

The Israeli Defense Forces Response to the 2006 War with HEZBOLLAH GAZA

Matt M. Matthews



Matt M. Matthews is currently employed by the Combat Studies Institute (CSI) at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. He spent 16 years as a member of the opposing forces battle command training program and served a combined total of 12 years in the active Army, Army Reserve, and Kansas Army National Guard. Mr. Matthews holds a B.S. from Kansas State University. He is the author of several CSI press publications including, We Were Caught Unprepared: The 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War and has coauthored numerous scholarly articles.

PHOTO: Israeli artillery shells explode over Gaza City during Israeli strikes on 16 January 2009 as seen from the Israel-Gaza border. Israel shelled Gaza seeking to ratchet up pressure on Hamas to bow to truce efforts gathering pace in Egypt to end the deadliest assault the Jewish state has ever launched on the enclave. (AFP Photo, Jack Guez)

WITHIN HOURS of the first Israeli air strikes against Hamas on 27 December 2008, military leaders, analysts, pundits, and the media began to speculate about the ability of the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) to conduct a successful campaign in Gaza. A mere two days into the operation, as the Israeli Air Force (IAF) continued to pummel terrorist targets in Gaza, some within the Israeli media were already suggesting that “the army had no appetite for a ground war.”¹ Such speculation at the onset of Israeli operations against Hamas was undeniably a direct result of the IDF’s uninspiring performance during its 2006 war against Hezbollah.

As the campaign progressed, however, it quickly became evident to many that the IDF Gaza campaign, Operation Cast Lead, would prove decidedly different from the 2006 war against Hezbollah. This time, the Israeli Prime Minister made no grand announcements of unachievable strategic goals.² As the IAF demolished Hamas leadership, training camps, and weaponry in the early stages of the campaign, there were no bombastic proclamations that “[w]e have won the war,” similar to those the chief of the IDF general staff made in 2006.

Cultural Change

Indeed, the Israeli ground forces in Gaza seemed to have undergone a major cultural change toward decisiveness, aggressiveness, commitment to the mission, and willingness to accept casualties. Commanders led from the front, and the IDF seized cell phones from Israeli soldiers and restricted

the media's access to the battlefield. In a complete reversal from 2006, Israel promptly called the IDF reserves to duty, and they arrived on the battlefield well trained and well equipped. Unlike 2006, the ground campaign shined. "Up to brigade level it was a showcase, orderly, perfect execution, timely [and] disciplined, [the] reservists as good as regulars," wrote one Israeli officer.³

The campaign against Hamas was a dramatic turnaround by the IDF after its faltering performance against Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. The Israeli government's response to the IDF's dismal performance during the 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli war had been swift and revealing. Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's government quickly formed a committee to investigate problems associated with the conflict. The findings in the resulting Winograd Report severely criticized Olmert, Defense Minister Peretz, and the chief of the IDF general staff.⁴ The report also concluded that the IDF had not been ready for war:

All in all, the IDF failed, especially because of the conduct of the high command and the ground forces, to provide an effective military response to the challenge posed to it by the war in Lebanon, and thus failed to provide the political echelon with a military achievement that could have served as a basis for political and diplomatic action. Responsibility for this outcome lies mainly with the IDF, but the misfits between the mode of action and the goals determined by the political echelon share responsibility.⁵

Both Peretz and Halutz resigned by the summer of 2007.⁶ According to Russell W. Glenn, "a considerable number of Israelis blame the poor performance during the 2006 war, in part, on their prime minister and defense minister lacking requisite military experience."⁷ Indeed, many Israelis believed that proven combat leaders were required at the helm. Former Prime Minister Ehud Barak soon replaced Peretz. Their differing military experiences could not have been greater; Peretz had fulfilled his military obligation as a maintenance officer in the IDF, and Barak was a decorated combat veteran, who had also commanded a tank battalion in the Sinai during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, later brigades, and an armored division. In 1991, he became a lieutenant general, and the 14th chief of the general staff.⁸

Halutz's replacement, Lieutenant General Gabi Ashkenazi, was also an IDF combat veteran. Ashkenazi fought in the Yom Kippur war, participated in the Entebbe Operation in 1976, and was the former commander of the Golani Brigade and a former IDF deputy chief of staff. Both Halutz and Ashkenazi were in the running for the position of chief of the general staff in 2005. When Halutz won the coveted appointment, Ashkenazi abruptly resigned. After two years as a civilian, however, Ashkenazi returned to active duty, determined, as one IDF official put it, "to pull the IDF out of the muck."⁹

To his credit, Halutz instituted at least 70 fact-finding teams before his departure. Twenty of these teams focused directly or indirectly on the general staff, while others focused almost exclusively on IDF operations in the field. Once in command, Ashkenazi appointed his own team of high-ranking officers to study the findings of the Winograd Report and weigh it against the IDF's own internal probe. According to one source, "The IDF has made sure it has all the answers needed to rebut whatever arguments [a]rose regarding the military, thus attempting to send the message that the military had already identified all the major failures during its own probe of the war, implementing the lessons learnt accordingly."

Indeed, in September 2007, Ashkenazi introduced "Teffen 2012," a five-year plan to increase the IDF's warfighting ability. One of the major goals of "Teffen 2012" was to create "a decisive ground manoeuvre capability based on modern main battle tanks (MBTs) and other armored fighting vehicles, attack helicopters, low altitude unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and transport aircraft." The plan also envisioned advances in the IAF's "precision-strike capability," "intelligence superiority through all means of gathering" and "preparedness and sustainability through expanding emergency stocks of munitions."¹⁰ Senior officers pointed out that some adjustments the IDF made after the 2006 war "were not short of 'revolutionary,' but admitted that the military would not be able to objectively assess their efficiency until the next large operation."¹¹

Sweeping Transformation

While some of the changes within the IDF were groundbreaking, most simply involved a return to its venerable military principles. "Training, training, and training—as well as innovative thinking,"

is how one officer described the IDF's response to the 2006 conflict.¹² Clearly, Ashkenazi and Barak wasted little time in implementing a sweeping transformation within the IDF.

One of the first items on the agenda was the incoherent doctrine that several of Halutz's own fact-finding teams had already branded as "completely wrong." They concluded the doctrine used during the 2006 campaign created "confusion in terminology and misunderstanding of basic military principles." The IDF had replaced proven methods with "an alternative 'conceptual framework' for military thinking, replacing traditional notions of 'objective' and 'subjection' with new concepts like 'campaign rationale' and 'conscious-burning' of the enemy. . . based on this doctrine, the IDF was to rely on precise stand-off fire, mostly from the air, using ground maneuvers only as a last resort."¹³ The "core of this document is the theory of SOD (Systemic Operational Design)" noted one its creators, retired Israeli Brigadier General Shimon Naveh.¹⁴

The IDF quickly jettisoned SOD elements in its doctrine. Asked what changes the IDF made to its doctrine after 2006, one officer replied, "SOD cancelled."¹⁵

The IDF's transient embrace of SOD post-modern theories at the expense of traditional principles of war was, arguably, one of the strangest episodes in the history of military doctrine. Using John Ellis' work *Against Deconstruction* as a backdrop to describe the failings of SOD, Yehuda Wegman writes that SOD was "the image of intelligence and complexity . . . the use of rhetorical means in order to create the illusion of intelligent analysis at a time when there was no such analysis." Wegman adds, "The first casualty of the new language was the main principle of war: adhering to the mission."¹⁶

New Doctrine

Having abandoned SOD, the IDF went to work on a new doctrine, which it has yet to finalize. As a stopgap measure, the Israeli military has apparently returned to the doctrine in place prior to 2006.¹⁷ Drastic changes within the IDF continued under Ashkenazi and Barak. "There was an almost immediate adjustment in training," one expert in the field acknowledged. "The IDF started training more on the offensive and defensive, what we call conventional warfare skills."¹⁸ Indeed, within the IDF Armored

Corps, the changes in training were swift. Tank units once again focused on their traditional roles and advantages, that of "speed and firepower." Israeli armored brigades trained for months at the IDF Ground Forces Training Center in Nagev, Israel. As an example, Armored Brigade 401, which had lost 8 tank crewmen in 2006, conducted a 12-week training exercise in which it trained in urban terrain, but spent most of its time "sharpening the skills needed for armored combat," according to the *Jerusalem Post*. "Our advantage is our ability to move fast and our firepower," a brigade commander emphasized. "The tanks are now driving faster and using smokescreens—something they didn't use during the war—since we now understand that the threat of anti-tank missiles is 360 degrees."¹⁹ At the company and battalion levels, IDF units also conducted extensive and realistic training in an area meant to replicate southern Lebanon and Hezbollah tactics.²⁰

The IDF reserve forces, particularly tankers and artillerymen, returned to their designated weapons systems and trained on the basics. More importantly, the reserve forces started to receive their full equipment sets. In the immediate aftermath of the 2006 war, the IDF procured tens of thousands of ballistic helmets and vests and night vision goggles, as well as significant quantities of grenades, small arms ammunition, and magazines. After years of performing "other" duties, the reserve soldiers returned to their equipment to address what one observer called "classic warfare needs."²¹

With a new lengthened training program in place, the reserve armored corps began conducting live-fire exercises and participating in full-scale division maneuver training. These exercises included all required combat support units. Unlike 2006, when some reserve officers first met their soldiers on mobilization, these large exercises, the first in years, brought the organization together. Furthermore, all reserve officers selected for command were sent to

**After years of performing
"other" duties, . . .
reserve soldiers returned to
their equipment to address . . .
"classic warfare needs."**

the proper schools and directed to conduct regular exercises with all forces under their command.²² The IDF reserve explored a new “fitness index” resembling the one used by the IAF to qualify pilots.²³

By late 2008, the IDF had undergone an almost complete transformation. Having scrutinized its missteps during the 2006 war, the IDF abandoned the defective doctrine of the past and returned to the fundamentals of modern warfare. If airpower and precision fires were to be decisive, they must be coupled with well-trained and highly motivated combined-arms ground maneuver forces. Air power alone could never be the sole instrument of victory. As the IDF continued its retraining, Hamas fired rockets into Israel from Gaza. This time, the IDF would be prepared.

The Gaza Conflict

After winning local elections against its political rival, Fatah, in 2006, Hamas gained complete control of Gaza in 2007 by confronting the Palestinian Authority and driving it out. The military wing of Hamas carried out this violent coup d'état, and by 2008, this force had grown to approximately 15,000 fighters considered by many to be the “most organized and effective militia in the Palestinian Territories.”²⁴ However, as Anthony Cordesman reported, Hamas’s triumph over Fatah “occurred far more because of a lack of leadership and elementary competence on the part of the Fatah/Palestinian Authority forces than any great skill on the part of Hamas. Unlike the Hezbollah, Hamas never had to develop the combat skills necessary to fight an effective opponent.”²⁵

Israel responded to Hamas’s rise by establishing an economic blockade. According to Cordesman, “Some 1.5 million Palestinians in Gaza became hostages to the power struggle between Israel and Hamas.” As the noose tightened, Hamas responded by smuggling in weaponry, with Iran and Syria supplying much of it. Small arms, rocket-propelled grenades, mortars, and rockets moved through tunnel systems connecting Egypt and Gaza, and through the Sinai and the Mediterranean Sea. From time to time, Hamas used its rockets and mortars to attack Israel, and the IDF responded in kind.

Hamas attempted to replicate a Hezbollah-type defensive system in preparation for any IDF incursion into Gaza. Cordesman believes Hamas

attempted to follow the pattern Hezbollah established in an effort to “create tunnels and strong points in Gaza, develop new booby traps and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and to create [a] spider web of prepared strong points, underground and hidden shelters, and ambush points throughout urban and built up areas as defensive strong points.”²⁶

An Israeli military source described Gaza as “one big minefield—IEDs, traps, and tunnels in almost every block.”²⁷ Hamas was also fully prepared to use the civilian population as human shields and to fire rockets from mosques, schools, and hospitals. It did not oppose placing weapons and rocket stockpiles in civilian homes and attempted to counter Israel’s massive firepower by placing its fighters in the midst of the population. According to one source, Hamas set up “kill zones . . . with no regard for the consequences for non-combatants.”²⁸ To prevail, Hamas would have to tie down the IDF in a vicious urban fight while it attempted to triumph on the world stage through the clever manipulation of the media.²⁹

While replicating Hezbollah’s tactics might have seemed a good idea, several major factors proved highly problematic for Hamas. First, Hamas lacked Hezbollah’s training and fighting prowess. One IDF officer explained that Hamas was not as well trained as Hezbollah and not as highly motivated. However, he continued, Hamas is “an organized force, trained and equipped by Iran, but of vastly different levels of competence.”³⁰ Unlike Hezbollah in 2006, Hamas also lacked large quantities of sophisticated antitank missiles, without which it was hard-pressed to stop IDF tanks.³¹ Second, the rugged terrain in southern Lebanon was ideal for defensive operations, while Gaza was much smaller, flat, and heavily urbanized. According to an Israeli military source, it represented a “completely different war DNA.”³²

After months of continued small-scale, back-and-forth skirmishing, Hamas and Israel agreed to a bilateral ceasefire on 19 June 2008. Not designed to foster a lasting peace, the break in fighting simply allowed both sides to prepare for the next round of hostilities. Hamas used the time to continue work on its defenses and to smuggle more weapons into Gaza, including 122-mm *Katyusha* rockets from Iran. Meanwhile in Israel, the IDF began planning its response.

Unlike in 2006, when Israel had no time to design a coherent response to Hezbollah, the IDF began covertly preparing a masterful campaign plan against Hamas. Cordesman wrote—

These plans included an air attack phase, an air-ground phase to further weaken Hamas and secure areas in the north, and a contingency plan to seal off the Philadelphia Corridor and the Gazan-Egyptian border.... The IDF did not go to war with plans to conduct a sustained occupation, to try to destroy Hamas or all its forces, or to reintroduce the Palestinian Authority and Fatah, although such contingency plans and exercises may have existed.³³

With ample time to prepare, the IDF was also able to collect an unprecedented amount of highly sensitive information on Hamas, enabling it to gain complete intelligence domination. In fact, Israel had been preparing a “mosaic” of Hamas targets for years. The lull created by the ceasefire provided an opportunity to combine this information with recently obtained human intelligence to create “a remarkably accurate picture of Hamas targets in Gaza that it constantly updated on a near real time basis.” Israeli military and civilian intelligence networks completely “penetrated” Hamas’s network at all levels.³⁴ More than one IDF commander said the IDF had been “blind in Lebanon, but in Gaza they could see everything. . . . The operations in Gaza were 200 percent better.”³⁵

First stage. In early November 2008, the IDF launched a raid that killed six Hamas fighters inside the Gaza Strip. Hamas responded with a barrage of rockets fired into Israel and announced it would end the ceasefire on 18 December 2008. This proved to be a costly blunder. Unlike Hezbollah, which had thoroughly prepared for war in 2006, Hamas was unprepared to do battle with the IDF in the closing days of 2008. Hamas had not completed its tunnel systems, established a new secure communications network, or planned logistical operations and the deployment of certain weapons systems.³⁶

Hamas fired 200 rockets into Israel from 4 November to 21 December 2008. As the month of December ended, Hamas continued to taunt the Israelis with ongoing rocket and mortar fire. Like Hezbollah in 2006, Hamas had greatly underestimated the eventual Israeli response.³⁷

Israel implemented a highly detailed deception plan that convinced Hamas that it had no plans to

Hamas continued to taunt the Israelis with ongoing rocket and mortar fire....[but]...[they] had greatly underestimated the eventual Israeli response.

engage in a full-scale conflict, and then the IDF launched Operation Cast Lead. At 1130 hours on 27 December, IAF aircraft roared in from the Mediterranean to strike numerous Hamas targets in the largest assault ever carried out in Gaza. In the first passes alone, the IAF hit 180 Hamas targets with masterful precision, destroying weapon storage facilities, rocket assembly shops, training camps, command centers, communication networks, and other targets.³⁸

As the IAF’s precision munitions continued to thunder down, Hamas fighters fired 50 rockets into Israel, killing one civilian and wounding six others. Fire from both IAF fixed-wing aircraft and attack helicopters hit Hamas fighters scurrying to fire their rockets and mortars. “Virtually all IAF fixed wing strikes,” wrote Cordesman “could be carried out... with their maximum payload of precision weapons... [for] multiple strikes per sorties on relatively soft targets.” On the first day alone, Israeli forces killed approximately 200 Palestinians, the vast majority Hamas fighters. The IAF proudly announced, “The targets had been marked by intelligence collected during the months preceding the attack.”³⁹

The IDF continued to pummel Hamas from the air for the next several days. Then, the Israeli Navy moved in off the coast of Gaza, striking numerous Hamas targets. Hamas continued to fire rockets and mortars. On 28 December, Hamas launched 14 rockets and fired 16 mortar rounds, injuring at least five Israelis. The next day, Hamas launched longer-ranged rockets deeper into Israel. Although the attacks continued to kill and wound Israeli civilians, Israel’s population weathered this adversity better than in 2006.⁴⁰

By 30 December, the IAF was convinced that they had inflicted “critical damage to Hamas.” One IDF officer went so far as to suggest, “The IAF began its attacks at 11:30 and could have ended them at 1140.” The air campaign had been so successful that some within the IDF were equating it

with the 1967 Six Day War. However, while the air missions were certainly effective, Hamas rockets and mortars continued to strike Israel.⁴¹

There can be little doubt that the initial air attacks against Hamas were highly successful and succeeded in knocking out many key targets, as well as important Hamas commanders. Nevertheless, up until this time, as Cordesman pointed out—

Israel had not demonstrated that its ground forces, and air-land capabilities, had overcome the problems and limitations revealed during the fighting in Lebanon or demonstrated that they had either defeated Hamas's forces or forced it to accept any meaningful ceasefire. The IAF might have achieved most of its tactical objectives in attacking its prewar target base, but it did not achieve any major strategic or grand strategic objective.

While Prime Minister Olmert and Defense Minister Barak debated how to conduct the war and when to end it, the IDF stuck to its campaign plan, and on 3 January 2009, released a communiqué that stressed—

The objective of this stage is to destroy the terrorist infrastructure of the Hamas in the area of operation, while taking control of some of [the] rocket launching area used by the Hamas, in order to greatly reduce the quantity of rockets fired at Israel and Israeli civilians.

The IDF spokesperson emphasizes that this stage of the operation will further the goals of Operation Cast Lead as communicated till now: To strike a direct and hard blow against the Hamas *while increasing the deterrent strength of the IDF*, in order to bring about an improved and more stable security situation for residents of Southern Israel over the long term. The forces participating in the operation have been highly trained and were prepared for the mission over the long period that the operation was planned.⁴²

The IDF spokesperson wishes to reiterate that the residents of Gaza are not the target of the operation. Those who use civilians, the elderly, women, and children as “human shields” are responsible for any and all injury to the civilian population. Anyone who hides a terrorist or weapons in his house is considered a terrorist.⁴³



AFP Photo, Mohammed Abed

A Palestinian man sitting on the rubble of a building reads a leaflet dropped by Israeli Air Force planes over the Gaza Strip on 3 January 2009 as smoke from Israeli jets leave trails in the sky.

Second stage. The IDF launched the “second stage” or air-land phase of its campaign plan on 3 January 2009. While the plan contained several alternatives for the use of ground forces in Gaza, the salient objectives were to “set tangible and achievable goals: reinforcing deterrence, weakening Hamas, [and] sharply reducing or ending the threat from smugglers and rockets over time.”

The blueprint restricted this phase to less than 10 days. “It did so,” wrote Cordesman, “because it calculated that the war would begin to reach a point where serious negative consequences began to build up after about two weeks from the beginning of the first air strikes.” Some of these costs included increased IDF casualties, regional instability, and the steady acceleration of civilian casualties.⁴⁴ This was certainly a complete reversal from the confused, haphazard IDF response to Hezbollah. This time, the Israeli military moved forward with a well-conceived plan and predetermined objectives. Unlike 2006, it did so with a suitably trained, highly motivated ground fighting force.

During the last days of December 2008, the “Gaza Division,” under the direction of Southern Command, moved its units into attack positions along the border. The Gaza Division was a regional or territorial headquarters with few organic units

...the Israeli military moved forward with a well-conceived plan and predetermined objectives.

assigned to it.⁴⁵ The division's command post was highly practiced in Gaza operations and expert on the terrain and possible combat scenarios.⁴⁶ For this operation, the Paratroopers Brigade, the Givati Brigade, and the Golani Brigade all reported to the Gaza Division. Although these brigades fell under the command of the Gaza Division, they operated more like independent brigade task forces, complete with their own artillery. Several IDF reserve brigades were also under the operational control of the Gaza Division.⁴⁷ Although Israel called up "tens of thousands" of IDF reserves, they only saw limited action during the closing days of the conflict.⁴⁸ In 2006, the IDF employed five divisions against a mere 3,000 or so Hezbollah front-line fighters; now, in Gaza, the IDF grappled with approximately 15,000 Hamas operatives with slightly more than one division.

Air-land cooperation. The IAF assigned a forward air operations officer to each brigade, giving the brigade commander "practical control" of air operations. According to Cordesman, "each brigade had its own attack helicopters and unmanned aerial vehicles, as well as on-call strike aircraft."⁴⁹ This was an important transformation. Israel had removed fixed-wing CAS from the ground forces before 2006. One IAF officer described the new air-land cooperation as "groundbreaking." He insisted that the "concentration of air assets in a tiny territory permitted unparalleled air-land coordination. Unmanned aerial vehicles cleared around corners for platoons. Apaches provided integral suppressive fire during movements by small units. Jet fighters removed mines and IEDs, prepared terrain for ground movements, and laid down overwhelming firepower ahead of ground advances, servicing even the smallest unit."⁵⁰ In Gaza, the IDF used a variety of innovative tactics, techniques, and procedures.

A massive artillery bombardment up and down the border preceded the ground attack into Gaza and knocked out many of Hamas's defensive positions.

In the north, along the coast, the Paratroopers Brigade moved south toward Atatra, while the Golani Brigade attacked from the northwest in a three-pronged advance south toward Beit Lahiya, Jabaliya, and Shajaiyeh. Moving northeast from the south, the Givati Brigade advanced toward Zeitoun, while a large tank force assembled near Netzarim Junction. On the heels of the artillery salvos, the IDF forces, led by armored bulldozers, pushed across the border. Roving above the onrushing armored columns were attack helicopters and UAVs, which projected real-time intelligence back to IDF command posts. According to sources familiar with the campaign, "advanced digital systems were available at every major level of combat," and "the IDF fought with greatly improved plasma displays and ergonomic, operator-friendly software." Instead of following road networks that Hamas almost certainly mined and set up for deliberate ambushes, the IDF used its armored bulldozers to smash through buildings to create alternate routes.⁵¹

Rapid progress. Accompanied by bomb-sniffing dogs, swarms of infantrymen protected tanks and other armored vehicles from hidden explosive devices in built-up areas. The IDF took full advantage of Hamas's lack of night-fighting skills and equipment. Most, if not all, of these operations took place during hours of darkness. As the Israelis pushed across the border, senior commanders advanced with them.⁵² "What you are seeing today," retired Israeli IAF General Isaac Ben Israel told the press, "is a direct lesson of what went wrong in 2006. In Lebanon, we learned that if you want to stop these rocket launchers, you need to send soldiers in and take the area and control it, and this is what is being done now."⁵³

Unlike Hezbollah, which fought tenaciously for every inch of ground in 2006, Hamas fighters apparently had little appetite for the IDF's violent, well executed onslaught. Hamas IEDs and roadside explosives had little to no effect as IDF armored vehicles roared across the border.

The IDF took full advantage of Hamas's lack of night-fighting skills and equipment.

Having learned its lessons against Hezbollah, the IDF reinforced its armored vehicles' belly plates to better withstand enemy IEDs and mines. Conversely, locally produced roadside bombs used by Hamas seemed to lack the explosive power of similar Hezbollah devices. As IDF ground forces advanced, Hamas military leaders found themselves cut off from their frontline fighters and were unable to communicate or exert effective command and control.⁵⁴ "Hamas fighting prowess hardly inspired awe," an embedded Israeli journalist reported. "Hamas gunmen—in full view of the people of Gaza—abandoned the arena and fled into the crowded neighborhoods where they quickly shed their uniforms. The offensive array of bunkers and tunnels and booby-trapped buildings—set for remote detonation—were captured intact."⁵⁵

Although descriptions of most of the movements of IDF brigades remain classified, it is clear that the ground forces made rapid progress. They quickly cut off Gaza City from the rest of the territory. "By the third day of the air-land phase," Cordesman wrote, "the IDF was able to move forward to the point where it could begin to attack Hamas forces in detail. These operations continued to be conducted at the brigade level, rather than at the division level as in the past. This gave the forward commander much more freedom of initiative, particularly from second guessing that had sometimes reflect[ed] more concern over risk of casualties than rapid, decisive action."⁵⁶

While this command arrangement seems to have worked, some within the IDF say that there was a certain "vagueness" between the political levels and the military as to objectives and end states as well as an indifference to the IDF's strategic and operational processes. "It seems," wrote an IDF officer, "as if the ministry of defense and the Chief of Staff were directly working with colonels in the field and bypassing the chain of headquarters." He maintained that this may have led to a "less effective operational design," but had "nonetheless, to a degree succeeded." This same officer was also uncertain of whether "a clear operational design" was in place for the duration of the air-ground campaign. It was instead just "general pressure and attrition across the field," he surmised.⁵⁷

By 5 January, severe ground combat continued to flare up across Gaza, but this kind of persistent

...persistent fighting was limited due to Hamas's efforts to avoid pitched battles at all cost.

fighting was limited due to Hamas's efforts to avoid pitched battles at all cost. "In contrast," Cordesman wrote, "the IAF kept up a steady round of attacks, as did the Israeli artillery. This kept Hamas under constant pressure even when they did not engage in direct combat." When these head-to-head clashes did erupt, however, they were often brutal. On 5 January, three soldiers were killed and another 24 wounded when an IDF tank mistakenly fired into a building they were occupying during an intense firefight between Hamas and members of the Golani Brigade. What all these soldiers were doing in the same building is unknown, but similar incidents transpired in 2006.⁵⁸

From 6 to 10 January, the IDF continued to put pressure on Hamas, and the IAF hit approximately 250 targets in Gaza, including Hamas rocket-launching squads and areas, smuggling tunnels, manufacturing and storage facilities, sites containing hidden mortar shells, and the homes of Hamas fighters used as weapons storage facilities. The IAF also targeted groups of armed gunmen and Hamas command centers. Israeli intelligence continued to perform well for the IDF, pinpointing known Islamic Jihad fighters. On 8 January, with the help



Israeli soldiers prepare artillery shells as troops keep position on the Israel-Gaza border, 9 January 2009.

AFP Photo, Jack Guez

of the Israeli intelligence, the IDF struck four operatives who just days before had fired rockets into Israel.⁵⁹

As the ground campaign continued, the IDF killed or captured hundreds of fighters and expanded its control over more of Gaza. Hamas leaders also had to confront new attacks from their political rivals. To make matters even worse, they remained cut off from their fighters in the field, making command and control nearly impossible.⁶⁰ Although threatened with a crushing defeat, Hamas still believed it could strengthen its standing in the Arab world by continuing to resist and by conducting an effective IO campaign. However, while Hamas's propaganda machine tried to capture worldwide sympathy for its plight and paint Israel as the aggressor, the IDF pushed on relentlessly, seemingly unconcerned about any wide-reaching IO effort. One IDF officer said that the Israelis would never win global public opinion, but thought Israel's IO campaign had worked well in conveying the message that "we did as we pleased, when we pleased, and where we pleased—full battle space domination." He also considered the IDF's ability to be "less transparent" in this conflict as a positive factor.⁶¹

To their credit, IDF legal planners fully participated in the development of Operation Cast Lead, and the IDF took great pains to limit civilian casualties. In fact, the IDF set up phone banks with Arabic speakers to call homes targeted for destruction to give their occupants a reasonable amount of time

to evacuate them. According to one source, these callers were under stringent orders to convey the message to adults only. Nevertheless, many Palestinian civilians died or were wounded, and Hamas took full advantage of this to increase its popular standing on the world stage.⁶²

From 8 to 18 January, the IDF continued to batter Hamas with its air-land capabilities. Soldiers from the Givati Brigade later said they had put into service many of the lessons learned from the 2006 campaign against Hezbollah. Officers from the brigade spoke in glowing terms of their new fighting principles such as "commitment to mission and pushing for contact with the enemy." Indeed, a fresh, innovative spirit seemed to radiate from many IDF ground units. A Givati Brigade battalion commander stated during the height of the ground battle that his men "must deal with the enemy and nothing else. We are focusing on the mission. We haven't even received newspapers here. When we finish what we have been tasked with, we'll express interest in what people up there are saying about it." The IDF took cell phones away from IDF soldiers to thwart any problems with communications security and so that they could focus more intently on the battle rather than affairs at home.⁶³

On 11 January, after what one Israeli officer called, a bit of "fine-tuning," IDF reserve forces began moving into Gaza. Under the command of the Gaza Division, the reserve brigades moved into sectors regular IDF forces had already secured, allowing the regular infantry to continue offensive operations. In the two weeks prior to their commitment into Gaza, the reserve brigades trained intensely at the Ground Training Center in Tze'elim. "New and advanced equipment was issued to the reservists," the IDF reported, "and they have expressed their satisfaction about the quality of the equipment and emphasized its role in the improvement of their operational abilities." The increased training, as well as the upgrading of equipment, helped produce a force far superior to the IDF reserves employed against Hezbollah in 2006.⁶⁴

As the reserve brigades rolled into Gaza, the IDF air-ground campaign continued to kill and capture Hamas fighters. On 13 January, the IDF reported that they had already captured hundreds of Hamas gunmen while the Givati and Paratroopers Brigades continued to destroy weapons stores and



AFP Photo, Mohammed Abed

Members of the Ezzedine Al-Qassam brigades, Hamas's military wing, give a press conference in Gaza City on 19 January 2009.

tunnels. The ground forces and the IAF eradicated 22 cells of Hamas fighters in synchronized operations. While the IAF also managed to knock out 20 rocket-launching sites, Hamas was nonetheless able to launch two rockets and fire 12 mortar rounds into Israel. Since the opening of hostilities, Hamas indirect fire had killed three Israeli civilians and wounded 255 others.⁶⁵

While the IDF still listed its main objectives as “the creation of a better security situation [and] cessation of rocket and mortar fire and all terrorist attacks from the Gaza Strip,” the situation was rapidly reaching a decision point. Either the IDF could expand the ground campaign significantly in an effort to eradicate all rockets, mortars and Hamas fighters, or Israel could begin to move toward a ceasefire.

Expanding the campaign could have resulted in increased casualties for the IDF and Israeli and Palestinian civilians. Palestinian civilian casualties and the massive destruction produced by the conflict were causing mounting apprehension around the world. As Cordesman pointed out, “air-land phase of the fighting scored continuing tactical gains, but it also exacerbated the political, strategic, and humanitarian problems that had arisen during the air phase.” On 13 January, a senior IDF officer informed the press that the “political echelon will have to make [a] decision on [the] military operation’s future.”⁶⁶ After five more days of fighting, the Israeli cabinet announced a unilateral ceasefire in Gaza on 18 January.

Triumph

The IDF’s campaign against Hamas was an impressive achievement. While the enemy that the Israeli military confronted certainly lacked many of the traits normally associated with a professional fighting force and undoubtedly fell far short of the combat prowess of Hezbollah, these facts do not diminish the IDF’s accomplishments.

In the end, the IDF’s real triumph was not its ability to quash an inferior military organization like Hamas, but its success in retraining and restructuring its ground forces in the wake of their disappointing performance in 2006. These postwar reexaminations and alterations allowed the IDF to defeat Hamas so decisively and convincingly that would-be enemies of Israel could not fail to take note.

***...the IDF’s real triumph...
its success in retraining and
restructuring its ground forces
in the wake of their disappoint-
ing performance in 2006.***

There were striking differences between the 2006 war with Hezbollah and the conflict with Hamas. The IDF abandoned the peculiar doctrine in place in 2006, which ran counter to the basic principles of war, and returned to classic military principles. These included mission and aim, initiative and offensive, continuity of action, and the maintenance of morale and fighting spirit. All of these principles were absent in southern Lebanon, but certainly on full display in Gaza. The IDF returned to a policy of commitment to the mission and simplicity.⁶⁷

There was also a vast difference in leadership during the course of the two conflicts. Ehud Barak, a solid leader and ground combat veteran, replaced Defense Minister Peretz, a man with no combat experience. By 2008, the veteran ground commander Ashkenazi had replaced the verbose theorist Halutz. While Halutz was prone to garrulous public statements during the 2006 war, Ashkenazi remained relatively silent during the Gaza campaign. Even as Barak and Prime Minister Olmert debated the direction and timetable of the Gaza operation, Ashkenazi adhered to the IDF’s campaign plan. This was indeed very different from Halutz’s erratic approach in 2006.

Another major difference between 2006 and the Gaza campaign was training and equipment. In 2006, IDF ground forces, both regulars and reserves, were ill-trained and ill-equipped for a war against Hezbollah. Senior officers and enlisted soldiers alike floundered. Lacking basic combat skills, and in many cases required equipment, they were thwarted by the veterans of Hezbollah. Both tankers and artillerymen had been away from their equipment for too long, and their competence and proficiency showed it.

Owing to the hard work and foresight of Barak and Ashkenazi, the situation had changed dramatically by 2008. In Gaza, senior officers, leading from the front, understood their responsibilities and were able to maneuver their forces. Soldiers had trained in basic combat skills, were proficient in the use

of their equipment, had trained for night fighting, and were equipped for it. They were also highly proficient in indirect fire skills. More important, in little time, the IDF was able to regain its combined arms maneuver capabilities.

The 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli war and the 2008 conflict in Gaza demonstrate that a resourceful, imaginative enemy can catch even a historically

successful army unprepared. However, the IDF proved adept at indentifying and analyzing its mistakes and miscalculations. A rigorous training program that focused on time-honored principles of warfighting enabled the IDF to restore competence and credibility in its ground forces. One need look no further than the 2008 Gaza conflict to affirm the IDF's great success in this endeavor. **MR**

NOTES

1. Ian Black, "Six months of secret planning—then Israel moves against Hamas," *The Guardian*, 29 December 2008.
2. According to Yair Evron, when Israel launched its campaign against Hezbollah in 2006, it "announced far-reaching objectives, including a complete change of the situation in southern Lebanon and the destruction of Hezbollah. These were entirely unrealistic and certainly unattainable through military methods." Yair Evron, "Deterrence: The Campaign against Hamas," *Strategic Assessment* 11, no. 4, February 2009; Steven Erlanger, "For Israel, 2006 Lessons but Old Pitfalls," *The New York Times*, 7 January 2009. Also, see Matt M. Matthews, *We Were Caught Unprepared: The 2006 Hezbollah-Israeli War*, The Long War Series Occasional Paper 26, U.S. Army Combined Arms Center, Combat Studies Institute Press, 2008.
3. Erlanger; Matt M. Matthews, 37; Ron Tira, email interview by author, 22 January 2009.
4. The commission, officially titled "The Commission of Inquiry into the Events of Military Engagement in Lebanon 2006" was named after its lead investigator, retired Supreme Court Justice Eliyahu Winograd.
5. Matthews, 85; Information and Internet Department, Winograd Committee Final Report, Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 30 January 2008.
6. Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Government/Personalities/From+A-Z/Amir+Peretz.htm> (19 February 2009); "IDF Chief Halutz Resigns," YNetnews.com, <www.ynet.co.il/english/articles/0,7340,L-3353269,00.html> (19 February 2009).
7. Russell W. Glenn, senior defense and political analyst, RAND, Santa Monica, CA.
8. Matthews, 36; Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/MFAArchive/2000_2009/2001/3/Ehud+Barak.htm> (19 February 2009).
9. YNetnews.com, "Who is Gabi Ashkenazi?" 22 January 2007, <www.ynet.co.il/english/articles/0,7340,L-3355253,00.html> (19 February 2009); YNetnews.com, 8 February 2007, "Ashkenazi, Gabi—IDF Chief of Staff," <www.ynet.co.il/english/articles/0,7340,L-3362535,00.html> (20 February 2009).
10. "Armed Forces, Israel," *Jane's Sentinel Security Assessment—Eastern Mediterranean*, 13 January 2009.
11. Hanan Greenberg, "IDF Chief Appoints Special Team to Study Winograd Report," *Ynetnews.com*, <www.ynet.co.il/english/articles/0,7340,L-3500824,00.html> (23 February 2009).
12. Tira, email interview by author, 26 January 2009.
13. Alon Ben-David, "Debriefing teams brand IDF doctrine 'completely wrong,'" *Jane's Defence Weekly*, 3 January 2007.
14. Shimon Naveh, interview by author, 1 November 2007; Colonel Ronen Shviki, interview by author, 23 February 2009. The new design was intended as a tool to help IDF commanders plan their campaigns and contained terminology drawn from "post modern French philosophy, literary theory, architecture, and psychology." Yotam Feldman, "Dr. Naveh, Or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Walk Through Walls," *www.haaretz.com*, 27 October 2007, <www.haaretz.com/hasen/spage/917158.html> (5 November 2007). According to Milan N. Vego, "SOD enthusiasts claim that modern military operations are too complicated for applying a linear approach because the enemy and environment form a complex adaptive system. However, they mistakenly argue that such systems cannot be destroyed but must be pushed into disequilibrium—that is, into chaos." Milan N. Vego, "Systems versus Classical Approach to Warfare," *JFQ*, 1st Quarter 2009, 42.
15. Tira, email interview by author, 26 January 2009.
16. Yehuda Wegman, "The Distorted Self-Image: On the IDF and Its Responsibility for Civilians," *Strategic Assessment* 10, no. 2, August 2007, 2.
17. Tira, email interview by author, 26 January 2009.
18. Yaakov Katz, "IDF applying lessons of war to improve use of tanks," *The Jerusalem Post*, 20 March 2007.
19. *Ibid.*
20. MG Custer, Briefing on Israeli Operations in Gaza, Lewis and Clark Center, 5 February 2009.
21. "Sentinel Security Assessment—Eastern Mediterranean," *Jane's*, 17 December 2008; Yoaz Hendel, "The Reserves Comeback," *Strategic Assessment* 10, no. 4, February 2008, 2.
22. Hendel, 2.
23. Yaakov Katz, "Army to upgrade reservist equipment," *The Jerusalem Post*, 20 March 2007.
24. "Hamas," *Jane's World Insurgency and Terrorism*, Jane's Information Group.
25. Anthony H. Cordesman, "The 'Gaza War': A Strategic Analysis," Center for Strategic & International Studies, Final Review Draft: Circulated for Comment and Updating, 2 February 2009, 5.
26. *Ibid.*, 8.
27. Tira, email interview by author, 28 February 2009.
28. COL Hanny Caspi, "Cast Lead Operation," Briefing slides; COL (RET) John Antal, "Flashpoint Gaza: The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) Launches 'Operation Cast Lead,'" <www.armchairgeneral.com/flashpoint-gaza-analysis-january-4-2009.htm>, 5-6 (1 March 2009).
29. Antal.
30. Tira, email interview by author, 28 February 2009.
31. Tira, email interview by author, 9 March 2009.
32. Tira, email interview by author, 22 January 2009.
33. Cordesman, 8-9.
34. *Ibid.*, 15.
35. Custer Briefing; Ehud Eiran, email interview by author, 23 January 2009.
36. Mohammed Najib, "Hamas Investigates Poor Military Response to IDF," *Jane's Defence Weekly* 28, January 2009, 16.
37. Cordesman, 9.
38. *Ibid.*, 15; "Operation Cast Lead—Update No. 1, Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Israel Intelligence Heritage and Commemoration Center, 28 December 2008, 4; "IDF Operations in the Gaza Strip," Daily Update, 27 December 2008, *The Military-Strategic Information Section/The Strategic Division*.
39. "Operation Cast Lead—Update No. 1; Cordesman, 16.
40. "Operation Cast Lead—Update No. 2, 29 December 2008, 4; Cordesman, 21; Tira, email interview by author, 22 January 2009.
41. Cordesman, 19.
42. *Ibid.*, 27, 28, 38.
43. Israel Ministry of Defense, <www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2009/01/mil-090103-idf01.htm> (2 March 2009).
44. Cordesman, 38.
45. Two territorial brigades.
46. COL Ronen Shviki, email interview by author, 9 March 2009.
47. *Ibid.*; Cordesman, 39.
48. Tira, email interview by author, 26 January 2009; Aaron J. Klein, "Israel Enters Gaza: Negotiating with Extreme Prejudice," *Time*, 4 January 2009.
49. *Ibid.*, 41.
50. Tira, email interview by author, 22 January 2009.
51. Aaron J. Klein, "Israel Enters Gaza: Negotiating with Extreme Prejudice," *Time*, 4 January 2009; Joel J. Sprayregen, "The Inside Story of Operation Cast Lead," *American Thinker*, 27 January 2009; Cordesman, 39-40.
52. Klein; Sprayregen; Cordesman, 39-40.
53. Charles Levinson, "Israel's Ground Assault Marks Shift in Strategy," *The Wall Street Journal*, 5 January 2009.
54. Mohammed Najib, "Hamas investigates poor military response to IDF," *Jane's Defence Weekly* 28, January 2009, 16.
55. Sprayregen.
56. Cordesman, 41.
57. Tira, email interview by author, 22 January 2009.
58. Cordesman, 42; Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "IDF Operations in Gaza: Cast lead, 5 January Friendly Fire Incident," <www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism+Obstacle+to+Peace/Terrorism+and+Islamic+Fundamentalism-/Aerial_strike_weapon_development_center+_Gaza_28-Dec-2008.htm> (9 March 2009).
59. Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "IDF Operations in Gaza: Cast lead, Summary of Today's IDF Operations," <www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Terrorism+Obstacle+to+Peace/Terrorism+and+Islamic+Fundamentalism-/Aerial_strike_weapon_development_center+_Gaza_28-Dec-2008.htm> (10 March 2009).
60. Mohammed Najib, "Hamas investigates poor military response to IDF," *Jane's Defence Weekly* 28, January 2009, 16.
61. Tira, email interview by author, 22 January 2009.
62. *Ibid.*
63. Hanan Greenberg, YNetnews.com, 13 January 2009, <www.ynet.co.il/english/articles/0,7340,L-3655094,00.html> (10 March 2009).
64. Arnon Ben-Dror, "Reserve Forces Joining the Operation," *Israel Defense Forces*, <http://dover.idf.il/IDF/English/News/the_Front/09/01/1302.htm> (8 March 2009).
65. "Operation Cast Lead IDF Operations in the Gaza Strip," Military-Strategic Information Section/The Strategic Division, Distributed 0500, 14 January 2009.
66. "Operation Cast Lead IDF Operations in the Gaza Strip"; Hanan Greenberg, *YNetnews.com*, 13 January 2009, <www.ynet.co.il/english/articles/0,7340,L-3655094,00.html> (10 March 2009); Cordesman, 57.
67. Jewish Virtual Library, "IDF Principles of War," <www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/source/Society_&_Culture/IDFprinciplesofwar.html> (13 March 2009).