The IDF Strategy and the Responsibility of the Political Leadership

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On August 13, 2015, IDF Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Gadi Eizenkot released the document "The IDF Strategy," which describes the army's operational options and the security level that it can provide to the country. This is a highly professional document, unprecedented in the level of disclosure and detail, indicating well-ordered and profound thinking by the army. Its publication highlights the Chief of Staff's sensitivity to public opinion in Israel, both because the IDF is the people's army and because the public's views wield major influence on politicians making security and budget decisions.

The main message is that the political leadership is responsible for defining the military's goals and tasks, as well as the constraints on the use of force. It must enable the Chief of Staff to build up the appropriate capabilities and lead the army in ordinary times, in an emergency, and in war, and must therefore also supply it with the necessary resources. Regarding expectations of the IDF, the public and the political leadership must be confident that on any said day, the IDF can be ordered to undertake a limited military campaign or a war. Each operational option has its own risks and opportunities, and if the IDF is ordered to embark on a limited operation, total victory cannot be expected of it.

The Need for the Document and its Disclosure to the Public
The public debate about the defense budget and the reports by the Locker Commission and the State Comptroller deal with the price of security, without taking into account the quality of the product – the army's defense output. At the same time, over the past decade, the results of the Second Lebanon War and the violent conflicts with Hamas in the Gaza Strip did not meet much of the public's expectations of the IDF. It appears that these results and the trenchant criticism of defense spending have done considerable damage to the image of the army in Israeli society.

The strategic document provides what is missing in the discussion, and lays out for the general public, government officials, and elected officials not privy to classified documents what defense output the IDF seeks in return for the defense budget, and what can be expected from its capabilities. It also tries to clarify the extent of the IDF's authority and its relations with the political leadership.

Principal Elements of IDF Strategy

The introduction to the document presents "the changes required from the IDF in view of the future challenges and the enemy's changed characteristics. These changes include reinforced and improved effectiveness in maneuvering on land, diversification of operational capabilities in the campaign between wars, reinforcement in the cyber dimension, and maintaining clear intelligence, air, and naval superiority…The concept formulated in this document will be the basis of the process to be led by the IDF in the multi-year Gideon plan, and will be a guide for operating and building its forces."

The document focuses on the IDF's strategy against Islamic organizations, headed by Hizbollah and Hamas. In this context, three possible military situations are presented to the political leadership:

a. A regular situation – routine security, limited conflict, and a "campaign between wars."

b. An emergency situation – "limited campaigns and operations that do not amount to full scale war," and which are designed to restore a regular situation and deterrence, "without striving for an immediate strategic change."

c. A war situation – operation of force at a high level of intensity, requiring resources in order to obtain decisive victory according to the terms dictated by the political leadership.

It appears that the main method of operation in an emergency situation is a firepower campaign in which the land operation is limited in scope and depth, similar to most of the Second Lebanon War and Operation Protective Edge. The war can stand by itself, or it can follow a limited campaign in which offensive land operations are likely to be conducted – on the front and in the depth – "focused against important points, while striving to reach the lines for ending the fighting as soon as possible. When these lines are reached, the forces will act to stabilize the defense lines and clear the area." This means taking over the Gaza Strip in the case of a war against Hamas, or territories deep within Lebanon in the case of a war against Hizbollah. The IDF will be able to launch such attacks simultaneously on two fronts.

The Connection between the Military and Political Leadership

According to the document, the job of the political leadership is to define goals, means, and constraints for the IDF, while the Chief of Staff's role is to execute, i.e., to build the IDF and operate it accordingly. The document assigns much significance to the Chief of Staff's role as the "supreme command level" in the army (according to the Basic Law: The Army – 1976). According to the document, the Chief of Staff is "the sole battle commander in the IDF, and through the general headquarters, he commands all the operations carried out by the IDF…This responsibility of the general headquarters cannot be delegated or transferred…Every commander is subordinate to the authority of one

commander at every point in time. Commands shall be given according to the chain of command." This means that the army will always be closely managed by the Chief of Staff through the general headquarters (the general staff as the supreme command group in the army), and through no other command group, as in the First Lebanon War, for example, which was managed from the Northern Command, with the heavy involvement of the Minister of Defense.

The document emphasizes the duty of the political leadership to the IDF: "When it is necessary to put the army into operation, the political leadership should formulate instructions for the army as follows: a. what are the goals, and what are the required strategic end situations; b. what is the army's role, and how does it fit in with achieving these goals; c. what constraints there are on the use of military force; d. definition of additional efforts (diplomatic, economic, media, and social) and the IDF's role in their context." The document notes that the political leadership's directives require clarity and a regular dialogue between the Chief of Staff and the political leadership.

The question arises, however, why with the formulation of instructions it is necessary to wait for the moment the army is put into operation. In most situations, the response required from the IDF is known in advance, for example, in case of a terror attack, rocket fire, kidnapping, exceptional arms procurement by the enemy, and so on. It is therefore recommended that the political leadership not wait for an attack, as happened, for example before the Second Lebanon War and the events that led to Operation Protective Edge, and already outline the army's roles, tasks, and objectives in expected future contexts. When the moment of truth comes, the political leadership will have knowledge, and be ready to decide between three basic operational situations:
a. Restraint or a moderate containment response.
b. A limited campaign, with the knowledge that it is liable to escalate into a major theater campaign, or even all-out war.
c. A major theater campaign, in the knowledge that it is liable to escalate into all-out war on multiple fronts.

Missing from the Strategy Document
The document does not provide enough details about the risks, threats, and challenges facing the IDF. Explicit references to Iran are limited, and the same is true about the risks inherent in the situation in Syria. To this should be added the threat of a third intifada and the IDF's task to maintain Israel's control over the West Bank, thereby providing the political leadership with freedom of action in achieving a political settlement on what it regards as desirable terms. The risks involved in changes of rule in Egypt and Jordan remain outside strategy. It is possible that some of the gaps in this public document are due to considerations of diplomatic and security sensitivity.

The document explains that despite the basic scenario focusing on conflicts with organizations such as Hizbollah and Hamas, "the solution – approaches in the use of force and capabilities that will be developed in the buildup of forces – is generally also suitable for campaigns against armies and countries." It is recommended, however, that the army refrain from stretching this strategy to cover such different scenarios, and to formulate a special operating strategy for situations that do not fit the basic scenario.

As for integration of efforts, the document lacks significant reference to the IDF's partners on the security front – the Israel Security Agency, the Mossad, and Israel Police. Integration of the entire defense establishment, not just the IDF, is necessary. Where resources are concerned, the document makes no significant reference to the army budget and the human capital, including the future of the reserves system.

Finally, the document states, "The IDF's strategy is the ideological and practical infrastructure for all the fundamental military documents." It appears, however, that such formal and actual status requires the explicit and public approval of the Minister of Defense and the government. It is therefore recommended that the document be regarded as an IDF proposal until the processes of its approval are completed.