Long wars ahead

written by David M. Weinberg | 26.04.2024

Back in 2013, the IDF chief-of-staff promulgated a multi-year plan for the Israeli military called “Teuzah” (prowess or fearlessness). That plan accepted a significant decrease in overall funding to the IDF and shifted priorities away from the ground forces in favor of air force and cyber capabilities, intelligence, special operations forces, and stand-off precision fire. This came atop a cut of 25 percent in the ground forces budget between 2002 and 2006.

The IDF chief of staff at the time was Lt. Gen. Benny Gantz.

According to Amir Rapaport, publisher and editor of the military industry-leading *Israel Defense* magazine, Gantz accepted the relative weakness of the maneuvering capabilities of the ground forces as a given. He did not think that the IDF would need to fight conventional army forces in the foreseeable future, nor have to conduct large-scale ground maneuvers in enemy territory.

Obviously, Gantz and his predecessors and successors (Mofaz, Halutz, Yaalon, Ashkenazi, Eisencott, and Kochavi) – all of whom were party to this grand conceptual error to one degree or another – were dead wrong. It is today quite clear that Israel will likely fight several wars in enemy-held territory over the coming decade.

Responding to Gantz’s mistaken plan in 2013, Dr. Eitan Shamir and Dr. Eado Hecht of the BESA Center warned that “Neglect of the IDF’s ground forces poses a risk to Israel’s security. There are real battles ahead against well-entrenched Hamas and Hezbollah armies.” But back then nobody was listening.

Today it is clear that the IDF needs to knock-back the Iranian-proxy armies and jihadist militias camped on our borders. It needs to go house-by-house and tunnel-by-tunnel to ferret-out and eliminate terrorist cells in Judea, Samaria, and Gaza. It may need to “decommission” Iran’s nuclear enrichment and bomb-making facilities.

Consider the situation in Lebanon. To rout Hezbollah and destroy its missile stockpiles in the coming war Israel will have to reconquer southern Lebanon. Even with the Israel Air Force working intensively from above (including massive

leveling of Lebanese infrastructures), Israel could be facing months weeks of real and unrelenting ground combat in the deep valleys and steep mountains of Lebanon where Hezbollah is well dug in. (The Iranian-built and -funded terror army sits on a tunnel and bunker array that reportedly makes the Hamas military infrastructure in Gaza seem like child's play).

Given America's stampeding retreat from overseas commitments, the creeping repeal of an American protective diplomatic umbrella for Israel by presidents Obama and Biden, and the newest restrictions on use of US weaponry – Israel may be fighting truly alone.

UNDERSTANDING THIS is particularly relevant as Israel prepares to replace its military and intelligence leadership.

Military Intelligence chief Maj. Gen. Aharon Haliva has just resigned for his role in the gargantuan failure of October 7, appropriately so. Soon, IDF Chief-of-Staff Herzi Halevi, OC Southern Command Chief Yaron Finkelman, Mossad Chief Dedi Barnea, General Security Service Chief Ronen Bar, and dozens of other senior defense establishment leaders are expected to resign or be sacked, appropriately so.

The question is not only who will replace them but what sort of operational prisms their replacements will bring to the task. And what conceptual prisms will Israel's politicians lay out for them. (A new set of politicians is necessary too!) And what budgets Israel's prime minister and defense and finance ministers will allocate for the defense establishment.

Here is a brief list of necessary fixes:

* Manpower: Over the past 40 years, the IDF has shrunk from 15 to 10 divisions. It now needs to grow by at least three divisions. That is 50,000 soldiers more, and tons and tons of military equipment.

* Training: A gargantuan increase in the training of front-line troops is necessary. It is a well-known secret that many of the infantry and armored forces that went into Gaza over the past half-year were insufficiently trained for combat in built-up areas.

It is actually a miracle how well the IDF has fought in Gaza, with mid-level

military commanders in the field (the lieutenant colonels, battalion commanders; and the colonels, brigade commanders) learning on the go and quickly bringing their troops up to speed. They are among the true heroes of the current war.

Alas, training is expensive, especially for combined arms high intensity conflict – which involves multiple branches of the military working together. Training of the reserve forces is even more expensive. And unfortunately, budget lines for training are usually the first thing to be cut when the overall military budget is slashed – as it has been in recent decades.

* Platforms: The army needs to reverse the demobilization of armored formations and buy and deploy many more "Namer" armored personnel carriers equipped with the "Iron Fist" active defense system; "Merkava" main battle tanks with the "Trophy" system; and self-propelled artillery guns with the "Thundermaker" system. This will cost hundreds of millions of shekels.

* Ammunition: The IDF used up much of its ammunition reserves over the past six months, especially its stocks of shells for the ground forces and precision-guided missiles for the air force.

While the US has rushed tons of weaponry to Israel, Washington also has held up resupply of some of these munitions at certain times, and there is anyway a global shortage of some firepower like 155mm artillery shells (with the war in Ukraine soaking-up much of the available weaponry). As mentioned above, Israel also now faces increasing restrictions on its use of US-supplied weaponry.

The takeaway is that Israel needs to self-manufacture and the IDF needs to stockpile much larger reserves of weaponry for the lengthy wars of the future with Hezbollah and Hamas. Again, this requires more money with guaranteed funding over a multi-year plan.

Reportedly, Prime Minister Netanyahu has ordered a massive build-up, eight times over the current manufacturing capacity of the Israeli defense industries. Let's see whether this order is implemented and budgeted appropriately by the next Israeli governments.

* Navy: Elements of radical Islam are gaining control across the eastern Mediterranean basin, from Libya to Syria and Turkey. Israel and Greece are the only Western-oriented countries in the region.

Former Israeli Naval Chief, Admiral (res.) Eliezer "Chiney" Marom, argues that Israel needs a much more powerful navy, with a long reach, to counter the strategic realignments underway, and to protect from terrorist attack the substantial natural gas fields we have discovered at sea.

The Israel Navy wants more than $5 billion in new ships, submarines, weapons systems. and personnel over the next decade for this.

* West Bank: Given that security cooperation with the Palestinian Authority essentially has collapsed, and Mahmoud Abbas' forces are no match for Hamas and other terrorist mini-armies that have entrenched themselves across Judea and Samaria – Israel needs to pour more troops into policing the territory. This is a big drain on the military system, but without it nobody in greater Tel Aviv or Jerusalem will be safe.

The fact is that Palestinian terrorism is off the charts with organized battalions of terrorist commandoes operating openly in dozens of cities and refugee camps. Take, for example, Nur Shams, a tinpot refugee camp adjacent to Tulkarem in central Israel just over the security barrier. The IDF operated there for four days last week and was unexpectedly met by insane quantities of Palestinian firepower.

(So much for dreams of a "revitalized" Palestinian Authority that would not only truly combat terrorism in the West Bank but also assume responsibility for administering, demilitarizing, and deradicalizing Gaza. Hah!)

* Jordan Valley: Many voices in the defense establishment are calling for the building of a well-fortified security fence along Israel's long border with Jordan, as has been done along the Sinai, Lebanese, and Golan borders; alongside the permanent stationing of more troops along this strategic seam line.

Iran is actively seeking to undermine the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and take advantage of the porous border between Israel and Jordan to ship weaponry into the West Bank. The fluidity of the political and security situation to our east requires a military buildup in the Jordan Valley, and this needs to be budgeted for expeditiously.

* Iran: If worse comes to worse (and every day indeed it seems that worse news comes from Iran about its nuclear advances and from Washington about its strategic capitulation to Iran), the IDF and IAF may have to act against Iran's

nuclear and missile facilities. Then Israel will have to deal with the fallout from Iran's retaliation – and the country had better be ready both militarily and on the home front.

This month's unprecedented Iranian drone and missile attack on Israel proves that Israel needs quite a few more Arrow 2 and 3 anti-missile defense arrays. A small fortune.

Israel's independence depends on robust defense readiness. And on new military-intelligence leaders with clear-eyed understanding of the situation.

Published in The Jerusalem Post, April 26, 2024; and Israel Hayom, April 28, 2024.