By Matthew Smith

As the Israeli air forces strikes a cheese factory, rockets hit Israel and tensions rise fast towards possible intensified conflict, the nature of the last Israeli incursion into Palestinian territory bears re-examination

There can be no doubt that the conduct of the Israeli military during Operation Cast Lead in 2008/9 was heavy handed. With the seemingly unrestrained use of explosive ordinance and white phosphorous in the Gaza strip, combined with a media blackout and no stated timeframe for its operation, Israel was quickly demonised in the international media. The resulting coverage gave the impression of a malicious Israeli offensive designed to cause as much damage as possible.

However, simply reporting events on the ground failed to take into account the wider background to the operation. Whilst undoubtedly heavy handed, the action taken by the Israeli military was largely influenced by its failings during the Second Lebanon War. Whilst no explanation can justify the extensive damage done to Gaza, understanding the context of the operation provides a different perspective on events and allows a better understanding of the reasons for Israel's actions.

The failings of the second Lebanon war in 2006 were numerous and far reaching. To begin first with the strategic failings; the invasion was hastily conceived with limited planning and subsequently suffered from unrealistic goals. These objectives included, amongst others, the return of two Israeli soldiers kidnapped at the start of the campaign, the cessation of rocket fire into northern Israel and the disarming of Hezbollah. Matters were made worse by over-zealous officials who, confident of swift victory, repeatedly made bombastic public statements about success in the conflict.

The confidence of officials stemmed from a newly created Israeli doctrine that emphasised the use of standoff firepower and Effects Based Operations (EBO – in which effects were to be generated on enemy "systems", destroying the enemy's ability to function effectively). This caused a shift of emphasis within the Israeli military away from its traditional method of combined arms warfare and towards standoff firepower that could be best provided by the Israeli Air Force (IAF). The subsequent reliance on the IAF to deliver "effects" hindered strategic decision-making, as it significantly delayed the launch of extensive ground operations in Lebanon.

These strategic actions caused problems at the operational level, as Israeli officials were promising to deliver results that its military was not capable of given the means authorised to them. Suggestions that an extensive ground campaign should be considered were dismissed, as any substantial incursion into Lebanon would result in greater casualties. This is a crucial point, as casualty sensitivity is exceedingly high in Israel where its army is conscripted from the

general public. Consequently, there is little divide between the life of the soldier and the civilian, resulting in public outcry whenever a soldier is killed.

Within the first week of the operation it became clear that the plan to utilize IAF standoff firepower in conjunction with limited ground incursions would not be sufficient to achieve Israel's objectives. Whilst the IAF enjoyed great success engaging and destroying elements of Hezbollah's command infrastructure and long-to-medium range missiles, this was not enough to prevent a well-prepared Hezbollah from functioning. Without a significant ground presence within Southern Lebanon, short-range rocket fire continued unabated until the final day of the war.

When a concerted effort was eventually made to secure Southern Lebanon, operational failings became evident. Years of budget cuts and constabulary work within the occupied territories had blunted the Israeli Defence Force's (IDF) conventional war fighting capability. The increased demand placed on the IDF by its constabulary role and the reduced funding meant that the IDF could no longer afford the time or the funds to provide sufficient conventional training to its soldiers. This lack of training, combined with the limited experience that could be gained from fighting poorly armed Palestinians, meant that casualties were high when the IDF confronted the well-trained and equipped fighters of Hezbollah.

Whilst casualties were higher than expected, one of the biggest surprises of the campaign was the vulnerability of Israeli armour. Due to armour's limited utility in policing operations, tank brigades were the hardest hit by the budgetary cuts prior to 2006. The limited training that tank crews received was insufficient, and in the five years prior to the Second Lebanon War the IDF had not held an exercise with screening smoke due to the associated cost of smoke canisters. Consequently Israeli tank crews did not know how to react when they came under concerted attack from advanced munitions and swarming tactics.

To make matters worse, Israel had also failed to regulate media access to the theatre of operations. Not only did this create problems for Israel's strategic narrative, but it also had a major effect of operational security. Soldiers were permitted to retain their mobile phones in theatre, and contact between officers and members of the press was largely unregulated. Consequently policy debates, information regarding military operations and soldiers' complaints all made their way into the media, resulting in a serious lack of operational security.

All of this was extremely embarrassing for Israel, which has long prided itself on having the most advanced military force in the Middle East. The casualty figures, the damage done to Israeli tanks and the ultimate failure to achieve its objectives significantly eroded Israel's military deterrent and left the government facing a backlash of public opinion. Consequently, when Operation Cast Lead was devised in the closing days of 2008, Israel was determined to avoid its past mistakes and wage an effective military campaign to make up for the embarrassment of 2006.

The purpose of Operation Cast Lead was twofold; to prevent rocket fire emanating from the Gaza Strip, and to reinstate Israel's military deterrent. Having understood the strategic mistakes of the Second Lebanon War, Israeli planners deliberately failed to outline a timeline for the

operation or to provide detailed objectives for conflict. Indeed, the stated aim of the campaign was purposefully vague, being to "strike a direct and hard blow against 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." By operating in this way, Israel afforded itself a greater degree of flexibility than it had enjoyed during the Second Lebanon War. It could now call off its offensive at any point without losing face, as the phrasing of objectives left them open to interpretation.

With the objective of reinstating Israel's military deterrent declared, an impressive military performance was required by the IDF. In the two years since the Second Lebanon War, the Israeli aversion to casualties had not subsided. If anything, given the losses suffered at the hands of Hezbollah, casualties became an even more prominent issue. However, given the necessity of an aggressive and convincing ground operation, the IDF could not afford to be hesitant or withhold troops from theatre. The discrepancy between the aversion to casualties and the requirement to commit troops was eventually reconciled by the decision to use overwhelming firepower to protect IDF forces.

Consequently, the IDF took no chances with the lives of its soldiers inside Gaza. Force protection was paramount, with commanders continually encouraging troops to act aggressively and take no risks that might jeopardise their safety. Emphasis was placed on the maintenance of momentum, moving rapidly between cover and making extensive use of suppressive fire and smoke screens (including those utilizing white phosphorous). By doing so, the aim was to deny Hamas the ability to repeat the kind of short range strikes and swarming of multiple anti-tank munitions that had been carried out so successfully by Hezbollah in 2006. Predictable lines of approach were avoided whenever possible, and D-9 armoured bulldozers were frequently used to create new avenues of approach through built up areas.

To further protect its troops Israel also went to great lengths to ensure operational security, removing cell phones from soldiers and banning journalists from Gaza. This considerably improved operational security in comparison to the Second Lebanon War, but had the unintended consequence of increasing suspicion of Israeli wrongdoing. Lacking independent accounts from western reporters, media organisations were forced to turn to Palestinian journalists to verify the IDF statements, whose reports were unsurprisingly anti-Israel.

The entire operation was focused upon force protection, as not only was this required for the reinstatement of Israel's deterrent, but also to ensure continued domestic support for the operation. Consequently, force protection went beyond being an aspiration and became a strategic requirement for the operations success. Force protection was therefore pursued at the expense of all else, and resulted in catastrophic damage being done to Gaza.

Contrary to popular reporting at the time, Israel did not set out to cause as much destruction as possible within the Gaza Strip. Rather the damage done was a by-product of Israel's emphatic focus on force protection as a strategic requirement. The basis for this emphasis can only be understood in relation to the wider context in which the operation took place, and whilst this does not excuse Israeli behaviour, it does help to better understand their actions. Had the events of the Second Lebanon War transpired differently, a very different operation might have

taken place in the closing days of 2008.

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