



Ma'alot (Ascent): The IDF Will Need to Drastically Update Its Multi-Year Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The IDF's new multi-year strategy, Ma'alot (Ascent), led by IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi, was formulated before the Hamas mass murder attack on Israel of October 7, 2023. It was intended to build upon its predecessor, Momentum, emphasizing human capital, countering Iranian threats, boosting land maneuvers and border defenses, and refining organizational culture. It will need a drastic update following the war.

Prior to the October 7 mass murder attack on southern Israel by Hamas death squads and the collapse of fundamental operational and intelligence assumptions that guided the Israeli defense establishment, the IDF was shifting from the Momentum multi-year program, in place from 2020 to 2023, to its successor, Ma'alot (Hebrew for "ascent").

After the war, when the military has had time to review its failures, draw conclusions, and learn lessons, many of those lessons should be used to update the multi-year program and guide future Israeli force build-up.

The need will arise to get back to basics, which means prioritizing the destruction of the bulk of the enemy's military resources that are embedded in civilian, built-up areas, both above ground and underground. Afterwards, the IDF will have to focus on continuous ground and air operations fueled by intelligence to prevent Iran-backed tentacles like Hamas from rebuilding offensive military-terrorist capabilities after a war.

This relegates the concept of prioritizing sensor-based border defenses, and aiming to achieve lengthy periods of quiet while allowing terror armies to build capabilities almost without disruption, to the past in favor of offensive, continuous cross-border operational Israeli postures, with security operations launched on an as-needed basis.

The Ascent program strived to pick up where Momentum left off and outlined new strategic objectives for the IDF's force build-up. Prior to the war, IDF Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Herzl Halevi defined four fundamental pillars for Ascent. They were:

1. People and military-society relations. This clause was based on the premise that Israel will only be able to deal with its severe security challenges if its best and most suitable people choose to continue to perform significant military service.
2. The need to deal with Iran's ascension in the regional as a hostile power, led by a radical regime, that presents a multi-arena threat. In response, Ascent sought to improve Israeli readiness through boosted intelligence, defense, and offense.
3. The need for better training and readiness for ground maneuvers and border defense capabilities, with a stress on multi-force coordination.
4. The boosting of the IDF's operational and organizational culture by strengthening the young commanders in its ranks, intensifying the sense of responsibility among its personnel, and utilizing human capital to maximum effectiveness.

During a key workshop that took place at Camp Moshe Dayan just north of Tel Aviv on September 4-5, these topics were discussed by Halevi together with the IDF Planning and Force Design Directorate (J8), with the participation of members of the General Staff and additional senior officials as well.

However, in light of the collapse of the concept of border defense, sensor-based early warnings, and over-reliance on prior intelligence of intentions, accompanied by the failure to imagine how enemy capabilities could be used to overwhelm costly border protection systems, the next IDF multi-year program will need to focus on getting back to basics.

Momentum, the program that came before Ascent, which was formulated by former Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. (res.) Aviv Kochavi and his General Staff, offered a

new definition of what constituted military victory. Some of its achievements can and should be incorporated into the updated Ascent program.

The emphasis in Momentum switched away from the traditional goal of seizing enemy territory and instead defined victory as the rapid elimination of enemy capabilities. This concept could prove useful in the post-war Gaza arena, when the IDF will need to switch to a posture of denying Hamas the ability to rebuild its terror army through continuous security operations and cross-border raids.

Momentum's conception of success placed an emphasis on the fast destruction of enemy infrastructure, including command centers, armament stores, and projectile bases, as well as personnel. It measured victory through the speed and effectiveness with which threats could be eliminated. The same concept, at a lower intensity, can be applied to prevent the rebuilding of new capabilities, as Israel has done in different ways in both the West Bank and Syria - and failed to do in Lebanon against Hezbollah between 2006 and 2023.

Momentum's strategy was designed to build a network-based Israeli war machine that closed sensor to shooter cycles in very little time and delivered the full range of IDF "services," such as air power and intelligence, to the battalion commanders operating on the front lines.

These capabilities will be critical in the ground offensive to destroy Hamas's terror army in Gaza.

At the International Operational Innovation Conference held by the IDF in 2022, the achievements of Momentum were put on display for 200 international participants from 24 military delegations who came to witness the IDF's network-based combat capabilities.

The key question going forward is how Ascent will pick up where Momentum left off.

The need to significantly boost the IDF's force build-up budget will also need to be confronted by any future government in the post-war phase.

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