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On: 04 March 2013, At: 06:48

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Small Wars & Insurgencies

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/fswi20>

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Version of record first published: 24 Jan 2012.

To cite this article: Niccolò Petrelli (2012): The missing dimension: IDF special operations forces and strategy in the Second Lebanon War, *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 23:1, 56-73

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2012.632853>

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The missing dimension: IDF special operations forces and strategy in the Second Lebanon War

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In the course of the 2006 Lebanon War the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) employed special operations forces (SOF) for raids against Hizb'allah's command and control structure. This article argues that a faulty conceptualization of the value of special operations and misguided expectations determined by the new IDF concept of operations impacted adversely on the employment of SOF for this kind of operations. Both these elements contributed in turn to substantially degrade SOF performance in the context of the war.

Keywords: Second Lebanon War; special operations forces; Israeli strategy

Special operations in the Israeli military culture

The IDF history is rooted in irregular warfare: these roots can be traced back to the creation of the 'Special Night Squads' (SNS) during the Arab revolt (1936–1939). The SNS, organized by the Scottish Captain Charles Orde Wingate, were mixed (English and Jewish) militia units, operating from June 1938 and conducting patrols and raids deep in enemy territory. Technically the SNS were not SOF per se, yet they displayed many structural features as well as a modus operandi typical of the SOF: they consisted of volunteers, they had to meet certain (rather high) criteria for selection, and they operated in small units, of company strength or even below.¹

Although the SNS experience lasted a bit more than one year, its legacy can be considered of the utmost importance as it significantly contributed to the birth of the IDF ethos: Moshe Dayan, Yigal Allon, and many other prominent figures who would shape the IDF's *esprit de corps* were in fact enlisted in the SNS.²

The approach Wingate proposed to enforce was radically offensive and unorthodox, based on conducting retaliatory raids, hunting enemies in their own territory, and using some of their own operational and tactical methods against them.³ The experience of the SNS was to lay the foundations of a combat style which would become a trademark of the yet unborn Israeli armed forces, instilling in the IDF an unconventional ethos which still today pervades it.⁴

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The SNS also pioneered the creation of units which would replicate its ethos, techniques, and combat style. Around mid 1939 the Haganah command created the *Pe'uluot Meyuchadot* (Hebrew for Special Operations), which were undercover units charged with retaliatory raids against Arab villages, attacks against British infrastructures, and hunting informers.⁵ Later on, the *Shahar* undercover unit was created within the elite assault units Palmach. *Shahar* members underwent a demanding commando training and conducted covert operations, particularly targeted killings, in Palestinian cities and also in the neighboring Arab countries. All these units played a significant role already in the 1948 war, performing intelligence-gathering operations and direct action raids.⁶

Another turning point for the consolidation of the Israeli approach to special operations was the creation, in August 1953, of Unit 101, which can be considered the first Israeli counter-terror unit.⁷ Its creation was strongly advocated by Prime Minister Ben-Gurion and IDF Chief of Staff (COS) Mordechai Maklef, while opposed by then Chief of Operations Moshe Dayan, who disapproved the idea of creating special units. Incorporating the operational lessons of the previous special forces, Unit 101 came to represent the prototype of the commando unit and a model for the IDF SOF community under the structural and behavioral point of view. It was in fact recruited through a friend-bring-friend method and the first unit to bypass the regular chain of command, being directly responsible to the IDF General Staff (GS). Moreover, as the main executor of the 'reprisal policy' of the mid 1950s, it introduced innovative small unit maneuvers, activation, and insertion tactics (apparently still utilized today), shaping a tactical model of commando raids which would exert a considerable influence on the very concept of 'special operation' within the IDF, defining its tenets.⁸

Approximately in this period, from the mid 1950s, the IDF also promoted a build-up of the armed forces as well as the introduction of new operational concepts aimed at transforming the militia-style of the army. In the context of this modernization process, the GS developed more organized and systematic doctrines and practices, trying to establish the IDF as a more modern army. Yet this effort did not erase the militia-style ethos pervading the IDF, nor did it substantially corrode the warfare model crafted through the most relevant military experiences of the period 1936–1956: both had in fact penetrated deep into the Israeli military culture, with far-reaching implications. This situation determined a sort of dichotomy in the IDF's military practice: 'regular war' versus 'small war': in the former, the IDF perceived itself as an organized armed force; in the latter, it tended to operate as a guerrilla/commando force.⁹

Along the lines of a pattern which has been defined as 'military isomorphism',¹⁰ this same period witnessed the development of a SOF community in the IDF.¹¹ In 1957 on direct request from the GS, Avraham Harnan of the AMAN (Military Intelligence) 154th Unit, created Sayeret MATKAL. The unit was composed of about 200 men organized into teams of 12–16 elements and structured along the lines of the UK Special Air Service. It was tasked with

intelligence-gathering and covert reconnaissance operations.¹² Approximately in the same period the naval commando unit Shayetet 13, heir of the Haganah maritime unit PALYAM, was reactivated. Originally formed in 1949, it was composed of approximately 300 elements and tasked with seaborne assaults and reconnaissance operations.¹³ Moreover, in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War the youngest of the IDF SOF, Sayeret Shaldag, would have joined the IDF SOF community. Shaldag is a unit specialized in air to ground cooperation and target designation for air strikes. Since its specific skills were required in wartime, it was originally formed as a reserve unit staffed by former Sayeret MATKAL members, nevertheless the transformation of the late 1970s (with the purchase of massive stocks of laser-guided ammunitions) prompted its transformation to regular unit status.¹⁴

Sayeret MATKAL and Shayetet 13 were increasingly deployed, each for specialized operations responding to its specific skills, from the Six Day War onwards, knowing significant operational activity particularly during the War of Attrition and the years preceding the outbreak of the Yom Kippur War. On the other hand, Shaldag was deployed in its capacity since the First Lebanon War in 1982.¹⁵

This kind of employment of SOF can be considered as a by-product of the modernization process undergone by the IDF: the isomorphic development of the Israeli armed forces favored the acquisition of a proper special operations capability and the consequent employment of SOF according to their fields of expertise. Yet, based on the historical record, it is possible to trace another distinct type of employment of SOF which, by contrast, can be considered to be influenced by the legacy of the 'small-war' mindset. In fact, notwithstanding the modernization process undertaken by the IDF, the GS continued to look at the behavioral and conceptual by-products of the reprisal policy of the 1950s and at the experiences of the units more involved in its implementation, especially Unit 101, as capable of producing valuable operational and doctrinal lessons.¹⁶

This belief appears evident in the employment made of SOF from the 1970s. Along with their specialized missions, SOF were in fact increasingly deployed for counter-terror (CT) operations, especially commando raids strongly reminiscent of those of the reprisal era, which did not correspond with their qualifications and original goals.¹⁷ As Ami Pedahzur points out, this kind of operation did not require the specific training and skills SOF possessed, yet both the units' commanders and the GS were eager to commit SOF to them for several reasons, mainly connected with the units' prestige and reputation. On the other hand, CT assignments fitted also the IDF officers' 'culture of improvisation', that is the proclivity to show resourcefulness and adaptability when faced with complex military situations.¹⁸

The IDF widened therefore its operational latitude, moving from reprisals to include pre-emptive operations such as direct action raids against PLO's infrastructures and most of all targeted assassinations, a practice already adopted by the *Shahar* unit in 1947 (Operation Zarzir).¹⁹ From Operation 'Wrath of God'

in the aftermath of the Munich massacre onwards, the selected removal of key figures of enemy organizations through operations carried out by SOF became a 'trademark' of the IDF: operations such as 'Spring of Youth' in Beirut in 1973 or the assassination of Abu Jihad in Tunis in 1988, came in fact to represent some of the best-known public successes of units like Sayeret MATKAL, Shayetet 13, and Shaldag.²⁰

Colin Gray has explained how special operations are expressions of different strategic cultures; although they share certain organizational and tactical features regardless of country, time, and circumstances, yet different strategic cultures place distinctive emphasis on particular SOF skills and *modus operandi*.²¹ Accordingly, choices concerning the character of special operations to undertake are embedded and shaped by specific strategic cultures and subsequently crystallize through practice in the organizational cultures of the militaries.

In the case of the IDF, although the operational configurations of special operations became more complex, sophisticated and specialized as a consequence of structural and technological upgrades, the ideal-type concept of a special operation and its core features remained through the years consistent with the model defined by *Shahar*, SNS, and Unit 101: direct action raids which were distinctly offensive, daring, and elegant at the techno-tactical level.

Moreover, the experiences of the first Israeli SOF not only contributed to spread among the IDF officers a certain view concerning the features which rendered an operation truly 'special', but also carved deep into the IDF a conceptual model, a set of shared assumptions concerning the nature of a 'successful' commando operation and the rationales for undertaking it.²² In this view, the operational rationales for carrying out targeted killing operations against senior members of terrorist and insurgent organizations were quite simple and rather similar to those justifying the commando raids of the 1950s, residing mainly in retribution or in the availability of 'operational windows', that is of specific intelligence on a certain target. A similar pattern is discernible at the strategic level, where the main goal pursued through targeted assassinations has been to uphold 'cumulative deterrence' either by punishment (second strike – retaliation) or by denial (first strike – preemption).²³

The IDF managed on several occasions to successfully strike against senior members of enemy organizations, proving through the accomplishment of complex targeted killing operations the impressive capabilities of its intelligence services and an elevated degree of techno-tactical excellence of SOF in the planning and implementation of the operations. In this way Israel built a daring reputation for its SOF and partially succeeded in upholding its deterrent posture against terrorist and insurgent organizations. However, at the operational and strategic level, the results of these operations appear far from clear.

In fact, the IDF did not fully develop the employment of targeted assassinations, failing to systematically pursue proper 'decapitation policies' against enemy organizations.²⁴ During Operation 'Wrath of God' for instance, the IDF did not target only members of Black September, but mainly took

advantage of all the available operational windows to strike against senior members of Palestinian organizations, often independent of their actual role (military or political) and their organizational affiliation. Therefore, apart from the eliminations themselves, the ultimate results of these operations remained confined to 'cumulative deterrence'. It is in fact unclear whether the IDF high ranks were convinced that the elimination of single individuals could produce more profound effects, as for example delivering a knockout blow to enemy organizations or impairing their operational capabilities. Eventually, although such an employment of SOF proved under some points of view well suited for low-intensity conflict (LIC), the absence of clear operational rationales and well-defined strategic goals considerably limited the effectiveness of these operations, circumscribing it almost only to the tactical level (the assassinations in and of themselves).

Ohad Leslau's study describes a similar process with regard to the employment of SOF in the course of Israel's conventional wars. In fact, in wartime much is left to the initiative of SOF commanders who often independently look for assignments and missions; the main consequence of this *modus operandi* is that SOF were successfully employed in conjunction with conventional forces only in a few instances (such as the recapture of Mount Hermon conducted by conventional forces supported by the Sayeret MATKAL in the last hours of the Yom Kippur War) and that, although tactically proficient, their employment hardly produced any kind of strategic utility.²⁵

Through the years, the tendency to employ SOF for specific kinds of operations such as targeted killings, in the absence of clear operational rationales and strategic goals, impacted adversely on the way the potential contribution of special operations to a war effort (mostly in mid and high intensity conflict) was conceived. In fact, it translated into a proclivity to conceptualize their value somehow independently from the context, almost only as intrinsic, as they were effective mainly in and of themselves. This view ultimately led to misguided expectations regarding the results that special operations might produce.

The IDF's approach to the war

The Israeli approach to the 2006 Lebanon War has been defined as inspired by the 'Revolution in Military Affairs' (RMA), given its reliance on air power and limited infantry incursions.²⁶ The choice to adopt an approach to the war fundamentally distant from the tradition of the IDF deserves careful examination, due to the emphasis it placed on the role that SOF were supposed to play. At its foundation it is possible to identify two factors: first, the partial application of the new IDF concept of operations (CONOP) approved in April 2006; second, the experience of the Al-Aqsa Intifada and of the two medium-scale operations carried out against Hizb'allah: 'Accountability' (1993) and 'Grapes of Wrath' (1996).²⁷

As Dima Adamsky has described, Israel was the first country ever to operationalize the RMA during the 1982 Lebanon War. Yet, despite its being the first army in the world to operate along the lines suggested by the RMA theories, the IDF was late in recognizing its conceptual dimension and accordingly in introducing doctrinal changes. Doctrinal debates in the IDF date back to the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, but although progressively gaining amplitude and influence, almost until the mid 1990s the GS proved incapable of piecing together the various concepts into some form of innovative doctrinal thinking or concrete military reform. By contrast, it continued to integrate innovations into existing organizations, doctrines, and procedures, opting for an approach oriented towards a form of evolutionary continuity within a relatively stable military framework.²⁸

Doctrinal and organizational updates began to follow the incremental introduction of technological upgrades only after the creation of the Operational Theory Research Institute (OTRI).²⁹ Established as a think tank devoted to the development of the Israeli operational art, the institute provided professional–academic consultancy and educational activities for the IDF officers: OTRI’s works laid down the intellectual foundations of the new IDF CONOP.³⁰

According to the methodology developed by OTRI, the enemy was to be envisioned as a multidimensional system against which the attainment of battlefield decision equated to the disruption of its operational rationale and neutralization of its logic, rather than material annihilation of its forces. Achieving this required a triple strike against the enemy system consisting in isolation of the enemy’s subsystems from the super-system (*fragmentation strike*); coordination of actions across the spectrum of operations to paralyze the enemy system (*simultaneity*); and exploitation of the synergetic effects produced by the two previous elements to deny the enemy system time of response (*momentum*).³¹

Inspired by both the Soviet theory of ‘Deep Operations’ and the US theory of ‘Air-Land Battle’, the Israeli CONOP appeared to closely equate the American concept of ‘Effect-Based Operations’ (EBO).³² Emerging from the network-centric warfare (NCW) theories, EBO have been defined as a process for producing desired strategic outcomes or effects on the enemy, being effect as ‘the physical, functional, or psychological outcome, event, or consequence that results from specific military or non-military actions’.³³ The concept of EBO rejects in fact the notion of a full clash with the enemy and points to the need to affect the enemy’s consciousness through selected strikes against key targets aimed at generating cognitive effects in order to achieve battlefield success.³⁴ EBO is therefore designed to affect ‘the cognitive domain’ of the enemy system; the underlying assumption is that striking against key nodes of its infrastructure would cause a chain reaction resulting in cognitive-strategic (rather than military) collapse.³⁵ Although not specifically EBO, Brigadier General (res.) Shimon Naveh, founder of OTRI, had already advocated a similar course of action in 1996, suggesting the casting aside of the IDF ‘mechanistic approach’ entailing

the destruction of the enemy forces to the advantage of a 'systemic approach seeking to disrupt the rival system's operational rationale'.³⁶

As with regard to ground forces, the new IDF CONOP considerably reappraised the role of large-scale ground maneuvers, which traditionally had been the backbone of every major Israeli campaign. Fundamentally it acknowledged the modifications suggested through the years by the group of the so-called 'reformers' within the IDF, according to whose opinion, rather than continue to emphasize preemption and therefore maneuver, the IDF should conversely adopt an active defense posture through a combination of selected air, naval, and infantry (mostly elite units and SOF) strikes.³⁷

Although among the IDF ranks there has always been a widespread appreciation of the value of special operations, in the context of the traditional IDF (unwritten) operational doctrine SOF were not considered an asset whose employment could significantly affect the course of a military campaign.³⁸ This, in conjunction with the frequent employment of SOF for operations distinct from the main battles rather than in support of conventional forces, made sure that they were expected to play only a minor role in wartime.³⁹

By contrast, the new CONOP envisioned the employment of small, light, and swiftly deployable high-tech infantry units capitalizing on the IDF's superior command and control and intelligence-acquisition systems and rapid sensor-to-shooter connections.⁴⁰ Consistently with the concept of a slim and smart military machine developed in NCW theories, it emphasized the role that infantry units (and most of all SOF) could play operating as a diffused and self-synchronizing network through the whole depth of the battlefield operational space in close cooperation with the Israeli Air Force (IAF).⁴¹ This operational configuration for the deployment of ground forces was supposed to replace the physical cohesion of the fighting units with a conceptual one, to shorten the sensor-to-shooter loop to near real time as well as to allow immediate decisions based on contingency and opportunity, thus enhancing tactical adaptation and combat effectiveness even against asymmetric threats.⁴²

The new doctrine was approved in April 2006, but its basic concepts were already disseminated among the IDF and repeatedly tested on the battlefield throughout the Al-Aqsa Intifada (2000–2005). In fact, relying on the exceptional intelligence network built by the Shabak (Israel's internal security service), in the course of the insurgency the IDF placed considerable emphasis on a combat model focused on the smallest fighting framework and its capability to operate while synchronizing information from all the intelligence sources. Thus the GS deliberately favored highly centralized small-scale operations and surgical actions based on the use of small infantry units linked to assault helicopters, fighter jets, or reconnaissance unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) in a short and effective sensor-to-shooter loop. This operational model became almost a standard IDF *modus operandi* in the six-year period preceding the Second Lebanon War and witnessed not only a considerable employment of SOF, Shaldag, and most of all Shayetet 13 for CT activities in the Occupied Territories,

but ultimately saw the majority of IDF elite infantry units performing special operations at one level or another.⁴³

The introduction of the new CONOP and the successful application of several of its precepts, as tested during the Al-Aqsa Intifada, led to a reappraisal of the potential contribution of SOF to the war effort. First of all at the tactical level and under a quantitative perspective, through the adoption of operational models which perfectly fitted the structural configuration of SOF: light and swiftly deployable high-tech units based on a small and tight distribution of personnel with elevated average attributes.⁴⁴ Second and even more relevant, at the operational and strategic level, through the introduction of a CONOP whose logic strongly recalled EBO. In this context, Israel's traditional pre-emptive means such as aerial attacks or commando operations could be specifically employed to affect the enemy psychologically and organizationally.⁴⁵

It is worth remembering that the new IDF CONOP was introduced only three months before the outbreak of the war and that within the GS and among the IDF high ranks it had received only a partial consensus. It was in fact approved in a phase of deep intellectual disorientation within the IDF, even though it was supposed to serve as a new basic military document, it was not totally clear whether it should be implemented to the letter or merely considered as some kind of draft, as were many other documents disseminated among the various departments in the previous years.⁴⁶ Although the ideas and theories underpinning it had been spreading among the armed forces for approximately 10 years, the moment the war broke out the CONOP was still under assimilation and, most of all, implementation. Many of its precepts were therefore conceptualized and operationalized in light of the traditional IDF approach.

In the hastened assimilation process which ultimately took place, the concept of determining the enemy's cognitive-strategic collapse through selected strikes against its infrastructure's critical nodes somehow came to provide the operational and strategic rationales for specific kinds of operations, among others, the highly offensive direct action raids and targeted killings for which IDF SOF were so often employed in asymmetric conflicts. The aim of provoking a cognitive-strategic rather than physical collapse of the enemy system appeared in fact somehow to complement the use traditionally made of SOF described above.

Thus, paradoxically, although OTRI members criticized the IDF deep commitment to offensive operations as a dogma deprived of rationale, the introduction of the new CONOP, shaped along the lines of the OTRI theoretical works, did not lead to a reappraisal of the IDF tactical offense in the context of new operational patterns of action, but was rather 'transplanted' and constrained into the IDF traditional offensive approach.

SOF and the Second Lebanon War strategy

SOF were significantly employed in Lebanon from the mid 1980s; although from the beginning of the 1990s the IDF preferred to rely on the IAF, they continued to

represent a conspicuous element of Israeli strategy in the Lebanese theatre almost until 2000.⁴⁷ Accordingly, they were involved in the fighting from its very beginning: already in the first hours of the war on 12 July 2006, SOF were deployed in the attempt to locate the Israeli soldiers abducted by Hizb'allah.⁴⁸

It seems that, during the 2006 Lebanon War, the IDF conducted between 15 and 30 special operations in which SOF were deployed.⁴⁹ Generally speaking, experts tended to conclude that their tactical and strategic impact on the outcome of the conflict was negligible.⁵⁰ The majority of these operations went unexposed in the media. Nevertheless information, which was mostly leaked on purpose to the media by the Israeli authorities, is available regarding some of them. Although providing only a part of the overall picture of IDF special operations during the war, they clearly testify to the employment of SOF for strikes against the Hizb'allah command and control structure in the course of the war.

The first operation, codenamed 'Sharp and Smooth', was carried out jointly by Sayeret MATKAL and Shaldag in the city of Baalbek, over 100 kilometers behind enemy lines. SOF assaulted the city hospital, which was believed to host a Hizb'allah headquarters, together with another facility, kidnapping five Lebanese citizens, one of them bearing the name Hasan Nasrallah (the same name as Hizb'allah's secretary general). Although the IDF did not officially confirm it, apparently the aim of the operation was to abduct senior Hizb'allah figures, hopefully even the organization's secretary general, for bargaining purposes.⁵¹ On 4 August, Shayetet 13 conducted a seaborne assault, taking control of a compound in the city of Tyre. The operation was apparently aimed at eliminating a Hizb'allah unit as well as kidnapping a senior member of the organization. The militants' refusal to surrender sparked an intense exchange of fire which resulted in the death of almost the entire Hizb'allah unit, allowing nonetheless the main target of the operation to escape.⁵² Three days later, Shayetet 13 conducted another similar operation in the village of Ras al-Biyad, where an apartment complex was targeted.⁵³ In the last special operation about which details emerged, Sayeret MATKAL operated in the Beka'a Valley, assaulting the local Hizb'allah headquarters for intelligence-gathering purposes and once again in an attempt to kidnap operatives of the organization. Although the IDF spokesman claimed that the operation was successful, its results are far from clear: there is in fact no reliable information on the alleged arms shipment which the commando intercepted; moreover, in the course of the extraction phase the commando was attacked by a Hizb'allah force, and a veteran officer was killed and two others wounded in the ensuing battle.⁵⁴

In each of the aforementioned cases the aim of the operation seems to have been the abduction (or killing) of high-ranking Hizb'allah members, a practice apparently among the tasks of the Israeli SOF, and which, through the years, Israel has adopted on many occasions in the Lebanese and Palestinian theatres.⁵⁵ However, if the practice of removing senior members of enemy organizations has produced significant results when used under the guise of targeted killings against the Palestinian Hamas and Islamic Jihad, its results when adopted against

Hizb'allah were quite limited. Furthermore, if the high-quality intelligence provided by the Shabak and the near total control of territory enjoyed in fighting the Palestinians have allowed SOF to perform effectively even though repeatedly adopting similar tactics and operational configurations, this has not happened in Lebanon. In this case, the unimaginative use of special operations in the years prior to the conflict undermined their effectiveness and led Hizb'allah to predict IDF attempts to target the organization's senior members and therefore drastically to enhance their security measures.

Following its withdrawal from Southern Lebanon, Israel lost most of its HUMINT assets in the country.⁵⁶ Nevertheless in the six-year period prior to the outbreak of the war a joint effort between the Mossad and the IDF which involved about 40 special operations led Israel to recover intelligence concerning Hizb'allah's strategic arsenal and command and control centers. Such information proved crucial in determining the success of Operation 'Specific Gravity' on the night of 12 July, during which the IAF destroyed about 90% of Hizb'allah's arsenal.⁵⁷

The Party of God has nonetheless managed to maintain maximum secrecy concerning its command and control structure. As a result, Israeli familiarity with Hizb'allah's chain of command was rather limited, and during the war AMAN and the Mossad did not manage to penetrate the organization's command structure. Although prior to the outbreak of the conflict the intelligence services gathered information about Hizb'allah's leadership, compiling a sort of 'hit list', it seems that the political echelon vetoed a decapitation strike in the first hours of the war.⁵⁸ Afterwards, and for the whole course of the conflict, neither AMAN nor the Mossad came into possession of reliable information on the whereabouts of high-ranking Hizb'allah leaders, something which appears confirmed even by the IAF bombing of Beirut's Dahya neighborhood, in the course of which no member of Hizb'allah's command and control structure was killed.⁵⁹

In the case of Israel, the tendency to employ SOF in direct action raids and targeted killings is both a product of the irregular warfare experience described above, around which the Israeli approach to special operations crystallized, and a reflection of the offensive tendency that has traditionally characterized IDF performances. During every conventional war the IDF has, in fact, placed the utmost emphasis on offensive operations.⁶⁰ Even when the political context suggested a more nuanced application of force, such as in the course of counterinsurgency campaigns, the IDF did not cast aside its offensive approach and tried by contrast to put an end to the conflict as quickly as possible by pursuing an aggressive strategy. As Avi Kober has noted, the essence of Israel's approach is effectively epitomized in the promise of Deputy COS Chaim Bar-Lev before the 1967 War: to defeat the enemy 'quickly, strongly and elegantly'.⁶¹

According to James Kiras, the key to understanding how special operations can improve a military actor's strategic performance resides in the concept of 'strategic attrition'. Although special operations can be tactically useful in the whittling away of an adversary's material resources, they can hardly be decisive

in and of themselves, and their strategic impact would be negligible if used only for this purpose. Conversely, special operations can inflict disproportionate moral damage in conjunction with strikes against material resources through the accomplishment of particularly daring or complex operations. The cumulative effect at the strategic level of a number of special operations focused against the enemy's moral and material vulnerabilities would thus constitute 'strategic attrition'.⁶²

By contrast, special operations during the Second Lebanon War were carried out by the IDF as the ultimate realization of a pre-emptive doctrine: by attempting to strike directly against Hizb'allah leadership and to abduct or kill high-ranking members of the organization, Israel hoped to substantially degrade, or at best annihilate, its will to fight, delivering a crippling mortal blow that could induce a 'strategic paralysis' of the organization and seriously impair its ability to fight.⁶³

This is not to suggest that the IDF top ranks were convinced of the possibility of delivering a metaphorical 'shot in the brain' to Hizb'allah by relying almost solely on special operations, but rather to point out how the operational concept guiding the employment of SOF during the Second Lebanon War centered around the idea of swiftly paralyzing the Shiite organization through a series of offensive operations against key nodes of its infrastructure. As Kiras goes on to note: 'decapitation strikes are appealing precisely because they compress the horizontal and vertical dimensions of strategy into a single flat line in which actions, unburdened by friction, imperfect knowledge and unimpeded by political considerations achieve their effects against the enemy in a preordained manner'.⁶⁴

Such conceptualization of the value of special operations already deeply ingrained in the Israeli military culture was further enhanced by the adoption of the new CONOP. In fact this doctrine, with its emphasis on affecting the enemy's consciousness and morale, favored operations against highly symbolic targets within the enemy infrastructure, such as leaders and senior operational commanders, in order to erode the enemy's will to fight: ultimately, the adoption of a CONOP strongly reminiscent of the EBO doctrine called for a decapitation strategy.⁶⁵ In fact, as Ron Tira has underlined, in the view of some of its proponents, the concept of EBO was supposedly designed to bypass the tactical collision with the enemy. Selected strikes against key nodes of the enemy system would thus directly address the strategic level in order to create a sort of shortcut leading to the cognitive-strategic collapse of the enemy without first having to engage the adversary's fielded military forces in extended operations.⁶⁶

Generally speaking, experts acknowledge that Hizb'allah as a whole is systemically structured; therefore, applying a CONOP based on systems theory could theoretically work.⁶⁷ However, although the secrecy surrounding it prevents the outlining of a satisfactory picture, it is unclear whether this systemic structure extends also to its leadership. By contrast, it seems very likely that 'critical nodes' did not even exist within the Shiite organization chain of command, whose structure according to several scholars is rather simple and

redundant.⁶⁸ Therefore it is probable that Hizb'allah chain of command's structure rendered a decapitation strike de facto impossible. Ultimately, either due to the lack of valuable intelligence or to the enemy's very structure, the IDF operated almost blindly when attempting to strike against Hizb'allah's leadership.

As the Dahya bombardment testifies, Hizb'allah proved highly resistant to cognitive effects and after the initial shock, the impact of cognitive military actions was liable to dissipate quite rapidly and their operational logic and military rationale to wane with time.⁶⁹ Yet, as the conflict dragged on and the possibility of successfully striking against Hizb'allah's leadership appeared more remote, the IDF GS continued nonetheless to pursue the same strategy, clinging to SOF operations (among other things) in order to generate a strong cognitive effect and produce what has been called a 'picture of victory'.⁷⁰

Eliot Cohen has defined those operations aimed at sending signals and usually conducted more for a symbolic or political effect, rather than for a purely military reason, as 'sensitive signaling operations'. The aim of such kinds of operations is twofold: first, they are supposed to boost the morale of the signaler's armed forces; and, second, they are supposed to prove to the enemy the commitment of the signaler through the accomplishment of daring and complex operations by units whose reputation is very high.⁷¹

Throughout the war, and most of all during its last phase, the GS insisted on deploying elite infantry units to assault the Shiite organization's strongholds, such as Bint Jbail and Maroun al-Ras, and SOF to conduct selected strikes against enemy priority targets. Moreover, COS Dan Halutz continued to demand targeted killings of high-ranking Hizb'allah members, preferably Secretary General Nasrallah or military wing commander Imad Mugniyeh.⁷² Thus, while signaling purposes are always taken into account in the planning and implementation of special operations, in the Israeli case it seems that their importance, particularly in the last days of the war, has been overestimated.

It seems therefore that the confluence of factors determined by the tendency to employ SOF for targeted killings and decapitation strikes, together with the notions introduced (and incorrectly implemented) by the CONOP and excessive emphasis on producing cognitive effects on the enemy, worked to degrade the effectiveness of the IDF special operations, ultimately favoring the commitment of SOF to objectives either too complex to attain or rather marginal in the context of the campaign against Hizb'allah.

Special operations' significance and effectiveness ultimately depends on the actual context of a war, whether they are employed independently from distinctive battles (as in this case) or in support of conventional forces operations.⁷³ Virtually, any special operation can be provided with some explanatory cover, therefore it is difficult to question the validity of assertions concerning the supposed value of operations against Hizb'allah's leadership for reasons of morale or cost-effective attrition. However, in the case of the Second Lebanon War, the employment of SOF for targeted killing operations appears almost totally disconnected from the

war context, and ultimately Israel did not succeed in decapitating Hizb'allah, nor in generating strategic paralysis or any other effect that could substantially harm the will or the functioning of Hizb'allah's command and control structure.⁷⁴ Leaving aside any appreciation regarding the intrinsic value of the IDF special operations, the strategic framework guiding the employment of SOF clearly proved irrelevant in the context of the Second Lebanon War.

Conclusions

All the available evidence suggests that SOF performance during the Second Lebanon War was at best mixed and did not manage to influence the outcome of the conflict positively.

At a tactical level, SOF performed well, showing a high degree of combat effectiveness and conducting well-planned and technically impressive operations deep into enemy territory, as for example Operation 'Sharp and Smooth'. Yet, despite their tactical proficiency, the use made of SOF was hardly appropriate to the war context, which ultimately resulted in these units providing only a negligible contribution to the war effort. What dramatically affected the possibility that SOF could contribute to a positive outcome of the conflict was the faulty conceptualization of strategy guiding their employment and ultimately favoring their assignment to missions that were either quite marginal or too difficult to complete successfully.

SOF were in fact employed according to a well-established *modus operandi* in the IDF organizational culture even though the war context suggested it as absolutely inadequate. The recurrence of the IDF's traditional approach of *l'offensive à outrance*, in conjunction with the diffusion of concepts (such as EBO) associated with the new CONOP prompted the use of SOF for extremely offensive raids against the enemy chain of command. However, the lack of reliable intelligence on the location of the 'critical nodes' of Hizb'allah's command and control structure (provided that it was possible to identify them) undermined from the beginning any attempt to conduct a successful decapitation strike or generate a strong cognitive effect on the Shiite organization through the killing of one or more of its leaders and commanders.

Moreover, the growing feeling of a missing battlefield decision further pushed the IDF in this direction in the last days of the war, in the hope that the accomplishment of a few daring and complex operations by SOF units could somehow fulfill the need to produce a 'picture of victory'. As Colin Gray reminds us: 'Exaggerated, out-of-context expectations for the performance of special operations forces in effect set those forces up to fail'.⁷⁵

Notes

1. Anglim, 'Orde Wingate and the Special Night Squads', 36.
2. Van Creveld, *Tsahal*, 73; Allon, *The Making of Israel's Army*, 8–11; Dayan, *Story of My Life*, 44–48.

3. Anglim, 'Orde Wingate and the Special Night Squads', 35.
4. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 154.
5. Morris, *Vittime*, 192.
6. Yaniv, 'Special Operations', 114; Schiff, 'On the Origins of Targeted Assassinations'.
7. Gelber, 'Sharon's Inheritance'; Vardi, 'Learning Without Reference'.
8. Vardi, 'Pounding Their Feet', 299; Pedahzur, *The Israeli Secret Services and the Struggle against Terrorism*, 24.
9. Vardi, 'Pounding Their Feet', 299.
10. Farrell, 'Culture and Military Power', 412.
11. The scholarly literature on the IDF frequently employs the broad category of 'elite units' or 'special units' encompassing also the Sayarut, which are the reconnaissance units active within the majority of IDF brigades. Although the Sayarut perform special operations to a certain extent, their structure and modus operandi differs significantly from that of SOF. For these reasons, this article will include in the category of SOF only Sayeret MATKAL, Shayetet 13, and Shaldag. Spulak, *A Theory of Special Operations*, 12.
12. Eisenstadt, 'Israel's Approach to Special Operations', 23; Pedahzur, *The Israeli Secret Services and the Struggle Against Terrorism*, 37; <http://www.isayeret.com> (accessed 23 May 2011).
13. Cordesman, *Israel and Syria*, 115; <http://www.isayeret.com> (accessed 10 July 2010).
14. Harel, 'Commando Units Vie for Supplying New Top Brass'; <http://www.isayeret.com> (accessed 23 May 2011).
15. Rodman, *Defense and Diplomacy in Israel's National Security Experience*, 56; Terrill, 'The Nature and Value of Commando Operations'; <http://www.isayeret.com> (accessed 23 May 2011).
16. Vardi, 'Pounding Their Feet', 309.
17. Cordesman, *Israel and Syria*, 93.
18. Pedahzur, *The Israeli Secret Services and the Struggle against Terrorism*, 64; Anglim, 'Special Forces – Strategic Asset', 16.
19. Schiff, 'On the Origins of Targeted Assassinations'.
20. Pedahzur, *The Israeli Secret Services and the Struggle against Terrorism*, 30–65.
21. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 150.
22. Leslau, 'Worth the Bother?', 523; Vardi, 'Pounding Their Feet', 299.
23. Pedahzur, *The Israeli Secret Services and the Struggle against Terrorism*, 46; Jones, 'One Size Fits All', 279; Almog, 'Cumulative Deterrence and the War on Terrorism'.
24. The only exception seems to be the targeted killing campaign carried out against Hamas during the Al-Aqsa Intifada, where a detailed plan for the elimination of the entire Hamas leadership was not only approved but ultimately carried out; Harel and Isacharoff, *La Septième Guerre d'Israël*, 262–5.
25. Leslau, 'Worth the Bother?'; <http://www.isayeret.com> (accessed 20 May 2011); Henriksen, *The Israeli Approach to Irregular Warfare*, 15.
26. Kober, 'The Israel Defense Forces in the Second Lebanon War', 9, 16.
27. Gordon, 'The Vulture and the Snake'; Kober, 'The Israel Defense Forces in the Second Lebanon War', 18.
28. Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 93, 99.
29. Cohen, *Israel and Its Army*, 104.
30. Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 99–105.
31. *Ibid.*, 101; Naveh, 'The Cult of Offensive Preemption', 182.
32. Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 100, 106.
33. Batschelet, *Effects-based Operations*, 2.
34. De Czege, 'Systemic Operational Design'.

35. Smith, *Effects Based Operations*, xv; Vego, 'Commentary: Effects-Based Operations: A Critique'.
36. Naveh, 'The Cult of Offensive Preemption', 181.
37. Gordon, 'Who Needs a Pyrrhic Victory?' [Hebrew], *Ma'arachot* (February 1983), 34–7, quoted in E. Cohen et al., *Knives, Tanks & Missiles*, 84–5; Naveh, 'The Cult of Offensive Preemption'.
38. Gray, 'Handful of Heroes on Desperate Ventures', 5; S. Cohen, *Israel and Its Army*, 50.
39. Leslau, 'Worth the Bother?', 518.
40. E. Cohen et al., *Knives, Tanks & Missiles*, 119; Bonen, 'Sophisticated Conventional War'; Gordon, 'The Vulture and the Snake'.
41. Demchak, 'Technology's Knowledge Burden', 86; Johnson, *Military Capabilities for Hybrid War*, 2.
42. Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 107; S.G. Jones, 'Fighting Networked Terrorist Groups'; Kober, 'The Israel Defense Forces in the Second Lebanon War', 26.
43. Kaplinski, 'The IDF in the Years Before the Second Lebanon War', 34; Harel, 'Elite Shayetet Unit often Carries Army's Heaviest, most Secretive Burdens'; Harel, 'The Navy's Convinced it Belongs in the Territories'.
44. Spulak, *A Theory of Special Operations*, 12.
45. Naveh, 'The Cult of Offensive Preemption', 170; Weizmann, 'Lethal Theory', 60.
46. Adamsky, *The Culture of Military Innovation*, 109.
47. C. Jones, 'Israeli Counter-Insurgency Strategy and the War in South Lebanon 1985–1997'; E. Cohen et al., *Knives, Tanks & Missiles*, 32; Harel, 'Elite Shayetet Unit Often Carries Army's Heaviest, Most Secretive Burdens'.
48. Harel and Issacharoff, *34 Days*, 127.
49. Roggio, 'IDF Commando Raid South of Tyre; Abandoning the Litani?'.
50. Kober, 'The Israel Defense Forces in the Second Lebanon War', 27; Siboni, 'The Military Campaign in Lebanon', 69.
51. Pedahzur, *The Israeli Secret Services and the Struggle Against Terrorism*, 111–16.
52. Harel, 'Elite Shayetet Unit often Carries Army's Heaviest Most Secretive Burdens'.
53. Katz, 'IDF Commandos Operate South of Tyre'.
54. Pedahzur, *The Israeli Secret Services and the Struggle Against Terrorism*, 133; Harel, 'IDF Officer Killed in Commando Raid in East Lebanon'.
55. Yaniv, 'Special Operations: The Israeli Experience', 118; Pedahzur, *The Israeli Secret Services and the Struggle Against Terrorism*, 85–8.
56. Schleifer, 'Psyoping Hezbollah', 224.
57. Bar-Joseph, 'Israel's Military Intelligence Performance in the Second Lebanon War', 586.
58. *Ibid.*, 588.
59. Bar-Joseph, 'The Hubris of Initial Victory', 158.
60. Rodman, 'Israel's National Security Doctrine'.
61. Kober, 'From *Blitzkrieg* to Attrition', 219.
62. Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy*, 3.
63. Rodman, 'Regime-Targeting'.
64. Kiras, *Special Operations and Strategy*, 3.
65. Schleifer, 'Psyoping Hezbollah', 225.
66. Tira, 'The Limitations of Standoff Firepower-Based Operations', 25.
67. Sobelman, 'Hizbollah – From Terror to Resistance'; Byman, *Understanding Proto-Insurgencies*, Appendix A.
68. Tira, 'The Limitations of Standoff Firepower-Based Operations', 43–4; Bar-Joseph, 'The Hubris of Initial Victory', 158–9.
69. Tira, 'The Limitations of Standoff Firepower-Based Operations', 29–31.

70. Schleifer, 'Psyoping Hezbollah', 233.
71. E. Cohen, *Commandos and Politicians*, 49.
72. Harel and Isacharoff, *Spider Webs* [Hebrew] quoted in Bar-Joseph, 'The Hubris of Initial Victory', 154.
73. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 165, 166, 170.
74. Tira, 'The Limitations of Standoff Firepower-Based Operations', 26.
75. Gray, *Explorations in Strategy*, 149.

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