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Lessons from Gaza for Israel's military: Unprepared for unconventional warfare

By James M. Dorsey

Synopsis

As Israelis and Palestinians negotiate a lasting ceasefire a public post-mortem has begun in Israel of the month-long assault on Gaza. At the core of the debate is the question whether the Israel Defence Forces' organization, strategy and doctrine meets the requirements of unconventional rather than conventional warfare.

Commentary

ISRAEL'S POST-GAZA domestic battles have erupted days after the withdrawal of Israeli forces, following almost a month of confrontation of Hamas, the Islamist militia-turned-army in the making that controls the Gaza Strip.

At stake is Israel's performance in the war with Hamas, in which Gaza suffered billions of dollars in infrastructural damage and tremendous human losses and suffering, yet Hamas remains a military force to be reckoned with. Indeed Hamas has emerged as the key Palestinian player with which Israel is now negotiating, rather than the Palestine Authority of President Mahmoud Abbas, albeit through Egypt as intermediary.

Criticism in Israel focuses on the military's politically mandated strategy and its failure in recent years to reorganize and review its doctrine and strategy in a world in which Israel is more likely to confront unconventional rather than conventional forces. Israel's last four wars were against the Lebanese Shiite militia Hezbollah, and Hamas.

Changing politics and demography

The debate about the Israeli military comes against the backdrop of its changed demography. Israel's military today is not what it was in the late 1980s when it told then Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin during the first Intifada or Palestinian popular uprising against Israeli occupation: "We can solve this militarily but not on terms that would be politically or morally acceptable to the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) or the government. ... you, Mr. Prime Minister have to solve it politically." A few years later Rabin

engaged in the failed Oslo peace process with Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO).

Nor is the Israeli government similar to that of Rabin. The government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the first week of the assault on Gaza apparently turned down a proposal to conduct lightning strikes inside Gaza that would have destroyed Hamas' command and control centres and other military infrastructure. It also refused to entertain a proposal for a full re-occupation of the Gaza Strip. *Debkafile*, a news website with close ties to the military and Israeli intelligence, suggested that had Israel opted for lightning strikes "at an early stage in the conflict, instead of ten days of air strikes, it might have saved heavy Palestinian losses and property devastation, the extent of which troubles most Israelis too."

Too fat to enter a tunnel

Israel's liberal *Ha'aretz* newspaper added in an editorial: When you're too heavy, big or bloated, it's hard to move, run or even bend down. Your arm is so fat it can't reach into a tunnel. It gets stuck and you stand there helplessly. That's precisely the situation with the Israel Defence Forces. It's a King Kong of an army — big and cumbersome; every move unintentionally knocks down a house, bridge or UN school in Gaza... The top brass has forgotten that line in the Book of Proverbs: 'with wise advice thou shalt make thy war.'

With analysts predicting increased differences between the military and Israel's political leadership in the wake of the Gaza war, both entities are coping with very different political and demographic constituencies. Israel's right-wing has moved further to the right forcing Netanyahu to fend off pressure from coalition partners like Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman whose Yisrael Beytenu (Israel is our Home) Party that ended its alliance with the prime minister's Likud early in the war, and economy minister Naftali Bennett's Habait Hayehudi (The Jewish Home) Party both advocated reoccupation.

Similarly, religious and conservative forces have become more prominent in the Israeli military. The commander of Israel's elite infantry Golani Brigade Col. Ofer Winter, that suffered high casualties in the last month, declared holy war on the Palestinians in a message to his troops at the beginning of the Gaza war that went on to say: "The Lord God of Israel, make our way successful. ... We're going to war for your people Israel against an enemy that defames you."

Winning decisively

Calls for a reorganization of the Israeli military including a review of its strategy and doctrine are fuelled by the fact that military intelligence struggled to cope with Hamas' ability to quickly change tactics and strategy; faulty analysis that predicted that Hamas would quickly sue for a ceasefire; gaps in intelligence about where Hamas leaders were hiding and where the group had stored its rockets arsenal; a political failure to assess the strategic importance of the tunnels, including the fact that some of them ended on the Israeli side of the border forcing the military to change the focus of its operation; and underestimation of the enemy demonstrated by the use on several occasions of old M113 personnel carriers with inferior armour, and vehicles that had not been reinforced, at times a lack of body armour and radio communications, and the deployment of some troops that had no combat experience.

Said Amos Harel, one of Israel's most respected military commentators: "These phenomena show that the IDF, especially the ground forces, needs to think hard and plan anew. Israel's technically advanced forces found an enemy playing in a different field, thus eroding its advantages. The Israel Air Force, with the assistance of MI (military intelligence) and the Shin Bet (Israel's internal security service), can strike its targets with great precision. But against Hamas or Hezbollah, this may not be enough to win decisively... If the IDF wants to preserve its ability to win using manoeuvres, quite extensive changes must be considered."

Reorganizing the military and revamping its doctrine and strategy is no mean task. It involves a debate that by definition will have to also include Israel's broader policies towards the Palestinians at a time that popular anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian sentiment is running high.

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