

Was it a Mistake to Downsize and Deemphasize Israel's Ground Forces?

A Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies Memorandum, July 21, 2014.

Read more: [Neglect of IDF Ground Forces: A Risk to Israel's Security](#), by [Dr. Eitan Shamir](#) and [Dr. Eado Hecht](#).

In December 2013, the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies held a conference to discuss controversial cuts in the IDF ground forces. "Neglect of the IDF's ground forces poses a risk to Israel's security. There are real battles ahead against well-entrenched Hamas and Hezbollah armies," warned the BESA Center's [Dr. Eitan Shamir](#), who organized the conference.

With the IDF now embroiled in an intensive ground battle with Hamas in Gaza, and many infantry and armor units complaining of insufficient preparation, it seems that Shamir had a point.

According to conference co-sponsor and speaker, military analyst [Amir Rappaport](#) (publisher and editor of *Israel Defense* magazine, and a research associate at the BESA Center), the IDF has clearly decided to invest primarily in air force capabilities, intelligence, special operations forces, stand-off precision fire and cyber capabilities; at the expense of its more traditional units, mainly the ground forces.

IDF Chief-of-Staff, Lt. Gen. (res.) Benny Gantz did not think, he said, that the IDF would need to fight a conventional army force in the foreseeable future, nor have to conduct large scale ground maneuvers in enemy territory.

Two opposing schools of thought were presented in the conference. The revisionist school supported the direction that Gantz is taking, while a conservative school of thought expressed concern that these changes will weaken the IDF and make it too dependent on technology.

An enthusiastic supporter of the new IDF direction was Brig. Gen. Gal Hirsh, a division commander during the Second Lebanon War and current deputy commander of the IDF Depth Command (a command formed in 2011 to coordinate the IDF's long range operations deep in enemy territory). Hirsh argued that the use of flexible special operations forces equipped with

excellent intelligence provides the best response for the current threat posed by various terror organizations.

Hirsh's view was supported by Brig. Gen. (res.) Avigdor Klein, former Chief Officer of the Armored Corps, who voiced his approval for reduction in armored forces as part of necessary adaptations the IDF has to make.

A different perspective was offered by Vice Admiral (res.) Eli Marom, former Commander of the Navy. Marom stressed the need to diversify IDF precision-fire capabilities and not to concentrate it all in the hands of the air force. Today's technology, he explained, allows for precision fire to be launched from the sea as well, making the IDF a better balanced force.

Another aspect Marom discussed was the importance of the human factor: motivating soldiers through the education of values. "Not everything is technology, and to put boots on the ground you need well-motivated soldiers," he said.

Probably the strongest and most original critique of the new IDF thinking was offered by Maj. Gen. Gershon Hacoen, the outgoing Corps Commander of the IDF General Staff. General Hacoen argued that the IDF has become too dependent on technological solutions, rather than developing different strategies to cope with new threats.

"Military doctrine is a function of culture; it is never universal but is rooted in time and place. For years the hallmark of the IDF was the initiative and creativity of individual soldiers. Instead of the 'art of war,' today the IDF has become obsessed with the 'science of war' – statistics and numbers of targets hit – but this does not necessarily measure effectiveness. The IDF needs to maintain its ability to adapt to changing circumstances just like some of its rivals are doing. Technology cannot solve everything!" warned Hacoen.

Hacoen also warned the IDF not to neglect its ability to deploy a mass army. "A 'smart and small army based on special forces' is a nice slogan, but sometimes the events dictate the need for large forces to operate. IDF planning in this regard needs to be reexamined."

By way of background, [Dr. Shamir](#) of the BESA Center explains that the backbone of the IDF traditionally has been based on a large land army, comprised of heavy armored brigades supported by artillery and infantry. Most of the ground forces were reserve units mobilized from their homes in the event of war. A strong air force ensured air superiority of the sky and allowed the time for the reserves to deploy. This system proved highly effective in Israel's first decades of existence, when the main strategic threat was large conventional Arab armies threatening to invade Israel's territory.

However, Dr. Shamir says that three major strategic shifts occurred in the last two to three decades. First is the change in the IDF's main strategic challenge. The last time the IDF engaged in combat with a conventional army was on Lebanese soil against the Syrian army in 1982. Since then, the threat from conventional armies has diminished. Egypt and Jordan signed peace treaties with Israel (in 1979 and 1994). Iraq's army was essentially eliminated by US invasion in 2003. The Syrian army too has been devastated by the civil war in that country, with no end in sight.

Instead of conventional armies, the IDF finds itself occupied with operations against terror and guerilla organizations such as Hamas in Gaza, Islamic Jihad in Sinai, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. The threat to Israel's home front has also changed, from bombardment by hostile air forces to rocket and missile fire by terror organizations. The country that most supports and supplies these organizations is a non-Arab state actor that does not share a border with Israel – Iran. Iran also has a nuclear program that poses a threat to the entire Middle East. Under these circumstances Israel must be able to project force thousands of kilometers from home.

The second shift relates to the latest technological developments in the military (as well as civilian society) and the new possibilities they present on the battlefield. The introduction of drones and unmanned vehicles in the air, sea and land; networks of digital command and control; precision fire that can be launched from almost any platform; and cyber-warfare – all hold the potential to alter, and in some cases have already changed, the way armies fight.

The third shift in the strategic environment relates to domestic politics. The large civil protest demonstrations in Israel of 2011 reflect a change in priorities of the Israeli public: "More butter, fewer guns." The result is a growing public pressure on the IDF to become more effective and less costly.

Ideally, like every military, the IDF would like to have it all: The new F-35 jet fighter and state-of-the-art Dolphin class submarines, the new Namer APC and a new model of the Merkava tank, and additional batteries of Iron Dome, Arrow and the new David Sling missile defense systems. However, due to budget pressures, the IDF must compromise and make hard choices.

The Gaza war currently underway raises the question whether Israel and the IDF have made the right choices.

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