



The IDF's Record in the Current Intifada: An Interim Scorecard

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At their recent meeting in Sharm-el-Sheik, Ariel Sharon and Abu Mazen announced the cessation of the hostilities that erupted in September 2000. Whether or not the cease-fire will hold remains, of course, to be seen. But its announcement certainly offers an opportunity for a retrospective, interim assessment of the IDF's operational performance during the past four and a half years of violence.

This study argues that its record is no better than mixed.

True, the IDF can take pride in several tactical achievements. It was particularly successful in learning how to pre-empt and/or defuse terrorist activities by pooling its intelligence and surveillance resources with those of the General Security Services (*ShaBaK*) and the Police Force. Largely thanks to such measures the numbers of Israeli victims of Palestinian violence declined from monthly averages of almost 38 in 2002, and 18 in 2003, to just 11 in 2004.

That achievement should not be belittled. After all, the IDF was not fighting a conventional battle, but rather a "sub-war". As US forces are now discovering in Iraq, this category of conflict presents conventional armies with especially complex operational problems. In the Israeli case these were compounded by the fact that the IDF was also dealt an unusually tricky *domestic* hand. Throughout the past four years, its freedom of operational maneuver has been restrained by the seemingly chronic hesitancy of successive Israeli governments, whose domestic weaknesses have severely compromised their ability to provide the military arm with consistent policy guidelines.

Important though those considerations undoubtedly are for an understanding of the parameters of the IDF's operational behavior, they cannot excuse its failures. The latter become especially apparent once the terms of reference are shifted from the essentially tactical level of the fighting to its broader political and societal dimensions. At this level of analysis, the IDF's measure of success is gauged by the degree to which it fulfilled its three basic professional obligations during the past four years:

- To maintain the integrity of the State and the safety of its inhabitants against all foreign foes.
- To serve as an instrument of strategy in the wider sense, by providing the government with additional room for diplomatic and political maneuver.
- To constitute a "school for the nation" by imparting to soldiers the values underlying Israel's claim to be a Jewish and democratic state.

Although to a large extent inter-related, these three obligations will here be analyzed sequentially.

1. Defense of the integrity of the State and the safety of its citizens

Since September 2000, Israeli society has been made to pay an unusually high price in blood. Over 1,000 citizens have been killed, and over 5,500 injured, frequently as a result of outrages perpetrated in public facilities by suicide bombers, mostly within the “green line”. IDF reprisals, often against the same locations, by no means entirely undermined Palestinian motivation to mount similar attacks in the future. Neither have they put an end to the “Kassam” missile strikes against Israeli targets in the Negev, which in fact persisted after Sharm-el-Sheik, too.

Those circumstances ridicule the claims, boastfully articulated by senior IDF sources as long ago as the summer of 2002, that the Palestinians were about to cave in and that they will soon realize that they have nothing to gain by using force. More importantly, they also indicate that the IDF can take far less credit for the overall resilience of Israeli society under fire than is often supposed. The real heroes in this battle are not military personnel, but ordinary citizens, who continue to function with virtual normalcy.

2. Support to the political arm

Attacks on the scale experienced over the past four years certainly mandated military retaliation. But Israelis can take little comfort from the knowledge that, as a consequence of IDF reprisals, the scale of destruction and death on the Palestinian side was even greater.

As Clausewitz taught, only political calculations can validate a state’s resort to organized violence. Military operations are not ends in themselves. Rather, their main purpose is to widen the scope of maneuver available for other political activity, non-violent as well as violent. It follows, then, that the effectiveness of a specific military campaign can never be measured by simply adding up the number of enemy personnel killed and assets destroyed. What matters is whether the benefits of all that activity outweigh its political costs.

Judged by that gauge, too, IDF operations must be considered only a qualified success.

For one thing, the list of missed opportunities is far too long. There is no evidence that the IDF’s mission agenda in the recent conflict ever included local military initiatives, of the sort that might have won “the hearts and minds” of the Palestinians and thereby weaned at least some of them away from their allegiance to Arafat and the other gangsters who bear prime responsibility for the insurgency and its destructiveness.

Neither are there any signs that the IDF really understands the importance of managing operations in a way that will reduce Palestinian opportunities to score diplomatic points by projecting themselves as the “righteous victims” of Israeli aggression. Instead of carefully synchronizing military actions with the country’s overall political aims, the IDF has all too often given the impression of naively assuming that a simple resort to force, crudely applied, could serve its own ends and that its inherent justifiability would be self-evident.

Worst of all, the IDF has still not mastered the rudiments of psychological operations, whose importance for the successful management of a “sub war” has long been axiomatic in all analyses of modern strategy. Altogether, the IDF Military Spokesman’s Unit seems to be completely out of its depth and hence must surely carry at least some responsibility for Israel’s pariah status in many parts of the world.

3. “School of the Nation”

Like every other army, the IDF constitutes a social institution, which exercises a strong influence over the men and women whom it encompasses, and determines much of their behavior both in and out of uniform. In the Israeli case, the societal scope of that influence is especially pervasive, since military service is (nominally) mandatory for all citizens. As

a “people’s army” the IDF not only reflects the society from which it draws its human resources. What the IDF does, and how troops carry out their orders, inevitably permeates civilian society’s mores, too.

Troop behavior is an especially critical issue in counter-insurgency operations. Principally this is because of the complex ethical issues to which “sub-wars” give rise. It is not at all easy for armies to observe the humanistic norms of military conduct if their enemies altogether invalidate conventional rules of engagement, for instance by intentionally blurring accepted distinctions between combatants and non-combatants and committing morally outrageous crimes.

To its everlasting credit, the IDF avoided succumbing to the temptations of becoming as brutal as its enemy. Instead, it sought to grapple with the moral dimensions of combat far more fundamentally, for example, through the dissemination of its Code of Ethics, which was first published in 1995, and revised in 2000. Expressly designed to ensure that soldiers do not “dehumanize” their enemies, this document emphasizes the importance of the preservation of “human dignity” and the “purity of arms”.

Recent reports issued by IDF sources themselves cast some doubt on the extent to which those admonitions were in fact observed. Certainly, the wilder charges of mass rape, murder and pillage spread abroad both by Palestinians and by some of their irresponsible sympathizers inside and outside Israel, are patently false. But it is less easy to dismiss the evidence indicating the occasional resort to random acts of vindictiveness by some troops, especially in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist attack. At times, these resulted in the deaths of non-combatants (including women and children); more often, they took the form of patently callous behavior at check-posts. Even more disturbing is the tolerant attitude towards such behavior adopted by both the military judicial system and many senior commanders.

Such phenomena give grounds for grave concern. First, in the very long run, unless checked they could undermine discipline and self-restraint within the IDF. Secondly, and probably more realistically, there always exists the danger of a “spillover” into civilian society as a whole. To take just a simple example: Will young conscripts who were allowed to keep an aged Palestinian waiting for hours in the sun at a check-post show any more consideration when they are in civilian life when confronting an aged Israeli at a road junction?

Conclusion

Thus to indicate the IDF’s various faults during the recent campaign is not, of course, to imply that the military performance has been an entire failure. What does need to be pointed out, however, is that its record certainly falls far short of the standards set by the IDF itself, and which Israeli society has become accustomed to expect. True, the IDF was operating in an extremely delicate and complex political environment. Ultimately, however, it alone bears responsibility for both the effectiveness of its military operations, and for the manner in which they are conducted. And in each of the three areas discussed in this paper, the grades on its scorecard are disappointingly low.

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