area or hold a captured territory.

The Troop-Density Paradox

The aforementioned paradox measures the number of troops required for fulfilling missions in a populated area per 1,000 civilians. Low troop density may negatively affect an army's ability to control and stabilize populated

enemy territory, and small militaries may be insufficient for performing the job merely based on their operational and technological sophistication. The bottom line is that numbers are important.

Since the mid-1990s, military analysts have offered several history-based propositions regarding troop density in low-intensity conflicts. Most density recommendations have fallen within a range of 20-25 soldiers per 1,000 residents in the area of operations. Such ratios existed in Bosnia in 1996 (22.6) and in Kosovo in 1999 (23.7), two missions deemed a success by NATO. In other much-less-successful cases the ratios were well under 20 – for example, Somalia in 1993 (4.6), Haiti in 1994 (3.5), Afghanistan in 2002 (0.5), and Iraq from 2003-2007 (6.1). In Iraq, controlling an insurgency in the 6 million-resident city of Baghdad needed some 120,000 troops, but the US forces in Iraq were undermanned, numbering about 70,000 combat troops in the entire country, with another 60,000 troops in support and headquarters units. Only acquired experience with counterinsurgency and the rebuilding of the Iraqi army as a friendly force allowed for the US to stabilize Iraq. The new US Army's counterinsurgency field manual has adopted the troop-density rule, recommending a minimum ratio of 20 troops per 1,000 local residents.

The Force-to-Space Ratio

In asymmetrical conflicts it is difficult, and sometimes impossible, to rely on a small number of troops using high-tech equipment to destroy a sophisticated guerrilla force, capture the terrain from which guerilla warfare is conducted, achieve decisive victory on the battlefield, or destroy rockets launchers used by insurgents against populated areas. Even the staunchest advocates of small but smart militaries would admit that sometimes a massive traditional army may be needed even in low-intensity conflicts. In 2003 the US Army Chief of Staff, Gen. Eric Shinseki, insisted that 200,000 troops were required to hold and police Iraq. The high-tech oriented military critics, who accepted the need for a more agile and precise land force capable of bringing lethal force to the battlefield, nevertheless criticized senior civilian Department of Defense officials for holding and spreading the view that numbers were no longer important. One should not forget that decisive victory on the battlefield at the strategic level has never been achieved from the air or via firepower, but rather only at the tactical level. Kosovo, which is often referred to in such contexts, was a victory achieved by denying the Serbian *society* the ability to carry on the war. The Serbian army remained almost unharmed by air attacks.

Another example is the 2006 Lebanon War, during which the IDF suffered from a shortage in ground troops as a result of years of insufficient

investment in the reserve troops. The reserve units used to be the Israeli army's backbone of the ground forces' reinforcement during wartime. Prior to the outbreak of the 2006 Lebanon War, the IDF failed to understand that a significant number of reserve units are needed in low-intensity conflicts, too. "Conventional war is no longer our top priority," explained Gen. Danny Van Buren, chief of the IDF's reserve forces, two months before the outbreak of the war. Based on this premise, the IDF phased out some reserve units, reduced the number of reservists activated, cut nearly in half the days served per year from 30 to 14, activated reserve units only for training (not combat or guard duty), and lowered the maximum age for reservists from 46 to 40. In the war the army paid dearly for these changes.

Conclusion

No matter how operationally or technologically sophisticated an army is, a force operating in low-intensity conflicts must be large if the army wishes to be effective. Reducing the number of military brigades and dissolving reserve infantry units could weaken the IDF's efficiency in coping with low-intensity challenges. Moreover, a large number of troops are needed to deal with multi-front scenarios, the chances of which may increase in the future.

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