CHAPTER TWO

Judicious Use of Force

2.1 War Scenarios

Military force is a policy tool chronically pervasive in the Middle East. Israel, too, employs force to secure its survival and ensure the safety of its citizens, and to obtain other goals in the violent regional environment.

Since questions of life and death are involved, force must be used cautiously and tailored to the desired strategic goal. Therefore, political and military leadership should be in constant dialogue regarding defense policy and doctrine, as well as on the specific war scenarios and the relevant operational plans derived from them. Force structure needs to reflect these scenarios, the risks which can be taken, and budgetary constraints. Decisions on these issues must be based on a profound understanding by the political-strategic level of all these aspects.

Despite the great strength of the IDF, it is beyond Israel's ability to impose its will on enemies in the region in all matters. The range of likely achievement lies mainly in preventing the enemy from acting upon its threats to Israel's territory and population.

Israel has four permanent goals in all war scenarios:

1. To quickly eliminate a threat and protect the home front.
2. To severely degrade enemy capabilities, in order to generate near-term deterrence. (There is no guarantee, however, that any level of serious damage to the enemy will deter it for the long-term).
3. To maintain order on the home front, keeping production and supply lines open and ensuring normal civilian services.
4. To achieve the above at a tolerable level of casualties, and at reasonable direct and indirect economic costs, while maintaining domestic and international legitimacy.

The "worst case" scenario involves fighting a coalition of enemies led by Iran – Hizballah, Shi'a militias in Syria, and possibly also Hamas in Gaza – alongside broadscale popular unrest and significant terror attacks in the Palestinian arena. From this extreme scenario, which may become a dangerous reality soon if Persian Gulf tensions escalate, it is possible to deduce war sub-scenarios which involve some of these hostile forces.

The scope and intensity of Israeli action largely derives from the severity of the threat to the home front. In other words, the smaller the threat to the home front, the broader the range of Israeli military options.

Thus, faced with a northern war scenario involving an unprecedented threat to Israel's population centers, Israel will have to fully mobilize all its forces and defeat Hizballah in Lebanon by combining a massive ground assault with air power. (More on this in the next chapter.) Even so, the IDF will have to set aside forces for other scenarios, even if there is no immediate threat. Given the frequent political upheavals in the region (such as upheavals in Egypt), the IDF must be ready at any time to fight a full-scale war with regular modern armies.

The government should enhance public awareness about the possible necessity of an Israeli preemptive strike or preventive war, in order to build legitimacy for such an eventuality.

On the other hand, confrontations in secondary arenas, such as with Hamas in the Gaza Strip, do not require full scale military action (although this is an option that Israel must weigh seriously depending on the circumstances).

Hamas is an extremely hostile organization well rooted in Palestinian society, driven by an intense religious-ideological motivation to harm Israel. It is impossible to completely bring such an organization to its knees by large scale military maneuver, unless the IDF is prepared to rule in Gaza for a long period at a high cost.

The alternative path, involving forceful but patient struggle against Hamas (occasionally referred to as "mowing the grass") is meant to continuously degrade the enemy's capacity to harm Israel as much as possible. Usually, Israel acts to "mow the grass" only after sustaining a series of attacks and demonstrating a great degree of perseverance and restraint – thus building legitimacy over time for its counterattack.

This approach seeks to generate temporary periods of deterrence, allowing the Israeli home front to enjoy relatively long periods of calm. The Israeli public, however, doesn't always comprehend the strategic rationale of this policy – in which victory is measured in points, not knockouts; and instead seeks swift and decisive victories. But as explained above, Israel's ability to conduct a measured war of attrition against Hamas in Gaza and to maintain a wide range of combat options is itself a demonstration of Israel's military superiority.

To mitigate public frustration, the government and the IDF must articulate a clear strategic concept and explain to the public the nature of this limited, "managed" conflict with Hamas.

A war, or a large-scale military campaign, may be initiated by Israel or imposed on it. Thus, the government should enhance public awareness about the possible necessity of an Israeli preemptive strike or preventive war, in order to build legitimacy for such an eventuality. Dialogue on these matters should be undertaken with Israel's allies, particularly with the US Congress and Administration and those who influence public opinion in North America and Europe.

2.2 Ground Maneuver and Decisive War: A Return to the Fundamentals

Over the last 30 years the IDF has excelled in special operations and air strikes, but achievements in the use of force via large military formations have been lacking.

In Israel's earlier decades, the IDF built its force structure with a focus on strong ground strike forces, required to quickly carry the war deep into enemy territory and bring about defeat of the enemy. This was known as hachra'ah – achieving a decisive victory.

But since the First Lebanon War in 1982, the predominant operational doctrine of the IDF has been the "Intel-Firepower" nexus. This is based on accurate intelligence and precision-guided firepower brought to bear upon the identified targets (mostly from the air), with the expectation that this will destroy the enemy and sap its will to fight.

This doctrine has led to ambiguous outcomes. It has made violent clashes longer; imposed continuous emergency conditions on the home front with attendant economic costs; and afforded a sense of achievement to enemy forces, which encourages them to persist in their provocations of Israel.

Sub-optimal outcomes over time indicate a basic problem in the operational doctrine. The equation: "accurate intel multiplied by precision-guided firepower equals destruction and collapse of the enemy" is faulty, insofar as it does not consider an essential element: the enemy. The latter is learning lessons from every confrontation, learning to deny the IDF accurate intelligence and/or minimize the effectiveness of pinpoint Israeli firepower. Enemy techniques aimed at undercutting the utility of the "Intel-Firepower" approach include fortifying facilities, going underground, dispersing and hiding assets, using human shields, and more.

In most clashes, a deleterious dynamic has repeated itself. At first, Israel successfully launches a salvo of firepower based on accurate intelligence gathered over a long period of time; then follows a decline in the quality of targeting intelligence with an attendant reduction in the number of targets which justify a strike; a recovery by the enemy and a continuation of its attacks against Israel; Israeli frustration, leading to attacks on targets with high collateral damage or on useless targets; an immense effort to acquire new quality targets, which can lead to an occasional success (but this does not alter the general picture); a prolonged war campaign, leading to public anger and frustration; and limited ground forces maneuver, not sufficiently effective to bring the enemy to the point of collapse.

Consequently, a return to combat along more traditional lines is inevitable in cases where a ground campaign, aggressively pursued, will render better results than air activity. In such situations it is necessary to maneuver into enemy territory, locate and destroy enemy forces (or capture them, thus undermining the myth of the self-sacrificing jihadi "resistance"). The "Intel-Firepower" effort is important, but it cannot be more than a supportive adjunct to the main thrust, via ground forces. Only a determined ground effort can break the spirit of the enemy.

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There are exaggerated fears in Israel that such a military approach will entail heavy casualties. High friction does come with costs, but the relatively short period of fighting leading to the collapse of enemy forces may bring about lower numbers of losses on the frontlines; let alone in the rear.

Not in every situation will there be a need for this, but the IDF must be ready to carry out deep and swift ground maneuvers, for several reasons. First, even in fighting an enemy which is not a conventional army, it is important to capture territory used as an operational base by non-state military rivals. Controlling this territory denies their freedom of action. The reduction of missile and rocket fire on Israeli citizens can only be achieved by ground forces who act to destroy enemy launching sites.

Second, the capacity for ground maneuver is central to achieving effective deterrence. The enemy may be able to absorb immense damage from the air, but its very survival as a governing entity or its hold over territory is not in danger. On the other hand, the loss of significant territory does constitute a real threat to enemy organizations. Should Israel neglect the capacity to maneuver, its enemies will conclude that Israel's ability to harm them is limited.

Indeed, some of Israel's enemies today believe that Israel's fear of ground warfare and its unwillingness to suffer casualties suggests weakness in Israeli society. To restore deterrence, Israel must not shy away from convincingly demonstrating its capacity to carry-out a forceful ground offensive.

Third, ground maneuver must be the IDF's main tool in winning a campaign against a conventional army. Such a scenario is not on the horizon right now, but could become relevant given regional upheavals – e.g., if a radical Muslim Brotherhood regime should rise in a country like Egypt, or if the Syrian army would be rebuilt after that country's civil war. Bear in mind that building army ground forces is a complex process which takes time. Neglecting IDF ground maneuver capabilities is therefore a dangerous gamble.

Ground maneuver also has a moral dimension. It is the duty of government and the military to remove any threat to the home front as quickly as possible. A situation in which civilians become the IDF's shield (i.e., the home front takes casualties so that the IDF can avoid ground maneuver) is unacceptable. This amounts to abandoning the civilian population.

It should be recalled that at the beginning of the Palestinian terror campaign of 2000-2001, the government was unwilling to maneuver with ground forces into Palestinian cities, and even within the IDF it was commonly argued that the capture of significant territory was unnecessary. Hundreds of lives were lost until the IDF was sent into action into the cities of Judea and Samaria. Then, indeed, the IDF was able to achieve solid security results through ground maneuver.

Obviously, this matter requires constant dialogue between the IDF and political echelons to determine national security policy and to define achievable goals.