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Preparing for “Hybrid” Opponents

Israeli Experiences in Lebanon and Gaza

The U.S. military was largely designed for major combat operations against state actors, but over the past several years it has made significant changes to its training, organizing, and equipping paradigms to adapt to nonstate, irregular threats in Afghanistan and Iraq. The adversaries in both of these wars have yet to employ sophisticated weaponry (such as man-portable air defense systems or anti-tank guided missiles) in any significant numbers. The introduction of such weapons could radically escalate the challenges faced by U.S. forces. All that is needed for the Taliban to make the transition to a more lethal adversary is a state supplier of advanced weapons and training in their use.

Under these conditions, the U.S. Army might be approaching a situation similar to that of the Israelis in 2006 before the Second Lebanon War, when it faced a hybrid threat, defined as an *“adversary that simultaneously and adaptively employs a fused mix of conventional weapons, irregular tactics, terrorism and criminal behavior in the battle space to obtain [its] political objectives.”*¹ To better understand the breadth of challenges that could affect U.S. decisions about future military capabilities, RAND Arroyo Center researchers examined the recent experiences of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) in Lebanon and Gaza.

The Second Lebanon War: A Wake-Up Call

Israel’s strategic assessment prior to 2006 was that low-intensity, asymmetric operations would be the main role of its army in the future. Israeli leaders had concluded that the air force would deter state adversaries and the army reserves would have time to mobilize and train in the

Key Points

- The basics of joint combined arms fire and maneuver are necessary for successful operations against “hybrid” opponents.
- The ability of an adversary to transition from irregular to hybrid is relatively simple, requiring only the sponsorship of a state actor able to provide sophisticated weapons and training.
- Precision, standoff fires are critical, but not sufficient, to cope with hybrid opponents.
- Heavy forces—based on tanks and infantry fighting vehicles—are key elements of any force that will fight hybrid opponents.

unlikely event of a war with a bordering state, a possibility further mitigated by the U.S. presence in Iraq. Based on this assessment, budgets were cut; armored unit training, deemed largely irrelevant in low-intensity conflict, was neglected; the staffs and processes within the IDF that integrated air and ground operations were removed from brigades; and little training was done in air-ground integration.²

Focused almost exclusively on irregular combat, the IDF became generally incapable of the joint combined arms fire and maneuver capabilities associated with major combat operations. However, as demonstrated in the Second Lebanon War, taking a defended position from

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¹ Frank G. Hoffman, “Hybrid vs. Compound War, the Janus Choice: Defining Today’s Multifaceted Conflict,” *Armed Forces Journal* (October 2009), p. 15. Emphasis in the original.

² The Winograd Commission, *The Second Lebanon War*, Final Report, Volume I, January 2008, and discussions with IDF officers in Tel Aviv, February 10–12, 2009; in Washington, D.C., February 26, 2009, and April 1, 2009; and in Tel Aviv and Latrun, September 2–10, 2009.

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a hybrid force armed with standoff fires (such as anti-tank guided missiles) requires forces trained and organized for fire and maneuver, albeit at a reduced scale from major combat operations.

Although relatively small, Hezbollah units in 2006 were trained, organized, and armed with sophisticated weapons, including anti-tank guided missiles, middle- and long-range rockets, and man-portable air defense systems. Initially, the IDF tried to decide the issue with standoff air and artillery attacks, but this did not stop short-range rocket attacks on Israel, nor result in the return of the soldiers whose capture had precipitated the war. Eventually, Israeli ground forces entered Lebanon. Conditioned for low-intensity conflict, they encountered real difficulties when they confronted Hezbollah and paid a heavy price in casualties for their lack of preparation for a hybrid opponent. The IDF's reputation as an invincible military—fundamental to deterrence—was also tarnished.

Operation Cast Lead: Back to Basics

With a renewed appreciation for the importance of ground forces, the IDF went “back to basics” in the aftermath of the 2006 conflict, training extensively on high-intensity combat skills, particularly combined arms fire and maneuver. Before the Second Lebanon War, roughly 75 percent of training was on low-intensity combat and 25 percent on high-intensity combat; after Lebanon, this ratio was reversed. In recognition of the importance of heavy forces, production of Merkava IV tanks was also resumed, as was armored force and reserve training. As a result, when the IDF went into Gaza in December 2008 to reduce the number of rocket attacks launched from Gaza and restore Israel's military deterrent—Operation Cast Lead—it was markedly better prepared to fight a hybrid opponent.

As opposed to the Second Lebanon War, a ground campaign and reserve mobilization were planned for Operation Cast Lead from the beginning. The air force hit key targets in Gaza, and IDF artillery and air strikes “paved the way by fire” for ground maneuver by brigade combat teams, hitting Hamas positions and detonating mines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). IDF engineers used armored D-9 bulldozers to cut paths through remaining IEDs. The firepower that preceded the ground attack, coupled with

the rapidity of the maneuver, surprised Hamas, and it was driven from its prepared positions back to improvised positions. Heavy armored units were also a key component of the operation, providing protected, mobile precision firepower and intimidating the enemy. Although the IDF did not put a complete halt to rocket launches out of Gaza into Israel, it was able to reduce them. More importantly, the IDF demonstrated its renewed competence in air-ground operations, a key to restoring its military deterrent.

The “Middle” Range of Military Operations

The Israeli experience makes apparent that there are opponents at three basic levels of military competence, and each level places different demands on the military forces being designed to confront them. What is especially important to note about these levels is the relative ease of transitioning from a nonstate irregular capability (low level) to a state-sponsored hybrid capability (middle level). All that is needed is a state sponsor to provide weapons and training to irregular forces. The United States itself created such a transition in Afghanistan in the 1980s when it gave Stinger missiles to the Mujahideen, turning them from an irregular force to a hybrid adversary that unhinged Soviet strategy in Afghanistan.

Policy Issues

The imperative to conduct protracted low-intensity operations with limited ground forces in Iraq and Afghanistan has atrophied the skills and processes for integrated air-ground-ISR operations in both the U.S. Army and the U.S. Air Force. The Israeli experience points to the need for further analysis in at least several areas to enhance readiness:

- The air-ground-ISR integration implications (in organizations, C2 technologies, and procedures) of operations against hybrid opponents, particularly when they are operating “among the people.”
- The training implications of hybrid opponents for U.S. units (i.e., individual and collective skills that are different from those employed in irregular warfare or major combat operations).
- The kinds of ground combat vehicle capabilities—in the realms of survivability, lethality, and mobility—required to prevail against hybrid opponents. ■

This research brief describes work done by the RAND Arroyo Center and documented in *Military Capabilities for Hybrid War: Insights from the Israel Defense Forces in Lebanon and Gaza*, by David E. Johnson, OP-285-A, 2010 (available at http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP285.html). This research brief was written by Susan K. Woodward. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark.

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