Decentralizing the Israel Defense Forces

Adapting to the Iranian Challenge with a More Capable Ground Force

Eran Ortal and Tamir Yadai

This article was written in August 2023, before the Hamas attack of October 7 and subsequent consequential events that have redefined, and are still redefining, Israeli military strategy.

INTRODUCTION

A major change is unfolding in Israel's strategic environment, coinciding with a decay of the regional Arab order and the rise in the Iranian drive toward hegemony.[1]

This development is undermining one of the advantages on which the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) was first built—fighting on inner lines.[2] The IDF, which is a local force by nature, is therefore required to transition from playing on the home field to engagement across the entire Middle East, with emphasis on particularly demanding missions within Iran.[3]

In these circumstances, Israel is contending once more with the phenomenon of the "basic asymmetry" which was at the heart of the Zionist *Iron Wall* concept. In the Israel-Iran conflict, the Iranian side enjoys the advantages of size, strategic depth, and regional fighting infrastructure based on its proxies and protégés. Israel, despite economic, technological, and political advantages, such as the Abraham Accords, has reverted to being the underdog.

Based on the *regional aggressive containment* strategy described by Ortal, the IDF should not only adapt to its new regional role but also enhance its decisive capabilities with respect to the Iranian-affiliated missile bases on Israel's borders.[4] Furthermore, all of this must be accomplished without overstretching Israel's economy.

An Essay from The Caravan Notebook

The keystone for implementing this strategy lies in an extensive adaptation of the local IDF, which we refer to as a territorial force, to meet the challenge and serve as a springboard for the development of long-range capabilities. This argument relies on two foundations, one theoretical and one practical. The theoretical aspect is that Israel's long-term strategy of deterring Iran and eroding its capabilities will not be sustainable if Israel proves incapable of uprooting the threats of Lebanese Hezbollah (LH) and Hamas in Gaza. On the practical side, the IDF will have great difficulty expanding its already stretched intelligence and offensive capacities. In the past decades, IDF operations have become deeply dependent on superb intel and airpower. However, adding more resources in those sectors will not enable sufficient growth, since they are already reaching their upper limits. The dependence of the IDF ground forces on air support and centrally collected and analyzed intel has become so profound that it is holding back the IDF's ability to pivot to Iran. That dependence, created by decades of coordinated efforts, must be mitigated.

WARS OF ABUNDANCE

Following Operation Pillar of Defense (December 2012), we argued that the pattern of engaging in *deterrent operations*, a strategy defined by mainly aerial coercion efforts, has led to a strategic deadlock.[5] The IDF openly confirmed this in its 2019 concept of operations. Against that background, we now argue that the IDF has developed a pattern of resource-intensive "wars of abundance" that has deepened its dependence on intelligence and aerial support. This pattern, formed in an era of militarily inferior adversaries, has now degenerated into a weakness.

Learning from the 1973 Yom Kippur War, Israel was reluctant to remain satisfied with its well-proven, traditional approach to war. That approach was based on total mobilization and a qualitative edge in know-how, supported by capable air force and intelligence early-warning capabilities. Hence, the decade of the 1980s saw a comprehensive modernization of the IDF. It pioneered a modern intel-strike complex consisting of aerial sensors and other assets, and an impressive arsenal of precision-guided munitions (PGMs). As a result, in the following decade, the once-supporting role of the Israeli Air Force (IAF) and Israeli Defense Intelligence (IDI) became the leading role.

Times were changing. Israel's modern airpower and, even more so, the end of the Cold War significantly reduced the threat of an Arab conventional armor invasion. Instead, new adversaries developed their own asymmetric approach. Because the main objective of both terrorists and guerillas is to cause casualties rather than gain territory, the Israeli response of exploiting its modern intel-based accurate airpower and reducing casualties made sense. Israel did so even as its adversaries were rapidly adapting to its air and intel superiority and finding ways to neutralize it by means of concealment, robustness, and more.

Without valid conventional military targets, airpower quickly proved to be ineffective in defeating the new adversaries. Nevertheless, avoiding casualties remained important. Israel developed a new approach, a version of the old *Strategic Bombing* theory, which involved coercing host governments to disarm radical players such as LH. Unfortunately, LH and, later, Hamas in

Gaza have proven to be more dominant than the relevant governing elements, which renders this strategy ineffective.

Unable to be militarily efficient, and ineffective in its coercion strategy, IDF operations became increasingly protracted. That trend escalated further as Israel withdrew from Lebanon and Gaza, which enabled Israel's enemies to undertake a massive buildup of arms and capabilities. Apparently when faced with a limited threat, a wealthier and more technological Israel preferred warfare aimed only at maintaining the strategic status quo rather than a costly and riskier approach aspiring to eliminate the threat. That tendency had a cost: because the IDF ground forces were viewed as a strategic last resort in any confrontation, they were left largely ill-adapted to the dramatically changing battlefield.

A routine of wars of abundance was created. These wars, only declared as such in retrospect, were characterized by ever-increasing durations (2006 Second Lebanon War—thirty-four days; 2014 Protective Edge—fifty days), rising costs in resources such as PGMs and stockpiles of interceptors, and prolonged bombardments of Israel's population. A military that was supposed to be "small and smart" became a resource-intensive enterprise. Preparedness for the next war was repeatedly interrupted by costly, resource-draining operations in Gaza, which were necessary and yet strategically insignificant. Dependence on the goodwill of US administrations also deepened as emergency support to renew Israeli war stockpiles was needed after almost every round of violence.

Lost in the metrics of locating targets and acquiring the necessary ammunition, the IDF seems to have also lost sight of the concept of defeating the other side.

THE MULTITHEATER CHALLENGES

In recent years, the IDF has become increasingly occupied with a challenge known as the "multitheater threat" or a "convergence of theaters." Events such as the 2014 West Bank crisis, in which three Israeli teenagers were kidnapped and murdered and which spilled over into Gaza and escalated into a fifty-day armed conflict, marked the beginning of the more complex scenarios that we now face.

However, Israel's traditional defense concept was aimed exactly at that—a combined and simultaneous Arab offensive. The answer was both simple and effective. Following Napoleon's famous rule of defeating coalitions "one at a time," Israel's answer was a concentration of all efforts on the primary front, rapidly defeating the enemy there, and then shifting the effort to the next front. Why is it that, today, a much more capable IDF finds this approach to be so problematic?

The answer lies in the pattern of the wars of abundance. These military efforts that consume time and resources at high rates but are also indecisive have become unsustainable. The doctrine that has unconsciously taken root in recent decades assumes an inherent overwhelming qualitative and quantitative Israeli advantage. These assumptions are no longer valid. More so, these prolonged and only partly effective operations tend to encourage,

rather than discourage, more hostile actors to join the fight and thus contribute to the rising convergence of multifront threats.

NOT ASYMMETRIC ANYMORE

Both LH and Hamas, along with the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), have grown to be missile-based terror-military forces. Their effectiveness is based on missiles, aerial threats, rockets, and elite forces ready to raid Israel, and on the skills of concealment. That impressive development must be credited, at least partly, to Iran's constant and profound involvement. Iran has always given support to these groups, but it was after Israel pulled out of Lebanon (May 2000) and the Gaza Strip (August 2005) that the conditions emerged for a full-scale buildup of an Iranian-backed force. An additional boost was the "Arab Spring," which left Iran unopposed in many parts of the region. Israel is known to push back on the Iranians in Syria. While that *short-of-war* effort has its successes, it also serves to underline the freedom of action Iran enjoys in its support of LH in neighboring Lebanon. Growing military and strategic confidence has increased the defiant attitude of the malign actors.

The signs of the weakening Israeli position are obvious. When presented with an opportunity, Hamas leaders in Gaza have been all too eager to seize on any excuse to initiate rocket strikes into Israel, as in May 2021. In the new circumstances, Arab-Israeli extremist groups also felt confident to go ahead and riot. Recently, LH has changed its conduct in South Lebanon, becoming more visible, more defiant, and more provocative on the Israeli border.

Once weak and isolated but now well adapted, modernized, and coordinated by Iran, the *Shiite axis* is no longer a group of asymmetric adversaries. Aware of Israel's limited endurance and the tendency of aerial operations to last longer than planned, Israeli decision makers cannot afford the risk of an operation spilling over into additional theaters. So, despite military superiority on paper, Israel's strategic lever is subject to erosion, starting from the first day of any fight.

RELIEVING TEL AVIV

The IDF's stockpiles of munitions and interceptor inventory are only the second most important bottleneck created by wars of abundance. A more crucial bottleneck is the one located in Tel Aviv. By "relieving Tel Aviv," we mean that the most critical resources in the new form of warfare comprise intelligence gathering, data processing, targeting, and aerial strike planning. All of these are largely run from headquarters in Tel Aviv. That is the fact during wartime but also in the constant preparations for war and the ongoing efforts of the *campaign-short-of-war*.

The IDF's impressive capacity to strike 3,000 HL targets in a single day of fighting in Lebanon in 2021 was made possible by a cadre of thousands of highly skilled service members.[6] The IDF's brightest people are busy putting together the pieces of a complex puzzle, coordinating endless amounts of precious intelligence and processing all of it into actionable information.

Joining their ranks are many hundreds of elite professionals who are in charge of planning each of the thousands of strikes expected to be launched. That effort applies also to the hundreds of complicated air strikes regularly carried out by Israel around the region. Just keeping the so-called *Target's Bank* up to date is a constant effort. The constant race between Israeli intelligence and the buildup and disruptive efforts of Israel's adversaries is a spiraling loop of intel investments, keeping the entire intel-strike community very busy in an effort that simply maintains Israel's current advantages.

The IAF and IDI have never been released from their original duties, which were appropriate for the context of the 1950s and 1960s. Early warning of an impending war, ensuring air superiority, finding the enemy's strategic targets, and neutralizing its critical formations remain crucial, of course. To that we have added necessary antiterrorist efforts, also highly demanding in terms of attention and resources. However, IDI's considerable growth in numbers and budget cannot keep up with its growing responsibilities. No matter how technology enhances its capacity, resources remain short.

The IDF was never intended to be commanded directly from Tel Aviv. It was the growing dominance of integrated intel and airpower that pushed the IDF to become a more centralized command and control system, which tends to render the territorial combatant commands almost irrelevant. The IDF approach to enhancing ground force capabilities in an economically responsible manner has been to rely on better air-land coordination, a joint services approach. Gradually, therefore, ground forces became so dependent on intel-air capabilities coordinated from Tel Aviv that even the smallest of efforts, including immediate defensive ones, proved challenging to conduct without centralized coordination.

Air defense's centralized coordination, a relatively new form of the IDF's excellence, is also adding to Tel Aviv's accumulating list of duties. Various defensive layers are deployed facing northward or southward, coordinating conflicting detection and electromagnetic demands in Israel's cramped airspace, and more—all these require centralized management. The IDF headquarters (HQ) in Tel Aviv is constantly growing, becoming more complicated and, as a result, less agile.

IT IS IRAN

All this was happening while the IDF was still facing the so-called asymmetric adversaries. And then, one strategic morning, Israel came to understand that the problem is Iran. Not just Iran's nuclear aspirations, nor only its proxies, but also its own rapidly developing long-range strike capabilities, its defense industries, its air defenses, and the list goes on. In light of the regional containment strategy, Israel must now also greatly enhance its situational awareness and operational capabilities in vast and remote places such as Yemen, Iraq, the Sahel, and the Horn of Africa. A quick look at the map can demonstrate what a disproportional task that is even for an excellent intelligence core and air force community like Israel's.

The simple fact is that the IDF's intel-air and command and control capacity cannot keep up with these dramatically growing demands simply by adding resources in a linear manner. Something substantial must also be taken off that plate. Doubling the amount of fighter jets, intel sensors, or Iron Dome batteries is both impossible and unhelpful. The important bottleneck is with the competent personnel. That resource, even after exploiting high tech, is fully exhausted.

Only Tel Aviv HQ and its centrally run resources hold the potential to become a regional player. For that, the IDF needs to be relieved of the burden of tactically supporting the combatant commands and every ground force battalion, during both peace and war. The wars of abundance took a heavy toll on the IDF's command and control, as well as on its other resources. Practically containing Iran on a regional level demands a profound organizational change.

ADAPTING TO A MULTIDOMAIN TERRITORIAL FORCE

The IDF ground forces have to adapt to accomplish two aims: the first involves reasserting the approach of defeating the enemies on Israel's borders, and the second enables the long-range arm of the IDF to deal with Iran and its regional influences. Yet, all missions, whether long-range or on the borders, will clearly demand joint efforts of all services. The term *territorial force*, new to the IDF, is meant to make a better distinction between the two different challenges, allowing a better recognition of the multidomain (MD) capabilities needed for the territorial component. Rather than describing it in the form of service affiliation, it is preferable to focus mainly on capabilities and command and control aspects.

A NEW MULTIDOMAIN APPROACH

The IDF's goal is a rapid and effective defeat of LH or Hamas with a more independent force commanded from IDF's territorial HQs rather than from the busy Tel Aviv HQ, thus releasing vital air and intel components for distant efforts. This capacity must be developed while maintaining budget constraints. A key lies in the true, straightforward MD concept. In MD operations, we sometimes mean a better integration of air, intel, and land forces (joint operations), utilizing technology to coordinate their separate tactical command structure. That is important yet not new. Sadly, joint long-term implications in the IDF brought about some unintended consequences, deepening the dependence of ground forces. Reacting against that exaggerated dependence, a new approach to MD should stand for enhancing the independence of those ground forces. That is possible, as demonstrated by the Ukrainians, by integrating aerial sensors and data processing components into a unified tactical-level command and control structure.

The IDF's *Momentum 2019–2023* multiyear plan was aimed, among other things, toward that goal. However, the IDF is still in the first stages of experimental flagship programs and remains far from reaching a comprehensive capacity. Closely examining the *Momentum* plan, one must realize that Israel has maintained the vectors of intelligence and airpower

investments, favoring those immediate needs over the more visional MD concept. A joint approach is still the IDF's organizational habit. Dependency has actually deepened. Gaining the initiative, defeating the enemy, and cutting the prolonged wars of abundance short remain goals to be reached.

OPERATIONAL REQUIREMENTS

Ranged accurate fire is at the heart of the adversaries' war machines. Defeating concealed, dispersed, and entrenched enemies requires new capabilities. An MD territorial force assigned to the defeat of LH at Israel's northern front will require the following:

- Force protection and survivability, ensuring maneuverability and an acceptable rate of casualties. That capability is to be achieved in the face of advanced anti-tank missiles, loitering munitions, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and drone threats, and intensive, accurately directed artillery.

- Enhanced lethality, exploiting ground warfare friction and proximity to the enemy, luring enemy troops out of hiding and implementing rapid, accurate kill chains. That lethality is both the means of keeping the initiative and tempo, and an end in itself—clearing enemy forces and removing the threat to our cities.

- Effectively reducing and finally removing missile and rocket threats aimed at the home front. Ultimately, that is the sole purpose of the fight. A secondary, yet critical objective is to take a significant load off our homefront air defenses, allowing them to focus more on incoming threats from more distant arenas, such as Iran.

- Relieving Tel Aviv by doing all of the above with reduced aerial, intelligence, air defense and joint staff resources and attention.

Fulfilling these four requirements means not only changing Israel's strategic posture but also demonstrating its decision makers' confidence and political will to take more proactive, preemptive efforts.

A decade ago, these requirements would have sounded like science fiction. Today they are within reach.

A rapidly developing unmanned automated air dimension should be fully exploited to ensure not only vertical and horizontal multisensor surveillance but also a highly networked fighting environment. Squadrons of coordinated and automated tactical UAVs covering the advancing battalions and brigades can put pressure on the enemy to resist and be targeted or avoid the fight. The new vertical dimension must be organized in specialized squadrons to ensure they are an asset rather than a burden on maneuvering units. Loading IDF companies and battalions with too many vertical assets would be not unlike the misuse of tanks in 1940 by the French army. Operated by the brigades and divisions, these squadrons can be the

multidomain battlefield enablers. Enhanced by real-time and increasingly automated processed data, that capacity can enable troops to regain the initiative and increase maneuverability. Completing the lethality element will be the artillery and missile support capabilities following close behind the troops. That is meant to ensure immediately available and effective tactical fire support. The enhanced capabilities, concentrated at the brigade level, will also enable reserve battalions, not as well trained and modernized as the regulars, to reinforce regular formations and work under that operational envelope.

It is our estimation that the IDF can organize a significant mass of these capabilities in the coming years within a reasonable cost, relying mostly on existing technologies.

The task of suppressing enemy fire on the home front and on Israeli troops remains. Through his "rocket denial," Major General Aharon Haliva described the development of a ground system that is meant to create a "fire suppression blanket."[7] This highly capable sensors-to-shooters networked system, following close behind the ground forces, should be capable of intercepting and destroying the sources of enemy fire, significantly decreasing the threat to both the home front and Israel's fighting forces.

A multidomain territorial force does not mean that joint interservices coordination will come to an end. Intelligence gathered before and during the war will continue to be highly valuable for all types of operations. Early-intel-based air strikes on missile positions and enemy HQs will still be preferable. In some tactical situations, no artillery support can substitute for a 500 kg airborne Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM). And still, Israel is preparing for a simultaneous fight in Lebanon, Gaza, and arenas farther away. Decision makers should be free to launch a major air operation far from Israel's borders without considering the effect on IDF performance in the expected escalation in Lebanon. Intel gathering and resource analysis must be better engaged in the operational preparations for distant regional arenas, with the knowledge that the IDF's territorial commands will not go blind due to the reduced rate of intel provided to their sectors. Finally, with less than ideal but sufficient capabilities, commanders on the ground can take back control. The command and control structure of the IDF can rebalance, shifting responsibility to its territorial commands and maneuvering units, freeing the joint staff to focus on its strategic role and far-flung operations. Lowered dependence could also reestablish the IDF's diminishing culture of mission command. That culture was always one of IDF's secrets of flexibility and resilience.

PRACTICAL FORCE GENERATION

A comprehensive vision may sound far-fetched, but in our view, it is both practical and achievable in the near future and within a reasonable budget. To build this force, it is necessary to focus on five main lines of effort:

- Organization of special-purpose ground units for implementing the multi-dimensional battle. These UAV squadrons will deploy under division or brigade HQs, monitor the battle space, process data, secure communications, and coordinate fire support.

- Organization and strengthening of regional land-based fire assets. That will include additional surface-to-surface tactical missile capabilities.

- Addition of antimissile UAVs and artillery capabilities—the key effort. It requires a wide-area counterfire system at the front aimed at suppressing bombardments of Israel's cities and providing protection to its deployed troops.[8]

- Upgrade of reserve units' preparedness. War on more than one front will demand not only quality but also quantity.

- Reaffirmation of the IDF's mission command approach. While the IDF has never given that up, confidence and trust in that system have eroded. Building it back will require both cultural and practical efforts.

CONCLUSION

The IDF is faced with a challenge of historical dimensions. The intuitive route to meeting the requirements for regional impact is an extra effort on intel and air capabilities. Unfortunately, this route alone will not be sufficient.

Israel's strategy of countering Iran will not be sustainable unless Israel is confident in the IDF's capacity to defeat Iran's proxies on the borders quickly and decisively.

On the operational level, the current level of ground forces dependency is not only unhealthy but also effectively holds the IDF's airpower and intelligence back from pivoting to Iran.

Many of the necessary investments toward these goals have already been made. The IDF is a pioneer in UAVs and is heavily invested in the new generation of smaller, more abundant interconnected and automated ones. The IDF also leads in artificial intelligence (AI) and cutting-edge computing as well as missile and intercepting technologies.

The IDF should now focus on the proper exploitation of these assets. The conventional inclination to keep putting more eggs in the same centralized basket alone will not take Israel where it has to go.

NOTES

1. Dan Schueftan, "Israel's National Objectives: A Comprehensive Perspective," *Strategic Assessment* (January 2020): 4, https://www.inss.org.il/strategic_assessment/israels-national -objectives-a-comprehensive-perspective/.

2. Israel Tal, *National Defense: Few Versus Many* [Hebrew] (Hevel Modi'in, Israel: Dvir Publishing, 1996), 73.

3. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East*, November 2019, https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-dossiers/iran-dossier.

4. Eran Ortal, "Wearing Out the Iranian Tiger," *Caravan Notebook*, Hoover Institution, August 9, 2023, https://www.hoover.org/research/wearing-out-iranian-tiger.

5. Tamir Yadai and Eran Ortal, "The Deterrence Rounds Paradigm: A Deadlocked Strategic Modus Operandi and Doctrine" [Hebrew], *Eshtonot*, Israel National Defense College (January 2013), 15–17.

6. Amir Bouhbout, "The Air Force Has Practiced a War against the Hezbollah: 'We Can Attack 3,000 Targets a Day'" [Hebrew], Walla!, February 16, 2021, https://news.walla.co.il/item/3418513.

7. Aharon Haliva, "Denying the Rockets" [Hebrew], *Dado Center Journal* 34 (May 2012).

8. Eran Ortal, "Fighting Fires with Data," *Defining Ideas*, Hoover Institution, August 7, 2023, https://www.hoover.org/research/fighting-fires-data.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

ERAN ORTAL

Brigadier General Eran Ortal, a visiting scholar at the Hoover Institution, has served in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in various command and staff positions, most recently as the Dado Center commandant. His work focuses on the IDF's modernization and strategic effectiveness. He is the author of *The Battle before the War: The Inside Story of the IDF's Transformation*.

TAMIR YADAI

Major General Tamir Yadai is the commander of the IDF ground forces command. He worked his way up the ranks of the Golani infantry brigade and commanded it during the 2006 Second Lebanon War. He then went on to command two IDF divisions, the Homefront Territorial Command and the Central Combatant Command.

About The Caravan Notebook

The Caravan Notebook is a platform for essays and podcasts that offer commentary on a variety of subjects, ranging from current events to cultural trends, and including topics that are too local or too specific from the larger questions addressed quarterly in *The Caravan*.

We draw on the membership of Hoover's Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on the Middle East and the Islamic World, and on colleagues elsewhere who work that same political and cultural landscape. Russell Berman chairs the project from which this effort originates.

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on the Middle East and the Islamic World

The Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on the Middle East and the Islamic World studies a range of political, social, and cultural problems in the region with the goal of informing American foreign policy choices and the wider public discussion. The working group draws on the intellectual resources of an array of scholars and practitioners from within the United States and abroad to foster the pursuit of modernity, to combat Islamist radicalism, to promote human flourishing, and to spread the rule of law, human rights, and democratic governance in Islamic lands—developments that are critical to the very order of the international system. The working group is chaired by Hoover fellow Russell Berman.

For more information about this Hoover Institution working group, visit us online at hoover.org/research-teams/middle-east-and -islamic-world-working-group.