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ISRAELI COUNTERINSURGENCY
The never-ending ‘whack-a-mole’

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This chapter examines Israel’s counter-terrorism and counterinsurgency strategy and campaigns particularly vis-à-vis Palestinian groups on the West Bank and Gaza Strip. It will also briefly look at the Israeli Defence Forces’ (IDF) conduct in Lebanon during its occupation of the country between 1982 and 2000; thereafter it will focus on Israel’s counterinsurgency campaigns during the two Intifadas (1987–91 and 2000–6), periods in which its counterinsurgency and population control measures were seriously put to the test.

There are considerable complexities and challenges when a state adopts such a series of kinetic campaigns. This is because, rather than achieving a quick ‘battlefield decision’, ‘victory’ or even diplomatic resolution, the Israeli state has usually succeeded in postponing further rounds of hostilities by temporarily suppressing the level of insurgent violence or shifting the problem to another geographical area until such hostilities reappear, often in a more virulent manner.

Israeli counterinsurgency ‘strategy’

Although Israel has dealt with low-intensity threats to its national security since (and before) its establishment in 1948, its defence establishment has customarily focused on deterring full-scale conventional warfare. This was largely due to the perception that Israel’s enemies had the potential to wipe the state off the map should the state suffer a major defeat in conventional war. Accordingly, Israel’s force posture and doctrine regarding low-intensity threats such as terrorism and insurgency have not been clearly formulated. As David Rodman has contended, the ‘concept of “massive retaliation” captures best Israel’s deterrent posture in the area of unconventional warfare. To deter low-intensity conflict, Jerusalem has consistently promised to retaliate disproportionately against terrorist [and guerrilla] organizations’ (Rodman 2001: 77).

Such retaliation was often carried out beyond Israel’s borders into countries that harboured terrorist/insurgent groups, chiefly against Palestinian fedayeen paramilitary units originating from Egypt (until the 1956 Suez War), against Palestinian terrorist groups in Jordan (until the 1970 Black September events), in Lebanon (from the 1970s onwards given the influx of Palestinian terrorists/insurgents from Lebanon following Black September) as well as Syria. Retaliatory operations have also been conducted through targeted killings across the world – most notably following the 1972 Munich Olympics massacre of Israeli athletes by the Palestinian Black September terrorist group. Retaliatory strikes frequently involved not only seizing or killing...
terrorists, but carrying out punitive reprisal operations inflicting collateral damage and casualties on states or local communities harbouring such groups. Such retaliatory operations could often escalate into full-scale war – as in the case against Egypt during the 1956 Suez War, against the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) in Lebanon in 1982, against Hezbollah again in Lebanon in 2006 or into major military offensives – as in the case of Operation Litani against the PLO in 1978 and of Operations Accountability and Grapes of Wrath against Hezbollah carried out respectively in 1993 and in 1996 in Lebanon.

In any case, by 1967 Israeli counter-terrorist strategy had become firmly entrenched. It was by and large designated as a strategy of retaliation and pre-emption based on deterrence (Catignani 2009a: 68). Israeli counter-terrorist and counterinsurgent strategy has not really changed substantially in the years since. The IDF’s emphasis on its qualitative edge, sought increasingly by developing its technological capabilities and the need to achieve a quick battlefield decision, have customarily dictated military operations and these have been pretty much been adapted in order to deal with asymmetric threats (Adamsky 2010: 93–129). Such constancy has been due to the fact that its operational doctrine has remained in part static over the years. Only at the tactical levels have Israeli security forces demonstrated significant innovation, often as a result of improvisation.

Such a lack of innovation at the operational and strategic levels have in part been a product of the nature of Israel’s unique civil–military relations whereby politicians, lacking adequate intelligence and policy-making institutions as well as the political will to adopt long-term strategic goals, have often left it to the military to second-guess Israel’s security strategies (Ben-Eliezer 1998; Peri 2006). This has proven problematic, though, because

the military echelon has its own aspirations and needs. Internal forces are generated which are activist, vigorous, and targeted toward action and operational success. To the military, it seems as if political considerations are foreign to their raison d’être ... [T]o the military, creating and maintaining a record of operational success stands above any other consideration.

(Drory 2005: 4)

The military, thus, has usually been engrossed with immediate tactical challenges rather than on Israel’s future strategic options. During a period in which operational missions increased (as during the peak of Israel’s counterinsurgency and counter-terrorist campaigns against Palestinian and Lebanese organizations during the Intifādas and Israel’s occupation of Lebanon between 1982 and 2000) military commanders’ views have also increased in influence and their recommendations are often willingly approved by higher leadership echelons within the IDF. As Brig.-Gen. Dov Tamari has argued, the military leadership echelons were ‘molded to a tactical environment, not an operational one, and this is the reason behind the lack of innovation in military thought’ (Tamari 2009: 707). The military has often pushed tactical operations which in hindsight have proved detrimental to Israel’s strategic interests. And yet, such short-sighted military activism has repeatedly been used by Israel’s political elites as a panacea for their inability to provide longer-term strategic thinking.

Overall, Israeli counterinsurgency/counter-terrorist activities have historically comprised the following three major elements:

1. Offensive operations, which are instigated by the IDF against terrorist/insurgent targets in order to prevent terrorist organizations from planning and organizing the initial stages of future terrorist/insurgent attacks.
Defensive operations, which are intended at pre-empting and disrupting attacks while terrorists/insurgents are on their way to target Israeli civilian and/or military targets.

Reprisal operations, which are intended to punish the planners and operatives of terrorist/insurgent attacks, as well as the supporters of terrorist organizations.

The combination of these three types of operations have been aimed at preventing attacks and re-establishing deterrence if enemy attacks have actually been made on Israeli targets. Israel put into place defensive measures at a fairly early period in the country’s history against terrorist attacks and in order to interdict insurgent infiltrations. Israel built fortified outposts along its borders, placed minefields all along easily accessible passageways and strengthened these outposts and minefields with armoured vehicle patrols, all in order to impede the Arab terrorist’s and insurgent’s infiltration into Israel. ‘Over the years the IDF’s “perimeter defence system” continually expanded to incorporate such assets as ultra-sophisticated electronic equipment, maritime and airborne reconnaissance, border fences and patrol roads’ (Catignani 2009a: 68). Such a defence system was, moreover, extended during the 1982 Lebanon War into southern Lebanon itself following the IDF’s re-deployment in 1985 by 45 kilometres from its northern border.

The principal task for fighting terrorism throughout Israel’s existence has been consigned to the three main branches of Israeli intelligence: the Sherut haBitachon haKlali, the General Security Service, also known by its Hebrew acronym, Shin Bet and Shabak), the Mossad (the Israeli Intelligence Agency) and AMAN (the Israeli Defence Forces Intelligence Directorate). By relying on a far-reaching intelligence-gathering network centred on both technologically advanced electronic as well as human means, the Israeli intelligence services try to monitor and infiltrate terrorist organizations in order to impede their operations at the earliest stage possible. Over the last two decades this has often entailed the use of arrests or even ‘targeted killings’ by Special Forces units, and if deemed too dangerous to conduct ground operations (usually led by Special Forces units) then helicopter gunships, and more recently unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), have been used to eliminate such operatives. Aerial strikes have also been employed in order to ‘decapitate’ the political-military leadership echelons.

**Israeli security policies in occupied land**

Fighting terrorism and insurgency has been a constant concern for Israel, but it has proven even more challenging when trying to ‘pacify’ populations under its control in south Lebanon between 1982 and 2000 and in the Territories since 1967. Having taken control of the Sinai, Golan Heights and the Territories of the Gaza Strip and West Bank with the lightning victory achieved during the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel confronted the problem of having to control and manage a large local Palestinian population. Moshe Dayan, the Israeli Minister of Defence from 1967 to 1974, was responsible for devising and applying Israel’s security policy in the Territories during the first seven years after the war. Dayan made sure that the IDF maintained a light footprint, that is, an ‘invisible occupation’ in the Territories in order to reduce the chances of friction between the Palestinian population and local IDF forces. This in turn helped to avoid the local Palestinian population from radicalizing and providing support to the PLO and other Palestinian organizations clamouring for nationhood and self-determination. Such a policy lasted as long as Dayan was minister of defence.

By the mid 1970s, Israeli policy in the Territories became blatantly expansionist – with the rise to power in 1977 of the right-wing Likud party Israeli settlements mushroomed – and security measures became more widespread and stifling. By expanding settlements in the Territories Israel forcibly took control of local water resources, expanded road networks linking...
communities and increased checkpoint and border controls as well as the number of permits required by Palestinians to move, work and basically live in the Territories. So effective were Israeli security measures in the Territories that no significant armed Palestinian faction was able to operate from there. Palestinian factions consequently operated from neighbouring countries. Following the PLO’s resettlement into south Lebanon in 1970, Israel’s main security concerns increasingly derived from its northern neighbour.

**Interlude: the Lebanon (mis)adventure**

The PLO and other Palestinian factions from the early 1970s took control of southern Lebanon and began building significant terrorist and paramilitary capabilities, which were increasingly employed to attack northern Israel (through rocket and mortar barrages and terrorist infiltrations) and Israeli/Jewish targets abroad (through spectacular terrorist attacks). Israel progressively carried out incursions and bombardments in south Lebanon in order to try and deter further Palestinian attacks, which nevertheless still continued. Both the invasion of Lebanon in 1982 and the IDF’s subsequent re-deployment and establishment of the south Lebanon ‘security zone’ were carried out in order to stop Palestinian guerrilla/terrorist infiltrations and their highly disruptive Katyusha rocket and mortar attacks into northern Israel. Whilst Israel’s invasion managed to bring the PLO into temporary disarray by getting its leadership exiled to Tunis in 1985, Israel’s security patrols and operations, conducted with the assistance of the predominantly Christian Maronite South Lebanese Army (SLA), as well as the establishment of the southern security zone comprised of company-sized fortified outposts and security checkpoints led to the alienation of the initially welcoming local Shi’ite population.

By late 1982, in fact, the Islamist Shi’ite Hezbollah (‘Party of God’) was established and began to conduct suicide terrorist attacks against IDF units and command centres and suicidal assaults on IDF/SLA outposts. (See Chapter 14 in this volume.) These attacks, aided by Iranian and Syrian training and funding, became increasingly coordinated, sophisticated and most of all lethal. During the mid-to-late 1990s, Hezbollah’s growing ability to inflict casualties on IDF units increasingly led the IDF to conserve its regular units by reducing their patrols and operations. It also brought about growing domestic opposition to the continued presence of Israel in south Lebanon. So, whilst Israel’s 1982 invasion into Lebanon set out to reduce threats originating from its northern neighbour, the IDF/SLA deployment galvanized Shi’ite opposition to the Israeli occupation to the point where rocket attacks and terrorist/guerrilla infiltrations against Israel paradoxically increased the threat originating from south Lebanon.

Frustration with Hezbollah’s increasingly effective terrorist/guerrilla campaign led Israel, consequently, to carry out two large-scale artillery and air bombardment campaigns against south Lebanon and Beirut in Operation Accountability (1993) and Operation Grapes of Wrath (1996). ‘In these two operations the principle of transferring the war to the enemy’s territory was substituted by the concept of transferring fire to the enemy’s territory instead’ (Catignani 2009a: 71). This change was due to two main issues. First, Israeli domestic and international public opinion could not stomach another large-scale ground offensive into Lebanon. Second, this feeling was underpinned by the Israeli military and political leadership echelon’s growing casualty aversion, common amongst post-military Western societies (Ben-Eliezer 2004). The use of airpower in counterinsurgent warfare increasingly became Israel’s preferred method for fighting Hezbollah units in Lebanon (Gordon 1998). In any case, Israel’s bombing campaigns did not really have the desired effect of deterring further Hezbollah guerrilla/terrorist activities. Paradoxically, Israel’s operations helped Hezbollah establish a modus vivendi with the IDF/SLA, whereby Hezbollah would not attack Israeli civilian targets in north Israel as long as the
IDF’s and SLA’s security operations in south Lebanon did not cause a priori civilian casualties or collateral damage. Thereafter most skirmishes remained within the confines of the security zone. Despite attempts on the part of several Israeli prime ministers to reach, during the 1990s, a peace agreement with Syria and, by extension, Lebanon, Israel was not able to come to an agreement with either country.

This finally led Prime Minister Ehud Barak to order the unilateral withdrawal of Israel from south Lebanon in accordance with United Nations (UN) Security Resolution 425. This occurred speedily and without any major incident in May 2000. Without an agreement in hand and still at odds with Hezbollah, which continued to claim that the Shebaa Farms were part of Lebanese occupied territory within the Golan Heights, the Lebanese quagmire would in any case drag Israel into war again in the summer of 2006. Notwithstanding its poor operational performance, after the cessation of hostilities in mid-August 2006 and with the subsequent reinforcement of the peace-keeping UN Interim Force in Lebanon contingent in southern Lebanon, an uneasy quiet has persisted. But such ‘quiet’ could easily deteriorate into another war, given Hezbollah’s continued militancy and re-armament efforts sustained with the help of Iran and Syria (Eshel 2010; Opall-Rome 2009).

### The Intifada

Israel’s ability to suppress Palestinian self-determination in the Territories together with the PLO’s disarray caused by Israel’s invasion of Lebanon in 1982 intensified resentment towards the Israeli occupation on the part of the Palestinian indigenous population. This ultimately manifested itself in a spontaneous uprising against Israeli occupation on December 1987 and came to be known as the Intifada. Such an uprising was widespread and unremitting. During the first two years of the Intifada there were 60,243 disturbances (about 110 a day); 2,701 Molotov cocktails were launched; 140 explosive charges were set off; and there were 715 instances of intentional fires (Cohen-Almagor 1991: 21). Whilst political frustration was a significant factor in encouraging local Palestinians to demonstrate, relative economic deprivation was a key cause for the outburst and initial phases of the first Intifada. An initial IDF study of the Intifada found that most of the detained demonstrators did not have former records as political activists and that many took part in demonstrations for the very first time in their lives. The study also found that ‘the most basic principles of politics did not mean anything to most of those detained. They were not familiar with the Palestinian Covenant, and some even did not know about its existence’ (Cohen-Almagor 1991: 20).

However, within the first six months of the start of the Intifada the PLO was able to co-opt most of the popular resistance committees and coordinate further unrest in the Territories. As in the past, the Israeli security services’ reach often went far beyond the Middle East region. With the increasing participation of the PLO in the uprising, the Israeli security forces did not limit their operational activities within the Territories. PLO activists were, for example, killed in Cyprus. In Tunis, PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat’s deputy, Khalil al-Wazir (aka Abu Jihad) was also assassinated in order to deter further PLO interference in the Territories.

In order to deter local populations from providing logistical, intelligence and any other form of assistance to the various terrorist organizations involved in fighting against it, Israel increasingly made use of several emergency security measures, which had already been set up by the British Mandatory Government in Palestine with the 1945 Defence (Emergency) Regulations. This has allowed it to employ a variety of punitive measures against terrorists, terrorist suspects and by extension anyone actively (or even passively) supporting terrorist organizations. These measures comprised, amongst others, the incarceration of terrorists, the administrative detention
of suspects, who cannot be put on trial in Israeli civilian courts for various reasons, the expulsion of key local political leaders/agitators, and the demolition or sealing up of homes of terrorists either apprehended or killed during their failed terrorist attack. In the last case, for example, between 9 December 1987 and the end of 1993, the Israeli security services completely or partially demolished 493 homes (87 per cent of which were demolished between 1988 and 1990) as well as completely or partially sealed 443 homes (62 per cent of which were sealed between 1988 and 1990) as a punitive measure (B’Tselem n.d.a).

Untrained in civilian pacification measures, during the initial stages of the Intifada, the IDF resorted to a ‘policy of beatings’ and utilized non-lethal and semi-lethal weapons, such as plastic bullets, rubber-coated bullets and tear gas. Rules of engagement (ROE) allowed for the use of firearms, but their use was sanctioned only in life-threatening situations. However, such ROE were not firmly enforced after some initial court-martials against ROE violators proved demoralizing for IDF units on the ground. These units often struggled to demarcate clearly between life-threatening and non-life-threatening scenarios and routinely defaulted to the use of live fire in order to protect themselves. Consequently, Palestinian deaths and casualties were not insubstantial. B’Tselem, the Israeli Information Centre for Human Rights in the Occupied Territories, revealed the following statistics regarding the first Intifada (9 December 1987 to 13 September 1993): 1,070 Palestinians were killed in the Territories by Israeli security services (39 per cent of whom were minors under the age of 17), whilst 118 Israelis were killed in the Territories by Palestinians (40 per cent of whom were civilians) (B’Tselem n.d.b). Furthermore, the lack of clear guidance from upper military echelons, together with the thorny nature of having to control an unarmed civilian population through the threat or actual use of violence, proved particularly demoralizing and led to the rise in the phenomenon of conscientious objection within the IDF lower ranks.

The effectiveness of these reprisal measures was dubious even though they were justified by Israeli security officials as a means for reinstating some form of deterrence vis-à-vis terrorist organizations and their supporters. Their employment was really more the reflection of Israeli frustration with terrorism and, particularly during the Intifada, with the local population’s insubordination expressed through demonstrations, strikes and low-scale violence. Even large-scale and sweeping curfews on Palestinian villages and towns as well as the closure of the Territories in the aftermath of severe attacks within Israel have demonstrated to be of unsatisfactory operational efficiency. Very often such punitive measures have been carried out in order to placate Israeli public opinion. However, such measures have in turn galvanized Palestinians’ determination to fight the Israeli occupation in the Territories, particularly within Palestinian Islamist factions such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad and, most notably, Hamas (Islamic Resistance Movement).

An offshoot of the local Islamic Brotherhood, Hamas was established in 1987 and initially operated like its precursor as a charitable Islamic organization. (See Chapter 14 in this volume.) This enabled it to recruit and increase its membership through the provision of legitimate educational, welfare and health activities. At the same time Hamas – with its decision to participate in early 1988 in the Intifada’s violent activities – was also able to indoctrinate with extremist Jihadist doctrine and to train in suicide terrorist and guerrilla warfare tactics new members within the military wing of the organization (Behrendt 2007). By the early 1990s Hamas was already vying for political primacy in the Territories and played a major role in trying to derail the Israeli–Palestinian peace process outlined in the 1993 Oslo Peace Accord through the use of spectacular suicide terror attacks, which intensified once the Al-Aqsa Intifada broke out. As Hatina has aptly put it, ‘if the first intifada (1987–92) witnessed the canonization of civic resistance, the second intifada (al-Aqsa) witnessed the sanctification of suicide acts’ (Hatina 2006: 40).
When the Oslo peace process’ permanent status negotiations between Prime Minister Ehud Barak and President Yasser Arafat failed in July 2000 at Camp David, Arafat sought to gain further concessions by encouraging violent demonstrations in the Territories. After Ariel Sharon’s provocative visit to the Temple Mount on 28 September 2000, violent demonstrations broke out, which gradually escalated to the point that the Voice of Palestinian radio could declare the following day that a new Intifada had begun.

The Al-Aqsa Intifada

The Al-Aqsa Intifada, in the first year of its occurrence, progressed over four overlapping stages. During the first four to five weeks of the conflict – that is, until mid-November 2000 – the conflict exhibited the connotation of a popular uprising similar to that of the first Intifada. Following lessons learned from its experiences from previous armed clashes with the Palestinian security forces during the September 1996 Hasmonean tunnel and the May 2000 Naqba riots, the IDF adopted effective RoE that significantly limited the numbers of own casualties suffered during the initial three months of the Al-Aqsa Intifada. The IDF’s tactics, which included the employment of ‘sophisticated gear and personal mobile shelters, reduced casualties to a minimum’ (Eshel 2001: 36).

Nevertheless, the IDF did not possess a sufficient amount of non-lethal anti-riot weapons and was required to rely on ‘less-than-lethal’ weapons, such as tear gas, stun grenades and rubber-coated plastic bullets. As in the case of the first Intifada, these could often cause a significant number of casualties and occasional fatalities if fired outside the maximum stand-off combat ranges (100–150 m) (Eshel 2001: 37). With significant Palestinian civilian casualties and a real lack of popular enthusiasm for a prolonged uprising, Palestinian Security Services forces, set up under the Oslo peace process to fight terrorism, began to shoot at IDF units from within groups of stone-throwing civilians (usually youths). Guerrilla and terrorist ambushes began also to be employed by the various Palestinian factions, most notably Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, Fatah Tanzim and Force 17, which began operating together under the umbrella terrorist organization, the Al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigade. Attacks were normally aimed at settler and IDF traffic on roads adjacent to Palestinian towns. They ranged from sniper shootings to subsequently more intricate techniques such the use of Lebanese-style roadside improvised explosive devices (IEDs) and mortar barrages. By early 2001 Palestinian terrorist groups essentially adopted a mixture of guerrilla warfare tactics in the Territories and increasingly lethal suicide terrorist attacks against Israeli civilian targets which peaked in early 2002.

As the second Intifada progressed, both the escalation and militarization of Palestinian violence made it easier for the IDF to adopt and employ its full arsenal and military-style incursions. Given that Palestinian insurgents were able to attack IDF units with insidious IEDs and with large calibre assault rifles, the IDF decided to employ not only armoured personnel carriers, but also introduce Merkava (Chariot) main battle tanks in early 2001 into urban operations involving close-quarter combat. Up until then previous chiefs of staff had vetoed their use in such scenarios due the detrimental effect they could have on Israel’s international image. However, then outgoing IDF Armoured Corps commander Brig.-Gen. Udi Shani shrugged off such concerns by contending that, ‘The bottom line is that the tank is performing excellently and is very effective.…. We don’t exactly think it is a wise and an ethical way to operate tanks against the masses. But that’s the way it is’ (Rodan 2001: 16). His successor, Brig.-Gen. Avigdor Klein, justified the use of main battle tanks as a way for the IDF is able to better protect its forces ‘and use less manpower to accomplish necessary missions’ (Opall-Rome 2003). Such measures became common practice once Ariel Sharon came to power in early 2001.
Israel’s government under Ehud Barak had officially pursued a defensive ‘policy of containment’ during the first year of the Intifada, in order to maintain some resemblance of continued diplomatic relations and negotiations with the Palestinian Authority. However, the increasing spiral of violence brought about tit-for-tat Palestinian attacks and Israeli reprisal operations. These contributed, along with Barak’s inability to reach a peace agreement with Yasser Arafat, to the electoral victory of Ariel Sharon’s Likud party in February 2001. Sharon and Likud were decidedly more intent in crushing the Palestinian insurgent/terrorist campaign given that they did not see any serious peace partner for peace negotiations. In December 2001, the Israeli government defined the Palestinian Authority as a ‘terror-supporting entity’. Such a definition had clear policy implications given that many politicians as well as military leaders saw terrorism as an existential threat that had to be extirpated by any means and which necessitated Israeli refusal to concede to Palestinian terrorist organizations’ demands.9

Under Sharon’s leadership Israel adopted a proactive, if not offensive, posture vis-à-vis Palestinian terrorism following the Passover seder night massacre which resulted in 30 deaths and over 140 civilian casualties at the Park Hotel in Netanya. The IDF was unleashed with Operation ‘Defensive Shield’ and around 30,000 IDF personnel organized in various joint forces, comprised of mainly infantry and armour supported by field intelligence, combat engineer and Special Forces units, ‘swarmed’ the Territories.

IDF infantry units advanced whilst surrounded by an aerial and intelligence ‘bubble’, which proceeded ahead of them, targeted the enemy and opened up the terrain. The operational doctrine of using a ‘bubble’ entailed three facets:

1. the land dimension comprised of observation posts and snipers concealed in the terrain employed in order to gather information and neutralize targets;
2. the aerial dimension comprised of mini-UAVs and other aircraft also employed in order to gather real-time surveillance on ground movement and, together with attack helicopters, to neutralize targets;
3. the intelligence dimension comprised of both human and electronic intelligence sensors both employed to provide intelligence on both friendly and non-friendly activity. Improved real-time intelligence capabilities led to the reduction of the sensor-to-shooter cycle (Fischman 2004).

These joint task forces carried out multiple operations into many of the main Palestinian towns known for supporting terrorist activities such as Jenin, Tul Karem, Nablus, Ramallah, Gaza City, Khan Yunis and Rafah, in order to destroy bomb and weapons factories, kill terrorists, kill or detain suspected terrorists, seize weapons and explosives as well as re-establish control of the territories that had been under the PA’s control.

In addition in the months following October 2000, Cobra helicopter units equipped with little more than personal protective equipment, night-vision goggles and radio communications operated almost constantly in support of Israeli ground and air units. The helicopter’s almost total lack of armour was not an issue in operations that benefited from total air superiority over operationally familiar ground (Opall-Rome 2002: 21). Fixed-winged aircraft, other more protected attack helicopters and especially UAVs were increasingly used in order to attack insurgents operating in densely populated urban areas with growing precision. UAVs were particularly employed in order to provide live imagery of targets to commanders coordinating and approving attack helicopter strikes that could entail the risk of collateral damage (Fulghum and Wall 2002: 26). Such precision was enhanced during the Al-Aqsa Intifada by a system developed by
the Israeli defence industry that partitions ‘the urban battlefield into precise increments and gives each building in a city … an individual four-digit designation so that both land and air forces know exactly which target they are trying to hit’ (Fulghum and Wall 2002: 25). Employment of precision-guided munitions and other targeting assets did not mean, though, that collateral damage or civilian casualties were always deliberately avoided. Indeed, on several occasions, the IDF rashly employed disproportionate force.10

The IDF’s coordinated attacks were also subsequently facilitated even more through its ‘Digital Ground Forces’ programme called Tsayad (‘Hunter’), which has endeavoured to provide broadband communications capabilities to all ground units. A new secure cellular communications network dubbed Vered Harim (‘Mountain Rose’) was deployed in July 2004 in order to facilitate personal and secure communications between commanders from company level upwards and brigade or division headquarters (Ben-David 2004b: 20). This communications network was used in subsequent urban operations particularly during IDF incursions into the Gaza Strip.

Following Defensive Shield’s five-week offensive, the IDF subsequently launched the 13-month operation ‘Determined Path’ in which it deployed units around major towns in order to continue the interception of suspected terrorists and the seizure of weapons and explosives on an ongoing basis. Curfews, closures and house demolitions increased in number, partially in reaction to continued successful Palestinian terror attacks in Israel. Israel’s security establishment understood that they had a rather detrimental effect on Israel’s international public image given that such measures often had negative humanitarian consequences, but as former coordinator of government activities in the territories, Maj.-Gen. Amos Gilad, has argued,

It is very difficult to solve this contradiction between terror, on the one side, and humanitarian assistance, on the other. For example, to ease the daily life of Palestinians we must open the roads between cities, but the moment we do that, we are hit with terrorist attacks.

(Gilad 2002: 13)

Shrugging off the negative political consequences of various security policies has been a common practice within the Israeli security establishment and has been justified by quite a few military commanders who have stated often that Israel’s security imperative vis-à-vis terrorist threats trump other more ‘ephemeral’ considerations, such as international public opinion or negative strategic repercussions. During quieter periods, when the IDF has been able to normalize Israeli security by reducing the threat of terror to a tolerable level, internal investigations or committees have time and again reached different conclusions. For example, punitive house demolitions carried out by the Israeli security services during the Al-Aqsa Intifada resulted in the demolition of ten homes in 2001, 252 in 2002, 225 in 2003 and 177 in 2004 (B’Tselem n.d.a). Despite declarations by the Israeli commanders that house demolitions had a deterrent effect on terrorist activities during the first four years of the conflict, a military committee headed by Maj.-Gen. Udi Shani concluded in early 2005 that ‘the damage to Israel caused by the demolitions was greater than the benefits because the deterrence, limited if at all, paled in comparison to the hatred and hostility toward Israel that the demolitions provoked among the Palestinians’. This conclusion led the IDF to officially renounce the use of house demolitions as a standard operational procedure for deterring further terrorist attacks (Harel 2005).

In any case, the rise in successful Palestinian suicide terrorist attacks in Israel during the first three years of the Intifada together with the continuing inability to reach a peace settlement.
under the US-sponsored 2002 Road Map for Peace produced a situation where it was becoming too costly for Israel to remain indefinitely enmeshed in the Territories. The financial and human costs associated with the fight against terror in the Territories were taking their toll on the IDF. Training, for example, beyond company level became almost non-existent and conscientious objection became even more widespread. Regular army conscripts, who in the past underwent 17-week rotations of training and operational activities during their three-year mandatory service, were continually deployed in operational missions. During the Al-Aqsa Intifada, ‘regular units receive[d] only two periods of four weeks of training each year’. Battalions were the largest unit that underwent full exercise, whilst full brigade exercises were virtually unheard of (Ben-David 2004a). The IDF’s force preparedness had deteriorated significantly and proved to be one of the reasons for the IDF’s poor operational performance during the 2006 Lebanon War.

This state of affairs led Prime Minister Sharon to decide to unilaterally withdraw from parts of the Territories as well as approve in 2003 the construction of a security fence that would enable Israel to keep suicide bombers and other attacks out of Israel. Prime Minister Ariel Sharon approved the creation of the 650 km security fence, known in Israel as the ‘separation fence’, in order to impede the infiltration of further terrorists through Israel’s porous ‘Green Line’ borders. By late 2005, almost 80 per cent of the fence had been constructed. Along this buffer zone troops together with UAVs and aerostat surveillance carried out surveillance and interdiction activities, which were coordinated by sophisticated C4I centres. Despite international condemnation and the non-binding ruling by the July 2004 International Court of Justice declaring the fence illegal, the fence actually led to a dramatic reduction in the number of successful suicide terror attacks in Israel (Kaplan et al. 2005).

Yet, a resolution to the conflict was still far out of sight by 2005. Palestinian groups, Hamas in particular, were able to adapt their tactics into an ‘over/under’ conflict in which rather than resorting to suicide bombings, mortar and Kassam rockets were instead used to target Israeli targets within the Green Line and with IEDs within the Territories. The IDF conducted several large-scale incursions into the Gaza Strip with Operations ‘Rainbow’ and ‘Days of Penitence’ in 2004 in order to dismantle Hamas’ terrorist weapons and bomb-making workshops. These periodic incursions occurred after Israel’s unilateral disengagement from the Gaza Strip and from several towns in the West Bank in August 2005, mainly Operations ‘Summer Rains’ and ‘Autumn Clouds’ in 2006 and ‘Hot Winter’ in 2008. All of these incursions set out for the most part to take apart Hamas’ rocket-making capabilities and stop the relentless mortar and rocket launches against Israel following the IDF’s deployment from the Gaza Strip. They reached their pinnacle with the reprisal operation carried out in January 2009 known as Operation ‘Cast Lead’ which set out to debilitate Hamas’ military capabilities and destroy it as a viable terrorist organization. The operation was prompted by Israeli irritation with Hamas’ declaration that it had defeated the IDF by forcing its redeployment from Gaza as a result of unilateral disengagement in 2005 together with several abductions of IDF personnel patrolling the border with Gaza. In addition Hamas’ victory in the Palestinian Authority’s parliamentary elections in January 2006 and the organization’s continuous rocket attacks on Israel were the major factors that led Israel to launch Operation Cast Lead. Although the IDF achieved significant tactical successes – obtained mainly through a more lethal and improved joint manoeuvring performance that was enhanced by the IDF’s increasingly effective network-centric and intelligence capabilities – it was not able to dismantle Hamas’ political and military infrastructure, which even after having received a significant blow is today restocking its arsenal and regrouping itself particularly with the help of Hezbollah.
Conclusion

As seen in this chapter, the state of Israel has been constantly involved in counter-terrorist and counterinsurgent operations since its establishment in 1948. Whilst Israel has never developed a fully fledged counterinsurgent strategy, its continual engagement with terrorist and insurgent threats helped it to develop a de facto policy of ‘massive retaliation’ in order to quickly re-establish deterrence vis-à-vis terrorist/insurgent organizations. The IDF’s tactical inventiveness and assertiveness enabled it to wear down temporarily through attrition Palestinian and Arab organizations’ capabilities. IDF campaigns, following the escalation of violence, led occasionally to brief interludes of relative calm or to the forced removal of an organization from a particular geographical area.

Yet, as Noemi Gal-Or has persuasively argued, ‘the Palestinian struggle . . . changes sectors, wears different forms, and passes from intensity on the military level to intensity on the political-diplomatic one, but Israel has continued to respond with “operationalist” solutions’ (Gal-Or 1990: 223). Such ‘“operationalist” solutions’ have usually tended to postpone a further round of hostilities, but they have not been able to undermine the motivations that often help Palestinian and other Arab organizations to re-animate and continue their terrorist and insurgent fight against Israeli occupations. Without further political and diplomatic efforts that could re-ignite Israeli–Palestinian and even Israeli–Arab peace negotiations, it will only be a matter of time before another major operation or even war breaks out; whether this will be in the guise of sub-conventional or unconventional warfare remains to be seen. Clearly, a military can (poorly) manage, but not resolve an insurgency through military means alone. This is a lesson that Israel (and other states) continues to struggle to apply when appraising its strategy vis-à-vis the Palestinian problem and the greater Middle East. Consequently, Israel finds itself repeatedly whacking an insurgent in one area only to find it reappear in some other place or form.

Notes

1 On the rationale behind Israel’s decision to invade Lebanon, on the IDF campaign and the resulting quagmire Israel experienced, see Schiff and Ya’ari (1984).
3 On Hezbollah’s combat tactics, see Blanford (1999).
4 The United Nations has agreed with Israel that the area is not covered by UN Security Council Resolution 425, which called for the return of Israeli-occupied Lebanese territories.
5 On the issue of the Lebanon Summer War, see Harel and Issacharoff (2008); Bar-Joseph (2009); Kober (2008).
6 On conscientious objection during the first Intifada, see Linn (1996).
7 On the failed Oslo process final status negotiations, see Bregman (2005).
8 Such a visit had, in fact, been approved beforehand by the chief of the Palestinian Security Services and Israel’s Minister of Internal Security.
9 The IDF Chief of Staff declared in July 2002 that, ‘I believe as a military man, that this confrontation obligates us to win in a fashion that will be burned into the consciousness of the Palestinian side, that terror and violence have no chance of bringing any achievements whatsoever’ (Ya’alon 2002: 11).
10 The most notorious case was when the Israel Air Force F-16 dropped a one-tonne bomb in a densely populated neighbourhood of Gaza City in the middle of the night of 22 July 2002 in order to assassinate then leader of Hamas’ military wing, Salah Shehade. In the attack 15 people died, including Shehade, his wife and nine of his children. Fifty other civilians required medical attention following the attack as well.
11 For a detailed analysis of Operation Cast Lead, see Catignani (2009b).
Recommended readings


References


Israeli counterinsurgency


