



Foreign Policy Centre Fresh Insight Paper  
Back to Basics: Deterrence and the IDF

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As Israel emerges from yet another conflict the international community must wait to see how long the increasingly fragile ceasefire can be maintained.

Fawcett writes that the popular and persistent perception of the Middle East, and one which has pervaded academic as well as popular circles, is to see the region as one of conflict and war.<sup>1</sup> The latest round of conflict in Gaza which took the lives of over a thousand people merely illustrates this point. But perhaps we should not have been surprised by Israel's actions against Hamas especially when we compare the offensive in Gaza to that of the war in Lebanon in 2006. Israel has always had the policy of deterrence at the centre of their military doctrine centring on the belief that wars must be won quickly and decisively. Since the massive victory over three Arab armies in 1967, Israel and the IDF have been surrounded by an 'aura of invincibility'. This image was severely damaged at the end of the Second Lebanon War and resulted in the establishment of the Winograd Commission which was appointed *due to a strong sense of a crisis and deep disappointment with the consequences of the campaign and the way it was conducted.*<sup>2</sup>

By examining how the two most recent conflicts were undertaken, observations can be made that Operation Cast Lead was conducted by Israel reverting back to tactics used prior to the Second Lebanon War, as well as learning from both political and military failures as highlighted in the Winograd Commission's final report.

The inexperience of those holding key positions in the Israeli government and IDF was a major finding by the Winograd Commission as to why Israel was not

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<sup>1</sup> L. Fawcett *International Relations Of The Middle East*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p.4

<sup>2</sup>Cited at

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Communiques/2007/Winograd+Inquiry+Commission+submits+Interim+Report+30-Apr-2007.htm>



able to achieve its military objectives in Lebanon. The differences between the language and the objectives that were specified for the operation in Gaza demonstrate that the Israeli government has learnt from their mistakes. Against Hezbollah, Israel set itself impossible objectives that could not be achieved militarily, such as the return of the two kidnapped IDF soldiers, whose fate was unknown to Israel, and the disarmament of the organisation. The Israeli war objectives and the perception that the IDF would crush Hezbollah enticed not only the Israeli public but also the political echelon into boasting a false pretence that victory was inevitable. Former Israeli negotiator and Director of the Reut Institute, Gidi Grinstein, describes the situation Israel put itself in as the “90-10” paradox, whereby Israel could eliminate 90 percent of Hezbollah’s fighting capacity, but Hezbollah could still claim it fought the mighty Israeli Army to a draw by simply surviving.<sup>3</sup>

The operation in Gaza saw the Israeli leaders talk deterrence not objectives. Israeli politicians chose not to clarify what they wanted to achieve from the military operation apart from sending a message to Hamas that if rockets continued to be launched at Israel, Israel would respond. Due to both Hamas and Hezbollah being non-state actors who employ similar tactics, Israel is in danger of allowing the “90-10” paradox to have an emphasis on the overall outcome of Operation Cast Lead. With the ceasefires in place it appeared Israel had effectively deterred Hamas from launching rockets and achieved its objective of stopping the rocket attacks. However if Hamas recommence their persistent offensive against Israel then the only way for Israel to reaffirm its deterrence will be to enter into yet another major military operation. If the status-quo antebellum has not been altered enough from the operation in Gaza then this is a real possibility. Israel sees the fact that the border with Lebanon has been relatively quiet since its campaign against Hezbollah as proof that it successfully deterred the threat from the North. In Gaza, Hamas like Hezbollah in 2006 declared a “great victory” for the Palestinian people.

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<sup>3</sup> G. Grinstein, in Erlanger, S., Israel's soldiers engage in some soul searching, *International Herald Tribune*, 23/3/2007 p.2, 3/08/2006



If the ceasefire holds, questions still remain on how the offensive will be viewed. Cutting off the influx of weapons from Egypt is central to Israel preventing Hamas continuing their armed offensive. Hamas might have claimed a victory like Hezbollah but, like Hezbollah, they might now understand that every action has a reaction. The loss of over 1,300 Palestinians, many of whom were children, might compel Hamas to rethink its decisions regarding its policy towards Israel, if this is so Israel may declare that the operation was a military success. If the policy of deterrence is successfully implemented, as Smith who draws on the work of Carl von Clausewitz *On War* writes, it can alter “directly the opponent’s intentions”, making it possible to achieve your objectives.<sup>4</sup> However if Israel has to enter into another operation in Gaza in the not too distant future this will demonstrate that deterrence and the show of military force are not the best policies when dealing with non-state actors. The news reports and pictures that came out of Lebanon and Gaza only served to strengthen the standing, both domestically and internationally of this type of organisation, increasing their status whilst damaging Israel.

Israel needs to utilize a more pragmatic policy towards Gaza and focus on winning the hearts and minds of everyday Palestinians. Through investing in Gaza and improving not only the living conditions but also the lives of its occupants this could be achieved. If Israel and the international community could provide substantial aid, and progressively work to reopen the borders Hamas could be left with limited options. Firstly they could continue their attacks on Israel and risk losing their support base from the people in Gaza as they would be seen as the perpetrators. Some Palestinians living in Gaza put blame on both sides, not on Israel alone. Alternatively Hamas could establish themselves as a legitimate political party and endorse the Quartets road map, renouncing violence and recognising the state of Israel, leading to mediated

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<sup>4</sup> R. Smith, *The Utility of Force: The Art of War in the Modern World*, (London: Penguin Books, 2006) p.376



dialogue. The problem here is that in the ongoing 'tit for tat' conflict neither Israel nor Hamas will accept the other having the upper hand for fear of being shown as weak.

Personnel changes since 2006 within the coalition government have seen the leader of the labour party Ehud Barak, not only a former Prime Minister but also a former IDF Chief of Staff and Israel's most decorated soldier, replace the inexperienced Amir Peretz as Defence Minister. Barak who has brought a wealth of both political and military experience into the government has been the chief architect of Operation Cast Lead. The lessons taken from Lebanon can be seen in how the planning for each conflict was implemented. In 2006 Israel launched an immediate response to Hezbollah's cross border attack, which caught the IDF off guard. The Gaza offensive has been reported to have been prepared up to six months in advance with much debate surrounding when to execute it. When the plan was implemented Israel achieved the tactic of surprise which it had done in previous military operations.

The tactics which we have seen carried out by Israel in Gaza have also varied from those in Lebanon. Action against Hezbollah in 2006 saw the IDF use extensive airpower alongside a limited commitment of ground forces. The architect of Israel's response to Hezbollah's attack was the then Chief of the General Staff Lieutenant Dan Halutz whose military career was firmly rooted in the Israeli Air Force (IAF). In 2002 Halutz is reported to have said "Through the use of airpower supported by accurate intelligence, you can impose a siege, loiter over an area, maintain presence in an area, prevent movement or stop infiltration. All this can be accomplished from the air...and often more effectively and at less cost than artillery, tanks or ground forces."<sup>5</sup> The strong reliance on air power saw Israel move away from its traditional role of major IDF ground offensive in which they sought to conquer territory to achieve their

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<sup>5</sup> D. Halutz, Defense News 29/1/2007, in JINSA Online, IDF Shake-Up Over Hezbollah War: Unconventional War Revealed Failures of Leadership and Strategy, 23/032007, <http://www.jinsa.org/articles/articles.html/function/view/categoryid/154/documentid/3736/history/3,2360,654,154,3736>



objectives. It was only in the last few days of fighting that Israel was prepared to put into place a ground offensive.

What we saw in Gaza, in stark contrast to Lebanon, was the rapid movement of Israel into the ground offensive sending troops into Gaza after only a week of air strikes. The 'aura of invincibility' which has surrounded Israel and the IDF from its creation during the War of Independence until the early 1990's, has seen the major campaigns and operations (with the exception of War of Attrition) waged by the IDF based on large scale manoeuvres of ground forces, with IDF infantry and armoured forces operating deep in enemy territory in the early stages of fighting.<sup>6</sup> The findings of the Winograd were that the leadership during 2006 did not demand - as was necessary under its own plans - early mobilization of the reserves so they could be equipped and trained in case a ground operation would be required.<sup>7</sup> Gaza saw the government call up reserve troops towards the very start of the campaign, proving that they were reverting back to previous military tactics.

IDF reserve forces have been defined as the "core strength" of the IDF. An effective reserve and transportation system is written into their military doctrine and the ability of Israel to mobilize large numbers quickly has been a major element to their deterrence image. During the early part of the century Israel lost focus on how important the reserves are to Israel's deterrence and the IDF. A report by State Comptroller Micha Lindenstrauss found that between 2002 and 2006 training for IDF reserve field units fell short of projections. As well as noting that there were four and five year periods in which entire reserve battalions did not train in full live-fire manoeuvres, it continued to accuse commanders of reserve and regular brigades of failing to undergo the

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<sup>6</sup> A. Kulick, Hizbollah vs. the IDF: The Operational Dimension, *Strategic Assessment*, The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2006, <http://www.tau.ac.il/jcss/sa/v9n3p7Kulick.html>

<sup>7</sup> Cited at

<http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Communiques/2007/Winograd+Inquiry+Commission+submits+Interim+Report+30-Apr-2007.htm>



training courses that army regulations demand.<sup>8</sup>

The failures in Lebanon saw the IDF conduct major investigations and establish the plan known as 'Tefen' which designates a specific roadmap for systematic training of reservist troops and calls for ground forces to be reinforced so that battles can be decided quickly.<sup>9</sup> The Tefen plan also allowed Israel to prepare for any possible scenario which might arise in the region; this could be the reason why Operation Cast Lead was prepared so far in advance. Changes were also made to the overall structure of the IDF departments to make it more efficient in times of war.

As Israel completes its withdrawal from Gaza and the Western media move in we are only starting to understand the devastation that the war has had on innocent civilians. Operation Cast Lead saw a more efficient and well structured IDF operation and established that they have learnt from past mistakes. Both conflicts need to be viewed as a demonstration that Israel is willing to act with great force to deter threats from its neighbours. However Israel must understand that deterrence is not the sole factor in conflict management or resolution, but one strategy of several, designed to resolve conflict. The recent violations of the fragile ceasefire, which has again seen Israel respond to rockets launched by Hamas merely serves to strengthen this theory. The fact there was a war demonstrates that deterrence can only succeed for a limited period and is not a substitute for political accords. The war has shown Israel that it can no longer rely on its policy of deterrence to dissuade threats. It must instead pursue other diplomatic avenues within the region, and the international community must be prepared to provide the tools to build lasting peace and stability.

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<sup>8</sup> Cited at <http://www.haaretz.com/hasen/spages/925726.html>

<sup>9</sup> Cited at <http://dover.idf.il/IDF/English/News/today/2007/09/0302.htm>