



PERSPECTIVES

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Israel's "West Point" Increasingly Shapes the IDF Ground Forces

by Yaakov Lappin

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Israel Defense Forces' Tactical Command College (TCC), the Israeli equivalent of the West Point military academy, is increasingly shaping the professional cadre of the Israeli military's ground forces and leaving its mark on future military leaders.

Lt. Col (res.) Gideon Sharav, head of the Military Studies department at the IDF's Tactical Command College (TCC) and today a civilian employee of the IDF, has been at the academy since the day of its founding 20 years ago. According to Sharav, the TCC represents "the most serious effort by the green IDF [the ground forces] to create a level of professional specialty."

Unlike West Point, which receives cadets and turns them into officers, the TCC receives soldiers who are already officers at the rank of lieutenant. They come from all the ground forces—infantry, armored corps, engineering corps, and artillery corps.

They study for two years—the longest qualification program in the ground forces—during which they dive into military and leadership studies. They obtain a bachelor's degree in economics, political science, education, media, or biology from the University of Haifa.

During their studies, they analyze some 80 military battles from Israel and abroad in addition to 3,000 years' worth of military history. This includes recreating battles.

Exercises, lectures, and visits both within Israel and abroad teach the officers military lessons, said Sharav. He cited a trip to Vietnam that took place before the coronavirus pandemic during which the officers studied strategies and doctrines of the Vietnam War.

The officers go on to become company commanders—but only a third of the IDF's company commanders are TCC graduates. This is probably because attending the academy means soldiers must sign up for at least four to five years of professional IDF service. That is a commitment not all officers who have already been serving for four to five years are prepared to make.

Nevertheless, noted Sharav, “the interesting figure is that half of the IDF's battalion and brigade commanders [the command positions following company commander] are our graduates. One of the things that we manage to create is a military identity.”

After the Second Lebanon War of 2006, the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee examined officer training and called on the IDF to expand the number of officers who pass through the TCC.

“This has happened, but not sufficiently,” reported Sharav. “Company commanders today have much more on their shoulders compared to their counterparts from 30 years ago. They have many more capabilities; they must conduct multi-domain combat and activate firepower. The complexity that is required of them in Lebanon or Gaza, and the state of Israeli society, are not similar to what was in place 30 and 40 years ago.”

“On-the-job training doesn't cut it anymore”

Col. Shahar Back has been commander of the TCC for a year. He told this author about the relatively new IDF concept of going beyond the traditional model of on-the-job training for officers.

In the past, when security incidents and conflicts were frequent and wars occurred every decade, with significant military operations erupting every three to four years, on-the-job training was “very substantial,” said Back, since “commanders experienced combat conditions. They experienced real developments in command and in combat.”

Fortunately, clashes have grown farther apart, and the IDF has not been involved in a major armed conflict since 2014. In this new situation, “on-the-job training doesn't cut it anymore.”

This led the IDF to reach the same conclusion as did the US military: that alongside technological training and upgrades and multi-domain combat, it is the intellectual quality of officers that provides a true advantage in combat. “We are working on creating that level of intellectually high-quality officers,” said Back.

The Israeli navy and air force have their own well-established officer courses, but the ground forces' only equivalent is the TCC. "It really crystallizes the organizational identity. Our graduates stay in the system for longer," said Back.

Every year, the TCC graduates about 60 company commanders who go on to form the professional core of the IDF ground forces as they gradually move up the ranks and become battalion and brigade commanders.

The number of TCC graduates at the higher command levels means "these officers stay longer than those who didn't pass through the TCC. It means they are more committed, that they have a sense of mission that is totally different," Back added.

Following the 2014 conflict with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, eight out of the 10 ground forces company commanders who received citations were TCC graduates, a further indication of the academy's influence.

The TCC's activities include building mental resilience and teaching leadership, command-and-control abilities, and in-depth combat doctrines.

Cadets take an annual test after their first year in which they summarize their own progress. Some note major failures they experienced during their training—a natural part of the course—and describe how they are able to analyze those setbacks to see where and why they failed and to learn from their mistakes.

"We have to create these failures in a controlled manner in order to study and learn from them, professionally, in an in-depth manner," said Back. "The TCC is very personal. It's about fostering maturity and identity. Building character is what we offer here. The difference between how cadets enter and leave our gates is the cardinal thing here; their development is highly accelerated. What matters is not the difficulty but the difference in how one enters and leaves. Personal experiences are very empowering."

As part of their leadership training, the officers study time management, written expression, and crisis and conflict management. Officers are placed in situations of simulated conflict among personnel in which there are no good or bad decisions, only "least worst" decisions.

"This is very personal, and the officers use these simulations to get better at decision-making under pressure and uncomfortable conditions. This is based on the understanding that when they find themselves in tough situations in the field, they will say, 'Wait a second! I remember what this feels like, when the ground seems to be vanishing under my feet. I remember what it feels like

to have unresolved tension—the feeling that whatever decision I take will be imperfect. I've been in this situation, I know the order of action, I know how to analyze this," said Back.

Building a professional backbone

The TCC encourages commanders to develop their own individual command styles and mental strengths. Within two years, officers learn how to develop their own singular approaches.

"Instead of doing this trial and error on people, which includes acute errors, they've already practiced this, and they arrive at their command positions as experienced commanders without [making] mistakes that can cost lives or lead to failures of real-life processes," said Back.

Officers enter the TCC at age 22 or 23 and form groups of 15, with each group receiving instruction from a battalion commander. Such intimate training has "hugely significant value," said Back. "This can't be mass-replicated."

"In the end," he said, "we have the 72-year-old IDF narrative that says that on-the-job field training is what is important, which is great, but what happens when friction stops? The tools we provide will serve these officers for many years."

The TCC cooperates closely with West Point, and the two academies have exchanged delegations every year except for 2020 (due to coronavirus limitations). "We also exchange ideas and have a mutual patent-exchange program," said Back. "The IDF is building its professional backbone here."

This is an edited version of an [article](#) that appeared in JNS on December 2, 2020.

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