Fighting in the City: The Israeli Experience

military–Earth thinking notebook

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Probably linked to the long experience of fighting Palestinian terrorism, the Israeli army is often considered an example of efficiency in "urban" wars.

Colonel de la Ruelle considers that the reality is more nuanced. If the Israeli army prevails by the quality of its tactical training and the superiority of its equipment, it is not safe from half-failures linked, in particular, to very short-term planning.

Among the many accepted ideas about the Israeli army is the one that lends it a formidable effectiveness in urban combat. Probably linked to the long experience of the fight against Palestinian terrorism since 1948, to the capture of East Jerusalem in June 1967, to the fighting in localities and refugee camps, and to the fact that the Israeli army has a long history of fighting in the Palestinian territories.The reality is more nuanced, as shown by the examples taken from the 2000s onwards.

On contact, the Israeli army prevails through the quality of its tactical training and the superiority of its equipment, but it is not immune to half-failures linked, in particular, to very short-term planning.

Recent examples

- Second Intifada (2000-2006): the mass to quell an uprising

Following a new rise in tensions between Jews and Palestinians, the arrival of Ariel Sharon, leader of the Likud, on the esplanade of the mosques on 28 September 2000 was the spark that triggered an asymmetrical militarised conflict. The Palestinian population of

the West Bank rises up against the Israeli occupation. While some of the clashes take place along the roads, the most violent clashes take place in the major Palestinian cities, particularly Jenin and Nablus, where the Israeli army has to mount real operations to eradicate the terrorist infrastructure.

The Israeli army begins by evacuating positions that are difficult to hold: in the heart of urban areas that are booby-trapped and defended by armed Palestinian fighters who are well supported by the population, armed positions held by just a few soldiers who can very quickly be surrounded by a crowd of several thousand people. On two occasions, over-exposed and late evacuated positions have led to filmed lynchings of Israeli soldiers, traumatic scenes for the Jewish population (7 October 2000 in Nablus and 12 October 2000 in Ramallah).

Then, before entering them to launch real military operations to neutralise the terrorist infrastructure, the major Palestinian cities were isolated and their external access controlled. Dams were erected on the outskirts of the cities.

When the decision was taken to return to the cities in the spring of 2002 with Operation Rampart, 60,000 Israeli soldiers of conventional forces supported by formidable firepower entered the main Palestinian cities. The Israeli army also brought in special units and ensured an overwhelming local balance of power. The armoured forces are very present, the 500th armoured brigade [is] in charge of investing Jenin. The capacity to infiltrate Palestinian areas for intelligence and action purposes was reinforced (creation of commandos Sayeret Chadlag, Maglan. Combat engineering took on great importance from that time with the symbolic image of the D 9 armoured bulldozer, which became a "strategic weapon" in Gaza because of the obstruction of the axes, but also to create paths away from the axes of progression and firing.

The Israelis are testing new tactical methods: night armoured raids in the heart of cities, infantry advancing under cover of houses, increased use of dogs and snipers. At the same time, training in urban combat in specific facilities, which are multiplying, is becoming systematic.

The army's action is in a joint framework with massive use of drones, helicopters, in charge of targeted eliminations by missile launches, and even F-16 bombers used occasionally to drop one-tonne bombs on otherwise unreachable targets.

The operation did not destroy the "terrorist infrastructure", but it did deal serious blows to it and the intifada ran out of steam. The Israeli army achieved its objective through decisive ground operations, but neglected two aspects: On the one hand, the action on the population that it considers impossible to rally to its cause and that it is just trying to dissuade from joining terrorism; on the other hand, the training of the population in the use of the weapons of mass destruction, which is the only way to prevent them from joining terrorism, has been neglected.Secondly, training in high-intensity combat is becoming rare; as a result, the lack of maintenance of the specific know-how of this combat will pay dearly as from the following year...

- Second Lebanon War (2006): the battles of Bint Jbeil and Maroun A-Ras, or command performance at fault

During the second Lebanon war in the summer of 2006, the Israeli army initially relied solely on its air force to stop rocket fire from Hezbollah, which was bombing northern Israel on a daily basis from southern Lebanon. Noting the failure of this solution, a ground

offensive is planned as a minimum to regain the initiative while hoping to limit losses on the ground as much as possible. A limited offensive is decided, aimed at taking control of an area bordering Israel (the Shiite villages of Bint Jbeil and Maroun A-Ras) where, as a result of mistakes, the Israeli army deplores eight deaths in 48 hours.

The battle's casualty toll was clearly in the Israeli army's favour, as some 100 battle-hardened and defensive Hizbollah fighters were killed in short-range clashes. However, for the Winograd Commission, which was charged with drawing up the balance sheet of the war, as well as for the Israeli public, the outcome is more complex. Indeed, it is the Israeli casualties and the incredible scramble linked to the planning and conduct of the operation (flotations and rivalries between the three levels of planning and command - the operations division of the central headquarters, the northern front and the division of the front sector - that are mainly retained.

Indeed, the intelligence was lacking on the enemy's position; the establishment of the battalions to launch the attack was delayed; the mission to be carried out was not clear (to conduct a raid or to occupy the villages?). The lack of coordination between units of the friendly apparatus was obvious; orders that changed during the course of the action would have required re-articulation. The battle finally came down to a fight of separate units without mutual support. The configuration at Bint Jbeil prevented the IDF from using its technological advantage, and the battle turned into a succession of very short-range, almost hand-to-hand combat.

In terms of casualty figures, the operation was a success, but this aspect of things must be put into perspective, given that eight deaths represent a costly toll for the Israeli army and the tactical failure is obvious.

- Operation Protective Edge against Gaza: summer 2014

Following the daily firing of dozens of rockets from the Gaza Strip into Israel, the Israeli army is launching an offensive to stop the firing. After a phase of aerial and artillery bombardments, the Israeli army penetrates a few kilometres (2 to 3) into the Palestinian Peninsula.After a phase of aerial and artillery bombardment, the Israeli army penetrates a few kilometres (2 to 3) into the Palestinian-Urban area to eliminate rocket launching sites, but above all to find and destroy the entrances to tunnels one to two kilometres long. These tunnels (32 are eventually uncovered and destroyed) lead into Israel and pose a growing risk of attacks by Hamas commandos and the kidnapping of civilians and soldiers. The Israeli ground forces do not penetrate into the heart of the cities of the Gaza Strip, as the aim is not to overthrow the Hamas regime, but to eliminate immediate threats (rocket fire and tunnels).

Once again the balance of power is overwhelming in the face of an enemy who is asymmetrical but who knows the terrain perfectly well. The use of fire is massive on the Israeli side. The land and air armies cooperate fully, air bombs being dropped less than 200m from the Israeli troops under armour. The use of armour is massive: about 500 Merkava tanks take part in the operation, while Hamas does not have a single tank. The armoured tanks fire at short, even very short distances on nests of resistance and positions considered dangerous. The few tanks equipped with the Trophy active protection system and hit by RPG rockets or anti-tank missiles suffered no casualties. On the other hand, an old immobilised M113 is quickly destroyed, causing the death of 9 Israelis. In the end, it was mortar fire on the Israeli army's deployment and waiting positions that caused the highest losses (around ten deaths).

In order to limit losses among the Palestinian civilian population, the Israeli army uses several methods: dropping leaflets, sending sms, reduced warning strikes... However, when it considers it justified, the Israeli army pounds civilian installations because it considers thatHowever, when it considers it justified, the Israeli army pounds civilian installations because it considers them to be an integral part of the terrorist infrastructure (storage of weapons, munitions, caches of combatants in civilian infrastructure) and has done everything possible to force the civilian population to leave the targeted area.

Strongly committed to the operation, the army has greatly diminished Hamas' military capabilities. By holding a strip of land in a semi-urban area, the army enabled the combat engineer units to remove the threat posed by the tunnels.

Consistencies

Despite variations related to the enemy, terrain and context, Israeli superiority in urban combat is based on the following elements:

- Not a step without a drone or support: air-land combat in urban areas is under a permanent surveillance bubble. UAVs must detect the slightest movement and guide fire from the best placed supports.

- Intelligence: it is essential in peacetime to target infrastructures and HVT[1], to limit losses, and to counterbalance a potentially unfavourable balance of power. It is obtained in joint forces or even inter-service (West Bank). The golden rule is therefore "no engagement without intelligence", and the violation of this rule is costly, as in Bint Jbreil. In the West Bank, Israeli intelligence is particularly effective given the length of the Israeli occupation and the technological and human resources involved.
- Combat in urban areas requires the use of guided munitions (GPS and laser). It highlights the importance of using high technology (sensors, launchers, command, control and communications systems) to enable essential real-time decision-making.
- The protection of the troops takes precedence over the speed of the operation and the destruction agreed upon. Advancing into enemy urban areas is therefore carried out as far as possible under the shelter of armoured vehicles and built infrastructure. Mobility took second place to protection and firepower.
- Good joint coordination, thanks to the integration of two air force liaison officers into the brigade headquarters. UAVs and helicopters are in the hands of the Air Force, but provide effective support to ground operations. The air force provides close support to the troops. Furthermore, the coordination rules allow for artillery engagement even if drones are flying in the area.
- A completely assumed asymmetry: the mass of the combat and support platforms provides psychological and lethal support. Heavy armoured vehicles (class 60T) are systematically engaged. They protect the crews in order to bring fire as close as possible and accompany the infantry. As far as possible, they carry the latest technology (Trophy system). On the other hand, old equipment (M113) has become vulnerable to an asymmetrical enemy whose firepower has increased considerably.
- The population factor is better taken into account by the Israeli army, but remains subordinate to the objectives of the operation. This taking into account of the war in the midst of populations is new. A cell now exists within the brigade headquarters to manage the different means contributing to the management of

the environment (PSYOPS, COMOPS, CIMIC, Key leader engagement).

- Fratricidal fire is a constant fear: the digitisation of land units is the tool that enables them to be avoided as much as possible.
- IED damage is reduced to a minimum: the permanent observation of the battlefield (which is in fact reduced) by UAVs, the surprise effect and ground evolutions limit the risk. Following "Protective Edge", the Israeli army decided to equip itself with a mortar shell detection and destruction system.
- A generation before the Battle of Mosul, the Israeli army understood the importance of combat engineering in modern urban battles, particularly through the symbolic use of armoured bulldozers to move through obstructed urban areas made for channelling. As a result of Operation Protective Edge in 2014, even more urban and underground combat training areas have been constructed. An additional Combat Engineer Battalion was created.
- The Joint Brigade is the basic tactical manoeuvre counter in urban combat, under the orders of a brigadier who centralises the use of all reinforcements and support (CAS, UAVs, artillery, intelligence...). He must have a large margin of initiative. It is finally in this necessary modularity of land units that lessons, if they are learned, take the longest to be implemented. Prisoners of a scheme of organic units, Israeli units are little used to training at the unit level. It is in this particular area that developments are likely to take place in the short term.

Generally very familiar with its areas of intervention (West Bank, Gaza, South Lebanon), the Israeli army already has a definite advantage: cities and enemies are known. Technological superiority and local power relations also work in its favour. Nevertheless, as examples above show, success can be mixed. The enemy, too, learns from its mistakes and grows stronger. Finally, despite the latitude of the combat zone, the fog of war is also present in the area .

1] High value target: high importance target

After a first part of his career in the ABC, Colonel de la Ruelle then pursued it in the field of international military relations, notably defence attaché in Turkey (2007-2010) and Israel (2013-2016). He has been head of the Army's RETEX office since 2016.

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