



Defending Israel

By Maj. Gen. (Res.) Gershon Hacohen

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: In order to meet the external and domestic security challenges confronting it, Israel must promptly take two main steps: substantial expansion of the IDF's order of battle (by increasing its fighting units and creating a sizeable internal-security force), and reconstitution of its long-neglected territorial defense system.

The explosion of mass violence by Israel's Arabs against their fellow Jewish citizens at a time when the country was under attack by an external enemy exposed two fundamental weaknesses in the defense establishment's operational preparedness: an acute shortage of police and IDF manpower, and non-existence of the once formidable territorial defense system that incorporated army-trained armed local residents in border communities into the overall defense effort in their respective areas.

The illusion of a small, smart army

For over three decades the IDF has been steadily reducing its order of forces, especially reserve units, so as to create a "small, smart army" (to use the words of former chief-of-staff Ehud Barak). Former PM Ehud Olmert has recently joined this groupthink, proposing the substitution of a professional army for the existing conscript-based system and dismissing compulsory conscription as an anachronistic relic from the 1950s.

It is true that top of the line weaponry, including precision-guided armaments and sophisticated intelligence measures, give the IDF a clear qualitative edge. Yet for all the impressive technological breakthroughs of recent years, the belief that the era of mass mobilization is over ignores the complexity of warfare. The main fighting effort should definitely be carried out by elite, top-quality strike forces,

but they will still need the backing and support of a large-scale quantitative mass at a medium level of quality.

In view of the recent tidal wave of Arab violence across Israel, there is a dire need for the establishment of a sizeable internal security force based on IDF reservists, which will operate under the Home Front Command and/or the Border Police. For years now, most young IDF veterans have not been assigned to reserve units and they can readily be recruited to this hugely important national mission of reasserting the state's sovereignty, governability, and rule of law across the entire country.

The lasting vitality of territorial defense

Whereas in Israel's early days, borderline villages and towns were an integral part of the overall defensive system with IDF reservists living there organized in local frameworks and given weapons to fend off an enemy attack, today's frontline communities have no means to defend themselves apart from small on-call contingent groups in the various localities. Nor do these communities have any suitable infrastructure of defensive fortifications against an attack by enemy forces.

During his tenure as IDF chief-of-staff (1978-83), Lt. Gen. Raphael Eitan set up a string of protective fortifications in border localities, to be manned in wartime by residents in the territorial defense framework of reserve duty. As he explained:

Territorial defense communities are the local standing army. They must ensure that we stay in control and they must prevent the enemy from disrupting our systems in case of war. Very vital, then, are: their tactical location on the ground, their possession of up-to-date weapons, the training of their residents for their task, and the proper fortification of these communities.

With the passage of time, this territorial defense system withered away, mainly because the military and political leaderships no longer deemed it necessary. Yet in the present strategic circumstances of a clear and present danger of wartime attack on border communities, as well as of mass anti-Jewish riots in mixed Jewish-Arab cities and disruption of Israel's transportation arteries by militant nationalist gangs - the existing operational solution suffers from two major flaws:

- The timely deployment of security forces to trouble spots is heavily dependent on an early intelligence warning, which may not be always forthcoming.
- Deploying army elite forces for defensive purposes makes them less available for required offensive operations in enemy territory.

Yigal Alon, one of Israel's more original military/strategic thinkers, maintained that "Without territorial defense, which is based mainly on rural localities, the army would have to allocate considerable forces to defensive functions. The IDF, which is smaller than the Arab armies that surround Israel, cannot allow a weakening of its offensive force."

Over the years, this outlook has faded away and today the border communities are no longer incorporated into the overall defensive effort. In light of the current map of external and domestic threats, it is vital to revive the territorial defense system as both a safety net in the event of a surprise attack and a facilitator of a better and more effective use of IDF forces in states of external and/or domestic emergency.

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