



Neglect of IDF Ground Forces: A Risk to Israel's Security

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Dramatic cuts to the IDF budget have forced the army to reduce its ground forces capabilities. This is a mistake, as the IDF still must rely on a capable and credible ground force to deal with its strategic threats, specifically the rocket-launching capabilities of Hamas and Hizballah.

According to media reports and official statements, the dramatic cuts to the IDF budget have forced the army to choose one of two options: either strengthen the IDF's relative weaknesses – its maneuver-oriented ground forces – or, conversely, strengthen its relative strengths – stand-off fire, intelligence, cyber, and special forces. Apparently, the IDF has chosen the second course of action. The consequences for its standing and reserves ground forces are significant: closing the Namer APC and delaying the Merkava 5 tank projects; closing armor, artillery, and aircraft units; and a dramatic reduction in training. The ground forces could find themselves in dire straits, as it did prior to the Second Lebanon War.

The assumption behind this decision is that the ground forces' unique capabilities are less relevant to defeating future threats, and are therefore no longer necessary in large numbers. Instead, accurate long-range fire and special forces raids aimed by precise intelligence will rapidly destroy the enemy's capabilities.

However, this assumes a capability to predict the nature of these threats, especially the prediction that the IDF will not face a symmetrical enemy (a rival large-scale regular army). Rival armies do exist, but the IDF planners

assume they will not be used. Forecasting the future is difficult in any case; predicting the constant and erratic shifts in the Middle-East is doubly difficult. Just as no one could have foreseen the turmoil in the Arab world, no one can tell where the upheaval will end. These events have indeed reduced the probability of a high-intensity war between Israel and its neighbors in the immediate future, but no one can predict the situation in five or ten years.

The Ground Forces and Gaza

Deterrence is a central pillar in Israel's national security concept. He who wants to avoid a full-scale ground war should exhibit his readiness to conduct one successfully. Over the past twenty years Israel has conducted a number of operations based exclusively on fire power; the last one, Operation Pillar of Defense in November 2012, achieved its political goals. However, part of that success was due to the visible preparation of a ground invasion. Furthermore, the airstrike portion of that operation was not entirely successful; it destroyed almost all of the long-range rocket launchers, but Hamas still fired 1,500 rockets into Israel. Without the Iron Dome's spectacular success only a ground offensive or political surrender would have stopped the rockets. The existence of a strong high-quality ground force deters the enemy from posing threats that would trigger its use, and the lack of one will reduce deterrence.

Non-state armies that operate with autonomous units cannot be suppressed by strikes targeting a small number of command posts; each unit must be targeted separately. Against a small enemy confined in Gaza the combination of Iron Dome and air strikes were sufficient to induce a positive result. But would they be enough against Hizballah, an enemy deployed over a larger territory with an arsenal of strategic firepower – currently aimed at Israel's civilians – larger than that possessed by many states? At the Hamas rate of fire in November 2012, Hizballah can maintain fire for nine months.

Threats From Hizballah and Syria

It is true that Israel has often succeeded in surprising its enemies and reducing their strength with an initial strike; Operation Pillar of Defense illustrated this tactic. However, even if the Israel Air Force succeeds in surprising Hizballah again, as it did in 2006, and as it did to Hamas in 2008 and 2012, the maximum initial reduction in its arsenal would still leave Hizballah the capability of launching tens of thousands of rockets at Israel's civilians. Its short-range rockets cover a quarter of Israel, including large population centers and vital national infrastructure. Even without knowing the number of Iron Dome and other interceptors at Israel's disposal, it is clear that they number much less than the Hizballah rockets. Only the occupation

of the launch areas and its clearing by the ground forces will stop the fire quickly. The Israeli government will either have to abandon its civilians to a prolonged bombardment, hoping that Hizballah's resilience will break before theirs, or order a ground invasion to destroy or drive out the short-range launchers from striking distance. This mission requires a large ground force capable of quickly covering a large swath of territory – with armored vehicles that can withstand anti-tank missiles and large explosive devices – and support from artillery and mortar fire.

Hizballah is not Israel's strongest enemy. Even after the Syrian Army's severe degradation as a result of the civil war, it can still do everything Hizballah can and more. Though it is unlikely to attempt to invade Israeli territory – except perhaps to achieve limited propaganda victories – it can also heavily shell Israel. Compared to what the Syrians are doing to themselves, no Israeli retaliatory bombing will make much of an impression. Syria's economic infrastructure was bombed in 1973 without immediate strategic effect. Only a ground invasion to capture launch areas and threaten the regime's stability can shorten the war. Airstrikes against the military, leadership, and economic targets will cause much physical damage but relatively little to manpower. Only a ground invasion can cause heavy casualties to enemy troops, by forcing them to fight. To achieve this without suffering unacceptable losses to the IDF requires a well-equipped and well-trained ground force.

It has been correctly argued that the range of Israel's ground offensive capability is limited, much less than the range of many of the rockets and missiles available to its enemies. However, these long-range weapons are not the bulk of the available weapons and are more susceptible to air force strikes.

Conclusion

Cutting the order of battle of ground forces is easy, but rebuilding them is hard and time-consuming. Training troops requires months; procuring equipment and training mid-level officers requires years.

Some argue that war has changed and the army must change to adapt to it. The common slogan is that "the IDF must be relevant." But this is false. The nature of war has not changed; it is still defined as violence conducted to gain a political goal. What has changed is the strategy of Israel's foes, the technologies at play, and political reality. The characteristics of past wars have never been accurately predicted, and it is impossible to be sure of the characteristics of the next war. The IDF must remain relevant not only for a specific, limited capability in a particular scenario, but should be built to

defeat varying threats – including “low probability” ones that might one day become real.

Fiscal reality compels the IDF to make choices and where to focus its efforts. However, the choices that have been revealed to the public seem to threaten the IDF’s relevance in a number of scenarios that are still probable, even if not imminent. Flexibility is a crucial characteristic of any military organization, and this requires a strong ground forces component.

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