



Fight Not the Last War

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Operation Protective Edge in Gaza against Hamas was, in many ways, an exceptional operation that will probably not repeat itself elsewhere. The IDF fought in a unique set of circumstances: an inferior enemy a stone's throw from the border with the IDF using its full force, in some cases entirely unopposed. The IDF must be careful not to make too many operational changes based on the lessons of this operation, because the next wars will likely be fought under completely different terms.

Lately, a lot has been said in praise of the way the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) fought in Gaza during Operation Protective Edge. Indeed, great courage and extraordinary sacrifice were displayed during the operation. The commanders led from the front and displayed the kind of vigor that field commanders ought to possess. We have been promised that the IDF will investigate and draw conclusions from the outcomes of this operation, and that is precisely what should be done. No serious, professional institution can ever develop and progress without delving deep into its own actions – for better and worse.

However, it is advisable to be very careful with the process of drawing conclusions. The term "conclusions" in the military sense stems from the understanding that it is possible to improve from one battle to the next by learning from mistakes. But in order to actually improve in the future, great care must be taken, because each battle is slightly, or extremely, different than the one that preceded it. There is a high likelihood that a conclusion drawn from one event will not apply to the next.

Thus, for example, in the 1967 Six-Day War the enemy Arab air forces were crippled and our air force became available to assist ground forces in a way that was purposeful and effective. The "conclusion" drawn by the military was that there was no need for artillery on the ground because the ground forces could be effectively covered from the air. Six years later, during the Yom Kippur War, this strategy did not work. The conclusion was misleading because it was derived from a unique set of circumstances that would not occur again. The result was devastating: Ground forces went to battle without serious artillery cover. It is important to remember this as a warning against drawing mistaken conclusions from unique events, both in a strategic and tactical sense.

The most recent campaign in Gaza was, in many ways, an exceptional operation that will probably not repeat itself elsewhere. The fighting was against a small enemy, and it was waged entirely within the confines of a small, crowded space. The enemy felt diplomatically isolated and was not receiving any aid from anyone during the course of the fighting. Meanwhile, Israel unleashed the full power of its air force – the fourth largest air force in the world – on this narrow swathe of land, and marched (almost) all its ground forces (only) half a step inside, rubbing up against the enemy's protective shell but never confronting its main forces.

True, it was impossible to surprise the enemy – they knew exactly where and when to lie in wait for our soldiers.. But ultimately, just to put things into the right perspective, the IDF never "maneuvered," it simply forged ahead, a very short way, along the entire front.

Due to these specific circumstances, there was never a logistical problem because all the fighting was conducted within a 20 minute drive of an Israeli base. There was no difficulty in evacuating casualties beyond the point of friction because everything happened so close to the border. There was no issue of assistance because the troops were constantly within the range of the artillery units deployed in advance. The fact that the IDF waged battle just a miniscule distance from its own border and its permanent bases and infrastructure carried enormous significance, but it precludes the drawing of any significant "conclusions."

The characteristics of the enemy the IDF faced in the latest round of fighting were also extremely unique. So even when selecting the terminology to describe it, one must take extreme care: It was not a war, but an operation. It was even a limited operation, despite being techno-tactically challenging and despite the fact that several command centers were involved.

In large part, the enemy was static, beyond the most basic tactical levels. They did not possess tanks, armed helicopters, serious artillery, air defenses or anti-tank capabilities, beyond a handful of missiles. No depth and no provisions. As far as the IDF is concerned, that is not a war, even when its soldiers are fighting a bitter and painful fight –and it was certainly bitter and painful on the individual level as well as on the platoon and possibly even the squad level. For the purpose of drawing conclusions, the army must avoid being influenced by the great difficulty and low-level tactical challenges (and there were enormous difficulties and great personal risk).

The truth is that in terms of scope of the enemy battalion, they didn't really set a high bar for our troops. It is unlikely that the IDF would have been forced to flex too many muscles, mainly because the enemy operated in small groups, and in most cases there was no organized hierarchy that would allow a large-scale military chain of command.

The terrain was one of the biggest challenges in tactical terms – crowded built up areas equipped with well-built underground tunnels. These characteristics put our troops in extreme danger and created a chaos that hindered the tactical fighting and made it difficult for the IDF commanders to keep tabs on their troops. But let us keep things in proportion: Despite all these difficulties, it is no big feat for the army and the operational units to fight an enemy outnumbered 3:1, under heavy fire, for which the army has been training its soldiers for generations.

According to various interviews that appeared in the Israeli media, some of the strategy on how to confront the tunnel threat was developed in real time during the course of the fighting, because the true significance of the tunnels wasn't entirely understood before the operation. That, for example, is a good place to

draw conclusions on how to implement the significance of new threats developed between rounds of fighting, and how to improve the learning process during the course of the fighting.

There is no doubt that armies of foreign countries, especially democratic countries, will study the steps the IDF took to avoid civilian casualties in Gaza. We have plenty to teach the world in that regard, and that is something we should be proud of. No foreign army can hold itself to the IDF's standards, and that is nothing to complain about. However, we are allowed to, and should, demand more of ourselves. Maybe other armies will be able to learn the techniques developed by the IDF to combat tunnels in residential spaces, but not much more than that. Otherwise, during this operation, the IDF didn't really innovate in any important military field.

In conclusion, beyond the techno-tactical topics, it will be difficult to learn anything of true value for the future from such a unique set of circumstances: an inferior enemy a stone's throw from the border with the IDF using its full force, in some cases entirely unopposed. The IDF deserves accolades for its performance, but it must be careful not to make too many changes based on the lessons of this operation.

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