



In 2017, BESA Researchers Warned of Hamas Building Itself in Order to Carry Out a Large-Scale Raid Into Israel

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Over six and a half years ago, two researchers from the BESA Center, Dr. Eado Hecht and Prof. Eitan Shamir, warned of a development that could lead to a scenario similar to the one that occurred on October 7 in the Gaza envelope. They and others made similar warnings about Hezbollah, but few pointed to the possibility of such a scenario unfolding in the south.

The BESA researchers not only outlined a scenario markedly similar to what actually happened in the south on 7th October 2023 but made practical suggestions regarding the force-structure required by the IDF to provide an effective response to such a scenario. They criticized the significant reduction in ground forces, especially in the armored and artillery units. The authors analyzed the various non-state military organizations facing Israel, including Hamas, and revealed the goal of their force build-up: creating the capacity to launch incursions with significant forces to occupy Israeli settlements close to the border. The researchers argued that in view of this enemy strategy, the IDF's continued reduction and neglect of major ground forces, coupled with reliance on precision weaponry and airpower, constituted a flawed strategy.

Over six and a half years ago, BESA Center researchers Dr. Eado Hecht and Professor Eitan Shamir warned of a development that could lead to a scenario

similar to what occurred on October 7, 2023 in the Gaza envelope. Many others at the time were cautioning about Hezbollah's intentions to attack in the north following the declaration by Hezbollah's leader of a desire to conquer the Galilee in the next war, the exercises conducted by Hezbollah's elite force, Radwan, and its deployment on the northern border. However, only a few hinted at the possibility that such a scenario could arise in the south. The BESA researchers not only outlined a scenario strikingly similar to what actually happened but also offered practical suggestions regarding the necessary force-structure required by the IDF to provide an effective response to such a scenario.¹

Our intention is not to pretend that we predicted the future, but rather to emphasize that the scenario was foreseeable and required the preparation of a response quite different from the approach that dominated the planning of the IDF's force structure for over two and a half decades.

Below are excerpts from the [document published in March 2017](#), entitled "Medium-Intensity Threats: The Case for Beefed-Up IDF Ground Forces." Its purpose was "to present a number of possible threat scenarios that clearly demonstrate the need for the IDF to maintain large and highly capable ground forces." The study did not focus only on Hamas, but did convey that Hamas too was evolving in the direction that would bring it to the capabilities it exhibited on 7th October 2023.

The Threat:

The first part of the article discussed the strengthening of all non-state military organizations in the area surrounding Israel, including Hamas, and the military goal of this intensification:

*The rise of the medium-intensity threat is a result of the **increasing strength and capabilities of hostile non-state organizations** with control over territory and population. Sponsored by states, these entities are capable of inflicting greater damage than traditional terror or guerrilla movements. Much like states, they are characterized by well-developed organization and doctrine, the use of various weapons and tactics, and a division between the political and civilian arms.*

*Non-state organizations are strong enough to inflict considerable damage, though not as much as a full-strength state army – and as non-states, they are not bound by the laws of war by which western states abide. Because they are neither states nor irregular forces, they qualify for a category of their own: a **medium-intensity threat** that resides in the grey area between a low-intensity routine threat and a high-intensity fundamental threat.² Creating suitable strategic and tactical responses to this threat requires that it be defined and dissected. ...*

Given that the most probable scenario in the foreseeable future is a series of confrontations with Palestinians, Hezbollah (with or without Syrian and Iranian army support), Jabhat al-Nusra or the Islamic State, we must assess their military capabilities. All are essentially infantry armies equipped with light and medium weapons and with varying sizes of artillery forces. Each of these military forces, barring the smaller Jabhat al-Nusra, employs tens of thousands of fighters, and Hamas and the Islamic State are both working to increase their potential. ...

Whereas the strategy of these groups is more or less unchanging, there have been developments in the tactical field.

*The familiar tactics of stand-off fire and small-unit raids are still being employed, but more emphasis is being placed on commando-style cross-border raids. **One of the lessons learned by Hamas from the 2014 Gaza war is the tactical and strategic effect of such raids.** Using tunnels or diving gear to bypass Israeli detection systems, they were able to inflict casualties on Israeli forces inside Israel (a sixth of IDF fatalities during the 2014 war were in infantry engagements on the Israeli side of the Gaza border). **A number of Hamas commando troops have undergone parachute-glider training as well.***

*The novelty is not in the methods, which have all been used in the past. **It is in the emphasis on planned efforts to conduct several such raids in concert, simultaneously or sequentially, rather than conducting small, isolated actions.***

*Furthermore, **though the raids from Gaza in 2014 were fairly shallow (i.e., close to the border), Hamas is apparently contemplating deeper raids, with attack objectives further inside Israel.** Hezbollah leaders have mentioned “liberating” the Galilee – an operation currently beyond their military capability, but which could presage attempts to raid objectives deeper than merely along the*

border. The concept of deep, large-force raids is a staple of Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra tactics.

These raids could be conducted by forces ranging in size from a squad (as was seen during the summer 2014 war with Gaza) to a battalion (as seen in operations by the Islamic State, and which is certainly within Hezbollah's capability). **Hamas is lagging behind in the size of its trained raiding forces but could develop this capability if it so chooses.**

A different force size would indicate a different mission: the bigger the force, the bigger the objective, and the more persistent the force will be in achieving that objective. **In fact, there is a point at which, though conceived as a raid, such an operation might become an attempt to capture and hold territory.** This leads us to the most dramatic change in the tactical competence of these military organizations. ...

The indication is that there could very well be attempts to conduct larger operations to capture, at least temporarily, not just some military post, but Israeli villages or towns adjacent to the border, or some important civilian or military installation further in for the purpose of conducting massacres and/or taking hostages. Given the overall disparity in military strength, such attacks would likely be conducted more for the sake of their psychological value than to capture and retain territory. But the taking of an Israeli village or part of a town – even if temporary, and even if the population had been evacuated ahead of time – would have a dramatic psychological effect on Israel.

The Suggested Response:

In the second part of the document, the researchers suggested how the IDF should prepare for the threat, with an emphasis on strengthening and expanding its regular ground units (as opposed to special forces):

*Given the offensive tactics and weapons observed to be in use by Hezbollah, Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra (and partially by Hamas), defending against the ground threat requires the IDF to possess both defensive and offensive regular ground warfare capabilities. **Using air power to hold ground has repeatedly proven ineffective.** It can provide immense support to ground troops conducting this mission, and can inhibit large concentrations of enemy forces from moving freely.*

But, as was proven during the Second World War and repeatedly since (including during failed attempts by the anti-Islamic State coalition in Iraq and Syria over the past year), it cannot completely prevent the enemy from gradually accumulating his forces and attacking.

Therefore, when on the defensive, the IDF needs to be able to physically cover entire borders with contiguous observation and very rapid responsive fire capabilities. Given the observed enemy tactics of rapid massive infiltration, villages and towns near the border must be surrounded by permanent defensive forces. These forces must be well protected from light artillery and advanced anti-tank missiles, as well as from multiple attacks by large, vehicle-mounted bombs.

The defending forces must be deployed for 360-degree defense and be capable of withstanding attacks by dozens to hundreds of attackers while waiting for reinforcements. Quick reaction forces must be close enough to rapidly reinforce any area under attack, especially villages or towns adjacent to the border. The reaction forces must be capable of negotiating difficult terrain under light artillery and heavy anti-tank fire while crossing small fields of IEDs and mines.

Conducting such a defense with light infantry forces would be casualty-intensive for the Israelis. The casualty ratio would only be improved in the IDF's favor by prodigious use of long-range fire and well-protected armored vehicles. Precision-guided munitions (PGMs) can be used effectively only against an enemy that consists of a few small targets, whereas area-coverage weapons would be effective against a mass modern-style infantry attack.

In other words, contrary to the trend stated by many senior IDF officers, what would be needed are not more PGMs, cyber capabilities and special forces, but rather simple artillery, tanks, heavily armored personnel carriers, and denser infantry strongpoints to make infiltration between them more difficult.

It is true that against these enemies, one does not need the Merkava 4. But tank-mounted firepower, protection and mobility do offer a major advantage. One can make do with older, cheaper tanks upgraded with the latest anti-anti-tank missile protection (such as the Trophy system) and effective anti-personnel shells. Throughout the past 100 years, simple field artillery and mortars have proven to be the most effective anti-infantry weapons. ...

Though preferring to conduct its operations with stand-off fire rather than offensive ground operations, the Israeli government found itself in 1982 (against the PLO) 2006 (against Hizbullah), 2009 and 2014 (both against Hamas) compelled to conduct ground offensives in order to halt enemy artillery fire on Israel's civilians.

... the IDF was surprised in Lebanon in 2006 and in Gaza in 2014 by the intensity of enemy resistance. In future, the IDF must assume this level of resistance at a minimum. Actually, as potential enemies are gaining considerable combat experience, an even higher level of intensity and competence should be assumed. Even though Israel's current enemies are not as big, well-armed or well-trained as the Egyptian and former Syrian armies, they must be considered not merely as guerrillas, but as trained armies. To defeat them will require the application of regular warfare tactics adapted to the specific circumstances. ...

Though few of Israel's current enemies are significantly more competent than the PLO forces were in 1982, Hezbollah certainly is, and the learning curve shown by Hamas since 2006 indicates that it is going in the same direction.

As noted when discussing defense, to defeat these enemies the IDF might not need massive numbers of the latest high-tech ground weapons – but it will need the tanks, APCs and artillery it has used in the past, upgraded with specific capabilities (especially anti-anti-tank missile, anti-artillery and anti-IED protection). Furthermore, as recently retired IDF Major General Gershon HaCohen stated in an interview, the simultaneous capture and clearing of large tracts of territory will require significant quantities of these weapons – a statement with which the IDF strategy document seems to concur, under the heading “critical mass”.

The researchers concluded with a recommendation regarding the size, readiness, and desired composition of the IDF for a multifront scenario that might unfold:

... political and strategic developments, coupled with an increasing sensitivity to casualties and improvements in precision firepower, have pushed the IDF to increasingly rely on air strikes and stand-off fire to achieve the required destruction and deterrence while decreasing reliance on offensive ground maneuver.

Though still espousing the importance of ground maneuver capabilities de jure, as evinced in the IDF's recently published strategy document, the de facto reduction in the employment of ground maneuvers and perception of a weakened threat have led to a drastic diminishment of IDF ground forces.

This study finds that the IDF's de facto strategy of de-emphasizing ground forces and ground maneuvering is mistaken.

First, because the option of a large state-on-state confrontation, even if remote at present, cannot be completely ruled out. It has been proven time and again that in the volatile Middle East, things can change overnight.

Second, because simultaneously with the weakening of the Arab state armies, we are witnessing the emerging prominence of non-state armies capable of creating a medium-intensity threat. This phenomenon is the result of the Islamist resurgence and the increased funding, increased training and new technologies that are enhancing the military capabilities of non-state organizations.

*Though they remain weaker than most Arab state armies, these organizations are already capable of conducting medium-intensity defensive operations and are working to achieve a medium-intensity offensive capability. (Hezbollah already has this capability.) In other words, though medium-intensity offensive actors are not a fundamental threat, they are more powerful than actors posing a "routine threat" and their **power is increasing**.*

This paper has outlined several highly probable threat scenarios that clearly demonstrate that cultivating a small and highly capable ground force with the latest gadgets is important, but not enough. To meet the requirements set out in the IDF's strategy document, Israel is advised to maintain a large, mechanized, capable and ready ground force, as it has done in the past – even if a large portion of this force is equipped with older AFVs and artillery upgraded only in specific crucial components. ...

In conclusion, the authors warned that:

The IDF strategy document states the need for a "critical mass" to achieve its missions, but does not provide a number. We estimate that a scenario that requires maintaining a defensive line along all fronts, while having sufficient ground

combat power to also conduct simultaneous major offensives on two fronts (for example, Lebanon and Syria, or Lebanon and Gaza), would require a ground force “critical mass” equivalent to at least 10 armored or mechanized divisions plus a large force of lighter rear-area security forces.

*If we accept the assessment that most future wars will be multi-week to multi-month in duration, then this force size is even more necessary to enable rotation of units in action. **The past and planned reductions in ground force units by the IDF imperil the ability of the IDF to meet the standard it sets for itself in its strategy document.***

End Note

It will be emphasized again **that the researchers do not pretend to claim that they predicted exactly what happened on October 7 and certainly not the timing of this attack.** However, in practice, the IDF's force structure was built the opposite of what was observed as necessary in the BESA study and also the opposite of what was required according to two IDF strategy documents published in 2015 and 2018.

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¹The document also analyzed the extent of the threat posed by the organizations ISIS and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham (the Syrian branch of Al-Qaeda) and the military significance of the collapse of the regimes of Egypt and Jordan and their replacement by Islamic regimes.

² Israeli doctrinal concepts:

The Routine Threat: low intensity irregular warfare attacks whether by non-state organizations (guerrilla or terrorist) or the military of the enemy states.

The Fundamental Threat: high intensity regular warfare attacks aimed at destroying the state of Israel, or at least conquering major portions of it.