



The Russo-Ukraine War: Possible Lessons for the IDF

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The war in Ukraine is an example of modern high-intensity warfare. As such, it offers a number of lessons that can be learned about the capabilities, limitations, and requirements of armies conducting such warfare. New technology and methods have added capabilities, but have not rendered more traditional methods of warfare and technology obsolete. The IDF should learn to merge the new with the old by acquiring competence in new technology and tactics while maintaining technical and tactical competence in the veteran "basics".

This article will point out a few of the more important lessons the IDF can learn from the Russo-Ukraine War. Before discussing those lessons, however, a caveat must be stated. The political and military situations of Israel, Russia, and Ukraine are different, so not every lesson being taught by the warfare in Ukraine is relevant to Israel. Also, some lessons might be relevant "as is" while others might require adaptation.

A Shift in Expectations

There has been discussion for decades in Western armies and academia, as well as in Israel, on the changing characteristics of warfare. It has been proposed that these changes represent not merely an evolution but a revolution, in that changes are occurring not only in the characteristics of warfare but perhaps even in the nature of war itself. Some of this discussion is purely theoretical, while some is

based on analysis of wars conducted in the 1990s and early 2000s. The year-long war in Ukraine has added much fuel to this debate.

Over the late 1990s and early 2000s, the IDF gradually adopted an extreme view of the transformation occurring in warfare and the adjustments it needed to make to its own composition and operational art. Future wars, its senior commanders believed, would no longer include major maneuvers of massed formations conducting high-intensity warfare (inaccurately dubbed “old”, “classic”, or “traditional” warfare), but would be purely low-intensity warfare with the enemy invariably employing methods of guerrilla warfare and terrorism. Accordingly, it was argued, the IDF should be reorganized and retrained to focus on counter-guerrilla and counter-terrorist operations (just as inaccurately dubbed “new” warfare).¹ The conquering of territory was deemed irrelevant and even politically and militarily counter-productive. Wars would be decided by an exchange of fire with a minimum of maneuver or by small forces conducting counter-guerrilla raids, ambushes, and patrols.

Furthermore, argued proponents of this view, if by chance some enemy attempted to conduct “old-style” warfare against Israel, it would be easily defeated by the new technologies of surveillance systems and precise long-range weapons. Mechanized formations attacking these new capabilities would be rapidly decimated and were therefore no longer viable on the future battlefield. Statistical weapons were virtually obsolete and should be almost entirely discarded by the IDF, as should the majority of its armored vehicles.² New non-lethal options such as offensive cyber operations would disarm and dislocate enemy forces and even the enemy’s political entity with a minimum of bloodshed, compelling the enemy to desist from its attacks on Israel.

The Reality in Ukraine

The war in Ukraine has obviously not met any of these expectations. Two very large armies employing large mechanized and infantry formations backed by significant statistical fire capabilities are engaged in offensive and defensive maneuvers. They have fought and are still fighting to control territory and have both suffered enormous casualties to achieve their goals.

The first and perhaps most important lesson of this conflict, and the lesson from which many of the others stem, is that this type of warfare can still occur and national armies must be prepared for it.

One could argue that this is a result of the fact that both armies in question are outdated. Neither studied the new reality or adopted the latest technologies, doctrine, and training, so the conflict in which they are engaged is not a good example of current and future trends in warfare. This is true, but only to a certain extent. Both armies have employed some new technological capabilities (cyber warfare, a wide variety of remotely piloted aircraft, and long-range guided munitions) that were supposed to revolutionize the character of warfare. Despite this, both armies continue to employ and reinforce their forces with supposedly obsolete technologies (artillery, armored personnel carriers and tanks) in order to sustain their military effort.

Russia's massive cyber warfare effort achieved only partial success and failed to neutralize or sufficiently disrupt the functioning of Ukraine's state and military apparatuses. Ukraine's use of armed remotely piloted aircraft and advanced anti-tank missiles slowed Russian mechanized formations and caused them severe casualties (though not in excess of similar wars in the past), but did not halt them, despite the tactical incompetence prominently displayed by these forces. The Russians were finally halted deep in Ukraine by concentrated close-combat actions and enormous statistical artillery concentrations.³

Some of the fighting in Ukraine looks very similar to the battles of WWII and even WWI, even with the addition of many modern technologies of communications, remotely piloted aircraft, and advanced guided munitions to the even more numerous "old" weapons being employed.

Israel's Military Situation

One could also argue that though the IDF thinkers might have been wrong on the global level, they might still be correct on the local level. Perhaps "old-style" wars can still occur in places where older methods and technology are still relevant, but they do not apply to the specific threats that face Israel and that accordingly determine the IDF's particular needs. This argument too is partially correct. The enemies facing Israel over the past two decades are lacking in mechanized warfare capabilities, and the constant warfare in which the IDF is involved on a

continuous day-to-day basis--as well as the most likely escalations in this fighting in the near future--are indeed low-intensity warfare. However, constant low-intensity warfare has occasionally escalated in the past to medium- or high-intensity warfare, a scenario that has threatened Israel's security since its establishment. Furthermore, some of Israel's enemies are evolving to create massed armies capable of "old-style" warfare, even if they are not yet mechanized.

The most powerful of Israel's current enemies, Hezbollah, has grown into a large army capable of conducting regular defensive warfare and a limited regular offensive into Israeli territory. Given the size of Hezbollah's rocket arsenal, in a major confrontation Israel's very impressive anti-rocket defenses will not provide the level of protection they succeeded in providing against the much smaller capabilities of Gaza. To significantly reduce Hezbollah's bombardment of Israel's civilian population, the IDF will be compelled to conduct a major ground offensive into Lebanon, as small teams of special forces conducting raids or directing focused precision fire will not be enough.

A major offensive of this kind will require large IDF forces to rapidly capture and clear broad swathes of southern Lebanon to destroy or evict the rocket launch teams. Doing this will require defeating the defensive forces Hezbollah has established there, which are now roughly 10 times larger, better armed, better organized, and better trained than the forces it had in southern Lebanon in 2006. If this is to be successfully accomplished, the IDF will have to be equipped and trained to conduct massed regular warfare operations. Precision fire and special forces will certainly be important components in these operations, but they will not be able to achieve sufficiently rapid decisive results on their own.

Though Hezbollah's forces are much smaller and less heavily equipped than the Ukrainian army, the theater of war in Lebanon is much smaller than that of Ukraine. Also, Lebanese terrain is hilly and densely covered in fortified built-up areas (mostly large villages) rather than the huge open expanses of flat terrain in Ukraine, creating a higher density of forces per portion of territory in Lebanon. Therefore, the density of Hezbollah defenses and the concentrated anti-personnel and anti-armor fire they can produce will require the IDF to conduct offensive operations reminiscent of the breakthrough operations of past wars. It will require massed offensive fire and armored vehicles, though dismounted infantry will also play a major role given the character of the terrain.

The IDF must therefore prepare for high-intensity massed force operations. Given Israel's strategic situation, even if it prefers to remain defensive on the ground and conduct its offensives with stand-off precision fire, there are scenarios in which it would be compelled to conduct massed offensive maneuver operations. In those situations, it would have to enter hostile territory to defeat enemy forces and capture territory, even if only temporarily.

Possible Lessons from the Ukraine War for the IDF

In the war in Ukraine, most of the offensive actions are being conducted by the Russians, though the Ukrainians have conducted some as well. The causes of success or failure of these offensive actions must be studied to derive lessons relevant to the IDF, even if they require adaptation.

The first and most prominent lesson of the war in Ukraine is the necessity for technical and tactical competence and proficiency of combat forces in high-intensity warfare. Such warfare can still occur, and it requires different skills than the more common low-intensity warfare. Those skills include the ability to conduct, from the battalion to the division level, highly coordinated combined-arms operations against a massed enemy rather than against scattered teams of guerrillas or terrorists.

During the Second Lebanon War, the IDF exhibited a serious degradation of its proficiency in these skills. Creating and maintaining these skills requires first, acknowledgment that they are needed; second, a doctrine focusing on them; and third, sufficient training to implement that doctrine. In the wake of the tactical debacles of the Second Lebanon War, the IDF has improved in all three of these areas, but many Israeli observers contend that it is still far from its past level of proficiency.

Another possible lesson of the war in Ukraine is that while new technologies are very useful, they are not wonder-weapons that transcend veteran principles of warfare. Cyber offensives can be countered by cyber defense, redundancy, and alternate non-cyber-dependent equipment; massed use of remotely piloted aircraft can be countered by new anti-aircraft weapons and new electronic warfare equipment; and while precision fire is efficient, it does not provide everything ground forces need from their fire support. Though the rival armies in Ukraine might be somewhat deficient in precision fire, it has not proven a total

game-changer, and older fire and maneuver weapons are still providing essential capabilities. The lesson for the IDF is that it has moved too fast and too far in reducing its arsenal of tanks and statistical artillery (both guns and mortars).

A third lesson is that troop numbers still count. True combat power amounts to a multiplication of quantity by quality and the will to fight. This means that the massive reduction in IDF reserve ground combat units might leave it with insufficient forces to conduct high-intensity operations—especially if a high-intensity war involves more than one front and continues for many weeks or months rather than the days or few weeks of the past. Furthermore, given that the new technologies are extremely expensive and the older technologies have proven to still provide worthwhile and essential capabilities, it is not necessary to provide every unit in the large IDF with all the latest technology. Certain new technologies might be more important than others. If some are allocated to less fully equipped units (for example, the basic active anti-missile protection system for armored vehicles), the total difference in combat capability would prove less dramatic than previously believed.

A vital lesson is the need to provide robustness and redundancy in communications. A military unit exists only if it has effective and stable communications between its component sub-units. Otherwise it is just a collection of soldiers and equipment functioning independently according to individual estimates of the situation and combative spirit.

The IDF has been computerizing its communications more and more in an attempt to create a networked force. If successful, this new technology will dramatically speed up the transfer of reports and commands, creating rapid responses with fire or maneuver to every new situation or target. However, this technology is also more susceptible to electronic and cyber attack and is also less mobile. The Ukrainian computerized command and control system was disrupted by a Russian cyber attack on the first day of the war. However, Kyiv had prepared for this eventuality by maintaining older systems that were less susceptible to such interference. This enabled the Ukrainian army to continue to function effectively, if less efficiently.

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¹ Any serious perusal of the history of warfare shows that the vast majority of wars have always been low-intensity – i.e., focused on guerrilla and terror strategies and tactics. The so-called “new wars” are in fact the oldest and most common type of warfare and have existed ever since humans began to fight each other.

² According to public figures, over the past two decades the IDF has discarded most of its tanks and artillery and shut down a large number of formations.

³ In the words of one Ukrainian senior officer: “Anti-tank missiles slowed the Russians down, but what killed them was our artillery. That was what broke their units.”