

# Urban Warfare

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As someone who has worn a uniform since the age of 14, and as the commander of a host of platoons, companies, battalions, units, brigades, and divisions, let me review past examples of urban warfare with a view to the future. Talking about urban warfare makes us very nostalgic about the past. Warfare in the classic sense, which has inspired many classical works, poems, movies, plays, and insights, previously included clear arrays of a tactical formation with masses of soldiers (a phalanx). There were fortifications and armored columns and there was blitzkrieg. Nowadays we very much want to exhaust the army's total ability and demonstrate its full capability on the battlefield, with all of the IDF's intelligence power and firepower, while implementing the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) method, and since the early 1980s promoted in the Air-Land Battle instruction booklet for the battlefield. RMA talks about the use of technology to maximize the army's ability to advance on the ground and act against the first, second, and third echelons simultaneously. Although we aspire to do all those things today too, our enemy has other plans, and the modern campaigns are more irregular and located in densely populated areas. Our enemy wants to restrict our ability to deploy or manifest all of our abilities on the battlefield. It is forcing us to go into densely populated urban, mountainous, forested, and congested residential areas – in other words, into the multi-dimensional arena.

When I was the commander of the IDF's Officers School, we taught that the platoon or company operating in an arena considers that space as a circle and protects itself from all sides. The introduction of the new elements such as woodlands, built areas, densely populated spaces, and the underground tunnels that have gained such momentum in warfare

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in built up areas has made it incumbent upon the platoon, company, and battalion to operate at all times not only as a 360-degree self-protecting circle, but also to regard itself as a three-dimensional spherical ball on guard, operating against multi-story buildings and underground tunnels, within the entire 360 degrees around it. This is a supreme challenge, above all for the relevant force.

The main problem is that in such a crowded, populated, and intricate area, we only see what we can see; we simply cannot see most of the threats, as large segments of the enemy are concealed from us. Our encounters are consequently at very short range and put us in very uncomfortable situations – because the enemy exploits the civilian population for cover, because it blends in the civilian environment, and because it can be found on various levels, underground, above ground, and all around us – whereas we constantly lack information, data, and intelligence about it. This makes the circumstances in which the force must advance in a populated area very difficult.

I led the planning stages prior to Operation Defensive Shield (2002) for more than a year. The territory at that time was called “a different kind of battlefield.” When, in reaction to the bloody terrorist attack on Passover in March 2002 – which came on the heels of suicide attacks that left many hundreds of civilians dead in the hearts of Israel’s cities, not counting the casualties among our soldiers who died in combat – we were forced to launch that campaign, our response was both very proportionate and surgical. We first carried out incursions but were careful to confine our attacks to localized targets, only gradually expanding the scope of our operations. Ultimately, the die was cast so that when the propitious conditions were ascertained, we found ourselves being drawn into a full-fledged operation, which was highly contested the entire time I spent planning and preparing it, mostly on grounds of the massive damage it would cause because it would occur largely in built-up areas, refugee camps, and the Kasbahs. Our image, the scenes from the battlefield, and the general perception of us likewise played a deterring effect, and we were concerned that we might suffer many casualties.

We launched an operation in Judea and Samaria in reaction to that Seder night attack, and the mode of operation we were going to employ there involved all dimensions. We could simply have used the IDF’s enormous firepower to the maximum – after all, the IDF’s ability to direct massive fire

accurately toward any point in any area in which it decides to operate is legendary. Yet we did not resort to this form of action either in Operation Defensive Shield or in the other operations, and we continue to refrain from directing the IDF's firepower toward places that threaten Israel, its civilians, or the IDF itself. There are many reasons for this, and they are primarily rooted in our ethical values, which determine the end result. Even if we suffer losses in the short term, these ethical values definitely decide the long term outcome. We therefore do not use all of that firepower.

When we launched Operation Defensive Shield, the Paratroopers Brigade operated simultaneously from all directions. To circumvent the traps that Force 17, the Palestinian Authority's (PA) military intelligence, and many other PA forces joined by terrorist organizations operating on the ground had set for us, and to escape similar snares on the streets, we resorted to a unique strategic measure developed specifically for Operation Defensive Shield: the hammer, which we used to tear down walls and be able to move from house to house selectively and judiciously. We also deployed personal and platoon-level weapons instead of the IDF's massive firepower. We did that because of our ethical values and because we wanted to achieve proportionate results.

The final outcome is well-known. We are members of the OECD and our economy is thriving. We have a world class hi-tech industry, our educational system produced Nobel Prize laureates, and so on. All of this was made possible because we have the security achieved by having delivered the blow in Operation Defensive Shield and because we erected obstacles and the barrier along the Green Line. And notwithstanding all the criticism, I can vouch that our use of force was proportionate. We deployed our five divisions simultaneously as though we were dousing the fire with a blanket. We moved in densely populated areas; we kept civilian casualties to the minimum whenever possible, and I can affirm that this was achieved in spite of tremendous difficulties.

We all aspire to have fantastic intelligence capabilities. We all want to know more, monitor the terrain, obtain precise information, and strike only the necessary targets. I have great admiration for the IDF's work in Operation Defensive Shield, in Operation Cast Lead (December 2008-January 2009), and in the Second Lebanon War (in 2006), and I can honestly say that we are doing our utmost to operate with maximum accuracy by utilizing the best technology. We have a long way to go before

we obtain the kind of intelligence information that can pinpoint a specific individual as our particular target and can hit only a single window in that person's home but nothing else. For that, we have to undergo a very thorough process of developing know-how, new methods, and novel technologies. We must identify the changes in the situation and realize that both the circumstances and the various components that make up the entire puzzle are undergoing dynamic modifications, as are the campaigns, and that we therefore need to make the relevant adjustments continually.

In May 1988, I was the commander of a company during the battle of Maidun in Lebanon's Beqaa Valley. We embarked on this operation with some doubt as to whether or not civilians would still be found in the village. The operation was conducted in the same method that I described above: We went into the refugee camps and the Kasbahs as in Operation Defensive Shield, going in with our personal weapons and with our sharpshooters, using our machine guns, shooting discriminately, and deploying accurate weapons, leaving behind the IDF's firepower – the artillery batteries and the tanks. During the initial hours of the battle, when we suffered many casualties and I lost many friends and fellow comrades-in-arms, we were fighting in ditches and bunkers and in face-to-face combat inside houses. At some point, the penny finally dropped and we realized what was becoming evident as the battle's chronology unfolded. It dawned on us that either this was a fortified compound with no civilians, or this compound's main characteristics were not civilian. It used to be a village once, but now it was a fortress, a citadel. From that moment on, a company of Merkava tanks and an engineering unit went into action. We used artillery and took control of the village, eliminating the Hizbollah terrorists at the site. We withdrew after having completed our mission. In between, we lost three soldiers and 25 of our troops were wounded, all of them my buddies and fellow soldiers from the Paratroopers Brigade. As a young company commander, I wondered whether we could not have ended this incident by using just two warplanes. Instead, we covered the entire distance by marching on foot, taking them by surprise both with our timing and our mode of operation, fighting in the ditches as in the 1967 battle on Jerusalem's Ammunition Hill, and fighting among the houses and buildings in a densely populated area. We worked very selectively until it became absolutely clear that this was a fortified environment. Only then did we expand our use of force until we finally won the battle. There were many reasons for why we acted

that way. It enabled us to achieve a more decisive victory. Getting there on foot is not like scrambling a warplane, but in the end it is the moral values that determine the outcome.

The overall global urbanization has eliminated the army's advantage of deploying over large stretches of land and exhibiting its full capabilities on the ground. Our need to put our values to the test in a complicated environment full of civilians is manifested in many examples. As the commander of the Paratroopers Battalion in Nablus, my battalion, together with other IDF units, waged a very tough battle against Hamas's terrorism. At that time, Israeli civilians were victims of terrorist attacks all over Israel while we operated inside the terrorist dens, in Nablus's Kasbahs and in the refugee camps. One of my soldiers, Samuel, was a member of the squad of soldiers dispatched to bring supplies to the soldiers manning a rooftop position in the city's Clock Square. He came across a group of civilians walking up the stairs. We did not clear the staircase before bringing up the supplies. Even though we were in a state of war, we did not evacuate the population because we were in fact using their quarters. We did not disrupt their routine because we did not want to interfere with their day-to-day schedules or disrupt their normal course of life. A group of people whom we assumed were students were coming down the stairs. One of them pulled a knife out of his sleeve and stabbed Samuel. A hand-to-hand battle took place at point blank range. We could not use our weapons at such ranges. Samuel was killed, and his comrade Raz sustained serious wounds. This was one example of the outrageous and extremely frustrating enemy abuse and exploitation of the civilian environment, our moral values, and our desire to help them maintain their day-to-day life – which is something that we sincerely want to preserve in the places we control or in which we operate. Yet frustration and anger cannot be the basis for a work plan and a solution had to be found. Amid that civilian environment carrying on with its daily routine and pursuing its normal activities, at that time we activated a very large force consisting of undercover agents, who scored significant achievements. The area is conducive to such methods, allowing the troops to work in disguise – an activity at which we excel. The implication of this mode of operation was that while the one side exploited its capabilities and its normal civilian environment, we used the same environment to achieve our own goals.

We came across the unique characteristics of the urban environment once again when fighting broke out in September 2000 during an intensive terrorist offensive against Israel, which prevailed through Operation Defensive Shield in 2002. The terrorists launched their offensive in a particular and special way, introducing a novel mode of operation. We noticed the first signs of this already on the so-called called *Nakba* “(Catastrophe) Day” (the annual commemoration day for the events that befell the Palestinians in 1948) in May 2000, when an interesting development was observed on the battlefield, namely, a new phenomenon in the densely populated outskirts of the cities. We studied it and eventually gave it the nomenclature of “disturbances involving the use of weapons.” This is how they evolved: The Palestinians sent women, children, and civilian adults to the intersections where Israeli civilians were traveling and to their city centers to demonstrate and face off the IDF forces using ostensibly “legitimate” tactical weapons: rocks, concrete blocks, Molotov cocktails, slingshots, and all sorts of other supposedly non-lethal weapons. Yet, as everyone knows, a stone can send you to the hospital and leave you there for a year. It is a very dangerous weapon; stones are weapons, pure and simple. These local residents were sent out to the intersections with instructions to use their weapons from within the crowd, from inside the neighborhoods, and from the same place from which live ammunition was fired. They shot from the crowd, pulling their weapons from inside their coats or pointing them from the windows of their homes. They shot as they stood amid their kinsmen. This is the definition of the new concept of disturbances involving the use of weapons. We realized that we had to find a unique operational solution for this and indeed eventually developed a very special operational solution. It was in fact an entire doctrine, which the Ground Force Command likewise termed “disturbances involving the use of weapons,” and which consists of specifically targeting armed men alone while minimizing injuries among uninvolved parties, and the simultaneous use of non-lethal and lethal weapons to combat the phenomenon effectively.

In April 1996, during Operation Grapes of Wrath in Lebanon and in the July 1993 Operation Accountability, which similarly took place in Lebanon, we already implemented the lessons we had learned, carrying out massive and significant population evacuation using all the methods mentioned above. The objective was to remove the population out of those areas so

that we could successfully deploy our precise weapons, especially during aerial bombardments, and conduct special operations aimed at hitting the enemy without harming the uninvolved population. During the battles of Operation Defensive Shield, and later also in Bint Jbeil, Ayta ash-Shab, and elsewhere in Lebanon, in which I and my troops took part, we again noticed that the local population was abusing the civilians by turning them into its hostage. Take, for example, what happened at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem during Operation Defensive Shield. We tried to maneuver with our forces in a built-up area. The strategically important Church of the Nativity was seized by terrorist forces, which isolated it and turned it into a special theater that requires special treatment. In a holy site, you cannot use the same force you would use in other places, not even in a selective manner. That locus required different and special handling.

Similar phenomena took place in Bint Jbeil as well. Hizbollah used the local hospital as its headquarters. Throughout the war, there were serious deliberations on whether to attack it, break into it, or engage in fighting inside it. In the end, we did none of those things. We fought around the hospital, employing all sorts of stratagems to hit the enemy, and we ultimately did score some good hits. Bint Jbeil was conquered and the entire arena, including the Hizbollah brigade that was deployed there, was destroyed. The first time we entered the hospital was after the war. By the same token, we also refrained from attacking Shifa Hospital in the Gaza Strip, although the other side took shelter behind plenty of populated places, schools, kindergartens, and hospitals to fire on Division 91 during the Second Lebanon War. We, on the other hand, never directed fire at those places.

During the Second Lebanon War, Kafr Qana again became the venue where an unfortunate episode recurred similar to one of Operation Grapes of Wrath – and for the same reasons: The enemy used the civilian population as its human shield, hiding in the shelters inside the United Nations-sponsored refugee camps. As the commander who represented Israel, which is a democratic country, I did not authorize directing massive fire toward population centers except under my personal command and only on condition that we use very accurate weapons as part of a special operation. Without going into details or specifying the types of weapons, special technologies, or stratagems that we employed to get the enemy out of its cover so that we could attack it, these restrictions on the mode

of operation and the proviso that nothing be done unless it was under my personal command made military maneuvering very difficult. It is doubtful whether any other army or commander anywhere else in the world would consider imposing such limitations in similar circumstances.

As for the future, unfortunately we live in a world in which different solutions to fighting in built-up and densely populated areas are of supreme importance. Our progress here has been linear. As an operations commander, I look for solutions that manifest an exponential leap ahead, because, on the one hand, I must be effective in battle, but at the same time I am also the representative of a democratic country. As such, I have the obligation to observe the purity of arms and moral ethical standards. Thus, because I will not forgo the IDF spirit, I must look for a change in the warfare doctrine and methods and employ new technologies. All this will take time, but it is doable and certainly not impossible. If one examines our performance over the years, our technological, strategic, and tactical progress is patent: Ever since Operations Pillar of Defense and Cast Lead, through the Second Lebanon War and Operation Defensive Shield, we have utilized the most advanced hi-tech capabilities and implemented the IDF spirit and our combat doctrine more effectively.

We still have a long way to go, and we must also introduce changes: For example, we must look beyond normal logistics and seek special logistical solutions. I ask my logistics officers to avoid using trucks and convoys, which constitute easy targets for guerilla operations. I am looking for a sound logistical solution that proceeds like a well oiled machine, hoping to use this as a model for a solution that is applicable to the IDF. The IDF will surely continue to develop all the time with the aim of finding dynamically changing advanced operational solutions because our enemies are also learning and progressing. They are intelligent and have taken up positions in places that make it difficult for us to operate. We want to continue to be a leading and advanced country that cherishes its ethical standards and moral values. While we cannot forgo our security, we can likewise never give up on our values, for it is the values that ultimately determine the outcome.